

THE PARADE

A Sunday morning

Hong Kong, for so much of the year impossibly hot and steamy, was getting its two weeks of chill winter weather. It was a Sunday morning in February and the territory was a cold eight degrees centigrade. While the rich could stay at home with the air-con units producing warm air, the poor found their apartments turned into miserable igloos of uninsulated walls and cold windows. In the latter condition were the residents of the Tsz Wan Shan district in North Kowloon, living in ageing public housing estates on the lower slope of Lion Rock Country Park, and this is where Dolly lived.

She was standing in the cold on the pavement next to her estate waiting for a minibus. These minibuses tear around the estates conveying residents to the MTR station and this morning none were coming. Empty and still, the morning felt fragile, and very cold. Close to the stop a small lonely bird hopped on the road, took flight over the basketball courts, glided between two looming old towers - both in need of repair - and became ever smaller, a speck high in the sky escaping in the direction of Lion Rock.

She was thirty-two and unmarried. She had a slim proportioned frame and a good neutral face that might have made her a model if only she didn't have buck teeth. These teeth had gone awry when she was ten or so and had never got fixed, for lack of money and fear of local dentists. She counted herself beautiful and didn't think of her teeth very much, which were hardly visible full-face in the mirror, but men were put off by them. Inadequately dressed for the cold, fashion first, she was in a cute Japanese skirt, French tights and a schoolgirl jacket, a mash reflecting her interest in the Tokyo look.

She was a lonely person. Of late she had no one to meet and so on Sundays like this went out on her own. Her one pleasure was shopping and today she was going to view a warm outerwear coat from her favourite emporium in Causeway Bay, a fur trimmed, diamanté-buttoned jacket which had stood on display last

week. She owned a coat, a long purple puffer coat of the kind mainlanders wear, shapeless and in parts worn to a loathsome shine, which she had grown to hate as a teenager and never wore now.

Last year, at the end of a very lonely Sunday, someone on a street corner had evangelised her about God and Jesus. From then on she had new purpose attending a Baptist church, an airy place where most of the congregation wore dull clothes although the priest's gowns were fine. She was given a bible with gilt edging and expected to understand the inexplicable old testament prophets of the Holy Land in nightly reading. But when things got to the stage of baptism – they would robe her in a white gown, seize her by the shoulders and plunge her into a tank of cold water – she got cold feet and stopped attending. It was a foreign religion, foreign to Chinese culture, she decided.

Having stood in the cold for twenty minutes, in a fit of impatience Dolly began to walk. She didn't like being on foot in her neighbourhood, which she considered unsightly, and in the minibus usually kept her eyes closed but she knew the way well enough after twenty years.

Unusual though it was to walk to the MTR something else unusual lay in wait. At the usually closed Civic Hall half way down the hill the double doors were open and an A-frame stood outside on the pavement. She stopped to read it.

LUNAR NEW YEAR
NIGHT PARADE
DANCE AUDITIONS TODAY 4PM

Chinese New Year was a month away and the Night Parade was the main event of the public holiday, much loved by Hong Kongers and overseas visitors alike, overblown and colourful as Hong Kong could be overblown and colourful. Floats sailed the mile down Nathan Road and came out before packed grandstands at the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront. Comparisons were sometimes made with Mardi Gras for exuberance and scale. To Dolly's knowledge her district had never provided a dance troupe. Could some territory-wide selection process have always existed, decades in the rotation, to finally visit Tsz Wan Shan now?

Carefully she walked up the steps to the entrance. It wasn't a very big place. In the dark interior a sharp-faced janitor was scraping two chairs across the floor. Two men stood to the side where a pile of costumes was slung across two banquet chairs. Walking again along the pavement, she wondered about auditioning herself and her insides began to flutter.

She walked with hands together, head high, a little unsteady as if lacking a man's supporting arm, with something of the vulnerability of a little old lady. In typical fashion two minibuses whizzed past, one behind the other, just as the MTR station came into sight.

Holding her own

The boutique carrying the coat was one of a hundred or so crammed into the first and second floors of a commercial building, otherwise leased out to high street shops on the ground floor and to office space. It was her favourite place. Though goods were cheaply made and the shoppers had no money, it was in its way the pre-eminent place for buying Korean or Japanese import clothing. It was the sort of place Hong Kong was good at. No quarter was given though. Shoppers, most of them young and female, had to fight for elbow room and there were no changing rooms. The aisles were tiny and a distinct fire risk. The young go-getting entrepreneurs tenanted these cubicles were much in Dolly's respect.

She had to watch every dollar she spent. Her salary was fifteen thousand Hong Kong dollars a month. Nine she gave to her mother for her keep and to help with the government rent; travel and lunch at the work canteen took another two; and four remained – not a great deal for every sort of expenditure short and long term.

The coat remained on the rack at the same price of four hundred Hong Kong dollars (forty pounds): grey fabric, fake fur-trim collar, diamanté-buttons down the front, in length more a jacket than coat. She removed her sixth-form jacket and tried it on before a mirror half-obscurd by other racks of clothes in the centre of the tiny musty boutique where the owner sat on a stool and two other shoppers jostled her for space. But she didn't buy. Instead the next hour went to touring the

boutiques on both floors window-shopping. Then she took the escalator to the ground floor where a chill wind blew in from the street and walked up the High Street to find somewhere warm to have lunch.

Sad memories

The canteen restaurants in Hong Kong are of a local style with roots in the *cha cha ting* culture of old Hong Kong. Inside these places it is about as busy as McDonald's and the tables are about as clean, with staples like pork chop in tomato sauce and curry brisket. The average customer may eat quickly and go but for others these are places to sit a while. A modest family, glad to be out of the house, may make an occasion of it and go for fancier menu items. Burners can be set up and one option is to self-cook a selection of meats and vegetables in soup.

Dolly found such a canteen restaurant on the first-floor of a commercial building down the road. Once on the staircase the driving cold wind disappeared and it was warmer. Inside it was quiet and pleasantly lit, at Sunday lunchtime emptier than could be expected any other day of the week. There was no queue and she ordered BBQ pork and rice and Hong Kong milk tea at the cashier's desk, took her chit to the service counter, was served by an adolescent in a chef's hat who snatched her ticket and then produced a tray, then made her way through the grid of fixed seating to a corner where she could sit with her back against the wall.

When she was a little girl and her father was alive, before his death to cancer some ten years ago, she had been taken by him to the Night Parade and she had never forgotten it. There were marvellous floats to enjoy, entertainers, and two sorts of costume dragon, the small ones that ran close to the railings to give the spectators a sensation, the enormous one that arrived at the end animated by at least ten young men, rearing up high as a building. But a terror had come on her as she watched the dance troupes. These troupes, each made up of gliding spinning princessy individuals in colourful costumes, came between the floats. Just as she begun personifying with these girls, having dreams of being a dancer, a contrary premonition struck her like a bus. Nothing of that kind could ever be, because she was a tempestuous little person who had tantrums, who got angry easily and

was too sensitive. Her twelve-year-old heart told her this mercilessly. She remembered pulling at her father's sleeve with both hands to gain his attention. Like the movie stars of the day, he, her father, was a chain-smoker. Cigarette in mouth, handsome, he had had his eye on a near-naked float queen sailing by twenty feet up, with whom he had somehow managed to make eye contact. 'Do you think I could be in the parade one day?' she'd asked him plaintively, almost in tears. 'Why not?' he'd answered vaguely, watching the float queen, then abruptly, in the way he had, he had turned his attention full on her blanking the float queen. 'Yes, darling, of course. You're prettier than all these little tarts.' But, to her, they hadn't been tarts, only privileged lucky girls and she was shocked by the certainty that she'd never be among them. Her premonition had been right. There had never been any dancing. She'd never been to a disco. Like an undiscovered princess she was ill-used by the world, still waiting to be saved by a handsome prince or tycoon.

Rehearsal

In hope and sick with fear Dolly showed up to audition. Outside the Civic Hall now was a queue of girls in loose track suits over leggings, styles obviously more professional than Dolly's outfit of the morning. Among these girls she recognised a counter girl from a nearby baker that sold cheap sugar rolls and a girl who worked at the MTR station, whom Dolly passed every morning at the turnstiles standing in uniform pointlessly urging people to proceed.

They were calling girls in one at a time and asking them to dance to a popular Canto-pop song of the season. Those queueing moved their hips in slovenly rhythm to this music emerging through the doors, even singing snatches of the lyrics. Dolly took an instant dislike to the song and went on her phone, which was a fairly new model as was paramount. She just didn't care for popular music. Perhaps she was an oddball but the pipings and trumpeting of modern classical music, when she caught a few notes, were more to her taste: jarring, discordant, stark notes which somehow involved her existence more than Canto-pop frippery. Quite recently, as a cure for loneliness and in obedience of her

artistic side, she had learned the Chinese *zither* for fulfilment. A strict old lady attached to the school of music taught her. In a little music room they sat together. The *zither* was a stringed instrument sat over like a piano and plucked by thumb and finger picks. The music it made belonged to the Beijing Imperial Court, to tranquil settings in enclosed courtyards where tea was taken from fine Chinese ceramics, to old-fashioned brocaded clothes, to clogs and foot binding. She attended lessons and practised diligently and the old lady admitted she had talent, though it was too late for her to catch up and ever be really good. Then Dolly finished with the *zither*, utterly and completely, because it was an instrument too cumbersome and expensive to have at home, because she couldn't afford the lessons and most of all because there was no one but the teacher taking any interest in her recitals.

The queue shortened as girls were called inside. At last it was Dolly's turn. She was all nerves now.

Inside the hall the sharp faced janitor she had seen before ran the music from a black box amplifier. Instructing the choreography was a man of fifty, a Chinese man wearing corduroy trousers from Europe or America, rather majestically smoking a cigarette, a full ash-tray sat on the amplifier. 'Just dance as you like for a minute, could you?' he told Dolly civilly and the music recommenced.

Unable to decide whether to take her shoes off, she danced with them on. The floor was of polished wood. She did her best to extemporise a dance but even a simple boogie movement from the disco hall was outside her ken and her coordination all over the place. Once the dance instructor tapped the end of his baton on the floor in impatient emphasis of the beat. All at once the music stopped and the janitor called the next girl.

Going out onto the pavement, Dolly wasn't sure what to do with herself. But Sunday had already expired, night fallen, the temperature as cold than ever.

Family

These estates in Tsz Wan Shan were part of public housing of the sixties and seventies, hailed as a great improvement on the old-fashioned designs of old and an adequate response to a rapidly growing population, though some had to be demolished and rebuilt in the nineties. Dolly's family had moved across from China when she was eleven, from a village in Guangdong. A happy transition in many ways for a family used to much less. The two bedrooms, gas cooker in the kitchen, hot water in the shower room and air-con boxes in the windows made good living.

Dolly had the same way of washing as when she arrived from Guangdong. Even in a five-star hotel (men had taken her to a few) she sat in the shower tray or bath and washed her hair with a single bucket of water.

Her family, Chinese to the last, were not a thriving family or one of close affections. They had undergone the same kind of deterioration and inadequate steps of maintenance as the estate they lived in.

Dolly's mother was not the woman she had been in Guangdong or before her husband's untimely death. Time had turned her into a bulky shapeless old woman and no vestiges remained of any former beauty, instead her face was unsymmetrical and bloated and her teeth were those of an old hag. It was her peasant genes that had set in now she was fifty. Her legs no longer supported her faithfully and were bandaged at the local clinic once a week. By nature short tempered, everything annoyed her, yet she found herself living in fear of her own children, her sons Tsien and Yuen, while still capable of acting the old tyrant before Dolly.

The eldest, Tsien, in some sense head of family, was not a badly built or unhandsome boy but the world was against him. Arriving in Hong Kong halfway through his teens had messed everything up. He lagged behind locals at school in this refined, elitist territory where education was everything. His father died and he was forced to drop out and find work. The second brother, Yuen, was his shadow, a follower but in some ways meaner. Neither had got on in recent years, well and truly at the bottom end of the economy. Getting the better of people usually involved some tale of physical assault or swindling.

Now Tsien was getting married to a mainlander. He intended to bring her to live in Hong Kong and since there wouldn't be room in the apartment he wanted his mother and sister to go, disappear. It was un-Chinese but that was what he was

demanding. Yuen could remain but mother and daughter must get rehoused, though that was quite impossible.

His mother's head spun. Sometimes she thought her son was just frightening her and baiting her out of spite and would not force through his demands. She understood what it was to bully, being one herself, though age and infirmity had weakened her. At other times she was terrified of being murdered. On this subject her son had replied coldly, 'What if I lose my liberty. What liberty?'

Dolly, being younger, had made a better transition into Hong Kong, able to enter high school at the proper age. As a result she had got an open university degree and a job in product control, though a very low paid one. She had enjoyed the natural protection of her father while he was alive. Now the hostility of both brothers was severe. Many times in the past they had threatened to prostitute her to their friends. Recently, when arguments broke out, Dolly had to defend herself physically, often coming out with scratches and bruises. In her eyes they read superiority and it drove them mad. It was not a safe home for her.

Midweek

Dolly got to the door at nine pm. She had left in the dark at six am, worked all day and travelled back by MTR and minibus. She knocked to be let in, stood there on the fifth floor open landing cold and tired, holding herself warm, waiting.

One wretched thing was she didn't have a latchkey of her own, even though she contributed a substantial part of the rent. This curb on her freedom, depending always on her mother to open the door for her, to be in, not to be asleep, had crept on into adulthood, a daily injustice, but her controlling mother flew into terrible rages if challenged.

She came now on her bad legs, muttering about being disturbed, and opened the latch, leaving Dolly to swing the door open herself, as her mother turned away without making a greeting.

The brothers were ready to eat. Tsien was wearing a sleeveless jacket and old corps boots. He was the tallest in the household, his good looks afforded him to take a sour look, and the family unconsciously let him do most of the talking

and decide what subject was uppermost. The younger Yuen was also there. Mother came in with a trotter and offal hotpot she had cooked. The living room was a cheerless oblong room with peeling wallpaper, a stained ceiling and a barred window at one end. Chopsticks clicked against rice bowls as the brothers and mother began to eat in noisy fashion.

‘Mother’s cooking,’ said Tsien sardonically, though in fact the boys always came home for supper.

While the others ate around the table Dolly took her meals on the unpadded bench before the television – another source of misery for her. This was an arrangement that had its roots in the past. In their life here, Dolly had sometimes left the table rather than eat with her family. Sometimes also when she and her brothers quarrelled her mother had separated them. Also her brothers had driven her from the table on many occasions. But Dolly could never be used to it.

The brothers had been at Lee’s apartment all day. Lee had recently lost his mother after losing his father five years earlier and now had the family apartment to himself. Tsien was well aware that his mother was a busy-body dying of curiosity to know how Lee junior was living and also that she thoroughly loathed the Lee family, alive or dead.

‘You want to know about Lee,’ he said coldly. ‘Lee is Lee. Better for having no parents. He could make good money on his spare room.’

His mother frowned.

‘He still can’t get a woman to look at him though.’ The brothers laughed.

‘That family was not born for daylight,’ his mother pronounced savagely, but quickly regretted it as her son trained such a look on her as to make her recoil, a look which said with the utmost scorn, ‘Look at your own appearance!’

Tsien let silence fall then began in a nasty tone to hound his mother. ‘Have you been to the office yet?’ You know the address. Do I have to lead you by the hand?’

‘My legs . . . I’m not going to the office.’

‘Oh, you are. And you’re taking Cinderella with you.’

Dolly, in a huff of her own, went to finish her rice in the kitchen but Tsien followed her there and cuffed her over the head. ‘Haughty bitch!’ he said. She shrank against the wall. ‘Don’t turn away from me, Cinderella. Move out!’ Tsien shouted this last order right into her face, as he’d done hundreds of times in the

last month. 'Move out!' Dolly normally put up a good fight, if slender and weak she could scream and vituperate, but now her defences deserted her and she was dumb. Tsien dealt her a chop across the back, she reeled, her forearm struck the boiler pipe, the bowl left her grasp bounced against the porcelain sink and its contents sprayed on the floor. '

'Move out and take mum, otherwise I'll throw *you* out of the window.'

'Defenestrate, I think it's called,' said Yuen from the table.

Tsien returned to table, hung a cigarette in his mouth but did not light it. Since his father's death his mother had become crazy about smoking, one thing on which she remained indomitable. Yuen smirked silently.

On the floor in the kitchen, Dolly's phone began to ring with the opening chords of something by Johann Strauss. A woman with a quick and cold voice said, 'Dolly Ng? Sorry, we don't have a place for you, we've enough girls,' and rang off before she could be asked why.

Dreams

Dolly's sex life was this. She had frigged off for years, sometimes obsessively, and lost her virginity only recently after she decided to have herself photographed professionally and go online. After a period of saving she booked a photo-shoot. For some reason the photographer put her in a gold-hemmed Grecian gown, attached hair extensions to the back of her head and took shots of her on a swing holding a tennis racket. She uploaded these pictures on a site connecting Asian girls and foreign men. She hoped for someone rich and kind, a banker or financier and lost her virginity to a cultivated Australian man who took her to Sydney on holiday. But he was old, played the field and was not interested in marriage so she dropped him. Next she began seeing a good-looking Singaporean man in banking, who was married. She fell pregnant by this man and, in an age-old predicament, hoped he would marry her and divorce his wife. He parried and finally mocked her when she became desperate. On their last meeting she had screamed hysterically and he had coldly walked away. Then came the abortion, which she

had to arrange by herself and pay for, telling no one – a dark period, somehow endured.

After this last assault by Tsien, Dolly went to work the next day and tears started in her eyes to think she had no safe home to go to any more. In despair she realised she would have to sleep on the floor here. Her company occupied a second-floor laboratory in a commercial building and she was a batch tester for medicinal herbs. It was a strict and orderly place. Little conversation flowed, even at the half-hour lunch provided in the lunch-room. Except for the managers in their tiny offices, everybody was on their feet all day at their work-stations. Being a mainland Chinese company, the hours of work were those of the mainland, so the weekend did not begin until 2pm on Saturday.

Dolly realised that if she worked late she would eventually be left alone in the lab and if she left early in the morning to have breakfast before the Assistant Manager arrived to open up, no one would be the wiser, particularly as no member of staff was likely to have the slightest suspicion of what she was doing. At lunchtime she went out to buy something to eat later. By eight o'clock she found herself alone in the lab. 'So this is now my home,' she said to herself sorrowfully.

But it wasn't as bad as expected. Free from any danger the lab started to feel like a little sanctuary of peace. It was like owning a bedroom and being able to close the door and shut the world out - a far off dream for Dolly. With the lights off beautiful moonlight became apparent, streaming in through the big oblong windows; the commercial estate outside was asleep, silent but for the ambient roar of twenty-four hour Hong Kong. Masculine wooden chests along the walls contained herbs and extracts from around Asia: ginseng from Thailand, dried mushroom from Guangdong. And a dry pungent aroma was produced by traces of Wolfberry, Chinese Goldthread, Licorice Root, Ginger Root and Jasmine in the air. She ate her supper then put her head on the tile floor, bunching up faintly acidic lab coats for a pillow. Her nerves relaxed she lay on her back, looked up at the high ceiling and let herself dream.

There was a small trove of hopes she could carefully unpack. Little tickling ideas and fancies could fly around the room like fairies. Also, perhaps, her brothers would go under a bus and be killed. Then there was the night parade. Perhaps some illness or epidemic among the dance-troupe would necessitate her being called up. She let her mind fall where it wanted. To be in a team, doing

something artistic which brought status and validation. How she needed something to budge her life on, something to give hope now she was all but homeless.

After the first night, she spent successive nights sleeping in the lab. She returned home when she knew her brothers were out, to change clothes and wash. Her mother was incurious about her absence.

Fierce longing

On Sunday she returned to the Civic Hall. Perhaps there would be a list tacked up with her name on it and the woman on the phone had got it wrong. Perhaps the suave dance instructor would arrive, wave to her, call her over, remember her. The doors were open. It was already a more familiar place than last week. Still, as a precaution she first stood on the opposite pavement unobserved.

The dance instructor did arrive, majestic, wrapped in a big scarf, sweeping straight inside without seeing her. Soon, music came out, accordion and guitar, Mediterranean, Dolly decided. It was fierce and passionate, wild and exotic and in this landscape of grey Chinese tower blocks stirring.

She saw the baker's girl arrive in leotards. The MTR girl in a slovenly track suit sloped in. Hot coals of jealousy burned in Dolly's chest. How it hurt not to be selected, to miss out as the adventure before these girls took its first steps.

The doors swung shut from the inside but remained ajar. Dolly crossed the road, shuffled up the steps keeping out of sight as much as possible. But there was no need to worry about being spotted, the hall was already gripped in frantic concentration. The choreographer's echoing voice instructed on the routine. *Step forward, step sideways, hold the hem high, rotate, chin up, shimmy left, and right, glide and rotate and smile.* Twenty girls in three lines were attempting to follow all this. The enchanting music was obviously bemusing the stupid things. The suave instructor struck his baton on the floor, clearly unimpressed with the lot of them, who were looking dumbly at each other not at him. Hold the hem up high? We have no hem, they were miming to each other. Dolly recorded it all, ten

minutes worth, on her phone, grabbed a dress – there was a pile of Spanish looking ones near the door – and ran off.

Dangerous or innocent fantasy

The lab would close at the end of the week for the long holiday and in the meantime she intended to rehearse. Maybe it didn't fully make sense but that's what she would do.

First, a good look at the dress in the privacy of the lab. It was a fascinating and grubby object: light yellow silk, Spanish in a sort of Disneyfied way. There were cerise ruches at the shoulders and waist, a hem of disproportionate circumference, yokel-style lacing up the front, sleeves puffed out like a conquistador's, and, close up, stains and questionable stitching. By day it went stuffed in an unused cupboard and by night she wore it in full glory

The glass doors of the fixing chemical cupboards sufficed for mirrors. The aisle between the counters sufficed for a stage. The mirror confirmed she had the right figure for a dancer: the right kind of long legs, slender arms, slightest of chests. As she danced she imagined herself in the heart of the parade, in the troupe. The flared hem perfectly lent itself to the instruction to 'hold the hem high'. She swished the dress back and forth and stamped her feet. For precious time she could believe she was a real dancer, free from the humiliations of a miserable life, and if she crashed into a few pieces of office furniture causing a few bottles to totter and fall, she stopped, swept up the mess and practised again.

New Year holiday

The New Year holiday came on, a ten-day break on the mainland, a ten-day break for the lab. The brothers took themselves themselves by train to Guangdong to stay with relatives so the eldest could canoodle with his fiancée. Dolly returned to Tsz Wan Shan to sleep. She and her mother would see the Year of the Horse out

together, alone for a week in each other's company, and the Night Parade would bring the holiday to an end.

For Chinese households this page of the calendar was marked for a fever of 'spring cleaning'. Homes must be cleaned through and through and then visited by a Chinese dragon to complete the job by frightening off any lingering bad spirits and dispersing any vapours of ill luck. As usual, the management office put up a notice in the lobby detailing the New Year Dragon's schedule through the estate.

Instead of cleaning, Dolly's depressed mother used the first days of the holiday to screech and shout on the phone at her mainland relatives, expressing in long diatribes her outrage at her bullying sons who threatened to make her homeless. Dolly did a bit of cleaning but without much heart for it either.

On the morning of the dragon's visit, Chinese symbols crashed and drums beat throughout different parts of the estate in continuous noise. Then, after hours of waiting, the moment of drama finally arrived for the families of the fifth-floor landing. The dragon arrived on the landing and the symbol-clashing became frenzied and truly frightening, enough to roust any bad spirit, conjured up by a handful of well-trained schoolboys. In the living room, Dolly didn't know where to put herself, shuddering inwardly with incontinent orgasms of release. Her mother, in a cranky mood, would not open the door for the dragon. So while neighbours got the full treatment of the dragon marauding through each room, their apartment did not get its yearly anointing.

A phase of reflective peace came upon the apartment. Neither felt outspoken for once. Her mother softened. Dolly, sitting in one of her brothers' chairs, ate at table with her mother. Mother and daughter shared memories of happier times. He had been a rascal but her mother could be very sentimental about her dead husband. Dolly started to come out of her shell. She had more appetite than she usually did. She listened to music, filling the bedroom with sound, impossible while her brothers were there. She had come across some Russian orchestral music from Leningrad, modern and sharp, which was somehow to her taste. She splashed out on a good fashion magazine and devoured it slowly on her bed with intense interest. When there was a programme she wanted to watch on television she went right ahead and watched it. She had always like black and white films just as much as colour ones. For long hours she lay on the triple bunk-bed – hers was the top shelf – and looked at her phone. She positively existed on the

Facebook pages of certain actresses, ballerinas and models. She loved the whole world of Cosplay. She wandered from page to page through these sites that were part of her existence.

Then the holiday was shattered. In preparation for lunch Dolly had only wiped down the table which was usually left dirty. Finicky perhaps and her mother noticed it and took offence. Unaware of the anger growing in her mother's chest, Dolly helped herself to rice from the rice cooker after her mother put it on the table. Her mother said sharply to her, 'Wait until you are offered.' Dolly froze. Her face twitched and wounded tears appeared in her eyes. Why did this stamp of inferiority, so unfair and hurtful, always fall on her?

'Don't play the princess with me,' her mother snarled.

'You are always so horrible to me,' Dolly said.

'How dare you think you are better than me, you little bitch.'

'You don't love me!'

In hysteria Dolly ran out of the apartment. She found herself walking half mad in the wintry neighbourhood. This unsightly neighbourhood in which everyone was poor, everyone pinched. Without love, what was there but hopelessness and despair? She came to a small sitting-out area and under the gazebo a homeless woman was already in occupation, crazed and alone. Feeling the terror of equivalence, Dolly ran in the opposite direction. She returned home shivering. Her mother let her in and they did not speak. Nothing really had happened. Her mother watched television, Dolly shut the bedroom door and climbed under the blankets on the third tier.

Long night

Dolly longed to marry. It was the only way out of the apartment, the only route to one day having her own bedroom. Until then she was stuck, to grow old with no future. But no one had asked her to marry them. Was it her teeth which resulted in this dissonance between her expectations of the world and the world's expectations of her? What was Hong Kong? Not a place for arranged marriages, no country or village community life here, a small territory with a mass of people.

Hong Kong men were go-ahead, focused on money and business, making partnerships with the opposite sex along the way as part of their drive to succeed. Her brother had got himself a distant relative from Guangdong to become betrothed to, but men could do that. So many girls in Hong Kong were left on the shelf. Old China had so many happy stories of easy living. Hong Kong, it was like perpetually living in the teeth of a crocodile picking scraps. Hong Kong, part of Cantonese speaking Guangdong, international, Facebook open unlike on mainland. The Hong Kong residency card conferring some status, being something mainlanders still sought.

She had these confused thoughts lying in the dark bedroom, eyes open. Then she stopped thinking and it felt like her soul had wandered out of the window and was floating alone in the cold universe.

If she stayed fit and in work her mother could hardly push her away, facing a despairing future of her own and needing her daughter's income. Perhaps her mother had planned it that way. It would not suit her for her daughter to marry. Dolly was sorry for her mother, who was a foreigner in this city and would die one, somebody who could no more cope with life in Hong Kong than could a donkey.

Then from somewhere an injection of strength entered her body, a kernel of self-confidence deep inside and the universe began to feel warmer. She could endure and show them all.

Before sleep she forgave her mother and her brothers, forgave herself her temper, pledged to try to be warmer to her mother, more tolerant of her brothers in the New Year.

Temple visit

In the morning a special feeling, New Years', like Christmas Day for Westerners; the atmosphere in the crisp air beyond the window different, already vibrating with the imminent family gatherings, the red envelopes containing newly printed money for excited children, the big long happy meals. Dolly and her mother

exchange the traditional greeting of *Kung Hei Fat Choi* - Happy New Year – over breakfast. For Dolly love and hate at one.

At dusk she went out, dressed particularly, in a gingham dress, poppy socks, a band over her hair – things her father liked – and a *Hello Kitty* rucksack on her shoulders containing the Spanish dress and her despicable old puffer coat.

She walked to the local temple arm in arm with her father, or so she imagined. The queue was long and it was calming to stand there, everyone patiently waiting their turn, taking part in a ritual of the season, burning incense and saying a prayer for ancestors.

Cheerful market carts stood outside the temple selling glutinous rice balls, another essential of the day. The atmosphere around these carts was festive, steeped in Chinese tradition. Dolly ordered two sticks. ‘There we are, miss, hot and sticky, good luck to you,’ said the vendor in heart-warming tones. Eating as she walked, Dolly made her way towards Tsim Tsa Tsui where the Night Parade was hours away.

Be brave!

Nathan Road, wide and long, is at right angles to the waterfront. On this special evening its whole length was closed to traffic early and large crowds had been building up waiting for the eight o’clock start. In places there were platforms for television crews and up towards the waterfront the temporary grand-stands were in place, whose seats had been sold out on a single day in December. Along the route parents stood patiently, trying to keep their children amused, a certain happy weariness in the air, on what had already been a long day.

When Dolly arrived she had changed from the gingham dress into the Spanish one and wore her long puffer coat to cover it. She worked her way through the dense crowd. Luckily a rabbit hole opened up and like Alice in Wonderland she squeezed down it to the front. Here in long occupation adults hung over the crowd-control railings and children peered through the bars. Along the kerbs, bright hoardings from the sponsors dressed the route. The road itself was swept and deserted but for stewards in high-glow outfits stalking around with

nothing much to do. A father and child made Dolly some room and the child, tired but perking up, offered her one of his sticky rice balls. The father gave her a kindly smile and if he noticed yellow silk under her coat he said nothing. Dolly stood wringing her hands in an uncomfortable dimension of panic and fear.

The parade started on the dot of eight as the first extraordinary floats lumbered down the road, separated by entertainers: African drummers came through; individual Western opera singers; weird figures on stilts; giant blow-up cartoon figures who swayed as they moved propelled by little legs. There was so much to take in, more than Dolly could absorb.

As usual a big float came by from Ocean Park and one equally lavish from Disney World, the two entertainment firms vying with each other for top honours and the crowd decided it in their applause. Okinawa barrel drums next, then the Cathay Pacific girls in their uniforms doing a can-can.

The Tsz Wan Shan troupe came quite early, ten minutes in. They were coming down the road in a blizzard of yellow, twenty spinning girls in their Spanish costumes, chased by a virtually full-sized Spanish galleon, male conquistadors from some other team on top waving swords. Squeezed to nothing was the janitor and his music box on its trolley just keeping ahead of the prow of the ship.

As they got closer, coming square, Dolly saw them in full. Every dancer had the same sheer pearlescent tights and the same black ballet shoes with crossed straps. Their hair was drawn up identically in a chignon with a fabric brooch of orange rose petals; for make-up the same black lashes, shimmering blue lids and rosy foundation.

Step forward, step sideways, hold the hem high, look over your left shoulder, rotate, chin up, shimmy left, and right, glide and rotate and smile. They were dancing for their lives, these girls, their billowing dresses filling the whole width of the road, dancing in almost no space, transformed into goddesses all, these slovenly girls who had begun rehearsals in the Civic Hall. If Dolly could just join, she could hide herself inside that tight formation, unmatched shoes and socks and all. The troupe drew level in a squall of yellow, the Spanish galleon loomed high. Summoning up all her resolve Dolly flung off her coat somehow vaulted the barrier and plunged into the dance.

Dolly felt complete terror, out of body experience, no control of her body, blood in her ears blocking the accordion music, and the beginnings of exultation.

If the phalanx of dancers could have ejected her it would have but it couldn't stop. This alien girl was determined and somehow knew the moves and wore the dress. So the phalanx absorbed her for a minute. The baker's girl looked daggers at Dolly and almost tripped for the distraction.

Unfortunately the janitor pushing the music box missed nothing. His chance to intervene came fifty yards on at a sharp left turn which brought each float to a momentary stop, required to wheeled around ninety degrees before going on towards the paid grandstand seats in the final triumphal stretch, televised under floodlights. At this stop he furiously waved over one of the stewards while lunging at Dolly among the girls and grabbing her by the arm.

'This girl is not one of the dancers,' he shouted to the closest steward. The girls in the troupe were all now glaring at Dolly with hatred. They had rehearsed and rehearsed, submitted to the instructor's shouting, his familiarities, his picking of favourites. The performance was their stratospheric reward not to be shared with an interloper. 'I am,' said Dolly hopelessly, trying to wrest free.

Two alerted stewards marched up. 'Where's your badge?' said one of them. 'Everyone on the parade will have a badge.' It was true, in the folds of the girls' dresses were badges, all but Dolly's. 'Get out of the line,' she was told.

Someone opened a side barrier and the stewards pulled her roughly away. At the same time, with a lurch the floats began to move, like a conveyor belt resuming operation, and the troupe went back into its dance rather than be crushed by the inexorable Spanish galleon. In a moment the whole shipload had gone on.

Rough-handed to a help station in a side street where volunteer helpers were assisting fainers, Dolly screamed 'don't touch me' to the person who came up assuming she needed treatment. She had had enough of being pushed around. He backed away having plenty of other people to deal with. The stewards were more reluctant to leave but after a moment they too evaporated, uncertain how to deal with her. She was free to walk away and did so, proudly and not quite herself, glad to leave now.

Psychic survival

Dazed, cold and flushed at the same time, Dolly walked with no clear idea where she was going. Two blocks away Hong Kong was the same as ever, even on New Years Eve: roaring buses in traffic; the stench from alleys crammed with food bins and kitchen ventilators; commercial buildings of weather-stained concrete with their pipes hanging out; and on the pavements people careless with their elbows and shoulder-bags, these metropolitan blanched Hong Kong people who exercised no ceremony with each other. The district around the parade felt sucked out and desolate, the streets strange and creepy and Dolly walked fast on the pavement close to the building line like someone very late for a fancy dress party.

She came to a point of stopping and turning back, totally lost, when she noticed an opening in the prospect and realised she had nearly reached the waterfront. The place was somewhere far east of Tsim Sha Tsui. As it seemed a destination she went on, crossed a big highway by a pedestrian underpass and came to the promenade along the sea wall. Nobody was out except somebody fishing behind the wall at the water's edge – he must have hurdled a fence to get down there – his rod at forty-five degrees and cigarette smoke escaping from the back of his head and evaporating in the night air.

She leaned into the sea wall and stopped. The black water of the channel, slithery, gloopy and elastic, reflected the city lights of the opposite bank, part of which, off to the right, was the prime Hong Kong of a million postcards, a familiar fairytale sight.

She fetched herself up to sit on the embankment wall, looked at the milky urban sky with wet eyes and said, not quite out loud, 'Daddy, I was in the parade after all. You saw it.' Then she sat still and the skin of her bare slender arms was all goosebumps, cold as ice.

The aroma of the cigarette, that odd-bod fishing alone on New Years' Day, some loner like herself. She was attracted to that person at the water's edge.

Such a spark of pride glowed in her body. Who else could have done what she had just done? Who would have dared? It had been mad and desperate and yet she had carried it off. She had danced with the troupe in the parade and though he had stopped it the janitor could not very well say it had not happened. She had

span when they span, stepped when they stepped. She had done it, defied the selection process, danced right in the heart of parade with the cheering crowds in her ears. Of that she had had a good taste. And if, among all the photographs on the web that would be posted, one caught her, even if it was at the moment of her scandalous ejection, she would put it on Facebook as an indisputable permanent record. Let her mother and her brothers know how strong her will.

She wept deeply, as her situation merited, though not altogether hopelessly, and when she had cried she told herself she would buy that fur-trim diamanté-buttoned coat from the boutique, buy it tomorrow and wear it here, and that brought her a bit of cheer. She would walk on this promenade. Men would admire and desire her. The old coat was well and truly ditched anyway, in her rucksack sitting somewhere on the kerb. Street sweepers would pick it up for the skip and good riddance.

It must have turned midnight for suddenly the fireworks began. Barges, moored invisibly on the water, heaved up their heavy artillery for fifteen minutes and the roofs of some of the buildings on the Hong Kong side were also firing points. Each explosion of light was followed closely by popping and snapping sounds and the water doubled every pattern. The IFC2 sky-scraper, the tallest of the cluster of offices off right, began to sparkle as fountains of light ribboned off it from every tenth level. The sky became a frothing mix of pinks, lavenders and yellows. When all the visual revelry had finished the words *Happy New Year 2015* came up in sparklers on the front face. The Year of the Goat was in.

At the waterside the fisherman began on move. He threw his rod over the fence, climbed over himself, then scrambled up the embankment. He lit a cigarette and more aromatic smoke wafted in the night air. 'Hey there,' he said to Dolly a few yards away. His face was in shadow. He had thickset shoulders and a small head. '*Kung Hei Fat Choi*,' he added, his voice pleasant, Guangdong Cantonese.

'*Kung Hei Fat Choi*,' Dolly said weakly, a little shy.

Before she knew it he had laid his coat across her shoulders very delicately. 'You need this more than I do, don't you miss?' he said. It was very much a man's coat, heavy, smoke-infused, large and warming.

They looked at each other, strangers without embarrassment, and in the silence for some reason he laughed with a rich chuckling sound. Perhaps he

thought they were certainly two oddballs. Questions could be asked of both of them.

‘Going home soon?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Dolly replied.

The man smiled as if that were a very happy answer, picked up his rod, began to whistle an old Chinese song and turned off along the embankment. When he was a bit away he revolved a shoulder and called back, ‘the coat is yours,’ and Dolly said in a choked voice, ‘thank you so much, it’s so warm.’

‘I’ll bring it back tomorrow,’ she said, louder and clearer.

‘All right,’ he replied with a friendly wave of the arm.