

THE PARADE

Sunday morning

Hong Kong 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. The people of Tsz Wan Shan shivered behind uninsulated walls and cold windows. Theirs was a place of ageing public housing estates on the lower slopes of Lion Rock Country Park and this is where Dolly lived.

She was standing at the bus stop, feet together, quietly freezing, waiting for a minibus. These minibuses tear around the estates conveying residents to and from the MTR station and this morning no weak roar had yet announced one's arrival. Instead the air seemed steeped in the essence of Sunday morning peace. She waited and when a small bird hopped across the road, took flight over the basketball courts, glided between two looming old towers – both in need of repair – and became a speck in the sky escaping in the direction of Lion Rock, Dolly's heart was with it.

She was dressed carefully, loved fashion and the cold hadn't stopped her coming out in a skirt from Japan, French tights and a schoolgirlish blazer. She was thirty-two and unmarried. She was slim, white-skinned and had an empresses high-bridged nose. Without buck teeth she could have been a model. Her teeth had gone awry in childhood and were not easily fixed, requiring money and a good dentist. Full-face in the mirror, Dolly scarcely saw them but over the years they had counted against her in the eyes of boys.

She was a lonely person. Of late she went out on Sundays on her own. Her pleasure was shopping for clothes and today she was going to look again at a warm jacket from her favourite emporium in Causeway Bay, a fur-trimmed, diamanté-buttoned article which stood on display in a little boutique on the first floor. Her own coat at home was a long purple puffer coat of the kind mainlanders wear, shapeless and worn to a shine in the contact areas, which she had grown to hate as a teenager and never wore.

Having stood in the cold for twenty minutes, Dolly began to walk with a little mince towards the MTR. She didn't like being on foot in her unsightly neighbourhood. In the minibus she often closed her eyes and dreamed. But she knew the way enough.

Something unusual lay in wait. Half-way down the slope the double-doors of the usually closed Civic Hall were open and an A-frame board stood outside.

DANCE AUDITIONS TODAY 4PM LUNAR NEW YEAR NIGHT PARADE

As well Dolly knew, Chinese New Year was a month away. The Night Parade was the main event of the public holiday, much loved by Hong Kongers and overseas visitors for being overblown and colourful as sometimes Hong Kong could be. 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. Tsz Wan Shan had never provided a dance troupe. Could some territory-wide selection process have always existed, decades in the rotation, to finally fall back here? Dolly wondered.

She came up to the steps and bent in. It wasn't a very big place. In the dark interior a sharp-faced janitor was scraping a chair across the floor. Two men stood talking next to a pile of costumes lying across banquet chairs. Dolly walked on, sensible of her insides fluttering. Could she possibly join the auditions herself?

She had a funny way of walking, head high, legs unsteady; her whole deportment needed a man's supporting arm; she exuded something of the vulnerability of an old lady. Just as the MTR station came into view two minibuses whizzed past one behind the other.

Shopping

The boutique was one of a hundred crammed into the first and second floors of a commercial building near Time Square. The emporium as a whole was the pre-eminent place on Hong Kong for buying Korean or Japanese import clothing and it was the place most important to Dolly. Clothes were cheap but bang up to date, reflecting every new fashion break out. It was the sort of place Hong Kong was good at. The young go-getting entrepreneurs tenanted the cubicles were much in Dolly's respect. No quarter was given among the shoppers, most of them young and female, who had to fight for elbow room and do without changing rooms. The aisles were inadequate and a distinct fire risk.

Dolly's salary was fifteen thousand Hong Kong dollars a month and she had to watch every cent of it. Nine thousand went to her mother to help with food and rent. Travel and lunch at the work canteen sucked off another two. That left four remaining for every sort of personal expenditure short and long term.

The jacket was still there on the rack at its price of four hundred Hong Kong dollars. Made in grey fabric, it had a fake fur-trim collar, those diamanté-buttons down the front and in length it was almost a coat. The owner of the boutique sat on a stool and two other shoppers jostled Dolly for space. She took the jacket off the mannequin and tried it on before a mirror half-obscured by racks of clothes. The very look of it delighted her, but buy it she wouldn't. Instead, keeping her money, she went wandering the two floors. When she was hungry and her feet ached she went to the ground floor and out into the street. It remained cold. Dolly hurried into a nearby eaterie.

Memories

It was a canteen restaurant on the first-floor of a commercial building a hundred yards up the road. Once on the staircase the driving wind disappeared and it felt warmer. Up inside it was quiet and pleasantly lit.

As it was Sunday lunchtime the place was emptier than could be expected any other day of the week. There was no queue at the cashier's desk. Going straight up, Dolly ordered BBQ pork, rice, and milk tea, got her chit and took it to the service counter. Here an adolescent in a chef's hat snatched the chit, turned his

back, and produced a tray with her order on it. Carrying the tray, Dolly made her way through the grid of fixed seating to a corner where she could sit with her back against the wall.

Eating she thought about her father and the Night Parade. When a little girl and her father alive before his death to cancer ten years ago he had taken her and she had never forgotten it. Costume dragons had run up and down the railings giving the spectators a sensation then an enormous one had arrived rearing up magnificently in gold and orange. These were things everybody remembered and talked about. For Dolly her memories were of the dance troupes that twirled by between the floats and her reaction to them. She could remember it now. As her heart filled up with those dancing princesses who were everything she wanted to be, terror came on her. With horrible knowledge for a twelve-year-old she knew she would never be so happy. She was too tempestuous, she had tantrums, people didn't like her.

Crushed by this self-knowledge she pulled at her father's sleeve with both hands. Like the movie stars of the day her father was a chain-smoker. Cigarette in mouth, handsome, he 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 had asked him in tears. 'Why not?' he'd answered vaguely as he watched the float queen, then abruptly, in the way he had, he turned his attention on her. 'Yes, of course, darling, they are only shop girls. What are you crying about?' But, to Dolly, they weren't only shop girls, but regular and governable girls and she was shocked by the certainty she'd never be one of them. And her premonition had been right. There had never been any dancing in her childhood. There had been no discos when she was a teenager. Like an undiscovered princess, to this day she was ill-used by the world, still waiting to be saved by a handsome prince or tycoon.

Rehearsal

In hope and not a small amount of fear, Dolly showed up at 4pm at the Civic Hall. Outside there was a small queue of girls in loose track suits and leggings. Among

these girls she recognised a counter girl from a nearby baker that sold cheap sugar rolls and a girl whom Dolly passed every morning at the MTR turnstiles, standing in uniform urging people to come through.

They were calling girls in one at a time and asking them to dance to a popular Canto-pop song of the season. The music reached the pavement and those queueing moved their hips in lazy rhythm, the odd girl singing a snatch of the lyrics. Dolly didn't like the song and played with her phone, which was at least a fairly new model, imperative in the life of any self-respecting girl in Hong Kong. The queue shortened as girls were called inside. Then came Dolly's turn and she was all nerves.

Inside the sharp faced janitor she had seen before switched on the music from a black box amplifier. Instructing the choreography was a man of fifty, a Chinese man wearing corduroy trousers and smoking a cigarette rather majestically, a full ash-tray balanced on the amplifier. 'Just dance as you like for a minute, could you?' he asked Dolly civilly and the music started again.

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. 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 next girl was called.

On the pavement, Dolly wasn't sure what to do with herself. She felt she'd done badly. She walked away. Suddenly it seemed Sunday was over. Dusk was falling. It was colder than ever.

Midweek

Dolly got home from work at 9 pm. She knocked, stood on the fifth floor open landing and waited.

It was wretched but her mother wouldn't give her a latchkey of her own, even though she paid most of the rent and was now fully an adult. Her mother flew into rage if challenged on the subject.

She could be heard coming slowly to the door on her bad legs, muttering about being disturbed. The latch clicked. Dolly had to open the door herself. Her mother shuffled away back to the kitchen.

The brothers were sitting at table in the living room waiting to eat. Tsien was wearing a sleeveless jacket and old corps boots. He was the tallest in the household, his good looks allowed him to be as sour as he liked and the family unconsciously let him do most of the talking and decide what subject was uppermost. Yuen, two years younger, was also there. The living room was a cheerless oblong space with peeling wallpaper, a stained ceiling and a barred window at one end.

Their mother came in with a trotter and offal hotpot and sat down. They began to eat. Chopsticks clicked against rice bowls in noisy fashion.

‘Ah, mother’s cooking,’ said Tsien sarcastically, though in fact the boys always came home for supper.

While the others ate around the table Dolly ate on the bench before the television – another source of misery to her. This was an arrangement that had its roots in the past. In childhood 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 simply driven her from the table on many occasions.

The brothers had been at Lee’s apartment. Lee had recently lost his mother after losing his father a year before and now tenure of the family apartment was in his name. Tsien was well aware that his mother was a busy-body dying of curiosity to know how Lee junior was living. He knew too that his mother thoroughly loathed the Lee family, dead or alive.

‘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,’ Tsien added and the two brothers laughed.

‘That family was not born for daylight,’ his mother pronounced savagely, but quickly regretted it as her son trained a scornful look on her that said, ‘Look at your own appearance!’

Tsien let silence fall then began in a nasty tone to question his mother. 'Have you been to the housing office yet, mother?' You know the address? Do I have to drag you there?'

'My legs are no good. I'm not going to the office.'

'Oh you are. And you're taking Cinderella with you.'

Dolly, hating her family, went to finish her rice in the kitchen. Tsien followed her there and cuffed her over the head. 'Haughty bitch!' She shrank against the wall. 'Don't turn away from me, Cinderella.'

Tsien shouted right into her face, as he'd done hundreds of times in the last month, 'Move out!' Tsien was marrying a mainland girl. He wanted to move her in and his mother and Dolly out.

Dolly normally put up a good fight. If slender and weak she could still scream and flail her arms but 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.'

'He will, too,' said Yuen from the other room.

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

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 in the troupe, we've enough girls,' and rang off before Dolly could say a word.

Dreams

Dolly went to work the next day and tears started in her eyes because she was not safe in her own home any more. She realised she would be better off sleeping on the floor of her place of work.

The company occupied the second-floor of a commercial building. There was a laboratory and Dolly was one of the batch testers for medicinal herbs. It was a strict and orderly place. The managers sat in tiny offices and the staff stood at work-stations. Little conversation flowed, even in the half-hour provided for lunch at the small canteen. Being a mainland Chinese company the hours of work were those of Beijing, similar to Hong Kong but the weekend did not begin until 2pm on Saturday afternoon. Hong Kong companies did not work any of the weekend.

Dolly knew that if she worked very late she would be alone in the lab. And if she went out early in the morning at breakfast time, before the Assistant Manager arrived to open up, no one would be the wiser that she had never left. At lunchtime she went out to buy something to eat later. By nine o'clock she was alone in the lab. 'So this is now my sleeping place,' she said to herself.

The night wasn't as bad as expected. She was safe from her brothers and the lab felt like a sanctuary of peace. The whole world was temporarily shut out while beautiful moonlight came in through the big oblong windows. The commercial estate outside was quiet, 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. Traces of Wolfberry, Chinese Goldthread and Licorice Root in the air produced the dry pungent aroma she was so familiar with. She ate her supper. She put her head on the wood floor over a bunch of faintly acidic lab coats. Her nerves unwound and relaxed. She lay on her back, looked up at the high ceiling and shy thoughts began to creep forward. There was a small trove of hopes and dreams she carried around in her innermost heart. Now they had their chance. Fancies began to fly around the room like fairies.

Among her dreams was one that her brothers would be killed by the triads or run over by a bus.

Her thoughts turned to dancing for the Night Parade. Could she hope that somehow she would be chosen for the dance-troupe after all? Could she yet dance in the Night Parade and come to a positive turning point in her life? All the new friends she would make. The fact of doing something artistic and of high status. How she needed all of those things.

But before she was asleep she was crying bitterly, mortally scared of what was happening at home.

After the first night Dolly spent successive nights sleeping in the lab. She returned home when she knew her brothers were out, for a quick change of clothes and wash. Her mother was incurious about her absences.

Return

On Sunday she allowed herself be drawn back to the Civic Hall. Perhaps her name would be on a list tacked up to the door and the woman on the phone had got it wrong. Perhaps the suave dance instructor would arrive, remember her and wave her in.

The doors were open. The place felt less unfamiliar than it had last week. As a precaution Dolly began by keeping to the opposite pavement.

The dance instructor did arrive, majestic, wrapped up in a 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, delicious.

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 one of the selected ones, to be missing out as this great undertaking took its first steps.

Someone swung the doors shut from the inside, yet they remained ajar. Dolly crossed the road and went up the steps. There was no need to worry about drawing attention, the hall was already gripped in stunned concentration. The dance instructor's voice boomed instructions and he struck his baton on the floorboards. *Step forward, sideways, hold the hem high, rotate, chin up, shimmy left, right, glide and rotate and smile.* Twenty girls in three lines were attempting to follow this. They could hardly understand the music. The suave instructor was already impatient. The girls looked dumbly at 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.

Rehearsal

The lab would close at the end of the week for the long holiday and in the meantime Dolly intended to rehearse. She admitted to herself that maybe it didn't fully make sense but that was her intention.

First, a good look at the dress in the privacy of the lab. It was made of light yellow silk and was Spanish in a Disneyfied way, in the cerise ruches at the shoulders and waist, the hem of disproportionate circumference, the yokel-style lacing up the front, the sleeves puffed out like a conquistador's. Dolly wore it by night and by day it went stuffed in an unused cupboard.

The glass doors of the fixing chemical cupboards sufficed for mirrors. The aisle between the counters sufficed for a stage. The mirror confirmed Dolly 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 troupe in heart of the parade. The flared hem perfectly lent itself to the instruction to *hold the hem high*. She swished the dress back and forth. She could believe she was a real dancer and she felt glorious. She picked up bruises and upset a few bottles colliding with the heavy cabinets as she swept up and down the lab practising hard.

New Year holiday

The Chinese New Year holiday came on, a ten-day break on the mainland so a ten-day break for the lab. The brothers took themselves off by train to Guangdong where this fiancée her brother was marrying lived. Dolly came home to sleep. She and her mother would see off the Year of the Horse together, alone for a week, and the Night Parade would arrive on the final day of the holiday period.

For Chinese households now was the time for 'spring cleaning'. Homes must be cleaned through and through and then visited by a Chinese dragon to complete the purification, whose job was to frighten off any lingering bad spirits and disperse any last vapours of ill luck that detergent and soap had not budged.

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.

On the morning of the dragon's visit symbols crashed and drums beat throughout 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 and the symbol-clashing became frenzied and truly frightening, enough to roust any bad spirit, all conjured up by a handful of well-trained schoolboys, some under costume. In the living room, Dolly didn't know where to put herself, vibrating inwardly with cathartic orgasms of nervous emotion. Her mother, in a cranky mood, would not open the door for the dragon. So while neighbours got the full treatment their apartment missed out on its yearly anointing.

The following day 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. Her dead husband had been a rascal but her mother could be very sentimental about him. Dolly started to come out of her shell. She had more appetite than usual. She listened to music, filling the bedroom she shared with her brothers with *her* music, 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 top-bunk with intense interest. When there was a programme she wanted to watch on television she went right ahead and watched it. For long hours she lay on her back 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 website to website, picture to picture.

Then the holiday was shattered. In preparation for lunch Dolly had only wiped down the usually grubby table surface. Not particularly finicky of her, but her mother noticed and took offence. Unaware of the anger growing in her

mother's chest, Dolly leaned forward to help herself to rice from the rice cooker which her mother had just put on the table. 'Wait until you are offered,' her mother said sharply. 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 wintery neighbourhood. This neighbourhood in which everyone was poor, everyone pinched, was unsightly and depressing. Without love, what was there but hopelessness and despair? Dolly 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 her tier.

Hong Kong

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.

Dolly lay in the dark bedroom, eyes open. She stopped thinking and felt she had wandered out of the window and was floating alone in the cold universe.

Yet there was an ember. She was alive. She could endure and show them all her value and superior nature.

Temple visit

In the morning, the special feeling of the Lunar New Year circulated over the estate, like Christmas Day for Westerners, made up from an essence of family gatherings, red envelopes containing newly printed money and big long happy meals. In a holiday détente Dolly and her mother exchange the greeting of *Kung Hei Fat Choi* – Happy New Year – over breakfast.

At dusk Dolly went out. She was dressed particularly, in a gingham dress and poppy socks, and she wore a band over her hair – things her father liked. On her shoulders she carried a *Hello Kitty* rucksack containing both 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. He stylishly puffed at a cigarette and followed pretty women with his eyes. The queue before the temple shrine 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. After the temple Dolly came out and ordered two sticks. ‘Here you go, 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 an hour from beginning.

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 built up waiting for the eight o’clock start. In places there were platforms for television crews and up towards the waterfront temporary grand-stands were in place, seats sold out in a single hour in December. Along the route parents stood patiently trying to keep their children amused. A certain happy weariness was 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 over it. She worked her way through the dense crowd. Luckily a rabbit hole opened up and like Alice in Wonderland she squeezed down to the front. Here, in long occupation, adults hung over the crowd-control railings and children pressed their faces between 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 to do. A father and child made Dolly some room and the child, tired but perking up, offered her a sticky rice ball. The father gave her a kindly smile. Dolly wrung her hands in panic.

The parade started on the dot of eight as the first extraordinary floats lumbered down Nathan Road. Each float was separated by entertainers or dancers. African drummers came through, and individual Western opera singers, and weird figures on stilts, and giant blow-up cartoon figures who swayed as they propelled themselves on little legs. Dolly was quite incapable of enjoying any of it.

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 were early in the order, 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 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 the troupe got closer, coming square, Dolly saw it in full. Every dancer had the same sheer pearlescent tights and the same black ballet shoes with crossed straps. Everyone's hair was drawn up identically in a chignon with a fabric brooch of orange rose petals; for make-up: black lashes, blue lids and rosy foundation.

Step forward, sideways, hold the hem high, look over your left shoulder, rotate, chin up, shimmy left, 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 downtown girls who had begun rehearsals in the Civic Hall a few weeks ago. If Dolly could just get among them, 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, vaulted the barrier and plunged into the dance.

Complete terror, an 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. The baker's girl looked daggers at Dolly and almost tripped.

Unfortunately the janitor pushing the music box saw it all. His chance to intervene came fifty yards on at a sharp left turn which brought each float to a momentary stop, as they were 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 at a steward, lunged at Dolly amongst the girls and grabbed her.

'This girl is not one of the dancers,' he shouted as several stewards came forward. 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 a dancer,' said Dolly, trying to wrest free.

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

Someone opened a side barrier and the stewards pulled her roughly towards it. 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 which set off on the new course. In a moment the whole shipload had gone by.

Dolly was rough-handed to a help station in a side street where volunteer helpers were assisting fainers. 'Don't touch me,' she screamed to a 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 Dolly. She was free to walk away and did so, not quite herself, wishing she were invisible.

Midnight

Dazed, cold and flushed all at once, she 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, metropolitan blanched people who exercised no ceremony with each other. The district immediately outside the parade felt sucked out and desolate. The streets felt strange and creepy. Dolly walked fast on the pavement close to the building line like someone very late for a fancy dress party.

She came to the 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. It seemed a destination, so she went on, crossing a big highway by a pedestrian underpass. This came out on a promenade along the sea wall. Nobody was out except somebody fishing down at the water's edge beyond the sea wall – he must have hurdled a fence to get down there – his rod at forty-five degrees, cigarette smoke rising above his head and dispersing in the night air.

Dolly stopped walking and leaned against the sea wall. The black water of the channel, slithery, gloopy and elastic, reflected the city lights of the opposite bank. The part off right was the prime Hong Kong of a million postcards, a fairytale vision.

To rest she sat herself on the embankment wall. The urban sky was milky. Her eyes became wet and she said, not quite out loud, 'Daddy, I was in the parade. You saw it.' Then she sat and the skin of her bare slender arms was all goosebumps, deeply cold.

There was no turn to make now, this was the end of the road, just this seawall embankment and the aroma of the cigarette from the smoker fishing alone at midnight.

A spark of pride declared itself. Who else could have carried out 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 the janitor had stopped it he could not very well say it had not happened. She had spun when they spun, 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.

Tomorrow photographs would be posted on the web. Might one have caught her, even if it was at the moment of her scandalous ejection? If so she would put it on Facebook as an indisputable permanent record. Let her mother and her brothers know how strong her will.

She cried, deeply, as her situation merited, though not altogether hopelessly, and when she had cried she cheered herself up. She had decided to buy that fur-trim diamanté-buttoned coat from the boutique, buy it and wear it tomorrow. She would walk on this very promenade. Eyes would be drawn to her fashionable apparel and men would desire her. Anyway, the old puffer coat was well and truly ditched, in the rucksack sitting somewhere on the kerb where 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 also sent up ordinance. Each explosion of light was followed closely by popping and snapping sounds and the water doubled every pattern.

It was one of Hong Kong's most brilliant displays yet. The IFC2 skyscraper, 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 office face. The Year of the Goat had begun.

At the waterside the fisherman packed up. He threw his rod over the fence, climbed over himself, retrieved it, then scrambled up the embankment. He lit a

cigarette and more aromatic smoke wafted in the night air. 'Hello,' he said to Dolly. 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.

Before she knew it he had laid his coat across her shoulders delicately. 'You need this more than I do, don't you?' he said.

It was very much a man's coat, heavy, smoke-infused, warming.

They looked at each other, perfect strangers and in the silence for some reason he laughed with a rich chuckling sound. Perhaps he thought they were two oddballs of whom questions could be asked. What had brought them both here, so very much out of the party?

'Going home soon?' he said.

'Yes.'

He smiled as if that were a happy answer, picked up his rod, turned off along the embankment and began to whistle an old Chinese song. When he was a bit away he revolved a shoulder and said, 'The coat is yours for the night.' 'Thank you, it's so warm,' said Dolly, then added, 'I'll bring it back tomorrow.' 'All right,' he replied with a friendly wave of the arm.