

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 the Tsz Wan Shan district in North Kowloon living in ageing public housing estates on the lower slope of Lion Rock Country Park shivered behind uninsulated walls and cold windows. Tsz Wan Shan is where Dolly lived.

Quietly freezing, she was standing on the pavement next to her estate waiting for a minibus. These minibuses tear around the estates conveying residents to and from the MTR station but this morning none were coming. The very air seemed steeped in the essence of Sunday morning peace. Dolly stood with her feet together and nothing moved. Then a small bird hopped on 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 took every effort to look Japanese not Chinese. She had a thing for fashion and despite the wintry temperature had come out in a cute Japanese skirt, French tights and a schoolgirlish jacket. She was thirty-two and unmarried. She was slim, white and had an empresses high-bridged nose. But for her buck teeth she could have perhaps been a model. These teeth had been awry since childhood and were not easily fixed, requiring money and a good dentist, both in short supply. The one person who saw them less than anybody else was Dolly herself, full-face in the mirror, but no doubt over the years they had counted against her in the eyes of romantic boys.

She was a lonely person. Of late she had no one to meet and on Sundays went out on her own. Her 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 inside a little boutique on the first floor. Her 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 of course she had grown to hate as a teenager and never wore.

Having stood in the cold for twenty minutes, Dolly began to walk. 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 on foot well enough after all these years.

Something unusual lay in wait. Half-way down the hill 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 alike, as 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 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 two chairs across the floor. Two men stood to the side where a pile of costumes lay slung across two banquet chairs. Like a shy bird herself, Dolly took flight, clopping along the pavement in her court shoes. Her insides had begun to flutter and she was thinking about joining the audition.

She had a funny way of walking with a high head and unsteady legs, as if her whole deportment prompted a man's supporting arm. Lacking one she gave out something of the vulnerability of a little old lady. In typical fashion, just as the MTR station came into view two minibuses whizzed past her one behind the other.

Shopping

The boutique was one of a hundred or so crammed into the first and second floors of a commercial building near to Time Square. These two floors were Dolly's favourite place. This emporium was the pre-eminent place for buying Korean or Japanese import clothing. 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 these cubicles were much in Dolly's respect. 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 inadequate and a distinct fire risk.

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

The coat 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, diamanté-buttons down the front and in length was more a jacket than a coat. The owner of the musty boutique sat on a stool and two other shoppers jostled Dolly for space. Dolly tried the jacket on before the mirror half-obsured by racks of clothes. The very look of it fetched her into some fantasy land, but buy it she wouldn't. Instead, keeping her money, she went wandering the two floors until her legs were tired. Then she went down to the ground floor and into the street. A chill wind was blowing. Dolly hurried to find somewhere warm to have lunch. She knew just the place.

Memories

Dolly headed for a canteen restaurant on the first-floor of a commercial building a few hundred yards down 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 and rice with 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 soon afterwards produced a tray with her order on it. Carrying the tray she made her way through the grid of fixed seating and chose a corner where she could sit with her back against the wall. The back of the restaurant was quiet and pleasantly lit.

As she ate she thought about her father and the Night Parade. 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. Costume dragons had run up and down the railings giving the spectators a sensation, then, at the end, an enormous one that arrived, rearing up magnificently in gold and orange as high as a building. Really though, it was something else she really remembered. Watching the dance troupes twirling by, a terror had come on her that night about her future. As her heart filled up with those dancing princesses with whom she dearly wanted to personify herself, a horrible knowledge came to her that she would never find easy acceptance among her peers. She was too tempestuous, she had tantrums, she was too sensitive. Her twelve-year-old heart told her this mercilessly. Crushed by this premonition, she remembered pulling at her father's sleeve with both hands to gain his attention. Like the movie stars of the day he 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 had asked him plaintively, almost in tears. 'Why not?' he'd answered vaguely as he watched the float queen, then abruptly, in the way he had, he had turned all his attention on her. 'Yes, of course, darling, they are only shop girls'. But, to her, 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. 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 to audition. Outside the Civic Hall now was a queue of girls in loose track suits over 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 turnstiles, who worked at the MTR station, standing in uniform urging people, rather pointlessly, 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 didn't like the song and instead listened to something on her phone, which was at least a fairly new model as was paramount in the life of anyone in Hong Kong.

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 controlled 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 on the amplifier. 'Just dance as you like for a minute, could you?' he asked Dolly politely 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. 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. 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 terrible rages if challenged on this subject.

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

The brothers were sitting at table in the living room ready 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 room 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 too. At once they began to eat. Chopsticks clicked against rice bowls in noisy fashion.

'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 unpadded bench before the television. It was another source of misery to her, and anger. 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 as well as his father and now the family apartment was his. 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.’

She 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 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 housing office yet?’ You know the address. Do I have to drag you there?’

‘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. 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!’

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.’

‘He will, too,’ said Yuen from the other room.

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, the 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 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 to think she was not safe in her own home any more. She realised despairingly she would be better off sleeping on the floor at her place of work.

Her company occupied a second-floor laboratory in a commercial building where she was a batch tester for medicinal herbs. It was a strict and orderly place. Little conversation flowed, even in the lunch room during the half an hour provided at noon. Except for the managers in their tiny offices, the staff spent the day on their feet at their work-stations. Being a mainland Chinese company, the hours of work were those of the mainland. This was approximately the same as Hong Kong except the weekend did not begin until 2pm on Saturday afternoon.

Dolly realised that if she worked late she would be left 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 given the slightest suspicion that she was sleeping in. So at lunchtime she went out to buy something to eat later. By eight o'clock she was alone in the lab. 'So this is now my home,' she said to herself sorrowfully.

The night wasn't as bad as she expected. So safe was it from her brothers, the lab started to feel like a little sanctuary of peace. It was like owning a bedroom – always a far-off dream – and being able to close the door and shut the world out. 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 a dry pungent aroma. 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 nice thoughts began to creep shyly forward. There was a small trove of hopes and dreams she carried around in her innermost heart. Now they had their chance. Little tickling ideas and fancies began to fly around the room like fairies. Also she dreamed her brothers would be killed under a bus.

What of the Night Parade? Perhaps some epidemic would fall on the dance-troupe and she would yet be called up. Oh, to be in a team among new friends,

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. Then she became mortally scared and cried into her pillows, terrified of a new dimension of madness and loneliness ahead.

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.

Return

On the 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 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 adventure took its first steps.

Someone swung the doors shut from the inside, yet they remained ajar. Dolly crossed the road and tip-toed 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. 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 sort of 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 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. She could believe she was a real dancer and forget her humiliations. 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 themselves off by train to Guangdong where they had relatives and where the fiancée of the eldest 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 first be cleaned through and through and then visited by a Chinese dragon to complete the purification, 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.

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, all conjured up by a handful of well-trained schoolboys under the costume. In the living room, Dolly didn't know where to put herself, vibrating inwardly with cathartic orgasms. Her mother, in a cranky mood, would not open the door for the dragon. So while neighbours got the full treatment, their apartment did not get its yearly anointing.

The next 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 those lost times. Dolly started to come out of her shell. She had more appetite than she usually did. 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. She had always liked black and white films just as much as colour ones. 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 page to website page, in sum part of her existence.

Then the holiday was shattered. In preparation for lunch Dolly had only wiped down the usually grubby table surface. Not so finicky 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 the third 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 them. Was it her teeth which resulted in this dissonance between her expectations of the world and the world's expectations of her? Was it Hong Kong? Well, Hong Kong was not a place for arranged marriages, there was no country or village community life in this small territory massed with people. Hong Kong men were go-ahead, focused on money and business, making partnerships with the opposite sex along the way in a mutual 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.

Dolly lay 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. Her mother faced a despairing future and needed her income. Perhaps her mother had planned it that Dolly would not marry as it would not suit her if she did. Yet 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.

At last an injection of strength suffused Dolly's body from an ember of self-confidence. The universe might be cold but her heart was warm. She could endure and show them all her value and her artistic nature.

Temple visit

In the morning the special feeling of the Lunar New Year, like Christmas Day for Westerners; the atmosphere in the crisp air beyond the window happier, already vibrating with the imminent family gatherings, the red envelopes containing newly printed money for excited children, the big long happy meals. In a holiday détente Dolly and her mother exchange the traditional 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 it 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 much 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 an uncomfortable dimension of near-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. There was more to take in than Dolly could begin to 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 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. If Dolly could just get in 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, 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 over one of the stewards and then lunged at Dolly amongst the girls and grabbing her.

‘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 a dancer,’ said Dolly, trying to wrest free.

Two alerted stewards asked questions. ‘Where’s your badge?’ said one of them. ‘Everyone on the parade will have a badge,’ remarked 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 fainters. ‘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, wanting no eyes on her.

Midnight

Dazed, cold and flushed at the same time, 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, these metropolitan blanched Hong Kong people who exercised no ceremony with each other. The district immediately outside the parade felt sucked out and desolate. Then 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 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. 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 escaping from the back of his head and evaporating 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, part of which, off to the right, was the prime Hong Kong of a million postcards, a familiar 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, cold as ice.

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

A spark of such pride declared itself. 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 the janitor had stopped it he 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.

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 by telling herself she would 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. The old puffer coat was well and truly ditched anyway, 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 made 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 office face. The Year of the Goat had started.

At the waterside the fisherman packed up. 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. ‘Hello,’ 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.

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, strangers without embarrassment, and in the silence for some reason he laughed with a rich chuckling sound. Perhaps he thought they were two oddballs. Questions could be asked of both of them.

‘Going home soon?’ he said.

‘Yes.’

The man 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 back, 'The coat is yours for the night.'
Dolly said, 'Thank you, it's so warm,' then added, 'I'll bring it back tomorrow.'
'All right,' he replied with a friendly wave of the arm.