

Anak Sastra, Issue 8

Table of Contents

"Langkawi" by Hartley Pool

"The Pabitin Game" by Diana Hallare

"Dangdut Dream" by Peter Chang

"The Red Shoes" by Kinberlyn Chan

"Party of One: Your Table Is Ready" by Clifton Bates

[Hartley Pool](#) is a published author and stand-up comedian based in Malaysia. In December, 2011, his debut, *Stranger in Taiwan*, was published by Revenge Ink. It is a humorous work of narrative non-fiction concerning the life of an expat in Taiwan and has received good reviews in both print media and online. He also has an ongoing humorous column about life in [Malaysia in Expatriate Lifestyles](#) and is a member of the Society of Authors.

Diana Hallare is a college instructor in California. She was born to a Filipino family and raised in the Middle East. Her writings have appeared in *Dappled Things*, the *Barefoot Review*, and *Next Step U*.

Peter Chang is a student in dentistry. He has written articles and stories for several newspapers and magazines in Indonesia. He likes to make his stories short but loud, much like his wife.

Kinberlyn Chan was born and raised in the Philippines. A graduate in journalist and communications, she spent the last 7 years studying and working in China.

Clifton Bates has lived and worked in Alaska the last thirty-five years. He has been involved with Alaska Native education in one form or another during this time (teacher, district administrator, university professor). He has had a variety of plays, poetry, fiction, and education articles published. He co-authored one book, *Conflicting Landscapes, American Education/Alaska Natives* with the Very Rev. Dr. Oleksa. After living in Bush

Alaska on the Kuskokwim River for twenty-some years, he now lives in Chugiak, Alaska with his Belgian Shepherd, Quinn.

* * * * *

July 2012 featured author interview with Hartley Pool

Q. What motivates you to write? What do you hope to express through your writing?

I've always written. At the age of seven I took a small chair, a wad of paper, and a pen, and insisted on closing myself into the cupboard under the stairs for six hours. Something about the captivity, the lack of space, and the feeling of isolation inspired my first ever short story, which was to do with a trapped robot towards whom several different people were tunneling. It was never clear why the robot was there or who might be coming towards him: His savior, effecting a rescue? His nemesis, bent on destruction? Or perhaps his mother, shouting that it was time for tea. Looking back at the story now, the themes are quite advanced for my age, but the writing is truly awful. Not least because there was no light in that cupboard under the stairs. So, to answer your question, I am motivated by ... erm ... claustrophobia, and I hope to achieve recognizable cursive letters.

Q. Talk a little bit about your writing process. Do have any unusual writing habits?

Lucas, our two and a half year old either has ADHD or is constantly abusing a supply of sugar he's secreted somewhere, so my routine generally involves trying to distract him by putting puppets on my feet and re-enacting scenes from the Tellytubbies while frantically bashing out as many words as I can before Po falls off and Lucas tries to eat my big toe again. Thankfully, he has now started Kindergarten so I get two hours every morning to sit in front of the computer screen weeping over the lack of inspiration.

Q. You work as a stand-up comedian and humor columnist in Kuala Lumpur. How much do these fields complement each other and overlap? How important is a sense of location to your comedy?

Sometimes an idea from the writing will filter through into the stand-up, but not very often. The column allows a relatively long, considered build up before any punchline and readers don't come to it expecting to laugh out loud every thirty seconds (though it's nice if that happens). I'm not yet a confident enough performer to allow that much quiet time before getting a reaction from an audience.

Where I am is all important, most of what I talk about on stage is things that happen to me here that wouldn't happen elsewhere. The column is all about adjusting to the differences of life in KL, so without location I'd probably end up writing about the benefits of eating grapefruits every day and would be reduced to very occasional commissions from *Citrus Digest*.

Q. Your 2011 nonfiction book, [Stranger in Taiwan](#), talks about life as an expat in Taiwan. How would you describe the differences between expat life in Taiwan and Malaysia?

Taipei is a more developed city than Kuala Lumpur, which makes it more convenient as a place to live, but in many ways less interesting. Things in KL have a habit of breaking down, the service industry is less reliable, and you have to work harder to get what you want. It's character building though, and the people are great. I keep telling myself that.

Q. What is your most vivid memory, for better or worse, about having lived or traveled in Southeast Asia?

I like to live in the present. Right now, I can look out from our balcony and see a squirrel running across a neighbor's garden, there's a pretty yellow bird singing a beautiful song in a tree nearby, the sky is bright blue, and I've locked the balcony doors so can barely even hear Lucas screaming for more sugar.

* * * * *

"Langkawi"

Living the expat lifestyle in a gated condominium complex with a couple of swimming pools, a gym, and round-the-clock security has its benefits--of course it does--but there are downsides too.

Like when it rains.

Wish I'd bought an umbrella, I thought as I dashed for the main gate. It's not as if this didn't happen on a regular basis; on any given day in Kuala Lumpur, it was a fair bet that at some point the pretty mindlessness of blue sky would overcast into a catastrophe. Twenty minutes previously, having forgotten this fact, Anita and I had been packing our bags and getting baby Lucas ready for Langkawi. In our minds we would enjoy a nice relaxing walk to the main entrance, then casually hail a taxi to take us towards our first proper holiday as a family.

"Hang on," I had said, suddenly realizing what the noise outside was.

"What's that?" said Anita, who had been in the middle of bouncing Lucas up and down on her knee.

"I don't know if you've noticed, but outside is practically underwater."

"Urp," said Lucas, pale with motion sickness.

"And you'd better stop doing that, or he'll be decorating your rather attractive blouse with undigested rice and banana."

"Oh no! We will get wet!"

"No, just you."

"I mean wet from the *rain*."

"Well yes, I would say that's a reasonable conclusion to come to," I said, at the last moment trying to swallow some of my sarcasm in case she-

"Don't be so rude!" She looked at Lucas. "Daddy will go to the front gate and get us a taxi, then come back and pick us up."

"I will?"

She stared at me, the challenge to deny her and risk ruining the next three days written all over her face.

"But I'll get wet!" I said desperately.

Her look didn't change.

"I might catch pneumonia!"

Her look still didn't change. Lucas joined in.

"Oh for the love of...! Okay...I'll get the driver to honk his horn when we're outside."

And so there I was, running full tilt towards the security station. The three members of staff on duty stood there watching me with blank disregard for my drowned state, cocooned as they were in their dry little guardhouse. One would have thought, given the fees we paid to the management of the place every month, that they might be a bit more courteous and bring out an umbrella or something.

"It's raining like hell," I said when I finally reached the gate. "Why didn't you do something?"

One of the Burmese guards gave me a puzzled look and opened the hatch. "Excuse me sir?"

"It's raining like hell, I'm getting absolutely drenched. Why didn't you do something?"

He looked up into the sky then back at me, so completely oblivious to the concept of customer service that he could only think to say: "*Do* something about it, sir? I cannot. I am not God."

"This is nice," I said as our taxi rolled slowly through the Langkawi countryside. "Look." I pointed to a sign amid the greenery, "Monkey feeding area. There must be wild monkeys here."

"What's that on the ground?" said Anita.

It was, in fact, one of the aforementioned monkeys. Unfortunately, he was a rather disappointing example of the species, being dead and practically headless.

"Erm..." My brain was blank, but I didn't want to ruin her holiday so early on. "I think it's a...hedgehog." Fuck, she was never going to buy that. "A large one."

"Huh?"

Even Lucas didn't look convinced. I decided to own up and make it into a joke.

"Actually, I think it was a dead monkey. So 'Monkey Feeding Area' must actually refer to feeding *on* the monkeys, eh?"

"That's not funny."

"Well it was a play on words, so it might not have been *that* funny, but at least it was clever."

"It was not funny or clever. It was stupid."

"Well some people think stupid *is* funny and clever."

"Some people wouldn't think that this time."

These arguments could go on for weeks, but thankfully we had arrived at the hotel. "Never mind--look, we're here."

"Oooh, nice!"

The building itself was a five-storey white mansion that looked like something Graham Greene might have written about, and the setting was just as attractive. We turned into the drive-way and lush green, ape-friendly jungle was suddenly replaced with a quaint little town square with a selection of well-situated restaurants overlooking a harbour populated by shiny new yachts.

"Bloody hell, the monkeys must be devastated!"

A uniformed doorman--entirely the opposite of my Burmese friends back home--approached the taxi smiling, opened the door, and ushered my wife and child out. His colleague retrieved our luggage from the boot of the car and a third pulled open the hotel's double doors and beckoned for us to come in.

"Welcome to The Dumai."

Once inside the colonial-styled lobby, we were treated to their famous "deskless" check-in. Seated on a comfortable sofa, the staff coaxed our documents out of us while plying us with welcome drinks and giving out much-needed neck massages.

"So disappointing," said Anita halfway through getting her shoulders shiatsued.

"Feels good to me."

"No, I mean this check-in is supposed to be without desk, but I just saw the desk! It's behind that pillar over there!" She said, and then smiled.

"Very funny. Where's Lucas?"

"Who?" She had reached such a state of relaxation that all thoughts of our one and a half year old had evaporated. Realization hit her, and she startled upright. "Oh! Lucas!"

The masseur stepped back in shock and confusion. "No ma'am, my name Pearl."

"I mean our *baby*, Lucas. Where is he?"

"Baby ma'am? What baby?"

I was extremely tempted to follow this line of reasoning--indeed, *what* baby? When I was a child we once lost a pet cat while on holiday in the Lake District. My parents calmed my tears away with tales of the wonderful life Tippy would have exploring Lake Windermere and enjoying Kendall Mint Cake. Surely Langkawi was much nicer than the Lake District! Imagine the fun little Lucas would have wandering around five-star resorts and being brought up by wild baboons.

"Oh, there he is," said Anita with relief as she spotted him being cute with a couple of Japanese ladies. This is normal behaviour for our son--put him in front of a female or someone with a camera and he immediately begins striking poses and batting his eyelashes like he's in an episode of "America's Next Top Toddler."

"Just ignore them," I said to her quickly. "If they think he's been abandoned, they might want to adopt."

We spent the remainder of the afternoon enjoying our room. An enormous bed rendered the specially-provided cot superfluous, and in any case Lucas viewed cots in much the same way as Houdini viewed handcuffs. His personal best was 0.73 of a second. The supersized bathroom and large balcony gave Anita and me enough space to feel comfortable and pampered and Lucas the room he needed to express his euphoria, anger, hunger and deep-seated sense of personal tragedy. In precisely that order. At around 6 o'clock the turn-down service knocked on our door, and I was feeling good-humoured enough to try one of my jokes.

"Hello!" I said cheerfully after opening the door.

"Hello sir, turn-down service?" said the lovely looking young lady, her cart replete with fruit, towels and various species of unguent.

"Certainly! Would you like to have sex with me?"

"No!" She took a step back repulsed and I realised that--unlike the staff at the various British hotels I had tried this with--she probably didn't have a firm enough grasp of English to get the joke.

"No, I mean--not really! It was a joke because you are the turn down service and..." But she wasn't getting it and looked on the verge of calling for help. Thankfully, Anita was up to speed on most of my potential forms of mischief and appeared at my side.

"It's okay," she said, trying to smile. "He was making a joke about different meanings of the word 'turn-down'. He thinks he's funny."

"He is not funny," said the girl, clearly shaken. "That is not funny."

"Believe me, I know."

Lucas appeared behind her and seemed to be nodding his head in agreement.

"Sorry," I said, and closed the door before I could get myself into any more trouble. I turned to my wife to try and change the subject. "There's a pizza place nearby, shall we go and get something to eat?"

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather have sex with that hotel maid?"

I didn't answer that, mostly because I didn't want to lie and the truth would have caused problems.

Half an hour later, Lucas had finally agreed to let us put his shoes on his *feet* and we had somehow managed to eject ourselves from the womblike comfort of our room. We sat down in the fluorescent lit, disappointingly polystyrene atmosphere of a pizza restaurant and ordered a pepperoni special and some steak-cut fries. Unfortunately, the only thing special about our pepperoni pizza was its bland awfulness, and most of the fries were burnt.

"Let's not come here again," I said.

"That's the most intelligent thing you've said..."

"Today?"

"No. What I mean is, that's the most intelligent thing you've *ever* said."

"Why, thank-you."

The food really must have been bad. Even Lucas, who we had specifically kept away from his formula for the last few hours, only swallowed a few mouthfuls before giving a disdainful look and refusing any more. After eyeing our lack of enthusiasm from the counter for ten minutes, the owner came over. He pointed at the half pizza and almost-full basket of incompetently fried potatoes.

"For doggie?"

"Eh?" I said, wondering if he had mistaken us for some canine-owning regulars.

"You want doggie for that?"

"You want us to exchange this food for a dog?"

"I think he means doggie bag," said Anita, with impeccable logic, "for the bits we haven't eaten."

"Not really," I said, "but I might need a *sick* bag for the bits I've *already* eaten."

Nobody seemed to find that particularly amusing.

The bed in our room could have comfortably slept five people. Unfortunately, it could not comfortably sleep two people and a Lucas. I knew that now.

"Can we go for breakfast, yet?" I said hopefully, after being pummelled, pushed and kicked out of that bed for the umpteenth time.

"It's four o'clock," said Anita, after checking the incomprehensible multi-functioning digital device on her bedside table.

"God's arseholes! So it tells the time as *well?!!*"

"I think so. Unless that's the degrees. Or the number of kilowatts used since we moved in."

"So...breakfast?"

She gave me one of her looks. I think. It was dark. "At four o'clock no one can have breakfast; it's too early."

"Under normal circumstances maybe, but then according to the hotel website, we are in 'the realm of opulence'. I'm not sure exactly what that means, but I'm pretty sure it includes breakfast whenever the fuck I want it! Including at four in the morning!"

"Don't swear, you'll be a bad influence on Lucas."

"I think my swearing is the least of his worries, given all my other bad habits." I was about to elaborate, but I felt her shudder at some memory or other, and I decided it might be best not to go down that road. "In any case, unlike anyone else in this room, he's still asleep."

She sighed. "Call them then."

"With what?" I looked around the room. "I looked everywhere for the phone last night, but I couldn't find one. You would think that being in the realm of opulence would at least mean having a phone--how would Donald Trump cope? I was going to complain, but...well...I couldn't find anything to call them on. Which was the whole point."

"Shut up now," she said in a very, very weary voice. "Please shut up now." She turned on the lamp, reached over to the device on her table and pushed down on a bit of it. Immediately, a detachable be-buttoned lozenge sprang up from the centre."

"By the baps of Beelzebub! It's a phone as *well!*?"

"Just call them, please call them. And use your voice on someone else for a while."

"Okay--pass it here." I dialled zero.

"Hello, Dumai reception," said a female voice.

"Gosh, so you're awake."

"Erm...of course sir, this is a five-star hotel. We are at your service 24/7."

"Good, good--tell me, have you had breakfast?"

"Certainly sir."

"Right, so can I come down and have mine now?"

"Your what, sir?"

"My breakfast."

"Well, no sir."

"But I thought you were at my service 24/7. I'm supposed to be living in the realm of opulence here. Does Warren Buffet have to wait for his breakfast?"

"Erm, sir. Your complimentary gold-class buffet breakfast will commence at 6:30 in the Diamond Lounge Bar."

"That's a very fancy name for something that starts two and a half hours after I actually wanted it."

"Yes, sir." She paused for a moment as if trying to work out what this conversation might do next. "Do excuse me sir, but what's a warren buffet?"

"As much rabbit as you can eat," I said, and ended the call.

We didn't actually make it down to eat until well past nine o'clock. This was partly due to the hypnotically repetitive power of CNN, partly due to my then falling asleep in the bath and partly due to the discovery of the 341-page instruction manual for that multi-functional digital device. Late for breakfast I may have been, but I was up-to-date, smelt like a flower, and knew seven ingenious ways to make an in-room cappuccino.

"Look," said Anita, "they have welcome drink!"

They certainly did--there were two smart looking servers stationed at a desk handing out glistening fresh-fruit cocktails to the early-morning crush at the entrance.

"I want one!" said Anita, and Lucas did that thing he did when he appeared to repeat the intonation and stress pattern of everything you said, but just without any words.

"He wants one too!" I said, in a clear attempt to anthropomorphise our mewling progeny.

"No." She shook her head. "That just the intonation and the stress pattern, there were no actual words. Or thinking."

We reached the front of the small crowd, our tongues fat with anticipation, throats suddenly parched...and found ourselves being waved straight into the restaurant.

"Wait!" I said, momentarily desperate with desire for various species of fruit blended with ice and relaxing in a glass. "Wait! Help! Where's our drink."

"Oh, sold out sir!" said one of the waiters cheerfully. "Come back tomorrow!"

Next to me there was a double groan of despair, one of them with less potential for having any actual language in it.

I was about to take issue with the concept of "sold out" when applied to "free" and throw some withering sarcasm at his invitation to do something about which I had no choice. Luckily, a sharp dig in my ribs forestalled this, and we allowed ourselves to be directed towards a table.

"Coffee or tea, sir, madam and...sir?"

Since four o'clock that morning the thought of a cup of hot, recently-brewed coffee had been running repeatedly through my mind like a romantic obsession. Compared to that unobtainable juice, though, right now being offered coffee felt like we'd been on our way to see U2 at Wembley Stadium and somebody had sidetracked us into "The Rat and Parrot" to watch five old guys orally rape "Layla."

"Coffee please," said Anita while I was having this train of thought.

"Two coffees, or...?" The waitress looked at Lucas.

"Just two," I said. "If you give *him* coffee he won't sleep for twenty-seven years, and both me and my wife will die."

"So just two coffees then?"

"Yes."

"And do please enjoy our complementary live pianist."

"Okay, we will."

And indeed, over by the window there was a rather cheesy man in full cocktail attire bashing out a fair approximation of "If You Leave Me Now" by Chicago.

"This is going to be quite a disappointing morning for him," I said.

"Why's that?" said Anita.

"Because everyone's going to leave at some point!" I said, before remembering that she was from Taiwan and had a very shaky grasp of mid-70's American rock. She did an unfortunate thing with her eyebrows in my direction and stood up.

"You look after Lucas, I will check the selection and bring some food back."

"Sure."

This was not good news. It meant that for the next five minutes, rather than excitedly exploring the dozens of various cuisines that no-one in their right mind would ever guess were meant to be for *breakfast*, I had to be in charge of four limbs that each had their own individual idea of which way they wanted to go and a mouth that didn't know what language was but wanted to have a go anyway. Adding insult to considerable injury, I knew for a fact that my wife would completely bypass the bread, muffin, and cake section of proceedings, and bring back fresh fruit, possibly yoghurt, and some species of fish porridge that tasted like the sea had shat itself.

I tried to console myself by listening to the piano player and allowing Lucas to play with the cutlery. Thirty seconds later, he had narrowly missed stabbing the very understanding

Korean couple at the next table and the piano player sounded like his fingers were dying. A few seconds after that our morning musician hit another bum note in his startlingly awful rendition of Boston's "More Than a Feeling," sending him into completely the wrong key. He then appeared to give up altogether and, much like a man who almost trips over once, is embarrassed and keeps walking like that, stayed resolutely in flat for the remainder of the song.

Anita appeared before the pianist could butcher his way through any more American cities, and placed her disappointing suggestions for breakfast on the table. Motioning for me to tuck in, she picked up a fork and bit into the beginning of her salad. The immediate look of disgust on her face echoed my general feelings about the dining experience so far.

"This tomato is off!"

"He's not the only one," I said, which no one--including me--really understood.

"Look!" said Anita half an hour later, as we wandered along the hotel-side beach. "A squishy transparent crab!"

She rushed off to examine it, and Lucas toddled manically beside her, echoing her interest. Once there, he bent down so he could pick it up and--given the experience of recent behaviour--probably put it in his mouth.

"Noooooo!" I screamed running towards them. "There's no such thing as a squishy transparent crab! That's a jellyfish!"

Anita whisked Lucas away from the glutinous mess before he could Steve-Irwin himself.

Her eyes narrowed with a suspicion borne of experience. "Sure?"

I held out my hand so she would give me a moment to get some breath back. "Hold on... I really do need to start exercising more. Well, exercising *some* at least..." I had a few quick gasps of air. "Yes! I told you, there's no such thing as a squishy transparent crab--that's a jellyfish, and if he puts it in his mouth it'll sting the shit out of him."

"He doesn't need anything to get the shit out of him. That's automatic, sometimes seven times a d-ah!" With unfortunate timing, the squishy transparent crab unfurled five pairs of legs from underneath itself and bugged off sideways at a rate of knots. "See!" she said in rather accusatory fashion, "Lucas would have *loved* that! So delicious!"

"No, no, no..." I tried to think of a way out of this. "You see that may not be a jellyfish in the conventional understanding of the word, but it's almost definitely highly toxic. That's just nature's way of warning us not to eat something very poisonous, by making it...nearly invisible."

Anita turned around and walked off in disgust. Lucas stayed behind just long enough to shake his head at me in disappointment, before stumbling off after her.

I sauntered along behind them for a while, stopping every now and then to pick up a particularly pretty shell and put it in my pocket. This was the habit every time we came to a beach, and would culminate in said shells being scattered attractively around various surfaces in our bathroom for a while, before we either decided we didn't like them anymore or Lucas ate them all. The kind of thoughtless cycle that life excels in repeating, but it *was* relaxing to just walk along enjoying the salt-breeze, the roar of the ocean, and the sound of distant tourists screaming something about a baby walking into the water.

Oh.

"Anita!"

She turned round and noticed that Lucas was no longer behind her. "Oh no! Lucas!"

"It's okay, there he is."

He was stood at the edge of the sea, watching the tide as if mesmerized. A hundred metres away, two old Caucasian ladies who had been in the middle of having a paddle were pointing and waving.

"Yes, we see him now--it's okay!"

"No!" One of them shouted, and then she shouted something else that distance made unintelligible.

"No, it's okay--he belongs to us and we've got him now."

But they were still jabbing their fingers in our direction and gabbling away excitedly about something.

"What do they want?" said Anita.

"Not sure."

"Isn't one of them your grandma?"

"No!"

She was always doing this. To her, the vast majority of white people looked exactly the same. Despite the fact that Anita had only met my grandma once, and the poor woman was now seven years in the ground, my wife still quite often mistook random old white women for her.

"They're still shouting," she said.

"They're probably worried we're the kind of parents who would just let him wander off into the sea!"

"He does seem to like it, though."

Lucas was still hypnotised by the sound and the movement, his head moving in time with the tide.

"To him it's probably just like a gigantic swimming pool. He looks like he wants to run in!" I said.

"He definitely wants to go out into it."

Our son continued to look wistfully out into the enormous expanse of water. The yearning was palpable.

"Well...you know, if it's what he wants..."

Anita appeared to consider this for a moment, then turned to me. "We just want what's best for him. And if the sea is best for him, then..."

At that point, Lucas--perhaps sensing that something was amiss took a sudden step back from the water and burst into tears.

"Looks like he rumbled us!"

I picked him up to offer a rather belated hug. Given the heat of the mid-day sun, the sandiness of our shoes, and the trauma nearly losing Lucas to the sea, we decided to head back to the room.

"Did daddy enjoy his walk on the beach?" said Anita as we neared the Dumai.

"I've had a wonderful walk along the beach," I said. "Unfortunately, this wasn't it."

She barked a surprised laugh and even Lucas looked vaguely amused. "That's actually quite funny!"

"Well, yes, but it wasn't actually mine. I sort of stole it off Groucho Marx."

"No problem, you should steal things more often. Then you might be funny sometimes."

"Great. Thanks."

"Did we have any lunch?" said Anita, as she walked sleepily out onto the balcony.

"Nope. You fell asleep almost as soon as we got back from the beach. I was going to wake you, but I thought it might be a bit rude. You looked so peaceful...and then I wondered if you were unconscious because of that tomato at breakfast. But you looked okay, so I left you."

She shook her head in irritation. "Too many words!"

"Sorry."

"Okay...and what have you been doing while I was asleep?"

"Erm..." I racked my brain for something mature, fatherly, and responsible. "Well, definitely not *just* reading this latest Stephen King, eating most of this dark chocolate, and watching those water buffalo over in that field. Also looking after Lucas."

"Okay, so where is he?" She looked suddenly stricken. "Did he fall off the balcony?!"

"No! Of course not!" At least I didn't think he had. I tried to remember the last time I'd seen him. "He's..." I quickly scanned the bedroom, looked back over the balcony and remembered the wise words of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: *When you eliminate the impossible, then whatever is left, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.* "He's in the bathroom! He was sleepy, and I didn't want him to wake you up with his...sleepiness, so I put him in the bathroom!"

She looked like this might just about make sense, though her brain couldn't quite comprehend how. "Ok-a-a-y." She disappeared and a few seconds later I heard her muffled exclamations. "Lucas! The bath is not your toilet!"

"Mind you, that's closer than he usually gets to the toilet!" I shouted, but she either didn't hear me or chose not to.

I was going to have to do something quick to make up for this, or the rest of our holiday would be spent in revengeful silence. While she was cleaning whatever dreadfulness he had done in the bathroom, I rushed over to the amazing digital device next to our bed and popped out the bit of it capable of making phone calls. As she finished up and started muttering darkly, I did what I needed to do, replaced the receiver, and scooted back over to the balcony.

"Did you see what he did?!"

"Um...yes?"

"Then why didn't you...?" Her face started to go red and her fists clenched in preparation for what looked like the mother of all arguments. I needed to attempt my diversion.

"I've booked that wonderful restaurant!"

"Huh?"

"That restaurant you liked the sound of, the number one on *Trip Advisor*, I was busy booking that while you were asleep. That's why I wasn't able to look after Lucas..." Her fists had unclenched and that redness was fading, so I decided to chance my arm. "As well as usual."

"As well as usual?!"

"Well, you know, *better* then. Anyway, that restaurant is booked for six o'clock, so you'd better start getting ready."

"I will," she said, and there was a slight threat in there somewhere. "While you finish cleaning up that bathroom and change Lucas."

Oh yes, there it was.

"Well this is nice," I said with typical British understatement as a very waitery-dressed waiter came over with a silver dish bearing drawing paper and crayons.

"For the little sir?"

He placed them in front of Lucas, who immediately started tearing the paper up and eating the crayons, then eating the torn up strips of paper and cracking the damp crayons in two.

Anita looked concerned. "Do you think he might poison himself with those crayons?"

I hadn't thought about that. "Not unless he eats about two dozen of them, I reckon." At least that might keep him quiet while we enjoyed our meal. "Shall I start helping him break them up?" *Into bite-sized pieces* I silently added.

My wife didn't say anything, which is one of the tools in her arsenal for dealing with my frequent forays into foolishness.

I used the stony silence to have a proper look around. The restaurant was small but elegant, dark-wood paneling and rattan everywhere you looked. The theme seemed to be something to do with village life in Malaysia, expensive local pieces of art and, erm, banana leaves. Most of the food seemed to come on banana leaves--though none if it actually consisted of any banana--and a dried leaf had even been used to reserve the table, with our names scrawled across it in gold-dazzle marker. That personalized bit of greenery would have made a wonderful souvenir of *someone* hadn't turned it into an impromptu amuse-bouche. When we had we arrived twenty minutes ago the place had been empty; now, it was full to capacity with about twenty guests of varying nationality.

"Your first courses sir, madam...little sir?"

"Well he's nearly finished his starter," I said, looking at the pile of saliva and crayony mush he had made on the table. "And it looks like he's in the middle of mixing a delicious soufflé for his dessert!"

"Of course sir, I'm sure he is. Please enjoy your meals."

He walked away, leaving a selection of small dishes in very ornate little bowls.

Anita looked perplexed. "What did we order? I can't remember."

I picked up the menu. "Ah...it says a selection of small dishes in very ornate bowls."

"No it doesn't."

"No, you're right, it doesn't. But it's in Malay so it might as well say that."

"Why don't you ask the waiter?"

"Because he's supercilious and scary."

"What is *supercilious*?"

"The waiter, I thought we'd established that."

"Shut up now and let's eat."

We tried to work out which of the various knives, forks and spoons to attack the food with, but in the end it was so far beyond us we just used our hands. Luckily we were in a corner table and so none of the other guests--which from the looks of it included four supermodels, three judges, and a minor royal--would be able to see our ham-fisted attempts at fine dining.

Anita gave a sigh of relief. "I think we're going to be okay. I was worried this place might be too high class, but actually no one seems to care too much."

"I think you're right," I said. "See it's not that bad, we can be posh!"

At which point Lucas made a fleshy clicking sound in his throat, shot me a look of helplessness and immediately blurbled a rainbow of porridgy sick over himself and a third of the table.

"It's okay!" I whispered. "He did that fairly quietly. Well done Lucas! No-one seems to have noticed – quick hand me that napkin."

"Oh God!" said Anita, losing all the colour in her face.

"It's okay. I told you, no-one noticed."

No, not that," she said and clutched her stomach. "The bad tomato. *Help.*"

"The toilets are just there." I pointed across the room. Luckily, I always make sure I know where the facilities are as I have infrequent attacks of gastrophobia and sometimes have to hide there for five minutes until I've calmed down again.

By the time I'd finished reminding myself of that, she had stormed across the room, flung herself into the bathroom, and slammed the door behind her, causing some consternation amongst the various dignitaries.

"It's okay!" I said. "She just wanted to see what toiletries--oops, I am sorry--what *facilitiries* there were."

The murmuring of discontent ratcheted down a notch, and one or two people even nodded their understanding. *Perhaps*, I thought with desperation, *perhaps restaurants in these parts are famed for their soaps, sinks, and tissue dispensers and this is actually quite normal for them.* However, this quite unlikely possibility was completely blown out of the water by the noises that then began to come out of that small, thin-walled toilet.

"Oh God, no!" said my wife with a distinct lack of muffle before unleashing what I can only describe as an anal hailstorm.

We failed to get any sleep for the second night in a row. This time it had nothing to do with being punched in the back by someone who, pound for pound, was stronger than an ox, and more to do with Anita visiting the bathroom every five minutes to exclaim lumps into the sink. Technically, I could have put my earplugs in and gone to sleep, but this seemed unlikely to win me any favours; in any case, I'm a complete hypochondriac and so spent most of the night both waiting for the symptoms to show up in myself and then imagining them anyway when they didn't. Once again, Lucas showed a blatant disregard for either of us and slept through everything. The midnight hours gradually gave way to dawn, and my self-induced nausea was replaced with the comforting pangs of hunger.

"I'm going to go down for breakfast in a minute, darling. Do you want me to bring back some white bread or plain rice?"

Grimacing, she levered herself upright, her pale face set with determination.

"I'm...coming...too."

This was not surprising. Half a lifetime ago, when I finally moved to be with her in Taiwan, I suffered an appalling bout of Salmonella. Throughout the whole, horrific episode, her only concern had not been for the devastating attacks of diarrhea or the nightmarish nausea, but the fact that I was skipping meals. Like an old Chinese lady who crosses a busy road with her eyes closed to avoid being run over, she was of the opinion that so long as you kept eating, everything would be okay.

So no, I wasn't surprised, and rather than spouting my Western philosophy of letting unsettled stomachs lie, I helped her get dressed, woke up our son and took them down to eat.

This morning the welcome drink was green rather than red, but whatever the colour it still looked fucking delicious. As we joined the small crowd I recalled the tactics employed by beggars in Mumbai. I might have seen it in *Slumdog Millionaire*.

"Look really ill," I whispered to Anita. Lucas looked up at me, seemed to comprehend something and stuck his bottom lip out in a show of sadness. "I didn't really mean you, but good boy."

"Ohhhh...", said Anita in a sterling display of very authentic sounding discomfort.

"That was brilliant, well do... Oh. I think you've done a little bit of sick on my shoe." I made a show of inspecting my foot. "Well done, we're definitely getting that drink now!"

A few moments later we arrived at the table.

"Sorry, sold out! Come back tomorrow!"

"No, no, no--you don't understand. You see my wife is sick. We really need those drinks."

"She is sick?"

"Yes, she threw up just moments ago." I pointed to my left shoe. "See?"

"Then why does she want a drink?"

"Well...it's a Chinese thing, I think. You know--like not looking at the traffic when you cross the road so that it won't hit you."

"What? I don't understand."

"Actually, neither do I. Not really. Never mind."

Despite once again being without the better part of breakfast, the meal went much better than the day before. My partner disabled, I took charge of food selection and managed a delicate balance of fruity, vegetabley, porridgey things on the one side and big fuck-off wedges of muffiny pancake on the other. Even Lucas managed to calm down and leave the cutlery alone when I discovered that he enjoyed the taste of French toast so much that it sent him into a coma of drooling ecstasy.

"We should make millions of these and freeze them," I said, tearing off more pieces and getting them ready for the gaping wet cave of acceptance that his mouth had become.

Langkawi Oriental Village is neither a cultural museum nor anything to do with village is what it says on one of the many websites we consulted before having the hotel's front desk call a taxi and paying it a visit. *It's also neither particularly good nor anything to do with interesting*, I thought to myself as we did a third circuit of the crappy collection of souvenir shops, animal-less petting enclosures, and disturbingly empty restaurants. There was a high point when Lucas yelped with joy and pounced on something. I had assumed it was either a tiny animal he wanted to eat or something that had reminded him of that French toast. In fact, it was neither, but instead a porous reddish stone that he kept for three weeks before somehow eating it and then throwing its bits up all over our bed.

If the Oriental Village is deeply disappointing, the part of it masquerading as a deer farm goes that one step further and is actually personally insulting. You pay 1 ringgit to buy some food pellets, then turn a corner and are faced with a dead end populated by two threatening looking deer. We threw the pellets at them and got the hell out of there before they ate our *er-tze*.

"That was disappointing," said Anita in the understatement of the century, as we hurried away from those deer. "Shall we try the cable car?"

In fact almost the whole point of that park is, I think, to give people something to do while they wait for their turn on the cable car. The staff had reliably informed us that it was

the steepest cable car in Asia, and the little bit of it we could see before trees hid it from view did indeed look steep. But based on recent experiences, I strongly suspected that the bit of cable car we could see was the only bit of cable car that *existed*. And in any case, I had a troubling history with these contraptions.

"Let's not try the cable car," I said. "Remember the Maokong Gondola?" *Maokong Gondola* was the mystifying name for a similar ride in Taipei, and on we had spent twenty horrifying minutes a few years ago. "I can't go through that again; it will be the end of me."

She nodded. "You're right. I really can't go through you going through that again."

"How long have we been here?"

"Twenty seven minutes."

"Well that's good enough for an excursion, isn't it? Besides, you're not well, and the sun is getting quite hot."

In fact it was beginning to overcast, and Anita looked like she had more or less recovered. Lucas was only just starting to enjoy himself, having tasted every individual hole on that stone and ascertained that they were all delicious. But my wife knew me well, and she knew the effect bullshit tourist attractions could have on me.

"Don't worry. I remember Guilin. We can go home now."

I'd love to tell you about Guilin, but even though it's been several years it's still just a little too raw and painful for me to handle going into right now.

Langkawi's main draw is the fact that it's a duty-free island and so has cheap alcohol. At work in Kuala Lumpur when I had told my colleagues we were thinking of going there, the responses had ranged from "great idea--bring back shitloads of booze" to "great idea--make *sure* you bring back shitloads of booze."

Unfortunately, I only remembered this as we were in a taxi heading to the airport.

"Shit!"

"What's that?" said Anita.

"I forgot to buy booze!"

"What's a booze?"

"I mean alcohol!"

"We don't need any alcohol. I have a bottle in the cupboard. If you like we could buy shrimp when we get home and cook them in it."

"Not that kind of alcohol. I mean beer--wine as well--but *mostly* beer."

"Why do you want to buy beer? It's eleven o'clock in the morning. Did you become an alcoholic suddenly?"

"Not at all," I said, smiling. "It's been a gradual thing over several years." I had intended it as a joke, but from her face I could see she was considering how to respond to this revelation. "I wasn't being serious," I said quickly.

"Are you sure? In that restaurant I'm sure you would have ordered a second beer if Lucas hadn't been sick. And I hadn't diarrhea'd their toilet."

"Well yes, I might have had two. Even three. That doesn't make me an alcoholic. I'm British, remember. Three is like breakfast to some people I know."

"Cornflakes is breakfast," she said. "Not beer."

"Whatever, the point is I'm not an alcoholic."

"The why do you want a beer at eleven o'clock in the morning."

"I don't want a beer, I just wouldn't mind buying a crate of 24 cans at..."

"Twenty four!?" She said loudly, waking up Lucas, who had been contentedly snoring away in her lap. She pointed her finger. "Alcoholic! That's *eight* breakfasts, even for an alcoholic!"

"Let me finish. I'd like to buy twenty four cans because they're so cheap--three ringgit each! That's about fifty pence...takes me back to my student days!"

The thought of fifty-pence cans of Carlsberg sent me back twenty years to the taste of deep-fried beef burger and chips, the smell of festering dishes and the futility of arguing with Welsh housemates over the correct pronunciation of *archipelago*.

"Twenty five ringgit!," said the taxi driver as he drew up outside the small airport.

"See--that could have bought us eight cans!"

* * * * *

"The Pabitin Game"

When my aunt Tita arrived at our house in Bulacan, she noticed a new feature of the mango tree: the *balag*, a wooden grid adorned with toys and candies. In particular, the mysterious, colorful paper pouch dangling from the center of the square captured her interest.

"I'm going to get it," she declared. No one doubted her words--after all, she was the tallest among her sisters.

During the birthday party, Tita asked again and again when the pabitin game would start. She often glanced at the hanging structure, its goods twirling or swaying in the wind. Her contagious excitement affected even me. When my parents requested me to play the black keyboard for the guests, I performed *Für Elise* at a rapid pace, as if in anticipation to play with the other kids. Yet, I did not want to compete with my aunt. I only watched.

Papa untied the rope that secured the *balag* to the tree. Tita and the children rushed to the spot beneath the grid, which Papa lowered and raised. The participants jumped and jumped, with arms outstretched to grab their prizes. Screams and laughter joined the rustles of the leaves and the footsteps on the gravel.

Tita, the only adult in the game, aimed just for the pouch. Her fingers tore the paper, and white powder trickled onto her face.

In a few minutes, the lattice became empty, game over. The children had each caught a piece of chocolate or a matchbox car, but my aunt walked away empty-handed.

"I believe the special thing inside just slipped away," she said. "I didn't see it. What was really in there?"

"Flour," I answered.

* * * * *

"Dangdut Dreams"

Remy was thrilled to have the opportunity to study in a university. He hated village life, hated the farms. There wasn't a time when Remy was not complaining about something. He held Jakarta as a model for all that was right in the country. It was big and the people were rich. Artists and actors were so numerous that they couldn't help but brush elbows as they navigated the shops and clubs.

It was bittersweet for him, though, when he was not accepted to any university in Jakarta, but rather, in Surabaya. No more than a two-hour drive from his village, Surabaya was, nevertheless, a big city. Still, it was within range of his parents prying eyes. Remy sought privacy more than anything in attending university. Not privacy from people--no, he loved to be the center of attention--but privacy from disapproving eyes. He was an artist and did not take kindly to those who were not urban enough to understand his talents.

Remy made due with Surabaya and started his studies with great enthusiasm. He knew that it would be a good sign if he could finish his first semester with high marks. It would give his parents some comfort and hopefully allow for them to not be so concerned about his intended direction in life. *What did they know, anyway?* They were village folk. No education. And no exposure to the bright lights and tall buildings that Remy hoped would envelope him and accept him for the rising star he knew he was.

Remy had few close friends as he rarely ventured far from campus or his dormitory. He had little money, even for a student. But what he lacked in rupiah was made up for in the potential to earn it, at least, after he was prepared. The late nights spent studying were followed by late nights sewing. He would not dare buy clothes from the local shops. He had his own style and did not want to be seen wearing something that someone else also owned. Fortunately, he sewed quickly. It was a trait that helped him avoid doing much manual labor in the village--had to help mom sew.

By the time Remy had finished his first semester, he had also managed to scout out a venue where he would make his performing debut. It was a beautiful location on the Kalimas River, modern high-rise buildings in the backdrop, and the famous Submarine Monument right next to the series of stairs that would serve as his stage. The popular eating place across the street would provide the audience he would need to start a rabid fan base.

That night, Remy left his dormitory room and made his way for Jalan Pemuda in the center of the city. Nightlife was hopping. He could feel the buzz and energy of the city. Yes, this was the right night for his debut. The look in people's eyes as he walked past them reiterated what he was thinking. They could see a star in him, a star bursting at the seams. Tonight was the night.

Hiding down the alley between a hotel and an office tower, Remy started getting dressed into his stage attire. He had tried on the flashy clothes only once after finishing it. He had to know that it would fit perfectly . . . and it did. One day, on stage accepting an award for his talent, he would thank his mother for giving him the skills to make his own wardrobe, a crucial part of his star image.

Satisfied with his image after inspecting every inch of himself in a piece of broken glass he found on the ground, Remy made his way to the stage. He could hear the fans cheering; his heart raced. Tonight, Surabaya would give birth to a mega-star. Remy climbed the stairs next to the submarine and looked out over the audience. He could see couples sitting along the river, vendors and their customers interacting around the open plaza, and diners across the street. A Caucasian couple of tourists were even wandering around with their overloaded backpacks. This was truly the night Remy had dreamed of. Plugging the microphone into the small, scratchy amp, Remy stood up and waited for the screeching to stop before he introduced himself.

"Everyone, tonight you will witness a star being born. Allow me to introduce myself, in my debut performance . . . Ratu Rania!"

He bent down quickly to push play on the karaoke VCD and stood upright just in time to catch the first beat of the *gambus*, hips swaying to the left, then to the right, then circular all the way down to a squatting position before repeating those moves again. Toying with the long, wavy wig he was wearing, Remy made eye contact with the old man who had stopped his bicycle to watch him perform. *He was so taken aback by my aura that he had to stop what he was doing to watch!* This thought drove him wild as he unleashed the opening lines to the *dangdut* song made popular by Elvy Sukaesih a few decades ago.

Remy sang for an hour before announcing to his fans that he needed to take a break. He hurried across the street and ordered a Sosro tea in a bottle. As he stood there in full stage attire, he knew that all eyes were on him. The diners had been amazed by his singing and were too shy to even approach him. Remy ate up this thought. The road to stardom had begun. He set his tea bottle down--no doubt that someone would rush over and claim it as a prized trophy for having touched his lips--and jogged back across the street to continue onto his second set for the night.

As Remy sang, he looked around him. The city, the night, the fans . . . it was beautiful. And on that night, Remy became a star. At least, to himself.

* * * * *

"The Red Shoes"

"Whose child is this?," cried a man as if he knew every vendor in the hub.

The hub was extremely crowded but Bianca searched for the source of the voice. She soon found that it belonged to a short man selling apples on a shabbily-built wooden cart. The man was dark-skinned because of constant exposure to sunlight.

"Oi! Whose child is this?," he cried again as a little girl came into view.

The little girl was crying her eyes out. People were rushing to and fro as Bianca tried to squeeze through the crowd. She noticed that the little girl was very untidy. Her hair was all tangled, she wore a dirty white shirt with holes in it, and she was barefoot. Bianca was so taken by the sight of the girl that she was standing motionless in the middle of the street.

With such a heavy crowd, it was inevitable that someone would bump into her. She was forced to move forward and soon found herself inside the shopping mall that was just a few feet away from where she stood earlier. The shopping mall was dominated by immigrants and they sold their goods very cheaply. There were rumors that the products were used as a cover for smuggling illegal drugs inside the country. But nobody ever paid any attention to that, and people enjoyed buying the cheap products.

"What are you doing?," someone nudged her. "Hurry now. We've got tons of things to buy."

"Sorry, mom," she said. "I'm just..."

"Oh, here's the shop I have been looking for!," her mother said. "Somebody really ought to do something about those illegal vendors outside. It's really crowding the area, and those thieves are everywhere!"

The subject matter of illegal vendors is a delicate issue. The government's constant failure of providing aid to the poor and needy has become a tiresome matter. Most people took matters into their own hands. Although these illegal vendors were breaking the law and were a nuisance, it was difficult to completely overlook their plight because they are struggling for their own survival.

By the time they finished shopping, Bianca was carrying an armful of bags, and she was sore from doing so. "Let's go home, mom," she suggested.

The next day, Bianca was rummaging through an old box that she saw hidden away in an upper shelf. It was very dusty and it took her a while to finally clean the surface. She saw her favorite pair of red shoes from when she was about ten years old along with an old diary and some other memorabilia. There were also some of her childhood clothes which her mother unreasonably wanted to preserve. Bianca knew that her mother did not want to throw away the clothes because she was a hoarder, not because she wanted a memento. That afternoon, she visited the nearest orphanage which was a five-mile drive away.

"I'm here to donate these," she said as she showed a box of items to the receptionist.

"Is it alright if I just take a quick look?" asked the receptionist kindly.

"Sure," she smiled. "Do you mind if I look around?"

"Not at all."

As she went in, Bianca was suddenly staring at a little girl with a surprised expression. "Hello," she said gently. "What's your name?"

"Hannah."

"Do you live here?"

"Yes."

"Weren't you lost the other day?"

Hannah showed minimal surprise at Bianca's question. "I ran away," she said coyly. "I saw you with an old lady," she added.

"I see," she said. "Do you like these?" as Bianca showed the red shoes that she decided to snatch away from the box at the last moment. Although old, the shoes were still in a very good condition.

"They're very nice."

"Would you like to have them?"

She nodded shyly.

Bianca handed the shoes to her and told stories as she recalled her own childhood adventures with those shoes.

Hannah seemed contented with such a simple present.

"Miss, just sign this form, and we'll receive your donation," called out the receptionist.

"Will you come here again?" asked Hannah.

Bianca just smiled at her as she turned her back. She visited Hannah every week and spent a lot of time with her. Hannah helped her to see things from a different perspective. Eventually, Bianca decided to adopt Hannah, opening a new chapter in both of their lives.

* * * * *

"Party of One: Your Table Is Ready"

"Energy, excitement and mystery dripped
from the air like the juices of a mango."
The Communist Daughter, Dennis Bock

Adhesive tape. It was my sense of smell that brought me out of my reverie. I was absorbed with what was going on outside the bus window as we made our way through downtown Hong Kong on a sunny morning. Outside that window was a continual deluge of extremely interesting and incomprehensible occurrences: daily life in this wonderful city.

I turned and focused my attention on what was going on in the bus around me. When did those five nuns get on board? A flock of a dozen schoolgirls in light blue uniforms twittered away behind me to my left. Ahhh, there's the source of the adhesive tape smell: an overweight East Indian woman standing in the aisle nearby holding on to a strap and swaying to the bus's motion as she waited for the next stop. Her flowing, abundant sari was open all across her abdomen, exposing a wide bandage covering a recent operation. The smell of the tape in the heat and humidity had broken my trance. Some dark stitches could be seen at the edges, and the skin that shown around the dressing was deep purple. I assumed it was all in the process of healing right then and there.

She got off the bus, and I peered through an opening in the partition behind the driver where I could see the pedals and his legs that were ropes of muscle. His eyes were everywhere: looking to his right, his left, in the mirrors, leaning forward, looking up to judge clearance overhead, then in front, down close and around the bus. His arms and feet

were in constant motion, full of tension, skill, and strength as he operated this double-decked, wheeled contraption. It was like an archaic crane made mobile by his orchestration of a series of levers, cables, and pulleys in order to mesh some hidden gears that made it all work. And he performed this feat in the midst of the controlled chaos of hectic Hong Kong, roads full of traffic, pedestrians, overhanging wires, neon signs, and the eaves and awnings of the buildings lining the streets.

The bus pulled up to a stop I recognized. I wasn't sure where I was, but I knew how to get where I was going. I got off and began searching for some things to bring on the hike I had planned.

A construction site forced me to cross the road. The traffic came from the same direction, and as I waited the sun fell heavily onto me. A break finally occurred, and I quickly crossed to the other sidewalk where I had to bend and dodge water that was dripping off the buildings from somewhere high up. I merged with the flow of people and walked on with part of me observing the humans and the shops. The other part of me I just felt comfortable appreciating because it was unusual, and its constancy and dependability were surprising and welcomed; I felt pretty good about things. I was relaxed. I wasn't being my own worst enemy. And, refreshingly, it had been going on for a few weeks now. Maybe it'll be something permanent I mused.

A sharp loud voice behind me broke the spell. I turned to find a thin, muscular, Sisyphus of an old Chinese man steadily pushing up the graded sidewalk a large, heavy cart fully loaded with whole and cut up chickens. I stepped out of his way. Blood and water dripped a trail. He went on ahead of me repeating what he had been shouting behind me.

He held my attention until he disappeared into the population. Many pairs of shoes quickly obliterated what remained of his passing.

I went into a bookstore and found a copy of *To Have and Have Not*. Thought that would be good to bring with me. I was in the mood to reread the book. If nothing else, the first ten pages were worth it. There was a bakery a few shops down, and there I purchased a couple chunks of bread that looked good. I had no idea what kind it was or how it might taste. One more store I figured, and there I got a pint of South African brandy and two Chinese pears. I was equipped. I waited for bus thirteen and was then on my way to Robinson Road.

There was a stream that flowed down the hill and disappeared under the street not far from the bus stop. I got off the bus and walked over to the wooded area surrounded by green foliage, spied the trail alongside the stream and climbed down some rocks to the path. Elephant ear and bamboo were thick, but the trail was distinct and well polished by many feet over many years. It wasn't even eleven in the morning, but the heat and humidity were challenging me as I climbed. It was so odd to hike in this quiet sanctuary along a rocky stream through abundant greenery with nary a sign of the swarming civilization just a ways back over my shoulder.

I climbed and I climbed, and I sweated clear. Periodically I stopped and looked around me: a spider's web, an interesting plant, a strange insect on a leaf. I should have brought a bottle of water. I knew enough to not drink out of the tempting stream, but I sure was thirsty.

The bamboo and lush vegetation dwindled and turned to scrub bush as I neared my destination. I figured that I was maybe half way up to the Peak. The trail started to level out, and it soon emerged into a huge open area.

The barren plateau was dotted with shell damaged British gun emplacements that still overlooked the South China Sea as they have since World War II. It was a spectacular, blue umbrella sky with a slight breeze, and I selected my perch. I climbed onto a bunker and laid out my assortment of items for my little party.

There was not a soul in site. Except for the hovering, darting silver-blue dragonflies, I had the remnants of this old fortress all to myself. I took off my shirt and sandals, sighed and looked around. The amazing city that continuously emitted metallic clanking and deep sounds in a steady, peculiar rhythm lay below me. Beyond that the South China Sea spread out like a sheet of blue. It was easy for me to understand why, at one time, people believed the earth to be flat. That's sure what it looked like from where I was sitting. Due to the lighting, the water, temperatures and tricks of the eye, there wasn't the slightest indication there was any curvature to the earth. The sea met the sky at a barely distinguishable straight-line, level horizon that went from way to my left to way to my right.

It was an entertaining little still life laid out next to me on the roof of the weaponry relic: two fresh pears, a chunk of interesting-looking bread, a pint of brandy and the book. I was in no rush, no place to be, so I took my time. The flavors that I had ended up with, by chance, blended wonderfully. I'm sure the brandy played a key role.

And, yes, I did feel some guilt and discomfort, but this was all mixed with awe: imagining the intensities, sufferings, fear and confusion that men experienced in this very place long ago where I was now sitting quite spoiled and content. To think how men, like

my father, over the ages have battled, witnessed and endured unthinkable things in wars whereas I, pathetically, have only had skirmishes with my wits.

The book, thankfully, diverted these thoughts. I was suddenly in Havana right there above Hong Kong with pear juice running down my forearm. A bite of the fruit, a taste of the bread followed by a sip of the brandy: it was a peaceful, quiet little orgy under the Asian sun.

By the end of Part I of the book, I had a half a pear, a corner of bread and about two inches of brandy left. Seemed like a good time to lie back on the concrete roof and doze off.

When I awoke I completed my lunch and just sat there watching the panoramic, live cinema before me. It was late afternoon. Sometime I would like to be here when the sunset.

Finally, I stuffed the litter in my pockets, jumped down to the ground and said goodbye to my afternoon nest. As I started walking away this made me think, and I turned and looked back and wondered if, by chance, it had been a machinegun nest at one time. I shook my head and just marveled at the whole idea.

Going back down was more difficult since parts of the rocky path were slippery, and I had brandy in my bones. When I reached the road, it was a quick bus ride to my destination.

I arrived at my temporary home full of a new coat of sun and with a South African brandy lilt to my step. A tall glass of ice water refreshed me grandly while I read the day's edition of the South China Morning Post. Clean cotton clothes all ironed and set out earlier

on my bed by the amah were waiting for me after a long, cool shower. The flat was empty and quiet except for the hum of an air conditioner.

The view from this high-rise was magnificent. The harbor was a phenomenon unto itself: junks, dhows, modern freighters, barges, lighters, walla-wallas, sampans and various unidentifiable craft, each with its own purpose, all jockeyed for positions and sought avenues to get where they were going and do what they had to do.

I looked through the window with the binoculars and found the stack on the huge ship entering this maze of traffic. I checked a chart of funnel marks that my host had on his coffee table, and I learned it belonged to the Burma Five Star Shipping Company. A pod of small boats bobbed alongside this heavily loaded carrier. I put down the binoculars and decided it was time for dinner. I was ready to head back out into the metropolis to watch the neon reappear.

The bus stop was close to the flat, and I walked there thinking I would take whatever came first: the bus or a taxi. Of course a red and gray showed up right away. They consistently appeared out of nowhere. He brought me downtown, and I got out and walked deciding to go into whatever restaurant that attracted my attention. After moseying around for a couple of blocks I spied a sign that had a hand pointing up a flight of stairs.

I climbed up those stairs through some turmoil and clatter and reached a small lobby area. There a lovely young Chinese woman in a gold cheongsam stood straight with her hands behind her back. She nodded when I told her I would like to have dinner. A staid couple staring straight ahead sat waiting on a couch holding hands. After peering in a glass case hanging on the wall that was filled with a collection of colorful snuff bottles, I sat in

one of the stiff-backed chairs. The maitre d', in a dark suit, soon summoned the couple to be seated. It wasn't long before he reentered the lobby with a menu in hand, partially bowed and said to me, quietly and seriously, "Party of one: your table is ready."

When I entered the main dining area I saw a family of nine get up from a table and leave. As soon as they were a few steps away, there was a flurry of activity and two bus boys cleared off the dishes and clutter, whipped off the tablecloth, grabbed the large round table top, slid it off and rolled it away through some doors leaving a small intimate little table designed just for me. Three young men whisked away the extra chairs: leaving two. Another worker arrived, flipped on a new tablecloth and placed a setting of silverware, cloth napkin and glasses; all in the time it took me to walk thirty feet. It was part magic act, part ballet.

My waiter took my drink order and quickly returned to my table with a bottle of cognac. He pointed at my glass and asked if I wanted a double. I looked at him, at the bottle in his hand, my glass, and my first thought was to ask him if he might know where a bear goes to the bathroom. But I simply answered, "Yes, please; a double would be good. Thank you."

I ordered what was called Chicken Asaram on the menu, and it came in a big bowl. There were large pieces of a chicken breast and thigh in a reddish brown soup with coconut milk and various unidentifiable, colorful items. It was physically hot and very spicy. A fluffy mound of steamed, white rice was placed next to it on a black plate. Several prawns in a separate small cup of seafood soup were included with the meal.

The crustaceans were yellowish, and I inspected them through the bisque. There was a dark, greenish substance like that found in oysters embedded in the creases of the

prawns, and it floated on the surface as well. I imagined that I could actually see hepatitis germs gathering forces and taking up arms. I wondered if and when they would strike. My host recently related to me his horrible ordeal with hepatitis, and I recalled his adamant admonition that I avoid it all costs.

The soup broth seemed to be thinner than water, and it was nearly impossible to cut the pieces of chicken without it splashing and getting all over me. So, with a fork, I lifted out the chicken and placed it alongside the rice and proceeded to eat it my way.

The flavors of the dinner were certainly enhanced by the cognac, but it also kindly helped me overlook my fears of an assault by the, real or imaginary, hepatitis army.

After dining I walked through a pair of louvered swinging doors to the bar to have a drink and take a look around. One would never guess the two places belonged to the same owner. Maybe they didn't. It was called the Lucky Horse Saloon, and it had nothing in common with the restaurant I just left.

I theorized that quite possibly a Texan with a Chinese wife owned the whole enterprise, and they had made a deal on whose area was whose. Maybe he died and just a remnant of his dream remained. Since then it has metamorphosed into this very odd Chinese idea of an old American cowboy saloon.

I created interesting answers for myself to any questions I had about the place. Its entire history was clear in my inventive mind.

It didn't appear that anyone else was analyzing the goings on: they were busy talking and drinking while a few were moving about on the circular dance floor. It was mostly Chinese men and women sitting at tables drinking beer out of glasses advertised on

little signs as Authentic Prairie Schooners. There was a drawing on these signs of a huge schooner glass being transported by a covered wagon across the prairies with steer skulls by the trail. I was unaware that beer was a popular beverage with Chinese couples, but it sure was with the customers here at the Lucky Horse.

I sat down on a bar stool and, right on cue, what look liked a waitress from a truck stop in Oklahoma came over, tossed down a coaster, and asked what I wanted. I expected her to add, "Buckeroo." I decided she was the niece of the deceased Texan half of the marriage, and she remained working in his Hong Kong version of a Western bar because the money was better than what she could make back home in Texas.

"Thought I'd continue with some cognac."

"We have brandy, no cognac."

"I just had some cognacs over there," I said pointing to the open doorway to the restaurant.

"Well, that's over there, this is over here."

A brandy is what I had.

She loitered for a bit, being not too busy at the bar, but being quite a bit too nosy. "You trying to find a date?" She looked like she should be chewing gum, but she wasn't. "If you are, this isn't really the place to find a partner, ya know?"

"I'm not looking for anyone. Just came for dinner and now having a brandy."

"You married?"

"No, on my own."

"Spend too much time on your own, you'll end up being a selfish son of a bitch."

“Hmm, there’s a difference between being selfish and being self-sufficient,” I clumsily offered.

“Well, watch out for selfishness is my advice. I just got rid of one Mr. Selfish himself. Wasted seven years on the self-centered bastard. I figured it was because he lived alone too long before I met him.”

“Ahh, I don’t think that’s the cause of selfishness.”

“I don’t really care what caused it. I’m just glad he’s gone, and I’m pissed that I wasted all those years.”

She darted away. I turned to watch the band and the people who were dancing to this strange, upbeat, country-jazz-rock in this subdued, but mad replica of a Chinese-Western movie set.

I spied an unlikely pair. They walked right by me headed to the wooden dance floor, and I caught her accent. She was a long, lanky, big-boned Australian woman in her thirties holding the hand of an emaciated Chinese man around fifty.

When he started dancing, it looked like firecrackers were going off at his feet. He resembled a bee trying to communicate to his pals the direction and how far away some flowers were located. She danced with the beat of the bass while he seemed to try and match some movement of his body with each hit of a drumstick.

It looked like someone had lopped her hair off with a pair of lawn shears as soon as it grew to reach her shoulders. Her nose was quite large, and I couldn’t help but be amused to catch glimpses of her silhouette cast on the backdrop with this feature elongated even more so.

I would never know anything more about their story. Finished a few brandies, and I knew it was time for a taxi and head for home. I'd entertained myself the whole livelong day. And it was a good day with an interesting trip downtown, a good hike and lunch up the hill, and an OK dinner. It was another all-day, all-evening-long party of one. I was tired from all the sun and activity.

Walking out to get my ride, I felt thankful for my recently acquired ability to be more at ease: to not give myself such a hard time, to be on pleasant speaking terms with myself. And it had nothing to do with selfishness as I feebly tried to inform Cindy or whatever her name was. It was simply a matter of being content: observing, appreciating, enjoying things on my own while, at the same time holding, if not a fruitful, at least a congenial, inner dialogue. Later in life, I resurrected this ability on a constant basis, not out of choice, but out of necessity.