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Home amongst the Lost Souls

In the summer of 1986, the twelve-year-old you came with your family from Fujian province to Hong Kong. Yet a month before your sixteenth birthday, you left home and went to Taiwan alone. You cut off contact with your family and friends, and lived between Taipei and Hong Kong by yourself.

Two years later, you turn eighteen and find a job as a souvenir shopkeeper at the Star Ferry. The shop is inside the Tsim Sha Tsui (TST) pier en route for boarding the ferry to Central. You decide to give Hong Kong another attempt in settling down here. About accommodation, you discover the Chungking Mansions in TST from a tourist guidebook.

Located at the harbor end of the Nathan Road, the grey Chungking Mansions stand among luxury hotels like the Peninsula and Sheraton unapologetically. When you enter the mansions, a pungent smell – Indian curry mixes with Chinese salted fish – attacks your nostrils straightway. The air in the mansions' ground floor is so thick that it looks like a translucent veil hanging down from the ceiling, forever shrouding the horde. The open ground floor brims with shops and clamor. You do not mind the noise because you are in search of your voice.

That ground floor is also a gathering place for some of the ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, particularly South Asians; Middle Easterners and Nigerians. With your darker skin complexion than the normal Chinese, you blend in well. Though this fact makes you feel a prickle of something far far inside your abdomen.

The distance from the entrance to the lift is about fifty steps. You count them because you do not want to get lost. The space in between is heaving with South Asians and Africans,

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men mostly. A slight girl like you has to be brave, and brace yourself pushing your way through the throng. You endeavor to avoid touching anyone, or to be touched along the way.

You find the Travelers' Guesthouse on 17th floor of Block D and decide to stay there for three reasons. Firstly, it is the cheapest you can get in town: HK\$45 per night while the fairly inexpensive Imperial Hotel next door is \$500 per night. Secondly, there is no deposit required. You pay around 12pm and have a bed to rest for the night. Lastly, there is no Chinese in sight. You feel freer.

The guesthouse is big for Chungking Mansions' standard. It has a large lobby with a reception area up front and a guests' recreational zone at the back with a beat-up TV and sofa. The place bustles with life as an incessant stream of guests arrives and departs daily. You are so slight, you almost seem invisible.

There are two single rooms and six shared rooms with bunkbeds. A large shared-room is gender mixed and others are sole gender. You select a lower bunkbed in the most inner room with ladies only and pay each day around 11am to keep the same bed, and to make sure that the few belongings you have remain there. Once you forgot to pay on time, your belongings ended up scattered around the corner next to the rough wooden reception table.

Behind the table usually sits a mean looking Filipino lady. Marianne is her name and she seems to be in her forties. She has a hysterically high pitched voice that makes every hair on your body stand on end. Her one and only facial expression is malicious, which reinforces the terrifying experience when talking with her. She must be experiencing an early menopause, you reckon, and somehow feel sorry for her.

There is another guesthouse keeper by the name of Jimmy. He is an African guy who looks to be in his fifties. His voice is deep and dense; it sounds like the rumble of distant thunder,

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which matches his macho body that is slow in movement. When he walks, his arms and legs seem to move in different directions. Marianne and Jimmy are like concave and convex; they get on well with each other and make a great pair of watchdogs that guide the guesthouse tightly. Nobody there wants to mess with them by delaying his or her daily payment for a bed.

After some time, you make three girlfriends. One is Kate. She is English and has been there for a while as she becomes a private English teacher. Kate is tall and proper. You notice a tiny mole on the right corner of her lips. It is visible only because her skin is so lily white. Another is Julia, an Australian. She seems sporty and chirpy. Though, you find traces of shadow in her smiles. One more is Park, a Korean. She is stoutly built and square-faced. The peculiar opacity of Park's dark eyes is a statement to her private nature. But she opens up to you. And although the two of you speak little English, you use gestures and connect well with each other and with the rest.

You love the ladies, but when you are all in the same room with four bunkbeds, you feel the ceiling, walls and beds are closing in on you. There is no window. You crawl into your lower bunkbed and curl in there like a little trapped mouse.

Later on, you also befriend Takeshi, a Japanese fella; Marcus, a German guy and Ricky, an English chap. Takeshi is a tousle-haired, boyish good looking young man with soulful eyes. He has a mild stutter. Ricky is raggedly handsome with a head of shoulder length hair that parts in the middle. He often let the strands of his front hair drape down like curtains covering up most of his face. Takeshi and Ricky are in their twenties.

Then there is Marcus who is about thirty. He is tall, broad and muscular. Combined with his stern facial expression, he looks intimidating. But when he speaks, his voice is sonorous,

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which softens his appearance. For some reason, he seems striving to forget himself as he uses all kinds of substances daily.

Ricky and Marcus have boarded there for a few months already when you arrive. Their respective lower bunkbed is wrapped up vehemently with indigo cloths as if it is their most sacred and inviolable property. They always seem to exist in their own wonderland, but whenever you need to speak to Marianne, either of them will manifest next to you. And when one of them emerges, Marianne suddenly notices you. She looks up from her seat and listens. When she replies, her pitch lowers. It works like magic every time.

One night, it is Park's birthday and your gang decides to celebrate with her. Ricky reveals a secret back staircase from the 17th floor to the rooftop of the Chungking Mansions. You guys wait until after midnight when Jimmy, the night watcher, retreats to his chamber behind the reception table. Marcus brings a bottle of whisky and two bottles of wine; Takeshi sake; Park Korean rice wine in paper packs; Julia, Kate, Ricky and you more beers.

When you guys reach the rooftop, there is a square yard before you all. You walk forward, lean on a short wall in the front yard, and look out. Peking Road extends exuberantly ahead. The bright neon lights catch some rear figures of Susie Wongs, partygoers, lost souls... some walk in pairs; some disappear into the dark alleys in groups; yet some others descend to the underground bars or nightclubs along that road.

The late night air is cool and the sky is cloudless. The stars immerse themselves in the striking Hong Kong skyline. The open space is such a sharp contrast to the low ceiling, congested guesthouse a floor below. You stare into the wondrous void above and feel your muscles are relaxing. You realize that there is a bigger world out here where you belong. The

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atmosphere seems to vibrate with your heartbeat; it is full of vitality. The lightly salted breeze from the neighboring Victoria harbour embraces you all.

The gang begins to sit on the floor in the middle of the roofed yard, forming a circle around the drinks. Marcus holds up his lighter, lights it and asks Park to make a wish. She does so joyously. You guys are back on your feet, clap and sing the birthday song to Park and hug her. Sitting down, you all grab your drinks and chat away merrily. At some point you give your left inner thigh a quick pinch making sure that you are not dreaming – that you are on top of something for a change – as TST, the most glamorous district in the Kowloon peninsula is right under your feet, literally.

Marcus gets up. He gives your gang a Nazi salute and marches the Hitler march. You guys are startled at first, but soon burst out laughing. Julia jumps up and joins the march. They march on seriously, round and round you guys. You laugh so hard your stomach cramps. Some of you almost roll onto the floor. When the pair resumes their seats, you all hoot and cheer.

Some time later, Takeshi starts humming a beautiful Japanese folk song. His voice is mellifluous. A sense of serenity seeps through your skin traveling all the way to your heart. Others are also mesmerized by his melancholy melody as you all listen quietly. The song fades. Some of your worries seem to be dispersed with it. It is like when you finish reading a Greek tragedy and feel that your life is not so unbearable. The air becomes crisp and clear. It is a delicious moment of tranquility, which feels like the moment the tip of your tongue touches an ice cube or a slice of lime and its effect ripples through the senses of your entire body.

After a while Ricky picks up the beat. He begins by cracking a few light jokes about his old life back in London, stealing cars to get his father's attention or the like. He speaks as if the events do not belong to him; as if he tries to keep himself away from that other self – the self that

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seems at once intimate and alien to him. Then he goes on to tackle some edgier issues, such as the similarities and differences between the English, Irish and Scottish. It is your introduction to the United Kingdom. And you realize that those three kinds of British do not really speak to each other in the guesthouse where you are staying. You smile at Kate and she smiles back; as if she can read your mind and is seconding your thought.

Then an impulse so strong it propels you to stand up and walk towards the short wall in the front yard. Taking off your shoes, you climb on top of the wall. Its surface is gravelly. Small rocks are stabbing at the soles of your feet. You manage to steady yourself and rise. Spreading your arms, you take a few baby steps forward. Your body quivers like a fledgling. Park and Kate come over; others follow. They stay close to the wall, close to you. And they never take their eyes off you.

Wind gusts by, you sway and nearly fall. Your gang catches you. Kate and Marcus seize your upper limb; Ricky and Park grab hold of your leg; Julia lets out a relieved sigh; Takeshi whistles. Your body recovers its equilibrium. Standing back up, you are taller and steadier than before. You give your gang a broad grin; they return it with broader ones. Gleefully, you take a glance at the glimmering road ahead; draw a deep breath, turn and jump. You land on the yard and near the outstretched arms of your gang. The group hugs and laughs.

The night flows. The wind blows. The sound of an oceangoing vessel's engine drifts in the air. You look out to the harbour, awaiting the break of dawn.