

I was only a weekend hippie. I dressed well, washed, did all those middle class things that my sort of business, an importing firm, required of its staff, particularly of its senior accountant. Do what you like at the weekend, but weekdays, from nine to five, you served the god Mammon, who insisted on the niceties. He was a very conventional, uptight, anal-retentive old tyrant.

Julie worked in an advertising agency, where the goddess Venus reigned. People were expected to be unconventional. It might spark off an idea that could net millions. So it didn't occur to her that having an affair with a colleague of mine was any less acceptable than having affairs with anyone else—if you were going to have them at all. And she'd said she wouldn't. I'd thought at the time that her breaking that promise had been wilful selfishness. Now, stewing it over on the plane, I was beginning to see she simply couldn't help it. She was programmed to be a nymphomaniac. I was right to leave. I couldn't live with that.

Now let me tell you how I found out what was going on. The scene was the office toilet. I was hauling my strides up after a satisfying crap, when I heard two colleagues enter. They stood at the urinal, chatting.

'Still having it off with, er, what's 'er name?'" That was Tom's voice. A nice guy, I liked him.

'Julie. Yeah, fuckin' oath I am. But keep ya voice down, we don't want Harris to hear, eh? I wanna keep me job. Not to mention me hornbag. Hur, hur.'

Fucking Simpson, my bumptious, bloody assistant clerk! I had only one thought. To smash his ugly face in. I opened the toilet door, and there the two of them were, shaking off the drips. I lunged over and grabbed Simpson's collar, throwing him hard back against the wall, his head hitting the wall with a satisfying *thunk*. My left hand across the little fucker's throat, I kned him as hard as I could on his still exposed cock, that invasive cock that had destroyed promises. The look on his face was sheer terror, but it wouldn't be half a second later, I thought. Pulped faces don't look frightened. They don't look fucking anything.

My right fist did a hard cross jab—but it connected with the wall. It hurt like hell.

Fucking Tom had bear-hugged me from behind, deflecting my fist. He hissed into my ear: '*Peter!* For Christ's sake, mate. You'll kill him!'

Simpson was clutching his groin, whimpering, 'You crazy bastard, you've ruined me. If you've, ugh, done any real damage, I'll fucking sue, so help me.'

I pushed his hand away. His cock was still hanging there, still attached, not obviously damaged, no blood or anything. Then, on the spur of the moment, I did something I regretted.

I spat on it.

'That'll fix it, you cunt.' I turned to both of them. 'Now listen, you two. Let's do nothing further until we've cooled down. I've got nothing against you, Tom, except your tongue's too fucking long. But as for you, Simpson, you'd better start looking for another job. I can't work with you any more.'

‘You stupid bastard, ya don’t think I’m the only one who’s been up precious little wifie, do ya?’ Simpson sneered.

Oh shit! No. No, for Christ’s sake, no. It was only a cheap dig, surely. Or was it? Things were already way out of control. I left.

But it wasn’t Simpson who had to quit, it was me. I’d come to that conclusion even before I’d got back to my desk. Even if Julie swore black and blue that it had been a once-only lapse. ‘There’d been no-one else, honest darling, believe me,’ those wonderful clear, innocent—innocent!—blue eyes would plead. Which was exactly what she did say at home that night, and what those wonderful eyes pleaded.

Course I didn’t believe her. Either way. That Simpson was a once-only—‘*still* having it off?’ isn’t that what Tom had asked?—or that she wouldn’t do it again. No, I had to get shat of Julie. She still excited me, enraptured me, but trust had gone. I’d only be torturing myself.

And what about the office gossip! What would be worse—the sneers of those in the know or the embarrassed sympathy of those in the know? All would be in the know, Simpson would see to that. And he’d add: ‘And don’t go to the shithouse if Harris is there. He’ll slag on ya fuckin’ dick!’ I could just hear him saying it.

I went straight to see Norm, the boss. First up, I admitted the unseemly matter of the fight in the toilet. I felt like shit, slumped in a chair in Norm’s office, telling him all this. Norm was a bit of a straight-arse. He tended to disapprove when staff brawled in office hours.

He looked at me in a way I didn’t like. ‘So you want to resign, eh? I’d certainly want to in your position. Assaulting colleagues does little for office morale, you know.’ But then he changed tack entirely. ‘Not that I blame you, in the circumstances. No way. Reckon I’d do the same. Know what I think, Peter? I think I’ll accept your resignation. Then, you know what? I think you should clear out and start with a new slate somewhere else, far way. You’ve got talent and I’ll give you a terrific reference. Promise.’

‘Thanks a lot, Norm. I’d come to the same conclusion, but where?’

‘How about Hong Kong? I reckon I could pull some strings. We’ve got contacts with McKinnon’s Far East Trading, and I hear on the grapevine that they need an accountant. Want me to make enquiries? I know the boss there, Frank Roberts, funny old bugger but he’d be a good boss I reckon. How’s about it, eh?’

‘Sounds good to me. The further the better as far as I’m concerned.’ Yes, I thought Hong Kong was probably far enough. ‘Yes, Norm, please. I’d be really grateful if you’d find out more, like salary and stuff, how I apply.’

The more I thought about it the better I liked the idea. Simply resigning and working elsewhere in Sydney would only reopen old sores. I know I’d be tempted to try it on with Julie again. I had to get out and begin again with no baggage.

Norm got the necessary info, gave me that promised reference, and it was a done deal.

But what was I getting into? I knew next to nothing about Hong Kong. There was that Orson Welles film that bombed, *Ferry to Hong Kong*, which told me that Chinese schoolchildren had impeccable manners and spoke near perfect BBC English. Oh yes, and *The World of Suzie Wong*, which told me that Chinese prostitutes could charm the pants off

Westerners. But that wasn't going to be a problem, because the girls, cute though they may be, looked like dark haired fawns, and fawns with dark hair and cute eyes weren't my style. I preferred blondes, like Julie. *Stop!* Oh yes, and there'd been some riots last year, something to do with the Cultural Revolution, whatever that was, but it was all under control now. Oh yes, and the job paid rather more than I'd been getting in Sydney, and I'd be paying a lot less tax than in Australia, a lot less.

And that was about it. Not bad. Not bad at all. If only I could stop thinking about Julie.

'Have you been to Hong Kong before?'

*Huh?* The hostie brought me back with a thump. She was squatting beside me, her face level with mine. 'Connie', I read on the yellow name tag on her smart red uniform.

'No, Connie, never before. I'm looking forward to it.'

'Holiday? How long you stay ah?'

'No, work. I'm going to a job. Years, maybe. I've no firm plans.'

'Work! That is a big step. What sort of work you do ah?'

'I'm an accountant. No, not such a big step. I did similar work in Australia.'

'You will like Hong Kong, Mr. Harris.'

'Yes, I can see I will. You're from Hong Kong, aren't you, Connie? Hong Kong people are very nice.'

A little gentle flirting. Old habits die hard. We were interrupted by an announcement from the Captain: we were beginning our descent.

Connie smiled in a way that warmed me, that surprised me. 'Excuse me,' she said, 'but I must get back to work. You look out window as we fly through Kowloon City. Very famous view. It is very beautiful.'

She stood, treating me to her gentle fawn smile again, and walked briskly back to the rear of the aircraft. I watched her go. What a voluptuous bum for a fawn to have! And calves to match. Well, darling, if you're any indication, you are as I said very nice people. Not challenging, not in-your-face. Not like bloody Julie, who turned every moment of what should have been sheer existential pleasure into a compulsive search for the unattainable. Poor kid, but boy, was I well out of it.

The view was amazing. We seemed to weave between apartment blocks, floating past people's windows. If you couldn't exactly see what people were doing behind their windows, you could imagine: eating dinner, watching television, cleaning up, sitting on the toilet, making love. Doing whatever people do anywhere. But anywhere else, you couldn't see it from an aircraft window. No, not beautiful, as you said Connie, but dramatic. That's the word. Incredibly dramatic.

We touched down without a bump, taxied for a long time and then stopped. Connie stood by the exit door smiling professionally as we filed past.

‘Thank you, Connie. I’m really looking forward to living in Hong Kong. Thanks to you. I hope we meet again.’ I touched her gently on the arm. She subtly raised her arm, acknowledging the gesture.

‘Bye-bye, Mr. Harris. I hope so too.’

Now, why did I do that? I’d no intention of following up with Connie. Or with anyone else, not for a long time. No, I was going to concentrate on what they reckoned Hong Kong was very good at.

Making money.

I clanged down the steep metal stairs onto the tarmac with the other passengers, then fifty yards to the airport building. The first thing that struck me was the humidity, next the smell: spices, garlic, differentness. Recovering luggage, clearing immigration and customs, didn't take long. Then I was hauling two suitcases, all my worldly goods, down the ramp into the arrivals area, where I was told to look out for a guy with a placard with my name on it.

There. A young Chinese guy with large horn-rims glasses on his big, round face was waving a sign saying 'Peter Harris'.

I went up to him, pointing to the name. 'That's me. Pleased to meet you.'

'Eddie Tsang.' We shook hands, then he rattled off. 'I take you to Mandarin first, new, very nice hotel, but two nights only, all paid for. Special for you. Then you get your own flat, right? Tonight, we have dinner and I tell you many things, you listen. Tomorrow, I pick you up, go to office. Meet your new colleagues, right?'

We took a taxi to Star Ferry, my attention torn between Eddie's ceaseless chatter and the amazing scene through the taxi window. It was early evening, but it was still all go, go, go out there on the street. Huge double-decker buses roared through narrow gaps, people, taxis, people, cars, bicycles, people, huge neon signs lit in Chinese writing everywhere, still more people, fusty old buildings, and through gaps between buildings, the lights of another city across the Harbour flicked in and out of view. I pointed, asking a silly question. 'Where's that?'

'Hong Kong sigh,' Eddie explained. 'More better. We go there.'

Hong Kong sigh? Ah, got it. Hong Kong *side*.

Eddie paid the taxi. My God, it really was as in *Suzie Wong*. In the street outside the ferry terminal, women were wearing *cheongsams*, a few old men in what looked like pyjamas, hawkers in line flogging anything from weird, spiky looking fruit to shonky looking watches. Crowds of people, all shouting in a strange, harsh language. God, I'd never learn that! Fortunately, I'd been told I wouldn't need to. Everyone spoke English, so they said. I was ready by now to take bets it would be more like Eddie's loud, enthusiastic approximations than Orson Welles's pommy-sounding schoolgirls.

Hong Kong certainly was different, to see, to hear, to smell. The mini-skirted Julie, with her long, tanned, sexy legs, long blond hair and floral headband, was light years away from this place. I decided right then and there I'd made the correct decision.

We entered the ferry terminal. We passed the suitcases over the turnstile and went upstairs, waiting outside a huge gate with a crowd of people. An alarm sounded, the gate swung inwards, and the crowd surged forward. Eddie insisted I sit on the open side of the ferry: 'You watch the lights of Hong Kong sigh.' The city hugged the whole length of the shore of the Island, and climbed partway up a large, saddled hill behind. 'The Pik', Eddie explained, pointing. 'Rich people live there. Very rich. You work hard, you make lotta money, you live there too maybe.' He bellowed with laughter.

We disembarked Hong Kong sigh, manhandled the suitcases over the turnstile, walked across the road, and there we were, at the Mandarin. Impressive. I'd never stayed in a place like that before. I was a bit disappointed it wasn't the Luk Kwok, supposedly the model for the Nam Kok hotel where Suzie plied her trade, but I was happy to settle for this large room with ensuite and harbour view. Especially since the office was paying for it. But only for two nights. I couldn't afford to stay after that. I was going to have to find my own place fast. I mentioned that to Eddie.

'No problem. I have a friend. He fix for you. We have dinner here, and I tell you about work. Business dinner, I put on your bill.' He laughed loudly, punching me lightly on the arm. 'Office pay, no problem.'

I'd already eaten on the plane, but I guessed it would be useless trying to dissuade Eddie from his free but very expensive dinner at *Pierrot's*, the Mandarin's top of the line French restaurant. Eddie was only trying to be helpful, his energetic mouth ever a gushing fountain of information. I kept prompting myself to remember this point, that name, but it was useless. I'd been up since dawn, and with the three hour time change, I was shagged out, Eddie's fire-hose of information relentless.

After we'd finished the bottle of Burgundy—\$200, or well over forty real ones, I saw with disbelief—Eddie called for the bill and asked me to sign. Which was fair enough, as the room was in my name, but it made me nervous that Eddie's enthusiasm might be going to cost me big.

We parted in the foyer. 'Good to meet you, Peter. I see you here, tomorrow morning, nine thirty, right? Bye-bye.'

Eddie seemed to operate in energetic lunges. Loudly present one minute, *whoosh*, he was gone, leaving a pulsating space, like the inside of a drum.