

WHITED SEPULCHRES

John Biggs

I don't like bellowing into a microphone so that I can be audible above the Mong Kok traffic. They call it teaching. What a travesty, after my experience at St. James' Grammar in Melbourne's leafy suburb of Camberwell. But it was my other experience at St. James that explains why I was teaching like this.

Mary, my fellow teacher and wife of less than three years' standing—or lying, however you wish to interpret that—announced that she had been having it off with Brunton, the PE teacher, for some months: 'I'm moving out, Nigel. I'm *sure* you'll understand, darling. You see, Peter and I are in love.' My pretty Mary, with her wide blue eyes and, up to that very moment, her outward and elaborate displays of wifely devotion, had been two-timing me. And I had suspected nothing.

I was devastated.

I leave you to picture the atmosphere in the staff room once that became public knowledge. It was not nice. Someone had to go. The two love birds were perfectly happy where they were. They didn't intend to move from St. James. So I did.

Colin, good friend and deeply sympathetic to me in my predicament, passed me the staffroom copy of *The Times Educational Supplement*, jabbing his finger at an advert in "Overseas Vacancies". 'Seen this, mate? Just take a gander at the salary.'

The Department of Education and Manpower in Hong Kong were advertising for Native English Teachers (NETs) at approximately double my present salary, plus rental assistance and other perks. I wasn't a native but I was an English teacher, which was close enough for me. And Mary was a blonde, so what better place to forget her than in Hong Kong?

I applied for a post and was appointed.

Ranged in front of me every day were some of the sweetest, most innocent faces I'd ever seen in high school kids—but faces capped with black, occasionally decorated with brown streaks, and in the senior class, even with orange.

Take Venus Leung. She embodied that innocence more than any other of my students. She had such a sweet smile, making her seem more like thirteen than eighteen, and always so eager to help. She used to wait behind after class: 'Please Sir, I like clean board for you!' Which she promptly did, wielding the duster in elaborate sweeps and whorls, pony-tail aswing. Job finished, she flashed me a lovely smile of joyful innocence, then skipped out the door. The young sophisticates of Camberwell would never in a fit volunteer to do that, let alone with such evident pleasure.

Fancy teaching students like Venus to converse in English by shouting at them through that accursed microphone and calling it 'conversation'! The idea was preposterous. So to hell with current practice in the school, I arranged the kids in small, tight groups, their chairs jammed

together, and insisted they talk in English. One thing they loved doing was re-enacting, in English, scenes from the latest Canto movies.

They might have loved it, but my fellow local teachers did not. Anyone looking in through the glass panel on the door saw a classroom in apparent chaos; open the door and they heard apparent chaos, so loud that even the traffic was drowned out. Chaos it was not, the kids were learning, but the local teachers preferred to see and hear chaos. Here we go again, they said to each other, pointing knowingly, another of these overpaid and incompetent NET *gwailos* abusing their privileges. Their preference for this interpretation arose from the fact that we were indeed paid rather more than they, with allowances and a workload of which they were jealous. I didn't blame them for that at all; in their shoes, I'd feel the same way. But I did want to show them that lecturing through a blaring loudspeaker was no way to teach.

Another thing that surprised the hell out of me in Hong Kong was the bush walking! Yes, a short bus ride from Mong Kok, parts of which are the most densely populated areas on earth, is Lion Rock National Park. An MTR ride to Central, and you can catch the Outlying Islands ferries to countryside that is still unspoilt, with magnificent views. Billy Chan, one of the local teachers I do get on with, told me about the Outlying Islands. 'Lantau is a walker's paradise, Nigel! Sunset and Lantau Peaks very beautiful.' He took PE, incidentally, but I didn't hold that against him.

It occurred to me that here was a great opportunity to interact with the senior students, out of those awful, noisy classrooms. How, for instance, would Venus behave under these circumstances? Still the same innocent child, or would she reveal a mature complexity, a side I had yet to witness?

Billy agreed that this was a great idea. He said most would never have gone walking there although it was on their own doorstep. There would be one rule: conversation during the hike would be in English only.

But first, I thought I had better check out the route for myself.

So here I am, sitting in the open-air section of the First Class upper deck of the Lantau ferry, lounging back on a plastic chair, my feet on the railing. I'm studying the map of the Lantau Trail, aware that someone has just pulled a chair up beside me. I take no notice at first, but after a while I glance up to see a pair of prettily sandaled feet next to my walking boots, a pair of shapely legs in stark contrast to my own unshapely ones. Cafe-latté thighs are prematurely hidden in bright green shorts, to emerge and conjoin later as a compact, flat midriff. An expensive yellow embroidered silk top, with long sleeves to the wrist, follows.

I cautiously check out her face, which is buried in a Chinese romance paperback. Large eyes with long eyelashes are lowered in concentration on her book, her nose aristocratically shaped; full lips pout as she reads. Her hair, less aristocratic, is caught in a pony-tail poking through a pert baseball cap. Pony-tail aside, her features are unlike those of most of my students; she's a Northerner possibly.

I am suddenly aware of what I have been missing these past few months: attractive female company that is not out of bounds. Maybe an affair is looming? I look at her again and ask myself: could I crack it this lucky?

She senses my inspection. She glares at me over her sunglasses, exquisitely fine black eyebrows raised in an impatient question.

‘Sorry,’ I give her my most charming smile. ‘I hope you don’t think I was being rude. ... I..,’ oh shit, quick, a plausible line! ‘I’m a regular on this ferry, and I don’t think I’ve seen you here before.’

‘That is not surprising,’ she replies in an accent not from Hong Kong, ‘I have not been on this boat before.’

Not encouraging. Oh well, faint heart never won ...etc. ‘My name’s Nigel. Nigel Watson.’ I hold out my hand, Western style.

She ignores it, but acknowledges my introduction with a royal nod. ‘I am Xiu Xiu. Now, please, if you do not mind...’ She holds her novel up high—and returns to her reading.

Xiu Xiu. A Mainland name, I saw a film called that. Hmmm, could be a film star even. Her clothes are expensive, so are her sunnies. I decide to attempt more conversation when she stops reading. Fifteen minutes or so later she lays her book down and looks around her.

I catch her eye. ‘What do you plan to do on Lantau? There are some terrific walks and interesting old villages...’ I trail off, raising an eyebrow.

She shrugs. ‘Nothing. Walk a little, maybe shop a little.’

I laugh. ‘You’ll find plenty of lovely walks, but not much in the way of shopping. Mui Wo is only a village.’ I show her the map.

Her face thaws a degree but not yet into a smile. She shrugs, saying nothing.

‘I’m here for the walking, not the shopping. Care to join me? I’m going to catch the bus to Po Lin, you know, the big Buddhist monastery? I was planning to walk from there over Lantau Peak back to Mui Wo, but that may be too far for you. I’d be happy to change my plans if—’ Hey, hey, steady on, I tell myself. You’ve got a job to do: check out the walking trails for the kids. She won’t make Lantau Peak wearing those sandals!

She glances at my hiker’s boots, my backpack. To my mixed relief and disappointment she says, ‘No. You look too professional for me. I just walk around Mui Wo. Now, excuse me.’ She resumes reading until we reach the ferry terminal.

So much for that. Good try, Nigel, but at least you can get on with what you really came to do. And anyway, she did do something for me.

Not for one moment did I think of Mary.

It was a long and difficult walk, but the stunning, heart-stopping views from each of the two Peaks made it hugely worth it. Fantastic, and confident now I wouldn’t lose the way. However, I wondered if it mightn’t be physically too much for the Sixth Formers. Maybe we’d better start in

the hills back of Mui Wo. I read the map again, Butterfly Hill, Silver Mine Cave—hey, that'll interest them. I just have enough time to do some exploring there before the next ferry.

I return from the far end of the bay. A yellow and green figure is leaning against the seawall, near the ferry terminal. It's Xiu Xiu. I also notice the ferry approaching. It'll be leaving in about ten minutes: I'd better warn her.

She's sitting in a weird position, knees drawn up, arms wrapped around them, face buried between. She seems to be shaking, like she's crying.

I drop onto the beach and approach tentatively.

'Xiu Xiu?'

She raises her head and looks at me, sunglasses perched on her forehead, her face drawn tight. She's not crying, not right now, but she certainly has been: her cheeks are wet. She's shivering, violently. She looks panic stricken. Good Christ, what's up?

'Xiu Xiu, forgive me for interrupting, but the ferry's leaving in a few minutes. The next one is an hour after that. Do you want to catch this one?'

She looks at me blankly, shaking her head, as if she doesn't understand. Then suddenly, urgently, 'Yes! Oh yes, I do!'

I hold out my hand to help her to her feet. She takes it, with a forced smile. She looks bloody terrible, her legs trembling so much they're hardly able to hold her upright. She appears to be freezing cold, yet it's quite warm still.

'Here. Lean on me.'

She does, her face turned away from me. I put my arm around her waist, and hold her firmly by her far elbow. Any other time, such proximity to a woman like this would arousing, but this it is not. Sick women do not arouse me.

We make it in time. She seems confused at the ticket barrier, muttering *shee shirr* sounds that I take to be Mandarin.

'Your ticket,' I say. 'Quick. Do you have a return ticket?'

'*Shee shirr...*' She can't find it.

I buy her a single, and we go to the First Class upper deck, inside this time. I find two seats beside each other at a table. She takes the window seat, I sit beside her. Three young men crowd in opposite. No sooner have I sat down, a large man pushes in beside me, jamming me against her. She looks down, conversation discouraged. Our bare skin is in contact on arms and legs, my skin absorbing her, which is pleasantly disturbing. She seems a little better, trembling less, but her head remains bowed, except that occasionally, she looks at me, her mouth twitching a tiny smile. But her eyes remain distressed, like she's deeply afraid of something. What had happened on Lantau? A stew of curiosity, concern, and yes, desire, simmer inside me. But overall is the knowledge that she is vulnerable and needs my help, at least for the time being.

Not sure I want this.

When we arrive at the Outlying Islands Terminal, the trembling starts again.

‘Can I take you to a doctor?’

‘No! NO! But please, can you take me home? I do not think I can manage myself.’

I don’t think she can either. Well, I’m in it now. ‘Where to?’

‘North Point,’ she manages through chattering teeth.

‘Where’s that?’

‘Not far, I tell driver.’

I help her to the taxi rank at Star Ferry. ‘City Garden,’ she manages to the driver in English, ‘Block Seven.’

During the ride, she grips my hand so tightly it hurts. Something really weird is happening to her. And to me come to that: I’m getting involved in something way beyond my experience or competence.

I pay the driver, I help her out of the cab. She goes to the security panel at the foyer, where she fumbles for what seems like minutes. Then, *click*, the front door’s open.

‘Eleventh floor!’ she gasps. The trembling is now so violent I have to steady her.

‘Flat E. Right,’ she stutters.

Outside her flat, she slips off her shoulder-bag, handing it to me. ‘K-keys.’

I open her bag and find a key-ring on a jewelled leather tag; I avoid looking at anything else inside. I unlock the heavy security grill, then the front door. We step directly into the living room, a corridor immediately ahead.

‘You wait.’ She rushes down the corridor. To the bathroom I presume.

She’s home now, so why should I stay? But I’ve been told to wait, so I wait. Maybe she needs to be taken to the doctor. Oh well, I’ve nothing on tonight so I can continue to play Good Samaritans. I stand by the window, looking at her splendid view of the Harbour and Kowloon. I’m thinking I’ve been too soft in being dragged into this by a pretty face. About time I called it off.

I hear her enter the room behind me.

‘Thank you so much, Nigel. I am well now.’

I turn. Bugger me, an incredibly beautiful and entirely healthy-looking woman is standing there. And she’s smiling at me! Very nicely indeed.

Her left sleeve is flapping, it’s undone at her wrist. The penny drops. I take her hand, and pull the sleeve up.

She angrily pulls it away, but not quickly enough. The veins from wrist to elbow are scarred and sunken, yellow bruises running up the vein line. What a donkey I’d been not to realize she’d been in withdrawal! But then I knew stuff—all about drugs. The kids in Camberwell had been either too naïve, or too smart if they were into the hard stuff, for me to catch on to anything—e-tabs and some pot were the worst they were into as far as I knew. As for the kids in Mong Kok, I had no idea. I suppose some of them would have been into them but apart from some tough looking boys, none of the girls looked like they were. Venus? It was laughable to

even think it. All I knew about hard drugs was that they were expensive and users had to do funny things to finance their habit, and that if they shared needles, they could easily become HIV positive. Great. Just what I wanted to know about Xiu Xiu!

And yet, and yet. Here is this beautiful and apparently intelligent woman being so thoroughly charming to me. To me! Christ, she makes Mary look like a bush pig.

On the spur of the moment, I take her hand and bring her fingers to my lips. An old-fashioned action that is as sexually ambiguous as are my intentions.

‘There. I’m so glad you are well again.’ I look into beautiful eyes of clear, milk chocolate. ‘I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry. Care to have dinner with me? Please.’

I’ve done it again. My tongue has legs of its own. There’s no future for two people in such biochemical imbalance, but I guess I’m curious. I also share a secret of hers and that gives me a sort of power over her. Me, with power over a woman like her! Heady stuff.

‘Only if you do not ask impertinent questions.’ She smiles a ravishing smile at me. ‘Or try to change me. Drink, before we go?’

We go to her favourite Shanghai restaurant nearby, the Snow Garden. The food is fantastic, the company a male fantasy. Here am I, the recently cuckolded Nigel Watson, dining out with possibly the most beautiful woman in Hong Kong!

We return to her flat, where we have another drink. We kiss. In my arms is a slim body like a green young tree, so lissom, so tender, so sweet. I hold her at arms’ length, so I can stare into these beautiful eyes and admire that perfectly chiselled, flawless face. It’s beyond sheer sexuality, it’s an *aesthetic* experience of great intensity. Can you believe that?

And can you believe this? That seemingly perfect body is charged with poison, possibly harbouring a contagious, deadly time-bomb. Something harking back to those interminable lessons during morning assembly at St. James nudges my memory. St. Matthew was it? It went something like this:

You are like whited sepulchres, beautiful outward, but within full of dead men’s bones and uncleanness.

Oh God! I need to think about this. Undistracted, untempted.

Back to school, and to those sweet faces underneath their cute black fringes with the occasion streak of brown or orange. Faces that still look innocent.

But now, after this, how would I know if they really are or not?

Xiu Xiu calls me: we’d swapped mobile phone numbers in a moment I now regret. Perhaps she sees me—despite what she’d said that night about not changing her—as providing a way out of her trap. Perhaps she just likes me. Hard to imagine, a girl like her and a guy like me, but there you go. Anyway, we meet for dinner again.

‘Nigel, you are a kind, good man,’ she starts off. ‘Unlike all those I have to deal with at work.’

‘So what’s your work?’

‘The entertainment industry,’ she notes my rising eyebrow, ‘where most men are beasts.’
Oh shit. This sounds like *bad*. ‘What do you do, exactly?’

‘It started when I was in the fashion industry in Beijing.’ Another bad sign: a roundabout story coming up. ‘My family were very poor. We lived in a village in Hebei Province. There was no work for me there so I went to Beijing. I started selling clothes in a fashion shop. Then modelling clothes. I made much money, by our standards. I sent most home.’

‘Why did you come to Hong Kong?’

‘A Hong Kong man saw me modelling. He said he was a talent scout. He offered me a job, as a hostess. The money was unbelievable, just for singing Mandopop in karaoke bars with Mainland businessmen. I was told they become homesick when they are in Hong Kong.’

‘Homesick!’ I snort. As I had feared, she’s a high class prostitute. It explains everything.

‘It is not what you think. Just to sing. Except that was where I became addicted. Most hostesses are.’

‘More controllable then, are they? Like they’ll do anything to please rich customers?’ I expect anger at this remark, and probably the end of our relationship. Well, it has to end sometime and this seems like the right moment.

Instead, she sits there, looking at me imploringly, tears rolling out of lovely eyes, her mouth twisted, half open.

‘Yes, there are rich men I have to please. But I hate it, Nigel, I *hate* it! Please help me. I will give up heroin, I promise. If I can do that, I can escape. But only if you *help* me!’

Oh fuck! What can I say to that? ‘Well, Xiu Xiu, I really don’t know what I can do. If you want someone to talk to, a shoulder to cry on, then, yes, I’ll do my best. But that’s all.’

‘And when I am off drugs for a whole week, dear Nigel, then we shall be lovers!’

I guess that’s her currency. But it’s not mine. Not in this instance anyway.

She calls me a couple of times during the week, with the shakes and the sweats and the pain. Once is during class, and that was difficult, what with the noise and those faces, not quite so innocent-looking now, as they try to earwig while I shout above the noise into my mobile.

Once, I claim a sickie—for two whole days—just so’s I can stay with her, and talk to her and hold her hand. She seems to pull through okay. But why am I doing this?

I’m not a social worker, and after knowing what I know, I decide not to take advantage of her tempting offer.

Tonight is to be our final meeting—that I promise myself. We return to her flat after dinner in the Snow Garden. She is chattering like she is high on something after all, but she swears she’s not. She is now clean, she says. Yes, she wants to quit the ‘entertainment’ trade. But—the ever present ‘but’—what does she then do for a living? She needs to quit Hong Kong pronto: they’ll soon catch up with her if she doesn’t.

‘You, dear Nigel, live in Australia, right? You marry me! Then I shall be safe. And I shall make you happy, oh so happy, my darling Nigel!’

She is just so utterly gorgeous the way she looks now—unlike the way she looked when doing cold turkey only last week—but no. Please allow me some sense.

My reluctance shows. We are sitting beside each other on the sofa. She reaches over, kisses me, removes my coat. Gazing into my eyes, one hand expertly undoes shirt buttons. My chest bared, she cups her lips over a nipple. I’m like when I plug my flash drive into my computer: *klok!* ‘Found new hardware’ it says.

Klok! Yes, very hard.

The door chimes interrupt, followed by banging on the door and shouting in that oddly harsh but sloshy Mandarin.

We jump apart, her face ugly with horror.

‘Quick, into my bedroom! Stay there. Do not move.’ She runs to the door.

I gallop up the corridor and into the end room. It’s her bedroom. I reconnect buttons to the sounds of her loud sobs as she opens the door, then the security grille. There is harsh, slurring, angular shouting: her voice, then a man’s. Then doors crashing shut.

Fuck! I’d left my coat on the sofa. What do I do now? Go back and ask: Please, Mr. Triad, may I have my coat back?

I hear a chuckle. Confident footsteps stride up the corridor. The door bursts open.

A stocky Chinese in a flashy suit and a pencil-thin moustache stands there. He is smiling. Over his arm is my folded coat. He offers it to me.

‘This is yours? Please to wear. Come with me.’

I put it on and follow the sleazy looking creep back into the living room. I am getting worried. Very worried.

Xiu Xiu is sitting in an armchair, tying an elastic strap to her left forearm. She has a syringe in her right hand...

‘NO!’ I shout.

A thug steps over and almost lovingly takes my hand and forces it up my back.

‘You watch.’

He makes me stand in front of Xiu Xiu. The man with the moustache, the boss I presume, looks at me with a smile. He runs his finger along his moustache, this way, that way. Then he too turns to watch Xiu Xiu.

She gazes at me calmly. ‘You were right, Nigel. They get us hooked and then they can do what they want with us. They want me to spend tonight with a Mr Wang, a very rich man from Guangzhou...’

Boss-man interrupts. ‘But you Mr. Nigel may spend the night with her, if you so wish. We can arrange that. We say Xiu Xiu has symptoms of flu, Mr Wang, so very sorry..., perhaps later? Something like that. But for us to say that, we should need to cover two nights. Not to

mention Mr Wang's goodwill. So special for you, let us say \$200,000 dollars? Very cheap, very nice lady ah?'

Impossibility crashes onto my head. Whichever way you look at it, I am out of this. No way. Then Xiu Xiu seals it.

'See? They do not need force. Mr Wang is hateful, but he will be a blur in my mind. But this? I want this, I *want* it.'

She empties the syringe into her arm.

Her death had never died. Now she lives her death again. She is a Taj Mahal carved from flesh, beautiful on the outside, corruption and death on the inside. Yet this whited sepulchre looks at me with those wonderfully innocent eyes of milk chocolate. Tomorrow, no doubt, those same eyes will be gazing in fake adoration at Mr. Wang, telling him how wonderful he is.

And I suppose tomorrow, I'll be standing in front of a room, bellowing into a microphone, while forty pairs of innocent eyes of milk chocolate gaze at me as I tell them about the arrangements for our trip to Lantau next Saturday.

On my way back to my apartment in Yau Ma Tei—tiny it may be but at least it's convenient to school—I turn the corner into Shanghai Street. I am shocked to see a sweet-looking girl, early teens by the look of it, the spitting image of Venus. She is clinging onto the arm of a much older man, looking up at him, giggling with such disarming innocence. They stop outside a seedy looking hotel with the tell-tale yellow neon sign.

My God, *is* it Venus? The man enters first, she follows. She turns to pull the door closed. Our eyes meet. Relief rolls off me and hits the ground with an audible thud.

It is not Venus. But the thought that it might have been her suddenly grips me. Isn't this girl as innocent-seeming as Venus, as childlike and as sweet?

Or as Mary, come to that.