

Chapter 24

An Offering Declined, an Offering Accepted
A Famous Boxer Displays True Compassion

All at once, in one of the ever-briefer lucid spells, Weilin heard the crash of waves. It was full daylight now. Ahead of him was land: tall black rocks standing straight up out of the water. The sea was breaking against the rocks. Despair gave way to indescribable joy. He was safe! He would live! Then, as he approached the rocks, he saw that they were everywhere jagged and vertical, and the force of the waves against them was tremendous. The waves were carrying him forward now, with very little effort on his part, and it seemed he would be dashed to death on the rocks.

Flailing furiously with his arms, he tried to work his way sideways, in the hope that if he passed the rocks there might be some more hospitable place to land. But Weilin's strength had all gone. Having once broken the rhythm of his night-long swim, he could not re-coordinate his movements, nor his breathing. He took a mouthful of water and went under, the sea roaring in his ears. He came up choking and retching, but before he could draw breath was pulled down again. Under the water the crash of waves was easier to bear, a growling and hissing sound, remote and unthreatening. Dying is really not so bad, thought Weilin, and lost all consciousness.

If natural laws applied to human beings as remorselessly as they do to the inanimate world, Weilin's story would have ended there. But Lord Yanwang, the Emperor of Hell, who alone decides these matters, was not

yet ready for Liang Weilin. He accordingly caused to be sent an undertow and a great wave. The undertow pulled Weilin sideways away from the rocks, and the wave lifted him up and deposited him on a tiny beach hidden at one side of the rock mass. The beach was covered with large gray pebbles which dug and scratched at Weilin's flesh, and this stimulus was sufficient to restore a glimmer of consciousness. Weilin coughed the water from his throat and lungs. Then, fearful now of the sea clawing and tugging at his bare legs and feet, he crawled up the beach, clutching at handfuls of the pebbles. Further up the pebbles yielded to rough sand. The sand was waterlogged, though he was well out of the waves now; and Weilin had just enough power of reason left to deduce that the tide must therefore be going out. He fell asleep at once, face down on the sand.

When at last he woke the light was all different. The sea was in the same position but the sand was dry, so Weilin supposed the tide to be coming in. He sat up and looked around. The beach was no more than fifteen feet wide, a narrow cove between two masses of rock. On the landward side was a cliff of red earth, covered further up with tufts of coarse yellow grass.

With the sea coming in and the razor-edged rocks all around, Weilin saw no choice but to climb the cliff. He started up. With bare feet it was difficult to get a purchase in the loose red soil, but eventually he reached the grass and could then pull himself up by grabbing at the tufts. Sometimes the tufts came loose in a shower of red grit and small white stones, but Weilin kept hold somehow, hugging the slope with his belly, spread-eagled for every square inch of friction to keep from sliding downwards, and after an eternity of struggling up in this way he felt the slope decreasing, leveling out onto a plateau of grass and boulders.

Weilin stood up and looked around. It was mid-day, to judge by the light. The rough grassy ground stretched away in front of him to some low hills. Behind him were the cliffs and the sea. It was a scene of perfect desolation.

Baffled, Weilin scanned around, shading his eyes. Grass, rocks, the sea—and far away, along the coast to his right, a filament of smoke rising into the sky! Weilin set off walking along the cliff-top. He felt weak: his arms, shoulders, chest and thighs all ached. Several times he stumbled

and fell, and once he thought it might be nice to stay where he had fallen and take a nap. But he was very hungry, and curious besides. Where was he? Weilin supposed he must have washed up on the mainland somewhere between Shantou and Hong Kong. This was not, he thought, disastrous. He must at least be nearer to Hong Kong than he was before. Perhaps he could walk there, or walk to the border and swim over at night. At any rate, the first order of business was to get his bearings.

The smoke was from a fishing village, set down below him in a neat little bay. There was nobody to be seen. Weilin ran down the hillside to the village. A dog started barking, then another. Still no people. There were a dozen or so houses, set along a single unpaved street leading on to a jetty. Midway down the street was a temple. The smoke was coming from a house next to the temple. Weilin came at the village from the landward side and walked down the street toward the jetty. No-one, no-one. Three or four dogs were barking now.

He peered into the temple. Lighting up the gloom within was a beautiful, gaudy statue of Guanyin, surrounded by candles and imitation flowers. Above and behind her was a horizontal red board with gold lettering: QUEEN OF HEAVEN, BODHISATTVA OF THE SOUTHERN OCEAN, GUARDIAN OF SEAFARERS. There were other boards set about, all vertical, asking Guanyin for luck, for prosperity, for safety on the sea. In front of her were some offerings: dried fish, flowers, an orange.

The sight of Guanyin was perplexing. If this was the mainland, why had the temple not been smashed up by Red Guards? On the other hand, where else could it be? Hong Kong was a great teeming city like Shanghai, not a fishing village.

Weilin stepped cautiously into the temple. He knew Guanyin, of course, but he had only heard her title as Goddess of Mercy. This stuff about Queen of Heaven and Guardian of Seafarers must be some local cult. Well, if guarding those at sea was really part of her domain, she must have been watching over him during his swim, and favored him with life. Under these circumstances, she surely would not object to his eating the offerings. Having thus satisfied his conscience, Weilin ate the dried fish. Then he pulled some rind off the orange with a fingernail and bit into the flesh. It was exquisitely, almost painfully, delicious. He looked up at the

serene painted face above its necklace of green beads. Thank you, Guanyin. Thank you, he murmured.

Weilin was poised to take another bite at the orange when a voice spoke behind him. He jumped, and spun round. At the door of the temple was an old woman. She was wearing loose black pajamas, with green plastic sandals on her feet. Her face was burned dark, and was a mass of wrinkles, and the very little hair she possessed was white, brushed straight back from her brow. She did not seem put out by Weilin's presence and might even have been smiling; though since she had no teeth, it was difficult to tell.

The old woman croaked something Weilin couldn't understand. "I'm sorry," he replied. "I was hungry." He thought he had better not mention anything about his swim, or the fishing boat, or Shantou, until he knew where he was.

The old woman cocked her head on one side and gave him a long string of prose. Weilin couldn't understand a single word. It didn't even sound like Cantonese, which Weilin had heard once or twice. Perhaps he had washed up in a National Minority area.

"My name is Liang Weilin," he said. "I am really sorry about the food. It's only that I was so hungry. I meant no disrespect to Guanyin."

To illustrate his meaning, he put his hands together and made a *bai* to the goddess.

The old woman reached out a dark, bony arm and said a disyllable three or four times over. She turned and stepped away, looking behind her for Weilin to follow. Still clutching the orange, he followed. They went into the house next door. It was a rough affair made of wooden boards, the floor of beaten earth. The inside, however, was quite well-appointed. There was a comfortable-looking couch, an armchair, a cocktail cabinet, a colorized panorama of some city—presumably Hong Kong—on one wall. On top of the cabinet was a portable radio. This was the front room. Beyond this was a kitchen, with a brick stove and a pot steaming on the stove. Along the wall behind the stove were shelves stocked with jars and bottles. In one corner was a table with a meat locker. There was another table in the middle of the room. The crone took a folding stool and unfolded it, indicating for Weilin to sit down. Five minutes later Weilin

was looking at a steaming bowl of rice gruel, fortified with fragments of fish, vegetable and ginger. The old woman stood on the other side of the table, watching, as he devoured it. When he was through Weilin took the liberty of finishing Guanyin's orange. He felt wonderfully full, though still very tired.

The old lady chattered to him in her language as she cleared the table, putting the bowl into a tub with some other utensils, carefully placing the orange rinds on a shelf.

"Can you speak Mandarin at all?" asked Weilin.

The old woman squinted at him, not understanding a word.

"Can you read characters?" Weilin sketched the character for his surname, using a finger against his palm.

The old woman held up her own palms and shook them vigorously for negation. Illiterate.

Now she chattered away through a door in the far wall of the kitchen. It led to a small outhouse with a floor of square flat stones and a toilet cavity at one side. There was a huge earthenware jar full of water, a plastic bowl and some scoops, several rough pieces of rag on pegs. The old woman made washing motions and pointed to the jar, then left. Weilin relieved himself, washed the red soil from his body and toweled off. He remembered fouling himself on the boat, and examined his shorts warily, but their long immersion in the sea had laundered them most effectively. The shorts and T-shirt—the entirety of his current wardrobe—were dry now, but covered with the red dirt of the cliff. He brushed them off as well as he could, then put them on and went back to the kitchen. The old woman led him through to the front room. Once there, she bade him lie on the couch. Then she made a pressing-down motion with her hands to mean that he should stay there, and mimicked sleep by closing her eyes and cocking her head on one side. Weilin was only too willing. He got a comfortable position on the couch, looking out through the open front door of the house. The old woman left altogether. Weilin lay there, waiting for sleep. He could smell the sea, down at the end of the street, and hear the waves breaking. The only other sounds were seabirds calling, and a dog still barking several houses away. He felt sure that this was not the mainland now. He still didn't see how it could be Hong Kong; but

perhaps Hong Kong was a much bigger place than he had imagined—like a small country, with rural as well as built-up parts. That must be it. His mind at peace now, he fell asleep.

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Weilin was woken by a man's voice. The man was middle-aged and dark, with a crew-cut. He wore loose navy-blue shorts and a rough beige-colored T-shirt. His skin was burned dark brown like the old woman's. He was addressing some sentences to Weilin in the impossible dialect.

"I'm sorry," said Weilin. "I can't understand. Can you write?" He made the writing motion on his palm.

The man nodded and went to the cabinet. He came back with a pencil and a very well-thumbed notebook. Most of the notebook was full of numbers, all western-style numerals. On a clean page the man wrote a few lines. He had trouble making the characters, and not all of them were right, but Weilin could see the sense clearly enough.

You have come from the mainland. You swam in the sea. We are fishing people. Guanyin protects us. To gain merit with Guanyin, my mother has welcomed you. But we are poor people. We cannot support you. You should go to Hong Kong.

Weilin's heart leapt. The characters were clear: *from the mainland*. Somehow he had left the People's Republic. He took the pencil.

How did you know I have come from the mainland?

There are many, very many. They swim in the sea to come here. Some come alive, some dead. Those that live all go to Hong Kong.

There was no clock in the room, but Weilin judged it to be late afternoon by the light. Clearly, these people felt they had done their duty to Guanyin, and he should be on his way. "Where is Hong Kong?" he wrote.

The man nodded. He led Weilin out into the street. A boat was moored at the jetty, a junk like the one Weilin had taken from Shantou. Some people were taking things from the boat. Thinking of that other boat, of what had happened, Weilin felt cold in his belly. They walked up the street in the opposite direction, to where it ended. The man pointed over the nearby hills, making an “over” motion with his hand.

“How far?” asked Weilin. The man could not understand him, and they had left the notebook in the house. Weilin sketched the characters on his palm. He had to do it twice, the man struggling to make out the characters. At last he got it. On his own callused, mahogany palm he sketched: fifty *li*.

It seemed a long way to walk, but there was still plenty of light. Weilin put his hands together and made *bai* to the man, to show gratitude. The man just nodded, then turned and started back to his house. Apart from the two of them, and the people on the jetty, the village still seemed deserted. Weilin set off toward the hills.

Beyond the hills were more hills, but beyond these was a road, a real paved road. There was no traffic on the road, and no human beings to be seen. The light was beginning to fail. Weilin thought he would walk on the road, as a road was bound to lead to a town sooner or later. But the road seemed to cut right across the direction the man had given him, so there was no particular reason to go either right or left. At random, Weilin turned right and began to walk. His feet were sore. When he looked at the soles of his feet, they were blistered and cut. He wished he had asked the fisherman for something to cover his feet.

He had walked less than a mile when, coming over a rise, he saw the cars. There were two cars, parked by the side of the road facing towards him. The one at the front was a big limousine not unlike the ones Weilin had occasionally seen in Flat All Around, used by high-level leaders when visiting the town; but this one was a silvery-gray in color, not shining black like those cars the leaders used. Behind the limousine was a type of vehicle Weilin had never seen before: a pale-blue van with windows all the way along the sides. There were seven or eight people standing around on the road beside the vehicles. They were all young, and dressed in a very stylish way. The men all had long hair, so long it

covered the tops of their ears. They wore flowered shirts open at the neck, or T-shirts in interesting colors. Their pants flared out below the shin. Their feet were in two-tone sneakers, or leather shoes with thick heels. From their hair and clothes they looked like westerners, though they were all clearly Chinese. The two women had long sleek hair flowing down below their shoulders and the same flared style of pants as the men. One of the women was smoking a cigarette, holding it between the first two fingers of her right hand, her left hand cupping her right elbow—a posture that conveyed to Weilin incredible sophistication. This woman glanced at him as he approached. Apparently finding him to be without interest, she turned back to her companions. Looking at them, and the vehicles, the last traces of doubt disappeared from Weilin's heart. He was in, or somewhere near, Hong Kong. This was not the People's Republic.

Now he saw that there was a problem with the pale blue van. It was tilted towards the roadway. The tilt was caused by its being propped up on one side at the rear, and this had been done so that one of the men could take the wheel off. He was taking it off as Weilin came up to them, kneeling on the grass beside the van. Another man, standing next to him, was giving advice or explanation. The others were standing around talking. Mostly just one was talking, and the others listening, or responding.

The man who was talking was about thirty, of average height for a Chinese, with a wiry but well-proportioned frame. His hair was long, like the others', and framed a lean, intelligent face. He wore a burgundy-colored T-shirt, light fawn pants and gray-and-white sneakers. The man talked expressively, moving his hands. His feet, too: from time to time he would make small springing or skipping movements with his feet, apparently unconsciously, accompanied once with some very fast, flickering passes of the hands at someone who seemed to have contradicted him, in the manner of a traditional-style boxer. He was laughing as he did this, and everyone else was laughing with him.

The man stopped talking and turned to look as Weilin came up to them. He set his hands on his hips and leaned forward slightly, conveying suddenly to Weilin an overwhelming impression of contained strength—as if the concentrated life force of a hundred, a thousand ordinary men

were coiled inside this compact, sinewy figure. From a mouth somewhat too small for his face, white teeth flashed, and he said something in a language Weilin felt sure was Cantonese.

"I'm sorry," said Weilin, "I can only speak Mandarin."

"No problem. I can talk Mandarin."

Weilin could barely make out the words. The man's accent was atrocious.

"I'm trying to get to Hong Kong," he said. "Am I going in the right direction?"

"No. It's that way." The man pointed back the way Weilin had come, the way the vehicles were facing. "But it's twenty miles, you know. Too far to walk."

For "miles" he used *yingli*, meaning English miles. Weilin was not sure how long an English mile was—whether it was the same as a kilometer, or a Chinese mile, or what. Before he could pursue the matter, the wiry man spoke again.

"Why haven't you got any shoes?" pointing at Weilin's bare feet.

"I lost them," said Weilin simply, unwilling to speak the truth to strangers.

"You're a swimmer, aren't you?" said another one of the party, a younger fellow with the same sneakers and flared pants as the wiry man, but much better Mandarin.

Still unwilling to reveal anything, Weilin pretended to misunderstand. "Yes," he said, "I know how to swim."

"No. I mean you've just swum from the mainland, haven't you?"

"How did you know that?"

Everybody laughed. "Your clothes," said a third man, a slightly older type, scholarly, wearing glasses. "And your bare feet. And you not being able to speak Cantonese."

"Do a lot of people swim from the mainland, then?" asked Weilin.

The one with glasses nodded gravely. "Hundreds. Especially this last few months. Mostly kids like yourself. A lot of them drown. Some get eaten by sharks. Some are shot by the coast guard. You were lucky. I guess you came across Dapeng Bay."

“I don’t know.” Weilin didn’t feel he wanted to talk about the fishing boat, the things that had happened. “I came ashore a mile or so . . . back there.” he indicated the way he had come.

The wiry man was listening to all this, flicking his eyes from one of them to the other in watchful concentration. As he watched he slowly, with infinite grace, took his hands from his hips and folded his arms across his chest. There was something fascinating in his every small movement. Weilin thought he would like very much to see this man run, jump, dance, box.

“How old are you?” asked one of the girls.

“Thirteen,” said Weilin, adding a few months.

“You’re a brave kid,” said the wiry man. Then he said something Weilin couldn’t get through the awful accent.

“I’m sorry?”

“He wants to know, were you persecuted?” interpreted the man with glasses.

“Yes. My father was killed. My mother went mad and died.”

They all nodded gravely. “It’s all right,” said the man with glasses. “We’re all Nationalists here. We all like Chiang Kaishek.” He turned to the others, and now they laughed. “Were your family Nationalists?”

Weilin was struck speechless. He had been brought up to think of Chiang Kaishek as the Prince of Demons, a pawn of foreign imperialism and collaborator with the Japanese mass murderers. At every point of his life heretofore he had lived in an environment where to say these words: *We all like Chiang Kaishek*, would be instantly and irrevocably to condemn oneself and one’s family to a lingering death. The very combination of the words was beyond imagining. The man with glasses might as well have said to him: *We all like tearing our flesh with knives*, or *We all like to cook and eat small babies*. The phrase “freedom of speech” is overworked in the West, is often the plaything of cynics and charlatans. Nonetheless, the concept it expresses is imbedded deep in our consciousness, and it, and all its connotations, are as much a part of our lives as our own blood. It is difficult to imagine for us, but to twelve-year-old Weilin, a child of despotism and fear, the notion of free speech was not thrilling, or exciting, or attractive, or inspiring. It was simply, blankly, inconceiv-

able. *We all like Chiang Kaishek*—he trembled to hear the words! Was it some kind of trap?

“No, no,” he said at last. “Not at all.”

“Have you got relatives in Hong Kong?” asked the girl smoking the cigarette. In spite of her rather exotic appearance—as well as the cigarette and the long flowing hair, she was wearing a blouse far enough open to allow a glimpse of the cleft between her two breasts—Weilin thought her the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. The cleft between her breasts stirred something in him, made him think of Yuezhu at the pool, grabbing his arm.

“Yes. An outside uncle.”

“What’s his address?”

“Wodalao Road, number 433.”

“Wa!” said a boy. “Waterloo Heights! The guy must be rich!”

They all laughed good-naturedly.

“You’re lucky,” said the second girl. “Got a rich uncle.”

“But so far to walk,” said Weilin.

“You’re riding with us,” said the wiry man. His unmoving eyes, his stance, his voice, made this a fact of the world, known to everyone, as if it was just something Weilin had momentarily forgotten. The wiry man called back something in Cantonese to the men fixing the wheel. They responded; the wiry man cracked some kind of joke; everyone laughed; the man went to the limousine and opened one of the rear doors to let in the girls.

“Come on,” said the man with glasses. “You’ll ride in the *bashi* with us.”

The *bashi* was clearly the blue van. It had been righted now, and people were getting in. There were two rows of seats in the back. The man with glasses sat in the front row, Weilin behind him with a younger man carrying a camera. The van eased onto the road behind the limousine, and picked up speed.

Leaning on the back of his seat, the man with glasses introduced himself. His family name was Chen, his given name Houyi. He worked for a movie company. They all did.

“I guess you don’t know who you were talking to there,” said Mr Chen. “The one with really bad Mandarin.”

“No. Is he well-known?”

Mr Chen, and the man with the camera, and the other three in the van, all laughed.

“You bet,” said Mr Chen. “Everybody in Hong Kong knows him. I guess they don’t have ‘Green Hornet’ in the mainland?”

“‘Green Hornet’? No, what is that?” Weilin thought it sounded like a kind of medicine, but didn’t want to risk being laughed at again by guessing out loud.

“An American TV show. Li Xiaolong—that’s the guy’s name—lives in America, in Hollywood. That’s why his Mandarin is so bad. He grew up in Hong Kong, then he went to America. Never learned Mandarin. We all speak it because the movies are done in Mandarin, for the Taiwan market. Well, Xiaolong was the star of this show, *Green Hornet*, on American TV. Everybody in Hong Kong likes to watch it. It’s made him a big star here. Now our boss—he’s in the limo with Xiaolong—is trying to persuade him to make a movie here in Hong Kong. A Chinese movie. Xiaolong’s got his mind fixed on making American movies in Hollywood. He’s not crazy about making a Chinese movie. But it’s tough for him in Hollywood. They look down on Chinese people in America, you know. They won’t give him a good part. So I think at last our boss will persuade him. That’s why we’re here. Our boss is building a new studio, way out here in the New Territories. He wanted Xiaolong to see it.”

“So this Li Xiaolong is a movie star?”

“Not yet,” said the man with the camera. “Only a TV star. But if he makes a movie, he’ll be a *superstar*. You should see him on the screen. Wa! You’ve never seen anyone move so fast. He’s a master of martial arts, you see. When they do a fight scene—oh, you can’t take your eyes off him! But he can act in the regular way, too. Especially comedy. He knows how to make people laugh. Oh, he’ll be a big star!”

“Those girls—are they, is one of them, I mean, his wife?”

Everyone laughed. “No,” said Mr Chen. “He has an American wife. She’s in Hollywood. They just had a baby last year, so she’s stayed there with the baby. Those girls are movie actresses. Playmates for our boss.” They all laughed again.

The driver of the *bashi* said something emphatic in Cantonese, to more laughter. A conversation started up in that language. Weilin couldn't follow it at all, though he got the sense that it was considerably ribald, with a lot of laughing. He thought of the cleft between the girl's breasts, and the odd feeling surged again, strange and pleasurable. It was dark now outside the windows of the van, and the driver put on his headlights.

"Do you have any plan for your future in Hong Kong? What's your ambition?" asked Mr Chen, turning back to him.

Considering the matter, Weilin drew a blank. "My ambition is just to stay alive," he said.

For some reason this seemed to embarrass Mr Chen. He turned away and was silent for a while. Then he got back into the Cantonese conversation with the others.

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They came to a town, the streets all lit up. Mr Chen told him this town was called Xigong. There was some countryside, then another town called Jinglanshu. The next place was called Qide, and they all told him this was the airport for Hong Kong. Sure enough, Weilin could see, in the darkness beyond the windows, a great flat open place with parallel lines of light stretching away—and suddenly a plane! so close it made him flinch to see it coming down, followed after an unreasonable interval by its noise. The plane—the first one Weilin had ever seen up close—seemed quite impossible, so large, slow and silent swooping down like that ahead of its own sound.

After Qide there was no more countryside. The buildings were continuous. The buildings got higher and higher, the streets busier and busier. They made a stop, one of the girls getting out of the limo to buy something in a store. Although it was quite dark now, the stores were all lit up. Everything was lit up—Weilin had never seen so much electric light. This place was called Jiulongtang, said Mr Chen.

"We're going out of our way," he added. "It seems Xiaolong's going to take you all the way down Waterloo Road."

In fact they took him to the shopping district in Nathan Road. Mr Chen opened the side door of the bus to let him out. The wiry man, the one called Li Xiaolong, had got out of the limo and was standing on the sidewalk, one hand against the roof of the limo, but not really leaning. Weilin could see, now, that he was a martial-arts master. His posture, even in such an inconsequential situation, was taut and balanced. Weilin thought that if someone were to punch him it would have no effect at all, except perhaps to make him twang like a steel rod.

Li Xiaolong held out a hand to him, and Weilin shook hands. The hand he shook was cool and firm, giving no impression of great strength. “Wish you good luck in Hong Kong,” said Li Xiaolong.

“Thank you.”

“I think before you see your rich uncle, you’d better get some decent clothes. And some *shoes*, for Heaven’s sake.” He flashed a grin, and Weilin thought he would give anything at all if, in his next life, he could have this man as an elder brother. He was about to say: I haven’t got any money, but the other was holding out some bills to him, two bills marked with 20. “This store here”—he indicated the brightly-lit plate-glass windows— “will have what you need. Waterloo Road is up there, first main road on the right. Waterloo Heights is a mile or so along. Take your bearings from here, don’t get lost.”

Weilin took the money. “How can I pay you back?” he asked. “You live in America, one of the men told me.”

Li Xiaolong shook his head. “If a stranger does you a good turn, the way to repay it is like this: when you yourself have the chance to do a good turn to a stranger, do it. In that way, good deeds spread all over the world, and don’t just stay a private thing between two people. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Good luck, mainland boy. *Never stop fighting.*” This last was in English so that Weilin could not understand it. Before he could ask the meaning, Li Xiaolong was back in the limo. The door closed; but through the window of the door he waved once to Xiaolong. The white of Xiaolong’s smile was brilliant through the tinted glass, before he turned away to someone inside the car. The limo and the van pulled away and left, Mr Chen waving to him from the van.

Weilin went into the store. As he pushed open the door he was at once enveloped by a billow of cool, dry air. It startled him: he had never encountered air-conditioning before. The store was the cleanest he had ever seen, with more different kinds of goods than he could have imagined being together in one place. Here were kitchen utensils, there musical instruments, across the aisle shoes, further along men's suits. All was brightly lit and spotlessly clean. There were plenty of customers, strolling unconcerned among the plenty, stopping now and then to peer into the glass display cases or finger the clothes hanging on racks in the open, where anyone could just go up and touch them. The assistants were all dressed in smart navy-blue nylon tunics and white-soled shoes, just like those in the department stores on Nanjing Road in Shanghai. (Li Xiaolong, thinking to minimize the culture shock, had left him outside one of the stores run by the Beijing government, of which Hong Kong had several.)

Weilin caught people looking at him, at his bare feet. Two pretty teenage girls, arm in arm, pointed at him and giggled behind their hands. Weilin hastened to the shoe department, located an assistant who spoke good Mandarin, and purchased a pair of sneakers so white they seemed luminous. Next he bought jeans, though there was no way to put them on there in the store. He carried the jeans out with him into the street.

The street was still busy, though it was now quite late. The stores were all open, their lights shining out on to the sidewalk. One nearby, a record store, was playing music into the street—a sweet love song in Mandarin. There were people everywhere, strolling and window-shopping. Signs hung out above the sidewalk in every color of the rainbow, advertising the stores and the businesses located on the floors above them. A food stall on a side street was selling tasty snacks cooked in red sauce—chicken feet, slices of squid, balls of fish paste. On the next corner was a news vendor with a sensational display of magazines and newspapers, the magazines all full of bright-colored pictures. A group of well-dressed youngsters passed by, laughing and chattering in Cantonese. One of the girls was spectacularly pretty, wearing tight blue jeans, a smart blouse, and a

wrist bracelet in what looked like gold. So open, so free! How could he ever belong to such a place? *We all like Chiang Kaishek*. Was *everything* allowed here? Could *anything* be done or said? If so, what prevented it all from falling into chaos? These mysteries swirled and throbbed in his brain as the traffic roared, the colors danced, and the people—the clean, smart, fearless people—drifted to and fro in their unimaginable freedom.