

Chapter 25

Fourth Uncle Xu Holds a Full Month Party
Hong Kong—A Paradise for Shoppers!

Waterloo Heights was a cluster of apartment buildings at the top of a cliff which rose up, sheer blank rock, from one side of Waterloo Road. Weilin missed the access road, but found some steps cut up through the cliff. Number 433 was a large and very splendid-looking block, with many cars parked on the access road in front. Glass doors showed a bright white lobby. There were potted plants in the lobby and a small desk, with a man behind the desk reading a magazine.

Weilin pushed open one of the doors, releasing the same breath of cold, dry air as in the department store. The man at the desk looked up as Weilin came into the lobby. He was quite old, wearing an open-necked white shirt and smoking a cigarette.

“I’ve come to see Mr Xu Yiming,” said Weilin. “Can you tell me what room he’s in?”

Riding with the Mandarin-speakers from the movie studio, he had forgotten the language problem. It now asserted itself again. The doorman cocked his head to one side and offered a feeble, embarrassed smile. “*Waan binwei?*”

They found a pen and some paper, and Weilin wrote down Fourth Outside Uncle’s name. The doorman nodded. “*Chaat Si.*” On the paper he wrote: 7C. Then he indicated the elevator. Unfortunately Weilin had never before seen an elevator. He could tell that it was a sort of doorway,

with a door in it; but the door had no handle, and when he pushed at it it was quite firmly locked.

The doorman laughed at him good-naturedly and showed him how to summon the elevator using the button on the doorpost. Presently the door hissed open of its own accord, and the doorman indicated that Weilin should step in. Inside was the same cool, dry air. On an inspiration Weilin pressed the button marked 7. The doors hissed closed, but nothing happened. Weilin started to feel scared, then the doors hissed open again. To his surprise, the view was quite different. This was not the lobby, but a pristine white corridor, the floor a lovely mosaic of red, white and yellow tiles. He stepped out into the corridor. A little way along was a door behind a heavy metal grille. 7B, said the door. At the far end of the corridor was 7C.

When the door opened to him Weilin heard the sound of many voices, laughing and talking, and music playing—traditional Chinese music—and a distant clattering and rattling which, before he had been in Hong Kong much longer, he would know to be the sound of mahjong tiles. There was nothing to be seen, though; only a small bare hallway with a potted plant on a stand, and the old woman who had opened the door. The old woman wore black pants, black white-soled shoes and a spotless white top. She peered at him interrogatively through the heavy grille. Weilin showed her the paper with Fourth Outside Uncle's name written on it. The old woman glanced at the paper but shook her head. Another illiterate.

“Please help me,” said Weilin. “I must see Mr Xu Yiming.” To his astonishment the old woman replied at once, in Mandarin with a stiff south-western accent.

“Who are you? Mr. Xu is entertaining right now. It's a *manyue* party for his grandson.” [*Manyue* is the celebration of a healthy baby, carried out one month after the birth.]

“I am the son of his first wife's eldest sister's third daughter. I have just escaped from the mainland. My mother and father are dead. I have no money, no place to live. Please ask him to help me.”

The woman stared at him expressionlessly for a few beats, then abruptly shut the door. Weilin waited. He had originally knocked on the

door, reaching through the grille. Now he noticed a protuberance on one of the door-posts, which had what looked like a press-button set in it. In Hong Kong everything was done by buttons on doorposts, it seemed. After five minutes fruitless waiting, he pressed the button. A buzzing sound came from inside, very faintly. The old woman reappeared.

“Did you tell Mr Xu I’m here?”

“No. He’s entertaining his guests. He doesn’t want to be disturbed. Go away.”

Weilin’s heart sank. She didn’t even *tell* him? What had happened to Blood is Thicker than Water? He felt very exhausted, and close to tears.

“Please tell him. Oh, please! I’ll stay here until I see him. Tell him that. I’ll stay here all night, until I see him.”

The door closed. When it opened again, it was the old woman; but she stepped back at once for a large man of fifty or so, with a rough mottled face and graying hair slicked back with oil. He was wearing an old-style robe of some very fine material, with complicated frogged buttons, and was carrying a cigarette in a long ivory holder. He fixed a haughty stare on Weilin, but did not speak.

“Sir,” ventured Weilin. “I am looking for Mr Xu.”

“Yes, I know you are. And do you know what’s happening here?”

“Sir, I . . .”

“This is *manyue* for my daughter’s son. Do you think I want bad luck in my house on such a day? Do you think I want poverty and failure under my roof on such a day? Go away! Get out of here right now!”

“But my mother . . .”

“I don’t know anything about your mother. What, am I supposed to hand out favors to every urchin who knocks on my door claiming a blood relation? How many people am I supposed to support?”

“Sir, I have no . . .”

“The authorities in this city know me very well. I am in charge of all the concessions for U.S. Navy purchasing. The Governor, the Executive Council, they all know me. If you don’t get out of here I shall call the police. *They’ll* take care of you all right! You can be sure of that!”

So saying, Mr Xu slammed his door closed. Weilin stood there stunned for a moment. Then he made his way back to the elevator, down into the

lobby. The doorman looked up from his magazine. He said something in Cantonese, and nodded pleasantly to Weilin.

Out in the street Weilin was overcome by despair. Blood is thicker than water, indeed! What could he do now? Here, on the height above Waterloo Road, he could see a large part of the city. There was an empty area, a park perhaps, in the foreground, and beyond that the lights of ten thousand buildings, glittering and sparkling as far as the eye could see. Far away was a mountain, with more buildings scattered up its face, to the very top. The din of traffic on Waterloo Road below him was continuous. Weilin examined the money in his pocket. Four dollar bills and some coins. The rest of the money Li Xiaolong had given him he had spent on his jeans and sneakers.

The great city stretched before him in all its vibrant glory; and he knew no-one, and could not understand the language of the place, and had less than five dollars to his name.

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At a loss Weilin walked back the way he had come. He felt hungry, having eaten nothing since the rice gruel at the fishing village that morning. Well, a person must eat. He thought if he could eat something he would be able to think better, to find a solution to his situation.

Back at the corner where he had arrived, the shops were still lit up, the crowds of people floating to and fro. He turned left and walked south down Nathan Road. There was a food shop he thought looked cheap, with a sign saying RICE GRUEL AND NOODLES, and some pressed duck in the window. Weilin went in and sat at a table. The menu was on a board up on the wall: twenty different dishes with rice gruel and noodles. Some had names like Seven Treasures or Granny's Delight, suggestive of southwestern delicacies familiar to him, some others were quite specific, and the prices were mostly less than three dollars. He ordered rice gruel with slices of fish, and a dish of vegetables.

"Can you speak Mandarin?" he asked the waiter.

"I can understand a little," the man said, in a most atrocious accent.

"I need work. How can I find work?"

The waiter said something Weilin couldn't get at all. Seeing he was not understood, he went to the front counter area and came back with a soiled, much-folded newspaper. He offered it to Weilin.

"See into the newspaper," he said, ungrammatically.

Eating his rice gruel, Weilin scanned the jobs page. Easy! So many places wanted hands! Every advertisement carried a number, which Weilin assumed was a telephone number. He had never used a telephone himself, but he knew from movies that out here in the capitalist world people used telephones a lot. So! He would call these places the next day and get work. No problem! He had had no need of Fourth Outside Uncle after all! There remained only the question of where to sleep that night.

Further down Nathan Road on the right was a park. To Weilin's astonishment—it was past eleven p.m. by the clock in the food shop—the gate was still open. People could be seen inside the park, though there was little lighting. Unlike a mainland park, there was no entrance booth and apparently no admission fee. Weilin walked in, up some steps. There were bushes and trees and many quiet dark places. Benches were set along the paths at intervals, but every one seemed to have a couple on it, sometimes two couples, whispering to each other or embracing. At last he found an empty bench in a far corner of the park, behind some sheds perhaps used for maintenance equipment. Weilin lay on his back on the bench. The bench was hard, but no harder than an uncovered *kang* and it was good to lie down. He indulged himself in some quiet anticipation of the morning, when he would find work and begin to live like a real westerner, prosperous and free. To Hell with Fourth Outside Uncle! He would survive in spite of him! The park was dark and quiet; but the city beyond still busy with the noise of traffic, and so well-lit that no stars were visible above him, only the glow of the city, reflecting back a dull orange.

When he woke the sky was light. The sound of the traffic seemed less. Weilin sat up, his hips and shoulders stiff and sore from the hard bench. He seemed to be alone in the park. After relieving his bladder in a bush he walked back the way he thought he had come. Everything was different in the daylight, though, and he came out into a different street. This was a back street, but it led to another much busier. On one side of this busy street was a large open area full of small food stands. For sixty

cents Weilin purchased some batter-sticks and a glass of tea. This left him only coins, less than a dollar's worth, but he thought this should be sufficient to make a few phone calls.

"Where is the post office?" he asked the man running the food stall. The man squinted incomprehension. Weilin borrowed a pen and wrote it. This got him a long explanation in Cantonese, which he couldn't understand, and some hand gestures in the direction of the park, back to the south.

Weilin took the return trip through the park, which was still nearly deserted, as an opportunity to empty his bowels in the concealment of some bushes, cleaning himself with a superfluous page from the newspaper. Then he crossed the park to Nathan Road and headed south.

Nathan Road ended at the harbor. Now Weilin discovered that the mountain he had seen from Waterloo Heights was actually Hong Kong Island, on the other side of the harbor. He walked along the new road in the direction most of the traffic seemed to be going, and sure enough came to a post office. However, there were no telephones available inside. One of the clerks could speak Mandarin. He explained that the telephone service and post office were different things here, that local phone calls were free, and that any store would let him use a phone.

Back on Nathan Road Weilin went into the first store. It was a place selling cameras and electronic equipment. He asked the young man behind the counter if he could speak Mandarin.

"Sure. And English and Japanese."

The young man was terrifically smart. His smooth round face was decorated with gold-rimmed glasses and tiny black whiskers at the corners of his mouth. His hair was oiled and trim. In the pocket of his wonderfully smooth white shirt glittered a gold pen.

"May I use your telephone?"

"I guess so. But don't be long."

Weilin had never made a phone call before, though he had seen it done in movies. He pulled out the newspaper and dialed the first number. He had a vague idea that the telephone ought to ring, but nothing happened. Behind him he heard the smart young man laughing.

"You're a mainland boy, aren't you?"

“Yes. I know, it’s not being able to speak Cantonese.”

“Well, yes, there’s that. Also, not knowing you have to lift up the handset before you dial the phone.”

Boiling with embarrassment, Weilin lifted the handset and dialed the number again. A voice said something in Cantonese.

“Can you speak Mandarin?” asked Weilin. Click. Buzz. He listened for a while, but there was only the buzz. Not sure what to do he dialed the number again, with precisely the same result.

“Excuse me,” he asked the very smart young man. “Would you please help me make a phone call? I can’t understand Cantonese.”

“Who are you trying to call?”

“I’m trying to find work.” Weilin showed the newspaper.

The very smart young man laughed. “You’re only a kid. Your voice hasn’t broken yet. They won’t employ you. Don’t you know about the new regulation?”

“Regulation? How should I know? I’ve only just arrived.”

The smart young man smiled. The smile was supercilious, the smile of one in possession of knowledge critical to the fate of another.

“The companies aren’t allowed to employ anyone under fifteen. Some busybodies in England made a big fuss about children working in the factories. They started a boycott. So now the companies won’t employ anyone under fifteen. *You’re* not fifteen. Anyone can see that.”

“Then how can I get work?”

“Oh, stick around a few weeks. The busybodies will find something else to get constipated about. It’ll all blow over, and the factories’ll be taking in anybody again. But right now they’re scared of the boycott, they won’t employ you.”

“But I have no money.”

The smart young man shrugged. He reached under the glass counter where he was standing, and began to rearrange the items on display there.

“Don’t you have any relatives in Hong Kong?”

“No.”

“Well”—fiddling with the display items, not looking up at all now—“you’re in a pickle then, aren’t you? Hey, come on, get out of here. This is a smart store, not a place for kids.”

* * *

Weilin walked the streets all day in despair. That evening he went to the cheap food stalls where he had breakfasted, and bought a bowl of ungarnished rice gruel. His intention was to sleep in the park again; but he must have been lucky the first night, now the park was patrolled by policemen who roused him by shouting in his ears in Cantonese—“*Hei san! Hei san!*”—and laughed as he ran off in terror. He remembered the other park, up by Waterloo Heights, and trudged up there, only to discover that it was not a park at all but a barracks for the English army, fenced and guarded. He slept at last on some heaps of stinking hemp matting near the Jordan Road ferry, out of sight from the street.

A single breakfast batter-stick and glass of tea cleaned out his pocket. Numb with desperation, Weilin walked the streets of Kowloon. He knew he would have to steal, but had not the courage to do it alone. He wished Asan was with him. Asan would certainly know what to do in such a situation.

In the afternoon, exhausted, he went back to the park and dozed on the bench for an hour, but the police came again and moved him on. By the time it got dark hunger was beginning to dominate all other considerations. Weilin recalled the meal he had taken the first evening at the noodle parlor. He had paid after eating, he recalled.

He chose a similar food shop in the back streets between Nathan Road and the ferry. Not yet brazen in crime, he ordered a cheap dish—fish-egg balls with noodles and green vegetables—and ate it slowly, savoring every mouthful. Finished, he picked a moment when no-one was looking at him, and sauntered to the door. He was actually at the doorway before the waiter shouted to him. “*Wai! WAI!*” Weilin ran.

He had thought that in such a prosperous place they would not pursue him over a bowl of fish-egg and noodles, but this proved an error. Running down the street he heard the waiter running behind him, calling out something urgent and shrill in Cantonese. These were back streets and there were few people around. Some turned their heads to watch the chase, but nobody tried to stop him. Weilin’s impression was that he was gaining. Looking down a side street he saw the lights and bustle of Nathan

Road. That was it—get into the crowds and just walk steadily. He took the next side street, ran to the end, turned into Nathan Road, and ran straight into two policemen!

They were walking side-by-side, two Chinese officers: khaki shorts and shirts, black caps and long black socks. Appearing suddenly in front of them from the side street, Weilin caught them off guard. They stopped dead, staring at him. Close behind, a shout from the waiter. Trapped, Weilin vaulted the metal railing that separated sidewalk from roadway. This was pure instinct; he was not even looking. There was a horrible squealing of brakes, followed by a thumping and crunching sound. A taxi, trying to avoid him, had skidded, and two vehicles behind had hit it. In terror, Weilin jumped back to the barrier and one of the policemen, animate now, grabbed his arm and held it.