PAPER TIGRESS

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by

Rachel Cartland

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CHAPTER TWO

Early Days in Hong Kong

WHEN I LEFT FOR HONG KONG on 18 September 1972, it was the third time I had been outside England. I had never been to Scotland, Ireland or Wales but I had been once to visit my school pen-friend in France and in my last long vacation I had been to Spain with two university friends. The trip to Spain had involved going on an aeroplane and I carefully observed the details of checking in, luggage, etc., so that I would be well prepared for the forthcoming journey to Hong Kong. It was a flight of about twenty hours with several stops along the way since in those days it was not possible to get all the way without refuelling. The airline was the British Overseas Airways Corporation, later integrated into British Airways, and with Virgin Atlantic not existing at all and Cathay Pacific not yet licensed to fly this route, it was the only way to go. It seemed quite all right to a neophyte like me and not deserving of its nickname of 'Better on a Camel'.

As it turned out, I had company on the flight. The brother of an Oxford acquaintance was a BOAC pilot, on that flight as a passenger. David Pedder told me that their family believed that they were descended from William Pedder, Hong Kong's first harbour-master, appointed in 1841, having arrived as first lieutenant of her Britannic Majesty's armed steamer HMS *Nemesis.*

We landed at Kai Tak, Hong Kong's airport for commercial airliners, which was replaced by Chek Lap Kok Airport on Lantau Island in 1998. The final approach to Kai Tak was famous throughout the aviation fraternity. It involved flying over the crowded tenements of Kowloon City with the plane going so low that it really seemed as if you were suspended at the level of people's homes and that the washing would be knocked off the laundry poles that hung out of the windows. At what felt like the last possible moment before colliding with a red and white checkerboard which looked as if it was just positioned at the end of a city street, the pilot would make an abrupt turn to the right and come to a juddering halt on the runway. More often than not, as soon as the plane landed, the air would be filled with a really staggeringly filthy stench. This was the Kai Tak Nullah. Hong Kong's imperial legacy included some words, mostly of Indian origin that were more or less unique to the colony and 'nullah' with its meaning of a concrete-lined storm drain was one of these. In fact, they were pretty much open ditches but they could take up a lane of a main road. All the nullahs smelt bad because waste of all kinds found its way into them but the Kai Tak Nullah with its proximity to the unregulated and insanitary Kowloon Walled City, very crowded even by Hong Kong standards, smelt worst of all. A little strangely, after enough time had passed and one had made enough flights back into Kai Tak, the smell seemed more homely than revolting. That reaction was perhaps the true test of citizenship, the sign that one had become a real adopted son or daughter of Hong Kong. This was of course, some way off for me as I pushed my luggage trolley into the surprisingly small and unimpressive arrivals hall.

I was met by Mr Albert Lam, the principal assistant secretary in the Establishment Branch of the Colonial Secretariat. In other words, he worked in personnel management or human resources, although rather a senior sort of person to be sent out late at night to meet a girl of twenty-two who was yet to do anything useful. I was to come to understand that I was one of an unusually sizeable batch of young graduates recruited to the administrative grade and we were accordingly being carefully looked out for. He carried no board and I wasn't wearing any special badge, but with my distinctive red hair I must have been easy enough to spot. Chinese tend to look for different things from Westerners as marks of differentiation: face shape and skin tones rather than shades of hair colour but mine was unusual enough to stand out and in the early years I would sometimes be aware of people staring at my head with some interest.

We were on the Kowloon Peninsula which, apart from some areas of grand houses quite close to the airport in Kowloon Tong, was mainly an area of factories, government housing estates, tenements and squatter huts. To the north were the largely rural New Territories, so called because they had been leased to Britain after the ceding of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon; it was the expiry of the lease on 1 July 1997 that cast a shadow over the future of the whole colony, which was not viable without this hinterland. Albert and I needed to get to Hong Kong Island, the location of the headquarters of government and all the major businesses. There was an official government car waiting for us and if we had taken the Cross Harbour Tunnel between Hung Hom and Causeway Bay we could have been on Hong Kong Island within minutes. However, the tunnel had only been open for just over a month and its use was not yet thoroughly accepted as part of daily life and the toll was an expensive HK$5. A general circular had been issued within the government to coincide with the opening of the tunnel, adjuring civil servants to pay due regard to economy when using it for official business and taking the most junior member of the administrative grade to her quarters could hardly have been considered justifiable. Accordingly, we drove through Kowloon to Jordan Road and took the vehicular ferry, which was $2 less, to its pier on Hong Kong Island, at the westward end of the Central District, close to the Macau Ferry pier and the 'Poor Man's Night Club', a large open area where in the evenings street entertainers as well as hawkers of snacks, cooked food, cheap toys and novelties plied their trade, under loops of casually strung up, blazing bright kerosene lamps.

Once we were on Hong Kong Island, it was a short journey to 'The Hermitage', at the junction of Kennedy and MacDonnell Roads, which was to be my home for the next few years. Rarely was a building so inappropriately named since it was a block of government quarters mainly for single people, either young or experienced bachelors. British colonies, unlike, say, the French, operated on the theory that expatriate staff would not settle and live there indefinitely but would eventually return to the UK. From that proposition flowed the justification for providing a temporary home for them. When my sister visited later, she described the

Hermitage as 'bedsitter heaven'. The furniture and fittings were perhaps a tad too heavy and old fashioned for that but I could see what she meant, as we were provided with not just a one-bedroom flat but also cleaning and laundry services carried out by elderly Chinese ladies who came in every day, and there was a basic but tolerable restaurant on the premises.

It was rather like being in a student hostel but with no rules to speak of and some of the men saw this as an opportunity for a prolonged adolescence, one that was fuelled by healthy salaries that allowed access to the girlie bars of Wan Chai and then, as often as not, an eventual visit to the venereal diseases clinic. In those days, there were many single expatriate civil servants, particularly police officers, but also engineers, lawyers and all sorts of technicians. The women were mainly teachers at the government schools for English-speaking children.

Relationships between the sexes were in an odd state of flux. In the West, we females were trying to carve out equal opportunities for ourselves in jobs and education but we still had to work out strategies to avoid or even fight off attempts at 'date rape'. The sexual revolution of the '60s had not hit Hong Kong at all and sex before marriage was an unacceptable idea. Conversely, some people assumed that all Western women were totally promiscuous though, equally, they were judged frighteningly unattractive due to their large, clumsy shape and size. Western music had hit Hong Kong, and the Beatles were screamingly popular, although mostly the soppier items in their oeuvre, as well as anything from the more melodic ends of the folk and pop charts. Acts like the Platters and Patti Page were respectfully listened to long after they'd been dismissed as old hat in the West. Psychedelia and dropping out had no appeal at all for aspiring youngsters who wanted to make their way from squatter huts or resettlement estates to a precious place in one of Hong Kong's two universities and a job that would enable them to make a substantial contribution to the family finances. The strength of family bonds and the discipline this imposed was undoubtedly a major reason for this conservatism, although I think that the 1967 anti-government riots were also relevant since at that time the overwhelming majority had decided to support the British establishment, at least passively, as the radical alternative seemed so much worse. There had been exceptions: students and schoolchildren who came from loyal communist backgrounds and who might even be interned or imprisoned, but as dedicated socialists these young people tended to be puritanical too.

As part and parcel of the arrangements for the transfer of sovereignty, or 'handover', the Hermitage was eventually demolished and on the site an imposing glass building was erected for the use of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as its Hong Kong headquarters. And a natural consequence of the handover and the passing of time, was that some of those young people who had been imprisoned during the riots found important positions in the new establishment.

That first evening, Albert (we were encouraged from the beginning to be friendly and call our colleagues by first names) pointed out the Colonial Secretariat building down in Lower Albert Road, at walking distance from my new home and asked me to come to his office there the following day. The topography of Hong Kong facilitates standing at windows and pointing downwards, since buildings cascade from the top of the Peak down to the harbour, and indeed on the next day I was again standing at a window with Albert Lam while he indicated two adjacent buildings on Queen's Road below us. 'You must go to the Hongkong Bank and open an account there. Don't make a mistake and go into the other one: that's the Bank of China.' This warning was a mild joke but also meant half seriously. The Bank of China was one of the Hong Kong faces of the Chinese government and it was only five years since it had played a prominent part in the 1967 riots: plastered with posters denouncing the colonial government and with loudspeakers on the roof blaring out communist music and slogans. The Hong Kong government had retaliated with its own loudspeakers on the roof of Beaconsfield House located on the opposite side of Queen's Road, home of the Government Information Services, playing Cantonese opera. Now, in 2013, Beaconsfield House, recalling a small Buckinghamshire town, has been replaced by the Cheung Kong Centre, named after China's mighty Yangtze River and owned by Mr Li Ka-shing, the richest man in Asia; while the Bank of China is one of Hong Kong's note-issuing banks, with a network of branches and its shares quoted on the local stock exchange.

I suppose that if I had gone into the wrong bank I would just have been quickly hustled out since at that time there was a strict division between left-wing entities and the rest of Hong Kong and they wanted interlopers as little as we wished to step into their territory. I have a poor sense of direction but it was in fact almost impossible to avoid going into the correct bank. This was not, of course, the Norman Foster–designed building, which was opened in 1985 but like all the best modern architecture still looking contemporary today although also, frankly, like the back of a giant refrigerator. Its predecessor, which I was entering, had been there since 1935 and was very splendid in its own way. The dominating feature of the interior was a great barrel vault decorated with a spectacular gold mosaic with allegorical figures depicting trade between the East and West. The perfect Temple of Mammon! Indeed the mosaics used the same techniques as in St Mark's, Venice and at the opening ceremony its general architectural magnificence (it was the tallest building between Cairo and San Francisco) had been compared to Durham Cathedral. It proved much more transient, however. While I was handing over the advance of salary available to new recruits who needed something to help them through their first month, payday normally being at the end (the mighty volume of Establishment Regulations that dealt with personnel matters had an answer for all of life's little contingencies), the executioner's axe was hovering over a building that was already considered too small and the process of replacing it began within seven years. By and large, Hong Kong was a deeply practical and pragmatic place and there could be no reprieve on the grounds of a handsome mosaic ceiling.

I walked out of the bank and into the shock of heat and humidity. I turned right into Pedder Street, named after the putative ancestor of my companion on the flight to Hong Kong. He certainly would not have recognised it from the days when he kept sheep around his house-cum-office on Wyndham Street just above and when the harbour waters lapped right up to the bottom of 'his' street. Reclamation, the other Hong Kong predilection on a par with demolishing and replacing buildings considered 'too small', had put paid to that. In 1972, though, there were a couple of low-rise buildings left which within less than fifteen years would be replaced. One was the charming pale blue wedding cake of a Victorian building that housed the Hong Kong Club, while the other was the Edwardian General Post Office, not quite so charming in its harsh red-brick exterior but all the same a nice break in the skyline and with an interior worthy of the setting for the opening of a Kipling short story with its gilded Biblical motto 'As cold waters to a thirsty soul so is good news from a far country'. Lieutenant William Pedder might have had further to walk to the harbour in 1972 and he would not have recognised much of the shipping apart from the junks; Hong Kong waters were full of real working junks with faded, patched grey and brown sails, still rigged as they had been since the Sung dynasty, contemporary with Europe's Middle Ages, and the engines that helped them along in the twentieth century were not apparent at first sight. On the other hand, a time traveller from 2013 would have been surprised by the casual way in which private cars were able to park anywhere in Central and by the enormous expanse of prime land on the seaward side of the Hongkong Bank taken up by a cricket ground, which was only accessible to the members of the exclusive Hong Kong Cricket Club. The cricket ground was replaced even sooner than the Hong Kong Club and the GPO although this time not by a skyscraper but by a park where office workers could sit in shade during their lunch breaks.

That day was a solitary one for me but I was not the only recruit to the administrative grade that year; there were ten of us altogether of whom six were single expatriates living in the Hermitage. I had had special permission to delay my arrival by a couple of weeks so that I could be bridesmaid at my best friend's wedding. This meant that my name would come at the bottom of all lists as we were arranged strictly 'in order of seniority'. As it turned out, this had no ill effects on me though it might have done as sometimes, in the way bureaucracies work, a line would be arbitrarily drawn across the roll and only those above it considered for some treat or advancement. I met my fellow Hermitage-dwellers that evening and was shocked to discover that one of them was a . . . GIRL.

While I had been at Oxford, Liz King (later Bosher) had been at Cambridge and we both felt that we had been bamboozled by the recruitment board. 'They told *me* that I was going to be the only one,' we said more or less simultaneously. However, as time went by, we got over our disappointment at having to share our pioneer status and began to see the advantage in having two women together so that we could compare notes on the often slightly isolated situation in which we found ourselves. Liz and I became good friends. The only drawback to this double recruitment was that as our lives and careers unfolded in rather similar ways we found that people often mixed us up.

It was the first time for many years that the Hong Kong government had gone specifically to British universities to look for young people to become administrators. The 1967 riots had made it seem, for a short while, not quite certain that Hong Kong would even remain a British colony but might get absorbed willy-nilly back into China before the contracted date of 1 July 1997. Then it was thought that the service could function by recruiting from local universities topped up with a sprinkling of 'retreads', people who had had a career in some other colony which had become independent, so making them available to Hong Kong. This was feasible since processes and nomenclature were quite similar in British territories all around the world. However, Hong Kong's economy and consequently government activity were expanding so fast that there was more demand for administrators than could be met by these means. And so we came to fill the gap.

We had the backgrounds typical of Colonial Service recruitment almost from the beginning: Oxford and Cambridge Universities plus one from London, and all having studied arts or languages (one Chinese and one Arabic). That year only two young locals were recruited: Canice Mak and Shelley Lee. We became especially friendly with Shelley who was very hospitable and invited us to her home over the Chinese New Year holiday. It was a quite typical Hong Kong family of the time with numerous siblings all studying hard, eventually to do well in professions in both Hong Kong and overseas.

It could hardly be commended that in an era of increased localisation only two recruits had been managed to be found. It may be that the recruitment board was setting the wrong type of standard, being too keen to find locals whose English was at the same level as the expatriates, who normally could manage only limited Chinese. The following year Murray MacLehose instructed the recruitment board to find more Hong Kongers, and when they protested that they would not be up to scratch he instituted the year-long 'Oxford Course', which was tailor-made for the Hong Kong government by Oxford University and gave the Hong Kong civil servants who were sent on it not only academic programmes but also travel in Europe and elective subjects like art appreciation. Almost everyone who went on it found it an excellent, mind-broadening experience but as the transfer of sovereignty neared there were fears that the course might be considered an attempt at indoctrination of Hong Kong's ruling elite and it was ended.

No one could accuse the Hong Kong government of not having given careful thought as to how we young expatriates should be prepared for our roles in the administrative grade, even if we were not able to enjoy the two years of language training in Canton that had been the practice in pre-war days. Some senior people had apparently favoured longer language training while others thought that we would be needed at our desks more quickly and so a compromise was reached. We were going to be taught Cantonese in Hong Kong, for six months full-time and then six months part-time. Before the language classes began we would have a two-week attachment to a government department and the part-time training would be accompanied by time spent in some other office. At the end of that year, we would be given our first proper postings.

I was paired up with Tony Miller, one of the other newly arrived expatriates, and later director of housing and then secretary for financial services, to spend a fortnight getting to understand the work of the Urban Services Department. It would almost be simpler to list what this department didn't do rather than what it did as there was such an amazing range of activities. It was responsible for disposal of every kind of waste and rubbish, cleansing and sanitary facilities, markets, hawkers and abattoirs, restaurant licensing, burials and cremations as well as theatres, museums, libraries, beaches, parks and gardens. I suppose that the rationale for its remit was by taking reference to the kind of services that a British municipal council would provide. The staff were a mixture of generalist administrators, office support staff and professionals such as librarians and health inspectors. We were not at all ungrateful but we were young and I don't suppose that we gave much thought to the disruption caused to their own schedules by the requirement to take us out, guide us around, give us lunch and so on.

Before I came to Hong Kong I had been worried about the limitations of my wardrobe when it came to fulfilling my new role, which I had vaguely envisaged as being smartly dressed with other smart people, wrinkling our brows over complex policy issues. I had bought a fake suede emerald green trouser suit in a sub-Yves Saint Laurent-style and a chic long black raincoat with white press studs all the way down the front and white trim. The trouser suit was too heavy for a Hong Kong September and the raincoat turned out to be total madness since when Hong Kong was wet it was also very hot and its cool season was notable for its dry weather. I had not considered the possible need for clothes suitable to wear in a swelteringly humid climate for trips to live poultry markets or for following through the journey of Hong Kong's household refuse from collection in lorries to compression by giant compactors to standing on the great landfills at Junk Bay and Gin Drinkers Bay or for an on-site briefing on Chinese burial customs (exhumation after seven years so that a filial son could scrub the bones which would then be placed in a niche or bone pot) and how these burial customs impacted on government policy, which was desperately keen to encourage cremation in view of the shortage of land.

Our visit to the abattoir was preceded by lunch at the Carlton Hotel, which had an excellent position in North Kowloon, quite rural and with an impressive view from the terrace across to Hong Kong. The set menu was tongue with salad which was, perhaps, a touch unfortunate as properly cooked tongue is in appearance, so very, well, tongue-like. Mr Lau Pai-ping, the senior health inspector who was looking after us that day, was already obviously quite nervous about how the afternoon was going to go and clearly felt that a young lady might not be robust enough to withstand it, asking me anxiously over and over again whether I thought I was going to be 'all right'. It's sometimes quite a good tactic to get so keyed up in advance that if the reality is anything less than appalling it will seem like quite a relief. And this was one of those cases because although the abattoir was noisy and hectic it was also clean and efficient and to my inexpert eye the pigs and cattle seemed to be slaughtered as humanely as possible. The main thing that a visitor needed to be aware of was to stand clear so as not to be knocked over by a swinging carcass on the dressing line. On the other hand, given the quantity and sharpness of the knives on the premises, it was easy to understand why, according to Mr Lau, staff relations had to be handled with particular tact and sensitivity. He was a kind and caring man altogether; it grieved him that the workers left the feverish atmosphere of the abattoir for cramped homes in crowded housing estates with the consequence that they never enjoyed much real respite.

By this time, we couldn't help looking forward to seeing something of the department's more fragrant side. We were proudly shown round the City Hall on Hong Kong Island's seafront which had been opened ten years previously and was the colony's only government-provided cultural facility, housing a theatre, concert hall, the central library and a tiny museum and art gallery, as well as a *dim sum* restaurant where we would make our first attempts at eating with chopsticks. The day was grey, rainy and cloudy and we had to make a diversion to pick up Rei Oblitas, Hong Kong's cultural supremo, who was still living in the same area as Hong Kong University, from which he had been recruited. The drive towards the harbour and the view across to Kowloon was an artistic experience in itself. The hills with ribbons of mist cutting across them were a revelation. Suddenly, you could see that those watery Chinese ink painting landscapes were not fanciful at all but rather an accurate depiction of a unique landscape.

The Urban Services Department's empire was far too big for us to be shown more than a sample, but on another occasion we were taken to Shek O Beach on the south eastern side of Hong Kong Island facing the South China Sea and, since it was a weekday, this beautiful inlet was completely deserted. The weather was clear and bright. Back then, Hong Kong had no air pollution to speak of and battalions of Black-eared Kites wheeled in the pale blue sky, riding the air currents and completing an idyllic scene. We sat outside a simple cafe, eating noodles and drinking Coke. However, the health inspector who was our designated 'minder' to take us to and from the beach, show us the lifeguarding and other facilities, looked a bit distant and aloof, even somewhat disdainful. When it was time to go, he suggested that we stop off on our way back to the Hermitage as he wanted to show us Aldrich Bay on the eastern tip of the island.

Aldrich Bay still exists as a name on the map but it has long since been reclaimed and it is now an area of middle-class housing and shopping malls. It was a real bay then, an area of grey stinking mudflats. In the twilight, we walked out along a rather rickety boardwalk and came to one of the many wooden squatter huts that people had built there. Sitting outside was a woman who might have been young and might have been middle aged, it really wasn't possible to tell. Her clothing was a shapeless black tunic and her hair was yellow-green, discoloured by chemicals, not deliberately dyed. A scrawny little boy with waxy pale skin leant against her knees. They were both working mechanically on assembling plastic toys from a box of components at her feet. This sort of piecework was one of the reasons why Hong Kong was already the second-most prosperous economy in Asia after Japan. We retraced our steps with our guide, who offered no comment. We got back into the car, identified by its number plate beginning with 'AM' as part of the government fleet. We drove back to Bedsitter Heaven.

Not all our time in the Urban Services Department was spent on outdoor visits. Sometimes we were in their offices, which were practical and served the purpose, though not in any way grand or ornate. The activity there was a bit more like what I had imagined I would be coming to before I arrived in Hong Kong. It was especially impressive to see demure Chinese secretaries taking down English language dictation in Pitman's Shorthand. Later on, I learnt how to give good dictation myself, mentally seeing the draft scroll before my eyes and carefully including all the punctuation to try and minimise the need to make corrections later while at the same time keeping an eye open for a frown that meant it would be better to spell out the word concerned. Since the secretaries were not native speakers they could often cope with something quite technical but would be baffled by apparently simpler constructions like 'but since'. As time went by and most work was being done directly onto computers the dictation-taking secretary became a rarer and rarer breed and asking if it could be done was a pretty certain way of inducing panic.

More senior expatriate colleagues tried to give us helpful briefings about working in Hong Kong. Relations between Chinese and British staff were at something of a transition stage. It was policy, and widely accepted, that posts should as far as possible be localised and preference not given to expatriates. It would have been unacceptable to have been rude to, or bullied a Chinese, on racial grounds; I never heard a civil servant use 'Chink' or any similar term. Conversely, we all tolerated the ubiquitous Cantonese term *gwailo* for a Caucasian, though I sometimes wondered whether it was really so pleasant to be described as a 'devil', 'evil spirit' or 'ghost', depending on one's translation, however inoffensively the speaker intended it. There was undoubtedly some pointless stereotyping and too often sentences that began 'Well, Chinese always. . . .'

Expatriates who had been in Hong Kong for a long time were proud to call themselves Old China Hands and to give us solemn lectures on cultural dos and don'ts, particularly on the matter of 'face', which you must never allow a Chinese to lose. I thought that this was a bit over-done: after all, no one in the whole wide world likes to be made to look foolish and will probably resent the person who has been the cause of it. As time went by, however, I began to understand the importance of being sensitive to cultural differences. Traditional British reserve and Chinese diffidence were quite a good natural match so it was not too difficult to learn how to calibrate and, in particular, to avoid causing offence by outright confrontation, but instead to find some intermediary through whom to express one's displeasure. Getting things wrong could have awful consequences in an office setting. There would be no overt recriminations but suddenly everything from getting a new supply of pencils to agreement to one's policy proposals would become inexplicably difficult.

It was quite a miracle that I had enough time to learn all this stuff since by the end of that first fortnight I had decided definitely and definitively that I had bitten off more than I could chew and I was going to leave Hong Kong forever and for good. It wasn't the visit to Aldrich Bay and the other manifestations of poverty that put me off; in fact they were quite an incentive to stay as a combination of youthful idealism and the many good things that I could see in the government's operations made me believe that there was scope to improve things enormously. As I analysed my emotions, I concluded that the overwhelming issue was the heat and the humidity, which made everything so difficult and made me feel that I couldn't function effectively at all. A small but grating problem was that of my hair, to which I was used to paying minimal attention. In England it stuck on my head without any effort on my part and I brushed and combed it every day, washed it once a week, and got a certain amount chopped off when it seemed to be getting too long. In Hong Kong, though, this didn't seem to work; after about fifteen minutes outside I felt reduced to a pool of sweat and the same applied to my hair which became totally flattened and almost invisible, an effect which did not disappear. Eventually, I learnt that I simply had to wash my hair every day, even though this ran counter to traditional Chinese health lore which foretold awful consequences (such as rheumatism in the head) from washing one's hair too frequently or improperly.

What worried me the most though was that I remembered that I had been told at my recruitment interview that the weather would be getting cooler in September. If this was 'getting cooler' how could I possibly cope as it got hotter? My informants had not been wrong, of course, but they had been slightly misleading. September was indeed cooler and less humid but only by a small amount: thirty degrees and seventy-nine per cent humidity rather than the thirty-one degrees and eighty-two per cent humidity of August. It was really in the middle of October that the temperature and humidity began dropping significantly towards the lovely winter weather. Having no similar experiences to call on, I didn't understand how adaptable the human frame can be nor did I fully appreciate how much more comfortable life in Hong Kong would become as air conditioning replaced electric fans.

It was all the same hard to contemplate a return to England and the accompanying sense of failure. My parents would be disappointed and we would face quite a dilemma: how was I to live if there was to be a long period of job hunting, with no student grant to rely on? I decided to make one last effort before I threw in the towel. I had been given the names, addresses and telephone numbers of two people in Hong Kong and I decided to find out if there was anything that they might say or do which would make me reconsider my decision.

The first was Mr KC (Casey) Liu of the Casey Company. The brother-in-law of one of my closest friends at Oxford worked in his family's firm of Cecil Gee, which sold trendy menswear to the aspiring young professionals of the 1960s. Casey ran an import/export agency and one of his customers was Cecil Gee, for whom he had sourced some shirting. My contacts, Rowley and Liz, had said that they would let Casey know that I was going to turn up in Hong Kong although, as it happened, they hadn't yet got round to doing so. I had only his name and office address and no telephone number but I resolved to go and pay him an impromptu visit that Saturday. For civil servants and businesspeople alike in Hong Kong office hours normally included Saturday mornings but we had been given the day off; we were in a sort of limbo between being students and working people. Quite possibly, the Urban Services Department thought they deserved a break from taking us to look at public lavatories and so on.

I accordingly went to Number 1914, Prince's Building in Central. Later on, I learnt that nothing about Casey was a matter of chance: either he had devised it himself or had thought through its implications. ('Beginning of the First World War, see. So no one ever forgets where my office is.') I had set out from the Hermitage with a feeling of bravado and indeed some irritability masking my sense of personal failure. I told myself that I was disappointed in Hong Kong and everything in it. These emotions began to change to trepidation as I saw that I had arrived at a smart office in perhaps the smartest building in the Central District and, even more so, when having asked for Mr Liu, I was shown a door marked 'Managing Director'. I knocked and entered on hearing a slightly abrupt 'Yes' from inside. A portly middle-aged man raised his eyes from the heap of papers on the desk that he stood behind and looked at me over his reading glasses with his bright shrewd eyes. 'Yes,' he repeated in the same rather gruff tone. 'Who are you?' 'I'm a friend of Rowland Gee,' I said. 'Ah,' he expansively replied, 'Friend of Rowland Gee, friend of mine. What are you doing for dinner tonight?' 'Nothing,' I said sulkily. 'OK. Come to Hilton Hotel at seven o'clock.'

I fished out the bridesmaid's dress that I had first worn a month or so previously and that had been chosen with the express aim of also being able to be worn for evening functions later on and, as instructed, got myself to the Dragon Boat Bar of the Hilton Hotel. Casey was there as was his wife, Lena, who was what Chinese people call a *kwan yin,* a beautiful, cool, elegant woman. As I discovered later, she had a principle against the flaunting of wealth and disdained designer labels (at that time things covered with Dior monograms were fashionable but, as she said, you might as well just pin your bank statement to your back if showing off was your motivation) preferring instead the classically simple combination of a tailor-made *cheongsam* with a jacket over it.

Casey told me just a little bit of his life story: he had been a marine engineer with Butterfield & Swire before striking out on his own. He also mentioned that he celebrated two birthdays, the second commemorating the day on which his mother had sneaked out of the house and got him back from the Hong Kong hillside where his grandmother had left him, as was the custom in those days in cases of sickly babies who were not expected to survive. He had, of course, not just survived but thrived. There was a period of frailty before his long life ended in 2007 but until then he was always full of optimism, enthusiastic about exploring new things. He decided that diamonds would be a good business to get into and in late middle age became a qualified gemologist and opened up a diamond cutting factory in Aberdeen on Hong Kong Island. He spent the last part of his life in Canada where he did a lot of boating (having always been annoyed that the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club had advised him that he was too old to take up such a hobby) and, with no previous musical experience, became a pretty competent violinist when already in his seventies so as to enrich his new hobby of collecting antique instruments. That evening back in 1972 in the Dragon Boat Bar, he put his hand in his pocket, brought out something and said animatedly, 'Look, look at this.' It was a digital wristwatch, the first I had ever seen and indeed I had never even heard of such a thing. It seemed magically revolutionary and super-efficient to have the minutes flashed up as they clicked by. For the first twenty-two years of my life, there had been little in the way of technological change that had an immediate impact on our daily lives. All that was about to change with a wealth of new electrical and electronic inventions many of which, like that watch, would be manufactured in Hong Kong.

However, we were not due to have a quiet family dinner. Running your own company meant not just long hours in the office but also entertaining clients in the evenings and at week-ends and that was what we were going to do that Saturday. We were driven the short distance to Wan Chai and the Asiania Restaurant and Nightclub, at that time one of Hong Kong's more fashionable places. We were shown to a very large round table and the reason for that became clear when about a dozen German gentlemen arrived, to all of whom Casey hoped to sell some textiles. I had never been to a formal Chinese dinner before and did not know much about it, being ignorant of such things as the fact that the soup would be served towards the end of the meal rather than the beginning and that there would be some nine courses served one after another. This had a particular impact because as the Asiania was a nightclub there was a band playing and the courteous Germans felt it incumbent to dance, which basically meant that Lena and I, as the only women at our table, would be taken onto the dancefloor between every course, to be watched politely by the other ten and returned with a click of the heels and a slight bow after a short twirl. What amazed me about this process was that on each return there would be something new to eat nicely presented in a bowl or on a plate beside my chopsticks. I wondered how long this would last but the number of partners more or less balanced out the number of the courses and I went back to the Hermitage feeling that I had had a much more interesting and amusing day than I could ever have expected. Casey and Lena were very special people but they also represented something quite characteristic of Hong Kong at that time: an enormous energy and enthusiasm and a willingness to tackle life and its challenges head on.

Emboldened by this success, I decided to approach the other person whose contact details I had, the Reverend Joyce Bennett, a distant relative of mine. My family roots lay in Buckinghamshire and I was a descendant of long-established clans of farmers, butchers, dairymen and clayworkers. Because of complex webs of marriages between large families, I was related to some people through both my father's and my mother's side. There had however been a great fracture which had taken place just before I was born and had led to my parents moving away and leaving that way of life for ever. The reasons for it had the ingredients common to these sorts of family rifts: love affairs, elopements, divorce, second families, disputed wills and a business that faltered once the founding patriarch died. One of the results was that my sister and I grew up having little contact with our extended family. My mother, however, could not resist giving us a bowdlerised version of our history and we heard many stories of life on our maternal grandparents' farm, in which Joyce was a supporting character. She was described as a cousin though the relationship was more complex than that and she was probably a sort of second cousin, by blood on my mother's side of the family and by marriage on my father's side. Brought up in London, where her father owned a butcher's shop located just off Oxford Street, Joyce, who was some seven years younger than my mother, often came to the farm on holidays (although, poor girl, she was famous for being made sick by the shortest journey in the pony and trap that was their main means of transport) and during the Depression of the 1930s when my mother was working in London, she would go to Joyce's family home on her day off on Sunday. Soon after the Second World War, Joyce had been the cause of much sensation within the extended family because she had decided to join the Church Missionary Society, which sent her to Hong Kong. Her training in the UK had been as a teacher and she worked in education in Hong Kong, but in parallel she was pursuing her vocation within the Anglican Church which culminated, in 1971, in her becoming the first English woman to be ordained a priest. This was possible more than twenty years before such a thing took place in England because the Hong Kong Diocese was allowed to take this decision independent of other dioceses. There was relevant history, too; a Hong Kong born woman, Florence Li Tim Oi, had been ordained an Anglican priest by Bishop Ronald Hall in 1944 in China as a means to allow the community in Macau to continue to be served despite the chaotic wartime conditions. Miss Li temporarily surrendered her priest's licence in 1946 as her ordination had proved very controversial within the church but it meant that in Hong Kong the idea of a female priest was not as alien as it might otherwise have been.

As a consequence of my parents' estrangement from the rest of the family, I had never had any communication with Joyce and her presence in Hong Kong had had absolutely no effect on my decision to go there. However, my mother somehow or other had Joyce's address and telephone number and she gave these to me before I left England. This time I telephoned first and if Joyce was at all surprised, she did not display it. I suppose she was used to dealing with human waifs and strays and she invited me to dinner at her home. She was by then principal of St Catharine's School for Girls, Kwun Tong on the eastern side of the Kowloon Peninsula and lived in a flat on the school premises.

Nowadays, Kwun Tong is quite a mixed sort of area with some poor-quality older tenement housing but also modern public and private housing estates and middle-class shopping malls. Then, it was a place of great poverty, inhabited mainly by the refugees who had been arriving in waves from China ever since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 and who provided the bulk of the workforce for the factories that were the backbone of Hong Kong's burgeoning prosperity. In the beginning, it had been expected that, as in the past, these refugees would return to China when the situation had stabilised but this did not occur and instead squatter huts, flimsy wooden constructions that relied on illegally tapped electricity, and wells or public standpipes for water, sprang up all over the colony, which at that time had relatively large areas of undeveloped land, particularly on hillsides. A fire on Christmas Day in 1953 in Shek Kip Mei which rendered some 50,000 squatters homeless forced the government to begin a rehousing programme. It began building what were termed Resettlement Estates, which although they were fire and weather proof were provided only with communal toilets, kitchens and washing facilities. The accommodation was also extremely cramped; legend had it that some administrator had decided to base the space allocation on British Navy standards for hammock space and, whatever the origin, it was just twenty-four square feet per person. By 1968, some forty per cent of the population of almost four million was in government housing of one sort or another and the standards in the newer blocks were better than in the Mark One Resettlement Estates, although they were still very basic and not at all spacious. Furthermore, the 'squatter problem' had not been solved despite this massive building effort: sometimes it seemed to be like filling a sieve.

In those days, there was no Mass Transit Railway and ferries were a major means of transport, not just to the Outlying Islands but also across and around the harbour. So I got to Joyce's home by a journey first by boat and then by one of the red minibuses ('nine person cars' as they were known in Cantonese) that ran everywhere as useful components of the public transport system, even though they were largely unregulated, often dangerously driven, and widely assumed to be in the grip of triad gangs.

It is quite interesting to meet a blood relative for the first time, especially when you are already grown up and have some frame of reference. She reminded me of my mother and of my mother's younger sister, who was always as kind as she could be, despite the family quarrels and had had us to stay in the house she shared with my grandmother, and although Joyce was some twenty-five years older than I, I could see that we were somehow cut from the same genetic cloth too. I later discovered that she and I also shared some personality traits, including a complete inability to sing in tune. Joyce differed from all of us, however, in that her expression was totally imbued with serenity. She was not quiet, retiring or disengaged from everyday life, quite the opposite in fact, but her inner conviction that, in the end, 'all manner of things shall be well' shone through.

Even if her general appearance was what might be expected of a spinster missionary schoolmistress in an all girls' school, it would have been a mistake to believe that the environment in which she operated was a genteel one, or one to whose realities she was blind. The school, and therefore her home was up above Kwun Tong on its own on Crocodile Hill (Ngok Yue Shan), so it had magnificent views of the harbour and Kai Tak Airport and its runways, but it was nevertheless very isolated. She told me that when she first moved in she had had a visit from an inspector from the local police station who had asked, with some concern, whether she lived there on her own. 'Oh no,' she soothingly replied, 'Lau Je lives here too.' Lau Je was her live-in servant of a type then common in Hong Kong but more or less an extinct species now. These ladies wore wide black trousers and a tight-fitting top in sparkling white. They never normally married, providing devoted years of service to their employers but, on the other hand, enjoying complete sovereignty over the kitchen and, often, a mutually supportive relationship that transcended a purely financial transaction. The women in our family were fairly short as a rule and Joyce was no exception but Lau Je was even more so. The Inspector apparently looked at these two small ladies and then gulped and gave his considered advice: 'I think you should get a dog . . . a large dog.' Joyce was a careful and reasonable person and she did get a dog, who was alleged to be a German Shepherd and, indeed, looked like one but my own observation of Chris, as he was named, suggested that it was very fortunate that he was never put to the test as I think he would have been more likely to offer a gentlemanly paw to an intruder than to bare his teeth and bite.

St Catharine's School for Girls was a haven for many of its pupils, whose lives were marred by poverty, physical abuse and incest, which was a particular problem arising from the cramped and unorthodox living situations of a refugee population. A respectable number were able to go on to university and Joyce was always conscious as well of the importance of the 'frills' of art and music which some believed to be more properly reserved for the elite. The girls had a great record of achievement in the local schools' speech and music festivals and, years later, when I asked the Education Department for a selection of artwork for a government conference room, the ceramics all came from St Catharine's. Joyce had gone by then, having retired and returned to England in 1983, but long afterwards I heard people in the education sector speaking of teachers who had worked in her school and absorbed her ideas as an especially impressive breed.

As I rode the ferry back to Hong Kong Island, I was forced to reflect that I really should give this place another chance. Wouldn't it be foolish to turn my back on a place that contained such interesting, quirky and positive people? 'Yes, yes,' the twinkling lights round the harbour seemed to be saying, 'Stay with us. Your life will have more possibilities than you could ever have imagined.' And so I did.