

6. INSIDE HELLO KITTY'S HEAD

“Hello Kitty is not normally given a mouth because without it, it is easier for fans to project their feelings onto the character, and they can be happy or sad together with Hello Kitty.”

– Sanrio, the Japanese company that owns the trademark

Inside the girls' reform school in Ma Tau Wai in Kowloon City, a 14-year-old girl named Ah Fong was having nightmares every night. The nightmares were all the same – images of a headless young woman and a shriek in the background demanding: “Give me my head back.” Ah Fong invariably woke up in a cold sweat and was afraid to go back to sleep lest the nightmare recurred.

Even at such a tender age, Ah Fong had first-hand experience in the seedy side of Hong Kong's underworld and was considered streetwise and tough by any standard. But recent developments in her life left her on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

She was driven to desperation, and very much against her nature, she knocked on the door of the social worker at the reform school. When she was done telling the social worker the

nature of her nightmares and why she had them, she was shaking and crying like a baby.

Realizing the seriousness of the matter, the social worker took Ah Fong to the closest police station. Ah Fong spilled the beans – beans of horror – at the police station, and the story told in detail was gorier and more nightmarish than scenes from *The Silence of the Lambs*.

The police superintendent at the station promptly referred the case to the Organized and Serious Crime Unit (“O” Unit) and a team of detectives and policemen were quickly dispatched to Tsim Sha Tsui to gather as much evidence as possible, and to arrest the perpetrators.

The case revolved around the torture and ultimate death of a young woman called Ah Map.

Ah Map came from a broken family. Her mother ran off with another man, leaving Ah Map with her gambling-addicted father. The father owed money to loan sharks and had to skip town to disappear somewhere in China when Ah Map was still a young girl. Ah Map was bounced from one relative to another until she became a teenager, when she too ran away from home and lived in the street.

She made her living the old-fashioned way – the only way she knew how. Like many prostitutes, she became hooked on drugs (in her case, an amphetamine-based drug called Ice) and she kept a “white-faced boy” – Cantonese slang for a toy boy, a man who depends on a woman for livelihood.

By 1997, though still in her early twenties, Ah Map was a veteran of the flesh trade. She was living in Mong Kok with her “white-faced boy” – a young man called Ah Sai, a fellow Ice addict and part-time drug dealer. She was supporting him with money earned from working as a freelance hooker in Romantic Villa, a motel renting rooms by the hour in Sai Yeung Choi Street, Mong Kok.

The *mafoo* (pimp) for that motel was Lok Tsai. Being a *mafoo* is not a well-respected occupation even in the underworld – a job usually reserved for triad members too cowardly to chop people, and not resourceful enough to run elaborate commercial ruses. The attribute of pimps the world over is their ability to control, intimidate and beat up vulnerable women. Lok Tsai was no exception. He had a few girls under his control, and was living with one of them, called Ah Pui, who was obsessed with all things Hello Kitty. As the story evolved, it was found that one of her Hello Kitty possessions, a large stuffed doll, was used to hide a heinous crime.

Ah Pui and Ah Map were friends. And every time Ah Map was beaten up by Ah Sai – not an unusual occurrence – she sought help from Ah Pui, who in turn asked Lok Tsai if he could accommodate Ah Map in one of the spare rooms in Romantic Villa. Lok Tsai agreed, partly because they had shared Ice together in the past. Ah Map stayed on and off in a room in that motel, where she turned tricks, slept, and sometimes took Ice with Ah Pui and Lok Tsai.

One night in May, 1997, after bingeing on Ice for hours on end, Lok Tsai fell asleep beside Ah Map. In a moment of greed and poor judgment, she stole from him a DuPont lighter, an expensive ballpoint pen, and HK\$4,000 in cash before she ran off.

Ah Map moved to Tsuen Wan soon after. In a city of close to seven million, the odds of meeting someone you casually know should be slim. But as luck would have it, she ran into Lok Tsai by chance in the Tsuen Wan MTR station about eight months later.

Lok Tsai threatened her with violence there and then. Ah Sai was with Ah Map, but instead of standing up for her, he slapped her around in front of Lok Tsai, and made her promise to pay back everything owed, plus interest. Lok Tsai was satisfied after emptying her purse and obtained from her all her contact information, including her latest workplace, a sauna in Tsuen Wan. She agreed to repay him by monthly installments.

In spite of all the ill treatment received from Ah Sai, Ah Map stuck with him. She paid for all the household expenses, the drugs they both took on a regular basis, and Ah Sai's pocket money. Ah Sai had roaming eyes and was known to cheat on Ah Map on numerous occasions.

Around the time she was smacked silly by Ah Sai in front of Lok Tsai to show off his manhood, she became pregnant by him. The pregnancy was untimely for many reasons; one of them was that she was already under heavy financial burden to honor her monthly installments to Lok Tsai. In spite of the pregnancy, she

had to continue to provide sex a few times a day for customers in the sauna, to make ends meet. But she had to stop working when her belly became too big to hide. Then after she gave birth to a baby boy, she also had to rest for a couple of months. Not being able to work for so many months meant she had to default on her payments to Lok Tsai.

Lok Tsai wasn't very happy about that. He repeatedly called to tell Ah Map that even though she had already repaid more than seven thousand dollars, she still owed him ten thousand dollars from interest accrued.

The baby was taken to Ah Sai's mother for foster care. Ah Sai's mother didn't think much of Ah Map or her child, because of what she did for a living, and she made it clear to Ah Map that she would do it only if she was paid HK\$3,000 a month in advance. She also warned Ah Map if she didn't see the money every month, she would send the baby to an orphanage.

After paying Ah Sai's mother, Ah Map had no money left. She continued to default on payments to Lok Tsai, who decided it was time to teach Ah Map a lesson. He sent two of his goons (called *sai los*, meaning little brothers) to bring Ah Map to his residence in an old tenement building on Granville Road in Tsim Sha Tsui. The two *sai los* were Ah Joe and Fai Tsai. Ah Joe suggested raising the debt from HK\$10,000 to HK\$20,000 because of the extra effort involved in collecting it.

Ah Sai, Ah Map's de facto husband, was then in police custody because of a drug offense. There was no one to turn to for help. Ah Map didn't put up any resistance and followed the two goons

when they showed up at her workplace and told her their big brother Lok Tsai wanted to talk to her in person.

She was prepared to be roughed up a bit and to be a resident hooker for Lok Tsai, serving a long queue of men (a practice known as *sia bang* in underworld lingo – a snake coiling its body in circles, a description of a long queue) until all debts were repaid. She anticipated being on her back dealing with a lot of men in the coming weeks. She didn't know it would be much worse... much, much worse.

On May 17, 1999, Ah Map walked into Lok Tsai's flat on Granville Road in TST, and never walked out.

Lok Tsai lived on the second floor of an old building owned by Mrs. Cheng, widow of Limping Ho – the biggest heroin dealer in Hong Kong in the 1950s and '60s. She owned most of the units in the building and had plans to own more of them so that she could re-develop the site into a skyscraper, since the building height restriction in the area had been lifted with the old Kai Tak airport's move to Chek Lap Kok. To convince the remaining tenants to sell their properties to her, she relied on the triad way – harassing and threatening them.

She commissioned the task to a well-known triad figure by the name of H.M. Chan, who in turn asked one of his associates nicknamed Fut Fut to be in charge. The first thing Fut Fut did was invite some of his triad brothers to move into the vacant units and live there for free – the inaugural stage of an orchestrated campaign to make that building a living hell for the other tenants.

One of the freeloaders was Lok Tsai. Another was Ah Sam, who lived directly below Lok Tsai on the first floor. Around the same time Ah Map met her fate, Ah Sam was charged with the drugging and raping of his girlfriend's friend. The rape case had a direct impact on the outcome of the murder case involving Ah Map.

Lok Tsai's flat was sparsely furnished. The previous tenant had left a great deal of trash and numerous broken appliances. There must have been an aborted attempt to renovate the place, because there were renovation materials and tools strewn all over the place. Two old mattresses were placed on the floor of the bigger bedroom, which any of the boys could use to crash for the night or to spend some time with their girlfriends.

Lok Tsai, Ah Joe, and Fai Tsai all had a history of beating up women. Lok Tsai was a *mafoo* after all. Both Ah Joe and Fai Tsai beat up their girlfriends on a regular basis. Ah Joe's girlfriend didn't like the beatings and had left him recently. Fai Tsai's girl, Ah Fong (the one with the nightmares), admitted that the more he beat her, the more she loved him.

As soon as Ah Map was led into the flat, Lok Tsai pushed her into a small windowless bedroom and screamed: "Where is my money?" Ah Map said: "I just had a baby and I couldn't work for almost five months. But money should be coming. I have just started work again, and I am also applying for social welfare."

Lok Tsai shouted: "Now you talk about repaying me. How come when I called, you didn't even bother answering your phone?"