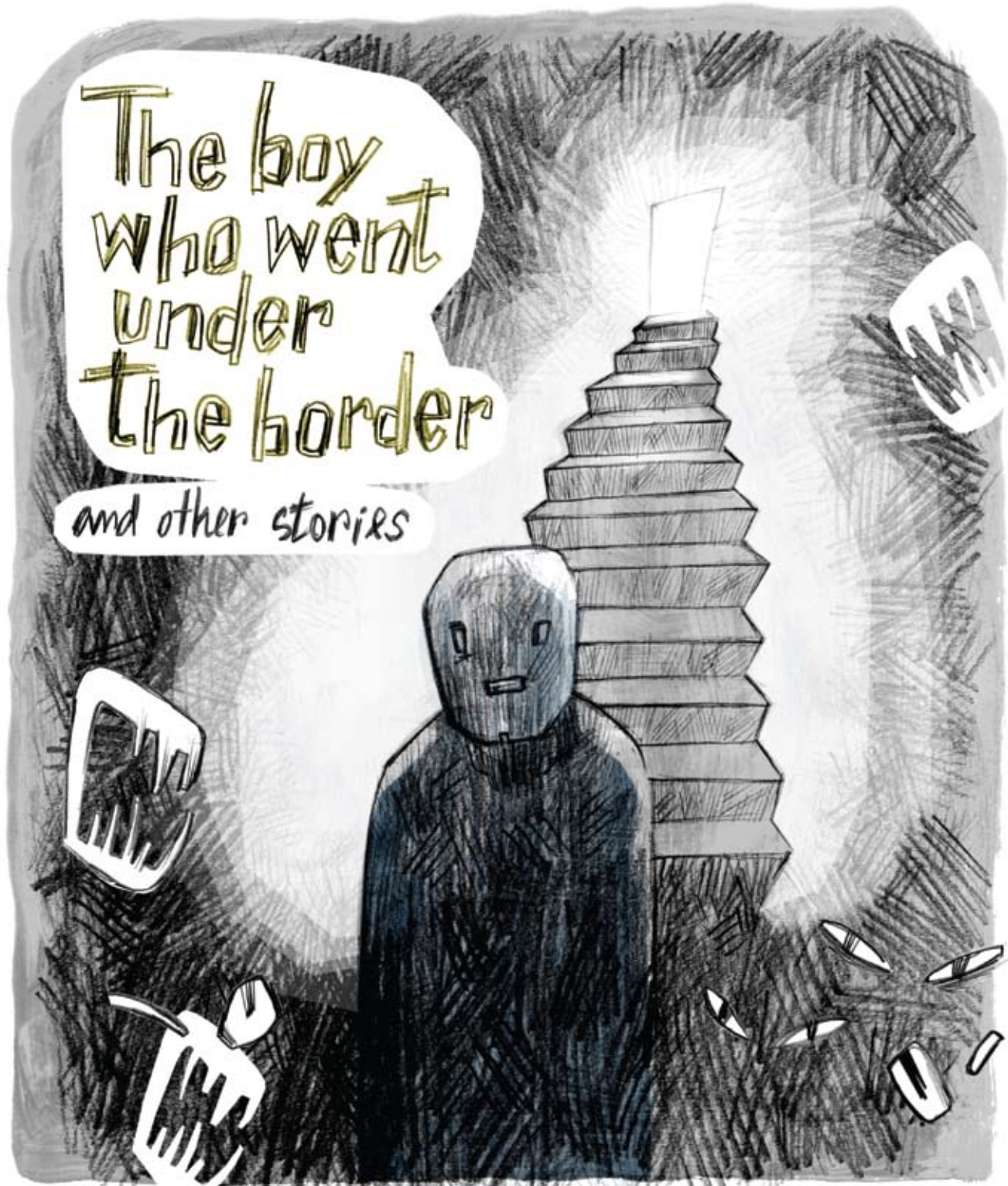


The boy
who went
under
the border

and other stories



the boy who went under the border and other stories

CLOSER
macau

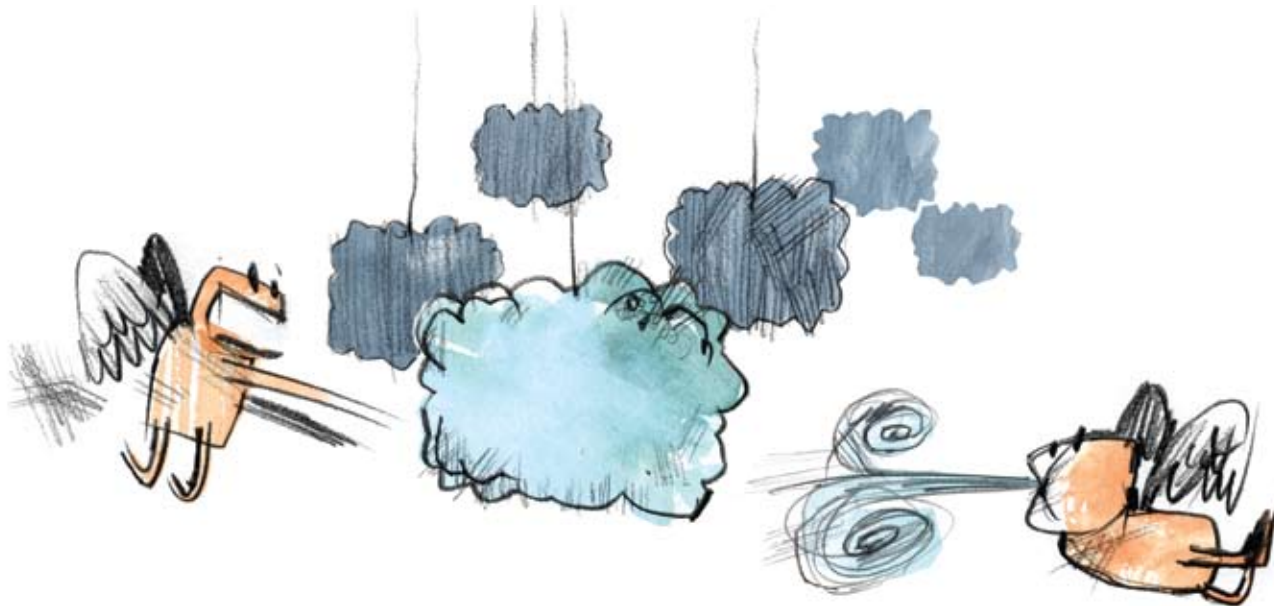
MACAO STORIES

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SQUARE CLOUDS

with Carol Tong

4 A long time ago, the clouds in the sky were all square in shape, and they had all been hung by a little angel called Angel Cloudy. His job was to hang the square clouds in the sky to build up a sun shield to protect people living on Earth. Angel Cloudy was a good and hardworking angel. He started working early in the morning and returned home late every afternoon. All the other angels liked him very much and were happy to be friends with him. All except Angel Windy. He was a lazy and naughty angel. He liked to play tricks on others. He used to destroy things with his special power. Angel Windy's special power was his breath. With just one big puff Windy could blow everything away. Because Windy was always causing so much trouble, no one wanted to be his friend.

It was a beautiful day just after the dawn of time. Angel Windy was wandering around the sky when he found that Angel Cloudy was hanging out new square clouds. He was hanging them out one by one. The sky was so big, Angel Cloudy still hadn't finished filling it with clouds. He was singing happily to himself while he was hanging the clouds. When Angel Windy saw Angel Cloudy, Angel Windy thought, 'Wow... There he is! The most hardworking angel in Heaven!' Angel Windy laughed because he had just thought of a trick to play on Angel Cloudy.

Windy flew towards his brother angel, and asked, 'So busy! Do you need my help?'

Angel Cloudy knew who it was and though he was surprised he knew he had to think quickly to stop Angel Windy from making a mess. 'No, thank you, Angel Windy. I can do it by myself.' So Angel Cloudy hoped he would be able to ignore Angel Windy and continue his work...

Angel Windy was annoyed. He walked away with only blue sky under his feet. Then just when Angel Cloudy was putting the last cloud up in the sky, a strong wind blew towards him. The wind was so strong that no one could have stopped themselves being blown away by it. In a minute, everything was wrecked. All the square clouds were torn into pieces. The naughty angel laughed happily to see the trouble he had

made. He shouted, 'Angel Cloudy, you're the most hardworking angel. You're happy to have more work to do, haha!' Tears were welling up in Angel Cloudy's eyes. There was nothing he could do but to stand still and watch the troublemaker flying away.

Now Angel Cloudy was alone, feeling sad and angry. He decided to fly to the King of Heaven and tell him what had happened. After Angel Cloudy told his story the king replied kindly, 'Cloudy, some day later you will understand.' Angel Cloudy had no idea what the king meant. What could he do but go back to repair the clouds?

In fact the job was bigger than Angel Cloudy had thought. The whole of the sky needed repairing and as a result the sun was blocked out for a long time. Because the sun was blocked out none of Heaven's washing could get dry. The king was very annoyed at having to choose between wearing wet clothes or dirty clothes and the king knew who to blame. After a while he made a summons for Windy to see him at once. Windy didn't want to see the king but he could not say no.

The king said, 'I know you came down to Earth secretly a while ago and I know the damage you did. You know that angels are forbidden to visit Earth without special permission. You have broken the law and you must be punished. Now, you must go to the Laundry of Heaven and dry all the washing there.'

Windy begged, 'There are tonnes of washing and I don't want to waste my time on this job. I promise you that I won't break the law again.'

The king replied, 'I'm pleased that you admit your wrongdoing but you still have to pay for it. Do the job now, or else...'

Windy interrupted, 'Okay! I will do it.'

Then, the naughty angel flew away.

While Angel Cloudy was busy working on his clouds, people on Earth were amazed by the different shapes of the clouds in the sky.

5 A boy pointed at the sky and exclaimed. 'Hey, papa, look at the sky! The clouds are very different today. They're not square anymore. Look at that cloud, it looks like a cow. Ha, that one looks like a fish. That one looks like a...'

It took Angel Cloudy almost an hour to repair the scattered clouds. But one hour in Heaven is two months on Earth, so by the time he had finished repairing the clouds, and the clouds had returned to their square shape again, people below had had plenty of chances to see the new shapes. Angel Cloudy hadn't had time to listen to the people before because he'd been so busy, rushing around fixing the clouds. Now he had time to rest, he heard people say, 'It's fun to see the clouds in different shapes, but now they're all square again. It's so boring. Before we could guess what the shapes were meant to be, but what can we do now? A square is always a square, just a square.' Angel Cloudy was upset and disappointed after hearing all of these complaints.

On a still moonless night only a few days later, naughty Windy felt bored and secretly came down to Earth again. It was so boring up in Heaven - there was no one there he could tease at all. No one in Heaven wanted to play with him. He couldn't do anything naughty because all the other angels knew all about him. But Windy could get excited just making plans for how he'd be naughty down on earth.

Angel Windy was lying on the roof of a small hut. He heard people inside the hut say, 'I like Angel Cloudy very much because he always cares about us. Last time, while I was working under the sun, I wasn't feeling well and could not put up with the heat. Then, I prayed for Angel Cloudy to come. As soon as I'd finished praying, I saw a cloud moving to shield me from the heat. His square clouds are boring but he's really a very kind angel.'

Angel Windy felt uneasy after hearing what the boy had said. Everyone loved Angel Cloudy so much but

nobody ever mentioned Angel Windy at all. But just when he'd thought this thought he heard another man say, 'I agree with you about Angel Cloudy. But that Angel Windy, he's not a good angel. He's selfish, naughty and only knows how to destroy things.'

Angel Windy was furious after hearing this. He envied Angel Cloudy and he was angry with the man who had just gossiped about him. So Angel Windy used his power, took a deep breath, and blew everything around. After his blowing, everything was damaged. The naughty angel had destroyed many things such as houses, boats and shops on Earth. When he saw what he had done, Angel Windy was afraid that he would be punished again by the King of Heaven, and more harshly than before. And so he went into hiding.

While Windy was hiding himself in his secret place in the Garden of Heaven (just under the washing line, next to the laundry) he heard the King of Heaven's voice. Angel Windy was trembling in his hiding place as he listened to the king's voice.

'Windy, do you know how serious this matter is? You are gifted but you have used your power in the wrong way again. Now, as a penalty, I order you to work for Angel Cloudy forever.'

Angel Windy knew that he could not escape from the king and so he came out from where he was hiding. 'Why? I don't want to work with him. His job is so boring, and I... don't want to...'

The king interrupted, 'I have told Cloudy what to do and he will guide you. Go to Cloudy now!'

Angel Windy knew that he could not disobey the king and so he trudged off slowly to Cloudy's place. His head was down and he was feeling very sorry for himself by the time he got to Cloudy's house. When Angel Cloudy saw his brother, he didn't look annoyed at all, instead, he felt happy.

Cloudy said, 'I know we will be partners for life, I'm sure you're the only one who can help me with this special job. Now, are you ready?'

Angel Windy exclaimed, 'Ready for what?'

Cloudy replied calmly, 'It's an easy job for you. You just need to take a deep breath and blow softly towards the clouds. That's it! Simple, right?'

Angel Windy did not understand what his brother was talking about, but he thought he still had to listen to Cloudy, otherwise, he would be punished in some new way by the king.

Angel Cloudy looked at Windy sincerely and said, 'I want to bring interesting clouds to the people on Earth and I need your help to do it. Last time, when you destroyed my square clouds, I was very angry with you. But while I was repairing the clouds, I was surprised to hear many happy voices from the people. They said they loved the clouds in different shapes! I thought about this for a long time and then I understood that I had to do my job differently... I have to change the way I do things. I need your power to help me to fulfill the people's dreams. Let's work together and bring happiness to them, okay? We are angels and this is our duty. We'll be partners. Let's make their dreams come true. Windy, this is a good chance for you to make up for the damage you've done.'

Angel Windy thought deeply about what Cloudy had said. He knew that he could do it. Then, he said, 'I know that I was wrong before. Let's work together now.' It wasn't long before Cloudy was saying, 'Now, I want to hang a cow shaped cloud, please...' Windy would follow Cloudy's instruction and give a soft blow to shape the cloud just as Cloudy wished.

As time passed, and the two did their jobs, there were no more square clouds in the sky. All the clouds were in different shapes and the sky was now like a picture with different objects in it. People could enjoy themselves as they looked at the sky. They didn't always agree about what shape they saw but they all agreed they were seeing something. It was because of the work of Angel Cloudy and Angel Windy that people today know the saying: 'A new shaped cloud comes with a warm breeze. You can always tell when it's time to look up.'



THE BABY SEA URCHIN

with Silvia Wong

Deep in the warm tropical sea off Macao lived a baby sea urchin. He always felt lonely and sad. He had only one friend, Starry, a starfish.

'Starry, I wish I were like you. You are white. You are handsome. You have many friends.' Baby squeezed himself down into a dark spiky ball, which meant that he was sad. Both his parents (Mr and Mrs Dark) and his dear friend, Starry, had told him many times what a handsome sea urchin he was. But they didn't understand how Baby felt. Baby was called Baby because he hadn't yet found his own rock.

'Don't be sad, Baby. I'm your friend. I'll always stay with you.' Starry tried to comfort him.

'But, I am so ugly! I am dark and I have sharp spines sticking out all over my body. No one wants to come near me. They say it's dangerous! Woo... woo... woo...' Baby began to cry. When Baby cried it always ended the same way. He would curl up into a little spiny ball and when he woke up, he would wonder why he'd been so upset before, that was if he remembered at all.

'Don't cry. Don't cry. My dear friend, I have heard from an old starfish who has traveled everywhere of a witch mermaid who can help anyone in the salty sea to solve their troubles, whatever they are. She is a kind witch. She lives in the northernmost corner deep in the seventh sea. It would be a long and difficult voyage but, if you're brave enough, we can pay a visit to her.'

'Yes, I'd love to. I hope she can help me. Let's go! Let's go!' Baby was so excited, he thought nothing of the dangers ahead in the big big ocean.

Baby and Starry started their journey to the northmost corner of the seventh sea. It was very far away from where Baby and Starry lived. They swam very hard until they reached the seventh sea. As they approached the North Pole they found the water getting colder and colder. But fortunately it was the middle of summer so they were able to bear the freezing temperatures for a little while at least.

When Baby first caught sight of the Mermaid he forgot all about the fact that he was almost frozen solid. 'Miss Mermaid, Miss Mermaid. I am Baby, Baby the sea urchin. I wish to meet you. I want to look beautiful like other animals, like Starry or like a beautiful fish with beautiful scales. I don't want to be a sea urchin anymore. Miss Mermaid...' Baby pleaded and pleaded for the mermaid to help him.

The mermaid never said a word but her magic must have been very strong because suddenly a storm came to them where they were under the sea. It was strange! A storm under the sea! Baby was swept away. When the storm calmed down and he shook the sand and mud off of himself, he saw that there was a big reflecting shell in front of him. He was a little afraid to look in the mirror because even though the storm was impressive he wondered whether the mermaid's magic had worked. What if she'd turned him into a mollusk by mistake?

But what could Baby do? He had to be brave! He had to look! When he finally stood in front of the mirror and opened his eyes, he could hardly recognise himself because he had changed into a fish with golden scales. He swung his tail and swam around the mirror three or four times. 'Wow... It's great to be a fish with golden scales. I look charming and elegant now.' Baby was delighted. 'Thank you, Miss Mermaid.' But Miss Mermaid was nowhere to be seen.

Baby swam away now and found that there was something very strange about this seventh sea. He could not see any other kinds of sea animals, but only sea urchins all round him. It must have been the Sea Urchin Sea. When the sea urchins met Baby, they swam away fast because they had never seen a fish with golden scales before.

Baby was sad that all these members of his family were ignoring him. 'Don't they know that I'm a sea urchin too?' But of course they didn't know. How could they? To them he looked just like a fish with golden scales. They couldn't know that he still felt like a sea urchin inside.

8 Still, all the fish had swum away and they weren't coming back. So now Baby had to face the fact that he wasn't a sea urchin anymore. Baby thought of his Pa and Ma and he just wanted to go home. He felt so lonely there in the seventh sea where none of his cousins would talk to him. He swam and he swam. He swam for a few days and a few days more. And a few days after that he came back to the tropical sea near Macao, the sea where his parents and he had always lived. When he caught sight of his parents again, Baby was overjoyed.

'Pa, Ma, I miss you.'

'Oh! Who are you? We don't know you. Why do you call us Pa and Ma?' Mrs Dark was surprised. She was very suspicious of strange fish, especially the ones who were brightly coloured.

'I'm sorry. You're not our son. Our son's name is Baby. He is a sea urchin, dark with sharp spines like us. But you... um... I'm sorry!' Mr Dark was in no mood to argue with a crazy fish, even if that fish did have beautiful golden scales.

'Pa, Ma, I am your son. I'm Baby Dark Sea Urchin,' Baby was almost crying now because he was worried that his parents wouldn't have him back.

'Do you know anything about our son? He's been missing for a few days.' Mrs Dark began weeping as soon as her husband had said these words. Mr Dark went on. 'Our son is special to us. He is a sea urchin, dark and with sharp spines like us. No flashy fish could ever replace him in our hearts.'

'But...but...but...' But what could Baby say. They would never believe that a fish with golden scales was really a sea urchin like them. 'I'm sorry to have troubled you.' Baby swam away. He was very depressed and started to cry, but now that he was a flashy fish, he couldn't even roll into a ball to comfort himself. He now realised that to be beautiful was not the most important thing in the deep blue sea.

He was very lonely because he had no Pa or Ma or Starry with him now. He cried and he cried and he

cried. And then, even though there was nobody there to hear, Baby said out loud to himself, 'I only wish I were the real Baby, Baby the Sea Urchin, I want to be Baby again. I'm a sea urchin! I'm not a fish with golden scales. I never was and I never can be.' For days and for nights he wept - and finally the sea was so full of his tears it overflowed and caused a flood. Then there was another big storm - so strange - just as there'd been when Baby had seen the mermaid. And this time like before Baby was swept away.

When he shook the sand and mud off of himself and opened his sleepy eyes to see, he found himself with Pa, Ma and Starry beside him.

'Oh! It's good you've got up at last. You slept for more than a week after you bumped into that rock, you careless little urchin!' But his mother gathered him and cuddled him, and her spines and his fitted together just so.

Baby was very happy to find that he was not a fish with golden scales, but a sea urchin, son of Mr and Mrs Dark, and a good friend of Starry the starfish.

Baby now realised that to be beautiful was not the most important thing in all the world's oceans. It was more important just to be himself. Now he knew that everyone was unique and that no sea creature could take another's place. Now he was the same sea urchin he'd been before, except Baby had changed, hadn't he? He'd changed inside. And maybe he needed a new name now.

A MAGIC BALL

with Karen Lam



Siu Fat was studying at a famous school in Macao. He was a chubby eight year old. People liked to play tricks on him because of his appearance. Siu Fat didn't get along with others. He felt that everybody treated him badly. Most of his classmates saw him as a laughingstock, except Siu Chong and Siu Ming, his two best friends. Siu Fat's teacher scolded him all the time without any good reason. His parents nagged at him day and night. Siu Fat was so fed up with their ceaseless 'lessons'.

The only thing Siu Fat liked was playing basketball. His parents seldom gave him any presents, but once they had given him a basketball. It was for his fifth birthday. He was fat back then too, and his parents had hoped the basketball would encourage him to become fitter. Siu Fat was so slow with the ball though that it was unlikely to make him any fitter or thinner. But the basketball had become his only companion. He would rather chat with the ball than with anybody else.

One day, Siu Fat came home from school and shut himself in the bedroom. His class teacher had scolded him again for not paying attention in class. The teacher had shouted, 'Siu Fat, can't you pay more attention in class. You've failed in many tests. I really don't want to see you being kicked out of school.' But Siu Fat had ignored her words.

Siu Fat bounced the ball up and down and complained furiously, 'Huh, that witch (he meant his teacher) scolded me again. It wasn't my fault. It's all because of those irritating classmates. Why did she scold me, but no one else? It's so... UNFAIR!' Now he stared intently at the ball, as if it were a human face, as if it could answer. Siu Fat said to the ball, 'I wish she would just disappear.'

The next day, when Siu Fat got to school there was no sign of that wicked witch of a teacher. Nobody knew where she was. She had simply disappeared. It wasn't just Siu Fat who was happy to not have to see that witch. All of his classmates felt the same. They were overjoyed until they discovered that a more cruel and even fatter woman had come to teach them.

'Oh, no! Another witch has come. Poor us. Our freedom's gone again. Why do we have to have these horrible teachers?' Siu Chong complained.

'What a hell this school is! One witch leaves but another takes her place.' Siu Fat kept on like this.

'Siu Fat, let's go to Siu Ming's home tomorrow. He's got a new computer game. Let's have fun and forget those witches.' That was what Siu Chong suggested and Siu Fat went along with the idea.

Though Siu Fat was excited that he could play a new computer game at Siu Ming's home, he was in bad mood the whole day. On the way home, he never lifted up his head. Instead of taking the most direct route, he wandered here and there on his way. He hadn't wanted to get there in a hurry but he soon found himself at his home.

As soon as Siu Fat stepped through the doorway, a woman with a huge body blocked his way, 'Lazy Worm, have you studied? Don't you know that you have already failed in many tests? If you keep on like this, you'll soon be kicked out of school and become a beggar on the street.'

Siu Fat slipped past his mother and slammed his bedroom door so hard it seemed the whole apartment block shook. He could still hear his mother calling after him, 'I'm only telling you this because I love you.' Siu Fat didn't believe that nonsense for a moment. He'd heard it all before.

Siu Fat was so angry that he had escaped from his mother without giving her a word. He talked with the ball again. 'My dear ball, you are my only friend. You're the only one who understands me. My teachers hate me. My mother doesn't care about me. She never understands how hard it is for me to study. I don't understand anything that the teachers teach me, even after I've spent a whole day to study. It's useless. I'll still fail in the tests. I wish I didn't have a mother to nag at me and scold me all the time.'

After Siu Fat had finished all his complaints, he came out of his room and looked around. There was

nobody there. Nobody around, nobody to tell him what to do. Siu Fat pondered, 'Magic, it's really magic. Each time I tell the ball who I wish away, the people disappear'.

The following day, when Siu Fat went to school, a group of students were waiting for him before the class began. Siu Fat hated them very much because they always jeered at him. And they hated Siu Fat just as much as he hated them. 'Stupid fatty, why do you come to school? It's no use for you to come here. You're so stupid that you'll never learn anything. You'd better go home and stay with your toys, HAHA...'

All day long, Siu Fat couldn't concentrate on his lessons, because their mean words were stuck in his head. Surely there was some kind of revenge he could take. After school, Siu Fat tried his magic ball again. This time he told the ball that his classmates had jeered at him and he wanted them to disappear. Sure enough, the next day, there was nobody in his class. Siu Fat was very happy. It was as if he was now the king of the world. Nobody would make a fool of him or scold him anymore. Siu Fat was gradually becoming addicted to the ball's magic. He used the magic basketball as a tool to make anyone he disliked vanish. One day, he told the ball, 'Everybody is bad, except me. I want all them to disappear. I'm the only good person in the world.'

The magic ball really made everyone disappear, everyone except Siu Fat. Siu Fat felt excited because now nobody would control him, and he could do whatever he wanted. He did not have to go to school from now on, because there was nobody teaching in the school. Siu Fat really enjoyed being alone and having so much time to do what he liked.

Siu Fat's happiness did not last long though. Early the next morning, Siu Fat woke up and switched on the TV, but there was no program at all. He went through all of the channels, nothing. Of course not, there was no one in the TV station. Siu Fat went out to find his friends, but of course there was nobody there. It was fun to walk through the empty streets. Siu Fat could go anywhere and do anything. But the city had stopped working. Nothing was moving at all. It was like a broken toy.

Thinking and walking had made Siu Fat hungry, so he went home to have lunch, but there was no one there to cook for him. The previous days he'd been hungry but he had made himself sick eating snacks. Right at this moment, though Siu Fat didn't know it, was when he became especially hungry every day. It was because at this time every day he could smell delicious noodles cooking in the flat next door. Though there was no one in that flat now, and so no one was cooking noodles, still his memory was strong, and so it was as if he could smell those noodles. The smell of the 'virtual' noodles was so strong it was driving him mad. Siu Fat sobbed, 'I really want a bowl of hot beef noodles, cooked by my mother. I miss the noodles, I miss my mother so much.'

Siu Fat went back to his room and saw his basketball on the floor. Seeing the basketball reminded him that it was he who had made everybody disappear, using the ball's magic.

'My dear ball, can you talk with me? I feel so lonely now. I don't like the new teacher. She looks so ugly and she doesn't care about me. My old teacher was much better than her. She cared. I miss Siu Chong and Siu Ming, too. I want to play the new computer game with them. They're so good to me and they're with me all the time. I'm so hungry. I just want a bowl of hot noodles. Can you bring me some noodles?' Siu Fat was sobbing in a corner, holding his basketball. He was unhappy and regretted having wished the human race away. He didn't want a world like this. How much he wanted the people to come back.

Siu Fat was sorry, so sorry. What could he do? He wished and he wished but nothing happened. There was nobody to talk to him. He really wished the basketball would speak to him. But the ball said nothing.

Eventually Siu Fat was so angry with the basketball, he wished it would disappear. And to his surprise, it did. How could that be? It wasn't even human? Or had it been? Now Siu Fat was truly alone in the world, with no one even to listen to him. He didn't even have a ball to play with. And he was still so hungry, so hungry... and he soon fell asleep.

@@@

The ringing of bells was deafening. Was this the end of the world? Siu Fat had never wondered how that would sound. But now he was there, facing the end alone... His eyes were still closed. What should he do?

Without thinking, Siu Fat reached over and did something he did every morning. He hit the alarm clock and it stopped. And then there was another noise, the door creaking. Then Siu Fat heard his mother's voice. She was saying what she always said. 'Get out of bed, you lazy boy.' Was he dreaming? Siu Fat pinched himself. He breathed deeply. He could smell congee from the kitchen. Siu Fat was overjoyed, tears ran down his cheeks. He gave his mother a big hug, she was taken aback with her son's enthusiasm.

Siu Fat had just put the last spoonful of congee in his mouth when Siu Chong and Siu Ming called him out to play football with them. He rushed to his room cheerfully, changed his clothes at once and dashed out to meet his friends.

The three of them were late as usual. Darting into the classroom, Siu Fat met his old teacher. She scolded him as usual, 'Hey, why are you boys running? Don't you know that it's very dangerous to rush like that...'. The teacher was surprised at how patient and attentive Siu Fat was while she scolded him. The other boys had already run off. Siu Fat was so pleased to see the teacher again, he couldn't help noticing her big caring eyes. She was so much less fat and less cruel than that other woman who had replaced her.

Back on the football pitch at lunch time, Siu Fat began to explain what had happened. He wanted to tell his friends about the basketball's magic. But every time Siu Fat began, he realised that there was no way he could get them to believe what had happened. Did it matter though? How could it matter if he'd wished that evil ball away, as long as his world was perfect again?

ENOUGH HAIR

with Hilda Tam



There was once a man called Mo who had only one strand of hair on his head. He was often laughed at by the people in town. Even so, he loved his one hair very much. He took great care of his only hair. He washed his hair every day and gave himself an oil treatment for his hair three times a week. Since Mo had to do the oil treatment so frequently, he always kept a box of the special oil at home.

One day, when Mo had washed his hair and was about to give it the oil treatment, he found that the bottle he'd been using was empty. So as you can guess he went to get a new one from the box. When he opened the lid of the new bottle of oil treatment, a fairy squeezed out from the lid and floated in the air.

The little fairy had long dark hair. She bowed to Mo and said, 'I'm a fairy from Fairyland. May I have your hair?' At first he couldn't believe what he'd heard but then when he saw that this fairy was serious, Mo grabbed a towel and wrapped his head with it to protect his coveted hair. 'No way! I have only one! I love my hair.'

'Oh, I love your hair, too.' The fairy pointed to her head and continued, 'See my beautiful dark hair? This is actually a wig. I use people's hair to make wigs. People's hair gives me power. Since you have taken so much care of your only hair, it has great power. I beg you to give it to me.'

Mo shook his head nervously and said, 'No! I've got only one hair. What would my friends say if they saw me bald? No!'

The fairy grinned, 'I can grant you a wish to compensate your loss. Just tell me what you want.'

Having been mocked by the people around him since he was born, Mo saw this wish as a chance to get back his face and his confidence. He made up his mind and said, 'I wish I could have everyone's hair!'

'Anyone's hair?'

'I said everyone's hair!'

'Anyone who's anyone?'

'Everyone!'

'So you want a whole lot of nobodies' hair?'

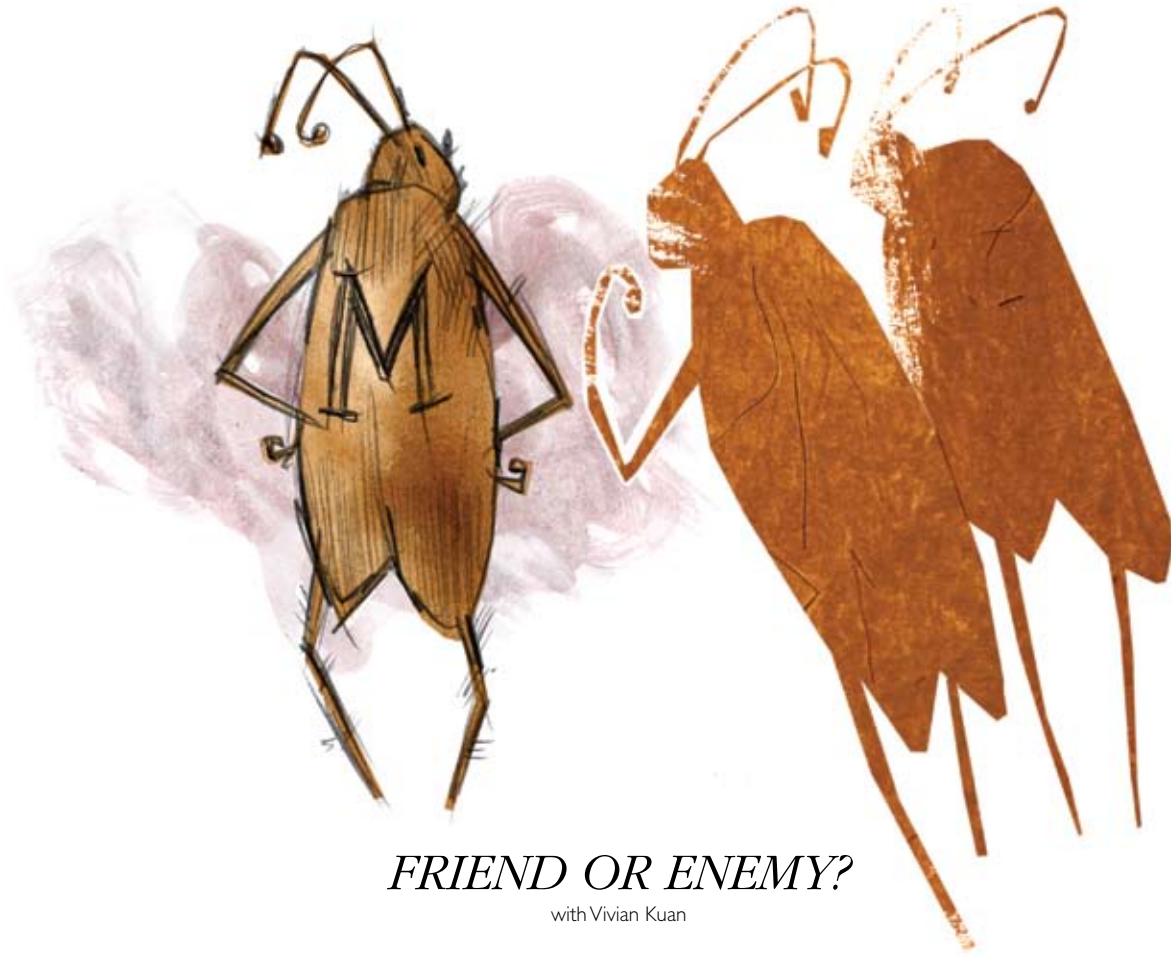
'Alright, alright, any old hair.'

'Done,' said the fairy. 'So I'll have your hair.' She flew onto Mo's head and – ouch!!! – she pulled out the single hair. She smiled, waved her wand and disappeared. Mo felt his head was a bit itchy. Within a minute, glossy hair – and lots of it – started to grow out of his bare head. He rushed to the mirror and looked at his now bushy head. 'Bravo! Bravo!' Mo cried.

Next, Mo wanted to show others this miracle, his miracle. He went straight out to the street. Everyone in the town now was bald. Of course they were. Mo had all their hair. Mo could not help laughing. But he soon stopped when he found that people had gathered around him and they all looked surprised. A child shouted, 'Look at him! He's got hair on his head! He looks so funny!' It seemed as if none of these people could remember ever having had hair. That must've been part of the spell.

Seeing Mo, the crowd burst into laughter. It was too late for Mo to realise that in other people's eyes, he still looked strange and amusing. Even when the laughter stopped the crowd couldn't help tittering, just taking a sidelong glance at this fur ball. The only difference from before was that people were bald now and Mo was the only man who had serious hair on his head.

Mo rushed back home and tried to shave off all his unsightly hair. But as soon as the hair was shaved, new hair grew out. Well, this was the wish he had made and nothing could be changed. From now on he had everyone's hair. However he tried to shave it or burn it or beat it back, new hair grew out of his head. And faster and faster the harder he tried. He would still be laughed at by others no matter what he did. There was nothing for it but to buy more bottles of oil treatment and to take great care of his countless hair.



FRIEND OR ENEMY?

with Vivian Kuan

Two cockroaches were gossiping while they were eating rice from a lunchbox.

'Have you read the *Cockroach Daily News* today?' F621 asked.

'No, I haven't. What happened?' M629 responded.

'Fifty corpses discovered in the rubbish bin yesterday! It's on the front page.'

'It's not surprising, is it? Fifteen is quite normal.'

'No, it's *fifty*! Not fifteen!'

'What? Well, that's a serious matter.'

'The story says the victims had penetrated into human domestic space and that was how they got killed.'

'They deserve their fate. You know, I always say, humans are dangerous. It's one thing to eke out an existence from their garbage but to go where they live? No cockroach can survive in close quarters with those monsters. You'd better stay in our Rubbish Kingdom, you know, that's our place. That's the moral of the story. You know, I'm really worried about M944. He has been risking his life...' M629 went on with his mouth so full that F621 had trouble making out what he was saying.

While M629 was still chewing on his last mouthful, Ah Ming was passing through the boarder gate from the human world and into Rubbish Kingdom Headquarters. Ah Ming saw F621 and M629 written on the back of the two cockroaches talking, so he walked over to his friends and greeted them. Only cockroaches could see these special numbers.

'Hey, buddies, I'm back!' he smiled at them.

'Hi, M944!' M629 and F621 chorused.

'Friends, I have told you a thousand times. I have a name. Don't call me by my identification number.'

Ah Ming put on a proud expression as he corrected them.

'Come on, it's weird to call you "Ah Ming" when everybody here is named by numbers.' M629 was annoyed.

'Well, it's really weird to me if you call me M944. I am used to "Ah Ming" and I like my name. Anyway, what are you guys talking about?' Ah Ming asked.

'We are talking about how bad the humans are. And this news is especially important for you. Fifty dead! Fifty! You know, you stay with the humans all the time. It's too dangerous over there.' M629 spoke with great passion and sincerity.

The world at that time was dominated by our Cockroach Kingdom and of course there was the human world as well. We were where the rubbish was. The rubbish station was our headquarters. All of us believed that humans were our enemies because humans had been killing millions of our kind. Not a day went by without the cockroach papers reporting at least twenty cockroaches deaths from the human terror. Although we could reproduce in great numbers and more and cockroaches were born all the time, still it was scary to hear about the deaths happening every day. There was however one male cockroach (number M944) who also had a human name - 'Ah Ming' refused to hear his friends' advice. He liked to be with humans, and he treated them as friends.

'Don't worry, I am very safe on the other side. Mr Lou has been my best human friend ever since I was born in his kitchen. He is very kind to me, and I am sure that he would never hurt me.' Ah Ming was delighted whenever he talked about Mr Lou. But his friends were suspicious. They did not believe what he said about the human world.

'Come on, trust me. Let me show you. Come with me to Mr Lou's house. Now!' So it was Ah Ming took them to his human friend's place.

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Ah Ming spent most of his time with a human called Fishball Lou, who was a fishball seller. When M629, F621 and Ah Ming arrived at Mr Lou's ground floor house, Mr Lou was pulling down the door gate. He had a very sad face. The three cockroaches saw the gate coming down and rushed and rushed and just barely made it into Mr Lou's house.

Every day, Mr Lou would pull the fishball cart outside his house into the street in order to begin his business. On this particular day, Mr Lou did not notice the three cockroaches because he was busy cleaning his cart. This was very unusual for Mr Lou. While Mr Lou was cleaning, Ah Ming was showing M629 and F621 around the house.

'So messy! I love it! Just like the Rubbish Kingdom.' Ah Ming asked his friends. 'Don't you feel at home already?'

'Exactly the same,' replied F621, and really she was quite surprised.

'Not really the same. It's even messier than our Kingdom!' M629 added.

'I love this place, it's a paradise,' Ah Ming praised his home.

'Absolutely. A beautiful paradise!' his friends shouted in amazement.

'Look! I usually sleep on that pile of trash over there. It's huge and comfortable.' What Ah Ming was pointing out to them was actually the dirtiest corner of Mr Lou's dirty house.

'What's this?' M629 picked up a soft yellow ball of something that had to be food.

'Fishball. Food. That's my favourite. You know, Mr Lou's business is selling fishballs. Everyday he will place the fishball cart in front of his house. Many human kids like eating fishballs, because fishballs really taste good especially when they are dressed with curry sauce. Yummy! Do you want to eat some? I usually hide under the plate on the cart and come out to taste the curry sauce when the customers aren't watching.'

'I prefer the fishballs to the sauce, but they are so hot and we can't get them from the cart. Still I really want to have some.' F621 was getting hungrier and hungrier as the conversation went on.

'Fishballs. That's easy. Can you see there are two containers and a large plastic bag over near the television? Those are cold,' Ah Ming pointed with one of his front legs.

Ah Ming's friends followed him over to the bag of cold fishballs by the television. Ah Ming told them that inside the bag were thousands of uncooked fishballs. He also told them that the already-cooked curry fishballs were stored in the containers. The three of them climbed up to the lid of one of the containers and looked down. Inside the container was a deep pool of yellow liquid, and there were lots of yellow balls floating on it.

'I can't swim,' said F621.

'Neither can I. I am scared of water,' M629 chimed in.

'Let me do it. I was trained to be a good swimmer ever since I was young. Watch me carefully. I will jump into the pool, make a u-turn at the bottom and then come up as hard and as fast as I can. My aim will be to head the first ball I can out of the water for you to catch.'

'Catch?!'

'Don't tell me you can't swim and you can't catch either? You must try your best.'

F621 and M629 felt a little shy but they agreed to try their best. Before they could blink Ah Ming was diving into the pool – just like a dolphin in Ocean Park – and within seconds a fishball was flying at them like a canon ball. Neither had a chance of catching it but they watched where it went and quickly leaped after it. They wondered why Ah Ming hadn't caught up with them yet but they didn't wonder for long because before they could reach that first fish ball other 'canon balls' came flying at them. Ah Ming kept up his trick until his friends begged him to stop. By that time he'd already 'fired' five fishballs in their direction: enough to feed a family for a week!

Now the cockroaches were able to taste the curry fishballs. It was a party and the three friends enjoyed themselves with what they all now decided was their favourite food.

'You're right, M944,' M629 said, but it was hard to make out what he was saying because his mouth was so full at the time. 'Fishballs are good, spicy and soft. By the way, it's strange that you are the only cockroach in this human's house. Why didn't the others come and live here?' M629 looked curiously at Ah Ming.

'Well, there are quite a lot living here, but they always hide themselves. They don't care about Mr Lou, and he doesn't care about them either. I am his only friend. You see,' Ah Ming turned his back to show them, 'he has put a mark on my back.' Ah Ming's friends looked hard but they could not see the mark. 'But we can't see it,' they said.

Ah Ming turned his head and realised that he couldn't see what the others couldn't see. He did a little

dance round in a circle in order to look at his back. But it was hopeless. He was about to give up when he saw his reflection in a mirror. Still, in the mirror he could only see his head and his antennae, he couldn't see his back. In the mirror though he could see the television set reflected and on the television screen he did have a view of himself from the back. And now he realized the reason neither he nor either of his friends could see the mark he wanted to see. 'Oh, what a shame!' Ah Ming cried, 'My whole body is covered with curry sauce from the diving. That's why you guys can't see the mark.' Ah Ming tried to shake and to dance off the sauce. They looked at him strangely, now they knew what they had always suspected: Ah Ming was completely mad. But it was true also that now his friends could see, but just barely, a blurred letter "M" was painted in white on Ah Ming's back. 'Mr Lou wrote that letter on my back because he really loves me and doesn't want to get me confused with any other cockroach.' Ah Ming looked very proud as he spoke.

'Where is the human's family?' F621 continued their conversation. She didn't know what to think of this idea that a human could love a cockroach. It just seemed... ridiculous to her.

Ah Ming explained Lou's story. 'He told me that his wife had gone away and his son, Ah Ming, had died when he was five years old. Mr Lou feels lonely. That's why he named me 'Ah Ming' – because he misses his son very much. I always cheer him up when he looks sad. Like this!' Ah Ming turned himself around so his back was on the floor and he moved his legs very fast, then he turned over again and turned back again. He repeated this mad action several times. His friends couldn't help but laugh. Then Ah Ming stopped and continued, 'Then Mr Lou will be happy and award me a fishball, or at least half of one.' M629 had a puzzled expression on his face. 'Ah Ming, you never told us about your family, do you live with them?'

'I don't know them. I have never seen them since I was born. I was brought up here, in Mr Lou's flat. Until I met you, M629, near the trash bin at the end of this street, until you asked my ID number... well, I didn't know I needed a number. I didn't know that I had to register myself in the Rubbish Kingdom. I got registered and I got my number but I still like living here. Mr Lou is a good man. I want to stay with him for... all my life. He's my family.' And now Ah Ming was choking back the tears, he was so emotional. M629 thought this was very funny, F621 was trying not to laugh.

The three cockroaches did not pay any attention to Mr Lou, who was at the other end of the tiny flat, washing his cart much more carefully than usual, and doing something very odd indeed: he was throwing away hot fishballs, the ones he'd normally be selling to customers. In fact Mr Lou shouldn't have been home at this time at all, he should have been out selling. Now, he was sweeping the floor, again very carefully. Ah Ming was surprised that Mr Lou was cleaning his house. Mr Lou had never done this much before. Ah Ming looked at the clean cart and the clean floor and he felt very uncomfortable.

Ah Ming was still puzzling over Mr Lou's strange behaviour when a female cockroach, who had hidden herself behind a cupboard for a long time, came to join them. Ah Ming did not recognise her, but he could see from her face that she looked very frightened.

'Ah Ming!! Why... are... you... still... here?' she panted.

'Why not? It's my home. Why shouldn't I be here? But what's happening? What's making Mr Lou do the cleaning?' Ah Ming was confused.

'He... he... he...,' she was still panting.

'Speak faster!' he requested.

'He... he... wants... to... kill... kill ... AHHH...' she screamed and ran away. Ah Ming thought she was crazy.

Ah Ming watched her running away. What a strange day it was! Then he saw a big slipper coming down from above. There was a tremendous banging sound and the slipper was hitting her hard. Ah Ming rushed to help her but she was already gone, murdered. What was happening? Ah Ming couldn't remember who

she was but he couldn't bear to see her killed. The sight made him feel ill. Ah Ming didn't have too much time to think about the situation though because now from the other end of the room he could here - bang, bang - that slipper coming down again and again. And Ah Ming saw who was wielding the slipper. It was Mr Lou!

Ah Ming was now totally lost. None of this made sense. How could his friend and protector be killing his kind? 'What's going on?' he asked, 'Can anybody tell me?' His friends only stepped backward to get out of the way. They were afraid that they would be killed as well. Each had selected some item of rubbish under which to hide.

But it was too late to escape. Mr Lou was now clearing the trash that Ah Ming used to sleep on and play with. Mr Lou was sweeping the rubbish into a large black plastic bag.

'Run!' Ah Ming shouted as loud as he could. The three of them ran now, out from under their hiding places. They ran across the moving rubbish.

'Watch out! The broom!' The three of them narrowly escaped and they kept on running. Ah Ming was in the lead. Now Mr Lou could see three cockroaches tearing away. He put aside the broom and quickly removed a slipper, ready to hit them.

The three cockroaches knew from his looming shadow that Mr Lou was chasing after them. Ah Ming's cockroach friends were so afraid that they kept on calling for help. Ah Ming still did not believe what was happening but he knew he must run. 'Hold on! There's a hole, can you see?' He saw a hole on the wall in front of them. 'Let's run into it and we'll be saved!' He encouraged his friends to run faster. But just at the last moment, Ah Ming shouted, 'Oh, my God! Stop! Stop! STOP!'

Bomm... But since the three cockroaches were running so fast, they failed to stop and they crashed into the wall. They'd seen the hole and they'd run towards it but they hadn't been looking while they were running. That was why they'd now crashed into the lemon tea paper box Mr Lou had used to block the crack in the wall which had been in front of them before.

So now the cockroaches had no way to escape. Ah Ming shouted 'Move! Run through his legs!' He was thinking on his many feet.

'Move!' they all shouted together and started running at the same time. Mr Lou saw what they were doing. He raised his slipper to hit one of them. It was F621. She was sacrificed to the eternal struggle between humans and cockroaches. Ah Ming saw that now. It was as if something had snapped inside him.

'No!!!' shouted M629. He looked back and hesitated a little.

Ah Ming shouted back at him, 'Don't stop! Keep running! We have no time. Otherwise, we'll be killed as well'. M629 didn't want to leave F621, even though she was gone. They weren't just friends! M629 turned and he ran back towards F621's corpse.

'No! Go back! Don't be so stupid! There's nothing... ' Ah Ming shouted, but it was already too late.

'Ahhrrrrghh!' M629 was also hit by Mr Lou's slipper. He lay beside F621, and he held her foremost leg tightly. A last twitch of his antennae, he was gone.

Ah Ming was now alone facing Mr Lou. He was so exhausted that he had to slow down. Ah Ming really wished his old friend would recognise him from his mark, but he knew that it was blurred from the sauce. His cockroach friends could only see the mark when they came very near to him. Ah Ming could not run anymore, he had used up his energy. What could he do to make Mr Lou remember him? All Ah Ming could think at this point was that Mr Lou was temporarily insane but that if he could make him remember who he was then everything might be back to normal. Now Ah Ming knew what to do and knowing gave him strength. He had to show Mr Lou some happy memory from their past together.

What great times they'd had when Ah Ming had jumped in and out of the fish ball container! So now

Ah Ming was climbing up to the fishball container again, just to remind Mr Lou. Mr Lou had stopped trying to hit him. There was a strange look of concentration on the man's face. Ah Ming was glad that Mr Lou had remembered him. Now any sensible cockroach would have seen that Mr Lou didn't care about Ah Ming. Mr Lou was only afraid that he would spill his precious curry sauce on the floor. Mr Lou waited till the cockroach was inside the box. He put the lid on the box, he carried the container out and then, taking the lid off again, he emptied its contents into the bin at the end of the street. Even Ah Ming - blinded as he was by his 'friendship' with this human - could see what was happening now. The dream had vanished. Ah Ming was being - had been - thrown away.

But why had Mr Lou done what he'd done? Ah Ming couldn't answer this question but actually it was easy to understand why Mr Lou did all the things he did. It was because some humans felt sick after eating Mr Lou's fishballs. One day, two unfamiliar humans had come, dressed in uniforms, and talked to Mr Lou. After showing their work I.D.s to him, they requested to inspect Mr Lou's business environment: where he prepared food, how he cleaned up and so on. After the inspection, Mr Lou's fishball seller's license was cancelled.

Mr Lou had to throw away all the contaminated fishballs. That was the reason why Ah Ming was thrown away as well. Mr Lou's fishball license was cancelled but Mr Lou had not given up the idea of running his own business. That was why he was cleaning his working and living place, and that was why he was killing every cockroach he could. Mr Lou hoped to get a new license. Mr Lou had lost one son, Ah Ming, and now he had disowned another: the cockroach he'd named after his own flesh and blood.

Poor Ah Ming! How could he have understood the change of heart his human friend had undergone? Ah Ming was lying inside the rubbish bin. His heart had never felt such pain. To make things worse, it was raining heavily. The big drops of rain fell down on his exhausted body. Each was like a deluge sent to drown him but the flood he faced was nothing compared with the pain of the swords that were tearing him inside, in his heart and in his mind.

Ah Ming cried louder and louder but neither humans nor cockroaches heard his cry. Ah Ming felt hopeless now. He had been cheated by his one human friend and his cockroach companions were dead. He did not want to live anymore. When more and more rubbish was thrown into the bin, Ah Ming made no effort to escape but just lay there hoping the end would come. Soon the world became darker and darker and soon he fainted away.

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It was already early afternoon. The sun was shining brightly in the sky and a shaft of sunlight penetrated all the rubbish that was lying on top of Ah Ming. That shaft of sun shone straight onto his jet black head. Ah Ming opened one eye and then another. He had survived and he was a new cockroach now. It was close contact with the essence of rubbish that had brought Ah Ming to recognize his mission on earth. Rubbish, you must understand, is what purifies and sanctifies we cockroaches.

In his new frame of mind, Ah Ming knew what his wings were for. Ah Ming realized that he too was a powerful creature. It was desire for vengeance that gave him power. Ah Ming was to be a cockroach avenger!

Ah Ming meditated briefly on his friends' death and on Mr Lou's betrayal. That human could not be allowed to go so easily. It was only now that Ah Ming understood the universal law: man is man and roach is roach and never the twain shall meet.

Ah Ming raised one of his arms towards heaven and swore aloud, 'To all the rubbish that ever was, to every rotting stinking fishball a human every threw out, I now swear. That filthy old man who has betrayed

me is my enemy! I will fight him until I die.'Then - in the very formal cockroach language no human could ever understand - he shouted to his adversary, 'You Fishball Lou, I assure you that you will suffer. You deserve this. Your sufferings must match your crimes!'

Ah Ming was much more confident and much more powerful than before. He flew from the bin straight to the home of his former friend. Before he could enter the humble home, he noticed a big yellow card stuck on Lou's cart. On it was written 'Lou Gei Zha Mut'. Mr Lou's new business was selling deep fried food. Ah Ming heard a little boy ordering, 'Excuse me, I want three chicken wings and one bag of French fries, please.' A voice from far inside called loudly, 'Wait a minute, please.' And Mr Lou came out from the back of his house.

'We meet again, buddy.' The cockroach flew straight at the man's head. 'Ouch!' Mr Lou was packing the food for the boy. He could not see the flying creature but he felt a sudden blow to his forehead. Now Mr Lou was alert and looking around.

Ah Ming landed on the cart. Man and roach were staring at each other. Their war began. The cockroach flew in among the deep fried food and moved his wings rapidly, 'Virus attack!' he shouted. Immediately, Mr Lou raised the frying utensil which was to his right. He was confident of hitting his target.

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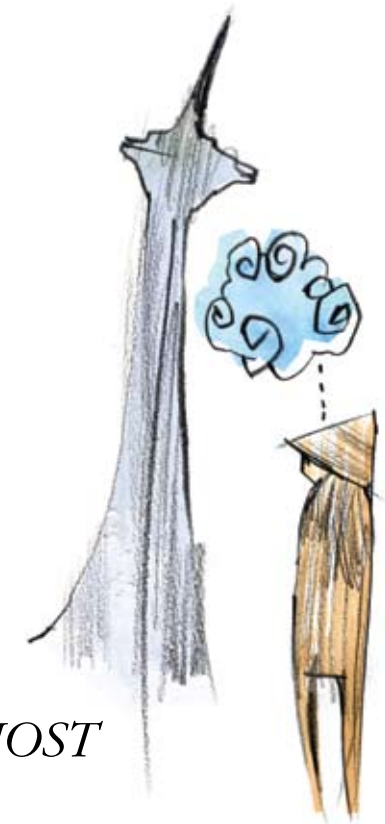
But immediately there were many much louder noises. Ah Ming quickly jumped to the ground, out of the way, while all of Mr Lou's food trays - French fries, fried fishballs and fried eggplants - came tumbling down to the ground.

'Oh, my food!' the miserable human cried out. Then Mr Lou bent down to pick up what was left of his livelihood. It was only at that moment, he noticed the cockroach was still alive and was flying towards him again. Mr Lou grabbed the newspaper that he had been reading and began waving it in front of him to defend himself. Ah Ming then flew around him. Mr Lou was still waving his newspaper as he chased Ah Ming round in circles.

Lou felt dizzy after turning round and round for a while. His vision was blurry now and all he could see of Ah Ming was a fuzzy dot moving in the air and that fuzzy dot was now landing on his tray. Oil, ketchup, soy sauce, vinegar, mustard: everything was on that tray! If that cockroach put one foot in any of those sauces there would be cockroach germs everywhere. Lou couldn't afford his new snack selling license to be cancelled again like his previous fishball business. He would not let history repeat itself!

Although Ah Ming was merely a fuzzy dot in Mr Lou's blurry eyes, in the snack seller's mind there was nothing but the cockroach. Ah Ming, on the other hand, was waiting on the tray to trap the man. Lou hit the tray and those sauces and he thought at first that he had hit the cockroach as well. The oil fell. The soy sauce toppled over. The vinegar spilled, the mustard oozed down over the edge. All the while Lou was trying to save something from his tray, anything. In the end he not only failed to save a drop of sauce but he lost his own balance in his effort to juggle all those falling items. The last thing he grabbed at was the ketchup squeezer. It must all have taken less than three seconds, but there was Lou, face down in the oil and soy and vinegar and with ketchup all over his back. He appeared to his customers now as the bloody vanquished gladiator. What the customers might not so easily have noticed was the victorious Ah Ming standing proudly on top of Lou's head - his armour unscathed - as if triumphing in the arena over some wild beast of vast proportions.

That was the end of that particular battle but the fight has kept on to this day. You should know that Ah Ming and Mr Lou have remained till now under the same roof together, although their roles are far different now from what they were in the days of their friendship. Their hatred will never be diminished and the war between them will never end.



HUNGRY GHOST

with Alice Chan

In a remote village on the mainland, there lived a foolish man called A Ming. The villagers loved to play tricks and make fun of his stupid character. One day when he was walking in the town, a sudden strong wind blew a small dirty piece of paper near to him on the ground. He picked up the paper and read:

Congratulations! You have won a one day tour around Macao. It's FREE! Bring along this piece of paper and contact us (Fortune Road, No.8, Zhubai) before 14th October 2005. For more details, reach us at 0086-756-3974-223.

A Ming found it strange. He wondered how he could be so lucky. He had never been lucky before, but maybe now his luck had changed? He ran to the only telephone box in his village and dialed the numbers. A lady answered the phone and congratulated A Ming. Everything was true.

A Ming was excited. He had never left his village before and now he would be visiting Macao - a place he had long wanted to visit because of the famous story of how a poor boy became the richest man in town, all through luck, through gambling. Although there was still a week to go before his tour, he already had everything packed as if he was about to leave.

A week had gone and the day had finally come. A Ming became one of those 'free walkers' on the streets in Macao. He did a lot of sightseeing, everything was so new to him. But what surprised him most was

the generosity of the Macao people. There were people on the streets offering him different sort of things for free; packs of tissue paper, pens, paper fans, rubber bracelets, key chains and more. A Ming thought the people in Macao must all be rich. He walked many miles and he was tired and hungry by the time he reached the Macao Tower. In front of the tower he saw an amazing scene. Hundreds of food stalls had been set up in the square opposite the tower and thousands of people were eating. A Ming was curious about this. He went to the entrance and read the banner. 'Macao Food Festival 2006' was all he could read before he was pushed into the crowd.

People from some of the stalls offered A Ming food and drinks. This made him think how nice the people in Macao were, especially compared with those in his village. A Ming really found the whole place wonderful. He did not want to leave. He made up his mind to be an illegal immigrant (an I.I.) in Macao.

From that day onwards, A Ming went to the 'Food Festival' every day. He had all his meals free there. But one day he came and found nothing. A Ming was confused. He waited in the square and he thought maybe it was only a holiday. He left and returned the next day. Again there was no food, there were no people. For four days, A Ming fasted, always hoping the free food would be back the next day. Finally he fainted in front of the tower.

A Ming was taken to the hospital. For the first few days, he was so weak that he could not even talk. No one knew anything about him yet they took good care of him. He was given good food and a comfortable bed to sleep on. A Ming was touched by the kindness of these people and truly believed that people in Macao were angels. He stayed in the hospital for more than a week. His strength was soon recovered and the doctor announced that he could leave.

For most patients, being allowed to leave the hospital should be good news. But not for A Ming. How could he even think of leaving such a comfortable place? The truth was revealed only when he had to give his personal information in order to check out of the hospital. His identity as an I.I. was discovered. A Ming was arrested at once. The police made an arrangement to send him back to the mainland within a month. During this waiting period, he would be put in gaol.

Once again, A Ming couldn't believe his luck. And he couldn't believe how kind Macao people were. He was again given free meals each day. It was the best punishment he could have hoped for. Although he was in gaol, he thought there was nothing better than free air conditioning in summer and having three free meals every day.

But A Ming was wrong. Life was not as easy in gaol as he had thought at first. Because of his foolish character, he soon fell into the clutches of the bullies in the gaol. They taunted him and called him names. A Ming suffered a lot from their jibes and violence. Eventually he became moody and uncommunicative. He had no more appetite for the free meals now. He isolated himself from the other prisoners. He spent his time thinking about his past and the poor village he loved and regretting his foolish dream of getting a free lunch forever.

One day when he was alone, he saw the prison guard burning some incense for Guan Di, the god of bravery. Even though he'd been taught at school that gods and incense were silly superstitions, he knew that incense was the food of the dead. Thinking of this, an idea popped into his mind. A Ming thought how wonderful it would be to have endless food in this form. All he had to do was to die and then he would leave all his troubles behind.

A Ming slashed his wrists without giving things another thought. He died slowly and painfully but he had a big smile on his face because he was thinking of all the free rice that lay ahead of him.

What A Ming had forgotten was that incense and Hell money has to come from somewhere and that, as he had no family or friends, A Ming had a very hungry eternity ahead.



TEMPLE OF DREAMS COME TRUE

with Fanny Mok, Sueie Lam and Tammy Wong

Today was Sunday. Ming Fong was watching DVD at home as her regular holiday activity. To a thirty-eight-year-old woman like her, the best activity on Sundays would be to take children to the park and have fun, go shopping with her husband or go out for dinner with her family. But, these things only could appear in Ming Fong's dreams as she was still single. She was eager to have her family before she was forty.

'Why can every one find their true love and get married except me?' Ming Fong muttered as she was watching the happy ending of 'Fifty First Dates'.

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Bring bring....Bring bring...

'Wa...i? (Hello)' Ming Fong received the phone call.

'Ming Fong, it's Ah Mei. My daughter and my husband are out today, so we can play Mah-jong at my home. I know that you're always free, right? Come to my home at 3 p.m., okay?' Ah Mei was very excited and she just hung up the phone without waiting to hear Ming Fong's answer.

Ah Mei had known Ming Fong since secondary school. She and the other two in the Mah-jong circle, Ling Ling and Sum Yut were Ming Fong's best friends and they always played Mah-jong together at every opportunity. Ming Fong didn't want to meet them today because she knew they would only talk about their children and husbands all the time.

As soon as Ming Fong heard Ah Mei's voice she decided she would rather stay home than hang out with them. That was the answer Ah Mei hadn't heard. Ming Fong knew she hadn't heard, so now she had the choice of ringing back to say she wasn't coming or waiting for Ah Mei's call to ask what had happened to her. Or she could just go. This was the easiest thing to do, Ming Fong decided. Since they were *san quip yia* (three lack one) and Ming Fong really had nothing to do, she decided to play Mah-jong with them. She thought that perhaps she could win money this time because she was *ching chuen sug yi, dou chuen dak yi*, unlucky in love but lucky in gambling.

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They had just started playing when Ah Mei asked, 'have you heard the Ma Ma Temple is going to be

repaired next month?’

‘Yes, and they say the repairs will take about three years as the temple is damaged and old.’ Ling Ling mentioned this casually as she *da ganged* her *fa choi*, leaving her discarded tile in the middle of the table.

‘*Pong!*’ Ah Mei put down the three *fa chois* in the corner to her left. ‘I think many people will be sad about it because this temple really helps wishes come true.’

‘Especially in money and marriage.’ Sum Yut looked at Ming Fong with a devilish smile. ‘Ming Fong, it’s better for you to visit there. Maybe you can find your *chi loy dei chun tin*, your late spring. Ha! Ha! Ha!’

Ming Fong wanted to ask more about the temple but she gave up this idea after hearing what Sum Yut said. Although she was interested, she thought that if she asked them about the temple, they would laugh at her and she would lose face.

‘I’m not eager to get married. I enjoy my single life and I don’t want any man to disturb my world. And, I’m not superstitious like you three. I only believe in myself.’ Ming Fong’s voice was full of confidence but in the depths of her heart, she was begging the gods not to leave her bed empty.

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The next day, Ming Fong was reading the *Macao Daily* over breakfast. She was very shocked and jealous to read a piece about an old lady who’d won ten million US dollars and had three men propose to her at once.

‘Oh my God! What an unfair world! She’s so lucky. She can get a lot of money and also a husband at the same time.’ Ming Fong’s eyes were full of envy.

For the whole of that morning, she could not get the story out of her head. She was grumbling over why she was so unlucky, having neither money nor a husband. That was when she decided she had to go to the temple. She remembered that Sum Yut had said Ma Ma could make wishes come true, so Ming Fong determined to change her destiny.

‘I must win my first bucket of gold and my husband,’ she promised herself in her heart.

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The next day, Ming Fong got up at 9 a.m. She bought a chicken in ‘Fat Choi Siu Mei’, a barbecue shop.

‘Forty dollars,’ the shopkeeper said.

‘Forty dollars? I bought one last week, it was only thirty-five.’ Ming Fong gave the shopkeeper a sharp look.

‘Thirty-five dollars? It’s impossible!’

‘Thirty-eight dollars, thirty-eight dollars, thirty-eight dollars are enough for such a small chicken.’ Ming Fong was taking out her purse.

‘Ha... okay, okay.’

Ming Fong left with a victorious smile on her face, and, with a thirty-eight dollar chicken. Then she took the No. 10 bus to the Ma Ma Temple.

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Ming Fong put the chicken on the altar carefully and knelt in front of Ma Ma.

‘Ma Ma, can you see? I’ve brought you a big chicken. I heard that you are very kind. You can help people fulfill their wishes, right?’ Ming Fong looked around and made sure that there was nobody around her.

‘Ma Ma, I am going to Gold this afternoon,’ Ming Fong was not sure whether Ma Ma knew Gold or not,

so she explained it. ‘Gold is one of the casinos in Macao. You know, casino is for...’ but then Ming Fong decided it was too difficult to explain to a god what a casino was, so she continued making her wish. ‘Could you please help me to win money? Please! I promise, if you help me, I will bring more delicious food for you next time!’

Ma Ma was impressed by Ming Fong’s fervent prayer, and she thought the chicken from ‘Fat Choi Siu Mei’ was very tasty, so she decided to make this worshiper’s dream come true. That afternoon, Ming Fong won three thousand dollars from the Gold casino.

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The next day, Ming Fong got up at 8 a.m. She bought a suckling pig at ‘Fat Choi Siu Mei’.

‘A Suckling Pig, please!’

‘Oh! It’s you again! There are three prices, one hundred and eighty-eight, two hundred and eighty-eight and three hundred and eighty-eight. Which one do you want?’

‘Easy question! One hundred and eighty-eight.’

Ming Fong put the money in the shopkeeper’s hand.

‘Wai, *Si Lai*, Auntie!’ The shopkeeper was very angry. ‘You’ve only given one hundred and seventy!’

‘It’s enough for such a small pig.’

Ming Fong left with a victorious smile on her face and with a one hundred and seventy dollar suckling pig. Then she took the No. 10 bus to the Ma Ma Temple.

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Ming Fong put the suckling pig on the altar carefully and knelt in front of Ma Ma. Ma Ma was happy to see Ming Fong again.

‘Ma Ma, you see? I’ve brought you a big suckling pig. I’ve won three thousand yesterday. You are so kind! Ma Ma! I’m not a greedy woman but I just want to win more.’ Ming Fong looked around and made sure that there was nobody around her.

‘Ma Ma, I am going to Gold this afternoon, could you please help me to win ten thousand this time? Please! I promise, if you help me, I will bring more delicious offerings to you! Also, from ‘Fat Choi’, the most famous barbecue shop in Macao.’

After enjoying Ming Fong’s suckling pig, Ma Ma was eager to try everything else ‘Fat Choi Siu Mei’ had to offer, so she decided to make Ming Fong’s dream come true. That afternoon, Ming Fong won ten thousand dollars from Gold.

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The next day, Ming Fong got up at 7 a.m. She knew that she had to spend money to make money, so she bought a cow at the Red Market.

‘This cow costs two thousand dollars. No bargaining. If you don’t want to buy, get out of my store.’ The shopkeeper was very scary this time and he held the chopper menacingly while he was talking.

‘Two... thousand... dollars. Okay, I want one. Give me now, I’m in a hurry.’ Ming Fong wanted to leave at once.

Then she wanted to take a taxi but the cow was too big to fit inside and no driver would pick her up.

Ming Fong only could pull the cow along on a rope behind her as she walked along the street. She pulled and pulled and every one in the street was surprised to see this crazy woman. It was quite a sight to see a cow coming along San Ma Lo. Pedestrians stopped and stared but Ming Fong didn't care. Motorists were very annoyed and wouldn't stop honking their horns. Still Ming Fong and the cow trudged wearily on and it took them nearly an hour to reach the Ma Ma Temple. Ming Fong was exhausted when she arrived and the beast moo-ed plaintively because there hadn't been a blade of grass along the way.

'Finally, I... get... here...' Ming Fong couldn't breathe easily.

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Before going to see Ma Ma, as well as other offerings she donated one thousand patacas for the temple's repair. Then she tied the cow up to the altar carefully and knelt in front of the Ma Ma Statue. Ma Ma could not help laughing when she saw Ming Fong again.

'Ma Ma, you see? I've brought you a cow and other *zang yeh* – delicious animals – as well! I'm not a greedy woman, so I won't want more. I just want...' Ming Fong looked around and made sure nobody was listening.

'Ma Ma, there's a jackpot of about ten million patacas today in Gold's super slot machine. I'm going to Gold this afternoon, so could you please help me to win the jackpot? Please! I promise, if you help me this time, I'll bring 'Fat Choi Siu Mei' for you! The whole shop! You know, I've been single for a long time and I need a husband. If I win the jackpot, I can have a husband like that old lady in the newspaper and also the money. Ha! Ha! Ha! So, I'll *da bai ge dou mzai iao*. Even lame, I'd be happy.'

Ma Ma had no way to cook the cow, but she was sure it would be very delicious. So, she had no choice but to eat it raw. After enjoying Ming Fong's whole cow, Ma Ma felt obliged to help Ming Fong to fulfill her dream. Such a sincere believer! Ma Ma had to make her dream come true. That afternoon, Ming Fong won ten million patacas from Gold's slot machine.

But, something miserable happened to her that day.

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Ming Fong was on her way home with the cheque for ten-million patacas. She was still very excited and could not stop laughing. Near Wui Lick Hin, she noticed a man was following her. 'Ah, money really makes me more attractive! He must be attracted by my beauty! Oh, I should seize the chance of my late spring,' Ming Fong thought proudly. She slowed down to let the man catch up with her.

Past New Yaohan, Ming Fong entered an alley and she sensed that the man had almost caught up with her. She was thinking what she should say to him. But before she could think of anything, the man patted Ming Fong on her shoulder. She turned to him with a charming smile.

'*Bie dong!* Don't move! *Da jie*, give me your money!' The man was holding a steel stick. Ming Fong was very frightened, but she did not dare to scream.

'What do you want? You've got the wrong woman! I have no money.' Her voice was trembling with fear.

'What? You have no money? I followed you after you won the jackpot. You can't fool me! Hand over all your rings and jewelry and also your cheque!' The man shouted threateningly and pointed his knife at Ming Fong.

'Ah... Don't kill me! I'll give you everything. Don't kill me!' Ming Fong gave the man her handbag.

The man rifled through her handbag but could not find anything of value apart from two fifty-dollar notes. The man was really furious after finding nothing in her handbag. '*San ba*, damn woman! You only

have one hundred in your bag! I have more. No diamond ring, no gold watch, no necklace? Where's your money? Where's your cheque for ten million?'

'I've already told you that I have no money. I didn't take the cheque from the casino. I left it in a safe at the casino because I knew one hundred was enough to get me home.' Ming Fong said all this in a low voice.

Ming Fong's words made the man crazy. He was so angry that he threw her handbag on the ground and hit her with the steel stick and left. Ming Fong was hurt seriously by the blows she suffered. She fainted and fell hard, injuring herself further.

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When Ming Fong came to, she found herself in *San Den* Hospital. The first thing she did was to look for her ten million dollar cheque. The funny thing was that though she remembered the money straight away, she couldn't immediately remember where she'd put it. It wasn't in her handbag or her pocket. Finally, she found the cheque under her left shoe-pad. 'Ah, lucky, I put the cheque in a safe place, otherwise, I would have lost it all! I'm really lucky!' she said to herself. 'I must thank Ma Ma after I leave the hospital!'

It was only when Ming Fong tried to get out of bed she was shocked to discover she could not lift her leg. She tried and tried but it just wouldn't move by itself. Ming Fong was in a great panic, worrying what had happened to her, but after a while, she calmed herself down and then she remembered that she had said *da bai gir dou um sai iao* to Ma Ma, that even lame she'd be happy. Now, she was lame.

Ming Fong knew that she was suffering now because of her silly offer to the goddess. She regretted that she had accidentally cursed herself. On the other hand, Ming Fong told herself not to worry about her leg any more because she knew if she went to see the goddess, Ma Ma could cure her leg. So, she didn't give up hope. She decided to go the Ma Ma Temple as soon as she left the hospital.

What Ming Fong did not know was that, at that very moment, Ma Ma was suffering medical problems too. The goddess was in heaven's hospital and her condition was worse than Ming Fong's. Ma Ma was in the Tian Wu Hospital's Intensive Care Unit because she had eaten the whole cow raw and the cow had mad cow disease. Ma Ma's medical condition was very serious.

A week later, Ming Fong left the hospital and went back to the Ma Ma Temple. She was shocked to see the temple under repair and to see a sign which said 'No Admittance'. She cried out loud, 'Ma Ma, where're you? I'm crippled now, how can you leave me? What can I do?'

Just then, two middle-aged women appeared and they told Ming Fong that there was a miracle doctor in China and he could cure all diseases. Ming Fong thought that this might be the last chance for her, so she decided she would believe what they said and gave all her money to them. But they were swindlers and this was the way they trapped their victims.

In the end, Ming Fong had no money, no husband and she would have to use a walking stick from now on. She knew that if she really believed in herself, she wouldn't have ended up like this. Still, she didn't give up and she believed that even if Ma Ma couldn't help her any more, another god or goddess would. So, she visited all the temples and churches in the world and asked different deities to give her a generous husband. Ming Fong never did find a husband but she became a well known visitor of temples and churches. She was so helpful to the gods and goddesses that when she died, they voted to give Ming Fong Ma Ma's old job. So Ming Fong became a goddess.

And as for Ma Ma? You probably want to know what happened to her. Although she had been quite generous in her time as a goddess, she also made many mistakes and so she was reincarnated as a cow. The last time she was seen she was still looking for husband, just as her best devotee, Ming Fong, had always been.

THE FLYING FAIRY CASINO

for Winnie Piu and Petuna Chang and friends



Once there was a naughty fairy who lived in a casino. She ate chips for her dinner every night. She ate chips for breakfast and for lunch too. Chips were the only thing she ate. Not the kind of chips you or I would snack on. Fifi ate casino chips. Fifi was the fairy's name. She was naughty because... well because fairies are. There wasn't anything special about this one in particular. Fifi was just average for a fairy where naughtiness was concerned. She lived in the casino because there were plenty of chips there and chips were what Fifi liked to eat.

What happened in the casino when Fifi was eating? Well, first of all, you should know that Fifi was almost completely invisible to almost everyone almost all of the time. Why almost? Well, sometimes someone got a glimpse. Whenever they did, that person would be seriously worried that he or she - but it was almost always a he - was losing his marbles, which is to say, mind. Which Fifi didn't. I mean to say Fifi didn't mind if winners or losers or drunks or punks or casino staff or anyone saw her. Fifi didn't care if they noticed her or not. Fifi simply didn't notice if or when they noticed her. She wasn't eating all those chips to impress or depress anyone. She wasn't eating those chips because she was greedy for money. Fifi didn't know what money was. She didn't know how serious and important that kind of paper and plastic was. She didn't know how wonderful it was to win it, how tragic it was to lose money. Fifi ate the chips just because she was hungry.

Now what happened when Fifi ate her chips was quite simple, quite obvious. They were gone. You'll realise right away how serious this was. Fifi couldn't know it but something that was equivalent to anything you could want in the world because that something was equal to money just wasn't anymore. I'm sorry if that last sentence was complicated in a silly way. That's just how money is. The point is - in case you missed it - the chips Fifi ate just disappeared. They were there and then they weren't. Where were they? Nobody knew. It was all very worrying whenever it happened to anyone but to tell the truth the casino itself wasn't so worried because - although it couldn't be explained - the disappearance of chips was something - is something - that happens in every casino. Now you and I know the reason it happens is simple - it's because every casino has at least one fairy and fairies like to eat chips. But no respectable serious suited adult in the world could ever admit to such a thing. 'Fairies?!' they'd say, and then they'd add something like 'huh' and then they'd sneer sardonically, as if to say that they knew all about everything, which of course they didn't.

People think they know all about fairies but how many people have met one, seen one, had a conversation with one? That's the problem with people. They're so busy thinking they know they never bother to take the time to find out.

Now here's how it was when Fifi was snacking and you should know that Fifi was snacking all of the time. The chips might disappear from the gaming table, they might disappear out of a gambler's pocket, they could disappear before the very eyes of a cashier. That cashier would feel quite queer and have a lot of trouble later on with the books, which as you know, are not 'books' at all but something which lives inside a computer, along with everything else that's important these days.

Can you picture the nervous expression on the face of the cashier? And on the face of her supervisor? And his boss's face? And the face of her manager? All the way up. Missing chips! Disaster! Heads would roll! People would have to make excuses for something so important gone missing. In fact though, you should know heads rarely rolled. And there were some simple reasons for that. First of all, missing chips were not always bad for the house. If the chips went missing when they were in the hands of the gamblers, the gamblers got very angry but the casino didn't have to pay them a thing. They would stamp around huffily, saying 'but I had two two hundred dollar chips in my hand and they simply vanished.'

The casino staff were very experienced with this kind of thing. They'd just say, 'There, there. We know

you did. Of course you did. It could happen to anyone. Happens all the time.'The gambler would go away shaking his head but after a few days he'd calm down and come back. Gamblers, you know, are wonderful that way. They have such terribly short memories.

The second reason missing chips weren't always noticed, and so heads needn't always roll, was that there were often extra chips which made up for them. That was because some gamblers were cheats and they took chips home to copy to make their own. It was easier than counterfeiting money and if the cheats were clever they could make money that way.

So you see it was only rarely that Mr Lo Ban – for that was the big boss's name – found himself shaking at the knees and knocking on the owner's door to tell him the terrible news, the news about the missing chips.

Now the casino in our story – which had recently been renamed the 'World Religion Casino' – was owned by a man everyone called Mr Christmas. Everyone called him Mr Christmas because he was very agreeable and he was always saying '*Hiya, biya, biya*' and '*Hoa, boa, boa*,' which you might know are very agreeable things to say in Cantonese. They sound like the sort of thing Santa Claus would say if he spoke Cantonese, which of course he does. 'Mr Christmas' fitted this casino owner nicely too because he was always giving people things. He had plenty of money so he could afford to.

Mr Christmas had so much money it wasn't funny. In fact when you stepped through the door into his office you almost always tripped over on the money that was just left lying around there. Only then did you notice how warm it was in there when the rest of the casino was air conditioned to Arctic temperatures. Mr Christmas left money lying around because he thought it was a sign of wealth. Everyone who walked through his door thought it was too. Everyone was most impressed. There were so many different kinds of money in the world: coins and notes and bonds and certificates, credit cards and cash... all different colours and though mainly the same shape, money did come in a few different sizes. Mr Christmas had to show everyone that he had every kind of money you could have. To tell you the truth though it was the gold bars in the doorway that tripped most people up.

World Religion? Mr Christmas had decided to rename his casino because he thought gambling should be the world's new religion. He thought it was better than every religion that had ever been before. After all, gambling was all about money and money was something everyone believed in. With money you could do anything, buy anything, go anywhere, be anyone. Gambling was what made winners and winning was like all your Christmases come at once. Mr Christmas had a big smile on his face just from thinking such thoughts.

So you see, between the short memory of gamblers and the gamblers who thought they were crazy, between the counterfeiter and Mr Christmas, it really didn't matter if a few chips went missing here or there. That was simply the way things were. Whenever the terrible thing called a 'discrepancy' was noticed, someone would think of something to make it all right and because there were so many chips and there was so much money and there so many gamblers coming through the doors to give all their money away every day – well, it didn't really matter if Fifi kept snacking.

It didn't matter to the casino. Fifi wouldn't send the casino broke. And it didn't matter to Fifi. It didn't matter how much Fifi ate, she simply couldn't get fat. And this was how things had always been, for as long as anyone could remember. Just the same as at every other casino.

Or that was how things *bad* always been... That was how things were until Fifi developed an appetite. And what an appetite it was!

Fifi couldn't work it out. Fairies are always hungry and Fifi had always been hungry by fairy standards but now she was simply ravenous. All the time. The casino management had begun to notice that things

were a little out of the ordinary when they found themselves regularly counting far fewer chips in the morning than when they'd gone to bed. At first all the managers had been quite concerned but in a few days they realised that no one was cashing the missing chips, so money wasn't being lost. The missing chips simply weren't there. The problem was that there were less and less chips in circulation. So the casino thought of a simple solution. Make more chips. They were cheap as... to make after all. So who cared if they needed more?

Making more chips soaked up the extra 'demand' for maybe a week but after that it seemed that no matter how many new chips were made, they would all have disappeared by the end of the day.

Every day now, by the end of the day, Fifi would have eaten all the chips, no matter how many there were. And Fifi would still be hungry. And when she got hungry – too hungry – Fifi got angry. And when she got angry? Well, have you ever met an angry fairy? They can be quite scary. The other thing was that Fifi was getting fat.

Now before we go on there's a little more you should know about Mr Christmas. Yes, he'd renamed his casino the World Religion Casino because he thought gambling was the best religion ever. But the question was why (?). The answer was that Mr Christmas had a guilty secret. Very simple and very terrible. It troubled him for many years until he found what some people call a 'guru'. Now a guru is a very special kind of creature, much more like a gnu than a kangaroo. A guru knows how to agree with you so that you think that you're agreeing with him. Yes, a guru is almost always a him. And you have to be very rich to have your own guru. Oh, poor people can borrow somebody else's, put a picture of him on the wall, but it's rich people who keep gurus in business. Now a guru always has a mantra or two, the best have a few. Mr Christmas' gurus' best mantra was this: 'Flaunt it!'

Mr Christmas' guru had told the billionaire just what he had to do to fix his guilty secret for good. The cure was very expensive but it was very effective. Mr Christmas had had to have an operation and after that – well after that – he'd been so much nicer to everyone.

The operation was to regain his innocence so that he could see things a child ought to see. Note 'ought to': because often children don't get to see the world they ought to see. Often there are two many of what adults call 'grim realities' bearing down on children, which is why they sometimes have to work in fireworks factories which ought to be schools and which do blow up from time to time, killing everyone in them, which schools in fact rarely do, no matter how bad you think they are.

But back to Mr Christmas. He'd had what they call the 'fable and fairytale chip' implanted in his head, he'd had the rose tinted glasses permanently fixed over his eyes, and after 'the operation' it didn't matter what anyone said or did, Mr Christmas would give them a present. Every time. No matter what. Without fail. Mr Christmas, as you know, could easily afford to do this. It was like he was just a little bit drunk all the time but without having to drink anything.

So Mr Christmas' guilty secret was fixed forever now. Usually when a knee trembling manager would knock on Mr Christmas' door to tell him about some missing chips, Mr Christmas would just say 'Hoa hoa hoa' and 'hiya, hiya, hiya' and give the poor fellow some gold coins or fancily printed stock certificates and send him on his way, without even listening to hear what the problem was. The manager would go away feeling that he had a guilty secret which he'd meant to, but hadn't been able to, share.

But that reminds me. I don't believe I've told you what Mr Christmas' guilty secret was in the first place, the one of which he'd now been cured. I'd just told you that it was simple and terrible. Mr Christmas' guilty secret was that he had stolen the first dollar he'd ever had. He still had it too. It was above his desk, framed in a glass case, with a legend beneath labelling it 'personal demon'. It was there like that because that was what Mr Christmas' personal guru had told him he ought to do. It was up on the wall because Mr Christmas

was trying to flaunt it. This didn't work though because, being the most worthless thing in the whole vast palace of a room, nobody visiting paid it any attention. They were all too interested in the gold bars and the platinum bars and the diamond studded just about everything.

Still, Mr Christmas had his rose tinted specs and he was quite convinced he was flaunting his guilty secret and so everything should be okay. Mr Christmas was now a deeply satisfied man. It had taken him a long time to find his personal guru and for many years as Mr Christmas had got richer and richer he'd wondered what he could do to make up for his guilty secret. The richer he got the harder it seemed for him to do anything about it. He didn't just have one dollar to give back. He had a fortune which was bigger and bigger every year. Mr Christmas never worried – as some people might have – that he was stealing money day and night from every gambler who lost in his casino. That idea never troubled him at all. What tormented him was only ever that first dollar. You see Mr Christmas had always been very interested in debt and interest and everything to do with counting money. That was how he'd begun to get rich in the first place before he'd ever had his casino. He had leant money out at high interest to people who were desperate to borrow money to gamble in someone else's casino. He'd made so much money that way he'd woken up one morning to find that he had his own. So what was his debt now really? Was it just the first dollar he rightfully owed, or that dollar adjusted for inflation or with compound interest or was it the whole of the huge fortune he'd amassed all through the years? That was what had worried Mr Christmas before he'd found his guru.

Now you might think it unusual that Mr Christmas should be so concerned about stealing a lousy little dollar so long ago when nowadays he fleeced people day and night. But the fact was he'd stolen that dollar from a particularly terrible and shameful place. He'd stolen it out of a beggar's cup on San Ma Lo. The worst thing for Mr Christmas was that that beggar was still there on San Ma Lo. Mr Christmas felt guilty every time he passed him and then even guiltier hoping the man would just die and be gone forever. But the man never did die and by Mr Christmas' calculation he now had to be several hundred years old, which as you know, is a little unusual for a beggar.

In the old days, before he'd found his guru, Mr Christmas had tried everything to get rid of that beggar. He'd have the police move him on but the beggar would always be back on the same corner, just like a ghost, tapping his stick and rattling the few coins he had. At one time Mr Christmas had spread a rumour about the beggar, saying that he was really the richest man in Macao. But no one believed this, in fact the rumour backfired. Everyone was asking why it was the richest man in Macao was spreading a rumour about a beggar.

But that was all in the grim past and now that Mr Christmas had his guru, everything was rosy. Or it was until today.

Today, there were a lot of nervous people in Mr Christmas' casino. They were nervous because, although Mr Christmas didn't yet know it, there wasn't a chip in his place. Mr Lo Ban was nervous, knock kneed, sinking into the velvety plush of the deep pile carpeted corridor, about to knock on Mr Christmas' door. And every manager and cashier and croupier down the line was nervous as well. The gamblers themselves were nervous as hell. They'd come here to give their money away and now there was a hitch. No chips.

'Come in.'

'Sir.'

'Ah, Lo Ban. Have a box of cigars. And here's one for the wife. She smokes doesn't she?'

'Thank you, but sir.'

'Beautiful day in here, don't you think?'

'Yes but sir.'

'Oh all right, alright. Business then, if you must. What is it?'

'It's serious sir.'

'Yes, well?'

'There are no chips.'

'Nonsense, just make some more. Print them or mint them, whatever you do.'

'We have, but...'

'Well, do some more. We can't have too many you know.'

'I know but sir, it just doesn't work anymore. They disappear as fast as we make them, even before they come out of the machine that makes them.'

'Disappear? Hmmm.'

And Mr Christmas hmmmmed at this point for quite a long time. Had you been there you'd have been surprised just how long he'd hmmmmed. You wouldn't have thought it possible. The thing was that Mr Christmas was looking for an angle. All his life he'd managed to find money where other people had lost it. Why should today be different? Ideas like 'world's first chip free casino' flashed through his mind. But Mr Christmas failed to see how there could be money in that. What if they used potato chips or corn chips? Perhaps pretzels? The plastic pretzel, he could invent it. Inventing was something Mr Christmas had always fancied he could do.

'Lo Ban, Lo Ban,' at last Christmas spoke. 'I need time to think this through. You do what you think is the best thing to do.'

'But sir!'

'No buts and no butterings up, Lo Ban, you heard me, now go out and do what a big boss should do.'

'Yes, sir.' And in an instant Mr Lo Ban was outside in the deep plush carpet, in the corridors of power, bossing people about, but without a clue of what he was about or of what would be the right thing to do. You can guess I suppose how this silly bossiness was passed right down the line, everyone quite clueless, but each telling someone else what to do. The new 'policy' filtered down the line to the tables where the desperate gamblers were writing the croupiers piles of IOUs.

What was to be done was what Lo Ban wondered. He did the obvious thing first. He called the police. Something was missing so had to be stolen so the police should surely be able to help. They came – uniformed, plain clothed – their aim was to watch closely and see who was stealing the chips. The police tried conscientiously but they just couldn't stay awake. When they went they left behind a huge pile of IOUs which everyone knew they'd never pay. It was like all their Christmases. But the loan sharks outside the casino grew hungrier and hungrier. As everyone knows, Christmas can't last.

So Mr Lo Ban called in one *Do Si* after another. There was a queue of priests going through the casino. The Catholic ones were black as beetles and the Buddhist monk came in his karma pyjamas, a special outfit designed to protect him from massive attacks of desire. As you can imagine, at this point some of the staff were looking really worried. After all, here they were working in the 'World Religion Casino' and instead of chips on the tables, there were worthless IOUs. The house honoured its but things didn't seem to work the other way around. Now, to top it all off, there were salesmen from every religion thick on the floor where the suckers should have been. In the 'New Testament Room' they were daily expecting the arrival of a messiah.

Ah, but you've already guessed, none of the multitude of soothsayers and physiognomists, none of the pack of Tarot hacks and hoodoo gurus could find a single missing chip. The thing was none of them could see Fifi.

Fifi? Well, I'd better bring you up to date on her story now. You see, well it's difficult to explain, a little

indelicate. But the reason Fifi had got so hungry was quite straightforward. Fifi had been pregnant. She'd been pregnant since almost the beginning of the story. Now this is the kind of thing that happens to a female fairy every so often. We don't have time for the details here but the long and the short of it is that Fifi had got hungrier and hungrier and bigger and bigger and... Fifi *had been* pregnant but she wasn't anymore. It was when Fifi had had her fairy litter that all the chips had disappeared, demand had outstripped supply as it were. Chips couldn't be minted fast enough to keep up with the hungry fairy babes. And now chips weren't being made at all, because what would have been the point? The result was, though none of the priestly tribe could see it, there were a lot of hungry spirits in Mr Christmas' casino, and being hungry all the time was not something a fairy would appreciate any more than you would. These fairies would not have called this Christmas.

Right now it was hard to say whether Fifi was hungrier or angrier. She was angry because all the multitude of little Fifis floating through the casino were empty of tum and complaining to mum. She was hungry because she hadn't seen a chip for days.

Fifi was on the warpath and where do you think such a path should lead a fairy on the loose? Up through the corridors of power Fifi went, demanding satisfaction, for the first time in her life addressing all the casino staff whom she'd never before paid the slightest attention to, and who of course could not see her at all. Fifi had never bothered trying to communicate with humans. What would have been the point of that? Now she was desperate to get her message across.

None of the officials or holy men could see Fifi or her multitudinous brood. The funny thing was that Mr Christmas could. Of course he could, he'd had the operation. He wore the rose tint specs. Only he didn't know this quite yet. Mr Christmas *could* see Fifi in the sense that he was able to. He hadn't yet had the opportunity though.

36 That was because Fifi had never been in Mr Christmas' office and Mr Christmas didn't come out very often. He didn't come out very often because it was too cold in the casino. Mr Christmas' office was twenty seven degrees Celsius every day of the year and every night too because that was the temperature Mr Christmas liked. His office door was always closed not just because he was so very important – which of course everyone knew that he was. It was also closed to keep the cold out. That was why Fifi had never been in there till now. But today things were different. There were so few customers Mr Lo Ban had ordered the air conditioning switched off as cost cutting measure. Mr Christmas had opened his door because he thought it was a little unusual there wasn't any cold air coming in under it. And then he'd taken a look out in the corridor. And then he'd seen Fifi! She was very thin and wraith like – as fairies generally are – and she was flying hither and thither like a Fury.

Fifi flashed past Mr Christmas and Mr Christmas scratched his chin and then his head in wonder, and then he scratched his chin again, because he'd made it itchy by scratching it before. Mr Christmas had actually seen a fairy – a real-life fairy – not on the screen, not in a picture book, but in the corridor outside of his office. This was the first actual proof Mr Christmas had had that that guru of his was anything other than useless. If he'd thought about it he'd had have realised that it wasn't the guru but the doctor who'd given him the 'fable and fairytale chip' who was responsible for what he had seen just now. But Mr Christmas didn't have time for that train of thought because – quick as lightning – Fifi had returned to the scene of recognition.

You see Fifi had flashed past so fast at first it hadn't registered with her. That look in Mr Christmas' eye. And then there was the ... well it's not exactly *smell*, it's the fairy equivalent. Chips! Old and stale but chips still. That look! This was the first human she'd passed who'd actually noticed her. And now Fifi was back, she was in Mr Christmas' office, she was hovering in her most menacing manner. She was distinctly unimpressed

with the gold and the paper money and the bonds and stocks and share certificates. She sneered at the lot. These things meant nothing to her. Still there was something in the way of dinner in here and Fifi was very very hungry. Gingerly, Mr Christmas closed the door behind them, but not before half a dozen or more of Fifi's children had crowded glimmering into the room.

'So you're a fairy then?'

'What's it to you?'

'Well it is *my* casino.'

'Oh, *your* casino. Big shot, huh? Let the children starve?'

'Sorry?' Mr Christmas wasn't apologising, he just hadn't quite caught what Fifi had said. Or rather he had, but he couldn't really understand. But it was too late. Already this last accusation was meaning for Mr Christmas because he could hear – well, was that really the right word? – he could sense something he could only describe as the whimpering of hungry youngsters. It was pitiful. The heart he'd never much before considered was breaking or so he thought. 'They're...?'

'They're my children. They're hungry.'

'I'm very sorry to hear that.' There, he'd said that word again. 'If there's anything I could do...'

But a glass frame on the wall was smashed and the first of the new generation of chips which had been so proudly displayed in it were gone. There'd been just a glimmer of tiny wings and then the chips were down. The youngsters would be hungry again in minutes. Mr Christmas had witnessed it all.

'The chips! The chips! You eat them?'

'Well, what else would we eat? We're fairies.'

'Yes, of course. I'm so...'. And Mr Christmas caught himself just in time before he said the word 'sorry' a third time because as you know that's a terrible word for a big important man to say. That word spells weakness and once weakness is spelt the whole world might fall apart.

'Don't you know we need chips to survive? If this is *your* casino then you ought to do something about it. Or else...'

'Or else?' Mr Christmas wasn't meaning to dare Fifi, he just couldn't help wondering. It was then he asked a very silly question. 'Why *my* casino?'

Now Fifi might not have known very much, she mightn't have been what you'd call worldly wise, but nor was she slow on the uptake. The interview was at an end. Nor did Fifi try to fly back through the closed door, the way she'd come. No. There'd been a sickening pause for a moment after Mr Christmas had said '*my* casino'. It was then Fifi saw another thing she'd never noticed before: an open window. In all her years at the World Religion Casino and at whatever it had been called before that, Fifi had never once seen an open window, a window to the outside world. In fact she'd not known there was such a place. But now she was out in it, she was flying down the street and she was pursued by hundreds of little wings, each pair moving at a miraculous speed and all with one purpose driven. Fifi and brood were in quest of another casino, anywhere else chips might be found.

This sent Mr Christmas into a panic. That was because he knew that the other casinos would know where the fairies had come from. Everyone knew about the problems with World Religion so there'd be no need to guess where the plague had originated. And the thing was that the owners of some of the other casinos would not take very kindly to the kind of invasion they were about to host. That was why Mr Christmas had himself flown down the stairs and out the front door of World Religion and onto the street. This caused much less fuss than you might have imagined because very few of the casino staff had ever met Mr Christmas. Mr Lo Ban wasn't there to help. He was busy laying workers off. There was no point asking for a car or a driver to follow the fairies. Mr Christmas was the only one who could see them. There

was nothing for it but to follow on foot. At least Mr Christmas had one advantage over Fifi and Co. He knew where every casino in Macao was, they had no idea.

The glimmer of a thousand wings was still in Christmas' view when he hit the pavement outside. They were heading for the Inner Harbour, or so it seemed. Down Gou Si Duk as far as the Red Market and then they turned north towards the border. Mr Christmas pursued them like a madman. He was exhausted but relieved they were going where there weren't any casinos. And then they doubled back, climbed Guia Hill, which was more exercise than Mr Christmas had had this many a year.

Really he needn't have been so worried. When the fairies finally passed the Hotel Lisboa they had no idea there was a casino in there. The fact is fairies have no trouble sniffing out a chip when they're in the same room, but when it's a matter of nosing dinner through concrete walls, well that's a different story. With so much air pollution in Macao these fairies had no chance. The only reason Mr Christmas had been able to keep up with them at all was because they had so much trouble crossing the road. They simply had no idea how it was done and as you can easily imagine, very few cars were prepared to stop for them.

Finally though, the big man did lose sight of them and that was on San Ma Lo. He rushed along and then he paused to gaze into the distance and rushed along and paused, but they were out of sight. And so resignedly Mr Christmas walked on until he came to a familiar corner and there he saw, ageless as ever, the beggar from whom - so many years ago - he had stolen his first dollar. You know that Mr Christmas had already said sorry twice this day and almost a third time when he'd almost meant it. Now something came over him. It must have been all the excitement of his world turned upside down. It must have been the feeling that fate had finally caught up with him. Mr Christmas felt in his pocket for a pataca. He placed it in the cup and he said the fateful word. Mr Christmas said 'sorry' and he really truly meant it. And then something even more extraordinary. Mr Christmas said 'thanks for the loan.'

38

And even though it hadn't been a loan and even though the debt he owed might not have really been repaid, that 'sorry' and that 'thank you' set all sorts of magic in train. There was a golden glow around that beggar, who really didn't seem to know what was happening either. People on the street took a step back away from the beggar and Christmas, they shielded their eyes. Some crossed themselves, some clutched at their pendants. There was Mr Christmas lifted up above the crowds and whisked away, to where? You'd never guess.

Or perhaps you did? Mr Christmas was spirited away to the North Pole. He was given a job shoveling snow outside Santa's workshop. After a hundred years of that he was promoted to the position of second assistant to the ti-er of the less decorative kind of bow. The cold was hard to bear to begin with but Mr Christmas is getting used to it. His 'hoa, hoa, hoa' comes in very handy. It's what everyone's always saying up there or more or less. Further promotions are in the pipeline. The best thing is that Mr Christmas - having said sorry and thank you - found the politeness quite catching. In no time at all he'd discovered sincerity and now, well now he mightn't have a single chip or even a single pataca. He doesn't have any bonds or stocks or share certificates, but he's grown a heart a gold.

You probably want to know what happened to Fifi and her brood. They found the other casinos in the end. In fact they found so many, they were able to occupy one each. There are so many casinos in Macao today. So far each of them has plenty to eat because the supply of chips hasn't yet outstripped their appetite. But half of these fairies are girls and as you know, with female fairies, it's only a matter of time.

Which just about brings us back to the beginning. Which is why it will always be true to say: Once there was a naughty fairy who lived in a casino. She ate chips for her dinner every night. She lived in the casino because there were plenty of chips there and chips were what she liked to eat.

THE BOY WHO WENT UNDER THE BORDER or *HELL AND BACK AGAIN*



39

Ming had been standing in the immigration queue for an eternity, or it seemed like an eternity to Ming. Ming was a little uncertain as to how long eternity was, but then who isn't? It is hard to imagine how long eternity might last. Isn't funny how we use such a word all the time for something we just can't imagine? Still everyone says it when they think things are taking too long and, at Ming's age, everything done with your parents seems to take too long.

Ming was in the queue with his mother. Ming thought his arm was going to fall off because of the heavy bag he was holding. It was all his mother's shopping. Well, not all of it. Most of his mother's shopping was in the trolley she was dragging. But some of it wouldn't fit and that was why they'd bought this extra bag, the bag Ming was carrying now. The worst thing was what was in the bag. It was full of paper offerings and money to burn for the ancestors. Ming thought all that stuff was a bit spooky, and even sillier than it was spooky. Ming's mum had seen these offering materials at the last minute in the mall under the border. Because they were cheaper than she could buy in Macao, she'd insisted on buying as much paper as they – or I should say, as Ming – could carry. Hell money – like everything else – was cheaper in China, and after all it was because things were cheaper they'd gone to Zhuhai in the first place.

All this standing in queues waiting and waiting, seemed so stupid to Ming.

'Mum, why do we have to queue up to go to Macao when we're in China and Macao's part of China and all of us are Chinese?'

Ming's mum wasn't answering this kind of question any more because Ming had been asking this kind of question all day and she was tired of it. In the morning she'd been saying things like 'it's complicated son,' and then when pressed, she'd said, 'If there wasn't a border then everyone from the Mainland would come and stay in Macao and then there wouldn't be any food or clothes or even air for us. And there wouldn't be any jobs.'

But Ming knew his mum was making all of this up. So ridiculous. 'But mum, all these people have homes, they don't all want to live in Macao... I'm sure they don't.'

'You're probably right dear...'

'The mainland is so much more modern. Everything's better in China, why do we have to go home?'

'No, dear, that's only Zhuhai, and it's only parts of Zhuhai that are so...hi-tech.'

'Most of China is primitive, dirty, dangerous...'

This had been Ming's mum's main theme for the whole of the day. In fact she'd started the night before, even before they'd set off. This had been the worst thing about the whole trip. Ming had to hear about how dangerous Gongbei and Zhuhai and Guangdong and the whole of the Mainland was. And now he'd started her off again.

'But mum...'

'No buts about it. Don't you know Gongbei is a dangerous place? There are pickpockets, pimps, prostitutes everywhere. You can't trust anyone. And if you get lost you're lost, who'll help you? Your family's not there. What could you do? I've got your passport. Without it...'

Ming couldn't stand this story his mother was telling. She'd told it to him last night at home. She'd told it to him this morning on the bus on the way to the border and now she was telling it again. It was just too much. Ming could see the queue ahead of them going on for what seemed forever. In fact Ming was annoyed at his mother for another reason as well. She'd flatly refused his very reasonable request to buy the latest Game Boy he'd seen – very reasonably priced too – in a shopwindow they'd passed by, just a small eternity ago. How crestfallen he'd felt when she wouldn't even let him go into the shop to ask about the greatest invention ever, the gadget that would make him good, even be good to his sister, for the sake of which he would promise to do unnatural amounts of housework and even homework, if that was really

necessary. No Game Boy, just a bag full of smoke for dead people, just this endless queue.

There was no way they'd get to the counter in the next hour and an hour at Ming's age was – if you can remember – an impossible amount of time to wait. Ming simply *bad to* get away. It wasn't just the nagging. The fact was he had to go to the toilet. And because it was only his mother who was with him and because she couldn't possibly take him into so dangerous a place as a men's toilet Ming knew in advance that she simply wouldn't let him go. And so there was no point asking.

That was why Ming decided to take the initiative. At home he was forever being told to be more grown up and to look after himself more and now – rushing back out through the border station's entrance doors, heavy bag in hand – that was exactly what Ming was doing: being grown up, responsible, looking after himself. Surely his mum wouldn't notice if he was gone just for a moment?

Where was the toilet? It was hard to remember but Ming headed straight back down into the underground mall they'd come from because he knew there was a toilet down there somewhere. He knew because he'd used it. It wasn't long before he found the place and soon was feeling much better.

Coming out of the toilet though, Ming found himself a little confused. He was in a Chinese restaurant. There must've been more than one way into the toilet. No point going back now, Ming thought. It smells much better out here. And so Ming thought to make his way back to his mother by first finding the entrance of the restaurant. The restaurant was huge and although it was late in the afternoon there were yum cha trolleys moving everywhere. People were laughing and talking and shouting and smoking and of course they were drinking tea. Ming was feeling a little hungry himself now even though it hadn't been long since lunch. There were simply so many good smells around. There were signs saying 'we take every kind of money' and that was when Ming remembered what was in the bag he was carrying. It was full of cash. But Ming had only just finished thinking that thought when he found himself coming out through the restaurant's main entrance into a part of the mall he thought he recognised. Yes, there was the shop that sold the Game Boy he wanted. Well, it couldn't hurt if he just went in and took a look and maybe even had a play and that man behind the counter looked so friendly and helpful and that queue they were in upstairs? It would simply be ages before his mother got anywhere in it. She'd still be making her speech, she wouldn't have even noticed he was gone, so it couldn't hurt to just ask a few questions, have a little try.

What a great machine it was! How could his mother have been so mean as to deprive him of the opportunity of even testing it out? But soon Ming was so absorbed he forgot all about his mean mother. After a couple of games the very helpful man behind the counter asked Ming, in the friendliest way he knew, if Ming intended to buy. It was then the boy – who was concentrating on a very delicate manoeuvre – pointed in an offhand way to the bag beside him as if to say that he could afford anything in the shop. The shopkeeper looked doubtful at this gesture and when Ming had finished the game the nice man finally asked to see the colour of his money. He looked at Ming as if he'd seen a ghost and then he composed himself again as if he saw ghosts everyday. It was then he gave Ming a knowing look and advised him that they had another shop where that money might be good.

'It says on your sign here, you take every kind of money. Just like in the restaurant.'

'Yes, yes, but... look, why don't you try our shop downstairs? They have quite similar stock and they might just be able to help you.'

Ming noticed how nervous the man looked, how he was sweating. He thought it was time to leave. It seemed as if this fellow who'd been so anxious to help before was now equally anxious to get Ming out of his shop. By now he'd forgotten all about the border upstairs and his mother in the queue. Ming was just thinking that that Game Boy was nearly his. The ancestors wouldn't miss a little cash. What did they have to spend it on anyway?

And so Ming followed the instructions the kind nervous man had given him. Down several very dark, empty, smelly flights of stairs he scurried. Rats were scurrying there too. But none of them got in Ming's way. It was as if they knew he was on a mission. Before long Ming found himself standing in front of a shop almost identical to the one he'd been in upstairs. Everything was much darker down here but the products in the window looked more or less the same as what he'd seen before. It wasn't long before Ming's eyes adjusted to the dim conditions.

The shopkeeper here was friendly enough although much slower than the man upstairs. It seemed to take him forever to say or to do anything. Finally though he asked if Ming intended to buy. Ming had been putting off this moment because he was worried he'd get the same treatment as he'd got before. The situation did look doubtful for a while. The shopkeeper asked if Ming had brought his passport. And when Ming had said no, he'd said that there was an office downstairs where things like this could be sorted out. Although really he shouldn't do business with anyone whose papers weren't in order, he could see that Ming was a very nice boy, and he was sure he wouldn't tell anybody, would he? Yes he was sure. Ming kept nodding to all of this and when he finally produced the money from his bags the man looked very pleased indeed. In fact he looked impressed. He took just a single note from Ming, one with a lot of zeroes, and he handed the boy the package, and more paper change than Ming could cram in his pockets.

'Closing up now,' the man said in a sly way, which Ming thought strange because the sign on the door had said '24-7'. But what of that? The boy had wanted the Game Boy and the item in question was now in his hot little hands. The shopkeeper had vanished. Ming was out in the corridor wrapt in his new toy, just getting the feel of it. Soon he'd be playing games on it, games he'd only dreamt of before.

But there were a few strange things going on, Ming would have noticed had he been paying attention. For some time it seemed the backlight in the machine he was holding was the brightest light in the place. Ming was moving the controls so adeptly to navigate the maze in which he found himself, he didn't even notice that backlighting was all around him now. He hadn't met any monsters or killer machines or anything like that yet but now the machine was asking him how he wanted to die. A challenge? Well, he was up to it. Ming was ready for anything.

It was only at this point Ming noticed that the gadget he was holding in his hand didn't say 'Game Boy' at all, it said 'Hell Boy'. When a new round came up, Ming saw the software copyright. It said © Yim Lou Wong, Year Dot. Ming knew that Yim Lou Wong was the King of Hell, so he thought that the copyright message was pretty funny, but a little creepy too at the same time. When Ming started scrolling through the various ways there were to die, the smile vanished from his face. A sign flashed before him, 'Delay no more! You must choose now!' The screen wasn't just in front of him. The sign was everywhere he looked, all around him, as if it were in him. When Ming finally realised that he was in the Hell Boy game itself, and that he really had to choose how to die, the colour drained from his cheeks altogether.

Every manner of death he saw seemed worse than the one he'd seen before. There was hanging and there was strangulation with a wire. There was poison, that was slow. There was death by fire. There was bitten to death by spiders, kicked half to death by the class bully then nagged to the grave by your father, there was falling out of - what a long list - aeroplanes, tall buildings, fast cars, trains... Although it was terrible and horrible and nasty and scary, Ming was a brave boy with the bloodthirsty imagination so common at his age and to tell you the truth the grisly details were beginning to get his interest. It had taken Ming a while to work it out but now he understood. The rules of the game were that you had to die to get to the next level. And getting to the next level meant facing a grislier fate than before.

The rules were the opposite of the ones Ming was used to. Instead of killing your enemy, you had to be killed in order to go up. And it wasn't just a matter of getting yourself killed in the same old boring way

time after time. No, you had to die in a better (that is, a more horrible) manner every time.

You see, Ming had been scared but his interest had overcome his fear, and as a result he'd forgotten that he was in the game and that as a result everything was really happening to him. It was quite a shock dying for the first time but once he was through that and had got to the higher plane, Ming at least had the satisfaction of knowing his parents would never again be able to nag him about life experience and how much more and better they knew everything than him. Ming picked himself up, dusted himself off, he was ready to die again. Bring it on, Ming thought and in short measure he got through all nine lives, the last one he lost by going through a meat grinder. Each time he'd died he'd gone up two floors in the lift and now he was on the eighteenth. True it was painful, but mercifully fast and now that the lives were all got through, Ming couldn't feel a thing.

Out of the clearing gloom before him appeared a strangely familiar form. It was about this time Ming realised the lift hadn't been going up at all, it had been going down. The bloke with the funny hat in front of him was none other than Yim Lou Wong, the face on the billion dollar banknote.

'So you've come for judgement?' the King of Hell asked gravely.

'I'm the winner!' the boy proudly offered.

Demonic laughter, long and loud. 'The winner?' Demonic giggling.

'According to my scanner, you're not even dead.' And sure enough there were lights flashing and alarms ringing. A general 'mortal alarm' had been raised. 'Not even dead! How dare you.'

Ming was shaking at the knees before the infernal presence and yet he was still somehow emboldened by his recent fatal experiences. 'I am so dead!' he blurted out.

'Still alive!'

'Dead!'

'Alive!'

'Dead!'

'Alive!'

'Dead!'

'Alive!'

'Dead!'

'This is childish!' Ming finally countered, recognising that although they both had limitless time now, there were probably better ways to spend it.

The King gave an age-long sigh, as if very disappointed to give up the game he'd been enjoying. 'Every thousand years we get one. Orpheus. Odysseus. Monkey. And you'd be?'

'Ming.'

'Ah Ming, I don't know how to tell you this, but you're in a bit of a hole.' And it was true the décor around them was something lacking. The King of Hell now explained to him that the Hell Boy was just a game and although it was indeed a game meant for dead people, having played it didn't make him dead, even though he was presently in the ideal place to be that way. The man who'd sold the Hell Boy to him and abandoned his shop so rapidly after would be caught up with. He had probably dispensed with most of his ill-gotten millions by now in one of the netherworld's innumerable Mahjong dens. Yim Lou Wong congratulated himself on the wisdom of having installed the Demon Tracker system last Ghost Festival. 'So, Ming,' the king now tailed off, 'What are we going to do with you?'

Now the terrible thing these days about being in the presence of Yim Lou Wong, when he's thinking of what to do with you, is that... well hell is so hi-tech today, that all of the punishments he imagines for you are shown in holographic form around you and seem very very real. The tortures which spontaneously occur

to the mind of hell's reigning monarch really put to shame anything the Hell Boy could come up with.

Yim Lou Wong wasn't trying to think of nasty tortures for Ming, he was actually trying to think the kindest thoughts he could think of. You see the king was just an average sort of demon who'd landed a dirty job which somebody had to do. But to tell you the truth the nicest thoughts Yim Lou Wong could think were still pretty nasty. For instance he thought of letting Ming watch his favourite cartoon while he was being flayed alive, or having his brains sucked out with a straw while eating a hamburger, that sort of thing. But the terrible plans the tyrant couldn't help but imagine would have to be put on hold for the moment. That was because - midway through imagining Ming being eaten alive by cockroaches - there was a terrible rumbling all about them. The king became irritated with this, as if it were an annoyance he'd anticipated. So he quit imagining, took out a very sharp knife... well really a sword, and sliced off Ming's very real ear. What a howl the boy let out. There was blood everywhere. Yim Lou Wong was coming after Ming. It was only now Ming admitted to himself that the nine lives he'd lost in the Hell Boy couldn't have been the real thing, for the simple reason that this clearly was. There were real screams now issuing from Ming's throat.

There was real terror in his eyes, not only because of the missing ear, not only because of the blood everywhere, but more because of the ghosts and ghouls of all manner, because of the rotting decaying corpses, the putrid smelling zombies, which had gathered around to try for their share of Ming's blood. It wasn't very often they got to enjoy a 'live' sacrifice like this. Hell, you should know, is a mainly virtual experience these days.

These gruesome characters were so creepy that the hair on Yim Lou Wong's back was standing on end. You can imagine how Ming felt. But before the ghouls with their horrible tongues hanging out or the king with his just whetted sword could get closer, the rumbling grew so terrible that everyone lost his or her footing and Ming - marshalling what was left of his vital spark - managed to flee.

Ming fled in the direction he deemed safest; he fled towards the men's toilet and I think you'll have no trouble imagining that at this point, having been in such fearful surroundings, apart from survival, Ming had an urgent purpose in mind. Before you could thumb your nose at a demon, Ming had locked himself in a cubicle and sat down on the seat, just hoping against hope that the denizens of hell pursuing him would see fit to respect his privacy. What a vain wish that was. Although the terrible rumbling only grew louder and more horrible, still the infernal crew had seen where the boy had gone and they were bearing down on him fast.

Picture Ming, just praying that he might see his mother again, just wishing he'd never left her upstairs in the immigration queue. He only opened his eyes again because he was deafened by the sound of the monsters bashing on his door. Only then did Ming see the sign on the wall:

Tour of the Mainland Mortal World.

Insert \$10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,324.57

Now this happened to be just exactly the amount of money that Ming had left after his single purchase in the nether realms, and so, as quick as he could, he poured it all into the slot for the purpose, and pushed the button, which sent him flying upward at a breakneck pace. Ming held on by the seat of his pants. Looking down as he flew, he could see the destruction being wrought below. The Underworld was cracking up under him and although little Ming could not have known it, what he was witnessing was a Harrowing, and that Harrowing was all because of him. If Hell is no place for a mortal boy then it's just as true to observe that a mortal boy is no person for Hell.

Finally the magic toilet arrived in surroundings Ming found strangely familiar. Only smoke and dust below whence Ming had come, that and a wailing and gnashing of teeth. But Ming knew where he was.

He was in the toilet of the Chinese restaurant he'd been in before. Quick as a flash he rushed out through the crowds, into the restaurant, upturning yum cha trolleys in his path and somehow finding his way up into the light, into the border station, into a queue which he hoped was the right one, where he hoped his mother would be waiting for him, or better still, wouldn't have even noticed he'd gone. Everyone in every queue was facing resignedly towards the border, there wasn't a single soul looking back to see Ming rushing to find his place.

Perhaps no time had passed, perhaps, perhaps... and then Ming caught a glimpse, up ahead. Yes, up ahead. His mother's red dress, her hairstyle, her perfume. Never in his life had he ever imagined he could be so happy to see such familiar things. And now, like a dream, he could hear her carrying on just as she'd been carrying on before he'd run off. It really was as if no time had passed.

'Don't you know it's a dangerous place? There are pickpockets, pimps, prostitutes, loan sharks, everywhere. You can't trust anyone. And if you get lost you're lost, who'll help you? Your family - huh - they won't even be able to see you.

What will you do without your passport?'

But Ming was so happy he couldn't restrain himself. He finally tugged on his mother's dress to get her attention. 'But mum,' he said, 'we're almost home now.'

It was only then heads turned, and - how horrible - Ming saw that each was the head of an animal. A chicken, a rabbit, a dog, a duck. Only now the dress he'd tugged turned and the face of a cow - but very like that of Ming's mother - bent down to ask, 'Who are you, little boy? You're not my son. What have you done with him? Find your own ancestors. Don't bother me.'

But by now Ming found himself at the counter, where the horse's head before him asked, 'Day walk in the Land of the Living? Passports ready, please!'

Ming searched in his pants for what seemed an eternity.



A CAMERA

with Amy Wong and Hilda Tam

Mr Mok was sitting leisurely, and listening to the radio. A hot summer night in Macao.

'*Cha shao bao, shbei ai chi gang chu long de cha shao bao...* Fresh steamed pork buns – who wants to eat 'em?'

Mr Mok yawned lazily.

'*Beep. Time is now 9 p.m.*'

Mr Mok got up from the chair and walked slowly to pull down the gate. An old man popped up.

'I hope you aren't leaving.' The old man said in a low voice.

'Yes, I am. How can I help you?' Mr Mok was a bit impatient.

The old man took out an ancient camera from his dusty bag. He handed it to Mr Mok.

'I want to sell you this camera here.'

Mr Mok examined the camera. It was an antique, and although it didn't seem to work anymore, it looked precious.

'How much?'

'Fifty. Fifty patacas.' The old man looked serious.

'Fifty? Are you sure?' Mr Mok smiled. He thought that the old man was a *sui yu*, a sucker.

'Okay. Let me jot you down in the register.' Mr Mok went back into the shop to do the register. When he turned round, he found that the old man had disappeared.

'What a strange man!' Mr Mok looked at the camera, puzzled. He shrugged and put the camera on a shelf.

◎◎◎

Chang walked along Estrada do Repouso (Dou Sun Gai in Cantonese) and came to Mr Mok's shop. He entered and saw Mr Mok was sitting leisurely as usual.

'Good morning, Uncle Mok!' Chang greeted Mr Mok.

'Morning, lad!'

'Anything new today?'

'Ah. There's never anything new in my shop, you know that.'

'You know what I mean. New old stuff.' Chang grinned.

Mr Mok then took out an old tripod and showed it to Chang. 'How about this?'

Chang shook his head. 'No no... I've got enough tripods. I want something special.'

'Special? How about this folding camera? It's from Shanghai, it's from the 1950s.'

'Interesting. But I know it must be very expensive.'

'Not really, it's just fifty thousand dollars.'

'Come on, you must be joking, uncle. You know I can't afford it.'

'Ah, but it's beautiful, isn't it? Well, let me think. Yes, an antique camera.' Mr Mok got up slowly and brought Chang the camera. 'A strange old man brought it to me yesterday.'

Chang opened the back of the camera and tested some parts of the mechanism. He thought that the camera was lovely.

'It looks great. How much is it?'

'Ha! Frankly, the old man asked quite a fair price. Well, since you like it so much, um... you can have it for seven hundred.' Mr Mok smiled in a friendly way.

'Seven hundred? No, no. How about six fifty?'

'Ha!...' Mr Mok pretended to be thinking (as was his usual custom when cheating people). After a brief pause he said, 'Okay. This price is only for you.'

'Thanks, Uncle Mok. You're always so nice!' Chang paid immediately. 'Bye, uncle.' He had the precious object in his hands.

'See you, lad!' As Chang went away, Mr Mok laughed silently and sat back in his chair. 'Wow! Another *sui yu!* Money is easy to make these days.'

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There was no film in the camera but Chang pressed the shutter release and the camera made some *ka cha* sounds, as if it were working.

'Cool, it's still working.' Chang inserted a roll of film in the camera straight away.

Ka cha.

'Great, the shutter and the lens are still quite good.' Chang took a photograph of the food stall where he was standing just then, and then he went on taking other photographs at some interesting spots as he walked. He was an avid amateur photographer and especially liked to take photographs that he thought were strange or humorous. He stopped before a tiny shop, which was called 'Big Big Store'.

'It's really 'big!' *Ka cha.* Chang laughed to himself out loud.

Chang kept on taking photographs as he walked along with his new toy. He was in high spirits. Everything seemed so fresh and interesting to him through his new lens.

'Wow! I'm so happy today! This must be my lucky camera. It gives me so much inspiration.' He took a photograph of a drain, next to which lots of rubbish was stacked.

He heard some noises behind him. He turned and saw that two boys were fighting in a blind alley.

'Interesting.' He rushed to the boys and took a photograph of them.

The boys stopped fighting and said, 'What are you doing? Get out of here.'

'Hey, don't be like that, boys. Why are you fighting with each other?' Chang asked kindly.

'He ate my candies! He stole them from my drawer this morning!' one of the boys said angrily.

‘No, I didn’t. I swear.’ The other boy denied the charge, gave Chang an appealing look.

‘Come on! Don’t get so upset about this small matter.’ Chang took out some candies from his pocket. ‘Here you are. Let’s share, and don’t hurt each other anymore. Okay?’

The boys nodded and shared the candies. They thanked Chang and went away hand-in-hand happily. So his camera could make peace as well!

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Chang finished his photo expedition, had dinner and a drink after. It was already 9 p.m. when Chang got home.

‘Honey! I’m home!’ But there was no response. The house was empty. Chang rushed into his small darkroom to develop the film. He wanted to see his work as soon as possible. He already knew it would be great. He had never been so excited.

Two hours later, the photographs were developed. Chang took them off the clips anxiously.

His face turned blue. He could hardly breathe and his heart almost stopped beating. Yes, the photographs were wonderful. They showed the places where he’d taken them. But they showed night scenes. The backgrounds were dark. The streetlamps were on! But he’d taken all of the shots in broad daylight.

Chang took a few steps backward and stood against the wall. He could not believe his eyes. He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself.

‘What the...’ He stood straight and went slowly again to the photographs. He squinted and rubbed his eyes but the pictures were still the same. He sat down and made himself comfortable, and then he examined the photographs one by one. The places were the same, but they were all at night. The people in the pictures seemed different. Chang was not sure.

48 He found the picture of the boys fighting. He was shocked. The blind alley was still in the picture, but there was nobody in it. Where were the two boys? Were they ghosts? Chang scratched his head. He had no idea of what was going on. He shuffled the photographs and leaned back. One picture fell on the floor. He picked it up and looked at it, feeling depressed with this unexpected puzzle. The picture was taken at the Big Big Store. There was a lady with long hair in a yellow dress talking to the shop owner beside the cashier, and a little girl was standing outside the shop. There was a clock hanging on the wall in the shop and... A clock! Chang blinked at it closely. The clock in the picture said 12:30. Chang was totally puzzled. He remembered that it was around 6:30 in the afternoon when he took this picture. 12:30? A sudden idea came to Chang’s mind. He looked at his watch, it was now 11:43 p.m.

Without thinking any further, he brought along the picture and rushed to the Big Big Store.

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12:20 p.m.

Chang was now standing outside the Big Big Store. There were few people in the street. Everything seemed normal. The air was cold but Chang was sweating. He could not cool himself down, and he wished that time could run faster. He gripped the picture hard in his hand and it was a bit crinkled. A second seemed like a year. Chang did not know how long he had been standing here. He looked at his watch, and it was 12:28. Chang’s heart beat faster. The time of the clock in the photograph was approaching.

12.29 p.m.

12:30 p.m.

The lady in yellow with the long hair and child appeared at the corner. Chang stopped breathing and

was frozen. His eyes were wide open. The lady was the one in the picture. Exactly! The lady went into the store and asked the little girl to stand outside and wait. The shop owner greeted the lady and they started talking, beside the cash register.

Chang looked at his picture and at the store again. He covered his mouth with his hand. He was too surprised to think clearly for ages, but suddenly he burst out laughing.

‘It’s incredible! The camera is a treasure! I’ll be rich! I’ll be rich! I can take a photograph of the TV, and then I can win the prize of the Mark Six! I can take pictures everywhere and I can be a prophet! Yes! The world is mine! And I...’ He stopped this wild train of thought and looked at the camera, ‘Well, may be I should take some more pictures to make sure it really has the magic. I hope it isn’t a dream.’

On his way home, to test the magic, he took some pictures of streets and alleys just casually as he passed. He went home with great expectations.

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‘Honey! I’m home. I’ve something incredible to tell you! Honey?’ There was no response. The house was empty. Chang did not really care if his wife was at home. He rushed to the darkroom to develop the photographs.

Chang guessed from his calculations that things in the pictures should be of around 6:30 the following morning. Chang was strained as he carefully developed the pictures.

Finally the photographs were done. It seemed to Chang that this was the longest time it had ever taken him to develop pictures. Quickly he examined them and felt relieved at what he saw. The scenes in the pictures really were of the daytime. He shuffled through the pictures at random. But when he came to the last picture, his blood froze. It was a picture of an alley, and in the picture was his own dead body. Chang dropped the photograph and took a few minutes to recover.

‘What will happen to me? Is that the cost of having this camera? Does the camera never lie?’ Chang had been on top of the world, now he was dead in the gutter. He nerved himself and picked up the picture again slowly. He looked at his body closely. It was lying gorily in the alley, a knife in the chest. It was disgusting and distressing and Chang was very worried. Who wouldn’t be? Chang kept on looking at the picture and hoped to find some clues as to what had really happened. He noticed that that his gold ring and Rolex were not on the body.

‘It must be a mugging. There must have been a struggle. I was defending myself, my property. Then the thief kills me in the alley and takes my things away. That must have been it. Poor me!’ Chang frowned for a few second but relaxed and laughed, ‘Ha! Stupid me! Why am I so worried? I can save myself! I’ll be fine if I stay at home for the whole day.’ Thinking of this, Chang was relieved. It was now 3:57 a.m. He had one more film to develop, still in the camera. But it would have to wait. Chang swung through the bedroom door, put his head on the pillow, and was soon fast asleep.

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4:34 a.m.

Chang’s wife, Pei opened the door and tiptoed into the house. A well-built man was following her and he closed the door carefully.

‘Shhh. Long. Don’t wake him up.’ Pei whispered and went to the bedroom.

Chang was sleeping like a log. He showed no sign of waking despite the fact that Pei and Long were in the room.

Pei wore a pair of plastic gloves. She took out a knife from her bag. She looked at Chang and then at

Long.

'Don't hesitate. We can't have a future if we don't get rid of him.' Long whispered, and then he added, 'Do you love me?'

'Yes, of course.' Pei looked very serious.

'Go on then. Be quick!'

Pei took a deep breath and drove the knife hard into Chang's chest. Chang woke now. He looked around in horror. Pei went to Long's side immediately.

'Why?' Chang asked weakly. He could not believe that his wife was doing this to him.

'You owe me! You owe me!' Pei said with hatred.

'What?' Chang felt dizzy. He was bleeding hard. 'Help me, Pei. Please.'

'No! You don't love me. You just love your cameras! You spend all the nights in the darkroom, busy doing with those rubbish photos! I have had enough of this kind of living. I don't love you anymore. I want to be with Long. We can have a lot of money from the insurance if you die. And Long and I can lead a new life. Goodbye! Chang. See you in hell! I can't...' Pei was very agitated, and Long laid his hands on her shoulders.

'Pei, he's dead.'

'Sorry, Chang. I have no choice.' Pei said blankly.

'Come on, Pei. Let's first take his valuables, so that people will think it's a mugging.' Long reminded her of their plan.

'Okay.' As Pei took off Chang's Rolex she said, 'This watch is a birthday present I bought him last year.'

'Don't think too much, Pei. He's dead. We'll have a bright future.' Long checked through Chang's clothes and finding that all his valuables were gone, he tried to lift the body.

'Yes, you're right.' Pei sighed and helped Long with the heavy burden.

50 Pei and Long put the corpse in a big suitcase and brought it to the narrow alley Chang had photographed the night before. The alley was empty but the first light was coming on.

'There's nobody here. Let's leave it.' Long opened the suitcase and dumped the corpse on the concrete. 'Done!' Long smiled.

'Good-bye, Chang.' Pei looked a bit sad, and Long patted her shoulder.

'It's now time for breakfast. Our new day is dawning.' And the pair walked away blissfully.

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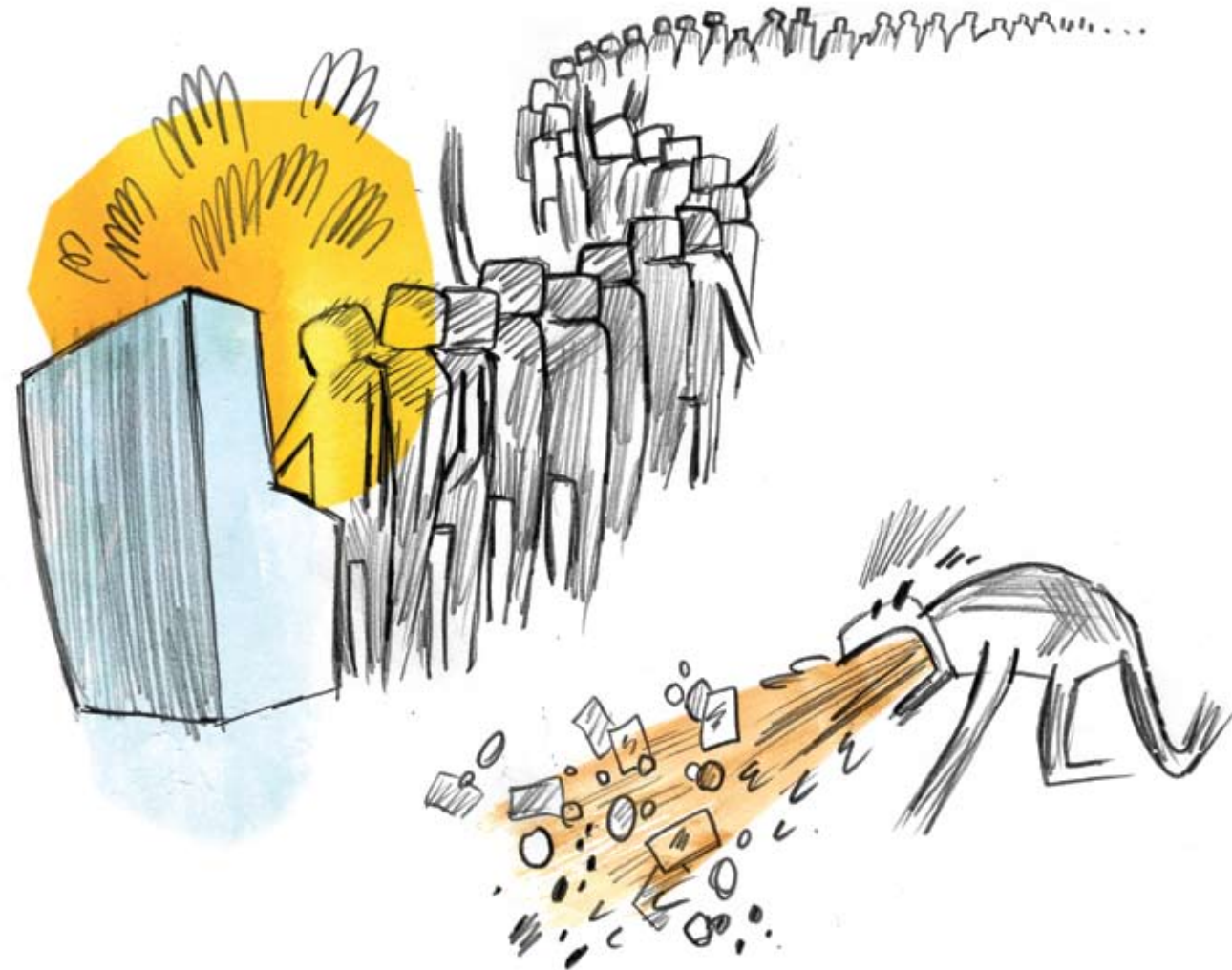
Three months later...

'Mok here. Is that detective Lam? Yes, good. Detective Lam, I think I've solved the Chang murder for you. I was recently sold all of his photographic equipment by the widow. There was no trouble valuing it because I sold it all to him in the first place... But sorry, that's not the point. The point is, I developed the film that was still in the camera... and, well... I can't explain it but there's a picture - I have it here - picture of the wife and her new man dumping the body out of a suitcase in the lane where you found him... What's that? I can't hear you... Yes, I've got the suitcase too. That's what they used to bring all the equipment. I guess they thought they were getting rid of something... Right then, see you shortly.'

Mok leant back in his easy chair. The wife had actually put up a reward for information leading to the arrest of her husband's murderer. To draw suspicion away from herself, no doubt. The police hadn't suspected her or her boyfriend however. They had thought this was a simple mugging gone wrong. The police had custody of the reward money. It would be coming soon with Detective Lam. '*Zhu tao bing*, what a dumb pig head!' was what Mok was thinking to himself, '*Zhu tao bing*'.

HOU YET AND LAP SAP CASINO

with Edwina Lui, Fanny Mok, Graffam Lam and Sally lam



Last year many tourists visited Macao. They didn't come to Macao for delicious food. They didn't come for beautiful scenery. They all came to try their luck at different kinds of betting games in Macao's casinos.

The most famous place for all gamblers in Macao was a magical slot machine at the newest casino called 'Hou Yet Lap Sap'. Since this casino was famous for this slot machine, the founder used the name of the slot machine as the casino's name as well. This slot machine, 'Hou Yet & Lap Sap', was different from others because it could make people's wishes come true. It could make wishes come true, not just in a manner of speaking, but really, directly, without any money needing to change hands to buy the things which usually make wishes come true. Winners wished and then straightaway they had whatever it was that they had wished for. People said that the 'Hou Yet & Lap Sap' slot machine's power was like the power of a god. This was no exaggeration because this slot machine had the power, not only to bring winners to heaven, but also to take losers to hell.

Even though the machine was quite dangerous, and no one even knew where it came from, there were still lots of people willing to take the risk of playing it. After trying their luck, some of them went home with smiling faces, some went home with tears, or worse.

This slot machine not only attracted the tourists but there were also many local people wanted to try the magic. Chi Seng was a twenty five year old Macao man who hadn't finished secondary school and so had trouble finding a good job and so he worked as a waiter in a small cafe. He was poor and his life was hard, but he was optimistic and always thought that he was a lucky guy because the gods would bless him now and then with a sweepstake win or a scratchie good for ten dollars.

Chi Seng was like so many other people who always wished they could get money without any effort. After the magical machine appeared, Chi Seng thought of it every day. He wanted to try his luck but he was afraid because he knew nothing about this slot machine except that it was the newest and most famous one in Macao. Chi Seng didn't know what it looked like or the difference between this machine and the others at other casinos. Chi Seng wanted to go there by himself but there were too many people queued up outside the 'Hou Yet & Lap Sap Casino' every day. Still, he wanted to have a look.

One Sunday afternoon, Chi Seng was having a drink with his friend, Ah Kwok. Ah Kwok was Chi Seng's best friend at school and Chi Seng had helped Ah Kwok many times, with things such as dating girls, lying to girlfriends or his mother and all sorts of other things like that. Now they were discussing the magical slot machine.

'Ah Kwok, have you heard about that slot machine in 'Hou Yet & Lap Sap Casino'?'

'Of course. The "Hou Yet & Lap Sap" slot machine, right?' Ah Kwok checked. 'Are you interested in it?'

'Yes! I want to try it. Perhaps, I could become a rich man in a minute!' Chi Seng was excited.

'But, this machine isn't as simple as you think.' Ah Kwok replied slowly.

'I know, I know. I heard that not everyone could get what they wanted and...' Chi Seng was interrupted.

'And some of them even got a very bad outcome!' Ah Kwok went on, 'Don't try it, my dear friend. It's just too dangerous. I don't want you to have a bad life in the future.'

'Okay, okay, I promise. By the way, do you know how to play it?' Chi Seng knew that he could not ask Ah Kwok to go with him but he wanted to know more about this machine.

'I heard there are some English letters on the reels, and if you get the word "*hou yet*", you win a prize. But...' Ah Kwok stopped and looked worried.

'But what, Ah Kwok?' Chi Seng asked.

'If one draws the word "*lap sap*", something bad will happen. I think that's why people say that the machine can make you *fu gwai*, rich or *bai ae*, poor.' Ah Kwok explained.

'Do you remember that there was a man who won a bonus two months ago?' Chi Seng asked.

'Yes, he got a supernatural power as a prize, and whatever he touched would turn to gold.' Ah Kwok then he continued with a horrible expression on his face, 'but I also heard that someone drew "*lap sap*" and he became blind the next day.'

'Really? It's like something out of a fairytale. Now I really want to try. I know I'd be lucky if I did.' Chi Seng stood up and took out his wallet to pay the bill. He knew that this machine could change his boring life even though Ah Kwok said that it was dangerous.

But when he was ready to go, Ah Kwok stopped him and said, 'It's very dangerous. It's too dangerous. Luck can change at any time and you may meet with misfortune.'

'Don't worry. I'm a lucky guy. Why would I get "*lap sap*"? Remember, I always draw a lucky door prize in those dinner parties and I always win competitions.' Chi Seng swung his forefinger to show his friend that bad luck wouldn't touch him. Ah Kwok gave him a doubtful look but Chi Seng just patted his friend on the shoulder and left.

In the end Ah Kwok decided to go to the 'Hou Yet & Lap Sap Casino' with Chi Seng because he worried about his friend. As they arrived, Chi Seng and Ah Kwok saw some people leaving the casino very happily. These people couldn't stop laughing. Some of them were even throwing money on the pavement in front of them. Others were scrabbling about to pick up the notes before they blew away. But there some other people coming out of the casino blind, crippled or deaf and they were wailing crazily.

Ah Kwok thought the stakes were too high and wanted to leave straightaway but when the two friends overheard three women say that it was very easy to win a prize in the casino, Chi Seng's eyes sparkled and he asked Ah Kwok to queue up for him. He rushed to the counter to change money. There were lots of people at the casino and the queue for the "Hou Yet and Lap Sap" machine was so long that Ah Kwok couldn't find the head of it, so he couldn't even see the famous machine. So after Chi Seng had changed his money, he played Baccarat while they waited for his turn.

After two hours, their turn finally came. They read the instructions first and then, before starting the game, they signed an agreement to promise that they would accept any outcomes that the machine gave. Chi Seng was a bit afraid now and he asked Ah Kwok to try it first.

'Why me! I've just come here with you! You try it!' Ah Kwok shouted.

'No, you go first. Don't you remember I'm your backer? I've helped you in so many ways. You promised me that you would do anything for me.'

'Did I? When was that?'

'In fourth form. I remember it very clearly.'

Actually Chi Seng had used tactics like this many times to get Ah Kwok to do things for him. 'Okay, okay. I try it first!' Ah Kwok gave up bargaining with Chi Seng and went to the machine. They couldn't waste more time arguing because of the long queue behind them.

Ah Kwok's heartbeat became very fast. He didn't know what would happen after he pressed the button. He didn't want to win any money and he didn't have any special wish, he just wanted to get through this ordeal with the machine. Ah Kwok closed his eyes and pressed the start button. The reels were spinning. Ah Kwok prayed for good luck. Then the letters dropped one by one. 'H...O...U...S...A...P'. It's '*Hou sap*'! 'Yeah!' Ah Kwok was cheerful even though he could not get any bonus or have any wish come true. He turned to his friend and said, 'Chi Seng, it's your turn.'

Now, Chi Seng went forward to the machine and he prayed before he started the game. It was the only chance for him to change his poor life. He had to win! He looked at the reels on the machine and imagined the word, '*Hou yet*'. Then, he pressed the button.'

'*Hou yet! Hou yet! Hou yet!*' Chi Seng chanted the word while the reels were rolling. Then, the letters appeared. 'H...O...U...Y...E...T'. Woo! It's '*bou yet!*'

'Oh my God! I did it! I did it!' Chi Seng shouted and he gave Ah Kwok a big hug.

Then the screen of the machine showed that Chi Seng would have sixty seconds to think about his wish and shout it out. If he could not shout out his wish within sixty seconds, the wish would be forfeited.

'Why haven't I heard about this rule before?' Chi Seng complained but he could not wait any longer because the machine started counting down, 'Sixty, fifty-nine, fifty-eight...'

So, Chi Seng thought over and over what his actual wish should be. He didn't know which wishes would be the most beneficial to him. He wanted to be rich, but he also wanted to have a beautiful wife and he wished to be a handsome guy as he wasn't satisfied with his appearance. The time was flying but Chi Seng was still thinking about his wish.

'Thirty-eight, thirty-seven, thirty-six...' Chi Seng became nervous and kept saying to himself, '*Iu mae bou? What do I want? Iu mae bou?*'

Now there were only a few seconds left, '*Lok, mg, sei*, three, two, one.' '*Iu MAE ...*' Chi Seng shouted loudly. '*Bi.....*' the time was up.

All of the people in the casino were silent and waiting to see Chi Seng's wish come true. But nothing happened...

Several seconds later, still nothing had happened...

Chi Seng thought that nothing had happened because he had said his wish too late. The expectant silence in the gaming room could not last much longer, but just as everyone was about to go back to their games and their chatting, a strong light came from the ceiling and everyone looked up at it. The light became brighter and brighter and that made people cover their eyes. Then just as suddenly as it had come the light disappeared but where it had been there was a sheep hovering in mid-air. The animal looked scared, it was shaking. So were many of the people watching below, although those who had had a few drinks were finding the show very enjoyable.

Looking up at the sheep, Chi Seng thought of what he had said at the last second, '*Iu mae...*' '*Iu mae!*' he said out loud.

'*Mae!*' the sheep said too, because as you know, that is what a sheep says in Cantonese. Chi Seng gazed up at the animal, in wonderment at his own stupidity. And then the sheep fell. It knocked Chi Seng to the floor, but by the time he had picked himself up, it had become smoke and disappeared.

Drunk or sober, no one at the casino could stop laughing after seeing this funny scene. Chi Seng was very angry because he hadn't won anything and he looked such a fool. He was so furious he picked up the first chair he could find and attacked the nearest machine with it. The nearest machine was the 'Hou Yet and Lap Sap' slot machine. The guards wanted to stop him but it was too late, the machine was broken. Chi Seng wanted to escape after smashing the machine, but the people in the queue were so mad at him for destroying the machine, that they surrounded him and punched him to the ground. Not even Ah Kwok could help him. There was chaos in the casino with people stealing chips and customers robbing each other. The security staff couldn't drag his attackers away from Chi Seng until the police arrived.

Chi Seng had got nothing from the 'Hou Yet and Lap Sap' machine and now he was in debt because he had to pay back the casino for the damage he had done. Things looked desperate for him, but because of the labour shortage in Macao, Chi Seng was able to get a job straightaway. In fact he didn't even have to leave the hall they were in before he was offered a job as a croupier at 'Hou Yet and Lap Sap' casino, replacing one of the staff who had fled for his life in the melee Chi Seng had caused. This lucky guy would not worry about finding jobs or money in the future. He knew that the gods would bless him forever.

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