

Once Upon the Green Hills

It was during one of the trips to the green hills near Toronto, or Niagara Falls, that I met a wide-eyed youth who wanted to know more about Hong Kong, the ex-Colony, two weeks after reporters had disseminated news about its recent return to China. I was a courier of a different kind, bringing stories in person from East Asia to the classrooms in North America.

“Will the people of Hong Kong soon start eating dogs, cats, and snakes?” the youth asked. “You know, the Chinese do that in the mainland.” He waited for my answer.

It began to sprinkle. “Is that all you have heard about the Chinese people?” I asked.

“I’ve read about it even in church,” he replied. “The Chinese eat their pets.”

“You can’t trust everything you read or heard as if it were the gospel truth,” I said. “It could be as untrue to real life as the happy ending of a fairy tale.”

“What do you mean?”

“Many fairy tales end with a Prince Charming marrying a Cinderella, and they live happily hereafter,” I said. “That’s a lie. Their marriage could end in a divorce. You will find that out soon enough.”

“I don’t know what’s true, and what’s not.” He paused, and then released a series of questions in rapid succession. “Do you believe in UFOs? Do you watch the *X-Files*? Are you real? Did you come from out of space? You could have just popped out of the picture book I got last Christmas.”

“And you could be the happy prince,” I said.

“I love that story.” He smiled. “My mother read it to me when I was small.” He looked as playful as the sun disappearing and emerging behind the clouds. His hair rippled like a golden field of wheat in the wind. Light and shadow danced in the rain, and the youth held an umbrella over our heads. His cheerful disposition strangely reminded me of the sadness of a prince in a faraway land where the Union Jack was lowered for the last time after one and a half centuries of British rule. His Royal Highness promised the people he would never forget them although he knew very well they had been denied the right of abode in his kingdom.

I could not remember if it rained heavily that day, thousands and thousands of miles away from these hills, but I could almost hear the bagpipes and Chinese drums in the remote distance. A 21-gun salute echoed across the Victoria Harbour as fireworks burst in the sky. On top of the din, I heard Tufu from the Tang Dynasty reciting one of his poems, believing that the people of China can weather any crisis if only the leaders are mindful of their humanity.

I decided to satisfy the youth's curiosity and tell him a real-life story about the people of Hong Kong. "They are just like you and the girl living next door," I said.

I

The house was quiet when I returned from a birthday party. Mother was lying in bed in her room. There was no point of asking her if anything was wrong. She preferred confiding everything to my brother Luke, who had gone on a fishing trip with his friends to an outlying island. At 18, he was three years older than I, superior to me in every sport--roller skating, bike-riding, swimming, table-tennis, all of them. I played some table-tennis too, but he would not play with me, for he never thought I was a worthy opponent. An elder brother is supposed to take care of his younger sister, but Luke never behaved as an elder brother should. Once he shot at me with a toy water pistol, but I dared not fight back. I asked God why He had made Adam stronger than Eve. The pistol ran out of water, so Luke went to refill it and his anger began to cool. Maybe God had answered my prayer after all.

But mother loved Luke. Father liked me. He liked Luke too, for he could stay up all night helping him lay out the articles and photographs for publication.

Last night we had a fight. Luke was the one who started it right after we had turned off the lights and gone to bed. I outtalked him, and I heard father telling mother in the living room that I had good opinions. Luke heard it too. He got up from his bunk and climbed up to mine and slapped me across my cheek. "That's for your good opinions," he said.

Father came in to stop him.

"You're partial to girls," Luke said to father. He also insinuated the residents of our village were ignorant of that

fact when they elected father to be one of the three arbitrators to settle disputes in the village.

“Can you point out one particular decision that was unfair,” father said with solemnity. There was a special magical power in his voice that conveyed authority and silenced his opponent.

Luke was quiet.

Father asked Luke to behave himself and to be nice to me.

Last August Luke bought me a fuzzy toy dog before he went to Taiwan to do his internship. It might have been a cat. I couldn't tell. It had hair all over its face. He did not usually give me gifts, so it was a surprise. Shortly after his departure, he wrote back to us. He sounded homesick, saying that he had never cried so much in his life. What a shame! A man should spill blood, but not tears, as people say. I missed him, though, during the months he was away until he returned and started bullying me again.

“Where's mother?” he asked when he returned from his trip, swinging his filthy sweatshirt at my face.

“It stinks.” I fended it off.

Mother shouted for him from her room. He ruffled my hair and pushed me back into my chair. It fell back and I tumbled down with it. I heard mumbling, occasional sobbing, and short periods of silence.

My brother came out with a ten-dollar bill. “Mother asked us to buy fish balls and noodles for dinner. She's not feeling well.” He looked strange.

I went to the kitchen to fetch a large pot with a carrying handle and put it in a burlap bag.

“Don't choose that bumpy road again, please,” I said as I climbed onto the back seat of his bike.

He did not say anything, but he did not seem to be in the mood for playing tricks on me.

“Do you dare to speak English with the British?” he asked.

“Some of our teachers are British. Our form mistress said this morning that if we are caught speaking Chinese at school, we have to pay five cents for each word.”

“You know how to fill in forms in English too?”

“I have done that before.”

“I'm taking you to the city tomorrow.”

“Why?” I was surprised.

“To find father.”

II

The following day my brother and I went to the city by train. On the train Luke said mother had told him that father looked pale when he returned that afternoon with two other men. They followed him to his study which they searched, and they left with a pile of papers.

The room at the police headquarters was shrouded in melancholy. There were altogether ten people sitting on the bench, waiting, and my brother was the only man. Finally an English lady emerged from an office with a Chinese man following her. She was tall, brown-haired, and blue-eyed, like most foreigners. She looked like my English teacher, and the queen. All well-attired English ladies resembled the queen.

She had a sweet, pleasing voice, and politely asked what she could do for us. The Chinese man interpreted her question. A little elderly lady said during a staccato of sobs that she would like to see her son. The English lady said we had to fill in a form first and come back a fortnight later to check with them. Then she asked the Chinese interpreter to help us with the forms.

My brother gave me a push. He wanted me to ask the lady to find out if father was with them.

I never liked to speak to strangers, but she looked harmless. At first she could not hear what I said, as my voice was barely audible and she towered over me. She stooped a little, to shorten the distance between her ear and my mouth.

I repeated the question.

She stooped a little more and gave me a piece of paper to write down my father's name. My hand trembled while I was writing, and I tried very hard to hold back my tears. Then she left to get the details for me.

As we waited, I felt dizzy, wanting to hold onto something familiar. It was the first time I cried on my brother's shoulder.

Half an hour later, the English lady came back. She sat down beside me and told me that father had been detained in the Touch-the-Star-Peak center. Then she started asking me

questions, and putting down my answers. Finally she said we were allowed to visit father in two weeks' time.

It made the headline, but there was no need to splash such a trivial incident across the front page. Father did not have a hiding place for ammunition, so it was not a criminal case. But he collected information for several secret agents sent from Taiwan, in exchange for financial support for the newspaper he was organizing.

Mr. Sung, Member of the British Empire, called. Father had met him in a press conference, and had written campaign speeches for him. They had been good friends. I liked his daughter, who gave me a doll last Christmas. I had been to their house once, a three-storied mansion with more than ten servants, and with a kitchen three times the size of our house.

Mr. Sung promised to give father a full-time position if *Hong Kong News* fired him after his release. Mr. Sung had hired the most influential Chinese lawyer in the colony for father--Sir Joseph Wong. He and Mr. Sung were among those regularly invited to the governor's garden parties.

Father had confessed everything. He did not have any choice. A special unit in the Foreign Affairs Office had found out everything before they arrested him. Luke told me all this after his visit to Sir Joseph Wong's office that morning. A week later, the lawyer said over the phone that there would be no date for father's trial. There would be no trials at all. Suspects of political offenses did not go through the usual legal procedure.

None of us had a birth certificate. Luke and I were born in Mainland China, and so was mother. The Chinese government did not issue birth certificates. Although father was born in Hong Kong, he did not have a birth certificate either, for they did not give out birth certificates in those days. He was a British citizen. It wasn't a lie. The British government shouldn't deport its own citizens.

Sir Joseph Wong called, asking us to get someone to testify to the fact that father was born in Hong Kong. Grandmother was the only one who could do it, but we had been keeping his arrest a secret from her.

Grandmother had a weak heart, and I did not think she could stand the shock. We lied to her that father was going to Singapore to take care of some business on behalf of Mr. Sung. Father was applying for a passport, and he had to prove

that he was born in Hong Kong. She believed our story. Mr. Lee, Chairman of Chinese Affairs, promised not to reveal the secret to her. He was the interviewer, quite impressed by grandma's memory. The problem was that almost every witness of father's birth was dead or had gone elsewhere without a trace.

As we waited for the first opportunity to see our father, people in the neighborhood labelled us the James Bond family. "I hope our village will not be turned into a hideout for spies," said the owner of a rattan factory.

III

The truck stopped in front of a mansion that was almost hidden by a high stone enclosure. Luke told me that we were atop the Touch-the-Star Peak, and the building in front was the detention camp. He helped mother and me down from the truck. He also helped the elderly lady, who had come to see her son. She was my grandmother's age.

I walked on a cobbled path lined with palm trees along its two sides, curving around the mansion. Tall and erect, the trees were stretching toward the sky. I felt diminished, very small and frightened. Behind the flower beds on my left, five panting German shepherds were fenced in a wire enclosure. I looked into Luke's eyes to find the assurance that they could not jump over the fence.

A guard led us into a small room, silent and bare with metallic benches. Forty-five minutes later, an overweight British officer emerged from his office and waddled toward us. The three top buttons of his shirt were unfastened to expose a hairy chest.

"Ask them to keep their bloody mouths shut," he shouted. "If they yelp, I'll kick them out." His portly carriage rocked a little.

"Please stay calm," the interpreter said. "Otherwise we may have to ask you to leave." His job was to soften the threats hurled constantly by his bosses although he could not stop the verbal brutality.

"That's not what that ugly British said," I told my brother. "He must have mistaken us for dogs. Only dogs yelp."

He hushed me.

The elderly lady came forward, saying: “May I see my son now?” She started to weep. Although wrapped in a heavy sweater, she was shivering, and her face was pale in the dim light.

The hairy man abruptly curtailed her appeal for compassion with a shrug and quickly disappeared into his office, slamming the door behind him. She followed him to the door and stood there. He emerged a few minutes later, shot a glance at her, and pushed her aside. “John, put a stop to this, will you?” he said to the interpreter. “Why don’t you take them to the visitation room? I am tied up here.”

The woman wept uncontrollably and felt upon her knees.

“Is she crazy?” the hairy man shouted. The cluster of pimples, nestling on the tip of his enormous nose, reddened. “Ghastly!”

His scowl must have unsettled the feeble woman, whose muscles around her mouth began to tighten. All of a sudden, she reached for his hand, grabbed it, and sank her teeth into it.

The man screamed, bursting into hoarse shrieks which sounded hardly human. The elderly lady beat her head on the ground. Luke sprang to her aid and helped her get up. The interpreter interceded, explaining that she probably meant to kiss the British officer’s hand instead of biting it as two burly guards were about to take her away. Luke put his hand on the frail woman’s back and guided her away from the guards.

“I, daughter of a brave sea captain, have knelt before a barbarian for mercy,” she muttered between sobs.

“Come with me, everyone,” the interpreter said, trying to calm the guards and the visitors.

We were led to a bigger room. Some were typing while others were talking, or having their afternoon coffee break.

“What’s your name?” The man, sitting nearest to the door, spoke to us. He looked like John Kennedy.

Luke pushed me lightly. I told Mr. Kennedy my name, my mother’s name, and Luke’s name. He seemed impressed that I did not need an interpreter. He smiled.

“Fifteen minutes only,” Mr. Kennedy said. “Don’t give him anything.”

We had nothing to give him. They had made us leave the cigarettes and matches in the headquarters. Father might have quit smoking.

It was a dimly lit room. I could not believe what was happening. My own father, who was so near, yet seemingly so remote, was on the other side of the barred window. He appeared to be in grave meditation; his face showed signs of deep sadness, and his eyes looked at us with an unfocused attention.

Mother asked if they had fed him well, if they were nice, if he had found everything satisfactory.

Three meals a day. No cigarettes. Father tried to chuckle a little.

Luke wanted to know if they let him read the newspaper. *The South China Morning Post* only. But Father couldn't read English. Chinese-language newspapers were supposed to be either right-wing or left-wing. My brother worried about the kind of torture they might have used. No inquisition was necessary as everyone involved had been caught and deported.

I wanted to do Luke a favor, so I told father that Luke was taking good care of mother and me.

We were silent for a few minutes.

Father told mother that it would take him only a couple of months to establish himself in Taiwan. "The plum blossoms are the same everywhere." His voice trailed off.

Mother started to weep.

Luke had a job in the factory just a few blocks away from home, I told father. He could ride his bike there. He was paid twice a month, and two days ago he had received his second check and had bought some roasted duck for dinner.

Mr. Kennedy came in to ask us to leave. Father stretched out his hand to reach mine and asked me to be good. He did not have to worry. I was always good.

Grandma went to see Mr. Joseph Wong again, but learned that he could not locate any witness of father's birth. It was up to the ranking officers to decide my father's fate.

IV

“Dad.” That was all I could say, for his sudden appearance in the front yard did not seem real.

Mother hurried out from the house. I watched her closely and saw her eyes gazing at father with disbelief. She leaned against the door with a sigh of relief, her lips quivering.

“Oh,” she said, like a suspect who had just been found not guilty. I remembered what I had seen in foreign movies, all the kissing, all the hugging--the foreigners like to kiss and hug a lot. But I had never seen father kiss mother or her kiss him or them kiss each other. No, there was no hugging. No kissing. Nothing but my greeting “Dad,” and my mother’s “Oh.” Neither did father rush forward to embrace us, as people do in movies. I did not expect him to do that either.

V

The story of my father ended happily as a fairy tale should. Still holding the umbrella over our heads, the youth wiped the raindrops off his face. I assured him that this real-life story was essentially true although a few of the characters and events could be composites. The names of the people had been changed, and my memory might have played tricks on me at times.