

Extract from - The Cherry Blossom and the Parang

By Geoff Anderson

CHAPTER 1

A group of tanned children set up a row of rattan rings and practised with their bows and blowpipes. They never missed, not even the small rings set at a distance. Other children drove dogs and small black pigs, barking and squealing, ahead of them. The jungle shuddered to a constant backdrop of industrial noise. The high-pitched whine of chain saws, and the rumble of heavy machinery, a constant reminder of looming change. The children ignorant of the present risk to their futures hunted, gathered and built shelters, adults in training. These children were familiar with every nuance of the jungle. A lanky old man, his blue tattooed skin hanging in folds from his bony frame, looks over the children. He raised his blowpipe to his mouth aimed, and cheeks puffed he fired a dart 200 feet. A large orange and black fruit bat fell dead from the canopy to the forest floor. Its arched leathery wings folding then collapsing. Only he had seen the creature drop from its roost and soar: his eyes honed through years of acute observation.

The bat fell to the ground and a small, dark child sprinted to retrieve it, accompanied by his lithe hunting

dog. The boy excited to help reached the bat and crouched to pick it up. He stood looking skyward, frozen to the spot. A huge tree swayed and fell, filling his view, obscuring everything; It landed on his small frail body. The old man arrived at his side, too late. The child lay limp, bloodied and hideously disfigured, crushed dead by tons of tropical hardwood. His arms and legs spread aside, tangled and distorted. The old man jumped backward as the bulldozer pushing trees, bushes, roots and debris ahead, completed its murderous furrow. Fury filled the native's heart, eyes flared he raised his weapon one more time and in a second the dart hung from the neck of the driver. The bulldozer swerved, and stopped against a large tree. The driver's body writhed involuntarily, the toxin accelerating his heart until it arrested. He hung forward in his seat, dying. The old man dispatched him, beheading him with a single blow from his Parang.

The trees, the infrastructure which gave life, shelter, food and trade for the Penan, do not kill: it was corruption, greed and evil that killed the child. Third son of Ngang, headman of the Penan.

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The dying embers of the campfire smouldered. Men were clearing up the camp, ready to move, delayed and confused by recent events, they assembled packs containing their possessions. Women made final preparations, packing food and dipping darts into the sticky yellow-white gum from the Ipoh tree. An old woman, weeping and frail drank an infusion of leaves and roots from a boiling bowl.

A careless truck drew into the camp, crushing pots and packs, and scattering animals. Two thugs stood in the back pointing shotguns. Three others, ran ahead of the truck, herded the natives into the rear. A group of children were already captive, seated on the wooden benches, still shaking and shocked.

'Where are you taking us?' said an elder.

'You will be taken to a Long House where you will be safe.'

'Safe from who?'

The truck drove away, dogs and pigs scavenged through the site, which faded back into the jungle.

I followed Fu Manchu's *scraggy ass*, for twenty minutes, he bounced up and down with every push of the pedals. As *scraggy asses* go his is the scraggiest. I can identify every curve of his pelvis. Each muscle of his

legs is taut and defined, from years of hauling overweight tourists around.

Take it from me, there's no good reason to leave America. Two hours in Singapore and I have seen two McDonalds, an Amex office, several American banks, some American shops even a Ben & Jerry's. They have nothing we don't have, and most things we do have. It's a scruffier, busier, less civilised copy of home, with a scattering of random fake Chinese architecture, a bit like Disney. It has different language, food, customs and currency just to make things difficult for American visitors, a pastime the locals seem to revel in.

I hailed this trishaw outside my Orchard Road hotel, the American abroad, I was anxious to escape the concrete, plastic and glass monolith to view the sights, and smell the smells, of Singapore, and find myself a good steak. Catching a taxi would have been a better option. The trishaw is a cross between a supermarket trolley and a baby-carriage with a faded blue and white striped awning and a mesh front leg guard which would protect me from nothing more violent than a frontal assault by a miniature-breed dog. The padding from the double seat is leaking in several places, making a hard ride even harder. The trishaw heels over on one wheel on every corner and even on the straight sometimes, any hole, drain or white line causes us to deviate sharply

from our path. The whole ride gives the sensation of navigating a series of sharp angles with no curves.

My driver wears a tatty blue Chinese style smock with a mandarin collar and matching baggy trousers. His tanned feet stained, filthy, black and brown and are shod in frayed leather sandals. A conical, comical straw hat top off his ensemble. His wizened, brown face, wispy grey beard and moustache complete the ethnic look. Looks can be deceiving: this guy probably owns half of Singapore.

My trishaw driver pedals up tree-lined suburban hills and swoops down through dimly-lit back lanes. The oriental smells of Singapore are most apparent here, rising up and closing in around me. We weave past deserted residential areas and modern boulevards, through pedestrian arcades, thronging with night life, and back down endless alleys lined by warehouses and dingy cafes; lit but signless, where my driver's friends seem to loiter, smoking and drinking. Was I safe here? I left my passport and money in the safe in my room as the hotel instructions recommended. I felt sympathy for this bony little man as he heaved my 150 pounds through the city streets. His machine is not stripped down: a tangled mass of velour, fringing and braid, horns, klaxons and bells, all adding pounds to its weight. Mirrors and lights would have been my first priority.

This guy is a player. Steering toward pairs of young girls crossing the road. He hoots his klaxon, rings his bell and swerves aside, at the last second, sufficient to make them, scream and shriek, grab their bags and sprint for the kerb, testing their high heels to their structural limits. I should caution him, after the third such episode, but there is a perverse entertainment to this, the thrill of the chase. The Trishaw makes a final turn as we leave the 1980's and, enter the 1940's. Raffles Hotel emerges from the modern buildings arcades and neon lights, appearing as if it had been hiding there all the time. It is low and grand, a mirage emerging from the past, becoming defined. It looks out of place, a throwback to a long-gone age, occupying more than its fair share of downtown real estate. A palace set in a garden: a shelf of green nested at the base of a towering concrete chasm.

I was here because I took the advice of the portly Indian businessman who sat beside me on the London leg of my flight from Houston. He was either successful, a crook, or maybe both, to afford business class. I expect he got an upgrade.

Did he know Singapore well? What should I visit?

Take a trishaw to the Long Bar in Raffles Hotel for a Singapore sling came top of his list. Its a drink he added. Did he know, or had he just read about Raffles in

the Singapore Guide Book he had been leafing through since our flight left Heathrow airport. It is my first time out of the States and I have a lot to see. I did America first: Florida and Hawaii and work assignments in Texas and Alaska. I am determined to seize every opportunity and not to take the easy option, never being one to hide in my hotel, cowering behind room service and CNN. I resolve that I will be confident, bolder, and make the most of this experience.

Is he stringing this out to increase the fare? Don't all tourist taxis? My suspicions increase as we speed round the front our destination, veering down the quiet side of the hotel. This 'pedal past' gives me the chance to admire the curved sweep of Raffles' frontage, with its long red canvas awning over the pillared entrance, one nations colonial-architecture is much like any others, we have plenty of this in the South. The whole effect is heightened by hidden spot-lights illuminating the white building, draping it in a bright orange cloak.

We stop, time to pay. Do you tip a trishaw driver? He takes out a laminated sheet of paper from below the cushion of his seat. The seal had failed and the typing faded in the brown edged water stains.

CITY TOUR \$35

I paid with poor grace: no tip. The trishaw sped off, straight across the busy intersection, dodging competing lanes of cars, slaloming like a skier ignoring the modern world which honked and swore, a torrent of abuse; more a release of frustration than an admonition.

I walk along the road, past the side of the hotel, with its row of tall period widows. Only the roof of the room inside is in view: designed to keep out the prying peasant eyes. The front of the hotel is revealed.

A rather grand Indian doorman dressed in a long white jacket with blue sash, red cuffs and more gold braid than you might see at a review of the fleet, stands at the door. His white turban sets off a magnificent black moustache and beard. He is every inch the Maharajah of my grade school stories. He is more like a wrestler than a doorman.

'Good evening sir. Everything all right?' He reads my discomfort.

'That little shit. 'He ripped me off, I'm sure. He overcharged me and dropped me off round the corner.'

'Ah Sir, don't worry, an old trick, you are not the first to be caught. View this as a tax on inexperience.'

I was furious. He was laughing at me. He might have done something about it. He never even asked the classic doorman question, 'Did you get his number sir?' Lazy sod, on a cut I expect.

My anger was focused on myself. I sat in the trishaw aware I should have negotiated the fare in advance. How stupid, I would not have neglected this stateside. Why here? It had been my, ' I don't want it to seem like the cost is an issue' thing.

He regards me with that disparaging glance perfected by his caste over two hundred years of Empire. The doorman knew what had happened, how it had effected me, all without me saying a word. A moments neglect. It will help his family, I can afford it, I rationalised. I despised him for his smug indifference.

I stick my hat on my head, focus straight ahead and walk into the grand Palm Court, a bright hall of arches, pillars and gilt, an Asian Valhalla. Tropical flower arrangements decorate every flat surface. Wooden signs with gold leaf lettering proclaim left to the Long Bar, right and down the corridor to the Writers' Bar and ahead to the Elizabethan Grill. I keep moving, in case I show how far out of my comfort zone this feels. Am I allowed to be here? Might I be be challenged by the red-suited porters with the rows of gold buttons down the front of their uniforms? Being thrown out would be the final indignity on a bad evening.

I take a left, climb the marble steps and march with purpose into the Long Bar. It resembles the set of some old B movie. Surely no one finds this attractive. Sure it

is long, and a bar, but most of its length was wasted, the sort of room that ought to have a pool table and a pinball machine in the back corner. A solitary girl sits near the entrance a few feet to my right side, chin resting on folded arms leaning on the rear of her seat. She is the only other person in the room except for a barman busying himself doing nothing much at all with the same self indulgent indifference as the doorman. The chairs are bamboo and rattan, placed either in circles of four round a small bamboo table or arranged in casual sitting areas with three chairs and a settee. This seems familiar, more echoes of my home in the South. Suspended from the ceiling are rows of rattan fans, leaf shaped, wafting like fig leaves on a cantering native, decorative but impractical. The fans beat in perfect harmony coordinated by the long iron poles and clanking ironmongery, generating a light but pleasant draft. I notice they are in the process of being supplemented with electric fans. The type that resemble the propeller of an old fashioned biplane, even they turn languorously, making as little effort as possible to shift the air. Lazy fans typify the pace. Everything and everyone is indifferent and aloof. No wonder the British lost their Empire. Nothing was sorted or beaten into shape. It had been endured, expected and tolerated. Indulgence had bred indolence.

I ask myself, 'Have these people never heard of electric lights?' Clearly they had, as the rows of bottles in the bar were lit up in the usual cliché enhancing and multiplying their reflections in the mirrors. On the wood bar top are old fashioned lamps, brass with green shades, more for decoration than illumination. The huge wooden rear of the bar area towers. At an unreachable height on its top are an assortment of pots and artefacts from past times making the whole effect one of a tired old-fashioned pawn shop. Fluorescent tubes would make the room, brighter and more inviting. Rickety old tables just put people off. The atmosphere was meant to be classy, subdued and slightly impersonal. I despised it for its aspirations.

I go to the bar and order a large bourbon and coke. Looking round I met the glance of the attractive young girl. She is unmistakably European, reserved and cold. She looks lonely and nervous, abandoned, sat all by herself in this foreign country, I walked over to talk to her. Could I help her?

I sat on the first settee at the entrance to the Long Bar which provided a clear view of the hotel lobby.

People watching is my hobby. I 'm conducting a survey to pass the time. As tourists entered the Palm Court a smug grin comes over their face. It is a 'Here I am, I've made it, standing in Raffles one of the most famous hotels in the world', kind of grin.

In marches this tall Yank. You can spot them a mile off, blue denim jeans, checked shirt and white Stetson gives a big clue. Where's the rodeo? He probably wouldn't know one end of a horse from the other. He failed my survey test, no reaction, so either he is on familiar ground or he is trying to put on a front.

I will find out soon he's coming over, patronizing expression on pallbearer features, he's a dead ringer for Scott Tracy from Thunderbirds. He even holds his arms and walks like him. I can't see the strings. I must behave myself, in the interests of International relations. Bless. He looks a bit lost under that stiff exterior...

'Howdy ma'am.'

'You'll be local are you?' I replied unable to stop myself.

'No ma'am, Darren Friday from the U. S. of A'.

It's America you dick, I pondered, but instead said petulantly,

'Ah one of the Crusoe Fridays I presume.' this brings a blank look.

'No, the Friday's from Baton Rouge Louisiana, Born on the Bayou.'

'Credence Clearwater Revival if I am not mistaken.' God I'm good.

'What do they call you, missy?'

'Kirsty McGregor from Glasgow, Scotland, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and NorthernIreland, that would be the U.K. Of G.B. and N.I. in your language and if they call me Missy they get their nuts to play with'.

'My you're a feisty filly. You English are all a bit uptight. '

'Scottish actually, it's a different country.'

'I love Scotland. Where did you learn to speak such good English?'

I decided to let that one go, although I have learnt some prime Gaelic abuse for such occasions. '*Póg mo Thóin*' I quietly said to myself, which for those without the Gaelic means, '*kiss my ass*', useful in every foreign situation.

' I'm of Scottish descent,' Darren confided.

'Ah, the McNuggets clan.' Perhaps that was a low blow, he looks a little upset.

Enough. As we Scots say, there are two types of people in the world, those who are Scottish and those who wish they were Scottish. We are terribly tribal, I'm afraid. Still, I persisted.

'If you are Scottish, I'm Wilma Flintstone'

'Have you lived in the States? You seem right up to speed with our culture'.

'It's a culture? Well no. Actually we watch television in Scotland and have cars and even Coke, although we tend to drink Irn Bru by preference and to distinguish ourselves from the rest of the world. Can I help you?'

'I am looking for some friendly interesting conversation, you fail on all three counts'.

'You a tourist?' I said attempting to build bridges.

'No, I'm here with work. Heading for a place called Miri in Sarawak. I'm a driller you know, off to explore for the hydrocarbons to keep the world turning round.'

'Well that is one way of describing it. I might prefer destroying the planet for future generations.'

'Ah, you're a tree hugger? The clothes you are wearing, most of your possessions and presumably the plane you flew here on are all made from or powered by hydrocarbons,' he rehearsed the well worn argument, 'everything of value is made from Oil'

I know that oil largely comprises hydrocarbons why does the oil industry think they own the word? I could quite happily live without plastics and the other synthetics. I could list a lot of valuable things that I could not do without that were made from oil derivatives

but not wanting to help his case, I restricted myself to a terse reply.

'I walked here and my dress is silk, made by worms.'

'You are going to be a tough nut to crack. Would you like another drink?'

Why am I trying to make friends with this moron? I'm a bit lonely and welcome the banter. Glaswegians live for banter, but he is a super-lightweight. He wouldn't even hold his own in a Bearsden nursery school.

I can be pleasant and polite but it's much more fun tae get stuck in!

Glasgow University had been very particular about getting to know your hydrocarbons if you did a science degree. I am proud of my BSc. I worked hard to get my First Class Honours. My parents tell me I am wasting my education. Since graduation I have travelled the world championing one cause or another. It certainly feels important to me.

'Sorry ma'am, my round, where I come from the gentleman buys.'

God, he's still here, I thought I had brushed him off, persistent and cute. Stop it Kirsty, you have a significant other, you are off the market.

'Fair enough, a Singapore Sling. Where I come from we are happy to let the other person buy,' actually we almost insist on it and would certainly never refuse.

'They were invented in his bar seventy years ago,' I added by way of an educational tip in exchange for his offer.

'I don't drink that foreign muck.' He walked up to the bar.

Last time I looked, Budweiser was from Eastern Europe and come to think of it, America is all foreign unless you are a Native American.

Darren strode up to the bar while I eavesdropped on his conversation, delivered at a volume, anyone within a few blocks could have heard.

'One Singapore Sling and a Miller Lite please.'

'Sorry sir, Tiger, Anchor or Heineken.'

'Large Bourbon please.'

' Jack Daniels sir?'

'Unless you have Rebel Yell or Wild Turkey.'

The barman poured him a shot of Jack.

'Rebel Yell, that is a classic, the label reads, 'Not to be sold north of the Mason Dixon line' he offers, to anyone listening.

Was Singapore south of the Mason Dixon line? This guy did not have a clue.

He returned and sat down with a smile. Initiating a temporary truce.

Within ten minutes I seemed to have told him my life story.

He had told me his too. Everything warts and all, Americans are so big on disclosure. He was not as stupid as he looked, just close. He could probably name every State and its capital and recite the name of every President but he did not have a clue where Singapore was. He had boarded a plane, transited in London and got off at the other end. He had made the connection and not got lost, credit where credit is due.

In sixties Scotland education was old fashioned and all encompassing and we had the residue of colonialism to broaden our horizons. My primary classroom at the High School of Glasgow was dominated by a large, glossy world map. It said World Map at the bottom right in an elaborate scrolled panel, strategically placed between New Zealand and Antarctica. I always thought navigating round the panel must have been tricky. The map was disintegrating along its brown cracked folds. The predominant colour was red. The Empire on which the sun never sets, also disintegrating along its folds. This American was after all just a colonial, I may have mentioned this to him.

I interrogated my new companion. He was articulate on subjects he knew well but his favourite subject was himself.

I had let down my guard. He did have a sort of ingratiating way about him that was endearing. Americans

to their eternal credit have that wonderful warm open friendly manner. He was rather like a well behaved Labrador, although he was far from cuddly . I have to confess I found it hugely beguiling.

I told him I too was heading for Sarawak, to hook up with my long term boyfriend, Vincenzo, an Italian environmentalist who is working in the rain forest with local tribes to try to stop the loggers destroying the jungle and the habitat of the jungle tribes. This was just in case he fancied his chances. I moved the conversation on, fearing he would launch into his knowledge of all things Italian which, no doubt, would identify my boyfriend as a mafia ice cream salesman.

'We need the jungle to counteract the effects of burning your precious fossil fuels. A time may come when the jungle provides us things we desperately need. There is much to learn from the ancient indigenous tribes. '

Why am I doing the hard sell? He is not a receptive audience. Am I so unsure of my facts that I need to keep rehearsing them? I know myself too well. Too many years of my own company and a lifetimes practice of self analysis.

'This is the twentieth century, it's progress. The world needs wood and commerce. These people need civilising, they will be looked after, and educated and the country will prosper once business takes over.'

'You are going to get a shock. Malaysia, and especially Sarawak is not the U.S. of A. You are flying in at an interesting time, they are in the middle of critical elections and a logging war. I suggest you just keep your eyes open and your mouth shut'.

I had said my piece; I got up and walked out with a sneer, that I regretted as soon as I had made it.

I headed to the river to get a meal at a floating restaurant and some fresh air to clear my head. Walking down toward the river, I was thoughtful. Where was I going with my life. The American had got me thinking. The rain forest was my passion but really I was looking for something else, someone else.

My life seemed to have been compressed into a very few years. I am twenty-eight but my present phase really only started when I was fourteen. I was adopted by a lovely couple who lived in Milngavie, the upmarket end of Glasgow. They had given me the perfect upbringing, adopting me from care and fourteen years of disruption, squalor and solitude. Now, that took courage, taking on a fourteen year old delinquent, with form. I had made their life hell and only in my mid-twenties did I recognise and respect them for this selfless act.

I do worry that I carry my birth mothers flawed genes. She was an addict, a violent criminal who spent time in jail for the murder of her supplier. I don't know

my real father but he was likely to have been from a similar background as my mother and probably one of ten or twenty people. Prostitution was my mother's solution to finding the money for her habit. It was my only source of pride in my mother. Prostitution is a victimless crime far better than those addicts who stole to feed their habit. My story was that my mother was a flawed woman with principles. I selectively ignored her more obvious defects.

I heard her faked moans and laughter every night on and off for fourteen years. I sat smoking, locked in the kitchen under strict instructions not to move or make a sound. During her frequent jail terms I pretty well fended for myself in and out of care which would last until I escaped, then I lived off my wits.

Once I had been removed from the home and settled into my foster parents house all that was over. It had taken me through my teens to settle. My foster parents had been summoned every term to school at some point to remove me and to apologise for my latest misdemeanour. Why should they apologise it was me who had done them and all I was sorry about was getting caught. A fight in the girls toilets, assault with a hockey stick a hair cutting incident and a succession of smoking or boy related transgressions. I had spent most of my first three years of secondary school behind the bicycle shed. Hanging out

with a gang of similar girls, all of whom had been cautioned to stop hanging out with 'that awful Kirsty girl', this had made me all the more interesting both to these middle-class girls and to the boys.

It had suddenly clicked in fourth year. I was taught Biology by a smart, politically active woman Miss Baxter. Miss Baxter had that gift of communicating with and inspiring difficult children. She became my heroine. I worked hard and soon was achieving grades that surprised me, pleased Miss Baxter and astonished the rest of the staff. I had a friend and an ally. he was tough, straight talking and took none of my nonsense. Other teachers reflected and tried her approach and I responded mostly.

I sailed through my 'O' levels and Highers, pushed by Miss Baxter with offers of a better freer life. University was a much better environment for me generally. I enjoyed learning for learning sake, joined societies, the Young Socialists, the Hockey Club, the Drama Group. I joined Greenpeace and Amnesty International, I liked the societies but I was not an activist, I enjoyed the parties and the feeling of belonging to something.

I had a number of short romances, to move on from my skirt round the waist encounters behind the bike sheds but had raised my standards higher than the politics, economics and pharmacy crowd who frequented my social

life. I preferred the crowd from the Glasgow Art School and the Glasgow School of Music and Drama. Less drugs, more tolerance and certainly more creativity.

Now after a succession of causes championed through protests and expeditions I was at an emotional cross roads, heading into another jungled to see if Vincenzo was the one. We had a brief affair the previous summer when I first visited Sabah, looking for Orang Utangs, which seemed like a great cause to support at my father's expense. I had become sidetracked, following Vincenzo into Sarawak from Sabah, when he decided to champion the cause of the Penan. The Penan were an ancient nomadic tribe who lived in the deepest areas of the jungle, isolated from civilisation. It was they whose way of life was most threatened by the timber industry and its insidious spread. In my case I was championing Vincenzo and keeping a weather eye on the plight of the rain forest myself, another of my private surveys to make myself feel busy and involved.

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I chatted to the barman for a further hour. I asked but learnt very little more about Kirsty, she had been in for a drink by herself the last two nights but wasn't staying in the hotel. She was by herself, each time, sat

in the same place and drank moderately, seemed thoughtful and sometimes read a book.

The barman was a Kelabit from the Sarawak interior. He explained the Kelabit inhabited the highland area around the town of Bario and across the border into neighbouring Sabah.

I was experienced in interviewing barmen to work out the lie of the land. I had done this in a hundred bars in fifty towns. The oil industry was nomadic as well.

The barman was very proud of his country and especially the racial diversity. He was a mine of useless information; clearly aiming for a tip, these locals always had their hands out. The barman was anxious to share the tales of the Long Bar, it helped to pass the time on his shift. I was a willing audience, I needed to learn more about the lie of the land.

He started,

' I love my country and am very proud of it but it has its problems. Sarawak for years has been in the control of politicians who have used corruption and violence to line their own pockets.'

'In the past years it has got worse. The logging industry has given them the chance to make billions. Corruption is almost a way of life here, it is alleged that every major Project is bought with bribes, its been all the papers.

It would not be so bad if some of the wealth was shared around, some people are making a living working in logging but the indigenous tribes are being forced from their ancient lands and are living in poverty on the edges of the towns. Once they lose the jungle which provides them with everything, they lose their lives. They are largely illiterate and unskilled for urban life. They cannot adapt to modern living and indeed have no desire to. The loggers fell the largest straightest trees from the depths of the jungle, destroying the smaller trees the natives use for food, weapons and weaving. Loggers burn the undergrowth; destroy the paths the natives have navigated for years. The ground becomes dusty and unconsolidated in the heat and then washes away in the monsoon rains.

Now the timber companies have realised if they lay waste to an area, it will drive the game deep into the interior, the tribes will follow and more areas can be logged. Once they are logged they can be cleared and replanted with Palm Oil plants. These provide a temporary crop but cannot replace the long growing hardwoods.

Our heritage is being destroyed, our future, the lives of our people for the benefit of a few, who are becoming more powerful, wealthier and more difficult to shift?

It is a vicious cycle. More corruption makes them wealthier, more money buys more thugs; more thugs can enforce more corruption. If you are a tribesman in the middle of the rain forest you are helpless. We are seen as a prehistoric anathema, we fit no model for the future of the vision of a modern developed nation they see in K.L.'

By now I was in information overload and pleading an early flight, I left. I caught a taxi back to my hotel. It was a two-minute drive costing just a few dollars. The route seemed more or less straight and that just left me more irritated. I would have to keep my wits about me, or I would be cheated at every turn.

I realised I had not eaten and was hungry. I left the stetson in the room, realising that the less I appeared like a typical American the better I might fair. I immediately caught another taxi.

' Take me to an interesting restaurant please. Could you recommend somewhere?'

' I will take you down to the river, its a lovely place to eat.'

So it was twenty minutes later, I was seated by myself at a table for two on The Lotus Grill. It was a long boat with a green awning covering the dining area , the second boat down the quay. I descended the steps from the bridge where the driver dropped me, onto the quay and

past the first restaurant which I had decided looked rather touristy, the second boat looking much more authentic. I climbed steadily up the gangplank, giving a familiar wave to the waiter at the top. It was basic but friendly. I enjoyed the gentle rocking of the water. It was a familiar feeling. Semis-submersible drilling rigs had that same regular sway, not disconcerting until the first week home, when you bounced from one side of a corridor to the other, your subconscious balance mechanism not switched off yet.

Kirsty watched Darren walk past the boat on which she was eating. It had the best food and the American had fallen for the old authentic look trick. She smiled to herself, she could be so cynical but he was nice. She hoped he avoided trouble he just did not seem well prepared for anything but a bar brawl. Time would tell.

The menu offered the choice of Chinese or western food. I opted for Chinese, ordering spring rolls for starter and a duck main course. The conversation with Kirsty, the rude Scottish girl, hinted to me that I was not well equipped for this cultural experience.

The waiter gave me a brief lesson on using chopsticks. I was quickly on my third set, having dropped a stick from both the first two on the floor. They were

quickly replaced. I marvelled at the hygiene and noticed the general air of cleanliness around.