

**The Ghost
of
Neil Diamond**

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

by

David Milnes

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'The Lady is a Tramp'

"The Lady is a Tramp" by Richard Rodgers
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The Ghost of Neil Diamond

Chapter One

The Karaoke Collection

Amen to all sorrows.

With a few splashes of cold water Neil washed away his sins. He watched them slip down the plughole, one by wretched one. The wrongdoings and wrong turns, the bad debts and bad memories sank beyond the U-bend, and his soul lay empty and prepared. A whiff reached him from the urinals, the stale reminder of that catalogue of men who had fallen short at just this point – the last call, the swan song. Well, forget them, he decided. They had their lives and this is mine. He lifted his aching head to the mirror. This time. Maybe this time.

David Milnes

Two young Chinese – city boys with spiked hair, loosened ties, daytime suits - burst in upon his peace and quiet, banging the toilet door against the wall. They shouted at each other in Cantonese and joked and poked and laughed so hard it doubled them up, slewed how they walked. Neil followed them with scowls of boozy disapproval. They used the urinals quickly, not watching what they were doing, shouting and laughing across the stalls, then left without washing their hands.

These Chinese and their manners, Neil thought, turning back to his sink of sorrows. He remembered an old scare about bar snacks at The Peninsula, The Marriott, The Furama, all the plushiest Hong Kong hotels. Fifteen different urine samples, minimum, in a single bowl of crackers. Asia's premier world-class city pissed on inside out.

The toilet door eased shut on its spring, cutting off the lounge once more. He braced himself against the sink, closed his eyes and listened. Mysteries of the oriental night drifted through the broken Xpelair. The clangs of container trucks on the flyover below. The dull, continuous murmur of tyres on concrete. From somewhere a lonesome horn cried out, in the far distance – on the sea perhaps. He winced at that solitary, frightened sound.

While the karaoke machine played, *Sweet Caroline* . . .

Oh, Neil Diamond Nite - when would it ever end? And tomorrow Stevie Wonder Nite. I Just Called To Say I Love You. Stevie Wonder – blind, smiling, chin up against all adversity. And Thursday Marvin Gaye Nite. What's Going On. The late & great Marvin Gaye, gunned down by his preacherman father during a porn film and gone to burning hell. Neil Diamond, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye – all has-beens before the weekend.

Amen to all of them, and to all their sorrows too.

He found his hair band in the mirror and set loose his greying frizz. There was so much of it now it wasn't even funny. Mr Bojangles, the full reprise. He raked and ordered the twists and straggles as best he could, then took a step back

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

so the grey darkened in the mellow mirror light, and the hard lines softened. He turned in profile and looked back at himself with his chin thrust out, haughty and severe, posing as he might have posed for an album cameo, back sleeve, twenty years ago: strong and young and wild.

Now the wild man at forty-eight. Never too late. His hair discreetly hid his thickening jowls, the terrible pear-shape of things to come.

No. Not that . . .

Fare thee well then, *Sweet Caroline*, and all the good times that don't seem so good now.

The lounge felt more threatening, more treacherous, after the healing solitude of the toilets. It was blacker and smokier and noisier than before. He weaved tipsily by pontoons of private booths, edging around the larger parties - Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me, please - and their long glass tables, strewn with empties and peanut bowls, white bowls shining upwards in the darkness, like the whitened Chinese faces rolling up at him, startled, amused, as he passed. Even the carpet he stumbled on was a deep and wavy black shag, hiding all manner of rubbish and insect life. Seaweed. Silverfish. Roaches.

He was still four tables out when the first cry went up.

"Here he comes!"

"Hey! Would you look at that?"

"Ooooooh, yeah!"

"I like it!"

"It's all hanging out tonight!"

"Mister Bojangles!"

"He jumped so high!"

"His dog up and died!"

"On a piece of string!"

"It was suicide!"

Please, gentlemen, please . . .

"You letting go tonight, Neil?" Damian teased. "We gonna have some of the ole toons? Where have all the flowers gone?"

David Milnes

I wonder about that sometimes, you know? Where they all went. Don't you?"

"All the time."

"And where were you the night they drove ole Dixie down? Were you here at the bar? Pissed out your skull?"

"How'd you know that?"

Damian's knavish face smiled up, soft and round and brimful of lewd intent. The mock Teddy boy, cupped in blue velvet, stuck in the middle of his own decade. His grey mullet flowed so smoothly over his collar it must have been curled at the hairdressers' this very afternoon, with heated tongs. He was a curled darling all right. But why was he shielding him from Angel? Or her from him? And why was she rearranging her tight white blouse while he talked? They don't call him big little Damian for nothing, you know.

"You having a good time, Neil? You giving us a turn? Go on, now! Go go go!"

Neil tried to catch Angel's eye but she was taking a drink, looking the other way.

"Yeah! Go on, Neil! Give us a turn!"

Some new hanger-on, to her right, seconding the motion. A northerner. A Geordie with a stringy, stingy, skew-jawed face, but young, a thirty-something among the pack of grey wolves. Where'd he come from? Trendy black retro glasses. Someone who wanted him out the way as well so he could get closer to Angel in her tight white blouse. A new friend covering the further side. Teamwork.

"Oh, give us a song, Neil!" he whined. "Don't be a meany!" He laughed and looked around for support, pressing his luck. A young loudmouth. "Go strut your stuff, Neil! Let yourself go, why dontcha?"

"He's already let himself go," Damian muttered, and he chuckled and reached for his glass, losing interest.

Neil couldn't take that. He bore down on Damian. Big cock or no big cock, good fuck or no good fuck.

"Why don't you let go a moment, Damian? Hmmn?"

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

He put his hand on Damian's shoulder and pinched the velvet hard. Damian squirmed under pressure. He grinned and wriggled and pretended to enjoy it.

"Ooooh! Touchy touchy! Touchy touchy touchy!"

Neil watched the grey mullet break up on the blue velvet.

"Touchy-feely!" cried the Geordie.

And they all laughed. Oh, how they laughed.

A squiffy jazz piano, someone just fooling around, signalled the next number. Neil released his grip and gave up the fight. He glanced at the monitor above their table. A song from far, far away, from the mid-sixties, was cueing in at the foot of the screen. Reason to Believe. He knew this song. Knew it only too well. A beautiful song. Tim Hardin. Tim Hardin? Dead at thirty-nine, nursing and cursing his heroin addiction to its lonely, bitter end. Bright colour filled the screen as Neil Diamond himself appeared above the lyrics, his body gloved in a tight red jumpsuit spangled with sequins. The top of the suit was open low, Elvis style. He was stepping downstage with an old-fashioned cable mike in his hand. He flicked the trailing cable step by step on his way down to the audience. The picture looked live, shaky, slightly out of focus. It was late seventies, twenty years old at least. There were fairy lights in silly hearts and bows on every step. An amphitheatre somewhere, on a soft and balmy summer evening. The lightest breeze teased the superstar's hair and it made him look down and smile, that teasing breeze, as he put his hair back in place. Because nothing, absolutely nothing, could ruffle him for a moment tonight.

Neil raised his hand for the mike and drifted off from his party. Cheers and jeers and fleers followed him to the dais near the MC's console, where the limelighters did their turns. A waitress came forward with the mike, looking up at him with a sympathetic and motherly smile – these grey-haired, long-haired guys - who did they think they were?

No one quietened down for him. They kept chattering away and wandering about. They bought drinks or slipped off to the toilets, or drifted across to perfect strangers to light their

David Milnes

cigarettes. He looked down at his baggy pants – Bojangles, again - and at his shoes, the anonymous loafers in which he'd shuffled into middle-age.

Well, never mind.

He took a breath, a deep breath, then gave them the first line, loud and clear but with a cool restraint, the big feeling under control. The line was a gift to them . . . a love gift . . . for all of them . . .

If I listened long enough to you . . .

And a sudden hush followed. Faces turned his way. He saw a Chinese girl look up, take her cigarette from her lovely mouth, and stare at him. She pulled back her hair from her face. He'd hit the world famous voice full on, the slight crack in it, into which he'd poured some of his own feeling, just a little anger, hurt and heartache, but not too much. He shook his hair free once more, loosening everything up, and stepped towards the nearest table –

You know I'd find a way, I'd find a way . . .

A few whoops and cheers for the song but more, much more, surely, for who he was, who he was becoming before their very eyes. He was pulling them in, all of them, no head unturned. He slowed right up for the title line . . . yeah, still looking for that -

Reason to Believe . . .

He glanced across at his table, at Angel. He had the whole table, all the old China hands, looking his way, looking up at him, looking up to him. For a moment they were nice guys and full of goodwill. They forgave him and he forgave them. For a moment they all understood maybe, and understood also that this was nothing to him. He panned round the rest of the lounge. They were coming out of their private booths and jostling for places to stand and watch. Standing room only. He had the whole lounge in the palm of his hand. They thought Neil Diamond had just showed up in person for Neil Diamond Nite. Rather older now and a touch desperate. They thought it was some freakish stunt. Top of the bill. Talk of the town. He stared into Angel's eyes -

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

You see, someone like you . . .

But she looked away.

So he did too, and drew in the MC – How're you doin', friend? He beckoned to him, mike held high, little finger crooked on the mike stem, and he rolled his free hand, working the rhythm, this way, that way, never too much –

You see, someone like you . . .

And the MC – an ancient Chinese groover, complete with baseball cap, shades, wraparound smile – why, he took it in his stride, he wanted in on this too, he wanted a part of this, sure he did, yes sir, he wanted to own a bit of it, and he looked about and faked it, tried to play the gathering crowd, he grinned and nodded and cocked his head as well, and tipped his baseball cap, No. 69 – yeah, sure, keep it comin', I like that, keep it comin', yeah . . .

Neil bent low to a table for two and offered the next verse to a pretty Thai girl. She was too young. Teenage spots under her make-up. Impossibly, indecently young. Her Chinese sugar daddy, sixty at least, sagged in his seat opposite. Two black kiss-curls strayed down his brow. Neil shut him out completely. He wasn't part of it. He wasn't even sitting there. It was not that old lecher's moment. Not yet. This was Neil Atherton's moment, and Neil Diamond's. It belonged to them. The girl belonged to Neil Atherton and Neil Diamond now. No, you can't take this away from me. He cradled the mike in his fingertips, cabaret style, and gave the girl the whole verse, gave it all away to her, with passion, line by sacred line.

And the Thai girl smiled and giggled and looked anxiously to her escort, and her pencilled eyebrows arched helplessly – What could she do? – as Neil turned away, casting another glance at his table, his wife, then on to the jealous crowd -

Yeah, someone like you . . .

And he kept it going right up to the final refrain, when he raised his fist in the limelight and lent the lyric the most tender parting of his world famous voice, filling each note till it broke and fell worthless into awed silence.

David Milnes

Wild applause. Keep it comin', yeah . . . Let's really hear it. And table thumps, whistles and hoots of amusement. The old magic of performance still there. Encore, encore . . . He opened his arms to the crowd, opened his heart to the crowd, and flung his thankyou's to them with kisses and imaginary bouquets. He caught the eye of the ancient MC and won a last lipless smile, a farewell tip of the baseball cap – yeah, sure, he really liked that too, but let's keep it rollin' now, it's Neil Diamond Nite, all night, all right, uptightanoutasight.

Only Angel remained unamused. Under the dim monitor lights he saw her break free of Damian and his young northern friend and sit forward at the table, her chin in her hands, watching him gather in the fading applause, watching him make a fool of himself one more time - just one more time, everybody. She shook her head severely. Her new hairstyle, short, dark, expensive, framed her cold stare. Her new make-up, the hard and bruised look, the look of total experience, wasn't so seductive when she really felt it. It aged her. She was more than late thirties, much more. Tonight she'd caught him up: she was mid-forties or even late forties. The company of people like Damian put years on her too. Why couldn't she see that?

He bowed out and handed the mike to an overweight and very drunken Chinese, who launched into *Song Sung Blue* from where he sat.

Do that, friend . . .

Neil's face and throat were burning. He set out to get a drink but was briefly surrounded, nailed and hailed by drunken fans and jokers. The route to the bar became a gauntlet of shoulder pats and high-fives, and when he finally arrived, there was more jokey adulation from the barflies, perched on their high stools. He waved their quips and taunts away and they turned back to their private conversations.

Then someone came up from behind and tapped him on the elbow.

“Hey there . . . You're really very good, you know . . .”

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

Neil tried to get a drink but it wasn't easy, despite his new status. He looked back, then down. A Chinese or Eurasian guy, early forties maybe, was staring up at him in a very direct and serious way. He was so short Neil could see his hair-flip laddered all along his pasty scalp. Just another nondescript and forgettable guy, except for a bold statement. A wild Hawaiian shirt. Blue skies and palm trees, brown sugar beaches, girls and cocktails and fancy cars – all the good times were there, spilling down to the crotch of his suit trousers. All the good times were there, and they'd never looked so bad. The man stood with one hand in his pocket, ruffling the baggy shirt. In his other hand he held a full bottle of beer. It was difficult to read his very sober and penetrating expression. Was it really intense, or just dense? His flat features gave nothing away.

Neil nodded curtly – Goodnight, pal – and turned back to the bar.

The mood had passed. Ephemeral as the beautiful song that inspired it, the mood had vanished. He felt a light sweat around his hairline. He was worried about what was happening behind him right now, about the attentions Angel might be encouraging and receiving again. The pack were so shameless, so randy. Especially the older ones and the ugly ones. The old China hands. The desperadoes. He had to return to the table and hold the lid on things. He glanced over his shoulder the other way. There was a merry raising of glasses and interlocking of arms.

He caught the barman's attention and ordered his drink.

The fan spoke up again, tapped him on his cold shoulder.

"You sing so well, you know . . ."

Neil shrugged him off without looking back.

"I mean very, very well . . ."

Okay. Neil looked down one last time. The fan was smiling. It was a smile with absolutely nothing in it, animal, the smile of a monkey.

"If you want to fix up some dates, some bookings," the man said, taking out his wallet, "just give me a call or stop by." He

David Milnes

removed a business card. "I think you're terrific. Terrific. I really do. Any time. Open door. Perhaps I can be of service."

He offered the card formally to Neil with both hands and a slight bow. Neil took it with one hand, thanked him, and slipped it into his shirt pocket with his change. He grabbed his beer and left.

Damian passed him on his way to buy more drinks. He made the bottle-up gesture and in reply Neil held up his full one. Nothing about his song, of course, about how good he'd been - such an ungracious guy.

"Who's your buddy?" Angel asked, as he took the seat next to her. Damian's seat.

"What buddy?"

"With the shirt." She glanced at the bar.

Neil followed her glance. The fan had gone. Then he saw a kingfisher flash of the Hawaiian shirt out the corner of his eye, under the Exit sign.

"What did he want?"

Neil didn't care to talk about it but there was warmth in the way she blinked at him, patiently, knowingly, and he did care about that, very much.

"He said he might be able to fix something up. Some dates. Bookings."

"When will you see him?"

"I don't know." He had no intention of seeing the man again but to keep her interest he took the business card from his shirt pocket.

"He gave you his card?"

Neil flicked it on his fingernails, at arm's length.

"Losers can't be choosers, Neil."

He looked at her. She must have had too much to drink to say that, though it didn't show. She reached across and put her hand on his wrist. She squeezed, then pulled his hand closer and drew the card from his fingers. That's all it took. Just one squeeze.

"Elbert Chan," she read, squinting at the name. "Funny name."

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

“Funny guy. Very funny.”

She smiled. She put the card back in his shirt pocket, patted the pocket against his chest, then withdrew her hand.

“Go see him in the morning, Neil. First thing. Go see Elbert.”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Go see him, Neil. First thing.”

“I’ll think about it. That’s all.”

“Well, you think about it hard.”

David Milnes

Chapter Two

Elbert Chan

“Variety,” Neil said. “Any middle-of-the-roadster. Any guy with two first names. Billy Joel, Elton John, George Michael, Cliff Richard – any of their songs . . . No problem at all . . .”

Elbert Chan’s looks, last night so nondescript and forgettable, were distinctive enough under the strip light of his poky office first thing in the morning. His face was very flat, very still, quite imperturbable. His hair-flip was sprayed high and firm for the day ahead. Only his eyes moved, and very slowly, admitting nothing and committing nothing, under their smooth brow.

The Hawaiian shirt had vanished without trace. He wore a cheap, dark business suit.

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

“Or I could go back a bit,” Neil continued, filling the silence. “Classic songs. Bigger artists, better artists. Dean Martin. Frank Sinatra, of course. Tony Bennett. Bobby Darin, maybe. Tony Newley. Any of the old crooners - ” Neil laughed briefly after that word. A crooner, you see, Mr. Chan, is one of those singers who - “Anyone you like, really. I’m a musician. I can read music and I sing in key. You’ve heard my voice. You know what I can do.”

Why the stonewall? Where was the flattering fan from the karaoke bar? ‘I think you’re terrific. Come on up and we’ll fix some dates and bookings . . .’

“I’m here today to offer a new act, Mr. Chan. Not spoofs, impersonations, jokes – nothing like that. But classic songs, hits through the ages, done my way. My Way, done my way!” He laughed again at this rehearsed joke but to no effect. “And with respect to the original artist, of course. With dignity. Like last night. No hard rock. That’s not it. I’m from a different place, different tradition.”

“What tradition?”

“All I need is a band and an entrée, Mr. Chan. Just a small band to back me up. It would be easy. No sweat. That’s the business plan.”

When Elbert Chan spoke again his voice was without tone. It was without any detectable trace of feeling, of memory, without the vaguest hint of welcome, warmth or sentiment.

“Tony Bennett, you say.”

“If you like.”

“Frank Sinatra.”

“No question.”

“Tony Newley.”

“For sure.”

Neil felt Chan’s eyes creep over his lined face, his crinkly grey hair.

“But could you really?”

“Yes, I could. No problem at all.”

Chan sat back in his swivel chair. There was a sudden flush of gold: gold tie-pin, phoney gold watch, gold cuff links.

David Milnes

“But could you really?”

“Yes I could.”

Then Chan smiled, like last night. That quick, tight smile, over small and tidy teeth. The smile was so detached it was free-standing, hovering there like some clever executive toy.

“Well, let me tell you something.” He seemed to relax now that Neil had played his hand. “I know one or two clubs around here. Just one or two clubs. The American Club, out at Tai Tam, and The Jockey Club, for instance. And The Fanling Golf & Country Club and The Beas River Country Club . . . I know these clubs, and I’m welcome at these clubs. That can’t be said for all the members, I might add . . .” A soft, secretive chuckle, after sharing this confidence. “And there’s The Pacific Club right here in Kowloon. Very classy. If you want more class go on up to Mid-Levels and drop by The Ladies’ Recreation Club. Then you have The Hong Kong Club itself, in the middle of town, but that’s somewhat top dollar . . .”

Somewhat top dollar . . .

With a wave Chan directed attention to a sheet of contact numbers hanging on the wall.

“All the best clubs. I know all the right people – the Entertainments Managers, the Food and Beverage Managers, the Sports Bar Captains and so on - at all the best clubs. I mean the very best clubs, period. Forget the other clubs.”

Things were looking up. Neil tried to study the list on the wall, as directed, but he was led astray by June’s girl, suspended beneath the contact sheet on the same picture hook. She was a fleshy Chinese teenager in a strapless bikini, sitting astride an exercise cycle. Her skin was covered in suntan oil or massage oil that glistened under the studio lights, on her shoulders, her flanks, her thighs. She looked like something edible hooked up there, like a piece of caramelized meat or fruit. She returned Neil’s gaze with slippery indifference. What was she doing here, in Elbert Chan’s office, on her exercise bike?

The contact list for the clubs caught the light too but in a different way. It was a shiny laminated table, A4 size,

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

suspended on a grey treasury tag. The names of the Entertainments Managers, F&B Managers, Sports Bar Captains and so on were given in full, anglicised in the colonial style - Gavin Fan, Harry Lam, Martin Wong – but the exclusive club names were all crudely cut to fit their boxes. American. Ladies. Beas R. Pacific. Jockey . . . It looked amateurish, the contact list, hanging there on its treasury tag.

“Does your wife sing?”

“What?” Neil swung back. “I beg your pardon?”

“Does your wife sing? She’s a looker, isn’t she?” Another smile. Those nibbling teeth. “I notice everything, you see. Everyone.”

“Why do you ask?”

“Sonny and Cher.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Chan blinked slowly. “I’m thinking Sonny and Cher.”

“My wife doesn’t sing . . .” Neil felt a twinge of guilt, letting Angel be mired in any of this. “She did once. A long time ago. But not now. Definitely not.”

“What’s her name?”

Neil hesitated, very uncomfortable. “Her name is Angel.”

“What does Angel do?”

Neil frowned and hesitated again, letting Chan know he was off limits, then answered quickly. “She works in The Lippo Building. Top of the building. She’s a negotiator.”

“What does she sell?”

“She sells shipping space, Mr. Chan. Insurance contracts, assurance contracts. My wife is a very intelligent and successful woman, Mr. Chan, but she doesn’t sing, you see. I sing.”

“Left you behind, eh?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Just a little, though.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

Chan looked down to his desk and opened The Neil Diamond Collection CD that was lying there in front of him. Neil had bought it in HMV in Hankow Road on the way in.

Something to remind Chan, soften him up, focus attention. I can do any of those songs, he'd said, with quiet authority, tapping the CD on Chan's desk. No problem. No problem at all. But now his boasts about his songs and singers, and Chan's boasts about all his clubs, seemed to have cancelled each other out, to have crossed swords in the air above them and fallen in a useless heap, leaving them nothing to say to each other.

Idly now, Chan removed the sleeve notes from the CD case and flicked through the contents, the biographical material, the titles and lyrics.

"Store bought woman . . ." he read, squinting at a song lyric. ". . . somethingsomething *store bought woman*? What does that mean?"

Neil shifted in his rattan armchair, the only other chair in Chan's seedy office. He had no answer to such a question. Somethingsomething . . .

"What does that mean? Store bought woman. Do you know?"

"I don't know what that line means," Neil admitted. "That particular line."

Chan looked at Neil as if he'd already fallen short.

"But you . . ."

"Yes? . . ."

"Are a store bought woman."

"I don't know what it means. I just told you. Does it matter? . . . Prostitute, perhaps. I don't know."

"You're a store bought woman."

"Oh, that's very funny, Mr. Chan. I've got long hair so I'm a woman. Ha ha ha. You'll have to do better than that or I'm out of here."

"Go ahead."

"What?"

"Go right ahead."

There was a pause. Neil stayed where he was.

"You are what you don't know," Chan said, "and that makes you a store bought woman. Remember that."

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

Chan glanced again at the lyrics, looking for something else, but then he closed the booklet. Game over.

“You’re right,” he said. “It doesn’t matter.”

He flicked the booklet aside.

“Now what was it you wanted again?”

Their eyes locked.

“That’s ridiculous,” Neil said. “You remember me. You know why I’m here. What’s your problem, pal?”

Chan drew his laptop in front of him, his Compaq, and opened the lid. He continued absently, speaking to the screen. “Sure I remember you. Of course I remember you . . . I remember your song . . . Your party . . . Your act . . . Your wife . . . Her friends . . .” He typed something, cocked his head at what he’d typed, frowned at what he’d typed. “I remember your long hair, like a lady . . .” He looked at Neil again, looked at him hard. “. . . And your voice . . . I remember everything, I notice everything, you see . . . and everyone . . .” His right hand floated high off the keyboard and he began to draw limp circles in the air around Neil’s face, white cuff and gold cuff link catching the light. He rolled his wrist as Neil had done last night, this way, that way, never too much, showing he remembered everything. Then his eyebrows arched in mild surprise, his mouth opened and his voice lifted into grating half-song, spread over just two or three rocky notes. A mockery of the old Sinatra standard –

She never bothers with people she hates -

He’d started at that moment when Sinatra points at a pretty lady in the audience who ‘always comes late’. That moment of revelation when, with a flick of his foot, in time with the bass drum hitting home, Sinatra explains, as Chan explained on his two or three flat notes now –

*That’s why the lady,
That’s why the lady,
That’s why the lady,*

Is a tramp!

Quiet.

Chan's hand finished its circuit and stopped with his finger pointing at the middle of Neil's forehead, where his gaze steadied, not meeting Neil's gaze – pure bullseye – pure bullshit –

“Are you a tramp?”

It was Neil's turn to stonewall.

“Are you a tramp? A gypsy? Mister?”

Neil said nothing. His expression said nothing. Just what *right . . . ?* Who the fuck was this guy?

“I need to know these things. How you're fixed, that's all.”

Chan stood from his desk and looked down at Neil, then turned his back on him to face the window. From behind, standing up, he was suddenly a slight figure again, in his cheap dark business suit. Neil could have felled him with one punch or kick in the kidneys, then walked straight out.

Go ahead. Go right ahead.

There was nothing to be seen out the window beyond Chan. Half of it was taken up with an air conditioner unit and the rest was covered with pollution deposit, the yellow plaque that settled on every ledge, in every gap, on every shelf in Hong Kong. Chan pointed a handset at the AC unit and the room quietened. Sounds of the traffic below filtered in.

“Reason to Believe,” he said, sitting down and facing Neil once more. “That's what you were singing, Reason to Believe by Neil Diamond.”

“It's a Tim Hardin song,” Neil corrected. “Nineteen sixty-six. Neil Diamond just covered it, like Rod Stewart.”

Chan's office chair had an adjustable height mechanism that was racked up to full advantage, and he leant forward now so that his slight torso towered behind the desk. He didn't like being corrected like that. Neil tried to sit up, to get on even terms, but the aged rattan armchair was so low it was impossible to do anything but slump in it, legs outstretched across the grubby carpet.

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

“Neil Diamond is one of my favourite singers, you know,” Chan announced, sharing another confidence. “The Atlantis Bar is one of only two karaoke places on the island that carry Neil Diamond songs.” He waved two fingers. “Two that I know of, anyway. The other is in Causeway Bay. But that’s somewhat expensive . . .”

A terrible homesickness swept through Neil. He thought of Angel, back in their apartment. She was going in late today. She’d told him to give her a call, let her know how it went. He thought of her washing up or taking a shower, or making herself some coffee, maybe eating a croissant or a Danish in the kitchen, glancing at the wall-phone as she ate, as she drank her coffee. If she could see him here, slumped in this office, see the yellow window – ‘Oh my God! What a dump!’ - if she could see where he had sunk to, his humiliation – Are you a tramp? A gypsy? Mister? – see all this dirt and triviality -

“Mr. Chan. You said you might be able to fix something up.”

“Fix something up?”

“Dates. Bookings.”

“Dates? Bookings?”

Chan chuckled at that. He shut the lid of his Compaq and set it aside, leaving the space clear again. Another smile started but he withdrew it with a flick of the tongue.

“Do you remember a sixties’ band called Manfred Mann?”

“Mr. Chan, I didn’t come here to chat about old sixties’ bands.”

“Do you remember, We are the Manfreds?”

Neil didn’t answer.

“Pretty Flamingo?”

“Am I a pretty flamingo? Is that it? Very funny.”

“They were over here, in Hong Kong, just last year. Manfred Mann. They played a string of clubs, then went back via Manila and Singapore - and Bangkok, I believe. For a little whoring in Bangkok, maybe. Manfred Mann. I swear not one of them was under fifty-five. I saw them at The Football Club

David Milnes

in Happy Valley. They cleaned up there. They cleaned up everywhere.”

Neil began to get the drift and was a little worried by it. He vaguely remembered a news item about a concert at The Royal Albert Hall for Manfred Mann in the not so distant past. Several sixties’ bands like that had been enjoying twilight comebacks. There had been a fad in England for this sort of thing. He remembered tv pictures, queues of punters outside The Royal Albert Hall, middle-aged people, bald men in light raincoats, solid, dumpy women, smiling and waving their tickets at the cameras. Angel had laughed: “Hope for you yet, Neil!” But he couldn’t see the funny side of it. The very notion exasperated him. All this fuss, pictures on the news no less, when a band like his, full of genuine musicians trying to uphold a cultural tradition, could hardly play for its beer, had to do ceilidhs in village halls, play barn dances, Country Fayres, Show Grounds, Truckfests, Summer FunWeeks for all the Family, and all the bloody rest of it.

“They did a concert at The Royal Albert Hall.”

“Did they?” Chan’s eyebrows lifted. Neil had said the right thing. “At The Royal Albert Hall? I didn’t know that. Big venue. Did they clean up there?”

Neil cocked a smile, got there first. “Did they wash the dishes at The Albert Hall? That it? Yeah, that’s a lot of dishes. Lots of dishes.”

Chan blinked slowly again, didn’t smile. “Was it a hit event, or not?”

“It was a sell-out event. Not so long ago. Last spring, maybe.”

Chan nodded. “You see, that’s very interesting. Very interesting. So what do you play, Mr. Atherton? What kind of music?”

“Well, what I have in mind, like I said - ”

“But what do you play? Normally. What instruments.”

Neil took a breath. It had to come out. His one and only, lonely answer.

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

“Well, first and foremost I’m a folk musician, you see, Mr. Chan. That’s what I’ve always been. That’s what I’ve always done. Folk music. I spent a few years - off and on - with Fairport Convention before coming out here. I had to quit when my wife got this job. You know Fairport Convention? World class. Dave Pegg? Dave Swarbrick? Richard Thompson? Or Sandy Denny, from years back? I recorded several albums with those people. And with other bands. Small bands, big bands. High profile bands. Lots of bands.”

Chan tugged his jacket from under his buttocks, then settled back. His disappointment was palpable, filling the office like a break of wind. This was such a long way – oh, such a long, long way! - from Manfred Mann in Happy Valley at The Football Club, and then at The Royal Albert Hall.

“Airport Convention, you say.”

“Fairport Convention.”

“And you’re a folk musician.”

“That’s right.” Time to hold on. Ride it out. “That’s right. That’s where my real musical interest lies. I did a lot of solo tours too, in the U.K., on the circuit.” He leant forward. “Listen, if you happen to have any folk connections up your-”

“Jacksie?”

Neil took a breath, sat back.

“What circuit?”

“Northern England. All the university towns, folk societies. And the East Midlands, East Anglia . . .”

Chan waved that away. The northern circuit. “So what instruments do you play?”

“Viola mainly, but guitar, bodhrán - ”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a drum. A hand drum.”

“A hand job.”

“It’s Irish. An Irish hand drum. And I can play a little harmonica too.”

“I get the picture,” Chan said. “You’re a wandering minstrel. Rags and patches. That kind of thing.”

“Oh no I’m not, Mr. Chan.”

“You’re a one-man band. On the road. Hitching a ride.”

“No I’m not.”

“Swagman. Billabong. Waltzing Matilda.”

“I’m not a one-man band, Mr. Chan.”

“Sounds like it to me.”

From somewhere Chan had fetched a toothpick and he began making his way round his mouth, one hand discreetly hiding what the other was up to. These Chinese and their table manners, Neil thought, but then he noticed that Chan’s hands were cupped around his mouth much like a harmonica player’s, and he saw some new mockery, another sly joke at his expense. Or was that paranoia now?

“As it happens, I also led a couple of bands,” Neil added, asserting himself.

Between picks, frowning at the bloodied tip of his toothpick, Chan asked: “What were they called?”

“Stone Age Doll, in the seventies.”

Chan took a Kleenex from a box on his desk. He wiped his mouth, said nothing.

“We brought out three albums. And in the eighties, Folk Renaissance. Dave Pegg played with Renaissance. For a while.”

Chan worked a food particle from his incisors, wiped the toothpick on his tissue, then snapped the pick and rolled it up in the tissue, into a tight ball that he squeezed very hard. He reached out and dropped the ball next to his Compaq.

“Time out.”

“What? . . . Excuse me?”

“I have no more time for this today. I’m sorry. Come back another day.”

Neil stiffened in the rattan chair.

“When, exactly?”

“Er . . .” Chan raised his eyebrows and his eyes flitted about the room, searching everywhere for free dates, in every grey and shady corner. “Friday?”

“When, Friday?”

“Same time. Why not . . .”

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

Neil needed to recover ground, to get something definite established here. He wanted to name one or two other outfits he'd played for, such as Pentangle and Steeleye Span – big artillery - but Chan's abruptness had wrong-footed him completely.

Now Chan was standing up, holding out his hand.

"Friday," Neil said, getting out of his seat.

Chan shook his hand across the desk.

"Till Friday," Neil repeated.

But Chan said nothing more.

David Milnes

Chapter Three

Veuve Clicquot

“So, how’d it go?”

Oh dear. Neil refilled his glass, put down the bottle, and leant against her desk.

“Don’t get drunk, Neil. That’s an order.”

Her chair was pushed back. She sat with her champagne glass in her lap and her glass was still full. She held it with both hands, very poised. The bag of clothes, underwear and shoes he’d brought lay in front of her, on her empty desk.

Could he talk about Elbert Chan here? In The Lippo Building? Was someone like that allowed all the way up to the twenty-seventh floor, stepping out the lift in his cheap business suit, with his phoney gold watch, cuff links, tie-pin?

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

Or his Hawaiian shirt? Surely a doorman would head him off. One moment, friend. Just where do you think you're going?

"Well?"

"There's something there," Neil answered to the floor. "Could be good. Could be very good. He has the contacts. But there's nothing concrete. Not yet."

"Why so cagey?"

He glanced at her. "I'll let you know on a need-to-know basis. Okay?"

She had a new, subtle look. Different on-the-town make-up for a new and different kind of party. A blue and silky sulky look about her eyes, professionally applied. Her hair was darker too and styled with a slight wave. She must have had it all done after work, while he gathered up and brought her things. Lacy things. Low, short, risky things. That's why she'd had no time to come home and change, why he'd had to fetch and carry for her. That was the real reason, not what she'd said.

"So." She put her glass on the desk and looked about for her handbag. "You'll be needing your allowance."

He'd come all this way with her sexy things, on public transport, for his allowance.

"I'll drink to my allowance."

He emptied his glass again. It was such a heavenly drink.

"Please don't get drunk, Neil. I just told you."

He stared about the smart offices, one hand holding his empty champagne glass, the other in his pocket. He gazed vacantly at the mysterious rows of dark, paperless desk tops with their flat screens and state-of-the-art terminals, their complicated telephones, their cables, clipped and bundled, disappearing down stainless steel hatches in the deep, pinstriped carpet. His gaze sank into the carpet, blurring the pinstripes.

Quite at ease, twenty-seven floors up. And on the next floor they drank only Bollinger, she said.

"You've done so well, Angel," he admitted. "You're a very clever woman. I'm a lucky guy . . ."

David Milnes

He glanced at her but she looked away and pushed her hand through her hair, ruffling its moussed thickness. A new, evasive mannerism. She fetched her handbag from under her chair but she didn't open it.

"And I'm lucky too, Neil." She faced him squarely, handbag in her lap. "I know where I stand in the pecking order. I'm third fiddle here. That's all."

"You must be good, though."

"I'm not getting any big ideas about myself."

There was no softening her these days, hardly any humour left at all. He had to respond to her wariness, those implications. "So it's time I got rid of *my* big ideas about *myself*, right?"

She frowned and lowered her eyes to her handbag. He could see, under the cold office light, the thickness of her make-up in the creases of her frown. She was becoming more impersonal towards him by the minute, as if she were dealing with a work problem that kept coming back to her desk by mistake, time after time.

"You have to get a job, Neil." She shook her head as if asking herself why she had to say this to him, again and again and again. "One way or another. Something different. Forget your music. Just forget about it. No one's interested here. Not in that. Try something else. Teach kids the guitar or something. Put an ad in the paper. You can't live off me. Not any more."

"I'll find something. You know that. Something will turn up. Always has, always does. Always." He steadied his gaze across the desks. The champagne had already got to him; such insidious bubbles. "I'm a survivor, remember."

"No you're not, Neil."

He looked down. She met his gaze through narrowed eyes.

"You're not surviving if I'm paying your bills. Come on, now."

Well, no answer to that.

He shoved himself off the desk and moved to the windows and stood there with his empty glass, his hand in his pocket,

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

and stared at the views of Kowloon and the South China Sea, from the top of The Lippo Building.

He heard her get up from her desk and come up behind him. Conciliatory, perhaps. But he couldn't handle a moment of sentiment with her right now, no matter how token. Before she could speak he asked her about the view. The new suspension bridge to the airport was quite wonderful from up here, strung up on washing lines of coloured lights across the sea. She gave him the names of the islands the bridge spanned - from Tsing Yi to Ma Wan to Tsing Chau Tsai, on Lantau . . .

Listening to her, and looking out from her offices in this early evening light, and seeing the dark shadows of the mountains all about, and in the far distance the columns of container ships anchored out there, ships and cargoes that were somehow tethered up here as well, to the desk tops on the twenty-seventh floor, through those bundled cables and stainless steel hatches - seeing all of this and sensing the fabulous wealth lying out there on the South China Sea, and up here, all around him, feeling the boom from which everyone - executive, clerk, salesman and saleswoman - was cutting out his or her slice, before it was too late, feeling the boom, at last, as a physical sensation, Neil had a moment of epiphany this Wednesday evening. Everything became sharper, starker, more black and white. Against this backdrop, and the Central and Western business districts, he felt any hope he had for his career, and his marriage, fade out of view. Little wonder the old China hands, Damian and his gang, shook their heads and laughed - Do you know Mr. Bojangles, Neil? I mean, personally? . . . Do you remember that seventies' hit, Neil - 'Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves'? . . . Neil, have you got that old sixties' song anywhere - 'King of the Road'? We'd really like to hear that now . . .

Just forget about it. No one's interested here. Forget about the kings and queens of folk, and their retinues and genealogies. Forget Dave Pegg, Dave Swarbrick, Sandy Denny. Forget also that Messrs. Pegg and Swarbrick played at a certain wedding twenty years ago, with Sandy Denny

singing too, on a makeshift stage, and with him, and with his young bride, in traditional white, head to the stars, singing her heart out to Judy Collins songs. But forget Judy Collins, and Joan Baez, and Joni Mitchell – all Angel's favourites, once upon a time – forget Judy, Joan, Joni – leave them behind. They're out the frame. Forget Both Sides Now, Amazing Grace, Lonesome Road, The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down, Diamonds and Rust. Forget Liege and Lief. Forget Little Boxes, Where Have All the Flowers Gone?, We Shall Overcome, Blowing in the Wind, Mr. Tambourine Man and a hundred other *million-dollar!* songs that had changed the face of western culture – because none of that matters here. Judy, Joan, Joni, Dylan, Seeger, Guthrie, The Weavers, Tom Paxton, Tim Hardin – dead or alive they are unwanted, they hold no sway here. Forget them. End of story. Teach kids the guitar. Charge top dollar.

But look in every song book, every guitar tutor – Teach kids the guitar, indeed! - and on every other page you'll find them. Dylan. Seeger. Guthrie. Joan Baez. So it isn't true. It can not be true.

He felt a shift beneath his feet as he stared out the glass at the dark and glittering seas. A sway in the building. He thought of the apex of the building – inside, under bows of steel, was a hollow for a vast Jacuzzi, with real rocks, and real plants, and bonsai trees, all set around a bubbling, steaming pool. Angel had taken him up there when they'd first arrived. She'd had to share it. It was unbelievable. Walls all the way around of one-way glass. Pine saunas imported from Sweden, and pine changing rooms, forty floors up. A haven for naturists, Angel had joked, but with a bar, of course. You could see forever up there on a clear day. She'd even hummed the tune.

He was no longer looking at the view beyond the glass, and he wasn't listening. His focus had retracted to his own negative in the window. He looked at his lower body, his belly – too much drowning of sorrows on his own, and then too many comforters in the morning, too many guilty croissants

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

and Danishes for breakfast, after she'd gone to work. He stared at the reflection of his heavy belt, a brassy, military thing he'd always worn on stage in England. A talisman, like the black velvet band he used to tie his hair. But neither had brought a drop of luck for twenty years. In the reflection the belt hung crooked over his crotch. The buckle sagged at a weary angle. There was nothing he could do about it. He'd tried. No matter which way he set it, pulled it, tightened it, it had to sag like that.

He looked up to his face: his grey hair scraped into the ponytail and tied back with the black velvet band. That phoney gypsy look –

*'Her eyes they shone like diamonds
They called her the queen of the land,
And her hair hung over her shoulder
Tied up with a black velvet band . . .'*

Oh, just forget about it now.

The next evening, Thursday, he was reading Hemingway on the sofa in the living room. Fiesta. He had the stereo on low and he didn't notice her come in. Without a word she put down her bag and pressed eject.

"Er . . . I was listening to that."

"Oh really, Neil . . ." She picked up a remote from the sideboard and switched on the air conditioner. "I have just finished work and I'm very tired, I'm weary, and the traffic was awful."

He didn't have air conditioning during the day, only the fans, but she never noticed.

"I've spent an hour sitting in one of those horrid green buses," she said. "I'm going to buy a car. This weekend I shall buy my own car."

He put his book down on the sofa. "Something sporty, maybe?"

"Maybe," she replied, replacing the remote, ignoring him. "I haven't decided."

He sighed and knitted his hands behind his ponytail. "Oh, you haven't been down to the showrooms and seen all the new toys, the new soft-tops and coupés?"

"No, Neil."

He ducked further sparring – didn't want it. He'd been so looking forward to her return this evening, not least because he'd cooked something for her. A French casserole from the recipe book. Something special after last night. She must be able to smell it, but she said nothing. And he'd talk to her about tomorrow, about his appointment first thing with Elbert Chan, even though he didn't believe it would come off. That would bring her over for a while. He stood and went to get his CD.

"No! I don't want that noise in my ears!"

She thought he was going to put it on again in some further provocation - "Angel, I wasn't - "

She bent down in an ungainly way and yanked out the plug at the mains. She brushed past him, rushing on to the bedroom - "I want to swim, I want to relax, I want to go out. I want to live a little. Put it on again when I've gone, if you must."

He hesitated, then followed to the bedroom with a firm step. By the time he got there she'd slipped off her dress and was standing in her underwear looking through her wardrobe.

"Angel. We need to talk."

"No. We don't need to talk," she said into the wardrobe, flicking through blouses, dresses, lacy bits and pieces.

He stared at her body, at the indents of her black silk underwear.

"You can see what's happened," she said. "Anyone can see what's happened."

He couldn't let that go.

"Angel, you must explain to me sometime how this plutocracy thing works, you know? What it does to you. There

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

is no need to be so mean to me now, when things aren't looking too good. Like you're expecting me to just get up and go if you're hard enough. You were quite a decent sort before you copped out and sold out, I seem to recall."

On that last line she rested her head on the edge of the wardrobe door and her shoulders drooped.

Had he got through?

"Oh Neil. If you only understood how that kind of thing sounds to me now."

He quit the bedroom, found his wallet, picked up his book and left the apartment.

Fiesta had a very dated sketch of a matador on the cover, gravely poised with shining blade, dressed all in black with dashes of sun-dried red and yellow. His skin was dark and swarthy and his long hair was drawn tight and tied behind. The gitano, made good. Neil loved the cover. He loved the book. He'd read it many times. Paris, Pamplona, Madrid in the nineteen twenties - a wonderful, in-between, expat world, so remote and glamorous and clear-skied, so far away from all his bars and dives, hangovers and rows.

Every seat on the Star Ferry was familiar to him, from bow to stern, port & starboard, on both decks of every boat. The beautiful lacquered frames, the neat Formica patch of the seat itself, and the views across every quadrant of the ever-changing seascape - all of it, too familiar. Children scrambled ahead and flipped over the back-rests, making a wonderful clattering sound across the teak decks, like the fall of mah-jong tiles.

He took a seat midships, upper deck.

It was just a habit, this trip, that was all. The best place to blow away a hangover or a bad scene. During the crossing he watched the junks and the barges and liners, or sometimes he read a magazine or a book instead, keeping his head down and

his eyes away from the painful glint of the waves and office blocks. The sea breeze flipped his ponytail as he sat by the open window and for the few minutes of the ride he was content.

The trip was too short, though, always too short. This evening in particular he needed it to last longer, after such an ugly scene. And the wind was wrong this evening too. Traces of the ferry's oily fumes, and the fumes of the Jetfoils and Turbo-cats and Star Cruise liners, came in light gusts across the deck. Star Pisces and Star Leo were both docked at Ocean Terminal. He'd read somewhere that during one docking a liner pumped out more pollution than 380,000 cars. It was the kind of fact he liked to store away to share at some point. But she'd caught him out, doing that. He'd offered too many of his nasty facts and figures and snippets of bad news, gleaned from secondhand newspapers and dubious magazines.

"Did you know that in Hong Kong there are nine rats for every human being? Did you know that? You are never more than twelve feet away from a rat. It's a fact. World class city, you know. Full of rats."

"Twelve feet? From a rat?" She grimaced.

"Never more than that."

"Well, I'm not."

"Ha ha ha . . ."

As the ferry shunted off across the harbour he opened *Fiesta* at the closing pages. He knew much of the wistful final dialogue in the cocktail bar of the Palace Hotel by heart. '*Isn't it a nice bar?*' . . . '*They're all nice bars.*' . . . '*Barmen and jockeys are the only people who are polite any more*' . . . '*I like an olive in a Martini.*' . . . '*Right you are, sir. There you are . . .*'

He looked up and winced at the evening sunlight, still strong despite the haze, the way it caught a golden block and dulled it to copper in the dusk. He shielded his gaze and stared at the postcard skyline, the shimmering slabs of success. Citibank. Standard Chartered. Bank of China. Banks and more banks. The Lippo Building. Insurance. Assurance -

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

'I like an olive in a Martini.' . . . 'Right you are, sir. There you are . . .'

When the ferry docked he waited for the crowd to disperse before drifting from the deck and making his way alone up the ramp. Then he faltered at the top, unwilling to cross the jetty to the return boat. He had an urge to walk ahead into the clean and well-lit subways of the island itself. He'd pop up again into the evening somewhere near The Furama Hotel, The Mandarin Oriental, or The Ritz Carlton. He'd take a lift to a high hotel bar overlooking the harbour and he'd order a Martini there, and ask the barman for a cocktail olive. Ah, but he needed to share that, to be with someone, someone new. The time would come, though, must come, he was sure, when he'd sit in a smart hotel bar and order that Martini, and he would use that line from *Fiesta*, and laugh about it to himself. A private joke. He promised never to have another Martini until that moment. He'd clink glasses with someone and smile, in the high hotel bar. Some lucky girl. Chinese. Beautiful. Cheers.

Then he thought of last night, when she came to bed at 2 a.m. after her special party.

How she pushed him away.

"No, Neil."

He reached out again. Stroked her back. Then she said something else, to make a point, as she settled apart from him and tugged the duvet round her: "I don't like your creepy advances any more."

He couldn't stand hearing that. It didn't need saying and it angered and humiliated him so. He was too much abused, too much left on his own, ignored, set aside. He moved over and persisted, more forcefully, trying to kiss her round the neck -

"Get lost, Neil!"

But he wouldn't get lost. He was carried away. He forced his hand between her legs -

"Fuck off, Neil! Please!" she cried out.

And then he slunk away, without sound or words, a wounded animal. That was too much for him by a long

David Milnes

stretch. She moved to the edge of the bed and he got up and tried to read in the living room on the sofa.

Now he turned back through the rusty cagework of the terminus, to the turnstile and the waiting boat.

Chapter Four

Breakfast Meeting

Chan's two receptionists ran a travel agency of some description. Very backstreet. Neil couldn't work out how that connected, but first thing Friday morning they were so busy with a consignment of glossy holiday brochures, so busy flicking through their new brochures and chatting about them and sharing them, they could hardly spare a moment just to tell him that Chan wasn't there.

Only one spoke, and not to him but down to her brochure. After she'd told him Chan wasn't there, she flicked the page to a double spread of a fancy hotel swimming pool. It was a crimson, heart-shaped pool, all new and empty. Neil's hope sank deep in it. She turned and smiled to her friend:

"Isn't that romantic?"

David Milnes

Neil cleared his throat. "Not here?"

"Not here."

"But we had an appointment this morning, first thing . . ."

She shrugged – then her friend shrugged, the one who didn't speak, in exactly the same way, a moment later. Neil caught that out the corner of his eye.

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

"No idea."

"Well, do you know where I might find him?"

The one who spoke looked up. She stroked her shiny black hair.

"He might be down the street?" Her answer curled up at the end. Nothing inside.

They were far too pretty, these receptionists, Neil considered, and enjoyed far too much of their own company. They were like colourful exotic birds, parakeets, preening themselves in the bare cage of Chan's offices. Of course they had no time for him, with his lived-in face and shabby clothes, his long grey frizz in a ponytail. If he'd strolled in here wearing an expensive business suit and asked for a Club Class ticket to New York for this afternoon - at the very latest or just forget about it, please - their attitude would have been completely different. They'd have slipped their beautiful black hair behind their ears and smiled at him, and spoken softly, and flitted and flirted about. But, as things stood, they couldn't give a monkey's fuck about him.

"Down the street?"

She turned the page. The pool was gone. Then the other turned her page.

"Sure. There's a café where he has breakfast. Next to the Plaza."

Neil nodded, though neither was looking at him.

"Thanks."

He stared from one girl to the other while they continued flicking through their brochures. He tapped the counter a few times, putting a marker down, then withdrew.

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

He thought he heard them titter as the door closed behind him on its spring. Then just as the lift arrived he definitely heard them laugh, laugh out loud, as the bell tingled and the doors sprang open. He felt foolish to pursue what they'd told him, but after that encounter he had nothing left to lose.

There was indeed a café next to the plaza. It was the kind of place that had long fascinated Neil. In the window lay a row of aluminium trays filled with bubbling meat - lungs, tongues, intestines, gizzards – all in a brown sauce, always the same brown sauce, bubbling around the tips and lips of meat, to whet the appetites of passers-by. The café itself was little more than a corridor decked out with collapsible tables and chairs. The corridor was hot and steamy and stank of boiled meat, garlic, ginger, and a tang of powerful bleach.

Chan sat alone in here, past the counter, under a swivelling wall fan. No air conditioner.

He ate with his head bent low over his food. On Neil's approach he didn't stop eating, but raised a hand and waved to the seat opposite. Neil pulled out the collapsible chair and sat down. Chan continued eating. He rolled up his strips of lung, wrapped them in black seaweed, dipped them daintily in chilli sauce and popped them in his mouth. The smell of the café made Neil queasy and he felt worse watching Chan eat his breakfast. Now Chan left the meat and seaweed and lifted his rice bowl to his face. He fed his twitching mouth with quick flicks of his chopsticks. When he'd finished he sat back and swept an open hand across what was left.

“Want some?”

Neil shook his head. “No thanks.”

The reason Chan sat at the end of the café now became clear. The fan was only part of it. A traffic jam outside had left a taxi stuck immediately in front of the door and its fumes were pumping into the corridor, filling it up. The two cooks behind the counter, standing on a platform – two tall cooks, too tall for their platform and their café - completely ignored this new taste in the air. They pretended the fumes didn't offend, didn't exist.

David Milnes

Chan offered Neil nothing else to eat or drink.

He took a sip of tea, then said: "Do you mind if I ask you something personal?"

Neil shrugged. There was little Chan could do to hurt him now, not after last time.

"Do you like Neil Diamond?"

Neil frowned: hadn't they done this? Hadn't they moved on from there?

"Do you like him?"

"Well - "

"Do you like him?"

"He's okay."

Chan shook his head. "I think he's a phoney."

"But last time - "

"I don't care what I said last time."

Neil was about to reply but stopped himself. He nodded wisely instead.

Chan folded his arms.

"If I say I like your voice, what I mean is, I like what you can do with your voice. What you can get away with with your voice. But what I actually like or don't like, and what you like or don't like, or do or don't care about - that just doesn't matter. Golden rule. You see that?" Chan was forceful, but he didn't seem to be puffing himself up or trying to score any points this time. His arms were folded away and his slight body was folded away to one side, in the foldaway chair. The open antagonism of Wednesday's meeting was gone, off the record. He just wanted to talk business this morning. But Neil stayed wary. Chan's features flattened out all feeling, and the bald eyes gave nothing away. Elbert Chan was a subtle and intelligent fellow, Neil reflected - but a snake, no question.

"Let's take a look at what we have here."

Chan unfolded his hands and a rapid, hypnotic sequence of movements followed before he spoke - he rubbed his wrists together, knitted his fingers, rubbed his palms, then flipped his left hand open and picked the index finger -

"We have some years on stage. We can use that."

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

The steel table between them was no more than two feet across and Neil sat very close to Chan, even though Chan was sitting back, side on to the table. Chan's hands were a child's hands, small and clean and innocent, but the first joints were covered in wiry black hair. Despite the greasy food and greasy table Chan's cuffs were perfectly clean and white and dry. His gold cuff links and gold watch still shone in the steamy light. He picked off his second finger.

"We can play those instruments. Viola. Guitar. Bodhrán."

That was quite a feat of memory, and effortless too. Despite himself Neil felt drawn in, felt a need to tuck himself in, to show willing, to bring himself physically deeper into the ambit of Chan's conversation and his sleights of hand. He wanted to lean forward, but didn't dare. If he so much as rested his hands on the table he knew that last slice of lung and the rice bowl and chilli sauce would all flick up in his face. Chan never touched the table, as if he understood it would collapse in this way, or as if he could make it operate in this way, remotely, if he chose to.

"And you have those instruments to hand, I take it."

A setback. Neil considered lying but thought better of it. "Actually, no. I sold up before we left the U.K."

"You haven't got any instruments?" Chan looked incredulous.

"There wasn't room in the baggage allowance." Neil tried to make light of the problem. "An Englishman always pays his way, you know."

"That may be so, but you haven't got any instruments."

One of the tall cooks came and took the dirty bowls and dishes and wiped the tiny table, but just Chan's half.

"Hong Kong is stuffed full of musicians," Chan said, waving the problem away. "Singers, artists, what have you. It's just a question of turning the right stones. We can get a four piece Filipino band for twelve or thirteen hundred a night. Peanuts. And they're really very competent."

Twelve or thirteen hundred dollars? A hundred pounds? For a whole band? This was hopeless. Neil really needed to get

out of this café and get right away from Elbert Chan and his delicious breakfast and his slippery hands. Why had he come back at all? Why had he allowed himself to be led on by those tittering receptionists? ‘Sure. There’s a café where he has breakfast. Next to the Plaza.’

Because he was desperate. That was all.

“Like I said, I’ve got connections with the clubs here in Hong Kong,” Chan resumed, folding his hands and sitting in profile again, legs crossed, “and with one or two clubs in Macau and on the mainland. I’m not talking about the good clubs, I’m talking about the best clubs.” He avoided Neil’s eyes. He kept glancing down the corridor into the street, or at the wall of the serving counter. Now he looked back: “You know how much it costs to join The Pacific Club, here in Kowloon?”

Neil didn’t answer.

“It costs half a million Hong Kong to join The Pacific Club, Ocean Terminal, Kowloon. That’s how much it costs. Half a million. Then you’re on the waiting list.”

Chan left a pause for these figures to impress, then looked away at his shiny shoe in the corridor. He flicked his shiny shoe.

Neil felt a tension in his calf muscles. The balls of his feet pressed on the floor.

Let’s go. Let’s go!

“I know the kind of thing they put on, the kind of thing they like,” Chan continued. “They had an Elvis impersonator from London. North London. Very good. Very funny. He doubled his itinerary, doubled his money. They couldn’t get enough. Particularly the ladies.”

No matter how lightly dropped into the conversation, the mention of an Elvis impersonator alarmed Neil. Impersonators, spoofs, jerks, jokers, hobbyist entertainers – all of that.

Chan turned back to the table and risked tapping it where the cook had wiped. “Let me tell you about these expat ladies. They play tennis in the morning, in the cool, then they have

The Ghost of Neil Diamond

lunch, and then they sit by the pool. That's it. They do step classes. I mean, step classes. They need their entertainment. The men are just as bad when they've had a bit to drink, and a lot are drunk before you walk on. Some of them are throwing food around. They're telling blue jokes. If they don't like the act they throw food around, and if they do like it they throw food around. It's like that sometimes."

Chan chuckled and stopped there. He looked away as if remembering one such riotous evening, and smiled at the busy cooks chopping, scraping and sweating behind the counter. So the acts he was talking about were there to be pilloried. That was it. Scoff the food, scoff at the act. That was the entertainment.

"Look, Mr. Chan, if what you've got in mind is some kind of spoof, some stupid joke - "

"No no no . . ." Chan immediately went into reverse, waved away the very idea - "Of course not! That's not how I see you doing this. I don't see comedy. Not for you. It wouldn't work. You're a serious man." He frowned earnestly at Neil, leaving no doubt on this point. "I've seen you. I've heard you. For your act, you *are* Neil Diamond. The best. The real thing."

The deal. The sell.

Angel would love this, on the 27th floor.

What's your husband do, again, Mrs. Atherton? He's in show business. Oh really? He's an actor? Not an actor, exactly. No? No. What, then? He's an impersonator. Oh really? Who does he impersonate? Find out at your club tonight.

"You come on stage as Neil Diamond. The whipped hair, all the razzmatazz, the whole bag of shit."

Chan thumbed over his shoulder, towards his office block - "You go into HMV in Hankow Road. It's full of tribute CDs. It's a growth industry. All the oldies recycled. Frank Sinatra, Tom Jones, The Beatles, Shirley Bassey - all made in China, at a fraction of the cost. And you really can't tell the difference. Same talent. Same for Neil Diamond. He doesn't

live here, never comes here. I'd go to his concert but I can't. That's where you step in."

Back in England Neil was a known quantity. A little old-fashioned maybe, a little out of time, out of style, but a known quantity. There were album sleeves with his name on, his cameo, his contributions, his arrangements, his credits.

"I'm not talking about a big market," Chan waved away any pipe dreams of that order. "I'm talking about a niche market. But it's big enough to make a living. Maybe a good living. I'm telling you that you can make a living as Neil Diamond here. You can do that. I've heard you sing and I know you can do that."

"I'm very flattered."

Neil stood up. Thanks for that, Mr. Chan. We got there in the end. He held out his hand, offered his own forced smile – "Thanks for your time. I'll think about it and I'll be in touch."

Without getting up Chan took Neil's hand for a fleeting moment, then snapped his fingers and shouted for his bill.