

Night Ferry From Macau

by

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It was 4.00 a.m. when the aged ferry shuddered under way. As usual on a Monday, it was filled to capacity, its pre-dawn departure being particularly suitable for gamblers extending their weekend sprees in Macau. The three-and-a-half-hour journey from the ancient Portuguese enclave to the British Colony of Hong Kong provided just sufficient time for a good nap before resuming the quotidian struggle for a more monied existence.

But a nap was out of the question for Pao, standing listlessly upon the after deck. Others could sleep. His burly escort could sleep. He was left mulling the consequences of having gambled and lost. Yet, oddly, he felt neither apprehension nor regret, only a strange sense of inevitability. It amused him to think that he had finally come up with a formula for turning adversity to advantage!

The night was dark and portentous, the deck crowded with shadows. The windows of the second class cabins, steamed up by the slumbering hordes within, threw only a grudging light upon the throbbing darkness of the deck. Pao's features, therefore, remained obscured.

Otherwise an observer might have discerned a thin, middle-aged man with an angular physiognomy. His complexion was sallow and washed out, suggestive of a lack of sleep. The forehead was indented at the temples, with high cheekbones shearing into hollow cheeks. Two vertical frown lines marked the space between nondescript eyebrows. A half-smoked cigarette dangled from a thin, sullen mouth. The small hands resting upon the deck failing were unremarkable, save for a missing little finger on the left hand.

Pao had not always looked that way. There had been a time when his features were attractively rounded and cushioned, when his eyes shone with intelligence. But that was before defeats and humiliations turned him into a stranger to hope.

The sea breeze, still edged by spring chill, caused Pao to shiver momentarily. He turned up the collar of his gaberdine jacket which still retained a certain faded smartness. He spat out the remainder of his cigarette and watched its frail speck disappear into the undifferentiated darkness merging sea and sky.

It occurred to him he had wasted more than half his life chasing the favours of the Goddess of Chance. Gambling seemed a peculiarly Chinese disease. Perhaps its germ had been planted among his people too early, during the traditional festivities marking each Lunar New Year.

He recalled the exploding fireworks, the resounding felicitations and, most of all, the red lai-see packages containing money handed out by adults. As a child he had longed to spend those bounties on toys of his own choosing, on secret hoards of liquoriced plums and on comics recounting the exploits of chivalrous swordsmen.

But his father, a widower and a maker of camphor wood chests, always expected him and his two elder brothers to risk part of their lai-see money on games of dice or cards. His father considered it important for each to know whether good luck or ill fortune would attend during the rest of the year. His young heart thumped when he betted. Yet, miraculously, he and his brothers always seemed to end up winning. It was not till he was nine or ten that he discovered his father had manipulated the games to ensure that each child began the year on a propitious note.

That discovery came as a disappointment. If the New Year games could be fixed, then winning did not really indicate whether a person was favoured by fortune. He wanted to find out if he had luck, so he conducted tests by systematically wagering with classmates on the outcome of examination results, football matches and other events. The results were inconclusive. They left him hankering for a way of harnessing luck.

Though luck might not always favour him, his father did. Because he did not share the dull, artisan faces of his brothers, he was not required to leave school at fourteen to learn wood-carving and carpentry. Instead his father encouraged him to aim for a career in commerce or one of the professions. Shortly after completing his secondary education, however, his father died and the prospect of a more dazzling future died with him.

The family business, together with the building from which it was conducted, was left to be shared equally among the brothers. Since he had not mastered a craft, it was agreed after much to-ing and fro-ing that he should assume responsibility for supervising stocks, purchasing materials and keeping track of orders and accounts.

Following a family tradition, each son drew an inadequate salary, mainly to dampen excessive wage expectations among fokis and apprentices. Shortfalls for the owners were made good through a confidential quarterly sharing of profits.

Times were changing, however. Camphor wood chests, no matter how beautifully carved or inlaid with semi-precious stones, were losing their appeal. People wanted more functional ways of storing quilts and winter clothing in their progressively smaller flats. The only steady demand, ironically, came from departing foreigners seeking to take home some memento of the East.

Quite apart from a dwindling income, Pao also became bored with his unchallenging work. It left him frequently restless for a creative outlet. He could feel neither the pleasure of working with a piece of seasoned wood nor the satisfaction of executing a well-carved composition. Indeed, the pungency of camphor wood gradually became an irritant. The dust and wood shavings in the workshop grew more intolerable by the day.

He wanted to strike out on his own, particularly when he sensed his brothers resenting his less onerous duties. But he lacked both capital and marketable skills. His bachelor status, however, dulled the edge of urgency. He allowed matters to drift, seeking diversions in mah-jong games and in punting on the amateur horse races organized by the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club. Both activities soon became regular pastimes.

At the age of twenty-two he married Lai-ching, a cheerful and comely girl who had been a former classmate. They honeymooned in Macau, that indolent cross between a down-market

Monte Carlo and an erratically administered Casablanca. The territory's Mediterranean dated charm was novel and soothing and to crown the sojourn they won five thousand dollars at baccarat in one of its many casinos. That represented a veritable fortune and they both took it as an auspicious start to their union.

Lai-ching's father, a head clerk in a firm of solicitors, had offered as dowry a tiny flat in Causeway Bay which he had acquired through a timely foreclosure. There the couple settled down to married life. They yearned for many sons but Lai-ching soon gave birth to a daughter. Two years later, another daughter arrived. Then life began to unravel.

Rising overheads and declining sales had reached a point where Pao's share of the profits proved inadequate to bridge the gap between salary and outgoings. To make matters worse, he began encountering a run of bad luck. The cost of raising another child, particularly a daughter, seemed an imposition.

He concluded that Heaven must be frowning upon him. His father had sired three sons. His brothers had produced sons. Yet he had only daughters and could not even afford a further try for a son.

One day an idea occurred to him. It came to him like a revelation and he threw himself into developing it with all the enthusiasm of a schoolboy plotting a prank.

His years of following horse races had enabled him to spot an anomaly in the tote rules. The tote always paid three place bets, even in a field of four runners, and the minimum return on a place bet of five dollars was five dollars and ten cents. That rendered punting for a place on the favourite a virtual betting certainty. If one had sufficient capital, a two per cent return in as many minutes was money for jam!

There was usually plenty of cash at the workshop to pay for raw materials, wages and other contingencies. Since races took place on Saturday afternoons, borrowing the money for a couple of hours would leave no one the wiser. When a four-horse race next appeared on a card, he took everything he could lay his hands on and betted it on the favourite to place. The horse duly obliged and he won a sum amounting to more than half a month's salary.

He was so exhilarated by his success that he could not help telling Lai-ching. But far from being pleased, she became upset.

"How can you take money that does not belong to you?" she asked. "What if something went wrong?"

"Nothing can go wrong. It's iron clad," he replied. "Besides, I haven't taken anybody's money. I've merely borrowed it for a few hours. No one is being hurt. I'm doing it for the children. How else are we to give them a decent education on what I'm making? Just take the winnings and start an education fund for them."

Lai-ching grudgingly acquiesced. During the next two seasons he made successful punts on no fewer than eight occasions. It seemed he had at last found a way of creating his own luck.

On the ninth occasion, however, disaster struck. The favourite bled during the race and had to be pulled up, leaving it unplaced. The loss suffered came to more than six times the accumulated winnings of the two previous seasons.

Pao fished a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket, lit one and blew a cloud of smoke into the cool night air. There was not another soul on the darkened deck and the steady droning of the engine sounded like the chanting of a dirge. He recalled the adage that those venturing frequently into wild mountains were bound, sooner or later, to encounter a tiger. He had encountered a tiger all right and it was devouring his life!

There was no alternative to confessing his misappropriation. He had expected brotherly understanding, forgiveness and a chance to make amends. Instead, his brothers berated him in front of the fokis.

“Father always thought you better than us, too bright to get hands dirty,” his eldest brother yelled, his face contorted with anger. “We’ve been carrying you for years. This is how you repay us!”

“You’ve disgraced the family,” his second brother added. “Who knows how much you’ve been stealing from us? No wonder profits are dropping. We’re finished with you. We want you out.”

The accusations pierced his heart. It stunned him to discover that thirty years of shared existence counted for nothing when it came to dollars and cents.

The brothers demanded that he made up the loss by signing over his third of the business, including the title to the workshop building. Otherwise they would go to the Police. He complied, tumbling in one fell swoop from being a part proprietor in a going concern to an unemployed pariah, too ashamed to show his face before kith and kin.

His resentment against his brothers brewed slowly into hatred, particularly when the value of the workshop land climbed with the Colony’s building boom. But hatred was a luxury he could not afford. Deprived of income, his need for employment was acute. He eventually landed a job as a clerk in a small trading firm. The salary fell far short of his family’s needs, particularly when his elder daughter was ready to begin school. But he had brought his family to such a pass and he felt it incumbent upon him to find a solution.

It so happened he knew a commission agent working for shops catering to the tourist trade. A passable living could be had by hustling strangers in the streets to persuade them to purchase made-to-order suits, shirts or shoes. He arrived at arrangements with a number of shops and began roaming the streets after his normal work. It was a small step to go from touting for tailors and leather merchants to touting for girlie bars and whores. Indeed, the latter came easier along the neon-lit streets around Fenwick Pier, particularly with visiting servicemen. The money was certainly better.

He did not have the heart to tell Lai-ching what he was up to. To explain his absences he told his wife he had found a congenial mah-jong club and was spending his evenings there.

“How can you think of mah-jong at a time like this?” Lai-ching demanded. “You’re like a stranger who only sleeps here. The children hardly see you. You’re moody and irritable with them.”

“I bring money home, don’t I? Can’t a man have a bit of fun?” he retorted. But he felt guilty. Confessing the truth would only add humiliation without bring financial relief.

“What if you lose? What if luck went against you? Your pay is barely enough to live on as it is.”

“Everybody wins sometimes and loses at other times. I’m winning big and losing small, playing with suckers who are nowhere in my class. We’re living no worse than before. What have you to complain about?”

Lai-ching continued to complain, however. She loathed to see him growing thin and haggard. Her mother and sisters were also starting to drop hints about the unwisdom of allowing husbands too long a leash.

Life gradually became intolerable. The punishing hours, the nights on the streets, the endless calumnies and, most of all, the crackle of tension around the home, depressed Pao beyond endurance. He had not wagered a single dollar since the debacle at the races and yet no one could think of him as anything but a gambling addict. He even had to trade on that reputation to explain his absences. He longed for a way to redeem himself, to snatch his life back from that pitiless tiger of misfortune.

One day an acquaintance told him of a small manufacturer of wigs seeking a partner. There was a fad in the United States for wigs made with human hair. Profit margins were high and the manufacturer needed fresh capital to expand.

Pao had heard of the craze and saw it as an opportunity for a fresh start. But where was he to find the capital to participate?

Suddenly he thought of Macau. During his honeymoon he could do no wrong at baccarat. If he could repeat that run of luck he would be home and dry. So on an impulse he begged and borrowed all he could and took off for the Portuguese enclave.

Luck was not with him, however. He lost all he had, leaving him in a deeper hole than before. If he settled his debts at the end of the month he would have nothing to bring home. To confess to gambling and losing in a casino would damn him forever in the eyes of the woman he loved. He had nothing even worth pawning. All he possessed was a cheap quartz watch and a ferry ticket home.

As he pondered his dire circumstances, a neatly dressed stranger of about his own age approached him. “No luck?” he asked, in a sympathetic tone of voice.

Pao shook his head.

“One needs plenty of ammunition to tussle with a casino,” the stranger observed. “Staying power, that’s the key. You have to stay long enough for luck to turn. If you’re not looking for a loan, may be I can help.”

Pao realized the stranger was a hustler for a loan-sharking syndicate. One part of his brain warned against getting involved but another part held out the hope of recovery. Before he knew it, he asked: “What’s the interest?”

“Depends on how much you want and for how long,” the stranger replied.

“Let’s say five thousand for a couple of days, till I get back to Hong Kong. I own a factory making camphor wood chests.”

“Ten per cent per month, one month’s interest in advance.”

“That’s steep!”

“Hey, Friend, what’s ten per cent for a chance to recover? You’re a gambler. You know how things go. Could end up with a fortune. On the other hand, if Lady Luck doesn’t smile on you, I have to send people to Hong Kong to collect. That costs money.”

A sudden recklessness possessed Pao. Without further ado he accepted a loan and surrendered his travel documents as security.

After two feverish days of playing, his loan too was gone. He was escorted home by two young toughs with orders to collect.

When he got home, he found Lai-ching in a state. “Where’ve you been?” she cried. “You’ve disappeared for days! Your office said you didn’t show for work. I thought something terrible had happened.”

“Something terrible has,” he replied. “Need five thousand dollars quickly. Please go to the bank and take it from the children’s education fund.”

“No! Can’t touch that money. Why do you need so much?”

“Gambled in Macau and lost, if you must know!” he shouted, with unreasoning irritation. “Borrowed from a loan-shark and if I don’t repay there’ll be trouble.”

“You got yourself into this, you can get yourself out. I’m not going to let you touch the education fund. There’s little enough there as it is.”

“I’ll pay it back, for Heaven’s sake! Try and understand. If I don’t pay right away, the interest will mount so fast the debt can never be cleared. We’ll be in hock for life. Stop paying and the loan-shark will hurt you and the girls. He’s got two men outside right now. Believe me, this is the only way. While you’re at it, draw something extra for housekeeping. I won’t have money for you this month.”

Lai-ching gave him a look as cold as marble. Without uttering a word she made ready to go to the bank. Upon her return, she thrust the money at him, also without a word.

The following Sunday, Pao woke up to find that his daughters had gone to visit his parents-in-law. “Why have they gone so early?” he asked, as he settled down to breakfast.

“I want to talk to you alone,” Lai-ching replied. Her eyes had a glazed, life-weary look and her mouth was tight with tension. It was as if she was overburdened with heartaches, recriminations and resentments.

Her appearance sent a pang of guilt through Pao. What had he done to the warm, guileless girl he married? It would have take so little to make her happy. Yet that little had proved beyond him. As he waited for her to speak he felt as if his bowels were on fire.

“I can’t take any more,” Lai-ching said, finally. “It seems your gambling is more important than your family. I’ve discussed things with Father and he’s advised me to seek a divorce. If you’ll give me custody of the girls, I won’t seek maintenance. My father can help me till I’m settled.”

“Please don’t do this!” Pao cried. “You don’t know how I’ve had to live all these years. You and the girls are all I have. Stay with me. I promise there’ll be no more loan-sharks.”

“How can anyone believe you? You’ve got this gambling disease. It isn’t enough that you play mah-jong night after night. You have to bring ruffians to our very doorstep. You’ll never change.”

“Just give me one more chance. I’ll show you I can change,” he cried, wild with despair.

Lai-ching shook her head. Determination was written on her face.

Seeing the unrelenting attitude, Pao burst into tears. He rushed into the kitchen, picked up the meat cleaver and chopped off the little finger of his left hand. He carried the severed finger into the dining-room, with blood streaming from the wound. “See! See!” he cried. “For you I’ll cut off gambling as I have my finger! Please don’t leave me.”

Lai-ching screamed, recoiling from the bloody object dropped into her lap. She flung it away in panic and burst into tears. When she had got over her shock, she rushed to find something to staunch the bleeding, crying uncontrollably the while.

“Please believe me,” Pao sobbed. “I’ll never gamble again. I would rather lose all my fingers than let you down.”

They wept together, clinging to each other, and something of the love they used to feel flickered back into life.

“Must get you to a hospital,” Lai-ching said, tenderly, as she helped him to dress.

They got back from the hospital shortly before the girls returned from their visit to their grandparents. Lai-ching told them their father had lost a finger in an accident in the kitchen.

When the girls saw the bandaged hand, the older of the two asked if the finger had been sewn back. “I’ve read they can do that nowadays,” she said. “That’s why I want to be a doctor.”

“No,” Lai-ching replied. “I’m afraid we’ve forgotten that in our panic. It should be still here somewhere.”

The girls searched for the finger and retrieved it from beneath a side cupboard. A consensus was quickly reached that it should be preserved as a keepsake. The girls got a glass pickle jar and half-filled it with methylated spirit. Pao made light of the episode and put the severed finger into the jar with exaggerated ceremony.

Pao took two weeks of sick leave from his day job and stayed at home. It surprised him how much his daughters had grown and how much they resembled their mother in their gentle,

easy-going ways. He speculated on how wonderful it would be if they could really pursue the kind of life denied him.

But as his wound healed, he realized he was chasing dreams. Without money there could be no rosy future and no escape from his double-life. There would only be the same traps hidden beneath the same lies.

It seemed best that Lai-ching should divorce him. She was still young. Once rid of him she might find a good man to provide decently for her and the girls. He would then be spared the web of deception tightening around him like a shroud.

He waited for an opportune moment to broach the matter. He knew the best way of persuading Lai-ching to go along would be to play upon her mistaken belief about his addiction to gambling. The opportunity came one evening when Lai-ching remarked that the girls were growing up and had need to see more of their father.

"I've been a rotten husband and father," he began. "I want to do better but I can't. You're right about my gambling. It's a disease. I've tried to change but can't, no matter how many fingers are chopped off. When the urge is upon me, I can no more resist it than I can the movement of the tides. For the sake of the children, please divorce me as your father has suggested.

"I won't contest anything. I just want the girls to grow up in a normal family environment. I'll repay what I have taken from the education fund. That still won't be enough to see them through university but that's the best I can do at the moment. I'll take out double indemnity insurance, in case something happens to me."

Tears trickled slowly down from Lai-ching's eyes. "I thought we could make something together," she said, "particularly after our auspicious start. Have I disappointed you by not giving you a son? I'm sorry. A son might have made a difference."

"No, no. Not your fault," Pao said, comforting Lai-ching as best he could. "It's just Fate."

He realized all of a sudden how desperately he loved her. He quickly ended the discussion, fearful her next deluge of tears would wash away whatever remained of his resolve.

A few days later he moved into a small cubicle in a sub-divided back street tenement. Freed of financial responsibility, he resigned from his office job to concentrate on touting. He proved quite successful in that dubious calling. He read the tourist magazines and became quite innovative in his approach, collecting photographs of star local attractions to show to prospective targets. Needless to say, he also flashed flattering pictures of some of the women he worked for when appropriate.

Once he came across an article on the history of Macau and he cut out a paragraph from it and pasted it on a piece of cardboard as another selling aid.

The paragraph in question read: "Macau was founded by Portuguese traders in 1557 who leased the territory from China. Though consisting of only a few square miles, Macau soon acquired a reputation for being a wild and lascivious place. In the 18th Century, a Franciscan friar stated that he considered it the capital of lechery, robbery, treachery, gambling, drunkenness,

brawling, wrangling, cheating and other vices. Some say little has changed in the last three hundred years.”

He would show the passage to foreign tourists and say: “Plenty exciting place. You want look-see? I can show. I good guide.”

Something ill-used and defeated in his bearing often elicited sympathy. It did not take long for him to twig that his best chance of hooking a customer lay among the middle-aged. Perhaps they, with dimming fires, were more anxious to savour afresh the vices listed in the paragraph.

When escorting tourists to Macau, he always encouraged them to have a flutter in the casinos. He calculated that a winning customer could be counted on for a generous tip. But such work resulted in a revival of his interest in finding a winning formula. As his customers gambled, he studied the casino games. His observations led him to conclude that the only way to win was to avoid protracted sessions and to resort to hit-and-run tactics. The trick was to time bets when that mysterious tide of chance favoured the punter.

He tested his theory and for a time it appeared to work. At least it proved successful enough for him to call on Lai-ching and the children with small presents and to repay money to the education fund.

In the meantime Lai-ching had found employment as a cashier in a herbalist’s store and, with a bit of subsidy from her father, she and the girls were getting by. She showed no sign of wanting to marry again.

Thus the years slipped by. The girls grew into adolescence. Pao hardly realized how quickly time had passed until he received an invitation from his elder daughter to attend her high school graduation. It dawned on him on a sudden that their university education still had to be provided for. His heart ached with self-reproach.

When his elder daughter told him she intended looking for a job after graduation, he put his foot down. “No!” he declared stoutly. “You were meant to study medicine and medicine you shall study, if that’s the last thing I do. Apply for a place. I’ll organize the finances.”

After the graduation ceremony he collected his commissions and sold every possession of value. From experience he knew that whores and bar girls were often big-hearted towards those in need. He explained his purpose and touched them for loans. When he had accumulated three thousand dollars he headed for Macau.

Upon arrival he went to one of the loan-sharks to negotiate a loan of ten thousand dollars.

“A lot of money,” the loan-shark observed. “How do I know you’re good for so much? Don’t want any aggravation.”

“Don’t worry,” Pao said, airily. “You’ve seen me around, sometimes with foreign friends. My brothers and I own a plant making camphor wood chests in Hong Kong. That’s not going to walk away, is it? The land itself is worth a mint. I’ll give you the address. Ask around. I’ve done business here before. If you don’t want to deal, I’ll go elsewhere.”

The loan was quickly secured and that filled him with a sense of destiny, of things finally going his way. He wanted to prolong and savour the moment. Instead of heading for a casino at once he went to the Portuguese restaurant where he and Lai-ching had dined during their honeymoon. He settled down to a leisurely meal of African chicken, a local Macanese delicacy, and a bottle of vinho verde.

The meal left him sated and mellowed. He wanted to be at his best before entering a casino. So he strolled along Senate Square and the waterfront for a while. When he eventually entered the largest casino in Macau, he picked up the money from the loan-shark and headed straight for the high-stake baccarat table.

He watched the fall of the cards for a while, waiting for a pattern he considered advantageous. When it finally came, he wagered twelve thousand dollars on the bank, calculating that on any individual hand the bank enjoyed a slight edge. When the bank obliged, he indicated with nonchalance that the entire sum should be left to ride. A collective murmur rippled among the players and spectators.

The bank obliged again and he felt invincible. All he needed was for the bank to oblige a third time and the university education of his daughters would be assured. So he asked for the accumulated winnings to ride again. The atmosphere around the table became electrifying. A number of punters rushed to follow his bet in the belief he was in luck.

The next deal turned out to be an egalite, a stand off, and the tension around the table became almost palpable. Some punters saw it as an auspicious sign and increased their bets. Others took a different view and withdrew their wagers.

Pao knew he could walk away from the table at that point clearing a considerable sum after repaying his debt. It would not be enough to see his daughters through medical school but it would give them a respectable start. But some inner voice urged him to follow his destiny, to find the courage to make the gamble of his life. He obeyed without hesitation.

When the hands exposed on the green baize showed that the bank had lost by a single point, disappointed gasps and curses escaped from players and spectators alike. But Pao merely smiled and walked away.

The loan-shark followed and commiserated. "Rotten luck," he said. "Another loan?"

"No, that's enough for one night," Pao replied. "I have a ticket for the four o'clock ferry."

"All right. Our man will be there with your travel papers."

Pao pulled another cigarette out of his packet and lit it. A final smoke for the killer of dreams, he thought. He felt a sense of indifference, almost of relief. Life had been a long, cruel jest but he had managed to fix the odds after all. In an hour or so, his burly escort would awake to a surprise. So would his insurance company and his unworthy brothers when the loan-shark's henchmen turned up.

He stood for a long moment staring into the unfathomable blackness before pitching his unfinished cigarette into the sea. He heaved a deep sigh and straightened the collar of his jacket, as if he were about to make an entrance into some grand affair. He then climbed calmly over the railings and jumped.

Just before hitting the water, a thought flashed through his mind. Was his little finger still being kept in that glass pickle jar?