

Blood Debt

The afternoon sun beat down on Detective Chief Inspector Hung as he entered the settlement. The littered pathway, with effluence dribbling down a crude gutter at its centre, reminded him of his own tussles with poverty and hardship. Those experiences had fostered in him an affinity with the underclasses and accounted for his present preference for field work to shuffling files in some air-conditioned office.

The settlement would disappear soon, Hung reflected, as he wove his way between grimacing hovels and the rickety workshops. Plans had already been announced. They involved decanting inhabitants into high-rise estates and demolishing Squatter Hill itself to provide fill for reclamation and more land for development. The scene of his boyhood, so charged with uncommunicable anxieties and unattainable dreams, would then be obliterated without trace.

His forehead knitted at the thought, drawing together a pair of thick black eyebrows. His penetrating eyes, which warned off attempts at intimacy even at the best of times, became veiled with foreknowledge. The day-old stubble added a shadow of resignation around his squarish chin.

He noted how little had changed since social workers bundled him out of the settlement thirty-one years ago. The patched-together shelters, made with corrugated metal sheets, salvaged bricks, planks, plywood, tar paper and a variety of handy materials and shared with flies, mosquitoes, cockroaches and rodents, seemed as mean and dispiriting as ever. Electric wires, dangling like festoons from overhead cables, evidenced the continuing theft of electricity. The odours of stale food, hemmed-in humanity and rotting garbage soured the air.

The sights, sounds and smells dragged him back to the past. The treacherous turnings and random hazards of the encampment had onced been a daily gauntlet he had to run. Residual memory now guided him towards his destination, to a grim granite plateau beyond the reach of paths.

He recalled the telephone conversation earlier that day. "I have to see you, Third Brother," Ma the Eldest said, in his usual guarded fashion. "This one's urgent. Let's meet at seven, at the usual place."

It was then that he had detected again those faint, queer sounds on the telephone his wife had told him about. There was no longer any doubt the instrument was being tapped. In all probability their meeting place at the Sing Sing Teahouse had been bugged as well. He felt at once both tension and exhilaration. The eventuality he had feared was coming to pass.

"No," he said, quickly, before Ma the Eldest could put in another word. "Let's meet at the cave, where we used to play as children."

"The cave? Why there, in this heat? We're not spring chicken, you know. I haven't been there for years. It probably no longer exists."

"It exists. They haven't started tearing down the hill yet. It's vital we meet there. Take my word for it."

"All right. It might be worth seeing the place again one last time. At seven then."

The dark stain of sweat spread like a Rorschach inkblot across the back of Hung's Hawaiian shirt as he moved with a smooth and easy gait. He was in fine physical shape for a man of forty-five, thanks to the rigours of his duties and the games of squash with his sons, aged seventeen and sixteen. It was neither the exertion of the climb nor the fevered breath of August that was making him sweat, however. It was the knowledge of what lay in store. The nudge of the short-barrelled Smith and Wesson revolver against his waist reminded him of his duty. That caused his lips to compress themselves into a thin, determined line.

Hung passed unnoticed among the squatters. His Hawaiian shirt, in a mixture of dull colours, was inconspicuous. His faded jeans and well-worn joggers did not mark him as a stranger. In any event, minding one's own business came naturally to those clinging to the edge of poverty. A woman scrubbing laundry in water the colour of slate favoured him with barely a glance while a carpenter fixing a rickety chair ignored him altogether. Screaming children brushed past in play and from within the bowels of the encampment a cheap transistor blared a popular aria from a Cantonese opera. Closer at hand a dog was yelping intermittently.

Hung sighed with irony at the propitious sayings decorating many of the hovels. They had been written by tradition on red paper. "May the Five Blessings attend this home," said one set of black characters. "May those residing here come and go in peace," said another. Clay images of Tu Ti, the Earth God, occupied niches outside some structures and burnt-out joss sticks stood before them in exhausted supplication.

Wasted money and foolish hopes, Hung reflected. Yet, if faith in a god or an idol enabled a person to cope with reality, why not? His father, a teacher in the Confucian mould, had relied on the maxims of that sage to see him through the dangers and privations of squatter life, until he perished in the great landslide of thirty-one years ago.

His father had brought him to Hong Kong when he was seven, to escape the campaigns then being waged against intellectuals in China. The flight necessitated separation from his mother, who had to stay behind to attend to his sick grandmother. He never saw her again. Even news dried up. His father said that was

for the best, to avoid implicating her in their disappearance. For years afterwards, he guarded those blurred fragments from a severed life like treasures, to be hidden from the world.

The journey to Hong Kong took more than two weeks. They travelled by night, either on foot or in sampans. When he was weary beyond words, his father comforted him by saying: "Be brave, my son. It will be over soon. The Superior Man accepts the rough with the smooth."

The trouble was it usually turned out more rough than smooth. After arrival, it took another week of sneaking about to reach the sanctuary of the urban area. There was a strange rule in those days, probably based upon some incomprehensible foreign sense of fair play. If an illegal immigrant managed to reach the urban areas without being caught, then he acquired the right to stay. Acquiring a right to stay was one thing, finding a place to stay was another. Refugees in their thousands squatted in alleyways, on the flat roofs of tenements and in the rotting hulks of beached junks. For him and his father it turned out to be an allotment of barren rock on Squatter Hill.

For the first few weeks their shelter had been no more than a few cardboard boxes covered with plastic sheeting. It was only after he had started coughing and running a temperature that his father arranged for a sturdier dwelling to be built. That had been made possible by the two gold pieces his mother had sewn into the waistband of his trousers.

The hill was without sanitation, electricity or running water. So for two or three hours each day he and his father had to queue with buckets at standpipes at the bottom of the hill. Carrying the water back to their hut without spilling a goodly part was more than either he or his father could manage at first. His father, after all, was more used to wielding writing brushes than carrying water.

The proceeds from the sale of the gold pieces did not last long, however, and a means for making a living had to be found. His father hired himself out writing letters and petitions for illiterate refugees. To that end a second-hand trestle table and two stools were purchased and set up under the shade of an ancient banyan tree.

The tree was located at a small clearing where several paths converged. It stood like a venerable old man, proud and imperturbable, with roots dangled from its branches like wild, shaggy beards.

Since the pitch had to be manned, the responsibility for fetching water, emptying slops and discharging other chores devolved upon him.

Hung suddenly discovered his footsteps had carried him to a clearing where an itinerant hawker was selling fruit beneath a banyan tree. He recognised the tree. It was the very spot where he and his father had been humiliated thirty-six years ago. His face tingled with shame upon remembering.

At the time he was returning from fetching water. On reaching the clearing, he saw his father arguing with two men. The strangers had a menacing swagger about them that sent passers-by quickly on their way. He heard one of them yelling and gesticulating at his father. "Greybeard, who do you think you are? You think you can set up business anywhere you wish? This is our territory, you know. To use it, you have to pay rent."

"I thought this was a public place," his father replied. "I'm not doing anyone any harm. I'm just trying to make a living."

"We have to make a living too. If you don't pay you'll have to go." With that the man kicked over the trestle table, scattering inkwell, writing brushes and paper in all directions.

"Please! Please! There is no need for violence! Let's be reasonable. Have pity on a penniless man."

His father appeared so helpless that he felt ashamed. He wanted him to deal with the intruders masterfully, like the heroes of old. But instead his father was pleading and retreating before the men. When one of them started jabbing a finger repeatedly into his father's chest, he could no longer stand the humiliation. His eyes brimmed over with tears. He ran forward with his pail of water and emptied it on the assailant, crying: "Leave my father alone!"

The bully cursed and delivered a backhanded blow which sent him flying across the clearing. He shut his eyes and gritted his teeth to await further assaults. Then, unexpectedly, he heard a voice boom out: "You rotten faggots! I'll teach you to beat up little boys!"

When he opened his eyes he saw a huge, barrel-chested man with a pock-marked face standing in the middle of the clearing. His nose was crooked too, apparently due to some ancient injury. He was dressed in a soiled cotton singlet and a pair of knee-length shorts of blue drill. He held a bamboo carrying pole in one hand and a heavy coil of rope in the other. He must have hit the bully with the rope, for the man was now sprawled on the ground, bleeding from a cut on the face. The injured man's companion stood indecisively by.

"This territory belongs to those who live here, and that includes me and this little boy. We don't want scum coming round making trouble. If I find you here again, I'll break every bone in your body. If you want to make something more of this, come down to the waterfront and ask for me. Everybody knows me there. My fellow coolies can do with a bit of fun also."

As the two bullies scrambled away, his saviour bellowed with laughter.

He joined his father to offer thanks. "Think nothing of it, my young friend," the big man replied, freeing a hand to place it protectively on his shoulder. "Neighbours should help one another. My surname is Ma. As you can see, my face

is more pitted than the skin of a Chiuchow orange, so people call me Pock-marked Ma. You shouldn't have any more trouble from those two. If you do, just let me know."

Hung's father then introduced himself and offered his services.

"Come to think of it, Teacher Hung, I could do with some help," Pock-marked Ma replied. "I am just a coolie, selling my strength like some dumb ox. My family is large but not a member knows enough characters to get by. Knowing characters gives people a leg up in life. If Teacher Hung can teach my children, I will be eternally grateful. I can't pay much, of course, but I'll pay what I can."

It took no time at all to agree upon free tuition and the next morning Pock-marked Ma brought his entire family to pay their respects. Mrs. Ma was of medium build, with broad hips. Her face might have been attractive once but it was now weather-beaten and exhausted. She cradled a baby in one arm and held a toddler by the hand with the other.

"People say nothing's worse than fixing kids with inauspicious names," Pock-marked Ma continued. "Without book-learning, I had to play safe. I gave them numbers. A man can't go far wrong with numbers, can he?" He then introduced his children.

Evolution had obviously come to their aid, for they bore the best of their mother's features. Ma the Eldest was a lean, broad-shouldered lad of eleven and Ma the Second was a thoughtful girl of ten, with lustrous waist-length hair gathered at the nape by a rubber band. There was no Ma the Third for he had died of cholera a few years back. Ma the Fourth was a girl, pale and listless, aged five and a half. Ma the Fifth was a boy of four. Ma the Sixth and Ma the Seventh had also died of disease. Ma the Eighth was the toddler held by the hand while Ma the Ninth was the babe in arms. It was soon agreed that Ma the Eldest and Ma the Second would begin lessons the following day, the rest being too young.

That evening, his father said: "We owe the Ma family a debt of gratitude. If not for Uncle Ma, we would be unable to earn a living. Debts of money can sometimes be overlooked, but debts of gratitude must be repaid. That is the Chinese way. You must help the Ma children with their lessons. Should you in later life find yourself in a position to do them a service, you must not hesitate."

By then the seed of a secret resentment had begun to sprout within the boy. He had no objection to helping others with lessons but what was the use of precepts about justice and loyalty and honour in a hostile world? When push came to shove, reason and ideals were no match for a strong pair of arms. He could not dismiss from his mind the image of his father cringing before bullies. He felt ashamed of him and for the first time questioned his teachings. Better a father like Uncle Ma, he thought. At least he could protect his family.

It was then that he developed that stern and uninviting look to hide the shame he was convinced the whole world could see.

A sudden cry of "Delicious pears! Sweet oranges!" from the fruit hawker jolted Hung out of his reminiscences. He looked at his watch and realised he had been standing in the clearing for ten minutes. But he was still in good time, so he selected an indirect path to his destination.

Hung and Ma the Eldest had hit it off well. The older boy was a natural leader and had gathered around himself a following made up of Ma the Second and some other squatter children. Hung, too, soon became a part of that entourage.

The gang prowled the neighbourhood in search of excitement and adventure. Some activities, like hunting for grasshoppers and crickets, were innocuous. But others had a malicious edge. Ma the Eldest had a dislike for pigs which he passed on to his followers. They therefore looked for unattended pig pens when visiting nearby villages. Upon finding one they would jab the imprisoned creatures with sticks till they squealed and jumped about with pain. They had to keep an eye out for irate owners, however, lest they be caught and given a thumping.

But for the most part they did not look for trouble. Their main aim was to raid fruit trees and melon-patches. If fortune smiled upon them, they might make away with a stray chicken.

Sometimes they foraged in the township abutting Squatter Hill. Favourite targets were small groceries or fruit stores, though Ma the Second occasionally insisted upon tackling a haberdashery for a bit of ribbon or a cosmetic shop for some lipstick.

Once targets had been identified, the gang attacked during the height of the shopping rush. Ma the Second usually entered first, to engage the shopkeeper in bargaining or to distract him with her girlish ways. The rest then crowded in to create enough confusion for one of their number to make off with a bar of chocolate, an apple or some other titbit. Once a respectable haul had been garnered, they retreated to enjoy the spoils, amidst much laughter and comradeship.

When Hung was eleven, things went seriously wrong during an expedition. He had been designated for the first time to steal some fruit and he was nervous. He hesitated before taking some bananas and got spotted. Since he was too far away to be nabbed, the fruiterer caught hold of Ma the Second instead.

"I'll teach you lot to thief in here!" the man thundered.

While the rest of the group scattered, he and Ma the Eldest remained rooted to the spot, panic-stricken. He could see Ma the Second struggling and screaming: "Let me go! Let me go!"

He wanted to go to her aid but realised that neither he nor Ma the Eldest was a match for a grown man. Then, out of frustration, he threw the bananas at the

fruiterer and kicked over a pile of water melons stacked at the front of the store, sending them rolling all over the pavement.

The store keeper's alarm was quickly noted by Ma the Eldest, who began overturning trays full of mangoes and oranges as well. The man released Ma the Second and rushed to stop the destruction. That enabled all of them to hightail it back to the settlement, to fall panting and trembling into each other's arms.

Some days later, Ma the Eldest led him on a climb through a desolate part of Squatter Hill to a small plateau with sheer drops of twenty feet or more on three sides. A shallow cave was located at the rear of the plateau. It was not a very impressive affair. Its opening measured barely seven feet across by four and a half feet, so that neither of them could stand upright in it. Its interior was wet from overnight rain.

"This is my family's secret hideout," Ma the Eldest said, proudly. "You have earned the right to use it. But you must help defend it. Are you prepared for that?"

He nodded with a surge of bravado because a hideout, no matter how modest, seemed at the time a wondrous thing. It never occurred to him to question whom he was supposed to hide from or why anyone would want to dispute possession of so unremarkable a hole.

A few days later, Ma the Eldest took him to the plateau again and suggested becoming blood brothers according to rituals laid down by triad societies. To that end they pricked their fingers, squeezed drops of blood into a small bowl of water, pledged brotherhood to the death and drank the mixture. Thereafter he addressed Ma the Eldest as Eldest Brother while he became known as Third Brother, assuming the title vacated by the death of Ma the Third.

In the years that followed, he spent a great deal of time on the plateau with Ma the Eldest and Ma the Second. They hacked a crude drain across the entrance of the cave to prevent rain seepage, cleaned up the inside, and covered the floor with old straw mats. They met there often, to plan fresh adventures or to kill time with speculations about how they might become rich one day.

While he and Ma the Second saw their futures in studies and good jobs, Ma the Eldest always talked in terms of easy money, of winning the lottery, finding some treasure buried by the Japanese or robbing a bank. It followed that Ma the Eldest had no patience with the slog of practising calligraphy or memorising classical texts, so that even by the time Ma the Fourth joined the lessons his progress had been minimal. As for the unsupervised gatherings for homework, he seldom turned up. Since Ma the Fourth was often sick, it became normal for Ma the Second and Hung to study together.

Hung and the girl had been drawn together following her rescue from the fruiterer. Studies drew them closer still. He sometimes had to hold her hand to demonstrate the correct way of using the writing brush or to guide her in the proper sequence of strokes in forming characters. He found such physical contact strangely pleasurable.

When Ma the Second expressed an interest in poetry, he taught her the standard ones learnt by children. But whenever he recited lines about homesickness, he inevitably thought of his mother and longed to be with her.

When the weather was pleasant, they studied at the plateau. They relished its quiet and solitude. Ma the Second, in particular, enjoyed the breezes playing there. She would untie her hair, spread it with her fingers and allow the wind to flow through the strands. There was something so lustful of life, so triumphantly girlish, in that simple act that he found secret delight in watching her.

The plateau also provided a convenient vantage point for a panoramic view of the city. Ma the Second seemed mesmerised by the sight. Occasionally she would swish around and pretend to be in a grand house, with servants at her beck and call. But the moment the mis-shapen roofs of the settlement intruded into her line of vision, she would turn pensive.

"We'll never escape from here, you know," she pronounced on one occasion. "The promises of the city are just there to torment us, like a mirage. This godforsaken plateau is all we'll get. It is so without pity that not even a blade of grass can grow here. We pretend this cave is our hideout. Actually it's our tomb, waiting for us."

The girl appeared so dejected that a complicated feeling of compassion, protectiveness, affection and impotence stirred within him. He wanted to console her but did not know how. In the end he said: "My father says where there's life there's hope. I bet we can make something grow here if we tried."

To prove his point, he constructed a small enclosure with rocks, as he had seen neighbours do for vegetable patches, and filled it with earth carried up from the valley. He then planted two pomegranate saplings and brought water each day to nourish them.

That delighted Ma the Second and for a while the saplings provided a focal point for their visits to the plateau. But, possibly because he did not know enough about growing things or because of the fierceness of the sun, the saplings soon withered. Their demise heightened their mutual sense of loss and caused Ma the Second to burst into tears. They turned to each other for consolation and comfort and in so doing awakened the latent passions of youth.

Hung remembered their first kiss. He recalled the intense searching of their eyes before they surrendered their souls. Then, suddenly, the delicious rush of

her breath upon his face, the ticklish interference of her hair and the vehement meeting of their mouths. Even the pungencies of her infrequently washed body seemed to ignite him with desire. They met at every opportunity, driven by their need for such healing moments unexpectedly discovered amidst the misery of their lives. Vows of undying fidelity naturally followed.

They had been at the cave on the day of the great landslide. It had been raining heavily for more than a week and the downpours denied them any chance to meet. They therefore made an assignation the moment the skies cleared and he headed for the cave after helping his father open his pitch. But it appeared that after his departure his father returned to the hut to fetch some writing brushes. It was then that the deluge of rocks and boulders came down and crushed him.

He felt responsible for that death. The fact that he had been engaged in physical intimacies at the very moment of the accident lashed his conscience. His father's body was cremated and he was handed a jar of ashes, before which he wept and beseeched forgiveness. The jar stood to this day as a symbol of his failings as a son.

He was offered shelter by Uncle Ma after the accident but the social workers ruled it out. A minor of fourteen had to be made a ward of the government, they declared, in assigning him to an orphanage in a remote part of the New Territories.

The facilities there were infinitely superior to those at Squatter Hill. Food was plentiful and regular. The luxuries of running water, electricity, shower rooms and flush toilets were his to enjoy. Moreover, there were classes in English and workshops to learn a trade. But, cut off from Ma the Second and surrounded by strangers, it seemed like an exile on the far side of the moon.

He could neither telephone nor write, for how could any letter be delivered to an address as imprecise as "a hut on Squatter Hill"? His need for her became so unbearable that he broke out again and again. Each time he was quickly rounded up and returned to the orphanage. Tighter surveillance resulted.

He eventually gritted his teeth to endure the new regime. After four years, when at last permitted to leave, he went immediately to Squatter Hill. He discovered a fire had razed part of the settlement during his absence. Members of the Ma family were nowhere to be found. At the waterfront, he was told Uncle Ma had died in that fire but nothing was known of the family.

He applied at once to join the police force, on the premise that a policeman could trace missing persons better than a layman. The English he had learnt at the orphanage and the discipline instilled by institutional life proved advantages. He was accepted. Once inducted, he checked estates where fire victims

had been rehoused but found no trace. Later, after becoming a detective, he fared no better. After nine years, he gave up hope.

In the meantime, political conditions in China had eased enough for him to attempt to locate the rest of his family. It turned out that his grandmother had died soon after he and his father left China, while his mother passed away some years later, alone and unmourned, leaving not even a jar of ashes behind. His whole life seemed blighted, stripped of everyone who could offer him love or comfort.

In his loneliness and despair he married a sales girl he had met in a department store and soon became a father. By the time his second son was born he had come to terms with his life.

Then he bumped into Ma the Eldest.

Hung had by now reached the outer limits of the settlement.hovels gave way to scrawny shrubs and forbidding granite. He paused for breath. The stunted growths, struggling out from crevices and fissures in the rock, reminded him of Ma the Second's remarks. Perhaps she was right about the false promises of the city. Perhaps life itself was a mirage and only death was real. The weight of his revolver reminded him a policeman must necessarily risk death every day. Otherwise the government would not pay double death gratuities to the families of those killed in the line of duty.

As he continued his journey he recalled the chance meeting with Ma the Eldest at a bar frequented by some elements of the underworld. He had gone there in search of a lead to a bank robbery. As he sat watching the comings and goings, Ma the Eldest suddenly emerged out of the cozy dimness. There was no mistaking his intelligent brow and the supercilious cast of his mouth. He had grown sturdy and confident like his father and was wearing a smart business suit and tie. One hand held a mobile telephone, a then fashionable symbol of success.

"Eldest Brother!"

"Third Brother!"

Their exclamations of recognition had been simultaneous. They embraced and shook hands enthusiastically before settling down to drinks.

"I went looking for you the moment I got out of the orphanage. But you had all disappeared," Hung began, excitedly. "I heard about Uncle Ma's passing. I'm really sorry. What happened?"

"Father died trying to rescue an old woman from a burning hut," Ma the Eldest replied. "The hut collapsed on him. Poor sod! Always trying to help others. With him gone we had a terrible time. None of us had a job, Number Four was sick most of the time and there was never enough money to go around.

"We didn't even get resettled, because there was a long waiting list. We got put into a transit camp that was little better than Squatter Hill. We realised if we

didn't find a way out we would be locked in poverty forever. So when we saw a chance, we grabbed it"

"You certainly look as if things have turned out well, with a mobile phone and all. What of the rest of the family?"

"Mother died about ten years ago. Everyone's married now, except for Number Two. She never seems to find anyone she fancies. I have three kids. What about you?"

Hung felt a sudden constriction around his chest. The news struck him like an accusation of betrayal. His father had asserted the word of a Superior Man had to be an unbreakable bond. He had not lived up to his promise of fidelity. He felt ashamed. "I'm married too, with two sons," he replied.

"How nice! So what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a Detective Inspector."

"A copper! No shit!" Ma the Eldest chortled. "This must be our lucky day. We could do with a cop in the family. Wait till I tell the others. We must have a big party to celebrate."

"What kind of business are you in?" Hung asked in return.

"You might call it the entertainment business."

"What kind of entertainment? Movie theatres, night clubs, dance halls, bars, what?"

"Well, let's say it's entertainment for men. Our establishments help men to relax and enjoy life."

"Hell! You're not running brothels, are you?"

"Of course, not! Brothels are illegal. You should know that. In our parlance, we provide 'a single phoenix in a single cage.' It's all quite legal. There's no law against a lady entertaining a gentleman in the privacy of her own home, is there? We just facilitate matters by making homes available, for a reasonable fee of course."

"That's living on immoral earnings," Hung said, evenly.

"Don't preach so soon after our reunion, Third Brother, just because you're a cop. No one is being victimised. It's better than thieving. And don't forget we used to do that together!"

"That was when we were kids and didn't know any better."

"Oh, we knew better, that's for sure! Have you forgotten all that stuff about proper conduct your father used to drum into us? We knew the difference between right and wrong. It was just that being wicked was more fun! It gave us some of the things missing from our lives."

Hung was disconcerted by that retort, for he recognised its essential truth.

"What I'm doing isn't all bad, you know," Ma the Eldest continued in more conciliatory tones when he detected Hung's discomfort. "I'm helping deprived girls get something out of life, before they shrivel up from undernourishment and despair. What have girls from poor families got to look forward to except drugs and rotten marriages? Look at my mother. What did she get out of life? Look at my sisters, with their lost childhoods. I had to rescue them, don't you see? The whole family is pulling together now. Number Two has turned into the damnest recruiter anyone has ever seen.

"Now that we've linked up again, we must look after one another. We're blood brothers. I could do with someone on the inside. There's more money in this than being a cop. You don't have to do much. Just put a word in with Vice when a squeeze is on. Keep an eye out for the way the wind is blowing. That sort of thing."

Hung's heart pounded over the blatantness of the proposition. The chance encounter that had begun on such a high note was turning horribly sour. The revelations being thrust upon him were more than he could cope with all at once. How could the boyhood companion he had so admired end up on the wrong side of the law? How could the woman he had loved so ardently turn into a procureress?

He felt heart-sick with confusion. "I'm sorry, Eldest Brother," he said. "I'm a policeman now. I have a duty to uphold the law. I can't get involved in this. Let's pretend this conversation never took place."

"Don't talk to me about the law, Third Brother," Ma the Eldest cried, with a flare of anger that took Hung by surprise. "Can't you see it's all hog-wash? The law's only there to protect the money-bags. Once a man's rich no one cares how he has made it. Money washes everything clean. Look at our pillars of society! Where did they come from? How did they get there? I'll tell you! Their families started off no better than mine, as opium dealers, river pirates, counterfeiters, insider traders, smugglers, usurers. You name it, they've done it.

"You want to uphold the law? What's that going to get you? A bullet in the gut, maybe. What did the law do for you and I when forty thousand of us were stuck on Squatter Hill? Wise up! The Brits are just using you. When the Commies come, you'll be dumped like a used diaper, unless you've been in the Special Branch and know too many dirty secrets.

"To your future masters you're just another colonial lackey. What will happen to you when the Commies come? Do you have enough put away on a copper's pay to get your kids out of harm's way? To hell with the law, I say. We've paid the price. We're entitled to take our due. We'd be suckers if we didn't."

They talked and argued far into the night, each trying to bridge the moral divide separating them, to restore the comradeship that had once bound them. But neither succeeded.

Afterwards, reflecting upon that ill-fated meeting, Hung felt so deeply despondent that his family kept asking if something was amiss. His life had suddenly been turned upside down. He had never sought to live on an exalted plane. He had accepted long ago that the standards of a Superior Man were beyond his reach. He simply wanted to live a life that was decent, to provide for his family and to nurse the memories of a boyhood passion.

His marriage had been one of convenience rather than love. He expected nothing more from it than children and a sense of family. When visited by boredom, he inevitably turned back to the preserved images of a girl with long hair and the remembered textures and pungencies of her young body. That was all he ever needed. But out of the blue Ma the Eldest had sullied everything and had questioned the whole meaning of his life.

His inadequacies as a son came back to him. They filled him with sorrow. To that was added his lack of constancy as a lover. Now he was turning his back on a brotherhood pledged with blood. Was he heading for failure as a father as well? If not, then he certainly had to fail as a guardian of the law. That appalling possibility made him wince.

Ma the Eldest telephoned a number of times during the months that followed, ostensibly to arrange a grand reunion with the entire Ma family. But Hung kept making excuses. He wanted no further knowledge of things that might have transpired over the last twenty-five years. He simply longed for his links with that family to fade away. That might have happened if he had not received a terse telephone call from Ma the Eldest one evening: "I need your help. Can we meet at the Sing Sing Teahouse? Number Two's been nicked."

He went to the teahouse with confused emotions.

Ma the Eldest explained that his sister had been picked up while escorting girls to customers at a leading hotel. "I wouldn't have troubled you if it were not important," he pleaded. "It wasn't supposed to happen. You have to help me, for old time's sake."

"How can I help? Your sister's been caught in the act. What the hell was she doing bringing whores to a hotel? I thought you were strictly small time. 'A single phoenix in a single cage', you told me."

"Every business has to grow," Ma the Eldest replied, blandly. "We've done a deal with connections in China. They send girls down on family visit visas. The girls spread their legs for two weeks and go home with more money than they will see in their entire lives. But the girls don't know their way around. We have to shepherd them."

"Can't you do something else instead of trafficking in women?" Hung demanded, upset over the invidious position in which he was being placed.

"What harm am I doing?" Ma the Eldest asked, bewildered. "It's supply and demand. The girls want to do it, our playboys want to pay for it, and I only facilitate it. It's a sweet deal all around. To hit trouble at the start is unfortunate. It may land my friends on the other side in trouble. I can't let that happen. They don't have presumption of innocence over there, you know. I don't know what went wrong here. Maybe somebody didn't get paid or someone wants to put the squeeze on me. I can sort that out later. What we must do immediately is to smooth things over, so no awkward questions get asked. That's why I need your help."

"Can't you see we're both getting in above our heads? You're now talking bribery and corruption. We could end up in gaol. Even if the girls haven't been booked, there's no way I can go to the Vice Squad and ask for their release."

"Why not? Isn't there an old boys' network? Fellow officers always give one another a bit of face. Tell them she's an informant, working undercover on a crucial case."

"What case? What am I supposed to tell my superiors when they ask for results?"

"Look, I can get you some genuine stuff. I pick up a lot of talk in my line of work. So do my girls. When we bumped into each other at the bar you were working on a bank robbery and getting nowhere. Right? Well, it was carried out by the Big Circle Gang from China. Their tactic is to come in, make a hit and disappear back across the border. I've got friends on the other side. I'll get you a handle on their local connections if you get Number Two and her girls out."

Hung pondered the proposal for a moment. Remembering his indebtedness to the Ma family, he felt it worth the risk. So he sold his colleagues a story of a covert operation. It worked, and the women were released into his care.

The moment he saw Ma the Second his worst fears were confirmed. The thin, dreamy girl with the melancholy eyes had disappeared without trace. Her long hair had been reduced to a businesslike bob. In her place stood a woman with too much mascara and smelling of strong perfume and cigarette smoke. Though she was not unattractive in a vulgar sort of way, she no longer had that air of innocence, that certain yearning for something beyond reach, which had once moved him.

During the drive home they kept up an inconsequential chatter, as if that obviated the need for explanations or justifications. By the time they parted Hung knew that what had remained unsaid would always lie between them and haunt them for the rest of their lives.

A week later, Ma the Eldest made good his promise. His information led to the arrest and conviction of three local men for handling stolen property. A substantial amount of money was recovered and Hung earned promotion to Detective Chief Inspector.

After an interval, Ma the Eldest telephoned. "Congratulations on your promotion," he said. "It wasn't so unprofitable dealing with the likes of me, was it? Why don't we lunch at the Sing Sing Teahouse. I have more information for you."

Over lunch, Ma the Eldest said: "I know of some people importing cheap pharmaceuticals from China and repackaging them here under fake Western brands for re-export to Third World countries. I hear of other shady dealings too. I don't know if they all fall within your province. But are you generally interested? If so, I expect to be paid. You have access to information money. Being in the know can't be bad for your career. What do you say?"

Though Hung felt reluctant to have further dealings with Ma the Eldest, he knew the information on the bank robbery had been vital in cracking the case. As a police officer, he could not afford to ignore criminal intelligence. So he said: "The police are always interested in criminal activities. But you get paid only if the information leads to results."

A deal was thus struck. Ma the Eldest was to contact Hung at home when he had something to pass on. The initial offerings were pedestrian. But gradually, accurate intelligence about smuggling, trading in stolen cars, drug shipments to New York or Amsterdam and other criminal activities came in. Operations mounted against them met with reasonable success and Ma the Eldest earned his reward.

The arrangement worked satisfactorily for eighteen months. Then Hung began picking up rumours of a powerful underworld organization offering protection against police interference. He thought some black sheep in the police force might be behind it, but shrugged off the problem as one more properly the responsibility of the Independent Commission Against Corruption.

In the meantime, Hung knew Ma the Eldest was prospering. He had put it down to the flourishing prostitution business and the official payments for information. But one day he encountered his blood brother in the company of bodyguards, one of whom was a known criminal. That caused him to begin discreet enquiries. Gradually, he uncovered links between the bodyguards and the people demanding protection money. It dawned on him with alarm that he and the entire police department had been made fools! Ma the Eldest had been playing a high-risk game, squealing on criminals not willing to pay for protection!

The discovery rocked Hung. He felt utterly trapped. If he could sniff out what was going on, so could others. To expose Ma the Eldest would raise serious questions about his own conduct. Once an investigation began, it would not be difficult to establish he had been mounting operations only against those who had not paid for protection. The untruths he had told to get Ma the Second out of custody, his long relationships with the family on Squatter Hill and the blood oath of

brotherhood he had sworn would all be exposed like maggots in a rotting carcass. In the face of such compelling evidence, no one would believe in his innocence.

Even as he pondered a way to extricate himself, his wife reported the strange sounds on their telephone. When he too heard them, he knew he was already under suspicion and there was only one way to resolve the problem.

At last Hung reached the plateau. He felt thirsty and his shirt stuck uncomfortably to his skin. The sun blazed alike upon the distant city and upon the rusted metal roofs of the hovels closer at hand. It struck him that there seemed an unusual vehemence in the evening sunlight, as if the sun was determined to scorch everything in its path before its day was through.

He went to the entrance to the cave and found a litter of empty tin cans, plastic bags and other rubbish lay inside. The crude drain still ran outside the cave but no trace remained of the flower bed he had built. A capricious breeze suddenly eddied around him, bringing the dry smell of baked rock and a vision of a thin, dreamy girl with long flowing hair. He shook his head to clear away the vision. He did not want to remember any of that. He turned instead towards the settlement and caught sight of Ma the Eldest and three bodyguards beginning their climb to the plateau.

One bodyguard was leading the way, with the other two bringing up the rear. All three sported reflective dark glasses that lent their dull, criminal features a distinctively sinister air. In spite of the heat they wore jackets and Hung knew from experience what the bulges beneath the coats meant.

Ma the Eldest, at the centre of the group, was dressed more comfortably in a designer shirt and white linen trousers. The latest model in mobile phones was held in one hand. He arrived panting on the plateau and said sulkily: "I've forgotten how filthy this dump is! I hope you've got good reason for bringing me here. I could have given you the low-down in town."

"We need privacy," Hung said, eyeing the bodyguards.

Ma the Eldest made a slight movement of his head and the bodyguards retreated beyond the edge of the plateau, after checking the inside of the cave. They stood out of earshot but within view of the plateau and its surrounds.

"There's a big shipment of stolen Mercedes going out by lighters tomorrow night," Ma the Eldest began. "That's why it's urgent. I know the time and the place. You can nab the lot. That should be worth a tidy sum."

"It's worth nothing," Hung said. "I see you've graduated from prostitution. Why didn't you tell me you had been using me to run a protection racket?"

Ma the Eldest allowed the merest flicker of surprise to show on his face before throwing open his arms and smiling. "So you've found out at last," he said.

"That's good. Now everything's in the open. I couldn't tell you before because I know you wouldn't have gone along. It's only money from fences, smugglers, gambling den operators and the like. What's wrong with relieving such rascals of some of their ill-gotten gains? I've kept a cut for you, as I should. It's safely tucked away in a numbered Swiss bank account. You and your family can live well on it."

"I don't need that kind of money. You had better leave while you can. If your extortion victims don't catch up with you, the anti-corruption boys will."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The game's over. Your tip-offs and my operations have both been too successful. I paid you squealers' money too regularly. The anti-corruption boys got suspicious. They think I'm on the take, doing your dirty work. My phone's been tapped."

"Shit! Shit!" Ma the Eldest exclaimed, and began pacing the plateau like a caged tiger. "They can't have anything solid, just a cop talking to his stool pigeon. We can beat this rap. I've got smart lawyers. At worst we disappear to Taiwan till it blows over. There's no diplomatic relations, so no extradition treaty. We can come back when it's all over."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm not going to give my sons a fugitive for a father," Hung said, as he manoeuvred to place himself with his back to the hill. "As for you, it'll never be over. It's one thing to be a pimp or a gangster but another to be a cop-killer. They never forget that."

"What the hell are you talking about? I haven't killed any copper! I may have put away competitors but never a cop."

"You had better leave while you can. When you fix a meeting with a cop and he turns up dead, you'll have a job convincing people you're not responsible. The beauty in being a policeman is that when he dies in line of duty he gets a hero's burial, no matter what. It wipes everything clean."

"Stop talking crazy! Who's going to die? Nobody's going to die."

"I'm sorry, Eldest Brother, but there is no other way out for me." With that Hung drew his revolver and pointed it at Ma the Eldest.

"Third Brother, don't be stupid!" Ma the Eldest cried, suddenly realising Hung's intentions. All at once a chorus of shouts erupted from the bodyguards, demanding that the gun be dropped.

"Leave quickly, Eldest Brother, and take care," Hung said, and squeezed the trigger. The shot had been aimed to miss.

A fraction of a second later Hung's body jerked like a puppet under the impact of bullets fired at close range. As he collapsed to the ground he saw Ma the Eldest rushing towards him, yelling something unintelligible. He was dimly aware of more shouting before someone cradled him in his arms.

He suddenly felt very cold. Then he heard Ma the Eldest whispering indistinctly close to his ear. The whisperings sounded earnest and warm and they evoked images of boyhood escapades and a comforting feeling of comradeship. He wanted to smile.

But his lips merely twitched. He did not realise he had already lost the ability to smile.

Blood Debt has appeared in **Short Story International** in the United States.