

Refuge in Australia

Perth ought to have been an agreeable and easy-going town, with a population of around a quarter of a million, but it was slightly unnerved on the day of our arrival. On February 19, the day before we landed at Fremantle, the Japanese had bombed the strategic northern frontier town of Darwin, sinking eight allied ships and leaving some 240 people dead. How the Japanese could have caught defenders napping after the shattering lessons of Pearl Harbour and Singapore remains a matter for soul-searching to the present day.

News of that disaster, filtering through in a garbled fashion, was very much on people's mind when we got to Perth. It created an atmosphere of foreboding, with some fearing the town itself might also soon be bombed. Others were apprehensive of an actual invasion.

The arrival of evacuees, stripped of possessions and luggage, shattered a long accustomed insularity fostered by a comfortable antipodean remoteness. Nonetheless, their charitable and welfare organisations responded with spontaneous generosity to our wretched and smelly state.

Our most conscious need was to rid ourselves of garments so badly seasoned by days of accumulated sweat and grime. We made for a centre distributing used clothing as soon as registration procedures for our care had been completed. The centre we visited was to remain a supplier of our evolving wardrobes for years to come.

I treasured one item received above all others. It was a dark brown overcoat with a subtle pattern of specks in black and russet-gold. Its cutting fitted me perfectly. Its length came down to just above my knees and created the illusion I was smarter and more debonair than I could have visualised previously. I was so taken by that coat that whenever I subsequently needed an overcoat, I would always select one resembling the cutting and length the one I had received in Perth.

It was at the same centre that I was later to receive my first pair of black leather boots and my first pair of second-hand long trousers.

Anna was the only one disappointed by her new outfits. She was so slender and petite she had difficulty finding anything to fit. She had to resort to raiding the clothing stockpiles meant for children.

The first time she appeared in her new clothes, she looked so frumpy and at sea that I could scarcely help laughing. In Singapore she had always been primly turned out each day. But in wearing a pink sweater meant for a young girl that clashed markedly with a chequered skirt in apple green and beige two sizes too big, she looked like a character out of a slapstick comedy. She had to use a string to tie the skirt around the waist to keep it from slipping off. Then she had to fold the top of the skirt over to reduce its length and to hide the string. Even thus shortened, the skirt hung ludicrously below her calves. She viewed her own get-up with such disbelief that she began laughing too.

Other family members were equally bewildered by the strange garb at their disposal but they made the best of it. Having once experienced a possessionless state, the children soon picked up an acquisitive instinct. An element of envy also emerged. If one got hold of a better-fitting or more attractively sweater or trousers than another, preening in one and resentment in another would be on display.

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Once fresh clothes had been obtained, Anna assumed the responsibility for securing a roof over our heads. She got us a house in Aberdeen Street, which was but a short walk across a railway bridge from the centre of town. I knew nothing of the tenancy arrangements nor how the rent was to be paid.

Aberdeen Street seemed a street unable to make up its mind about which segment of the middle class it ought to cater to. Some houses were

substantial, with front gardens guarded by hedges of varying heights, behind which lay clipped lawns, flowering bushes and climbing vines. But other dwellings displayed half-neglected patches of earth behind unstable picket fences. The most notable building along the street was a popular public house called the Red Lion.

Our house at No. 97 was situated within sight and shouting distance of the Red Lion on the opposite side of the road. The front lawn of No. 97 consisted of two mangy patches of withered grass bisected by a cemented path leading to a front porch. But, as if in compensation, a sturdy tree of an unknown species stood on the patch on the right. It was slightly taller than the building itself. By climbing high enough, a person could overlook the roof.

The house was made of brick, concrete, wood and corrugated metal sheets. It offered four fair-sized rooms with sash windows. There was a smallish fifth room, facing the kitchen, which was probably meant as a store room.

Beyond the kitchen, the brickwork ended. The rear section, constructed of wood and corrugated metal, consisted of only a porch with a sink and a bathroom. Because the entire house had been built on a sloping plot, the rear portion rested on a wooden frame rather than on a solid foundation.

A rickety flight of wooden stairs ran down from the porch to a backyard made up of an expanse of gray, uninviting sand. Here and there clumps of grass struggled for existence. A cemented walkway branched to the right from the bottom of the stairs to an open laundry shed with a corrugated metal roof. A brick outhouse with a flush toilet stood next to the shed. On the left of the yard, two wooden contraptions with wires stretched between them faced the shed. The lines hung like the strings of a sorry gigantic lute missing a base. Farther along, a round chopping block jutted out of the sand. Both the stove in the kitchen and the water heater in the bathroom required firewood as

fuel. Logs had to be chopped on that block.

Ramshackle picket fences made pretence of separating our backyard from those of our neighbours.

The whole environment was novel and bewildering to us. We had to re-adjust to everything, even to sitting down to defecate, for a toilet bowl was not the squat type we were used to back home.

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A house was not necessarily a home either. The premises were spartan and bare, with hardly a stick of furniture. There were no beds, chairs, tables or cupboards, built-in or otherwise. There was no lampshade, except for a cheap white one hanging in the kitchen. The only other amenity was an icebox.

We had no crockery, cooking utensils, linen, towels or other necessities. The welfare agencies had given us some cash but priorities could not always be set by our family. A blackout had been imposed because of the war and securing materials to cover the windows at night had to come first.

After that, attention turned to buying beds and mattresses. My grandmother's fund of cash proved woefully inadequate. An old double bed was secured for *Ah Mah*, on which she slept with Pauline for a time. The rest had to make do with just mattresses thrown on the floor of the same room. I, however, was favoured with an old, slightly sagging single bed installed in a smaller room next door.

The household quickly shook down into some semblance of routine. My grandmother and Anna handled the cooking and laundry while I, being the only "man" around, took on the duty of chopping up logs for fuel. Helen and Francis lent a hand with the drying of dishes and eating utensils.

With so many needs and so few resources, we had to be innovative.

We had to avoid spending money whenever possible. My grandmother took to cutting up salvaged magazines and newspapers into squares for use as toilet paper, spiking them onto a hook in the outhouse. Needless to say, those squares often turned out to be unfit for purpose.

My grandmother decided to cut her hair with the help of Anna, since there was no longer anyone around to help her plait and fashion her hair into a chignon. It might have been a symbolic act of renunciation as well, signifying her acceptance she was no longer a matriarch in a well-to-do Chinese family but just a penniless refugee surviving on welfare.

After snipping her hair off straight across, just below the ears, my grandmother took on an entirely different appearance, especially when dressed in ill-fitting Western clothes. The only visible reminder of the life left behind was the jade bracelet on her right wrist.

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Schooling was fortuitously free and compulsory in Western Australia. That happy situation took a great weight off the minds of the adults. Children were rounded up and despatched to school, except for Herbert, who was still too young for formal education.

Helen was hardest hit by the need to attend school because she had hitherto studied only Chinese. She had to submit, at the age of nine and a half, to learning the rudiments of ABC in a class full of foreign girls far younger than herself.

I had completed the final year of primary school at St. Andrew's by the time war started. But because I had no document to prove it, my claim fell on the deaf ears of school authorities.

The Perth educational officials probably saw me as an undersized

and undernourished boy claiming to have reached an unlikely standard of education at some unheard of school in an outpost of empire. Out of the goodness of their hearts they must have decided not to overtax me by inserting me into a secondary school. I thus ended up repeating the final year of primary school at the Highgate Primary School. I was to discover later that the standards at St. Andrew's were in fact much higher than those at Highgate.

I was elevated to Perth Boys' School the following year. The secondary school was located at James Street, which was just a couple of streets away from Aberdeen Street. There I remained till I had secured a Junior Certificate issued by the Public Examinations Board in February of 1946, with passes in eight subjects.

For reasons not altogether apparent, my siblings were all sent to different primary schools nearby. Adjusting to their new regimes and classes filled with "foreign devils" must have been trying for them. Most of them returned home too tired for us to bond among ourselves.

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Meanwhile, rumours circulated of Japanese troops having carried out massacres of civilians in Singapore. Those of us old enough to know what that meant held our breaths. Such happenings had become horrifyingly routine, established staples in the repeated Japanese incursions into China.

Australians, belonging to a relatively new nation, had hitherto fought its wars far from its own shores. They did not have to map the geography of mutilations, rapes, disembowelments and beheadings across their own land. How could they imagine a race capable of unspeakable barbarities in the middle of the twentieth century? They were probably blissfully ignorant that Japanese troops had been trained to regard them as sub-human, suitable subjects to be

slaughtered at will, in much the same way as swine or sheep.

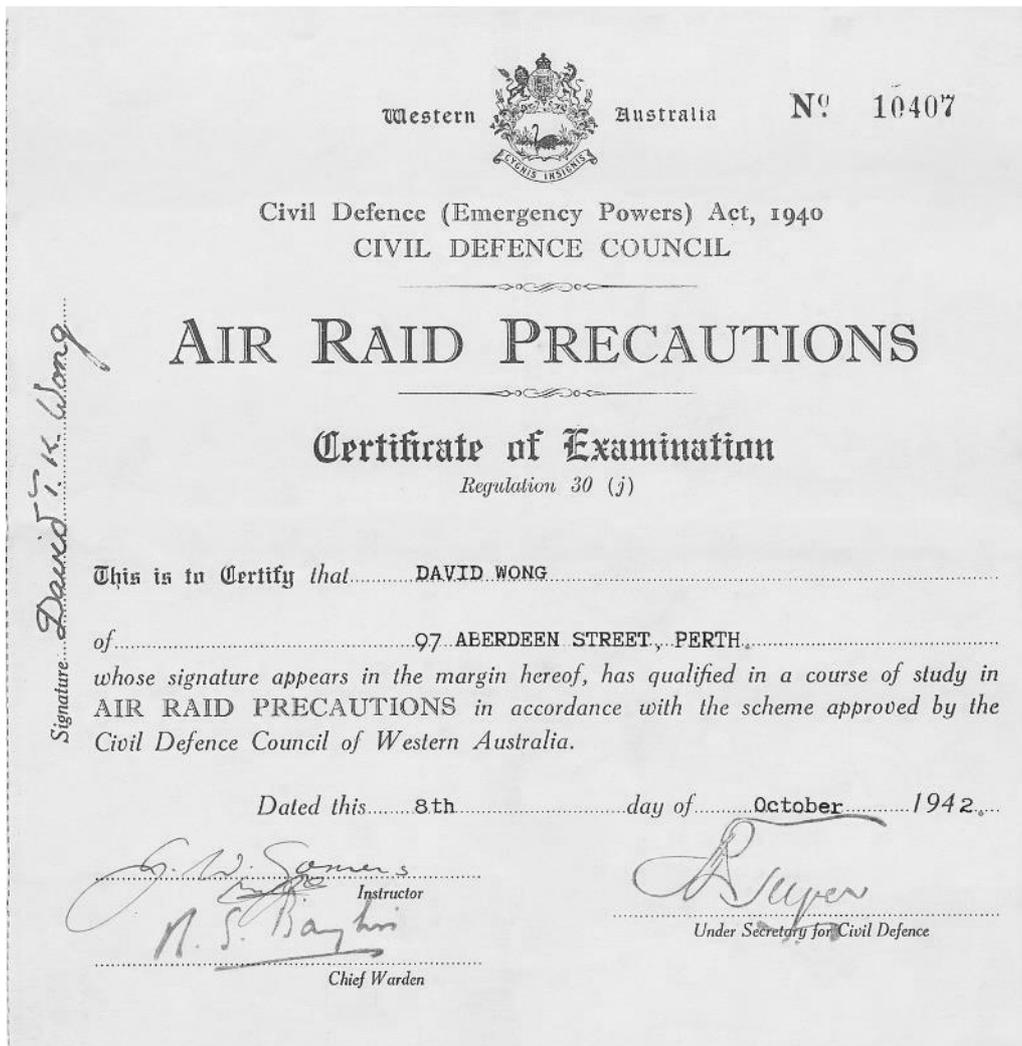
My grandmother's better knowledge of the Japanese behaviour exacerbated her anxieties. The inability to either verify the rumours or to make contact with those left behind caused her acute anguish. A forlorn look crept into her eyes and the frown lines on her patrician brow became almost permanent. A heartbreaking grimace settled around her mouth. It was as if she were quietly schooling herself to accept she would never set eyes on either her husband or her son again.

Anna was affected as well. But she hid her distress better, surprising me with a strength of character I had not previously given her credit for.

As for myself, I had to grapple with the dearth of hard news in my own way. I told myself that my family were Christians, and as such protected by a powerful God. That God would not allow anything bad to happen to them. After all, had half my family not made it safely to Australia? As flawed as I suspected that line of argument to be, I clung to it, pulling protective shutters down around my thoughts to prevent the invasion of darker conjectures.

A practical streak in me, however, told me I had to do my part to finish the war. To that end, I signed up for a course in air raid precautions organised by the Civil Defence Council of Western Australia. My grandmother did not object, seeing it would keep me occupied.

I gained my certificate in October of 1942. I was given -- if memory serves -- an armband, an electric torch and a metal Tommy's helmet. I went on night patrols with other wardens to enforce blackout regulations, though I was still a ridiculous 13-year-old primary school student!



Air Raid Warden's Certificate issued to Author.

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It took no time at all to discover who lived on either side of us. On one side there was a white couple with whom we had virtually no contact -- except for Herbert. We had no idea what they did for a living and they gave no indication of wanting to establish a relationship. The only impression they left on most of us was that they made frequent visits to the Red Lion.

They had a son about the same age as Herbert and that brought the two boys to play together in the rear yards of our respective homes. The yard

next door was the more attractive for them because it boasted a sizeable and flourishing vegetable garden.

Our neighbours on the other side consisted of an Australian Chinese family with a merry brood of six children -- four boys and two girls. They spoke virtually no Chinese, however, and it soon became apparent that their surname had been wrongly assigned, though they were probably not as conscious of the error as we were.

The putative head of the family was a Cantonese gentleman named Wong Sue, whom I did not get to meet till some time later. Upon arriving in Australia, he had followed the normal Chinese practice of putting his surname first. The Australian bureaucracy, following predilections of its own, assumed his surname came last. It was a common enough fate for Chinese migrating to Western countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "Sue" thus got recorded as his surname for posterity. Thereafter, through his marriage to a Eurasian girl by the name of Rita and through the subsequent registrations of the births of their six children, the mistaken surname became legally binding.

My family, however, still regarded our neighbours as distant clansmen, tied to us -- however tenuously -- by blood and a common surname.

It transpired that Mr. Wong Sue was the proprietor of an unpretentious Chinese restaurant selling fried noodles, *wonton* soup, dishes of rice with sweet and sour pork, soy sauce chicken or roasted duck, and similar fare. The restaurant was located on one of the streets cutting across Aberdeen Street at right angles. I think it was William Street but it could have been another. The name of the eatery was so commonplace and unimaginative that it has slipped my mind. It might have been called China Restaurant or Canton Restaurant or something of that order.

It soon became evident Mr. Wong Sue was not in residence next door. His appearances there were rare, though presumably he supported the

household. It was rumoured he was living elsewhere with another woman.

That situation did not surprise me. The experiences within my own family had caused me to view matrimony with a jaundiced eye, as a curious institution that adults insisted upon plunging into only to make a total mess of it. The reason for such widespread perversity was a puzzle I still have not quite worked out, though the number getting married has been in decline since.

Mrs. Rita Wong Sue was a cheerful and out-going person, and quite attractive though she was obviously not a full-blooded Chinese. Since she did not speak Cantonese, I could not identify her ancestral roots. Many natives of the southern provinces of China had migrated to Australia during the second half of the nineteenth century to engage in gold mining and sugar cane cultivation. She might have descended from one of them.

The way Mrs. Wong Sue horsed around with her children filled me with envy and delight. She evidently had close and loving relationships with all of them. It started me speculating whether I could have developed a similar relationship with my mother if I had not been taken away so soon.

The house next door was always a welcoming place for my siblings and myself. Apart from Helen, who tended to be more reserved because of her lack of English, we quickly formed friendship with the kids next door in keeping with our respective ages. Pauline, for example, became friendly with Joyce, one of the two girls in the Wong Sue family.

My grandmother was reluctant to reciprocate their hospitality, however. This was due partly to her inability to speak English and, more probably, to her embarrassment over the meanness of our circumstances. It took quite a while, for example, before we had enough beds for Helen and Pauline to have their own.

For me, settling into Aberdeen Street coincided with an awkward stage of puberty. I had begun to be teased by the usual longings for happiness. But I could not pin down whether that happiness ought to arise out of the company of some nymph-like maiden or whether it should come with the boisterous larking around with a bunch of chums.

Since I was attending a school for boys, I had virtually no opportunity to meet girls, let alone Chinese ones. I had fixed in my head, perhaps through some atavistic instincts, that my nymph-like maiden had to be Chinese. Those instincts also fed into some half-cocked belief that words of endearment could really only be conveyed adequately in one's own native tongue.

But the only girl to come anywhere close to the maiden of my imagination was Gladys Sue, the third among the children next door. Gladys was attractive, energetic, outspoken and about a year older than myself. But I quickly ruled her out for a number of reasons.

First, she did not speak Chinese. Secondly, she did not seem the least bit interested in me. I myself was acutely anxious to avoid another Lucy-like misstep. Most importantly, however, I knew that though she went by the surname of Sue, she was in fact a Wong, a blood possible relative with whom certain relationships were forbidden.

That left me seeking after chums. But I did not know any boys beyond my classmates and none of them had great appeal. Then I found myself drawn to Jackie Sue, the eldest son next door, a lad about four years older than myself.

Jackie was big-boned and muscular, with alert eyes, a pugnacious nose and a determined chin. He could not be said to be exactly handsome but he had a manly carriage, one suggestive of someone destined for action and high

adventure. He exuded confidence and spoke often of joining the armed forces the moment he reached 18.

After our relationship had matured a little, he invited me to visit his room. I was amazed by what I saw. Boomerangs and aboriginal spears decorated its walls. Poisonous snakes and reptiles, preserved in methylated spirits, stood in an array of bottles and jars. On display also were stunningly colourful butterflies and mean-looking scorpions, all mounted on pieces of cork. There was a human skull too, gained from some former medical student. Forked staves for catching snakes, lures for trapping small animals, butterfly nets and a variety of other equipment crowded the room.



Author reading in Jackie Sue's room in 1944.

I soon discovered Jackie had an artistic side as well. He could play the piano with considerable panache. For me, he appeared blessed with so many of the very qualities I was aspiring to possess. I began to hero-worship him shamelessly.

I never fathomed why he bothered with me. He did not seem to shower as much attention to any of his own brothers. Perhaps I had a certain lost look that excited his pity. In any case, for the next one and a half years, until he joined the Royal Australian Air Force in September of 1943, he took me under his wing.

During that period, he told me about the various species of butterflies found in Australia and taught me how to make nets to catch them. He also identified the various specimens of venomous snakes he had caught and explained how snakes ought to be handled. They seldom attacked humans, he explained, unless they felt threatened or cornered. He also gave me detailed advice on where snakes could be found and what I ought to do should anyone be bitten.

To illustrate his instructions, he took me out to the arid bush for demonstrations during weekends and holidays. Sometimes we camped overnight. During those trips I gained my first intimation of infinite landed space, of where a family's nearest neighbour might be five or six miles away. I also learned to set traps for rabbits and other small animals, to skin and cook them over an open fire, and to enjoy the outdoor life. Slowly I began to gather my own collection of butterflies and snakes.



Author (L) with Jackie Sue examining a captured snake.

My grandmother was delighted when I brought back butterflies to mount. She thought them very beautiful. But her attitude changed when I returned with snakes in bottles. She became fearful I might get bitten. I tried to reassure her that I would be perfectly safe with Jackie. I reminded her I was born in the Year of the Snake and hence had an affinity with them. She was not reassured, but she did not stop my excursions either.

After my friendship with Jackie had ripened, I was still reluctant to let him into my own room. I was ashamed of it. It had only a single bed, a large battered table without drawers and a chair. I had no wardrobe for the few clothes I had and no shelves to store other belongings. Everything was left either on top of the table or on the floor.

When Jackie eventually visited my room, he at once advanced a number of innovative ideas. He took me to a neighbourhood fruit and vegetable dealer and we cadged from him a few wooden vegetable crates. Jackie stacked them on their sides in my room, one on top of the other, and inserted pieces of cardboard on the base of each, to cover the gaps in them. By that means the crates were turned into serviceable shelves for clothes and other possessions.

Jackie could also perform other startling forms of magic. He got hold of a piece of galena crystal and, together with bits and pieces salvaged from somewhere, he constructed a crystal set for me. He grounded the set by connecting a wire to a water pipe running outside the window of my room. With that marvellous contraption, I could -- by jiggling a "cat's whisker" -- receive a variety of broadcasts from armed forces radio stations. They offered up an endless stream of ballads and sentimental music for homesick servicemen.

I was homesick too, but in a different way. Nonetheless, I soon became enraptured by the songs of love and loss crooned by Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Bing Crosby and Ella Fitzgerald. Their offerings became for me the secret tunes I dreamt by. I quickly mastered their lyrics and began imagining a romantic life with a maiden I had yet to meet. In such magical ways Jackie converted my drab room into a cosy retreat, enriching no end my years in exile. But in the process, some of the interest I had previously attached to Chinese opera and Chinese musical instruments gradually receded.

I saw little of Jackie after he joined the Royal Australian Air Force. He rarely returned to Aberdeen Street during his leave. He had a blonde girl friend at the time and he no doubt preferred spending his leave with her rather than at Aberdeen Street.

He eventually joined a commando special reconnaissance unit known as the "Z Force Unit". It appeared he was often sent behind enemy lines in one or more of the Japanese-held islands in the East Indies. At first it struck me as an ill omen for his unit to share a name similar to the ill-fated naval force sent to Singapore. But Jackie's unit met with success. He returned during one period of leave with two captured Japanese flags which he nailed to the wall of his room.

On the one or two occasions I saw him, he appeared more tanned but his skin also looked more yellow. I think the latter came from the quinine and

sulphur drugs he had to take to ward off tropical diseases. He was reluctant to talk in specific terms about his duties and I did not press him, for I knew they were of a clandestine nature.

Whatever his duties had been, he must have discharged them with valour, for he was later awarded an Order of Australia Medal and a Distinguished Conduct Medal.

I had no further contact with Jackie or with other members of the Wong Sue family after I left Australia in May of 1946. The reason was partly because of my own frequent movements before the invention of e-mails, texting and tweeting. On the eve of my departure, Jackie presented me with a large, inscribed photograph of himself sitting at a piano and described me flatteringly as his “pal”.



Jackie Sue at the piano.

Gladys Sue did visit my family in Singapore for a time but I did not see her because I had already left for China. She found work in the city and she stayed at Blair Road for more than a year.

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Meals at Aberdeen Street could not come anywhere close in quantity or quality to the fare previously served up by Ah Sei. We had to watch our pennies and food rationing did not help. Since I was used to hearty meals, I was frequently left less than replete. What I missed most were the fine soups Ah Sei used to make. But that was a dream too far because the requisite herbs and spices were simply not available in Perth.

Openly fretting over not getting enough to eat would have distressed *Ah Mah* and Anna to no purpose. They were both doing their best. My siblings, though less voracious than myself, were in a not much better position. We nevertheless took to watching each other like hawks at meal time, to ensure we each got our fair share.

A fuller belly was a matter I would have to solve on my own, I soon concluded. I decided to approach Mr. Wong Sue and I did it right after 1942 was out.

The restaurateur was a wiry Cantonese, of medium height and build, but considerably older than his wife. Just how much older I could not say, for he had one of those Oriental faces which could signify any age between 40 and 60. He spoke Cantonese with a distinct southern village accent. His English bore all the deficiencies of pidgin.

He was trying to run his restaurant single-handedly. Help was difficult to come by because of the war. Most males had been drafted for military service, except for those designated for essential civilian work or those found unfit. For some reason, none of his children seemed keen on assisting him. On the other hand, business was not particularly brisk after most of the money-spending males had been called up. The main patrons were

unaccompanied women, abandoned by husbands, sons or lovers.

I suggested to Mr. Wong Sue I might work for a couple of hours after school each day, in return for all I could eat. He was amused. He must have deduced from my hungry look I needed some kindness. So he agreed, even though my proposal must have been illegal under child labour legislation. I was only 13 at the time.

It foxes me even today how any person of conscience could consider it better to let a child go hungry to stay within the law rather than to allow him to work for a square meal in a restaurant like Mr. Wong Sue's.

Before I actually started work, I told my grandmother of the arrangement I had arrived at. She was no stranger to my appetite and she approved my initiative, but only on the basis my school work would not suffer. I was hoping my eating away from home would also help her, because I suspected she must have been eating less than her share in order to leave more for the rest.

I started at the restaurant by cleaning and sweeping the premises and washing up. The latter was far from easy, for lard was then commonly used for cooking and detergents had not yet appeared. I was not permitted to take orders, to receive payments or to serve beverages, which often took the form of beer rather than tea. Mr. Wong Sue carried out those functions himself.

Mr. Wong Sue and I got along well. He was never stingy over what I ate. During lulls in business, we would chit-chat. Once in a while he would ask about his children. I could not tell him much because, except for Jackie, I was not spending much time with them. I did not have the temerity to suggest the best way of finding out might be to pay them a visit.

I soon noticed a pattern emerging in customer trends. There were few patrons in the afternoons. Business tended to pick up only after office hours. I did not think it fair for me to work while business was slack. I wanted to earn my keep. So I suggested my turning up later, pleading I had sporting and other

activities to pursue immediately after school. Mr. Wong Sue readily agreed.

It gradually came to my attention when clearing tables that a few customers left small sums behind as tips. I handed them to Mr. Wong Sue. After a while, however, he said I could keep them, since I was not receiving wages.

His decision delighted me. The tips represented the first real money I had earned. I hoarded those coins like a miser, keeping them inside an old sock at home.

Once I started working later, it became inevitable that I would not finish till after dark. I did not mind, for home was less than 10 minutes away and I had my Air Raid Warden's torch to rely on. But working after dark soon revealed other opportunities of earning money.

The first occasion came on a moonless evening. I was at the restaurant and a lady customer of about 40 asked to go to the toilet. The facility was located in an outhouse at the back, just like at Aberdeen Street. I handed her an electric torch and indicated the direction of the toilet. But the night was pitch-black and the lady was frightened.

"Sonny," she said. "If you'd take me out there and wait for me to finish my business, I'll give you thruppence."

I agreed. She was so scared of the dark that she left the door of the toilet open and made me stand in front of it. But she paid the promised sum when we got back.

It so happened she was a regular. On the nights when she had to relieve herself of the beers she had consumed, I could always count on a thruppence. Mr. Wong Sue was quick to poke fun at me for providing a toilet escort service.

War time must have been a lonely time for women, with their menfolk gone. Many frequented the restaurant without a male escort. There was

a popular song at that time which lamented their plight. So far as I can remember, it had lyrics to the effect that “they’re either too young or too old, they’re either too gray or too grassy green”.

That lack of companionship provided my second opportunity for earning pocket money one evening as I was about to knock off work. When I picked up my steel helmet and torch to say goodnight to Mr. Wong Sue, a lady customer piped up: “Where you heading, duckie?”

“Home,” I replied.

“Whereabouts?”

“Aberdeen Street.”

“Dark out. Fancy walking me home first? I don’t live far. Give you sixpence for the trouble.”

I accepted the offer. In that way I augmented my slowly growing haul of tips.

After I had accumulated one pound, I offered it to my grandmother for family use. As the first-born, I was supposed to look after the family during the absence of male elders. But I had no way of discharging that duty and I felt badly about it.

“Keep the money for yourself,” my grandmother said, with a catch in her voice. “There must be things you’d want or need.” Her eyes misted over.

Her reaction to my offer made me feel worse. She had lost weight. The skin around her neck hung in folds. Her movements had slowed further and she was unsteady on her feet. Navigating the back stairs to get to the outhouse became a trial. At night it was almost impossible. In order to save her the journey, Anna placed a chamber pot in her room. The trouble with such an arrangement was that it infused the room with an unpleasant smell. I began to dislike entering my grandmother’s room for that reason.

I put away the pound *Ah Mah* had refused as a memento. But I

began spending some of my subsequent tips on what was known then as “penny dreadfuls”.

There was a small stall in the neighbourhood where an old man rented out comics and sensational story books for a small fee. It was at his stall that I stumbled upon the hard-boiled detective novels of Raymond Chandler and became an immediate fan.

His tales of Los Angeles mesmerised me. That city seemed inhabited by an abundance of wise-cracking tough guys and promiscuous beauties. It also appeared to be a place given over to random violence. I dreamt wildly and repeatedly of ways, weak as I saw myself to be, of distinguishing myself like his detective hero, Philip Marlowe, and holding my own in such a fascinating place.

One of my older companions told me the old stall holder also had some “smutty” books hidden beneath the counter for rent to special customers. They included books by someone called Havelock Ellis. But not being sure what “smutty” meant, I stuck with Philip Marlowe. I did not want to risk my hard-earned money on the unknown.

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None of us saw anything of Uncle Hok-Keung for a long time, until he turned up one day in his Australian army uniform. He too had heard the rumours of killings in Singapore but he had no hard news either.

I asked if he had been fighting the Japanese but he replied in the negative. He said he had only been working in an office, doing translations. After that disappointing reply, the children lost interest in his activities. But he did stand out as the bringer of some very precious bars of NAAFI chocolates.

He left after a couple of days and we saw nothing of him for another

prolonged period.

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One day in 1943, when I was on my way home from Perth Boys' School, I saw a portly white man staggering towards me from the opposite direction. He had the half-dazed look of someone who had had a few drinks too many. As we passed one another on the sidewalk, he shouted: "Dirty Chink!" and spat at me.

His aim was bad, however. His spittle missed its mark. But I was so flabbergasted that I stopped and turned around to look at him. He too stopped a few paces on, and began mumbling incoherently, fixing me with a hostile stare.

I could not figure out why he had behaved as he did. China and Australia were supposed to be allies in the war against Japan. Why should he shout abuse at me? I was about to ask him to explain himself when he made a sudden lunge towards me. I turned tail and ran off as quickly as I could, not stopping till I had reached the junction with Aberdeen Street.

When I paused for breath, tears of frustration sprang from my eyes, blurring my spectacles. I was obviously no Philip Marlowe. Nonetheless, I had just turned 14 and should have been capable of standing my ground against an inebriated stranger. Instead, I had been scared stiff and had taken to my heels.

In the days that followed, in the solitude of my own room, I tried to work out why a complete stranger, drunken though he might be, should show such antipathy towards me. And why did I get so scared?

I had done him no wrong and, up to that point, I had found Australians friendly, civilised and helpful. I had heard about a policy known as the "White Australia Policy" but knew few of its details. That policy did not seem to be any business of mine. I was largely ignorant of Australian history

and the plight of the Aboriginals.

Perth did appear to me like an essentially European town, with many features harking back to Britain. I assumed that other towns in Australia must be much the same. If their inhabitants wanted to retain their European identity, I saw nothing wrong with that. I would not want a lot of foreigners in China either, bossing over people like my grandfathers and my mother.

I thought if only I could share such sentiments with the man who had accosted me, he might not feel so upset. I could have assured him that I had no greater desire than to quit his country and return home, as soon as conditions permitted.

The thought of home, however, gave me another jolt over my rootlessness. Where *was* my home?

My *Ah Yeh* and my father were trapped in Singapore and I had lived there for some years myself. Yet I did not really belong among its riot of races and their polyglot sounds. Even the smells associated with the city -- the tropical damp, the strange pungencies and the gentle bubbling of opium over a slow flame -- felt decidedly alien after a spell in Perth. Moreover, the three years with Miss Fox had enabled me to shed virtually all of the peculiarities of Straits Settlement English.

Yet, thinking farther back, I did not belong in Canton either. The impressions associated with that crumbling town came back to me -- my mother's worried looks, my grandfather's priestly intonations, my grandmother's desiccated touch, my kindergarten teacher's niceness and the great ape, King Kong, roaring in anguish or defiance or both, as it fell to its death.

Perhaps home was just a myth, an unrealised longing, conjured out of snatches of family history, fuzzily-remembered fables, lines of poetry, misty mountains in landscapes and a once-caught glimpse of autumnal splendour bathed in a matutinal glow -- a Never-Never Land of the imagination.

But how could all of that be conveyed to an inebriated stranger, to reassure him I coveted neither his land nor his possessions, to point out I was merely a bird of passage, seeking temporary refuge from war?

The stark fact remained, however, that I had not the spunk to stand my ground, to state my case. Perhaps that was the fatal flaw of my race. We have always been too anxious to avoid fights, too ready to compromise, too willing to give way. It was a small wonder our nation was in such a mess.

The following day, touched by self-loathing, I went to the physical education instructor at school and, forgetful of my grandmother's previous injunction, asked to join the boxing class.

The sight of me, a bag of bones wearing an absurdly large pair of horn-rimmed glasses, must have disconcerted the instructor. There was nobody as light as I was in the boxing class, he pointed out gently. He asked me to step onto the scales, as if to demonstrate his point. I came out at three pounds short of a round hundred.

But I persisted. In the end the instructor relented and assigned me to punching sandbags, practising footwork, skipping rope and adjusting my boxer's stance for several weeks. I was not left-handed but for some reason I took naturally to a south-paw posture, leading with my right.

It so happened there was also another unusual boy eager to join the sport. He was a little older than myself but heftily built, weighing at least 30 pounds more than I. What was unusual about him was that he had been born with only one arm! Where his left arm should have been, there was only a short stump, barely long enough to tie a boxing glove around. Yet he appeared anxious to mix it in the ring.

The instructor allowed me to spar with him in a friendly fashion after a while. He must have figured that any weight advantage the lad had must be more or less balanced by his missing arm.

During those sparring sessions, I quickly developed a healthy respect for that single arm. It packed a very powerful punch. If he had both arms he would probably have ended up in some tough calling, like being a blacksmith or a lumberjack. I learned too that my own punches were ineffectual against him. He could brush them off more easily than flies. But I was nimbler. And I had only to worry about blows coming from a single direction.

After a while, both of us began calculating our chances in a real match. I knew I could never knock him down. But I figured that, if I could evade most of his blows, I could pepper him with enough hits to win on points. No doubt he calculated he could make mincemeat of me.

A three-rounder was eventually agreed. I followed my strategy in the first round and accordingly moved ahead on points. But I got careless in the second round. I did not dance away quickly enough and he landed a solid blow that winded me. Before I could recover, more hefty blows followed. One of them, a haymaker, hit me squarely on the mouth and decked me. I spat out blood and two teeth. The match came to an ignominious end. I was technically knocked-out by a one-armed opponent!

My grandmother was furious on discovering I had lost two more teeth in a boxing match. I was angry with myself for misjudging my own capabilities. I never expected such humiliation in my first bout.

There was no escaping a number of visits to the dentist, to get a denture fitted to hide the gaps in the front of my mouth. After such a disaster, track and field became the only sporting activity my grandmother would approve of. What she did not know was that I could not run to save my soul -- except when I had a drunken Australian on my tail!

* * *

Apart from the boxing fiasco, my years at Perth Boys' were illuminating and fulfilling. They were a continuation of the pedagogical rhythms begun at St. Andrew's. I slipped into them comfortably, perhaps too comfortably, because they had that kind of zip and forward momentum which contrasted with Tutor Tam's stodgy and endless practice at writing with a brush.

The teachers at Perth Boys' were kind, sympathetic and dedicated. I remember in particular a Mr. Harold Lewis, who was my form master for two years.

He was a gentleman with greying hair, bushy eyebrows and a rugged but slightly lopsided face. The stoop in his back indicated he might have been past normal retirement but had carried on because of the shortage of staff occasioned by the war. He devoted extra attention to me, probably because he felt he owed it to a foreign student. He steered me towards edifying works in what he called "the warehouse of ideas".

One such work was a book of poetry that included Kipling's *If*. The poem made a deep impression upon me, for it seemed to put into words some of the ideals I had been groping towards. I noted especially the words:

"If you can meet with triumph and disaster

And treat those two impostors just the same...."

They

seemed to convey the same sentiment *Ah Mah* had whispered to me on the *Gorgon*, about becoming a Superior Man.

I embraced the ideals set out in Kipling's poem so wholeheartedly that three and a half decades later, when I had children of my own, I bought a copy of the poem, done on parchment, while I was in London and presented it to my youngest son. Its old-fashioned virtues had become the ones I wanted my children to possess.

That poem still hangs in my son's home today.

I was devouring so much from the "warehouse of ideas", especially

late into the night under a bulb of inadequate wattage, that I progressively needed thicker lenses for my spectacles.

Another memorable presence at Perth Boys' was a Mr. Maurice Zines, a tall, dapper and cheerful teacher who taught French. He had also the Gallic trait of gesticulating when speaking. His fingers were slender and almost feminine. Since I needed a second language for university and no Chinese was on offer, I had no choice except to opt for French.

Mr. Zines brought the soft elisions of French to life in much the same way Miss Fox had done with English years earlier. I found his teaching delightful. He often enlivened lessons by playing French folk songs on a large gramophone.

Perth Boys' had a system back then of combining traditional grammar school education with choice in an element of vocational training like mechanics or carpentry. I selected the latter and found working with different kinds of wood thoroughly enjoyable. It is a pity such options have nowadays virtually disappeared from modern secondary education.

During my period at Perth Boys' I was elected by fellow students to become the class prefect. The honour both thrilled and worried me. It thrilled me because a group of white Australian boys had freely chosen me, a Chinese, as their stand-in for authority, as someone they were willing to take instructions from. But, at another level, did it mean my classmates had accepted me as one of them? Had I subconsciously repackaged myself to conform to their expectations? I had certainly adopted many of their values and idiosyncrasies, like a fondness for high tea and an attachment to that superfluous piece of fabric around the neck called a school tie. How much of my Chineseness had I surrendered in the process?

The warning Mr. Cheong had previously sounded at St. Andrew's came back to me. I had found delight in learning British poems and French folk

songs but I had lost the chance to keep up with my own heritage. It was an unsettling thought. Being stuck in a foreign country, there was nothing I could do about it.

* * *

Meanwhile, the war ploughed on. Reliable news from Singapore remained unobtainable and the lack of information took its toll. My grandmother's health went steadily into decline. Soon she became incapable of rising from her bed without help. Her eyes developed ptosis or droopy eyelids, which necessitated her having to use her fingers to lift them up in order to see. Bathing became impossible without the help of Anna and, to make matters worse, she became incontinent.

Her hearing, however, remained as sharp as ever. I could never get through the front door without her hearing me and summoning me into her room. She wanted an account of everything I had been up to, to guard against my further engagement in *débâcles* like boxing. She also clearly wanted to spend more time with me, to deliver all the moral guidance she considered essential to a proper upbringing of a grandson.

In truth, my activities outside the home were unremarkable -- hanging out with classmates, playing soccer and other games, searching for penny dreadfuls and working for Mr. Wong Sue. As the tides of war receded from Australia, my duties as an air raid warden also wound down. For a short while, I did try to learn the Hawaiian guitar from a classmate but quickly packed it in, both for the lack of time and talent.

The main new activity I had to report was joining the 44th Western Australian Iona Group of Boy Scouts. The bushcraft Jackie had taught me soon earned me an armful of proficiency badges. I was the only Chinese in the troop.

Nevertheless, the Scout Master promoted me speedily to patrol leader. It started me wondering again if my advancement was another indication I was blending in far too well with an alien culture.

As the weeks passed, I found the reporting requirements of *Ah Mah* increasingly irksome. They seemed boring and repetitious, like an imposition, a violation of my adolescent right to privacy. Her moral exhortations also began to sound like a broken record.

The crunch came, however, with the really frightening deterioration in her appearance. Her haggard features and her disorderly hair made her resemble a demented witch. The way she had to use a trembling finger to lift one or the other eyelid appeared positively ghoulish. Moreover, she developed the same habit my maternal grandmother previously had in Canton, often clutching my arm with a cold and claw-like hand, as if to prevent me slipping away.

In that supposition she was absolutely correct! The fetid air trapped in her room was unbearable for me. It was a far cry from the pleasant musk I remembered from childhood. The reek of urine and bodily fluids now created a stench that spoke decidedly of decay and death. It terrified me and increasingly I could not wait to escape.

After each session it became more obvious she was dying and my fear of it occurring in my presence increased. If she happened to expire while clutching my arm, how could I free myself from her death grip?

I did not want her to die, to leave me to my own devices in a faraway land. Yet such an inevitability seemed to be approaching at an accelerating clip. A riot of conflicting emotions played havoc with me. My heart did furious battle with my intellect. Ancient virtues did battle with modern sophistries. The requirement for filial piety clashed with the fear of losing someone I had been reliant on for so long. I needed a plan, a solution, a way of not being so tied to

her.

The stratagem I eventually settled upon was dastardly and unedifying but it did contain some elements of a convoluted logic.

The first step was to prey upon her weaknesses, to force her to continue her unequal fight for life, instead of allowing her to slip her mortal coils. To achieve that required the re-ignition of some hope in her of seeing her husband and her son again. I began feeding her fake and over-optimistic assessments on the progress of the war. I exaggerated Allied victories and wove accounts of Japanese bastions falling like ninepins. The war was virtually over, I stressed. We would be heading home soon.

The second step was even more heartless -- to deliberately reduce her access to me by creating the illusion that I was out and about long after dark, and possibly up to no good, even when I was safely at home. The deception was to agitate her strong sense of responsibility for my upbringing. If she could be made to feel she had not prepared me adequately for life, she would strive to hang on till the job was done.

The execution of my plan was simplicity itself. There was a five-foot wide path running along one side of No. 97, the side on which the sash window of my room opened upon. The path separated our house from that of the Wong Sues. Because the building was on a slope, the path was on an incline. No adult on the path could see into or reach my window.

There was, however, a sturdy water pipe running from the front of the building to the kitchen and bathroom. It was the one Jackie had used for earthing my crystal set. By using the water pipe as a foothold, I could reach the sill of my window and, by leaving off the window latch upon going out, I could slide it up and gain re-entry.

I progressively avoided using the front door for my comings and goings, relying on my window instead. I even resorted to that route when I

needed to visit the outhouse at night.

The inability to hear me returning home after work was quickly noticed by my grandmother. When she questioned me about it, I played at complete innocence, suggesting I had merely returned more quietly. In that way I planted the suspicion in her mind I was not being forthright. She responded by repeating homilies on filial piety and the five traditional Chinese virtues of charity, justice, courtesy, wisdom and truth whenever I came into her presence.

I could not help feeling guilty whenever I heard the pain and disappointment in her weak and straggled voice. How could I have stooped to such a disgraceful way of repaying her for all the love and kindnesses she had bestowed upon me? There must be real substance to the possibility I had been born bad. But at the same time hard logic maintained a hold on me. It stood to reason the shorter the time I was with *Ah Mah*, the less my chances would be of being there at the moment of her death.

In the end I succeeded in my cowardly subterfuge. I was not present when *Ah Mah* died on 20 November 1944, at the age of 69. Only Anna was there. But the outcome I had worked so deviously to avoid soon ate into my bowels like acid. I attended my grandmother's funeral dry-eyed and filled with self-contempt. One of the handful of mourners, seeing my impassive face, told me I was being very brave. In reality I was merely refraining from the final hypocrisy of shedding tears.

Even today, whenever I have occasion to reflect upon the final weeks of my grandmother's life, I cannot help feeling a searing regret over the shabby and curish way I had acted.

* * *

Shortly after my grandmother's funeral, Anna approached me and

handed me some money. She said it represented my share of welfare payments. Since my grandmother was no longer around, she suggested I ought to handle my own funds. That was all she said.

My surprise was so great I was struck dumb. Frightening possibilities flew around me like cinders flying out of a kicked-over stove. I retreated to my room with what she had handed me, dazed and lost for words. I stared blankly at the money. What did it mean? What was Anna trying to indicate?

My head swam with consternation. I had no feeling of animosity towards Anna, regardless of any friction that might have once existed between her and my mother. Indeed, I felt a genuine gratitude towards her, for single-handedly attending to *Ah Mah* during her decline. Though her position within the family was slightly anomalous, because she was not yet actually married to my father, I thought the devotion she had displayed in caring for *Ah Mah* had more than earned her a rightful place.

But I got the impression Anna now wanted to shed all responsibility for me. How could a 15-year-old, without parents, relatives or money, manage in a foreign land? I could not figure out whether she was hinting I ought to move out of the house or to merely pay my share of rent and for the use of common facilities. The amount she had given me, plus the tips I had accumulated, were totally inadequate for striking out on my own. Fear and tension gathered within me like static electricity, primed for discharge.

I hastened to secure letters of reference from Mr. Lewis, from my scout master and from everybody else I could think of. I also sounded out Mr. Wong Sue on the possibility of working for longer each day, in return for a small wage on top of tips and food. The proprietor was receptive. I next approached Mrs. Rita Wong Sue to ask whether, in case of an emergency, she could put me up for a spell. She thought I was joking. "Sure," she replied breezily. "You can

sleep on my front porch.”

After those preliminary moves, I avoided eating meals at home altogether, particularly since I could eat much better at the restaurant. I did not want to provoke any scene. I also took to doing my own washing and ironing.

Time passed, and in due course Anna handed me another small sum, but again without clarifying her intentions. My fears had by then subsided somewhat and I began to wonder if I might have misunderstood her all along.

It occurred to me then, looking at her, that she must have been under an enormous strain herself, with the vagaries of life on the dole and with so much uncertainty over the fate of my father. It was possible she understood the situation in Singapore better than I did. Her beauty, once so impressive, was now cruelly compromised by the toil of single-handedly bringing up her children and caring for my grandmother. She appeared aged beyond her years and her hands often shook when she went about her household chores. Indeed, she became so nervous that at one stage her doctor advised her to take up smoking!

I thought we ought to have been supportive of each other in our fraught situation. But I expected her, as an adult and as someone senior to me, to make the first move. Since she made no attempt at a thaw, neither did I. So a cold peace prevailed.

Meanwhile, I assiduously added every penny I could lay hands on to the nest egg in my old sock, as insurance against a rainy day.

* * *

The moment I had reached the age of 16, in April of 1945, I applied to join the Air Training Corps, a cadet organisation intended for boys aiming to enlist in the air force. I was accepted, in spite of my poor eyesight and my sub-standard physique. Moreover, for no obvious reason, I was quickly promoted to

corporal. By then I had reached five-foot-six and was never destined to become as tall as my father or grandfather.



Author as corporal in Air Training Corps.

The hard slog of the war dragged on, with the Japanese fighting tenaciously to hold onto whatever they had previously conquered. Because industrial production was so much at the heart of modern warfare, the pernicious concept of “total war” took hold of all parties. The age-old distinctions between civilians and combatants were cynically stripped away, supposedly in the interests of national survival or victory or whatever other abstraction

governments employed. All sides attacked and fire-bombed cities filled with ordinary people because they also contained industrial complexes judged essential to the war effort. Everybody descended to competing levels of barbarity, with the merest pretence of maintaining a moral justification for their acts.

The thought I might be sucked into the fray soon left me apprehensive. I thought I ought to fight to defend Australia in all fairness, if only to repay the sanctuary and kindness the country had extended to my family. But I had reservations about what I might be called upon to do in such an unchivalrous war. If I were directed to kill without mercy and honour, to sneak up and murder others in cold blood or to stick a bayonet into another human being while looking him straight in the eye, could I do it? I seriously doubted it. I would probably hesitate for just that fraction of a second too long to enable an enemy to do me in instead.

Partly for that reason, I joined the Air Training Corps. I thought I could then deal with death at a distance. Killing from a great height would be more impersonal, more abstract. But could a conscience be so easily salved?

The dilemma gnawing me was suddenly and unexpectedly removed in August of 1945. America dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. According to reports, 150,000 Japanese were incinerated, together with all other living creatures. They were all “literally seared to death” as one observer put it.

A few days later, a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, causing similar devastation. Those attacks promptly ended World War II, with the Japanese government signing an instrument of unconditional surrender on 2 September.

The spontaneous jubilation over the prospect of returning to Singapore was soon tempered, however, by the horror of the details emerging

over such unprecedented carnage. It might well be that the lives of those Japanese had been extinguished in a flash, much more mercifully snuffed out than the lives of civilians in Nanking and elsewhere. But the scale of the killing was too obscene. It went beyond enmity and vengefulness. My initial elation over the end of the war quickly turned sour. It was akin to the happiness of catching sight of a brightly-coloured butterfly, before realising it was fluttering over a field of mangled corpses.

The legality and the moral justifications for those two attacks, are still being debated today. They raise the deeper issue as to whether unstable Man, even if he were not born inherently bad, should ever be given control over weapons with so much destructive power. That thought remains more disturbing than ever with the increasing proliferation of such weapons.

* * *

I left Australia to return to Singapore in May of 1946. Since then, I have often thought of revisiting Perth, to see how much that city and Aberdeen Street had changed. Although I have made a number of trips to Australia since, as a representative of the Hong Kong government at meetings of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East and of the Asian Development Bank, I have never managed to make my way back to Perth.

I understand from friends that Aberdeen Street is now the hub of nightlife in the city and that the Red Lion public house is still going strong!