

Jessica's Choice

Part I: October-November 2002

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Jessica would be glad to get away from the man next to her. It was not that there was anything wrong with him; no, he had been courteous enough, quite a respectable sort of man. And there was an empty airline seat in between. But no amount of respectability could make up for being hours at close quarters with a man you didn't know, and in the dark too. She looked forward to landing in Hong Kong.

And that baby in front! He had cried and cried, and the parents had seemed not to care, in fact they had quarrelled with each other. In the end, the Filipina helper had walked up and down the aisle jogging him to sleep. Jessica's neighbour had not seemed bothered by it. Perhaps he was a father himself; he was certainly old enough, perhaps in his late thirties, with curly brown hair and a smooth-shaven jaw. Now he was looking her way, with a twinkle in his eye. Well, she wasn't having any of that!

To dispel the man from her mind, Jessica tried to read a newspaper. But Hong Kong's scandals, tame at best, could not interest her in the half-darkness. She leant against the headrest and tried to sleep. Yet sleep would not come, and Jessica's thoughts turned inevitably to someone she wanted to forget, someone who would certainly not be thinking of her. She tried to focus on her mission, on the prospects for her organisation in China, but this man's face kept obtruding on her thoughts. Eventually she opened the porthole cover and, by now deeply tired, gazed unseeing at the cloudscapes that undulated below.

"Would you like anything?"

Jessica awoke, to bright lighting and a gentle touch on her forearm. She struggled upright in her seat. The touch was from her neighbour; beyond him an immaculately made-up airhostess was asking which meal she wanted. Jessica chose the omelette. Glancing down, she saw that somehow the top buttons of her blouse had come undone. She fastened them, and looked quickly at her neighbour. Had he been peeking? But he seemed to be absorbed in his own breakfast.

To show that she wasn't embarrassed, she asked him if he had slept well.

"Not bad," he said. Indeed, he seemed irritatingly fresh. He went on, "I usually take business class, but it was full. So here I am at the back of the bus. And for the next leg, up to Shanghai, it'll be economy for me again. No point in luxury on a China airline."

"It'll save your company money," Jessica said, not quite liking his tone. Then her breakfast arrived. She opened the foil wrapper, and the smell of bacon was overwhelming. It was a last taste of England.

But she had a mission; she needed contacts. Jessica leant across the vacant seat and nudged her neighbour's arm. He thanked her for her card and rummaged for one of his own. His company was in engineering; he looked after the Greater China region. And his name was Errol.

"Oh, like the film star?" Jessica couldn't help asking.

Errol gave a mock groan. "Yes, I'm a swashbuckler," he replied. "I fight my way out with a fair lady on my arm." He made fencing motions, imitating the sound of clashing steel, at which Jessica smiled. "—No, I'm just an ordinary businessman, rather boring. What do you do?"

Jessica began to explain her purpose. It was to encourage companies to consider their social responsibilities.

Errol looked intrigued. "Something new for old Hong Kong." He glanced at her card. "And you have a regional role?"

"Well, to be frank, we aren't quite there yet," said Jessica, beginning to feel embarrassed. "In fact, we aren't even quite in Hong Kong, not until I get there, anyway."

Errol laughed. "I am sure you are too modest."

She asked him about his business, and he explained that he had set up his company's Hong Kong branch, and was now setting one up in Shanghai. "It is the same thing again, really."

Now it was Jessica's turn to tell him not to be modest: it was hard to set up a business from scratch. Errol acknowledged that it was, "but after a while you begin to wonder what it is all for." Then he looked down at her finished meal. "So you had the egg...?" He stopped. "Well, I'm sure it's all right."

Jessica was going to ask him what he meant, but the plane was beginning to descend, and her ears hurt. To distract herself, she craned forward to look out of the window. Yet the wing blocked most of the view, and the rest was a white glare. Then through the haze she caught glimpses of waves far below and fishing smacks like toy boats. The plane banked and the grey wall of a mountain sailed by. Dark rounded hillocks traced with white paths flicked under the wing. A valley set with tower blocks swung crazily past, and then the plane steadied in its final approach. It bumped down, jolting its passengers into sudden anxiety, and then taxied to a halt.

As the gong sounded and passengers busied themselves, Jessica tried to rise. But she knocked against the overhead locker and sat down again rather suddenly. At that moment, fatigued as she was, she felt like crying. What was there in Hong Kong to come back for? A fading city: even its scandals were tired affairs. Her mission called, but for herself there was nothing.

At last the passengers began shuffling forward, and Errol stepped out into the aisle. Now Jessica could reach up for her bag. But he was before her and lifted it down. Jessica smiled

acknowledgement, although she would prefer to manage her things herself. He was not a bad sort, just that she didn't quite take to him. Anyway, he was going on to Shanghai.

In front, the father carried the now-quiet baby, reversed on his shoulder so that it looked at her with wide eyes.

In the passenger terminal aluminium vaulting soared overhead, the huge arches reducing human ambition to ant-like scurrying across the floor. Jessica collected her cases and pushed her trolley past Customs. The pace of the passengers round her quickened, and then they were out into the crowd in the arrival hall. Jessica felt her heart leap when one middle-aged man barely her height began walking towards her.

"Daddy!" Jessica released her trolley and hugged him, receiving in return a cautious male embrace. She and Pa had become warmer with her absences from Hong Kong. He paid at the car park and then touched her arm, his round face wrinkling in concern. "Are you all right?"

"Of course." Jessica knew that she did not look her best.

"You must take care. There is so much sickness around, from China."

"Oh Daddy!" Pa was such a typical Hongkonger, still seeing China as a menace across the border. He had no notion of the modern China, the land of opportunity.

They had already passed out of the air-conditioning into the hot sun of a Hong Kong October. In the car park was a surprise. Gone was the white Japanese car, the standard civil service issue: the vehicle in the parking lot was larger and metallic green, with chrome bumpers and big wheels. She turned to her father: "Isn't it a bit young for you?"

"Get in!" was the response. Pa was sparing with words. Jessica opened the door and stepped up awkwardly into the front seat, bumping her head on the handgrip. Sitting down, she smoothed her hair and checked her appearance in the sunshade mirror. When she looked out, they were already onto the highway.

The verge dipped below the level of the window. Now she would see China – or at least the rim of that vast country. But instead the ocean merged with the grey of the sky. "Is it always like this now?" she asked.

"The winter monsoon – the factories in China," her father answered. "Most of them are ours," he added, for he was a fair man.

Jessica turned to look at him in profile as he faced the road ahead. Pa was assured and knowledgeable – at least on ground with which he was familiar; and for a moment she felt again a small girl's adoration for the god-like figure who could do everything. But the executive in her reasserted itself: the god shrank to a small man peering through the windscreen. And he was getting old. The folds under his chin were more pronounced; the flesh had dropped a little more from the cheekbones. Jessica looked away.

They reached the end of Lantau Island, and came to a great steel suspension bridge. Cables flicked past, and they swept down a highway, through a tunnel and out onto the final approach to Hong Kong Island. Now the towers of Central emerged dimly from the haze. Great juggernauts shouldered aside the lesser towers and rose to challenge the Peak itself.

Once through the cross-harbour tunnel, familiar blocks swept past, now overshadowed by shining structures of tinted glass. That was a famous hotel, now somehow so small; there the curious curving shape of the Club. They turned up Garden Road, the car engine whining. Just when it seemed that the car would stall her father turned and they were into the level side street where Jessica had passed her childhood.

Her parents' flat was in a block for senior civil servants. Once it had been the tallest in the neighbourhood, but it was now dwarfed by colossi of pink marble. As they drew up at the gate, the guard scurried out to salute them. Pa parked under a corrugated iron shelter huddled round the foot of the building. The guard helped him lug the case into the foyer.

Jessica followed into them into the musty interior. Walls of yellow marble, scuffed bare at shoulder level, enclosed them. Metal letterboxes filled one wall, flyers sticking out from them like leaves. Jessica picked one up from the floor: How strange it was to read Chinese again, to see those characters so redolent of her people's history. The flyer described bargain flats in the area. Perhaps it was almost time to buy, Jessica thought – Peachey could advise on that.

The lift creaked slowly up. At last they were out into the cramped little lobby, with its familiar stale cooking smell. Men's and ladies' shoes, of a similar size, lay on the floor outside one door and, pushing these aside with his foot, her father pressed the bell. A ding-dong tune followed, but before it had finished there was the familiar slap of slippers on marble. The chain rattled, and then the door opened. "Ma!" Jessica cried in delight.

They embraced, and her mother was already scolding her gently and straightening the collar of her blouse. As they disengaged, Jessica glanced at her mother's face. Ma was older. But she was still a fine-looking woman for her age: poised and alert, looking from side to side like a bird as she talked.

"Hasn't she has put on weight, Oliver?" her mother was saying.

"Nonsense, Irene," her father retorted: "The girl's too thin."

Her mother turned to her. "Dear, why don't you go to your room? You must be so tired."

The kitchen door opened then, revealing the cheerful weathered face of Mariflor the maid. With a shy smile at Jessica, she took over the bag. Entering her room, Jessica found it smaller than she remembered. And the air freshener did not quite drown the stale smell that pervaded the whole block. But she forced a smile and sat down on the bed.

After the two older women had fussed over the room, Jessica was left alone. From the wall, once covered with her posters, a picture of a Tibetan shepherd stared down disdainfully. On impulse Jessica took the picture down, setting it face to the wall.

The bathroom, when she entered it later, smelt strongly of disinfectant. The face that peered back at her from the mirror was fresher than she expected, and when she pouted the lines round her mouth disappeared. Her nose, prominent for a Chinese, was her best feature. Jessica looked at herself quickly from an angle, and swept back her hair to expose her cheek, which was satisfyingly round. English food was not all bad, she thought with a smile – and then quickly straightened her face when the lines reappeared. From the opposite angle, she was not so satisfied – her jaw seemed to stick out so – and she let her hair fall back. Well, appearance did not matter so much for a career woman. Next year she would be thirty.

2

Showered and in softer clothes, Jessica went out into the living room. Her mother, absorbed in an old photograph album, started as Jessica leaned over her shoulder. Then her face softened: “Dear, you gave me a shock.” Composing herself, her mother shut the album. “Are you ready to eat? The soup’s waiting.”

Mariflor brought in a steaming bowl and Jessica sat on the sofa. The soup tasted good, her mother’s cooking.

Irene spoke again. “I hope the room is all right. It is a bit small, I know.”

Jessica said that it was fine, except for the picture. Her mother half rose. “I’ll get Mariflor to move it. Your father bought it last year – Chinese art is so popular, I don’t know why, I’m sure – but I don’t think he really likes it himself.”

“OK, Mummy, no need-la!” Jessica motioned her back.

Her mother sat down again. Then she pulled out another album: “Look at these, dear.”

Jessica rested her hand on her mother’s shoulder and peered at the book. The photos were already old, yellowed by the heat of intervening summers. And yet it seemed no time since they were taken. Jessica saw herself, face round under an academic cap, on an English lawn: a graduation ceremony with black-gowned figures crowding behind her. In other photos her parents appeared, and the lowering teenager beside them was her brother.

“How is Isaac?” she asked.

Oh! her mother had so much to say. “He is such a bad boy, not like you, Jessica, although at one time we expected worse, but England seems to have done you good. A pity he didn’t stay there longer. We sent him when he failed his exams here – England is easy on students you know – but he wanted to come back. And his girlfriend...” Irene paused, as if her crimes were too wearisome to relate. “Anyway, the other day he just walked out.”

“You mean he’s not coming back?”

“Of course he came straight back, to fetch his things. And he will be back permanently soon. What has he got to live on? You can’t get a job in Hong Kong these days. He’s just a child,” Irene sighed. Then she talked brightly of her visit to the hairdresser.

Jessica looked idly over the room. So much had changed since she lived there. The box-shaped television had been replaced by a giant flat screen that filled almost half the wall. Gone were the piles of books where she had sat on the floor, absorbed in tales of romance. A few surviving volumes stood forlornly on an aluminium rack in the corner.

“I am doing all the talking,” her mother finished. “Tell me about London.”

Jessica replied hesitantly. In truth, she would rather forget London. But her mother’s interest in small domestic details stimulated her, and despite herself, she became talkative. Irene had plenty to say herself. It was important to have a proper cooked meal each evening, she told her daughter, otherwise one could quickly get out of balance. And eating out was so unhealthy. Perhaps Jessica had a friend round sometimes, to share the cooking.

Jessica was not yet ready to broach the subject of friends. Instead, she turned to her job. “Ah, yes, the bank,” her mother responded, “How are you getting on dear? Is that nice man still your boss?”

Oh, Ma!” Jessica was exasperated. “I left the bank three years ago. I’m doing something more meaningful now.” She introduced her organisation.

“‘ComCare’?” Her mother repeated doubtfully. “What is that?”

Jessica explained. ComCare’s founders were American, of religious persuasion, and they had already embraced the UK to their collective bosom. Now they wished to reach out to the East. And Jessica was their chosen messenger.

Irene was sceptical. “Why should companies care about the community?”

“Companies are part of the community,” Jessica replied. “They can’t forget about people: that’s the old-fashioned way of doing business. Nowadays, ‘Smart companies care.’” This last phrase was ComCare’s slogan. She herself had had a hand in its creation.

“Even in Hong Kong?”

“It will be difficult at first,” Jessica admitted, “but once we get a few good companies in others will follow.” She thought of Errol and his interest in her mission: it was not hopeless.

But how would she start? Irene wanted to know. Who was paying for it all? Jessica explained that they already had a few founding companies here, branches of their UK members. One of them would provide her with office space. And as Jessica described the programmes ComCare had held so successfully in the UK, even Irene caught her daughter’s enthusiasm. When Oliver came into the living room, he found mother and daughter bent over a chart depicting connectivity among a company’s stakeholders.

“Look at this!” her mother said, holding it up. “Your daughter drew it.”

Oliver looked at the flow chart with its arrows and boxes. “Very professional,” he said, turning it sideways, and finally upside down. “Let’s see what’s for dinner.”

The smell of cooking which had been filling the living room for the past hour left little to the imagination. Jessica found that she was hungry again, and when Mariflor brought in the dishes – the steamed garoupa, the beef with ginger and scallions, the choy sum covered with good old oyster sauce – she needed no prompting.

Oliver looked at his wife and shrugged: “Half-starved.”

Even her mother, concerned as she was about her daughter’s weight, was gratified. “It’s lucky that she likes beef,” she said to her husband, “now that we can’t have chicken.”

Jessica paused. “Oh, I had eggs on the plane.”

“Never mind, dear. I’m sure English chickens are well-behaved. It is just that here we get them from China. – Mariflor, have you done the dessert?”

Mariflor brought in a dish with little roundels of pastry – her mother’s lotus paste tarts. Jessica ate one straight away. How good it was! She ate a couple more before she recalled the proper order of things and returned to her now-cooling rice.

Her father was looking at the newspaper. “The government is unpopular enough already. W– Department will make it worse.” He lifted the paper: “Look at that.”

“Do you think that Nathan...?” Irene asked.

Oliver nodded. “A gesture will have to be made. Otherwise the media will never let go. The legislators are already asking questions. Even my own department, Y–, is affected. It is a shame, there are so few experienced people around. Why, in X– Department...” Oliver paused again.

Jessica began to recall the headlines on the plane. Curious now, she asked her father more.

Oliver, usually so taciturn, was keen to explain. The Head of W– had got into trouble, and had actually had to resign. Of course he would be found a post somewhere, but even so. And who would replace him? W– was such a difficult area. Yet whoever was appointed would have to accept.”

“Dear, I hope you will be all right in your job,” Irene broke in. “The national security legislation is coming, Article 23, and your company – this CoCo-whatever-it-is – sounds foreign. A pity you didn’t stay in that nice bank.”

Before Jessica could reply, her mother’s restless mind moved on. “Will you come to see Ken Hui?” she asked Oliver. He grunted, occupied again with the paper.

“And Jessica can come too,” Irene said. Seeing Jessica’s face, she hurried on, “Only if you want to, of course, but you used to sing along to his songs when you were small.” Jessica nodded, vaguely remembering. “Just indulge me once, that’s all I ask,” her mother went on. “And it is good wholesome stuff, isn’t it, Oliver?”

Her husband nodded without looking up.

After the meal, her mother left and Jessica found her father ready to talk. The economy, he said, had been getting worse and worse. Unemployment was at a record high; deflation was relentless. People were unhappy and – unfortunately – nothing that the government did seemed to help.

Then Oliver looked at his daughter. “You have met Nathan, haven’t you?”

Jessica recalled being introduced at a cocktail to a distinguished-looking expatriate. But that was years ago.

“His time has come, I’m afraid,” her father continued. “Just his bad luck to be in W–. Really rather a pity. You know, I have half a mind...”

His round face furrowed, and Jessica was going to ask more. But just then Irene called him to the bedroom. Left alone, Jessica found herself in front of the photo albums. On impulse, she pulled out the one her mother had been looking at, and glanced through it. There were photos of her mother as a much younger woman, little more than Jessica’s present age, almost – it was a curious feeling – almost someone who could be a friend, or a rival. She was with people Jessica didn’t recognise: some Chinese, a dark-haired expatriate with piercing eyes.

Later, when she emerged from the bathroom, she found the flat silent, the living room lights off. She walked over to the sliding doors. A soft brilliance glimmered beyond the glass. Jessica undid the catch, and throwing her weight against the heavy door she slid it open.

The air on the balcony was warm and still, as if she had moved from an antechamber into the nave of a great cathedral. For the space was enclosed. Gone was the view of the sea in which she had so delighted as a child. In front of her loomed a great grey wall set with lights. The lights formed a regular lattice, flickering faintly as a hundred television screens shifted in unison. The wall extended upwards until it merged with the luminosity of the sky. Below, it plunged downward for a dozen storeys and was lost in the gloom below. To either side, lesser towers pressed in, closing off the horizon. A narrow gap provided the only relief.

Grasping the balcony rail, Jessica leant outwards. The gap framed a glittering sliver of sea. As she watched, a black shape slid across the water. Then the ship was gone. Beyond the harbour should be the peninsula of Kowloon, the finger of Mainland China. But Jessica could make out nothing.

China was her real purpose. Hong Kong was only a stepping stone. It was China’s enterprises that had inspired her board back in London: the thought of converting a fifth of humanity to their cause. They had entrusted her with that mission. Yet Jessica could not fix the notion of China in her mind. The weight of history, the dynasties painstakingly learnt at school, the terror of the Cultural Revolution – these impressions floated before her, unresolved.

A frown appeared on Jessica's face. Then like candles after mass the lights in the wall in front of her began to go out one by one. Jessica released the balcony rail, now warm under her hand, and turned indoors.

3

“Well, will you take her?” Personnel asked.

Finance was looking Jessica up and down disdainfully. “I don't know. What did you say she does?”

Personnel – a middle-aged woman with vague hair – tried again. “She is with Com... – What was it, J...? – Oh, anyway,” she laughed, “this young lady was told to come here, she says. I thought you might know about it.”

This was Jessica's first day in her host company, and in the boss's absence Personnel was taking her round the cramped departments trying to find her a place.

Jessica felt she must speak up. “You see,” she said, “Mr Tang your chairman is sponsoring ComCare – that's my organisation – and he told us that we could be based here, and share the facilities. Not that we need much – not that I need much, I mean, for it is only me, at least to start with...” Under Finance's cold gaze, Jessica felt her flow drying up. What a hateful man!

She cast around, and by chance there was a vacant cubicle, rather shabby, just by the washroom. “I mean, I could sit there, or anywhere. Just until Mr Tang gets back.”

Personnel supported her. “That would be convenient – I can't seem to find anywhere else. And” (to Finance) “you could keep an eye on her.” She stepped aside to answer her mobile.

A girl came up and said Finance was wanted on the phone. Running a tongue over thin lips, he gave in. “All right,” he said to Jessica, “just until Mr Tang gets back. Then we'll see.” He hurried off down the aisle.

This was Jessica's introduction to Fruitful – for such was the unlikely name of her host company. It was listed on the stock exchange. This was to be the base from which she would launch her mission of corporate redemption across Asia. Jessica wondered what had prompted Mr Tang's generosity. Or perhaps, when he appeared it would turn out to have been a mistake. Fruitful obviously produced electronic goods, for a poster above a nearby cabinet featured a bikini-clad girl coyly holding a device. Jessica put a file onto the cabinet, obscuring the girl's legs at least, and sat down.

She got up again almost at once, for the chair was so high that she could not get her thighs under the desk. There was also something sticky on the worktop, which she rubbed

unsuccessfully with a tissue. Looking round, Jessica found herself in a drab corner, the washroom being the only relief. Fire doors, jammed with piled objects, closed off the end of the corridor. But as she unpacked her bag, Jessica felt that she had made a start.

And it seemed that in the person of the Head, she had already met the worst of the Finance department. The other staff were busy but kindly enough. Hardly had the boss departed when her neighbour, a frizzy-haired girl, came over and offered her a small bunch of freshly-washed cherries, on a couple of sheets of Fruitful notepaper. "From the market," she said in English. "Not fattening."

Jessica thanked her. But did that mean she looked fat? When later she went to the washroom – conveniently nearby as it was – she found the face that looked out at her from the mirror was a little bit round, although perhaps it was the effect of her cardigan, a chunky thing she had brought from England. The other girls wore much daintier garments, more suitable for the Chinese form. Everyone here was so slim: after stocky London girls it was hard to adjust.

On the way back, in Cantonese she asked her neighbour, who turned out to be called Yo-yo, where she shopped for clothes. The girl exclaimed how good Cantonese was, then continued in English that she went to a store nearby, "but it wouldn't be suitable for you."

"Why not?" Jessica asked.

"You would shop somewhere special," Yo-yo replied. "You're international. We're just local product."

A little later Jessica heard the rattle of crockery. A trolley was making its way down the aisle, stopping briefly at each desk to deliver drinks and leaving in its wake a buzz of conversation. "A-Sou," Yo-yo informed her. From the great jug on the trolley the lady poured a cup of such corrosive tea that on the first sip Jessica had to ask, hoarsely, for extra condensed milk. "Good for the throat," A-Sou beamed.

Jessica thought to make a plan for ComCare. But reaching into her bag, she found she had forgotten her notepad. She half-rose to look over the cubicle wall, but Yo-yo had disappeared. Then she saw the sheets of Fruitful notepaper that had borne the cherries. They were damp, but serviceable: she would make a start with those.

Jessica had barely filled a page with notes when A-Sou appeared again. This time the lady was collecting the rubbish. She replaced Jessica's empty bin liner, putting it onto the trolley – which looked very like the tea trolley of the previous hour. As an inspiration to hygiene, A-Sou placed a toilet roll on top of the watercooler, and trundled off.

The afternoon wore on. Jessica was hailed from time to time by staff on their way to the washroom. The women, Jessica could not help noticing, did at least use the washbasins. But she suspected that some of the boys did not wash at all, since the sound of their performance was quickly followed by that of footsteps across the tiles and an opening door.

Eventually Jessica had covered the Fruitful paper with slightly-smudged notes headed, 'ComCare – A Marketing Plan'. At six-thirty she got up to go, and found that she was the first. Did the other girls not have families? she wondered as she made her way up the aisle. Or perhaps there was some special project on. The staff near the Head's office were particularly subdued, and Jessica trod as silently as she could on the scuffed carpet. It was a relief to reach the foyer. But there she was confronted by a wall of plate glass.

Hardly had Jessica time to wonder at this barrier when a small sturdy figure leapt out from the corridor opposite and stamped on the floor. The girl – for from the swinging locks and rounded form it was a girl – jumped and stamped again. Even in boots, Jessica noticed, her feet were rather small. Nonetheless, the force they administered was sufficient, for the plate glass doors juddered and then slid slowly across until they had disappeared into the walls. "There!" the girl beamed.

"Oh. Hi!" Jessica said, rather bemused at this performance.

"I'm Mandy, pleased to meet you," said the girl, solemn now, the locks framing a round snub-nosed face. Extending a small hand, she shook Jessica's with surprising force. "You just started here?"

Jessica nodded. "Funny," Mandy continued. "They aren't recruiting many now – laying off more likely." She made little perky movements of her head as she spoke, like a sparrow. Jessica explained her role. Mandy nodded, taking it in. "So you've come to save us?"

"Well, not exactly," Jessica smiled. Her eye fell on a poster on the wall. It was the bikini-clad girl again, this time bending forward to reveal the full curvature of her breasts. "Or perhaps..." Jessica resumed thoughtfully as they stepped inside the lift, "perhaps you're right."

In the warm dusk outside, a fast food shop proclaimed itself in glowing neon as 'Bonky'. Jessica said goodbye and walked off, only to find that Mandy was walking in the same direction. She asked her whether she was going to the MTR. Perhaps mistaking her meaning, Mandy took Jessica's arm in her own and said, "Let's go to the market."

Not wanting to reject her new colleague, Jessica allowed herself to be led into the glare of a nearby alley. Naked light bulbs, some half-masked with newspaper, were reflected in the sheen of piles of fruit. Between the stalls a passage threaded its way steeply up the hill, clogged with discarded stalks and wrappings. Jessica stepped warily in her high heels, trying to keep up with the nimble Mandy. But they had only climbed a little way, when there was a hissing sound from above. "Wei!" Mandy exclaimed, and was only just in time to tug Jessica aside before a stream of water came rushing down. It carried a little tide of vegetable waste and polythene scraps down to the main street below.

"Christ!" Jessica exclaimed, and then continued in more measured Cantonese, "didn't he look first?" She pulled out a tissue to dab herself. The hawkers around resumed their shouts.

“Choi sum!” called one, gesturing to a pile of glistening stalks; “Ping-gohr!” shouted another over a heap of apples almost black in the shadow. The freshly watered alley gave off a stench of rotting vegetable matter. Jessica felt nausea rising.

Then as suddenly as it had come the sick feeling passed, and Jessica realised she was hungry. This was her world now. “Let’s get something,” she said to Mandy. “What’s good here?”

Mandy found some pomelos, and after beating the stallholder down, ordered two catty for Jessica. The stallholder slipped an apple into the bag after it had been weighed. Jessica bought some starfruit. Descending the alley in her high heels was more precarious than ascending; once she slipped on the greasy stones and was grateful for Mandy’s arm. Righting herself, Jessica saw a rat contemplating her calmly, as if she were the intruder. She blinked, and it disappeared beneath a stall. The two girls reached the safety of the main road without further incident. As a parting gift, Mandy bought Jessica some dough sticks at a cha chan teng. “Good for your balance,” she said, and indicated the starfruit: “That’s too leung.”

Extract from “Jessica’s Choice”, by Matthew Harrison.

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