

Temple of Dreams

"Mr. Pan will tell us how happy we'll be."

Lo Pan scurries up Temple Street's congested human corridor, just blocks from Hong Kong's Star Ferry terminal. He dodges the throng of tourists, almost dropping his portable tea-leaf reading table on the toothless snake-medicine vendor. Above the din, he hears the twang of an American couple and sees a pair of pickpockets converging on them. He glances at the couple's overstuffed waist bags, knowing they will soon be razor-bladed.

Members of a triad in reflective sunglasses chain-smoke Marlboros. They cluster around dark corners and alleys, guarding their turf and overseeing the drug traffickers and loan sharks. The locals feel their presence. But to the tourists, they blend in amidst the garish crowd of street musicians, prostitutes and scores of sidewalk vendors packed together, hawking made-to-order B knick-knacks, trinkets, and Rolex knock-offs. The watches remind Lo Pan of his recurring dream in which he tells a good fortune to a rich woman cloaked in shadow. In gratitude, she gives him a real Rolex and a Canadian passport.

It's early evening, but the colony's crushing humidity has not let up, and Lo Pan is awash in sweat. He crosses the crowded street and marvels at the auction of a carp as long as his two arms outstretched. Beyond the next block is his usual reading spot, the same one he has

had for seventeen years, half his life. Lately, newly arrived mainlanders—"village rats," Lo Pan calls them—have appeared. They've not only tried muscling in on his cramped space, but have given all readers a bad name, telling customers gloomy news, forecasting tragedies, even advising against marriage.

He sniffs at the aroma of a soya-roasted pigeon. Then he remembers the rice porridge in his leaky Thermos, the dinner that his wife begrudgingly set aside. His spot is free. He hurriedly unfolds two small lawn chairs and his rickety table, flicks on his kerosene lamp, then unrolls the frayed, yellowing scrolls of calligraphy. They declare his honesty, his integrity and his accuracy. He still considers himself to be these things even though he's lost his abilities. That happened ten years ago, the day he ignored his own fortune—that "a monkey and tiger union would lead to a river of grief." Immediately thereafter, he met his future wife Mei, a street magician born in the year of the monkey. Lo Pan, born six years earlier in the year of the tiger, was no match for her wily charms. That night, in a hazy and awkward act of passion, Kwong was conceived. Lo Pan had not seen anything in his cups since. But his wit, his instincts and his aptitude to speak vaguely and generally while sensing what his customers want to hear, keep his family fed.

The neighbouring vendor, Stanley So, busies himself restocking



charms, eight-sided Bagua mirrors and incense.

"Evening, Stanley."

"Ah, Lo Pan, late again." He wags his finger. "I see you've not brought Kwong tonight. I guess you won this round with that wife of yours."

Lo Pan shoots Stanley a look that says "Don't start about my wife." Despite his wife's gin-soaked gambling bouts, Lo Pan maintains a traditional view of family and marriage, thinking it is in his son's best interests. Still, he forces a weak smile for Stanley. He wants to tell his friend that at least some day Kwong will have a future. Instead he says, "I see you're having a good night."

"A good month, just as you said we all would."

"Yes, but for how long?" Lo Pan remarks. "Thatcher is here to sell us back to the Communists. Soon all the *wei lo* will be gone, not to mention many of our own scared clients with their money. Then the Communists may sweep us up like fallen rice."

Lo Pan sees his favourite *wei lo* customer approaching through the sea of vendors and tourists. She has a thick mane of long blond hair and wears a sleeveless summer dress, revealing her pale skin. She is the only customer who plants scarlet lipstick smears on his cheeks, before and after every reading, and tips him two \$100(HK) bills. Tonight she is arm in arm with a man.

A wary smile creases Lo Pan's leathery face. He brushes his short, receding hair with his fingers. "Hey Lo Pan, your little *wei lo* sister comes," Stanley teases, "only this time she brings a Navy boy. A British officer from the look of his uniform. She may want Big Brother Lo Pan's wisdom even more than usual."

Lo Pan studies the man and shifts uneasily as they approach. "Don't be silly, Stanley, she comes to hear what she wants to hear."

As they near, he pours jasmine tea into two chipped porcelain cups.

"Evening, Mr. Pan, good to see you again." She bends forward as if to kiss him.

Lo Pan turns his cheek, waiting for his kiss, then notices she has outstretched her

hand. He wipes his damp palm on his cargo pants before awkwardly accepting her greeting, and bows to both of them.

"Good evening, missie; good evening, sir."

Lo Pan ogles a huge diamond on her ring finger.

She notices his staring. "It's gorgeous, isn't it? Charles gave it to me." Charles winks at her. She reaches back with one arm to stroke his hand.

Lo Pan passes them each a cup of tea. She eagerly accepts hers and sits down. But the Navy man unfolds a white handkerchief from a back pocket before wrapping it around his cup.

"Charles, this is Mr. Pan. He's the gentleman who's given me nothing but good luck and advice since I met him last year."

Charles cocks an eye and grins. "Evening, Mr. Pan." He remains standing behind her with one hand on her shoulder, the other holding his cup up as if it were about to explode. He has a rugged, square face with an angular nose, pursed lips, and an immaculately pressed white uniform.

"Here darling, have some tea. Mr. Pan will tell us how happy we'll be."

He turns to her. "Must I?"

"Oh, lighten up, Charles. Mr. Pan has already predicted that my road to happiness has begun." She kisses her fiancé's hand.

"Could've been a coincidence." Charles returns his cup to Lo Pan.

"Okay sailor, I'll show you." She blows on her tea, and gulps it before handing the cup back.

Lo Pan takes her cup, centring it on the table. With sure hands he turns it five times in one direction, then repeats it the opposite way.

"He turns it once for each element. You know: earth, water, wood, metal and fire," she explains to Charles.

"Is this going to take long, love?" Charles asks.

"Shush, he's almost done. Now he'll read the leaves." She looks at Pan. "Can you tell us whether we should stay, or return to London?"

Charles bristles. "We agreed Hong Kong was the best place—"

"I know, darling, you love it here. And

my friends adore you, especially Samantha. But I miss London."

Lo Pan frowns, causing her to lose her smile. "Mr. Pan, what's wrong?"

Lo Pan's eyes are transfixed by the cup's contents. Normally he sees only the wet mound of tea leaves but pretends to examine and decipher them before giving her the good news and reassurance she craves. Now he sees a crane, alone and in sorrow. A long-tailed rat and a slithering snake are casting dirt onto it. The crane symbolizes health and longevity. Years ago, he saw them frequently, much to the delight of his customers. But he'd never seen a crane looking so forlorn and in such despair. He shifts the angle of the cup several times, but the image remains.

Lo Pan stalls: "No problem here, missie. I need birthday, sir's exact birthday."

"Jill, please," Charles pleads. She reaches to clasp his hand.

"It's all right, darling, no shame in telling Mr. Pan you're the perfect marrying age: thirty." She giggles.

"Oh, all right then love, for you." He looks at Lo Pan with a tight smile. "March fifteen, nineteen-fifty-four."

Lo Pan suppresses a gasp. His hands tremble as he takes out some charts and pretends to focus on them. But he knows them by heart and there is no mistaking the omen before him.

"Ah yes, water snake: sophisticated, charming, excellent manners, very resourceful when it concerns money."

Jill beams at a grinning Charles and says, "But tell me something I don't already know."

Lo Pan pauses before continuing. "There is more than meets the eye; can also be mysterious, seductive."

Charles' smile evaporates.

She pats his hand. "But Mr. Pan, the leaves—what do you see?"

Lo Pan looks away as he speaks. "I... I see deer, beautiful deer. Good luck and wealth will follow."

She peers at the fortune teller. "I'm glad to hear that. And should we stay?"

Lo Pan hesitates. "Follow your heart, yes. But heart alone can be misled. Be strong, act wisely, open your eyes. Then no matter where you go, happiness will

follow.”

She wrinkles her forehead and pauses. An ear-to-ear smile emerges before she reaches into her purse for some bills. “This is for you, Mr. Pan.” She hands him two \$100 notes, then scrawls something on a piece of paper. “We’re having a party in two days. Your talents would be well received. You will come, won’t you?”

“Party?” Lo Pan almost whispers.

Charles plants clenched fists on his hips and glares at his fiancée.

Jill ignores the smouldering glare. “That’s right. I’d be so happy if you could make it. I will have tea and cups all ready for you.”

Lo Pan stares at the paper, then looks into her doelike eyes. “Yes, missie, for you I come.” He lowers his head and takes the invitation.

“Splendid,” Jill says just before Charles drags her along, but not before the Navy man casts a suspicious look back at the fortune teller.

Lo Pan sucks in a deep breath and wipes at his dripping brow. Ten years ago, his abilities gave him confidence and self-assuredness. Now he is dazed and shaken that he can suddenly read again.

Stanley yells over, “Lo Pan, you rascal. I heard everything. Hey, why so glum? You have an invitation to her party. You’ve got it made. Think of all the new *gwei lo* customers you will find!”

Lo Pan nods. New *gwei lo* customers could mean an education for Kwong, a future. He glances at the paper. It gives her name, time, and location at the Mid-levels, the wealthy expat enclave that sits halfway up Victoria Peak, Hong Kong’s highest mountain. He has lived in Hong Kong all his life, but has never set foot on Victoria Peak. Even now with an invitation, he can’t imagine ever entering one of those mansions. He crumples the paper and throws it over his head. It lands in his bag.

The evening takes on a dreamlike quality for Lo Pan. One customer after another queues for him. He recognizes none of them, yet they gravitate to him like slugs to baby bok choy. Many want to know if they should remain in the colony.

He does not have to charade his way through as the leaves come alive for him.

He sees divorces, bankruptcies, political demonstrations, but also children laughing and grandparents smiling. No customer leaves without feeling enlightened. Yet it is Jill’s withering crane that stays with him.

“Lo Pan, what a streak you are on. I have never seen you so busy. You’re taking everybody else’s customers, you dog,” Stanley kids.

Lo Pan grins. It is after three a.m. and for the first time, he is out of tea. He is exhausted but less confused and frightened at the re-emergence of his sight. He realizes something significant is to happen, just as it did when he lost his abilities years ago.

Street traffic has slowed and Lo Pan packs up with the last of the vendors, leaving Temple Street to the prostitutes

Lo Pan’s eyes are transfixed by the cup’s contents.

and loan sharks. With half of the tip from Jill, he pays the triad for the evening’s “overhead costs.” The other half will be stashed in a tea canister in the pantry as part of Kwong’s “hope fund.”

He returns to his one-room apartment, divided in two by a thin curtain, which he shares with his wife and son. Since Kwong’s birth, they have moved a dozen times, typically just ahead of irate landlords. Currently they are on the twenty-second floor of a Kowloon highrise, over which jets forever screech to nearby Kai Tak Airport.

His sleep is disturbed that night. He dreams again of the rich customer in the shadow who gives him the Rolex. But this time she steps forward, and he is about to see her face when the smell of gin and the rustling of clothes wakens him. He forces his eyes open and sees his wife. Her ashen face is heavily smeared with makeup. She forages through his pants on the floor. Her manic eyes light up as she pulls out his wad of bills tightly wrapped with a rubber band. “So that is why the fortune teller was late, he had a great night. Any more?” She

waves the wad. “You’re not holding out on me, are you? Give, or your child and neighbours will hear me screaming that you beat me.”

He stretches for his bag but she reaches it first, and pulls out the party invitation.

“What’s this?”

Lo Pan hesitates. “It is business, none of your concern.”

“Business, on Victoria? That’s funny, fortune teller. What lovely writing, a white woman’s for sure. Hmm, perhaps you need an escort?” she jeers.

“It doesn’t concern you, nor does it belong to you.”

Lo Pan lunges for the paper. She turns and walks away, stuffing the note and the bills into her bra. “Too slow and too stupid, fortune teller. You want it, come get it. If you know how.”

He hesitates, then charges, grabbing her arm and swinging her around. He clenches the top of her blouse. She is astonished at his uncharacteristic spirit and just as he thrusts his hand down her top, she bites the back of his hand. He grimaces and wants to howl but knows Kwong is sleeping on the other side of the curtain. He comes up with the invitation, along with bills that fly everywhere as she cries out. Her screams are drowned out by a 747 banking toward a landing.

“How dare you, you useless son of a bitch!” She tries to slap his face, but he blocks it with a forearm. Their eyes lock for an instant. She blinks first, then looks away.

She drops to the floor in a scramble for some of the bills. With both fists full, she reaches for an overcoat, wiping his blood from her mouth.

“By the way, fortune teller, we are out of tea.” She slams the door on her way out.

Lo Pan listens to her hollow laughter down the hall until an elevator swallows her away. Then her words sink in. He bolts to the pantry in search of his tea canister. But he doesn’t have to grope for it. It lies on its side, empty. He stares blankly at the dented and rusted container as if doing so would return its contents and the future it held.

With a heavy sigh he looks away, then unfolds the torn invitation and studies it. He now knows he is meant to go. He squats on his heels, palms cradling his forehead,

wanting to burst into tears—not because his hand stings, but because Kwong has learned to sleep through this.

Lo Pan, dressed in a vanilla- and toffee-coloured polyester plaid suit, and oversized plastic dress shoes borrowed from Stanley, boards the Star Ferry to Hong Kong Island. From the terminal, a winding bus ride takes him up Victoria Peak. He is within a short ascent of the woman's address. He steps off and instinctively raises an elbow, expecting to fight his way through a crowd. But he is completely alone. He lowers his arms and jerks his head around, listening for something, anything. All he hears is the faint din of traffic below, and the bus driving off. The unfamiliar scent of lilacs, rather than exhaust fumes and tobacco smoke, makes his nose itch. With eyes wide open, he gazes down from the mountain. The skyscrapers form a ring of spires around the harbour, which is dotted with junks and ferries. Rising from the other side of the water are the outstretched New Territories, which rise to form a ring of mountains. He closes his eyes, imagining Kwong and himself jumping off Victoria and landing somewhere, anywhere, else.

Under the noon sun, his suit and a weighty application of Brylcreem entomb his sweltering body. He climbs the winding road lined with imposing stone walls and barriers. The homes are huge, sprawling, with the odd fruit tree or lychee bush planted nearby. He would love to surprise Kwong with a sweet, fresh lemon drink and reaches down through a fence for some fallen lemons. A German shepherd charges out of nowhere. It snaps its jaw at Lo Pan's injured hand, just missing it. He jumps away from the fence. Heart pounding and stomach churning, he stands rigid, expecting to be surrounded by police or security guards. Instead, he scans the empty street, and moves on.

Lo Pan finds the house, a Spanish-style villa surrounded by a spiked, twelve-foot-high iron fence. He gapes at it, having seen this kind of Hong Kong mansion only in pictures and on television. It has a long, circular driveway filled with European cars, a huge fountain and a small tropical

garden with a limp Union Jack atop a flagpole.

He presents his slip of paper to a bow-tied, white-gloved Chinese servant who eyeballs the plaid suit and shoes before snorting and escorting him along a granite pathway to the back of the villa. Lo Pan's oversized shoes clunk as he stumbles and almost falls. Recovering, he scuttles behind the servant and hears laughter, rock music, and splashing water. Fifty or sixty people are scattered about a kidney-shaped pool and a sprawling deck. Most of them are white and take no notice of him. He calculates that with just five new customers like Jill, he could replace in less than six years what his wife just stole.

The smattering of Chinese present avoid eye contact or glare down at him. Almost all the guests are dressed in swimwear. Many sway with cigarettes and drinks in hand before a band doing Boy George covers. Others crowd beneath a tent and around long tables of food, or lounge on the pool deck. Two partiers hand him empty glasses and ask for refills.

Jill sees him. She staggers over, spilling white wine onto her bikini and sheer sarong. She wipes at the stain, making a feeble attempt at drying herself.

He blushes at her near nakedness, wanting to shield her with his jacket. Instead he lowers his gaze.

She shouts over the blaring music, "Mr. Pan, thank you for coming, I'm so glad you could make it. I'm honoured, truly I am. This means so much to me. I told my best friend Samantha you were coming, we're so excited. And I've asked Mr. Yee to set up a table especially for you. This is going to be brilliant!"

Lo Pan is pleased to see her in such good humour. Perhaps he is wrong about the crane. Her generous welcome makes him forget his headache. Leading him past the edge of the pool, she almost slips, laughing and joking along the way. She waves at a bearded, rotund man who climbs onto the diving board and charges into a perfect belly flop, splashing Lo Pan and a cheering Jill. She takes Lo Pan to a glass table with two metal chairs.

Jill snaps her fingers at a servant and gives him instructions. Another servant

quickly returns with eight gold-rimmed, hand-painted cups filled with tea, and passes them around.

The rotund man joins them with a mouthful of canapes. "So this is why you stopped our weekly sessions?"

"Nothing personal, Dr. James, but Mr. Pan's fortunes are far more uplifting than anything you ever tell me. And as you can see, he makes house calls." She laughs as other guests gather around and reach for cups.

Lo Pan is surrounded by drunks slurping tea and yelling questions at him. He shrinks into his chair.

"How far will Deng allow market reforms to go?"

"Is BP a buy?"

"Is Boy George really a girl or a poofster with a damned good eye for mascara?"

"I want to know if Arsenal will kick Manchester's arse."

The hilarity pounds at his head like falling anvils. He wishes he were home with his boy, far away from this circus.

Jill calls out, "Hold it, slow down everybody. There's plenty of Mr. Pan to go around, but the queue starts with me, then Sam. Mr. Pan, this is Samantha."

Lo Pan observes Samantha's calculating eyes, then half bows as Jill sits opposite him and centres her cup on the table. Only then does he notice Jill's gold Rolex.

She catches his stare. "Do you like it, Mr. Pan? Charles just gave it to me."

Charles staggers in behind Lo Pan. "Yes, and if you're not careful, someone may help themselves to it."

Lo Pan can feel Charles' eyes burning into him.

"Oh hush, Charles. Get me some more wine. Sorry, Mr. Pan, ignore him. Focus on my leaves and weave your magic."

Lo Pan rests his chin on his knuckles and squeezes his eyes shut for several seconds. He thinks of the money he can earn after today. All he has to do is give them what they want to hear. And perform like a monkey.

"Sh, everybody," Jill commands, "give the master some quiet."

Lo Pan takes her cup. He spins it, though his eyes never leave hers. He hears taunts as well as laughter. The music

reaches a crescendo. The cup stops.

"Well, what do you see?" Jill asks.

He gazes into the cup, neither breathing nor blinking.

Charles jumps in, his speech slurred. "When he's done, his mates can probably use some help with the dishes." The crowd breaks into laughter.

Jill ignores Charles and leans forward. "Mr. Pan? ... Mr. Pan?"

Lo Pan gently exhales, then lowers the cup and whispers, "I see a fallen crane in tears, very sad. Beside it are a rat and a snake throwing dirt over it."

Jill recoils into her chair. "Are you sure? What does it mean?"

Lo Pan pauses. "The two that you trust most have betrayed you."

"Betrayed? Me?"

Lo Pan peers at Samantha out of the corner of his eye. Samantha's face drains of colour. She glances at Charles. Jill follows Lo Pan's line of vision and sees them, as well as Charles' hand hastily dropping from Samantha's.

"I don't understand," Jill says.

Charles blusters, "There's nothing to understand, love. You can't believe these people. This little man is a con, and a damned good one, I'll give him that. He's feeding you rubbish."

Jill gawks at Charles with a confused look which quickly hardens.

A slight quiver escapes from Charles' mouth before he clenches his jaw and stares off.

She then spies Samantha slinking into the crowd, many of whom avoid Jill's gaze.

"Where are you going, Sam?" Jill asks.

Samantha stops and forces a smile. "Now there you go again with your wild imagination. I'm not going anywhere, dear. I just hate to see you upset over nothing."

Jill's forehead creases as she notices the crowd inching away from Samantha and Charles.

Samantha retreats as Charles steps toward Lo Pan. He says with narrowing eyes, "You're upsetting my fiancée and ruining our party. Tell her you're putting her on, or I'll personally escort you out."

Lo Pan doesn't flinch. But his heart pounds and sweat trickles down his brow.

"I mean now." Charles hovers over Lo

Pan.

Lo Pan rises slowly to meet Charles' gaze, and studies him. He sees the eyes of a caged animal, a snake.

Charles says through gritted teeth, "You forget who you are, and who you're talking to."

Lo Pan winces. "You are a snake, and as you say, I am a con, or did you say you were the con? I do not remember and my English not too good."

Charles' face flushes crimson as he lunges for Lo Pan's throat. Lo Pan deftly

Lo Pan is surrounded by drunks slurping tea and yelling questions at him.

sidesteps him and kicks his foot out, tripping Charles, who falls onto the table, shattering glass all over. Several people are cut. Jill is one of them. Her cries for help startle Lo Pan and he goes to her.

Bleeding from several cuts, Charles ignores his fiancée. Instead he searches for Samantha but sees Lo Pan bending to help Jill. He charges into Lo Pan's lower back, knocking the wind out of him, sending him sprawling head first onto the pool deck.

Arms locked around his stomach, Lo Pan edges away from Charles, desperately trying to suck in air. Several guests try to hold Charles back. But he breaks free long enough to jump onto Lo Pan and hurl blows to his face and body until Lo Pan loses consciousness.

A week later Lo Pan's broken nose, sliced face and bruised body are healed enough to allow him to return to work. Stanley greets him warmly. "Lo Pan, the girls have been asking about you. They say you were their good luck charm and with you gone, business was

bad."

Lo Pan tries to smile, but the stitches allow only a weak grin.

As he sets up his stall, Jill appears through the crowd. She gasps at the sight of Lo Pan's injuries, but recovers. "Good evening, Mr. Pan, I'm very glad to see you again."

He is startled by Jill's voice and wants to turn to her, but instead ignores her.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am for what happened," she says.

He takes a deep breath and continues to unroll his scrolls.

"I've waited here every night for a week, hoping to find you. To apologize, and to thank you."

Astonished by her words, he turns to meet her gaze. He is taken aback by a healing cut under her eye. He wants to reach up to touch it.

She responds to his stare. "Oh, that. From the party. But it's coming along nicely, as will the rest of me. Charles and Samantha had been ... well, I think you already knew. But how are you?"

This is the first time she has ever genuinely inquired about him. It is a fact they both recognize.

"Well enough to work. Thank you for asking."

She reaches into her purse and pulls out a diamond engagement ring and the Rolex watch. She drops them onto his table.

His eyes widen. He can see Stanley gawking at them.

"I'll not be needing or wanting these any more. Please take them. I won't be bothering you again."

He stares at what she has dropped, then at her. He wants to say something. But she turns to walk away.

He calls out to her: "Hong Kong is not the place for you any more. Your happiness lies elsewhere. You will find it." The same can be said for him, he thinks.

"I know that, Mr. Pan. I figured that one out myself. Goodbye."

Lo Pan slips the ring and watch into his pocket. He nods at a grinning Stanley, then abandons his stall and crosses Temple Street to the fake ID man. With luck he will have just enough to haggle for two passports, and passage to Canada.