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Hong Kong Lights

J.T. Lundy

The gangplank clanked as we stepped onto the ferry. The stairs in front of us led to first class, reserved for the British and wealthy Chinese. We stayed to the left and therefore bottom of the boat. Second class, steerage – whatever you wanted to call it we had no other choice. We had gone bust in Macau and were on the Ferry back to Hong Kong.

It was 1986, back when Macau was tough, not the Disneyfied casino-land it is today. Back then there were no bells and whistles, when you got ripped off you knew it.

And ripped off we were. How could the two old, fat jai-alai players we bet against win every game? Jai-alai, a young man's game - a game of speed and agility where the ball can be flung faster than a 180 mph. Explain that.

Mark, Adil and I were on break from college and thought we were pretty smart, but you wouldn't have known. We stopped betting on jai-alai and descended into the blackjack room, the only non-Chinese in the place. We sat down at a table and did not leave when the empty chairs immediately filled up around us, playing on though the cards were torn and badly warped. Played on until we were flat broke. And it was hard enough to get out at that – we had to stiff the dealer who actually expected a tip. Yeah, we were smart all right.

The bottom deck of the ferry was metal with peeling red paint. It noisily vibrated from the rumbling diesel. White plastic tables and chairs were filled with Chinese laborers making the two-hour commute back to Hong Kong. They were too tired to care about us – strangers in their world.

A TV blared with old Kung Fu soap operas in Chinese. It hung from the ceiling over the kitchen front counter. Steam, smoke and the smell of fried rice and noodles billowed out. Second class was hard and gritty. I didn't smoke, but if I did this was the place for it.

Waiters in tuxedos carried food upstairs with fine china and silverware. Adil bought some fried rice (he had been holding out on us) that we shared with wooden chopsticks from cardboard trays.

The ferry had been traveling along the coast of China for only an hour and I already despised the first class passengers. They sat up top with their plush seats and tablecloths, reading the *Times* and watching the BBC. What would I feel like if I did this everyday? Only a few stairs separated us, but we were miles, countries apart even.

And what a difference a day makes. Yesterday we were at a posh party atop The Peninsula with girls from Adil's English high school in Hong Kong. Adil was Indian, but could speak neither Chinese nor his parent's Urdu, only English – a curious consequence of the British Empire.

The party looked out over the sprawl of Hong Kong. It was an adult party - a power party for the ruling Brits. The only Chinese there were the help.

The girls had wanted to meet Adil's American friends and with, at least, Mark they were not disappointed. No girl ever was.

Mark was probably the best looking American male in all of China. Tall with blond hair and blue eyes, he had a smile like Robert Redford and he knew it. But he was not cocky at all, only worse - he forced himself to be humble and the act drove the girls crazy - a nice guy.

The girls circled around Mark smiling and laughing competitively. Adil and I, weary from the girls' shameless display of alluring expressions, walked away and looked out the window. We were too early anyway. Mark was top gun and Adil and I were not even wingman, we were like mechanics. Only after Mark locked in on a lucky girl would we have a chance to assuage the losers' spirits.

The affluent party atop the most capitalist city in the world was a far cry from Macau and our ferry ride.

The ferry approached the city after nightfall. A cool breeze wafted over us and we were silent. We leaned over the rail, mesmerized by the lights of Hong Kong and Kowloon Bay. They were everywhere; sparkling green, red, white, and blue, on giant cargo ships to little junks moving to and from the center fire of the city itself. They spread out up into the hills and leaped over to the island creating one of the most beautiful sights anywhere. And the good thing was – the lights were for everyone.