

Chapter 1

The Fixed Grin

Another day of rain, on my rusty emotions. My thoughts chase one another in and out of wreaths of smoke. Gently opening the window, I see raindrops blinking on a branch. Water slides down the leaves with the fluid steps of a dancer. I turn on the radio. God calling. Probably a good time to go out. In the bar, a waiter in white is serving drinks. Across the table from me is a pair of sparkling eyes. (I could build a whole pulp fiction character just from those eyes. The mistress of the kungfu master Wong Fei-hung, levitating outside a skyscraper in Queen's Road, in the classic move 'Rolling the Shutter Upside Down', peering in at the secretary sitting on Wong's lap.) My thoughts are still playing hide and seek in the smoke-rings, but now a puff of the corner of the room air blows the rings away. A bottle of melancholy, a cube of empty air in the corner of the room, and now our twin glasses of brandy are intertwining intimately. Time never wearies, the minute hand never gives up its futile pursuit of the hour. Happiness like a wanderer hovers somewhere behind the equal sign of an equation.

The music marches into my ears. That fixed grin came out yesterday at dusk and here it is back again. White lies are white because they're lies. The melancholy in the heart is equal to the happiness on the face. Happiness and melancholy don't seem to be two different things.

'Vodka,' she says.

'Why are you switching to spirits?' I ask.

'To let the drink intoxicate the fixed grin,' she replies.

I order two vodkas. (She's a seasoned drinker, always drunk, just like me.)

My eyes roam the patterns of light. The explorations of a philosopher also search in vain for a treasure contained within the human body. The music marches into my ears again. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*. There's something mesmerizing about the Platters. If James Dean were still alive, would he have given up racing fast cars, and taken up the twist instead?

'Do you always come and drink here on your own?' she asks.

'Yes.'

'To drown the memory of pain?'

'No. To drown the happiness inside the memory.'

That fixed grin's still swimming in my glass like an ice cube. She's definitely laughing at me for being so naive.

Not all hunters are brave. Especially in a neon jungle, youthful innocence has become a rarity. No more childhood swings.

One drink. Another. Three. Four. Five.

Now I'm drunk. Nothing but that fixed grin in my mind.

Chapter 2

The Morning After

I have so many strange dreams. I dream about an astronaut singing on Venus. I dream of the King from a pack of cards groping in the dark of a 'fingers-only' nightclub. I dream of a pack of dogs crunching on bones. I dream of Lin Daiyu making plastic flowers in a factory. I dream of Hong Kong sinking into the sea. I dream of her dreaming in my dream and dreaming of me.

I dream of winning the sweepstake.

I throw away my pen and go into a 'fingers-only' nightclub in Wanchai, wearing a sharp suit. I send for all the dance-girls in the place to come and sit at my table. I buy myself some pride.

Then I buy myself a new six-storey building.

I live on one floor.

I lease the rest out.

I'll never have to put up with a landlord again or worry about him raising my rent.

Then I get in my car and go to see Chiu Chi-yiu.

Chiu's a real miser.

Once when I was poor I begged him to lend me twenty dollars. He just pulled a sour face and looked the other way.

Now I'm rich.

So I throw my money in his face.

Then I get back in my car and go to see Lily Cheung.

Lily's a snob.

Once when I was poor I begged her to let me make love to her.
She just pulled a sour face and looked the other way.

Now I'm rich.

So I throw my money in her face.

Then I drive over to see Chin Shi-fu.

Chin owns a publishing house.

Once when I was poor I begged him to publish my novel. He
just pulled a sour face and looked the other way.

Now I'm rich.

So I throw my money in his face.

Then I drive down Queen's Road so that people can stare at
me with envy.

Then I sober up.

I'm wide awake. My head hurts. I squint at the woman lying
fast asleep next to me and realise how plain she is. Not just plain,
she's downright ugly. Her hair's a mess—she's shed a lot of it on
the pillow. Her fake eyebrows are sparse and straggly. A night
of tossing and turning has reduced them to a smudge. Her skin's
rough, her pores are like open craters. (When I saw her in the
bar last night, her skin seemed snowy and delicate. Why does it
look so different now? Were the lights too dim, was her face just
heavily powdered, was I just too drunk to notice? Or maybe ...
Anyway, she looks completely different now.) Her nose even looks
a bit Western. In fact it's really the only attractive part of her face.
There are still a few blotches of red lipstick on her mouth, like
tinned cherries that have lost their colour. But the faint crow's feet
at the corners of her eyes are the ugliest thing of all. Her efforts to

powder them over have been to no avail. She's no longer young—probably in her early forties. But in a dimly lit room, coated with powder and rouge, in the eyes of an admiring drunk, she could still be a flower in bloom.

She's still fast asleep. From time to time her mouth twitches unconsciously. She must be dreaming, but I can't tell what about. She rolls over, breathes out. Her breath stinks. It makes me want to vomit. (If I hadn't been so drunk, I'd never have slept with this woman.) I roll off the bed, wash, get dressed and stuff half my last pay from the newspaper into her bag. I don't get paid much, but this morning I'm determined to be generous. Usually, whenever I'm sober, I end up pitying myself—but right now I pity her more than myself. I'm being generous because I'm sober. As I leave the hotel, the first thing that enters my head is a drink. On the way I buy myself a bottle of whisky from a store. But when I get home I decide not to start drinking quite yet. I've still got two separate newspapers waiting for my kungfu instalments. I lay out my writing paper on the table. I feel indescribably terrible. (I've been writing these serials for over a year now. Stooping so low as to write this trash for a living is a strange enough aberration in itself; but the thought that there are actually readers out there prepared to follow me into the bubble of this meaningless fantasy world is even stranger.) I laugh. I go and open the bottle and pour myself a glass of whisky.

(Here's an idea. I could perhaps write a novella, and call it *Hemingway in Hong Kong*. My Hemingway would be a destitute man of letters in ill health, who keeps hunger at bay every day by

eating bread soaked in syrup. Steeling himself against adversity, he manages to finish a book called *A Farewell to Arms* and offers it to every publisher he can think of. They all turn it down, and tell him to go and write kungfu fiction instead. They promise him that if he can write stuff that appeals to the kungfu-loving public, he'll never have to eat bread soaked in syrup again. He'll be rich, he'll be able to buy his own apartment and a car. Hemingway rejects their advice, and they tell him he's a fool. Instead he just goes home and keeps on writing his next book. He finishes *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, but by now he doesn't even have enough money to buy bread. His landlady kicks him out and rents his bed out to someone who can actually afford it—a hawk who sells patent cures for impotence on the streets of Shaukeiwan. Hemingway still refuses to wake up and face reality. He keeps trying to sell *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, but it's rejected every time. He pawns his woollen overcoat, the last warm thing he has left for the winter, to pay for a couple of meals and some paper, and goes on writing, squatting in the stairwell of a building. The weather turns cold but the desire to write still burns like a flame in his heart. Then early one morning a dance-girl living on the second floor comes home in a taxi to find a dead body lying under the stairs. She screams. Onlookers gather around but no one recognises the body. The police come, and find that he is clutching a manuscript. The title is *The Old Man and the Sea*.)

I think it's a really promising idea? I laugh, swallow another slug of the whisky and start working on my kungfu serial. (Yesterday,