

The Year of the Horse
Kim Cheng Boey

The scene looks too sanitised, the river now cleaned up, tame, tepid, no longer the thrumming mercantile artery that once fed the heart of the nation, but part of a massive freshwater reservoir created by an ambitious dam project. He had no inkling on his last visit ten years ago that this was on the cards. Typical of the country. Things just happen overnight, with little discussion. The sea is now kept at bay by the monstrous Marina Barrage, and the river no longer breathes the tidal rhythms that once bathed the steps of the quays. Apart from a few converted into tourist boats that ply the unnaturally clean water, the flotillas of *tongkangs* and bumboats had been brought out to sea and scuttled. On his last visit the entire stretch of Boat and Clarke Quays had already undergone a sea-change, their two and three-story shophouses and godowns transformed as if by a megalomaniac magician into an anonymous chain of upmarket pubs and restaurants that can be found in any globalising Asian city. The General Post Office was then being cordoned off and turned into the five-star Fullerton Hotel, which now along with the rest of the riverfront, is illuminated at night. Yet, behind these bright lights reflected in the river in splinters and ropes of colours that negate its darker past, behind all surviving historic buildings and the bridges decked out for tourist display, he can hear faint echoes: the whole harbourfront with its intimations of the open sea, and the ghost of the old river with its tidal whispers, its weave of smells, an underlay composed of old incarnations of the surviving buildings and those demolished. He could sense shadows lying listless between buildings and boats along the quay that by nightfall would be deserted, derelict. And behind the shadows hover the handsome faces of his father and Steve McGarrett.

Three months ago, Pat started belting out the *Hawaii Five-O* theme as part of his practice repertoire, his still small ten-year-old hands wielding sticks almost long as his arms, tapping the brisk rolls, a fast-paced cadence that started the show; a smart, catchy tune that sounded in many Singapore households on Sunday primetime TV at 7.55pm. It unleashed a tide of memories, waves of drum-rolls gathering in strength, cresting auditory waves releasing images that had been long buried: his aunt and two uncles, his sister and grandmother, and his neighbour and then best friend, Ah Huat, whose family was too poor to afford a TV, all congregated in the living room, waiting expectantly for Detective Steve McGarrett and his team to appear. The TV stood like an altar on its spindly tooled legs, its screen flickering to life and steady resolution. It had a varnished scroll door that he loved sliding to hear it rattle, and to see the almost secretive way the convex screen is revealed, like a deep jade pool reflecting his goggle-eyed distended face.

It was a show that had brought them together for an hour each week. It had a dramatic opening on all counts. The accelerando drum-roll accompanies an image of a foam-crested wave, succeeded by a fast train of images: aerial shots of islands and their foamy rollers and long curves of sandy beach, the coastal sprawl of the high-rise in Honolulu backed by volcanic mountains, then Steve McGarrett pivoting around stylishly as the camera telescopes in on his handsome, well-chiselled face, strong-jawed with a slight chin-cleft, its features bordering on craggy, his deep-set steel-blue

'The Year of the Horse.' Kim Cheng Boey.
Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

eyes, his thick crop of hair sculpted back to the right in a long rolling wave, with a loose few licks overhanging, and his lavish sideburns.

More images follow in rapid succession, creating a montage matching the soundtrack's tempo: shots of McGarrett's gleaming black Mercury sedan, a tracking shot of a Hawaiian beauty clad in pareo running on the beach, her hand in a voluptuous gesture brushing her hair back, of undulating waves with dancing reflected lights, staccato shots of a white standing Buddha, a close-up shot of a boy. Then the exquisite face of the Hawaiian beauty turning to face the camera, followed by the underbelly of a jumbo in lift-out, the blue strobes of a police siren, stabs of sunset over the waves, a tantalising glimpse of grass-skirted hips swishing in a frenetic hula, and a flashing blue siren. The boyish-faced Danno or James MacArthur appears running, followed by the rotating loaded chamber of a revolver ushering in burly Kono (played by Zulu) barrelling with a shotgun down on a baddie, and Kam Fong turning to face the camera. The credits close with a shot of a blue siren against a street at night and the producer's name 'Leonard Freeman.' Everyone hummed as they watched this fast-paced overture, waiting for Steve McGarrett and his team to hound down the *haole*, local or Asian villains, and close each episode with 'Book 'em, Danno,' words repeated like a mantra by children and grown-ups alike.

For weeks Lee looked forward to his son's drum practice. He had been fearful that the racket would attract complaints in this serene suburb bordering on the Kuring-gai National Park and had wished that Pat had instead chosen to learn to play the violin or trumpet. But the neighbours had not come knocking; indeed, the drumming was not as loud as he had thought. Since moving to Berowra he had tried to convince himself that it was home, that the endless vistas of bushland and the hovering band of the Blue Mountains would blot out the island-state he had left behind. They had tried settling in Toronto, where his sister Debbie had emigrated but Fong, his wife, had doubts about the weather and had put in a bid for Australia. After two years they were defeated by the Toronto winter and joblessness, and when Australia called, they decided quite readily to re-migrate.

Listening to his son he savoured being dragged by a long undertow of memory, out beyond the shoals of middle age, beyond the reefs of the emigrant years, to that strange day on the Singapore River, when he had his last walk with his father, and happened on the film set of *Hawaii Five-O*. It was his father's favourite route; even before he walked out of their lives, his father would take him out on walks around the river and the historic heart of the city. They would start with Change Alley, tucked in between Winchester House and Clifford Building, drifting with crowds browsing through its cool interior, its passage lined with stalls offering souvenirs, bootleg tapes, watches, pens, toys, silks, anything that could be bought and sold. He loved the babble of tongues, the barter, the friendly banter, the deft transactions of the money-changers, and most of all the smell of the place, a slightly musty odour tinged with a whiff of sea air, urine, dust and decay. The Alley decanted shoppers into Raffles Place, the loud sunshine severing their reverie, and they would either proceed to the Moorish Arcade, an upmarket version of Change Alley, with its white stucco and arches and beautiful Italian floor tiles, or cross the lawns and pass the fountain to Robinsons, with its white Palladian façade, pillars and pediments, and take the grille-gate lift to the toy department on the top floor. Lee eyed the toys longingly but knew his father could never afford them.

From Robinsons they walked back through Change Alley to Collyer Quay and crossed the pedestrian bridge to Clifford Pier, where his father would light up a cigarette as they watched the bobbing bumboats, and the freighters and ships anchored further out. Lee detected a mixture of pain and relief, lightness and heaviness on his father's face. Then they would drift on past Cecil Street and D'Almeida Street, names redolent of distant, unknown places. Always they ended up at the river, before the struts of the elegant Cavanagh Bridge. They would have a sugar-cane drink at the hawker centre beside the bridge and then walk along the street of ship chandlers, shophouses and godowns that hugged the curve of the River, said to resemble the belly of the carp.

He was spellbound by the *tongkangs* berthed along the quay, ranks of them, ancient, mysterious, with eyes painted on their bows to see the danger ahead, their gunwales girdled with tyres to cushion knocks, and the sampans like minnows darting among them, rowed or motored by weathered old men. *Tongkangs* chugged in and out of the river, their helmsmen turning the large tillers; outbound boats with their empty cavernous hold, and inbound cargo-laden craft, sometimes towed by a smaller bumboat. Their passage scored the khaki flow of the river with a wake that spread across the river, nudging boats nestled at the quay's steps. He would follow the path of one making for the mouth of the river into the swells of the harbour, to the waiting ships riding at anchor, and inhale a whiff of other worlds, a stir of the unknown. On the quay, trains of sweaty men in worn singlets or bare-chested, heaved gunny sacks of dried goods, rice, gambiar, copra, spices; their bare feet expertly negotiated the gangplank trembling under the combined weight of men and goods.

On this day, his seventeenth birthday, their walk was conducted mostly in awkward silence, punctuated by his father's questions about his studies and his monosyllabic replies. He hadn't seen his father for a few years, and was angry, yet curious about where he had been. They had met at The Alley and on the way his father had insisted on him picking a watch as a birthday present. They had not done their usual circuit, for Raffles Place was in the throes of yet another transformation. Robinsons had been gutted in a fire that had taken nine lives and some of the arcaded shops around it had been demolished. They failed to see the signs of change, that in a decade's time the river would be cleaned up, all the *tongkangs* and barges removed, the streets, The Alley razed, and nothing would remain of what they had known. They did not foresee that he would one day be an emigrant, unhappy, lost and longing for this lost place, and his father dead at sixty, alone and unmourned.

They had gone straight to the river, where – this is something he could not forget – his father led him to a Toto booth beside the Post Office and got him to pick lottery numbers. His father said, 'It's your lucky day. Go on, pick the numbers.' He remembers the cheap orange biro attached to the window of the booth, and being given the ticket to cross and circle the digits, and by some quirk of memory, he is certain he had picked 17.

They had been walking along the river, he wanting to leave, wondering how they would part, whether his father would say anything about where he had been in the last few years, when they suddenly rounded Circular Road into Boat Quay and saw the shoot. Lighting and sound gear were posted along the stretch of the quay. 'They are filming *Hawaii Five-O*. Look, Steve McGarrett,' a scrawny Chinese youth was telling an elderly Sikh man. They stood in the five-foot-way outside a trading

company and watched.

The cameras were tracking McGarrett and a burly man as they measured their steps along the quay. McGarrett wore a long-sleeved, cream-coloured safari outfit and white leather shoes. Lee read later that this had been one of the few occasions when he would break from his habitual navy-blue suit and don flamboyant outfits. He remembered an episode in which McGarrett wears a flamingo-pink suit, another in which he is in a flowery silk-shirt; in an episode in which he has to go into hiding after being framed, he appears in a wide-brimmed straw-hat and a striking white suit.

The director's intention must have been to interfere as little as possible with the natural setting. There was no cordon and the locals must have been instructed to carry on as usual. The camera dolly glided on its track, keeping abreast of the two men as they walked and conversed, passing onlookers loitering on the street and in the shadow of the five-foot-way. It paused as the pair slowed down, and one of the cameras seemed to peer over McGarrett's shoulder at them. Then it moved on. A tall man in bell-bottoms tailed McGarrett, and was told by the crew with hand gestures to back off. Then, unscripted, an elderly Caucasian woman drew alongside McGarrett, peering at him before veering off. The director cried 'cut' as they reached the end of the street. There was no second take.

McGarrett thanked everyone and then lit up a Rothmans cigarette in the way that Lee's father did, his lips pursed to tilt the cigarette up and his left hand shielding his right as it moved the lighter towards the cigarette. As if a Rothmans ad were being filmed, a truck advertising the brand was parked just a few paces behind the actor. McGarrett didn't smoke but actor Jack Lord was a chain-smoker. Lord quit smoking long after the series had ended.

A few fans rushed forward to shake his hand. Lee's father nudged him. 'Go on and get his autograph. Here, get him to sign here.' His father turned the Toto ticket round to its blank side. 'No, Dad, you do it.'

His dad steered him towards the star. 'Mr McGarrett, may we have your autograph please? It's my son's birthday.'

McGarrett's piercing blue eyes turned to them; his familiar deep smile lines appeared as he took the ticket, laughed and signed. He was about to return it but added something else.

'Happy birthday, young man. And good luck.'

Then he was gone, as swiftly and gracefully as he moved on TV, into a blue sedan half the size of his Mercury in Honolulu.

His father showed him the ticket.

Best wishes for the Year of the Horse, Jack Lord. And Happy Birthday. The letters were clearly spelled, neat and level, but the J was a wild cursive stroke, betraying the flamboyant streak in Lord's character.

'I'd better keep this, to check the numbers this weekend. You can have it after we collect our winnings.'

As they sipped sugar-cane juice at the Empress Place hawker centre, his dad said, 'The camera must have caught us. Let's look out for it. It should be on TV in the next season.' Next season. How easy, seamless and neatly scripted televisual seasons are; a series' life, with its circularity, its contained episodes and dramatic closure, eclipses and mocks real life and its rough edges and gaps, its inexplicable twists and turns and humdrum stretches.

‘It’s a good sign, son. We are going to appear on TV. Like stars. Maybe we’ll win the Toto.’

‘We are not even extras. The camera just happened to be aimed in our direction, Dad.’

‘Extra extras then. Extras are extra important. They make the show real.’

Then his dad said that he had to leave for his afternoon shift. From being an assistant manager at a local bank he had descended through a series of failed jobs, dogged by debts and loansharks, to being a cab-driver.

They headed for the bus-stop at Clifford Pier, and as they arrived at the Post Office, they saw another film shoot across the road. The camera panned the harbour, then swivelled around slowly to take in Fullerton Road and the Post Office before completing the rotation back to its start point. It must have caught them in its sweep.

‘It’s our lucky day. I’ll find out the title of this movie.’

His dad never told him, never reappeared again in his life. The newspapers had tracked the vaunted visit of *Five-O* to Singapore, but hadn’t covered the other film. In a country with no film-making infrastructure in the 1970s, it was bizarre that it should host two productions in the same year and month, and that he and his dad should become incidental extras in one day.

In the months that followed he gave little thought to the two films as the World Cup fever took over. Then he enlisted in the army and underwent two and a half years of slavery, of quelling all the hate and frustration, of charging up and down hills, of crawling on belly and saying yes to everything, and of waiting for the day of discharge. In all that time he did not receive any news of his father. What had become of the Toto ticket? Did his father remember Lord’s words on it or did he throw it away after the draw? It was unlikely that he won anything; if he did, it must have been an insignificant amount that was squandered on the races and more Toto tickets.

As his son mastered the drumbeats of the *Five-O* theme, Lee started googling the show and found that it was the longest-running police drama in television history: twelve seasons in all, outlasting even *M.A.S.H.* His respect and admiration for Jack Lord grew as the facts painted the real man behind the screen image. He had a Master’s degree in art, and after the last season of *Five-O* lived a reclusive existence, devoting himself to painting. He was faithful to his wife, fifteen years his senior. He was a philanthropist, and his fortune was divided among charities after his wife’s death.

Danno, or James MacArthur, had starred in *The Swiss Family Robinson*; he recalled his father bringing him to the cinema in the Great World to watch the movie. The roof of the building on which McGarrett stands on in the opening sequence belonged to a local tycoon called Chin Ho Kelly, who also lent his name to the Chinese-Hawaiian member of the force, played by Kam Fong. Fong’s broad Chinese face and figure acquired more depth when Lee read about his disaster-stricken personal life: he had lost his wife and two children when two B-24 bombers collided above their family home in a freak accident.

From Amazon, he ordered all twelve seasons of the series, an extravagance that sparked a reprimand from Fong. After returning home from work he would hurry through dinner, ensure that Pat did his homework before going to bed and then put on double episodes. Fong watched some of them with him, curling up beside him on the

sofa. It too was part of her family ritual. Across the shifting sands of migrant time and space they were transported back to their respective childhoods.

They remembered the first episode, in which McGarrett appears in the opening, tied up and tortured by Wo Fat, a Chinese secret agent who is his nemesis, and who will finally be captured by McGarrett in the final episode of the last season. There was so much hype around it; maybe it was the nascent years of television broadcast in Singapore. It was magic, watching a show beamed from faraway Hawaii. Yet it wasn't that foreign; in his innocent, unschooled eyes, the Hawaiians or the *haoles* were not dissimilar to the Malays in skin colour and dress, and in their relaxed, content, and happy disposition. Also, Hawaii's multi-ethnic make-up, and the series' pioneering use of a large pool of untrained non-white cast, made it look familiar. Besides, there were the beaches with coconut palms and shacks, resembling the coastal stretches along Pasir Panjang and Katong.

It is strange how a television series can date or serialise real lives, and provide indices to the past. Lee's memories became embedded in the series, each season of his life intertwined with the scenes. He remembered when Singapore featured in Season Two. His father had suddenly appeared at his uncle's flat and asked to stay for a few nights. He felt embarrassed by his dad's desperate plea but was relieved that his uncle consented. It was a novel sensation to watch TV with his father. It had never happened before – they didn't have a TV in the succession of rented places they lived in, as his father dragged them in flight from creditors. In this episode ('The Singapore File'), McGarrett goes to Singapore to escort a lady eyewitness back to Honolulu, but the episode was shot entirely in the studio and in downtown Honolulu, and the footages meant to evoke the Oriental atmosphere were probably shot in Hong Kong rather than in Singapore. Nobody faulted the exoticising and typecasting of Asians in the episode, and indeed, in the entire series. The Chief Inspector in Singapore calls the island 'Jewel of the Orient' and adds that it is also 'city of sinister entanglements.'

Just a few days before the episode in which McGarrett is framed for the murder of his girlfriend, Lee's uncle had bought a car. He remembered his uncle taking them on a drive after the episode ended. Then halfway through a Wo Fat episode a violent quarrel broke out between his grandmother and her daughter-in-law, in which the latter threatened to kill herself. They had to turn the TV off.

Chin Ho Kelly dies towards the end of Season Ten. A week later Lee's aunt and grandmother moved out of his uncle's flat and he and Debbie were reclaimed by their mother. He stopped watching *Hawaii Five-O* after that.

At last they arrived at 'The Year of the Horse' episode, the last story in Season Eleven. In this penultimate season, McGarrett actually makes it to the real Singapore, to solve the murder of a drug mule and break a smuggling ring run by an American pilot who had gone MIA in Vietnam. Except for the opening, set in a plane and then in Honolulu, the film had been shot entirely in Singapore. It was the second time that *Hawaii Five O* was filmed overseas. The first was in Season Nine, in 'Nine Dragons,' when McGarrett wakes up to amnesia in Hong Kong.

He was enthralled, like a boy again, by the breathtaking aerial shots of the harbour and the ships, the clay-tiled roofs of the shophouses and godowns along the river, the Victoria Theatre and Memorial Hall, and views beyond the civic district to Fort Canning and further. So little high rise then. So much of what he loved still intact. Preserved.

After the panoramic opening, McGarrett and Danno walk through the customs at the old Paya Lebar Airport. Lee's family had lived briefly in a flat near the airport. Even now he could hear the jumbos, the ear-splitting screech and rumble that sent reverberations through the walls and floor of the flat. He watched closely the scene in which McGarrett and a Singapore police inspector amble along Boat Quay. His heart raced as he strained to make out the figures in the background. He replayed the scene again just as the two men reach the end of the street. Fong was annoyed, but he was too excited to care. In the shadowy five-foot-way the shapes of a man and child were discernible.

'That must be Dad and me. Outside that shop. See?' He rewound it and froze the frame.

'How can you be sure? You can't see the faces.'

'It's us. I know it.' Yet it looked unreal, and a flicker of doubt pricked his certainty, as though his watching it now in the present and in another country negated his being there in the past.

'It's terrible, this nostalgia. It's time to go back. See for yourself what the place is now. How long has it been since you went back, ten years?' Fong asked.

He had returned to settle his father's funeral expenses; he had died alone and hadn't been discovered till the stench alerted his neighbours. The funeral happened quickly, without any wake or ceremony, his aunt had said on the phone. The body had been brought straight from the morgue to the crematorium on the day that she had made the identification. During the flight he imagined his father's corpse, bloated in the heat and riddled with maggots. He couldn't reconcile that with his memory of his handsome father, whose smile was as charming as Lord's.

As he stood in the columbarium with Debbie and her husband Gerry, he wept. Debbie held him as he shook uncontrollably. She had always been a good strong sister shielding him in the storm of their parents' quarrels, and then steadying him as he struggled in the aftermath of the separation.

In the months following his father's death, he had a series of uncannily vivid dreams in which his father would appear and take him on a circuit of the river. He couldn't be sure of his age in the dreams; sometimes he was five or six, his small hand held loosely in his father's large, callused, nicotine-stained hand; in another dream he sat on his dad's firm shoulders, taking in the invigorating scent of his brilliantined hair, as they moved slowly through Change Alley.

After Fong had gone to bed, he played the Boat Quay scene again, as though the two marginal figures would resolve into more precise features with one more viewing. Then Lee remembered the other film. He had so immersed himself in *Five-O* that he had forgotten about it. Or perhaps he wanted to save it for the last.

The film was called *Saint Jack*. The story had been adapted from Paul Theroux's eponymous novel. The novel had made Theroux *persona non grata* in autocratic Singapore, for it dealt with the taboo themes of prostitution and pimping. Its protagonist is Jack Flowers, a middle-aged Italian-American working as chandler-pimp in Singapore and aspiring to set up his own brothel. Peter Bogdanovich, the director, realising that the script would not receive the Ministry of Culture's endorsement, had submitted a fake script entitled *Jack of Hearts*. It was the only American film to be shot entirely in Singapore, and the only film other than the *Five-*

O episode to capture so vividly and unwittingly images of the river and the harbour. The film was banned by the Board of Film Censors for misrepresenting Singapore as a haven for pimps and whores, and chided in the papers for its skewed portrayal of a city lacking in 'religious sensitivity,' in a scene when two Bugis Street transvestites committed a 'sordid act' even as a Buddhist and a Christian funeral were taking place simultaneously. Then in 1999 the film finally made it to Singapore as part of the International Film Festival, in the period that saw the country trying to shed its repressive image, and reinvent itself as a tolerant global city after the country's worst economic downturn in 1997.

His pulse raced to see the 360-degree panning shot tracking the harbour and its bumboats, and on the horizon dim outlines of the Marina reclamation, pivoting to Clifford Pier then shifting to Fullerton Road and its two-way traffic, and to the Post Office. In a fleeting traffic break, as an old bus cleared the frame, he caught a heart-stopping glimpse of a boy and a man in shadows of the Post Office portico. Then the traffic wiped them out and the camera moved on. For a moment, time erased, he appeared again, looking at the camera. He was buoyed by a sudden happiness. It was like finding a lost loved object; the brief image on the screen seemed to hold an unfinished story that could bring his father back to him.

He took in the scenes of Orchard Road and Bugis Street, greedily, trying to pin down the exact spots and the street names. It was coming together, the map of his longing and loss, and he realised that he had not emigrated at all; he was still wandering in the Singapore of 1978, the Year of the Horse. His old self was still there, waiting for his return. In the years in Toronto and Sydney he had never for a moment felt that deep love of place that is much more than fleeting attachment. Indeed he had felt a stubborn sense of not-belonging, a sense that all of his love had already been given and it was too late in the day to change. And it had taken him all these years, taken the rediscovery of *Hawaii Five-O* and this hard-to-like-or-dislike film called *Saint Jack* to come to the knowledge which also felt like lost or doomed love.

As he put on 'The Year of the Horse' again to compare the river scenes with those in *Saint Jack*, Fong said wearily, 'Let's get the tickets. Let's go back.'

'Book 'em, Danno,' he said and laughed.

Lee acts reluctant, bored, as they board the tourist bumboat. In the entire week they have been here, he has avoided the river, until he yields to Fong's suggestion that they take the cruise. Secretly, he feels a surge of expectancy and excitement akin to what he felt when his father took him on a bumboat out beyond the river to St John's Island, which harboured a drug rehabilitation centre but which also had an unspoilt lagoon open to the public. It was a rare unsullied day, swimming in the clear, warm, weightless water and picking coconuts and breaking them for the juice. He wanted the day to last, to stay on the island longer with his dad. Someday he will tell Pat about the day on St John's Island, the walks around the river, and the grandfather he has never met.

As the boat passes under the Cavanagh Bridge, he looks involuntarily at the spot where the Toto booth had stood and remembers the lottery ticket. He decries to Fong and Pat the conversion of the Post Office into a luxury hotel, the seafront developments, the Casino, the flavourless Bay, but the anger and dismay he had felt

on the trip ten years ago seem hollow echoes now; they have metamorphosed into something akin to acceptance. For the rest of the cruise he has only one thing in mind: to ask his aunt for the bag of his dad's belongings.

She has always held it against him for not keeping in touch but her eyes well up as they get to talking about his dad. Once, she had been vivacious and pretty, with long-lashed almond eyes and a svelte figure, courted by a string of suitors. His memory of her beauty is so vivid that it jars with the image of the tired woman sitting before him, her pert lips now solemn, dull, her once luscious hair limp and streaked with white, and her face worry-creased. She had made a bad marriage and is now alone, childless.

'Your dad had a good heart. Just very bad luck all his life.' His aunt always puts things down to luck. Either you have it or you don't. And his dad lacked it altogether.

She has the folder ready and passes it to him. 'Not much there, as I said years ago, but I've kept them just in case.' His father's last years must have been like a monk's existence, to own nothing. No clutter. He feels burdened in contrast, possessed by all his worldly goods and the weight of his memories.

It is evening by the time he gets off the bus just after the Elgin Bridge. Turning into Circular Road, he is shocked to find the once quiet backstreet already before nightfall pulsating with dance clubs and their skimpily-clad Filipino and Thai girls posted enticingly at the door, calling out to him, 'Hello, Sir, come buy me a drink.' They make him feel irretrievably middle-aged, sickened by the mix of desire and impotence that stirs sordidly and uselessly in his gut.

He turns into Boat Quay and searches the brightly-lit bars and restaurants. He can't square the scene with the old quay, the weathered shophouses and ship-chandlers with their embossed calligraphed names, weeds peeping between cracks, quiet at night except for the slap of tide water on the steps and the creaks of *tongkangs* secured to the quay. Now there isn't a single café or bar that doesn't blast the air with pop or whatever they call it these days.

Defeated, he sits on the top step of the quay away from crowds. Under the halogen streetlamp he takes the folder out of his bag. The yellowed sheaf of papers is creased, fraying, like ancient papyrus, and gives off a slightly mouldy smell. A school-leaving certificate from St Joseph's Institution, a taxi license; even a traffic fine. Then between the papers, he finds a British Commonwealth passport, issued in 1956, when the country was still a colony. It is navy-blue with a gold crest. On the second recto page is a photograph of his father, a handsome young man with hair groomed back, his well-shaped dimpled face tilted like a 50s film star. He is surprised and disappointed to find the pages unprinted; there isn't a single stamp to indicate that his father had travelled. Why had he applied for the passport? Why had he kept it to the end?

He turns to the last page and there, resting on the backing, is a recognisable slip of paper. It is creased where it has been folded, and bears yellow stains and watermarks, probably his dad's perspiration. He touches it, holds it almost with reverence, like a charm, a talisman. He had picked 1 and 7, and not 17. Of course, 7 was his favourite number then. He turns it over and feels a slow wave of relief and happiness filling him, as he gazes at Lord's signature and the words.

Then the scene before him is washed away – all the glitzy towers, the strip of

gaudily-lit bars and restaurants, like the scum and flotsam of the river during the clean-up in the 80s, the flavourless river displaced by its old incarnation with its rich textured breaths, its gentle voice on the quay steps, its flotillas of *tongkangs* and bumboats, silted again with freshwater mud, memories, presence. The lights before him dim and vanish before the memory of that sunny day on the quay, McGarrett smiling as he returns the ticket, his dad receiving it, the two men joined in this instant, and in this image he senses something resembling grace, forgiveness, the past still so alive in him he can see McGarrett's eyes turning to him on that day in the Year of the Horse, the day of his last walk with his father.