

Surprise Surprise

by Sho Botham

Sipping perfectly created Horlick's from elegant white porcelain cups the girls looked up smiling to the string quartet playing in the gallery, overlooking the small round tables covered with white linen table cloths and their accompanying plush chairs in the foyer of The Peninsula Hotel. Horlick's at The Peninsula had become a regular luxury for the girls since arriving in Hong Kong a few weeks ago.

The first time they came off the Star Ferry returning to Kowloon from Hong Kong Island they found themselves outside The Peninsula and thus began this elegant ritual which was in complete contrast to Sunday music jamming sessions in Ashley Road at Ned Kelly's, the Australian pub. Here, musicians of all sorts gathered and jammed together on Sunday afternoons. A loud rhythmic vibe so different from the quiet string quartet but brilliant in its own way.

Walking down Nathan Road, the main road through the Kowloon side of Hong Kong was a challenge in the 1970s. Nowhere was as peaceful as the Peninsula, outside it was busy and loud with street sellers, competing with shops and restaurants and a fusion of cooking smells permeated all around. The road was crammed with cars, vans, delivery bikes carrying covered deep metal box trays with what today would be referred to as home delivery food. Back then, these scooter-type bikes were rigged up with a tall pole and hook for hanging these box-trays on behind them. There was no carboard and throwaway cups. Oh no, it was china crockery and chopsticks and cutlery if required. And more than that, the price included them coming back to pick up the used crockery once the food was consumed. Nathan Road positively bustled with these deliveries all day and evening, well into the night.

Night in Hong Kong was interesting to say the least. The lights were bright and garish and Nathan Road took on a whole different look. People seemed brighter and their chatter less burdensome. It appeared to have a positive vigour that daytime chatter lacked. The night market was somewhere that the girls had been warned against going without someone local with them. Having met up with a local police inspector in Tsim Sha Tsui who actually hailed from Edinburgh, they felt safe under his guidance through the narrow gaps between the stalls.

As advised, they didn't take any money or valuables with them on this trip around the depths of the night market. One whole area appeared to be live birds, small animals and reptiles. The King Cobra that was rearing up much too close to the girls for comfort and with no protection from him if he decided to strike, made the girls head in the opposite direction. There they were faced with local men sitting on the ground milking snakes for their venom. The police inspector made sure the girls got back to where they were staying, in one piece.

Bars in Hong Kong at that time offered many experiences that were new to the girls. From interesting cuisine to waitresses on roller skates and even topless waitresses in some bars. It was in one such bar when eavesdropping on the raucous chatter of some guys at a table next to the girls that they discovered that sex changes was one of the tourist attractions of that part of the Far East. In the 1970s sex changes were only available in very few places in the world and apparently the Far East was in great demand. One of the guys was explaining how his mate had got off with one of the topless waitresses the week before and had gone back to her place with her. It was only after some time enjoying the private topless party that his mate had decided it was time to venture further and his companion was only too happy to oblige. But when his hand made contact with clearly male body parts between her legs, he realised that she was not the woman he thought she was being only part-way through her sex change. The guys at the next table fell about laughing at the missing chap who'd got a lot more than he bargained for.

The girls laughed out loud at the mental images of these tough young males finding out how they were mistaking well-endowed topless waitresses for young women when in fact they were very much still men but with boobs wearing short skirts.