

The Secret Life of an Asian Heroine

Charles Hugh Smith

Section One

Most things fail. When we consider the many potential causes of failure, this shouldn't surprise us. It's too risky, too daunting, or we can't muster the perseverance required. We may misread the situation, or cling to what once worked but no longer works. Or we counted on getting lucky right when our luck ran out. I could lengthen this list, but I'm tired so I'll get to my point: this story is a failure.

It's frowned upon to confess failure at the very start, but this story is already a failure. I probably won't be able to finish it, as this creaking old boat may well split open in the next roller and the ink on these pages will bleed away into the cold Pacific, the journal turned to flotsam along with the boat's three occupants.

I'm no good at telling a story.

There are two ways to tell a story. One is sawing away the untidy bits so there's a beginning, middle and end: *a man was born, he lived, he died*.

The second is to string together different points of view and storylines, presumably to better reflect *real life*.

That's beyond me, so this is *a man was born, he lived and hopefully doesn't die real soon* story.

I'm going to break a rule and start in the now rather than at the beginning. I'm wedged in the bowels of this complaining old yacht which I call The Little Lady, as she has fine lines and is modest in size: *I'm too old and tired for this*, I hear her say. *I should be slipping quietly through the calm waters of a protected bay, enjoying my old age. Instead, these fools sail me straight into the great waves and slashing winds of a typhoon.*

The stench in this closed cabin probably deserves a few words, a retch-producing brew of bilge oil, seawater-diluted vomit, and rancid remains of canned stew. Connoisseurs might detect hints of spilled rum.

A young woman is curled up motionless on one of the built-in cots, drained by seasickness. Let's just say she doesn't look her best. Her long hair is tied up, but I remember her glossy black tresses falling effortlessly down to the small of her back. I also remember her when she looked her best and time stood still.

She says she's pregnant, and I have no reason to doubt her.

The third occupant is slouched against the curved hull on the other side of the cabin, one foot braced against an age-stained teak grating. His eyelids flicker open, and he gazes at me with a detached amusement, as if he senses I'm writing about him. He is annoyingly calm about our decaying chances for a long life, and I can't tell if he's accustomed to cheating Death, or supremely confident by way of mental trickery—*it is my destiny to survive*--or practicing a very high art of detachment he learned while enslaved on a pirate ship plying the Straits of Molucca.

He's lean, another annoying trait, given his enormous appetite when decent food is available. He's a fellow cockroach who's been stepped on with great force. He claims to have

escaped a Southeast Asian prison, and I have no reason to doubt him. He doesn't look like much, slim, unkempt tousle of sun-bleached hair, but as the cliché has it, *looks can be deceiving*.

I had to stop writing for a moment, as the poor old gal wallowed in the trough of waves the size of hills and then rose to the crest and pitched down the backside.

Sometimes it's the blend-in women who are the most compelling, and the blend-in men who are the natural survivors. At this delicate point where worm-weakened planks giving way would guarantee the destruction of everything—our lives and the secrets the young woman is duty-bound to preserve and make public—I am willing to place my faith in The Pirate's idiot's-grin confidence.

The Pirate—our private nickname for him—had ably rigged a sea anchor, and so his self-confidence did not seem entirely delusional. A miser with his history and conversation, on rare occasions he'd splurge and sketch one his experiences. But I couldn't tell if these tidbits were a self-serving portrait or if they were offers of a limited-trust friendship.

We were, after all, strangers to each other, sharing cramped fetid quarters, and human nature favors some gestures of friendliness once the pecking order was clear. This was his boat, whether stolen or purchased didn't matter, and he was the Sailor of the Seas, the only one who could get us across the Pacific. Not only that, he'd agreed to our plea despite the many obvious dangers.

I don't know if he is brave, foolhardy, or a contrarian who grabs hold of stupid risks simply because everyone else runs away from them. Maybe he's challenging his destiny to prove itself. Surviving everyday life proves very little, but tumbling off the edge of comfort and convenience—that will establish the boundaries of destiny very quickly.

I am not brave. I had a far easier voyage in mind, and did not anticipate either the official frenzy to catch us on shore or a Pacific typhoon in an old yacht. I fear that first cold gulp of salty passage to the Other Side. I want us to live, to cheat failure, but here in the dim glow of the cabin's battery-powered bulb, so small it reminds me of a flickering Christmas tree light, my mind returns to this: most things fail.

I lack the disposition for real faith, and so my prayers ring hollower than I would like. Like everyone else facing poor odds, I'm anxious to cut a deal with God. It's always an absurdly asymmetric negotiation: we have nothing to offer but promises to become worthy if we survive. *I will make it up to you, if only I get one more chance*. We're like the worst sort of gambler, begging to borrow one more heavy gold coin to put on the next turn of the wheel; we're sure to win this time, we feel it in our palpitating hearts.

In other words, we know we're no worthier than anyone else, but we're touchingly sincere about becoming worthy in our hour of need.

But the young woman is different. She is worthy. And even though she will never admit it, she needs me, even if she doesn't want to, and we need The Pirate, even if we don't want to, and he seems to need us, at least temporarily, even if he doesn't want to.

I'm not sure how much more of this I can take, I hear our creaking boat sigh as we pitch over another peak in the endless howling rollercoaster. *I can't, but I must*. At least this is what I hope.

Even a landlubber like me recognized the yacht's fine lines and the care devoted to its teak woodwork. Given the chance, the interior would scrub up to enough of its former glory to

whisper of weekends lazing off Catalina. Its best days are behind it, but it has a history, one we recognize as a form of magic, like a well-loved violin, worn by decades of musicmaking.

Except for a few years in Snow Country, I've always lived within a few kilometers of the Pacific. The restless sea has been formative in ways I can't even identify.

We like to personalize Nature, as if the sea shares some commonality with us. People who drown in the Pacific—and I have almost drowned in the Pacific, pinned to the sand by a breaker—are not victims of a malevolent spirit; we're like plankton or a slimy thread of algae. The Pacific doesn't notice us, much less care about us.

I don't want to drown in the Pacific; I wish the water were warmer, and we were closer to land—a stupid thought, and one I probably shouldn't even put down here—but it is at least a familiar thing, fighting to the surface, chilled to the bone, surprised yet again by the saltiness of the water.

We could have surrendered to the authorities, of course, but she wouldn't choose suicide and neither would I. Given her history, and the three high officials accidentally sent to the Other Side, I didn't need to be persuaded to gamble on escape.

As for the Pirate, I reckon his experience with authority clarified the futility of escape on land, and perhaps the proximity of officialdom's bloodhounds had kindled his sympathy, a fellow fox lending a hand.

This is pure speculation; from what little I know of him—assuming what little he's recounted is true—I think it likely that anyone escaping from a hellhole prison would sympathize with those about to be captured and sent to a hellhole prison.

I'm tired. Tired of the corkscrewing pitches of the boat, tired of being unable to sleep, to really sleep, tired of getting it wrong, tired of my vain hopes for storybook happiness, tired of the nausea, tired of the cramped cabin, tired of being helpless, tired of hoping it will be like when we met, tired of the Pirate's dismissive grin: *this is nothing, you should have been there off Molucca*.

I'm tired of not understanding her and wishing I did, tired of wanting to live long enough to smell land again in the darkness before dawn, to see the creamy line of a breakwater at first light, to steer this once-glorious boat into calm waters and tie up at the first pier, never mind if we have permission, and stagger from the dock to solid ground, lay down on the earth and feel the immense deliciousness that it isn't moving.

But we're far from solid ground and I need to get on with the story. I'm not sure where it should begin, but what I remember is my friend Coltrane gazing up from his black-and-white photos of our street rallies and commenting, "There she is again."

* * *

The danger in writing is the untidy bits get left out because we want to save the snapshot where our eyes aren't closed. We want it to be hero's journey, showing off our nice white teeth, like a movie script.

There aren't that many script recipes: *a stranger comes to town*, *a forbidden love*, and *a quest that ends in a victory against all odds*. Oh, and *all you need is a girl and a gun*. All four fit, so I'm at a loss to pick one.

I don't have a story, really. What I have is a desire to *explain what happened*.

A stranger comes to town. That's her in America, and then me in her Home Country.

A forbidden love. A meeting, an irresistible but necessarily secret courtship, and then forces intervene.

A quest that ends in a victory against all odds. We're still working on that one.

A girl and a gun. Well, yes.

It is old-fashioned to rely on still photos rather than video to capture an event, but I've always been drawn to the way a still photo freezes an instant and allows us to study it with a kind of attention we can't apply to video. It's even more old-fashioned to prefer black-and-white images. Stripping away the color reduces the photo to its essence.

My photographer friend Coltrane who volunteered to document our rallies was intrigued by my request. His approach changed once he saw the black-and-white stills, or rather, his understanding of photography changed.

The rallies are modest events. I'm asked why we bother with gatherings of a few people when online videos garner thousands of views. The physicality is jarring, and I like that. Most people instinctively change their route to avoid any unpleasant entanglement—being hectored for donations, awkward interactions with fanatics, or getting swept up in some dragnet of undesirables.

The authorities' Watchers always position themselves at the edge, close to where passersby increase their pace or pause out of curiosity. When we stage live music, the ratio of the curious to increase-their-pace favors the curious. The Watchers don't try to camouflage their identity. Perhaps they want us to know we're being observed, or disguise isn't worth the effort. Their body language gives them away, and they must know that.

Infiltrators are also easy to spot. They dress up to look credibly marginal, but their enthusiasm for violence gives them away. They stop coming to meetings. Where they're reassigned is a mystery.

The street population is generally listless, though ranters welcome us as a target. As for the activists, let's just say the spectrum of human variety is well-represented. The old people who emerge to reminisce about past glories are especially evocative. Long-dead heroes and heroines are restored to life and the role of the old activist is recounted with modesty or bombast. *We started out like this, too, just a handful of us.*

For some, the thrill of finally finding an audience is inexhaustible. They become agitated when the unwilling audience attempts to politely disengage, and their stridency wearies even the sympathetic.

The idealistic are their own subspecies. I am an idealist, too, of course, but I fancy myself a realist. When someone suggests hanging a bedsheet with a slogan on some imposing structure of oppression, I politely point out that even a king-sized sheet will appear as a postage stamp, what the university students aching to disrupt the bourgeoisie in Paris discovered when they unfurled their banner emblazoned with the single word *merde* on the Eiffel Tower.

When somewhat more grizzled idealists—inevitably protected by tenure, a union contract or a spouse toiling away in the bowels of the beast—start talking about the workers taking over the houses in the hills from their undeserving occupants, there is nothing to say, for this variety of revolutionary wilts from any actual work. Strained from patting themselves on the back, they move on to more revolutionary pastures where virtuous cud-chewing is the favored pastime.

In other words, the rallies are failures. Nobody else stages rallies, and so they don't experience the magic of their physicality. It's like an altar imbued with the prayers of generations of worshipers. If you don't kneel on the worn stone, you won't experience the grace that's accumulated like a slow drip of water into a deep pool.

My idealism has one focus: how we create and distribute money. If we don't change the way we create and distribute money, we change nothing. Everything else is just noise. Reforms don't change how money is created and distributed, so the results don't change. This is why homelessness, piles of trash, inequality and despair are everywhere. Reformers pat themselves on the back but the system grinds on unchanged.

Understood as a system, giving banks the privilege of creating money has only one possible result: the wealthiest few benefit at the expense of the many. Inequality is the only possible output.

In the alternative system, money can only be created by human labor: those who perform useful work are paid with the newly created money. Rather than the wealthy having the power to create as much money as they want to buy up the world's assets, the wealthy would have to borrow from those who performed useful work.

This system is called the *Community Labor Integrated Money Economy* because the mechanism for creating money is embedded in the community and labor, not the banks.

I'm told such a system couldn't possibly work. It would work, but those benefiting from the current system have a vested interest in declaring it unworkable.

This is all so blindingly obvious that someday everyone will wonder how humanity could have been so recklessly stubborn, and the shabby mendicants who were dismissed will be recognized as the founders of a radically beneficial enlightenment.

Once you understand this, there's no path back. There is only the path forward.

The data slipped out of her Home Country reveal the workings of money creation and inequality. The frenzy to find us needs no further explanation.

This is my prayer: that we survive not because we are deserving but because we must survive to serve this greater purpose.

In scanning Coltrane's photos of recent rallies, I was looking for shots in which my eyes were closed. My vanity kept me from noticing what he'd noticed: a slim young woman in sunglasses and a hat was almost always in the audience.

Sometimes she wore blue jeans, a faded plaid work shirt and a beret; other times, a sleeveless sundress and a floppy woven hat, or a long tight-waisted dress and a smart fedora.

She stayed away from Watchers and hecklers, and moved about the curious, often using others as screens. On a few occasions, she was in the foreground. Given her sunglasses and hat, her face was never fully visible. She had long dark hair, usually knotted in a chignon but occasionally loose, nearly reaching the small of her back. She appeared older than a university student but not by much. Her posture was erect. She didn't slouch.

Coltrane commented that given her reliable attendance, she was probably a higher-level Watcher. That was certainly plausible. Who else would avoid the Watchers but another watcher? Who else would alternate her appearance between tourist, student, intern and corporate supervisor?

That the local authorities had to make sure nothing got out of hand was understood. But who else had an interest in sparsely attended rallies? It made no sense unless something about

us had drawn the attention of someone in a position to assign their own watcher. Isn't it obvious that we're harmless idealists?

Anyone with the slightest interest in surveillance knows that electronic eavesdropping is easier than sending watchers. Was this woman's habitual attendance a subtle signal? If so, what, and to whom?

It was a mystery because we weren't important enough to watch. We assumed our communications were being monitored and we didn't bother with security because everything we said and did was transparent. There was nothing to hide.

One night in the week between rallies I had a strange dream about the mystery woman. In the dream, we met as friends, but I remembered times in bed with her even as we posed as merely friendly. In the dream, I was surprised that we were already lovers, for she was casual with me, as if we'd only ever been friends. It was strange, recalling being lovers even though she did not acknowledge it.

At the next rally, I looked for her in the audience but didn't spot her. To my surprise, I felt a keen disappointment that our mystery woman hadn't come. But I was wrong.

As I was stowing the microphone and speaker in our van, Coltrane interrupted me. "She asked me to photograph her," he exclaimed. "The mystery woman."

Startled by her approach, he naturally agreed to her request. She'd removed her sunglasses and hat, and stood so City Hall was the backdrop. Coltrane showed me the photos and I saw her face for the first time. She was attractive, not beautiful, and her smile was sincere but pensive. Her hair was tied in a ponytail and she wore a fetching sunflower-yellow sundress.

She'd given him two slips of paper, one with her email so he could send her the photos, and a sealed one for me. I glanced at the hand-written note and by instinct pocketed it before he could read it. "It just says she admires my work, blah-de-blah," I told him.

The note was more interesting than I let on.

"Would you be so kind as to meet me at The Black Cat tonight at 9? Please ask for Christine C."

If she was from Asia, she'd probably chosen a Western name to ease communication. The note sounded like a non-native speaker, but this was just a guess.

The awkward formal tone of her note was at odds with the sketchy nature of The Black Cat, an invitation-only club reputedly favored by the criminal element. It was the last place I would expect a fresh-faced young Asian woman would pick for a first date—and that's if she could get an invitation.

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