

## Nikos Kavvadias – Li

Anna Reinert



We're running out of miles, Captain Charalampos mumbled. We must be close to *Green Island*. I can't see anything. My grandfather would do a maneuver.

It was starting to get light. Then the island appeared, looming, all green, planted with palaces like cloudy lace. The pilot arrived. I was standing in the rear, waiting for the maneuver. With him, the girls came. They would help with the ropes, as usual. The captain took the loudhailer and shouted to me.

- Who are these people?
- "Those" people, I responded.
- They oughta leave.

I didn't reply. I knew what would happen. I saw hustling on the navigating bridge. The pilot threatened to leave if they sent the girls away.

- They can stay, the loudhailer shouted.
- Who? I asked.
- The whores, to hell with you and them.

With their help we were done quickly. Clever and smart, they played with the wire ropes as if they were komboloi. As soon as they were done on deck, they started with other chores. They lathered our cabins, swept, dusted. Without payment, as per usual in the harbor. We shared our food in the afternoon and on the stroke of five the scene changed its tune. Silent, nocturnal music. With payment. In the morning, we arrived at the dock and the next day, we cast anchor between Kowloon and Hong Kong while we were waiting to hand over the ship to the new owners so that we could leave.

- They don't have the money, the captain told me. They'll delay us, I can see that, by a week. But that's what you want, isn't it?

A low mist was cloaking both cities but that did not keep us from seeing the colorful lights shining through day and night. I was sitting in the dining hall, alone. That's when she came to the door. The high threshold, so high, a protection against the waves, was covering her from the waist down. She was looking me right in the eyes. On her thin, weak back, in a scarf, two of its corners knotted at her neck, the two others around her waist, was a small Chinese baby about six months of age. He was fiddling with her braid. I told her to come in. She climbed over the threshold with skill and grace without holding on to anything. She was wearing a cotton blouse and tight black pants. She was carrying a big bamboo hat in her hands. Moving

her shoulders, she re-arranged the baby on her back. She looked about 8 years old. Her little face was plain but you couldn't get enough of her eyes that were constantly dancing.

- What do you want, I asked.
- To work for you as long as you stay, she answered in English that reminded me of a swallow.
- Skills?
- Sweeping, dusting. I can also mend socks.

Her hands were talking. She explained through her gestures.

- You will give food to me and my brother. We don't eat much. That won't be a lot for you.

I caught her looking greedily at a plate of eggs on the table. I gave her four. She put two of them into her pockets and kept the others in her hands. She made to leave.

- Where are you going?
- To the Sampan<sup>i</sup>, home.
- How are you going to get down the rope ladder?
- Come, I'll show you.

We arrived at the railing. Without any warning, she dropped the two eggs she was holding over the side, then the other two. I looked over the railing and saw five outstretched pairs of hands. None of the eggs were damaged. She climbed down the rope ladder like a monkey. About ten little zhou<sup>ii</sup> surrounded our ship. A laundry shop, a tailor, a coffee house, a food shop, a dentist, an acupuncturist. All of them with different flags. The brothel Sampan had a yellow cloverleaf. At night, they took down the flags and put up lanterns. The Sampan of the little Chinese girl wasn't selling anything. Its ideogram translated to "The House of Beggars".

After a little while she came back with her brother, detached him from her back and carefully set him into the hole of a pile of ropes. She stood in front of me, lightly on tiptoes, so she would seem taller.

- So, will you take me?
- Yes. What's your name?

She said something that was impossible to remember, let alone replicate.

- I'll call you Li, I told her.

She agreed.

- How old are you?

She raised her hands, holding up ten fingers. I understood.

- Where were you born?
- On these Sampans. I've never set foot on land. They call us "Tanka". We're not allowed to stay out there. The law doesn't protect us. Some of us run off with forged papers. The authorities pretend they don't know.
- What if someone dies on the Sampans?
- The corpse boat comes. It's a junk with a big sail. It sails out onto the sea and then drops them.
- Don't you want to see Hong Kong? Don't you want to get out?
- I know it very well. Every seven days the teacher and the storyteller come. The former

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<sup>i</sup> sampans: house boats, swimming shops, etc.

<sup>ii</sup> zhou: Chinese fishing boats

teaches us letters, the latter tells us about the two cities. If you want, I can show you around the most confusing neighborhoods and bring you back without getting lost. We'll try it, ok? Where are you from?

- From far away. From a land you call *Hsi La Kuo* (Greece).  
She understood my Chinese. She was delighted.
- Do you know any Chinese? Did you learn it in *Peioing* (Beijing)?
- *Pu shih* (no). But I was born in *Tung Sun Sheng* (Manchuria).  
She looked at me, doubtful. Then she laughed cunningly and said:
  - We'll see. How long are you going to stay here?
  - Could be ten days.
  - If you want, she replied, I could teach you how to pronounce Cantonese in no time.
  - We don't have time. But you will work for me all day. You will take care of the cabin and the radio station. How much is that?
  - As much as you're willing to give me. She looked at me pleadingly. I'm going to bring the baby too. He's good. He doesn't cry. He's the only one of my siblings I've met; the others left, some of them are with the fishermen...  
She stopped.
- And the rest?  
She thought about it.
- They're not here. My mother lives down there, with my grandfather, my grandmother.
- Let's go eat, I said.

[...]

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That afternoon I went up to the radio station. It was shining with cleanliness. Just like my room. The little one was sitting on a step, the baby asleep on her knees. She stood up and tied it to her back.

- Lots of books, she said, are those yours?
- Yes.
- Have you read them?
- All of them.
- You must know a lot.
- Not more than you, I thought, and what I don't know I now learn from you, at the age of forty.
- I can read, she said. But I like other people telling me stories. That way I understand them better. I also have an old pair of binoculars. I can see what happens on the *Peak*.
- Do you want to go up there?  
She grimaced.
- I don't know, she told me. It's so hard. Will you go ashore today?
- No.

- Then you should visit the musicians' Sampan. There, that's it, the one with the sign "Ta Lo"<sup>iii</sup>. I've never been on board. I can hear the music in the evenings. That's how I fall asleep.

We went to the kitchen. After that she went down the rope ladder. At midnight, we painted the town red. We set the lanterns on the stairs, so the girls would come. The Sampan came paddling and we scattered to our cabins. Later, when we were on deck to get some fresh air, we saw that about three hundred girls had swamped the ship. We had forgotten to take down the signal. They were talking quietly and sounded as soft as rain. We explained. Laughing, they left. We stayed with our girls. The madams were sitting in the rear, counting their earnings.



Chinese women have the prettiest mounds I've ever seen. A rosy gap like a blooming flower. Like a half-open dreamy eye. Their sprouting, like climbing grains. Or like the sparse goatee of a young mandarin.



At dawn, the woman that had been keeping me company overnight got up to leave. As she was leaving, she met Li outside. They stopped to greet each other. She came in and put the baby down; she had combed his hair and put it in a ponytail like a bunch of jasmynes.

- Look at him, she said. Isn't he pretty? That's what we call flower hairstyle.
- Have you ever seen flowers, I asked.
- Uh huh, many times.
- Do you have plant pots?
- No, flowers don't thrive on Sampans; but when they celebrate the flower festival in the city, there are Sampans full of people. Full of flowers that they scatter onto the water. We collect the wreaths. Many get taken away by the current.
- *Green Island*, I told her, is full of flowers. It's out there. Have you ever been there?
- No, but I know it. In the past, it was inhabited by those that traveled on big junks and raided other ships. An old noble man lives in one of the palaces. He takes care of about two hundred young girls. He feeds them, dresses them, lets them frolic through his garden. At night, they are guarded by some of us that resemble women. If one of them gets away, they catch her, tie her up and throw her into the sea.
- Stories, I told her. That's what the storyteller told you.
- No. I'm telling the truth. From time to time, his people come fishing for girls in our houses. Choose the pretty ones. They think themselves lucky if they get to go there.

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<sup>iii</sup> "Ta Lo": Chinese instrument

- Would you want to go?

She straightened her little back, crossed her palms on her chest and said:

- Lao pu (never).

She turned around and looked at her little brother who was playing with my shoes.

- Just like I won't let the fishermen take this one away from me.

I feared that she would start to cry. But the thing with Chinese women is that they only cry in front of you if you are one of them. While she was talking, I tugged at her and tried to make her sit on my lap. She refused, and left – for the first time – without the baby. I was sad. I feared that she had misunderstood my caress. I didn't have time to think about it. She returned holding the hand of an eighteen-year-old Chinese girl.

- I'm young, she told me seriously. I haven't learned the art yet. But she knows. The ones that come with you at night are doing this task. This one...

I explained.

- Give her something to make her leave. Or she will be sad.

I had some change on my secretary. I told her to take as much as she wanted and to give it to the girl.

- You need to do that, she told me. I'm not allowed to touch someone else's money. You should not have it just lying around; it's too tempting.

In the evening, as she was getting ready to leave, I asked her if she wanted to come to the city with me the next day.

She opened her little eyes as wide as she could.

- Are you telling the truth?

I swore that I was by forming a pagoda with my fingers. She believed me.

- I'll bring the baby.
- No, you can give him something when we get back.
- Yes...a caramelized apple and a paper rooster.



Before daybreak, she was waiting for me on the grate at the stairs. She was wearing her freshly ironed everyday clothes. No one left the *Sampan* to wave farewell. A small motorboat came. Li sat down beside me and the journey began. She was neither happy nor sad. As always. She was pondering. After a ten-minute drive, we reached the boarding bridge of *Connaught Road*. This creature, setting foot on land for the first time, didn't condescend to taking one of the helping hands reaching for her from the land. A line of green rickshaws<sup>iv</sup> was waiting for people to get in. She didn't allow me to take one. After walking uphill for a little while, we reached *Queen's Road*, the noisiest of H.K.'s streets. She wasn't following me like a shadow but, instead, was walking right next to me. Her eyes tried to take in everything. There was neither confusion nor amazement in her face but I could feel both emotions battling inside of her

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<sup>iv</sup> rikshaws: carriages for one or two passengers, pulled by kulis

when she occasionally stopped dead in her tracks, her shoulders tensed, as if an electric current was running through her.

We reached the “*China Emporium*”, a huge building, a department store the size of *Woolworth*. We took the escalators to go upstairs to the children’s department. I left her in the care of a young Chinese saleswoman that was smiling knowingly and then I waited. After half an hour she returned, completely changed. Only her face looked the same, without pride but full of dignity. The pretty saleswoman was carrying a small bundle. These were the clothes Li had been wearing before, she told me without using the word ‘old’. I told her she could throw them away. She bent down to whisper something into Li’s ear. Li snatched at the bundle. It seemed she considered leaving her clothes behind to be outrageous. I told her to leave them and that we could pick them up later, on our way back. She took the receipt and put it away. I suggested going for breakfast. She declined:

- First, I have to go visit my brother. When he first left us I was still a baby. We never heard from him again. My mother wants me to deliver a message. I have to go. If you want, you can wait for me by that big door, I won’t be long.
- Do you know how to get there? I thought you had never set foot on land before.
- That’s right. This is my first time on land but I’ll still be better at finding him than you.

I didn’t want to leave her alone. We took a tram to get to the Western part of the city. We stopped at a blacksmith’s workshop. A grimy eight-year-old boy with a spiteful face came out and started talking to her without so much as a word of greeting. He turned around with a resentful look on his face.

- How much did you pay for her?  
I explained, as calmly as I could, that there hadn’t been any sort of trade.
- Don’t lie to me, he told me, what are you going to give me?
- Nothing.
- Then I’m going to keep her. If you have a sale contract, just give me some money and then take her. If you don’t, you’re in trouble.

While we were talking, Li was standing between us like a little tiger ready to attack. But not ready to attack me.

- Do what you want, I told him, but do it fast, I’m in a hurry.  
He seemed to get scared. He smiled reluctantly.
- I’m leaving with her, I told him.

His expression changed to one of a dirty beggar and, bowing deeply, he asked for a few coins. I took out some coins but Li stopped me by grabbing my wrist. The coins fell to the ground and the boy bent down to get them. Then Li scooped up a handful of mud from the street and threw it at his head. That was the biggest insult for a man, similar to being spat at.

[...]

- Now, I told her, we’re going to get tea. We’re going to climb the *Peak* afterwards, right to the top, to get something to eat.
- Not yet. I need to see my sister. I’ve got a message for her as well.

We stopped in front of an old brick building that looked like an iconostasis on its stilts. The roof was wavy, casting shadows onto the orange walls. We climbed three steps, our hearts

beating faster, as if we were entering a sanctuary. We went in. The walls were made from wood, decorated with pictures of lakes, small bridges and pagodas. Very young girls were sitting on low stools around small tables, tea utensils laid out ready. They were talking quietly among themselves. Li walked to the middle of the room, took a look around and shouted something. Without getting up, a slender, pretty, young woman opened her arms to welcome Li and she ran towards her. She parted her dress, showing her beautiful legs, and pulled Li close, embracing her softly. The other girls got up to leave them alone. I was sitting in a corner, head bowed. My head was empty. Afternoon. A beam of sunlight illuminated the sisters. Occasionally, their faces lit up, and then they suddenly darkened again. Suddenly, the older one seemed to get angry. Judging from the motions of her hands, Li was asking her sister for something. But the older one pushed her aside softly and sat her on a stool. The sister approached me and bowed slightly, which seemed way more human than what the female students of the prestigious private boarding schools always do. She put her flat hands onto my chest. She left. A girl brought a teapot to my table and filled my bowl with steaming hot tea. Li hadn't so much as looked at me for the whole time. Another girl brought her a tray full of candied apples and roasted chickpeas painted in the colors of the rainbow. She put one of the chickpeas into her mouth and wrapped the rest in paper and put it away. Her sister came back and handed her a small package. She lifted Li up and sat her on her lap. She remained silent. After a little while, the sister lifted her up again, then motioned for me to open my arms; she put Li into my arms, then took her away again quickly and brought her over to the window and opened the reed curtains so that Li could see outside. Then she came over to where I was standing, bent her knees, bowed her head, and looked up again to look me in the eyes. After that, I bowed, took the tips of her robes and lifted them to my forehead. Without realizing it (maybe a long lost childhood memory had come to my help), I had done something that was only done in this country to honor the family of noblewomen.

The girls, their faces solemn, had formed a circle around us as if to encourage and agree with me. When we left, Li wasn't walking, she was dancing and singing.



We took the *Peak* Tram that climbs Mount *Victoria*, crossing ravines with thick vegetation on its way. We saw *Happy Valley* and the Dragon Pagoda with the incense tree before reaching the Peak; in the distance, we could make out the big mainland surrounded by islands. Through one of those touristy telescopes we saw the strait *Boccatigres* and the white, powerful streaming of the *Pearl River* vomiting sewage coming from Canton. We sat down at a table in the biggest *restaurant*. Officials of the embassies, H.K.'s elite, the great adventurers, were eating on the decks every hour of the day. Li took off her new straw hat with the round tip on top and walked around the room. She walked on the decks as if disinterested. She came back.

- Are you hungry? I asked.
- No.

I saw that her eyes were hungrier than her tummy but she was careful not to show her

curiosity. I handed her the Chinese menu and took the European one for myself. She left the waiter waiting for a bit. Then she ordered.

- *Abalone Soup (Bow yü)<sup>v</sup>, Pay Daahn<sup>vi</sup>.*

He turned my way.

- And for you?
- I'll have the same.

Li jumped up.

- Are you going to eat Chinese eggs?
- Yes.
- Have you ever tried them?
- Of course.
- Do you know how to prepare them?
- No. You tell me.
- Your people don't know the truth about it. Listen. You need to make three different ashes, from pinewood, coal and willow. Mix them with tealeaves, chalk and salt. Make mud from that mixture, then put in the eggs one by one with a spoon and be careful not to touch them. Put them into a big pottery vessel. Put in soil to make sure that they don't touch each other. Cover everything with soil. Put them into a cold room and leave them there for a hundred days. No more. Don't talk during the process. You will stick to the law of silence. Understand?
- Right. And after that?
- Wait until they get here.

The eggs looked pristine. As if they were fresh, so to say. They just smelled kind of funny.

- You don't hold *chopsticks* like that, she said to me. Let me show you.

She grabbed my hand softly, still chattering away.

- You only move the stick that's on top and grab a bite. Don't move the lower one. Who taught you to move both?
- A Manchurian woman in Harbin.
- That's why you're doing it wrong. Do you remember her?
- I do. She was sixteen, with tightly braided hair and she smelled like something I now can't remember.
- Like wet wood?
- Maybe.
- What do we in the south smell like?
- Like chamomile.

She didn't get what I meant. I explained.

- If you had said tea then I would understand. But I don't know what you're describing. Is it similar to *ya p'ien yen* (opium)?
- No.

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<sup>v</sup> seafood soup

<sup>vi</sup> old eggs



- Have you ever tried smoking it?
- Many times.
- Do you like it?
- Yes and no. Have you tried it?
- Uh huh.
- Even though you're still so young?
- Once a month, my grandpa lights some up and all of us take a drag.
- Do you like it?
- It's like going on holiday, you know?

She kept on talking and eating. Just like one of those fortunate young ladies that, at a very young age, learn how to behave on cruise ships, trains and in big restaurants. She handled her fork and knife with such skill and confidence that you could think she had been taught by Swiss *nurses*. But she had learned all of it from walking on the decks of the *Peak Hotel* for just a short time.

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I'm a fool – the biggest of them all – when it comes to important moments. I say inappropriate things that people remember. But I remember them more than anyone, when they pop up in my head when I try to go to sleep, torturing me. I set those traps for myself.

- Will you remember me when I'm gone? I asked. Will you remember me?

She didn't answer. Why, oh why did I say that? So that she would thank me? So that she would show me that she owes me? Only my demon knows. The one that tickles me with its tail, destroying the happy moment, making people turn their backs on me.

She remained silent. She was looking at *Lappa* Island only just visible in the distance next to *Macao*. She started talking as if to herself.

- There's the strait *Boccatigres*. The river Pearl leading to *Whampoa*, to Canton. That's where our people fought the Whites, many years ago. The Whites had canons. We had a couple of old rifles that they had sold to us. We didn't shoot them much with the rifles. Cholera was our weapon; most people died from smallpox. They were young and handsome with blonde hair. The ones that were able to escape cholera were scarred for life. One of them – a young man – couldn't bring himself to go home with his distorted face. He stayed, put on Chinese clothing, forgot his own language, pulled rickshaws like a kuli, and never accepted a passenger of his own race. He only accepted Chinese. My grandpa still got to know him.

She stopped talking. Bitterness crossed her face:

- I feel bad for him, she muttered. There's nothing worse than feeling bad for someone. Except being disgusted by someone. I wouldn't find him disgusting.

As if regretting what she had just said, she laid her small fingers on my hand hanging

motionless at my side. That was all. We left. We left for the *Carousel*<sup>vii</sup> where I could see her discover her inner child. She laughed and screamed while she snuggled up to me as the cars dropped vertically and then climbed up again. She didn't want to free herself from the ride. Again, she said to me, one more time. It seemed she had forgotten all about the Sampan. That's what I thought.

[...]



We walked under the arcades towards the boarding bridge. We were on our way back. It was a time of exodus. A big river cleaned big China of all its bootleggers, prostitutes, and perverts, whirling them out into the two big fish bowls, the swamplands called Hong Kong and *Macao*, like dead fish. A never-ending funfair. The day stole from the night and the night stole from the day. Shanghai and Beijing's most expensive prostitutes were waving at passers-by with their squalid scraggy lotus feet (*footbinding*), having never seen the light of day in their cities, clad in expensive gowns, wearing valuable jewelry and sitting in flashy rickshaws pulled by dirty kulis. Others were standing in the doorways of shops like dolls, the cheapest grabbing you softly by the arm. I couldn't find out when they rested, when they slept. Maybe at an hour that doesn't exist in time. Street merchants were openly selling opium and cocaine as if they were roasted chickpeas. The addicting smell of opium was wafting through the air like a cloud. Others were selling little boys and girls for 100 Hongkonesian dollars, with papers that had been approved by authorities for safety reasons. Mothers were saying good-bye to their children who had just been sold. Expressionless, only their hands showing their grief as they fixed their braid or dress, their fingers telling of pain and desperation when touching their children. Only then did I notice that something was wrong; I had lost sight of Li for a few moments and found her hidden behind a pillar. She was very upset.

- From now on you'll walk in front of me, I said to her. Where I can see your braid. I still remember a girl from Mytilini I once lost, a long time ago one evening in Beirut. I could never quite forget it after that, even when I found her again after many years had passed. And I won't ever forget it.

We climbed into the motorboat. She sat down next to me and fell asleep at once. We reached the ship. For the first time, she didn't want to get back into the Sampan. She covered the sofa with a quilt, sorted through the things she had purchased on our trip, and told me to turn towards the wooden partition so that she could undress; when she told me that she was in bed I turned my head. She had carefully laid down her new things on a chair. She was lying on her back, her hands folded under her head as a pillow. I smoked.

- I'll tell you a fairytale, she whispered. As long as the river of pearl.

I waited for her to start. I sat up and looked at her. She had fallen asleep. At dawn, I heard her walking around in the cabin. The quilt had probably fallen to the floor and I was naked. Half asleep, I saw her pick it up and carefully cover the parts of my body that should be

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<sup>vii</sup> Carousel: amusement park

covered. Parts where her fellow Chinese women rather saw me uncovered. I fell asleep again.



That afternoon, when I got the order – that we would be leaving on the *Asia* built by *Triestino* the next day – I told her. She didn't seem to be upset. She helped me pack my things. I gave her my quilt, my pillow, my mattress, and two Irish bed sheets. The cabin attendant called for me and I went down to the captain's cabin. Capt'n Charalampos's expression was stern. He put his hand on my shoulder.

- Get the leftover eggs and a dozen cans of salmon. Give them to your foster daughter, so they won't be wasted. Every morning, she came to my cabin and filled my *thermos* with water.

I told her.

- Then I'm rich now, she said. No woman on all the Sampans is as wealthy as me.

She bowed her head.

- Gratitude is a vulgar reward. If two people live together, with each other's breath, there's no room for rewards.

- I'll come back, I told her.

- No one ever comes back. The good dragon only comes down to our houses once in our lives. A lot of people don't ever see him. I've seen him.

- Why don't you tie him with a Manila rope, so he won't leave you again?

- When people touch him, he shrinks. He becomes as small as a worm, as small as my fingernails. If he's captured, he can't do any good.

- What's he like?

- ...He's embroidered on a silk cloth from Shandong with golden thread.

- And how does he help?

- He doesn't. He prevents you from falling into the river. Your people don't help you, they mustn't. They need to prevent your fall.

She's a midget, I thought to myself, that's why she talks like that.

- The truth, tell me the truth, I said. How old are you?

- I'm as old as I was the day before yesterday, when you asked me. Ten. Why do you ask?

She left at midnight. For a long time I waited for her to come back to say good-bye. But she never came.



At eight a. m., the big dinghy by *Dodwell* moored to the side of *Proteas*. We descended the stairs. All of us turned around to look at the ship that we were leaving in the hands of strangers. All of us remembered its virtues and forgot its flaws. No Sampan next to us. No junk.



In the custom office of Piraeus, an inspector, while searching my luggage, found a small brown paper package at the bottom of my kitbag that hadn't been opened since the day we'd left the ship. He unwrapped it. Carefully, he unraveled a small old flag which had a dragon embroidered on it sideways in worn gold thread. He tagged it "worthless" and placed it back in my bag.

25.12.68

