

ONCE UPON A TIME IN HONG KONG 龍頭鳳尾

Luk Pa-Choi runs to Hong Kong to escape poverty, brutality, and sexual abuse, having no idea that a future just as treacherous awaits him there. The young man begins by pulling a rickshaw and working as a bouncer in brothels, but fate pulls him deeper into the world of the Chinese criminal underground, and he begins to establish himself as a gangster. Yet he has a lover of no small significance – Morris Davidson, an officer in the British police force in Hong Kong. The two feed each other information, and provide each other comfort.

Yet when the Japanese army takes over Hong Kong, and British officers are thrown in jail, Luk Pa-Choi must learn to deal with this new enemy. As his situation becomes more dangerous, Luk faces betrayal and the bitter price of love as he tries his best to rescue Davidson.

Set in the tumultuous period of WWII and Japanese occupation, *Once Upon a Time in Hong Kong* tells the story of a young Chinese gangster's dramatic rise in Hong Kong's underworld and his forbidden love affair with a British police officer. Meticulously researched and artfully told, it is at once a crime epic, a heart-wrenching love story, and a sex-charged spy thriller.

Ma Ka-Fai 馬家輝

Ma Ka-Fai has a cosmopolitan background: he grew up in Hong Kong, studied psychology at National Taiwan University, and obtained his Master and PhD in Sociology in the U.S. (University of Chicago and University of Wisconsin). He had worked in advertising, publishing, news media and film, and currently teaches media and creative writing at City University of Hong Kong. He has published over 20 books of essays, many of them bestsellers. *Once Upon a Time in Hong Kong* is his debut novel.



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ONCE UPON A TIME IN HONG KONG

By Ma Ka-Fai. Translated by Jeremy Tiang.

Chapter Seven: You Bloody Chinese!

He muddled through his days as usual, but Luk Pak-Choi felt that something inside him had been transformed. He felt a dull itch, one he couldn't scratch himself. He required another hand, a strange hand. Yet he didn't want to look for it himself; he would wait for it to reach out to him.

He began waiting for customers outside the newly-opened Luk Kwok Hotel on Gloucester Road, watching the bar girls stroll by, arm in arm with their foreign-devil clients. Most were scrawny, dark-skinned women in gaudy cheongsams, with hair piled into little hillocks and scarlet lipstick, as if their mouths were stained with blood. He didn't understand how the foreign devils found this appetizing. Of course, Cindy was an exception. Luk Pak-Choi enjoyed her mature beauty – a shame she was a woman.

One evening, Luk was waiting outside the hotel when a familiar figure scuttled from the building next to Wing Cheong Pawnbrokers, looking distracted and holding his head low, as if trying to hide – but that pale skin was too visible, even in dim light. Luk froze, then steadied himself and looked more closely. It was him, Morris Davidson, Henry's good friend. On this muggy summer's evening, Davidson wore an olive-green shirt buttoned all the way up. His chest hair was so abundant it poked out the collar, mesmerizing as it glinted faintly in the streetlight – bright yellow one minute, dull brown the next, then golden once again.

Davidson's sharp, police-officer eyes picked out Luk Pak-Choi at a distance. Stepping swiftly over the tram line, he came close and said in a low voice, "Ah Choi, I want you to take me home."

To have Morris Davidson suddenly appear before him, standing so close, and murmuring so gently made Luk feel disoriented, as if he'd slipped into unreality. He looked up at Davidson, whose face was completely silhouetted by the neon lights of the pawn shop behind him, like an enormous, demonic shadow enveloping Luk, and leaving him helpless.

Without waiting for a response, Davidson jumped into the rickshaw and pulled down the green shade, sinking into the canopy's shadows. "Let's go!" he called.

Luk Pak-Choi bent to grab the rickshaw's wooden handles, and with a burst of energy, began jogging along. He came back to reality as he drove. He managed to stay silent for a couple of minutes, but at the turn off for St. Francis Street, finally couldn't stop himself. Turning his head slightly, he said, "Long time no see, sir. Didn't you return home? When did you get back?"

Davidson stayed silent for a while before replying, "I did go home, and took care of some official business while I was there. Now that's over, I'm back here to start work again. There's a lot going on. Your Hong Kong is giving us more and more trouble."

Luk smiled, "That's why you definitely shouldn't leave us." Davidson didn't respond; Luk chuckled awkwardly, then went on. "On a case so late at night? There's a few white powder stalls at the football field, everyone knows about them."

More silence. Luk Pak-Choi took the hint and stopped talking. A moment later, he heard Davidson's voice. "How well do you know the white powder guy?"

"So so, I guess." The white powder guy sold opium, and the football field was part of his territory. "I see his gang more often. Ah Muk, Ah Sing, Sandung Wing. They pop up all over the place, giving people a hard time. Damn them. You know what I mean by that?"

Davidson laughed. "Of course I do. Bastards!"

"Right! Shitheads!" Luk Pak-Choi chuckled too.

All the way, Davidson kept asking how things were going with the households around Southern Playground. Recently, hordes of people had surged into Hong Kong every day, fleeing the war on the Mainland. He wanted to know who'd come to Wanchai, what nefarious business they were up to, what the word on the street was. Luk Pak-Choi and the rest were used to calling this place "bo dei", playing field. According to Buck-toothed Bing, Southern was some foreign devil's name – he'd been an official in Hong Kong, but the field was actually named after his wife, not him, just like the newly-built Violet Peel Health Centre next door, dedicated to the devil governor's wife, not the man himself. Luk had a strong sense that while Chinese men occasionally feared their wives, Westerners actually had a fearful respect for theirs.

Davidson peppered Luk with questions, some of which he knew the answers to, and some of which he didn't, but he answered anyway. In fact, the less certain he was, the more detail he went into, as insecurity persuaded him that not knowing made him lose face. So he went ahead and made things up, spicing up the narrative, creating a great pile of nonsensical supposition. Lies were an effective sedative, for the teller as well as the listener. You had to believe in them yourself in order to speak them convincingly, and the more often you said them, the more you believed. Yes, that's how it was. No other way was possible.

Luk Pak-Choi's legs pumped away as he pulled his rickshaw that night. He leaned forward as he gripped the handles firmly, so hot air smacked his face then swept past his ears, over his earlobes and their backs, like being caressed by countless formless hands. Suddenly, he felt sore, waves of heat radiating from his hands throughout his entire body as the thick wooden handles rubbed constantly against his palms. He'd never felt like this before. Changes came fast that summer night.

The rickshaw kept moving forward. Luk spoke, and Davidson listened, responding every few seconds with an indistinct "mm-hmm."

Luk talked on without being asked, one story, one character after another. It was strange: he normally mumbled when he talked, but now the words poured out of him, Cantonese studded with English, faster and faster, like a reprimand, as if he needed to purge his heart of all that he knew and all he didn't, like emptying a basin of water – filthy water, yet also comfortingly warm.

Each grunt of acknowledgment from Davidson lashed him like a whip. If Luk were a horse, Davidson would be his rider. A person on horseback doesn't need to hit the rump with every twitch of the whip. All that's necessary is to let it slice through the air next to the tail; the sound is all it takes for the animal to understand it needs to speed up. Onlookers imagine that the horse is afraid, but the rider knows it's more excited than anything else.

He didn't know how long he'd been moving – all sense of time had disappeared. As if fleeing for his life through the darkness of night, Luk Pak-Choi kept his head down, charging ahead with his rickshaw. Step after step, as if tapping out a beat for his monologue, or applauding, comforting himself, he pulled a stranger along – and also himself, even less familiar, working hard to burst through the world swirling urgently around him.

Finally, Davidson's voice came from behind him. "We're here."

Luk abruptly halted, and the world stopped spinning. His breath came in gasps, and his torso was covered in sweat. Davidson lived at Phoenix Terrace on MacDonnell Road, a five-story tenement with a short flight of white steps leading up to the yellow front door. A streetlamp poured foggy yellow light into the summer gloaming, adding murk and mystery to a world it was supposed to illuminate. Davidson leapt from the rickshaw and stood with his back to the light, his features as indistinct as when he'd got in. Looking up at him, Luk could see only his lips moving as they said, "Thank you for telling me all this. I'll be sure to look you up for another chat. Good night."

As Davidson handed over a banknote for the fare, their fingertips brushed. They froze for a moment, then pulled their hands away at once.

Reaching into his pocket for his keys, Davidson climbed the stairs, went inside, and shut the door behind him. Even though this hardly made a sound, it roared mightily in Luk's ears. Perhaps because

he'd spent so long talking, or because he was perspiring so heavily, he felt like he'd been hollowed out, his chest and belly completely empty, the numb parts of his body even more numb now. His legs trembled, and he remained where he was, unable to move. Looking up at the building, he saw the lights come on in the third floor window. Davidson had reached his apartment. The windows remained shut, keeping out the city's cicada chirps. In that room were locked secrets Luk Pak-Choi longed to know.

After standing there a while, Luk had just taken up his rickshaw and turned to leave, when the yellow door swung open again, and he heard Davidson's voice: "Ah Choi, would you like a glass of—"

Without turning around or waiting for him to finish, Luk yelled out, "Yes!"

Davidson came forward and placed his hands on the wooden handles of the rickshaw, where Luk's hands were still in position, so Davidson's fingers rubbed lightly over them, crawling like ants from his palms all the way up to his elbows. Luk felt a wave of pain running all the way into his chest, then let out a burst of laughter and let go. The wooden poles dropped to the ground with a crash, startling both men. Davidson looked down at Luk. "Come. Don't be afraid."

He pulled open the yellow door and they went in, entering a world that wasn't completely unfamiliar. The difference was that this time, Luk Pak-Choi was no longer confused, no longer being forced, yet not taking the initiative either, because a hand had indeed reached out, like a bouquet of yellow roses blooming before his eyes, its fragrance filling his nostrils and dizzying him. Nor did this scent belong to Henry, but to Henry's good friend, which made Luk even more eager to breathe it in deeply. It gave him a sudden sense of revenge, as if he'd picked up a stone and flung it hard at Henry's head, the way Medicine King Kin beat him up that day. Davidson's appearance made Luk feel he had a mysterious connection to Henry, as if they were sharing this man. Luk was no longer the betrayed – he'd gone in the other direction, and was now facilitating someone else's betrayal.

That night, when he left Morris Davidson's home, Luk Pak-Choi felt lighter than ever before. It wasn't just his body that felt empty, but his mind too. The madness that had oppressed him so long suddenly smashed to fragments, boiled away, so his frame seemed completely weightless, and even the rickshaw he was pulling felt like nothing at all. He sprinted back to the Wanchai tenement, so quickly that he shocked even himself. Then he understood – this was the speed of a winner. Moving without burdens, without pressure, with nothing but the contentment of having achieved victory.

The sensation was addictive, and Luk began meeting Davidson more and more frequently. It was Davidson who usually sought him out by Southorn Playground, getting into the rickshaw and telling him to go north along Luard Road, down Gloucester Road to the sea, then turn left and head west, swinging round to Queen's Road Central before doubling back to MacDonnell Road. Along the way, Luk followed his passenger's instructions, pulling the rickshaw slowly so he'd have plenty of time to ask about the latest news. Mostly he just wanted to know what was going on around the playground, what the hooligans had been fighting about, and whether any suspicious characters had suddenly shown up. Sometimes, Davidson would toss out a name or two and ask Luk to pay special attention to these individuals. Recently, he'd been keeping an eye on White-haired Wing from the Hung Wing Triad, as well as the movements of the Japanese in Wanchai, and he hoped Luk could help him find out more. Hong Kong was a broken pail in a vacant lot – whenever a storm came, it filled with rainwater, and let it run everywhere. In two or three years, the population had swollen from six hundred thousand to seven, then from eight to nine hundred thousand, and then to a million. The worse the fighting got on the Mainland, the more refugees poured into the city, and the harder it became to keep order – which made Davidson's inquiries all the more urgent.

Naturally, that wasn't all he asked about. Their destination was always Davidson's house on MacDonnell. As soon as they stepped in the front door, they'd embrace, and the much-anticipated events would take place. Afterwards, lying in bed or on the floor, the two men would chat. Luk Pak-Choi enjoyed listening to Davidson's stories, of which he had an endless supply – stories of India, Southeast Asia, Canton, everywhere he'd been before. Davidson had an older brother, a highly accomplished fellow who was accepted to Cambridge, but unfortunately succumbed to lung disease before school started. His father started drinking heavily after his son's death, and would beat his

wife and children after he got drunk, so Morris decided to leave his home at the first opportunity, and go as far away as necessary. He was lucky enough to gain a place at London University. After graduation, he returned home to marry and have children. He taught for two years, then entered the civil service, and was posted to Ceylon, India, and Malaya, then Canton and Hong Kong.

Four months ago, during the Easter vacation, he'd returned home to Scotland to visit his father, who was seriously ill. At this point in the conversation, Davidson mentioned his wife, son, and daughter. Luk listened without asking questions until he could no longer restrain his curiosity. He stammered: "She, they—why not come to Hong Kong with you?"

"She didn't want to come," said Davidson expressionlessly. "She said it would be better for everyone this way."

Now Luk Pak-Choi told Davidson what his uncle had done to him – there was no way he could have kept this hidden. He wasn't a virgin, front nor back. When Davidson realized this, he held him down and demanded to know who his first time had been with. Luk bit his lip, trying not to cry, but ended up weeping anyway, blurting out the whole story through his tears, revealing his secrets, pent up for over a decade, in order to satisfy Davidson's curiosity. In doing so, he set free the wild beast in his heart, daring it to turn around and savage him. Luk suddenly thought of Ah Gyun, whose tearful revelation that her father had raped her seemed to unleash a mighty energy inside her, both in and out of bed. At the time, he'd thought he was merely afraid of her, and had failed to notice that he was deeply jealous of her as well. He'd longed to find someone he could tell his secrets to without hesitation, someone he trusted, someone he loved. There was no way of being certain that Morris Davidson was this person, but if not him, then who? Who else could it be? He was willing to offer up his heart, to allow him to enter and break the lock on the cage, releasing the creature within.

After Luk finished, Davidson pressed his full length against Luk's back, and pushed his face into the pillow with one hand, and spanked him hard with the other, scolding him with "You bad boy! Bad! Bad boy!" and laughing amid the slapping noises. Luk's tears had dampened the pillow, and as his face rubbed against it, he felt waves of cold moisture, the sensation of being drowned, the pleasure of suffocation.

Davidson came looking for him about once a week, and when they talked, Henry's name never came up. To be honest, this made Luk feel closer to Davidson than before. Some secrets can't be told to strangers, while others must be kept hidden from intimates, lest revealing them ruins everything. The more important a person is to you, the less willing you are to risk it.

Luk Pak-Choi continued to stay away from the sailors' hostel, to avoid running into Henry. He sometimes hung around Tai Fatt Hou waiting for customers, though lately he'd preferred Tai Yuen Street, where there were also many Japanese businesses – Shibaya Restaurant, Meiji Hairdresser, Nakamoto Clothing, Maruta Jewelry, Ichiro Tea House. You could tell from the names alone that they were Japanese-run. Even if not, you could have guessed from the décor. These storefronts were much more elegant and gleaming than the Chinese establishments, and the customers more neatly dressed too, their footsteps measured. The women in particular minced along gingerly, heads low and eyes on the ground, as if afraid to offend anyone. But how could they avoid it, at a time like this? To exist was to offend, and every individual had to shoulder the burden of the world's chaos, and the grievances swirling within. The era ground people into meal, then kneaded them into clumps of dough, like flour on a kitchen table, stained all over with visible or invisible fingerprints.

After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on seventh July, shops in the Little Japan of Tai Yuen Street frequently had their windows smashed, or got set on fire in the middle of the night. The Hong Kong government put up some basic huts by the harbor for the Japanese to live in. By day, they'd go to work as usual, and at night they'd sleep here to keep the peace. Some went, while others chose instead to guard their shops day and night, or pay local ruffians to act as security guards; such arrangements had to be made secretly, because none of the hooligans wished to be thought of as traitors. Many businesses left their metal shutters halfway down even when they were open. As the world grew even more chaotic, a battlefield atmosphere preceded the actual war.

Some Japanese people could speak Chinese – Mandarin, Cantonese or Hokkien – and took

Chinese names, dressed according to Chinese fashions, and called themselves Chinese, hardly ever giving away their real identities. Davidson told Luk to keep a particular eye out for these individuals, and if he spotted any, to inform him at once – for the safety of Hong Kong. Luk couldn't care less about that, he just wanted Davidson to be there, listening to him. Having him in the seat behind him made him feel safe, able to speak freely. He grew taciturn the rest of the time, saving up his conversational energy for those happiest of moments. Every two or three meetings, Davidson would give him a little money. It wasn't much, and Luk accepted it happily, because money was money and he needed the cash, and because he was afraid that if he didn't take the payment, Davidson would stop coming.

In order to see more of Davidson, he worked hard to glean information from everyone he came across, which he then turned into useful intelligence by using a little imagination. For instance, when he heard his roommate Catastrophe Hung mention in passing that the triad brothers were planning to cause trouble, he'd tell Davidson, "Look out, someone's planning to rob the Japanese jewelers!" He spoke with great certainty, as if he'd been keeping his ears open behind the scenes and heard everything. Luk Pak-Choi's calculations were simple: having planted this notion in Davidson's head, if there was no robbery after all, then that was clearly because his warning had been effective, and the preventative measures had worked; on the other hand, if a robbery *did* take place, he could take credit for that too, blame Davidson for not taking his report more seriously, and ask if he really trusted him. Luk came up with a theory: having a plausible, consistent story and sticking to it was more important than truth or falsehood. Both truth and lies could be believed – everything in this world was either believable or not. There was no such thing as truth.