

THE GLOBAL SOUL

Jet Lag, Shopping Malls,
and the Search
For Home

PICO IYER

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THE GLOBAL MARKETPLACE

HK ex
transit
2001

Birds in flight, claims the architect
Vincenzo Volentieri, are not *between*
places, they carry their places with
them. We never wonder where they
live: they are at home in the sky, in
flight. Flight is their way of being
in the world.

cf.
Home
of
Flight

—GEOFF DYER

In Hong Kong recently, staying with one of my oldest friends from English high school, I found myself in a flat furnished almost entirely with suitcases (a PRIORITY label around the handle of one, the stickers of hotels all over another). A Hewlett-Packard desk jet printer sat on the desk in the guest-room, and next to it I found some stationery from a Marriott Hotel, and a few postcards of the Imperial Hotel (in Bombay, in Bangkok?—I couldn't really tell). Nearby were some pictures of Macao and some personalized stationery (for someone I'd never heard of) made up by the Oberoi Hotel, Bombay. Next to the bed, a Dragonair systems timetable; against the wall, a travel iron, together with some guidebooks.

My old friend Richard and his wife, Sharon, were as kind and individual a couple as I knew, but they'd set up their flat—like the city around them—for people passing through. So there was a box for a Worldwide Power Adapter in the room where I slept, a set of Chinese Standard Version 3.2 diskettes, and a box of matches from Rick's Café down the street (where expats could collect a partner for the night). And everywhere, there were suitcases. When I arrived, two MBAs from Los Angeles, who'd just flown over for the weekend (on our hostess's unused frequent flier awards) moved out of the guest room and into the functional living room.

Now, as I joined them to discuss dinner, I let the fourteen-hour difference from California seep through my woozy system. We could

order room service, I was told, from a hotel with 565 rooms next door, or from one with 604 rooms next to it; we could order food from the other hotel in the complex, which had 512 rooms. Around us, in the distance, sat the last sad remnants of British rule: the Happy Valley Racecourse, the Noon Day Gun, the Craigengower Cricket Club. Beneath us, in the area known as Admiralty, were the trappings of the new Empire—a four-story shopping mall (called simply—definitely—the Mall), where shiny signs pointed towards the Atrium, The United Center, One Pacific Place and Two

“The thing about this place,” Richard said to me as I slipped in and out of time zones, “is that you’ve got a mini-airport on the ground floor, where you can check in for all Cathay flights. There’s a Seibu department store on Level Two, where you can buy everything you want. My bank’s next to the elevator, and the Immigration Office is next to my office. You never really have to leave the building.”

When I went into the guest bathroom to splash some water over my face—I hadn’t yet come down to earth—I found some Thai Air hair treatment next to the sink, and a bottle of La Quinta Resort and Spa moisturizer. There was a Delta business class toilet kit nearby, as well as a British Airways towelette and some Princess Cruises French formula shampoo. Otherwise, nothing whatsoever, except for some toothpaste from some Imperial Hotel.

There was maid service, should I want it, and laundry service, too; there were DO NOT DISTURB signs to hang outside the door. The place was run by the Swire Group, the venerable old British hong that had provided new Eastern lives for many of our schoolfriends, and here had constructed a kind of Club Class Lounge three hundred feet above the ground. A permanent hotel.

“It’s an odd life you lead here,” I said to Richard, whom I’d always thought of as a Victorian district officer transferred to a digital age. “It is,” he said, not without some glee, and, with that, he proceeded

to pull out his phone bill for the month just past. It was only one of the five he paid every month—and the smallest, as it happened—but still it came to seven hundred dollars. “I have twelve telephone cards,” he said, fishing them out, one by one, from his wallet. “A Singapore Telephone card, an AT&T calling card, and an MCI—three AT&T’s, actually—as well as an ETI—you know, an Executive Telephone International. Also, of course, a GSM phone with two SIM cards”—he drew out his mobile and showed me how he could slip the cards in and out, depending on whether he was in Asia or Europe. “And three Kallback services, with the appropriate cards.”

I was tempted to gape, except that I had just paid almost a week’s salary for my monthly telephone bill, not to mention another bill for the cell phone I’d gotten for my mother, another for a Kallback service, another for my phone in Japan, a few more for fax machines in Japan and California, as well as overseas on-line surcharges. An unlikely fate for two friends raised on Latin hymns. *in Oxford?*

“I don’t know how you keep up with all this.” *Sh-?*

“I don’t have to. I just charge everything to my AmEx card.”

“For which you get miles?”

“For which I get miles enough to send Sharon around the world every month. Look”—and with that he spread open his wallet so I could inspect a colorful assembly of members’ cards—from the Red Carpet Club and the Passages service, for Marriott Miles and Singapore Airlines. He had a Europlus and a Priority Passenger Service card, as well as the customary guarantee that he’d never be turned away from a seat on Marco Polo Class.

“The thing is, I always carry at least five plane tickets with me everywhere I go, so I can use segments sometimes.” He drew out a stash of half-completed, worn, and folded plane tickets, for almost every itinerary he might take tomorrow: Hong Kong–London, Hong Kong–Madrid, Boston–Tokyo, London–Boston. He had courted his wife, I recalled, by flying around the world—London–San Francisco–Tokyo–London—virtually every weekend for two years,

and still was without doubt one of the least ambitious and acquisitive people I knew: on expense-account trips, he'd been known to stay in youth hostels.

"I just switch back and forth," he said, knowing that he was talking to someone similarly trained in living in midair. "It saves the company a lot of money. In fact, I probably pay less for flying First Class than most people pay for Business Class." After getting off the thirteen-hour flight from London, Richard usually took the A2 bus home.

At that point, bulky envelopes began to emerge from his briefcase—one after another, till I'd counted twenty-seven—and I saw that every single one of them was stuffed with telephone cards, coins, and tokens for the twenty-seven countries he was likeliest to find himself in tomorrow. "Bus tickets for Amsterdam," he said. "That's the best way to get around there. Phone cards for Japan. Pesetas for Madrid."

"And you can still keep working wherever you are?"

"Absolutely. I have voice mail in Japan, Hong Kong, and Boston, and I can check my messages from anywhere. The only trouble is, I don't have a mobile modem, so I can't collect my E-mail in a car."

"But you're never in a car!"

"That's true. I'm more often in a plane than in a car. Some flight attendants recently were working out that I fly more than they do."

We paused a little while I took in the SIM cards. "But you're right," Richard continued. "We don't have a car anywhere. We don't need one. I don't even have an office, really. I'll show you when I get back from overseas."

The thing to stress here is that Richard is by no means extravagantly rich, and certainly no jet-setter; he's just an extremely hardworking international management consultant in a global market that asks him to move as fast as it does. He's also one of the most human

people I know, loyal and affectionate and strong enough to root himself in something other than the circumstances of his life.

But he works—more and more of us do—in an accelerating world, for which the ideal base of operations was this international Home Page of a city. There were four cinemas in the Mall where we were sleeping, more than twenty places in which to eat, and fully ninety-seven boutiques (Gucci, Guess, Valentino, Vuitton; Boss, Hugo Boss, the Armani Exchange). There was access to the MTR subway, to the Far East Finance Center, and to a car park. There were the great department stores of Britain, Hong Kong, and Japan. "A world of delights," as the literature announced, "under one roof."

world comp

On the plane coming into the old city airport, I'd flipped through the in-flight magazine and found a kind of mobile emporium of goods to allow "executives" like Richard to take care of business in midair. There were ads for Sky Tel alphanumeric paging services and for World Cell pocket phones, for credit card-sized "PC companions" and "voice file portable IC chip recorders." As I scribbled down on a piece of paper the details of teleconferencing speakers with satellites and digital cameras with built-in PC cards, not to mention a Card Scan Plus 300 for scanning cards into your "Personal Pilot," I felt, as I did more and more often these days, as if I'd left my language on another continent. In any case, most of these devices would probably be out of date by the time we hit the ground.

I could order any one of them, I read, in my "Airborne Office," by credit card, using the Airfone nearby, which could also be used for sending faxes, taking calls, and charging everything to an En Route credit card. The airline was about to install ATMs in its aisles, and even in Economy Class, the *Entertainment Guide* for my personal video system was a glossy magazine sixty-four pages long. You could live on the plane, I realized, or on the phone—or, best of all, on the phone on the plane. The declaration of John Self, the transoceanic

not self

Immigrants
PICO IYER

creature in Martin Amis's mid-eighties novel *Money*—"I am a thing made up of time lag, culture shock, zone shift"—needed only minor updates now—to "jet lag, shell shock, paradigm shift." The "thing" part could remain.

HK

"The Indians here, they are having a hard time," said the German next to me, catching my eye with a shrewd glance, his eye having fallen on my disembarkation card (Indians living in Hong Kong would soon be given British passports with a crown on them, but no right to live in Britain). "They are like stateless people now."

I fingered my old British passport, heartbreakingly close to a Hong Kong one, but minus two extra words that mark all the difference between freedom and incarceration.

"Sometimes the Indians are third-generation," he went on, "but the Chinese won't take them, the British won't take them. Things will be strange under the new management."

"That's all right," I said, writing off the Indians with the blitheness of one born in Britain. "They're used to getting on everywhere. They know how to make a living out of displacement."

"I know," he said, nodding seriously. "I, too, am so cosmopolitan now. I do not care where I live. Anywhere, it is the same: you can do business."

At that point, the pilot gave his mellow-voiced, BBC-worthy announcement of the time and temperature awaiting us on the ground—which we could follow on the Airshow Channel—and the cabin attendants prepared for landing, the vessel itself a perfect model of the old colonial order (cool British male at the helm, and women from ten Asian nations dishing out the drinks).

We descended between tall apartment blocks, almost entangled in lines of washing, and touched down.

When I arrived at the desk in the Immigrations area, I handed an official my passport. He looked at it, looked at me, looked at it again. A superior was called over, and he, looking at it, asked to see my ticket, my alien registration card, my Time Inc. ID. Then a third man

alien

came over, and led me to an "Interview Room," where I sat down under a sign that informed me of my rights "under custody."

I could make a single phone call, I read; I could contact my solicitor. I was, for the moment, an alien resident of limbo.

A fourth official came into the cell and, pulling up a chair across from me, looked at my face, flipped through my passport, and peered some more at my pinkish-colored green card. Why did I choose to live for twenty-nine years in a country not my own? he asked.

Because I liked America as a base, but never began to think of it as home.

This is not normal, he said, to live for almost all your life as an alien.

However, he could find nothing officially wrong with my papers, except for the fact that my face didn't match my birthplace, and people who looked like me were stateless. Finally, releasing me with ill-disguised unease into the colony of transients—the Customs Hall decorated with a pangolin, a monitor lizard, and other replicas of endangered creatures—he got up to attend to two young Germans in the next booth, whom I heard being told to wait for the next plane home, to be deported.

In Richard's apartment, the wonder of his phone cards and his plane cards exhausted, I retired to my bedroom, half-dazed and half-electrified (jet-lagged, in other words), and tried to will myself to sleep. But one sleeps strangely in such a state, in fitful, violent fragments, and my dreams unraveled like action movies, till I jerked up into wakefulness, after a month's worth of images, only to see that I'd been out for hardly more than an hour.

The clock beside the bed read 2:23.

I flicked the remote beside me, for what was here known as "terrestrial television," and stock-market listings came up on Channel 4. Listlessly, I flipped through Pearl TV, Jade TV, Phoenix TV; through

CNN International, BBC World, CNBC Asia. I caught Asian music videos on Channel V, some intimate Kanto drama on NHK-1, a Cantonese show on ATV-Home. I decided to walk off my confusion in the darkness.

Slipping out of the apartment, I went down in the elevator to the lobby, where two security guards were watching me on rows of monitors. Outside, through a set of electric doors, I passed into an open glass elevator and descended into the Mall below, the names all around the same ones that I'd seen on the other side of the planet that morning (Florsheim, The Body Shop, See's Candies).

I took an escalator up to the second floor, and walked through the brilliantly lit corridors of the empty arcade—Timberland, Lacoste, DKNY, The Athlete's Foot. Signs led me up steps and out into the night, to a sixty-one-story hotel.

Inside the lobby, the clocks showed the times in major centers of the world, while machines flashed and hummed in the Business Centre. Outside, in a small banyan-tree garden, two lovers (made of concrete) embraced, a bag of potato chips (also made of concrete) between them.

Looking for something to ground me—or simply to sustain me—I began walking down the main, deserted street, till I came to Lockhart Road, where heavy bass rhythms were thumping out of the Express Club and what looked like Moslems were gathered outside a pita and kebab stall called Midnight Express. A pretty young Filipina in a Dallas Cowboys jacket sat on the stoop of the New Pussycat club, while other of her compatriots, flouncily done up in pillbox hats and gold-chain bags, clucked and fluttered past noisy holes called the Lady Club, Hot Lips, and Venus. Upstairs, in a loud Western bar, where I tucked into a burger, a man in a jacket and tie was running his hands along the bare arms of a small dark girl with a baseball cap on backwards, while a five-a-side soccer match unfolded on-screen.

A few hefty British traders in gray suits were wailing, "I would do anything for love," in time to the record, at the bar, pumping their fists and steadying themselves against one another's shoulders.

Back out on the street, as I tried to walk off my restlessness, a man bumped into me, slipping out of a 7-Eleven with a package of Pro-Fil condoms in his hand; another, in a straggly leather jacket, was clutching a chubby new girlfriend to his chest and roaring, "But she's in England—thousands of bloody miles away!"

I passed the Duke of Windsor Social Services Department, a large skyscraper with a neon sign for TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) at its top, a rat scuttling across a vacant lot. In a small business hotel, I found a Japanese girl in a very short skirt, nursing a Heineken, while a young man in golfing pants, holding a glass of wine, whispered to her from the far end of the same small sofa. UKIYO-E, said the sign by the elevator button. FLOATING WORLD.

It was getting light by the time I returned to the room where I was staying, and the phone was ringing—from New York—while faxes continued to chug in through the night. I found a copy of Time International lying around, and opened it to see pages of classified ads at the back—for Offshore Companies and Second Passports, for EU Residence Permits and Call Global telephone cards. I could enter a green-card lottery through the magazine; I could apply for Canadian citizenship. I could even get goods from the Counter Spy Shop. The overseas edition of Time, like the Sky Mall catalog on the plane, suggested (with its ads for "Camouflage Passports" and "Satellite Decoders") that the future was just a video war conducted by other means.

Outside, though, the day looked warm and sunny, and, still in some cloudless afternoon state from California, sixteen time zones away, I decided to go out to take in the scenery. People talk these

days about how the world is turning into a Microsoft and McDonald's uniculture, but every empire has always tried to remake its image around the globe, and when I went out into a place like Hong Kong, even now, I was almost instantly in boyhood again, in some tropical rendering of Berkshire.

Taking a tram (with "Cathay Pacific" written all over its sides) down to the Bank of China, I got out and started climbing the steep concrete slope to the Citibank Plaza—Hong Kong's Central district was a web of such anonymities—when suddenly I saw the towers of an Anglican church down the street. I walked along to its entrance, stepped inside, and instantly I was in England, on a gray November morning, being prepared for a war—or an Empire—that never came. It hardly mattered that birds were chirping in the rafters here, or that fans were waiting to turn above the pews; I hardly noticed the signs in the parking lot speaking of a VEHICLE IMPOUNDING ZONE. The circulars pinned up with thumbtacks, the "collects" fluttering from green baize notice boards, the hymnals lined up higgledy-piggledy along the pews, and the grand organ ready to strike up another chorus of "Almighty, Invisible, God Only Wise" made the years, the miles evaporate.

It was a space as generic in its way as any Burger King, I thought; I could have been standing outside the Supreme Court building in Singapore, or along the Avon in the tree-shaded parks of Christ Church: the Empire had meant that children singing of "a green hill far away" were all thinking of the same place. Standing in this mock thirteenth-century Gothic cathedral, I could have been my father, in Bombay in 1937, reciting a borrowed litany—except that his world was made up of two cultures that he knew, while I, at this moment, was between two homes (California and Japan) that were quite strange to me.

In recent times, in fact, when our family got together, the discussions we had were about whether it was better to fly from Los Angeles to Bombay via Frankfurt or via Tokyo, and how best to convert PAL videotapes into U.S.-compatible ones; our local issues had to do

with green-card applications and student visas, and which international phone company offered the best rates for Bangalore. A hundred and fifty years before, Tennyson and those around him had seen the railway as both the force of history and the death of neighborhood; now the jumbo jet made all such thoughts antique.

Outside my bedroom, as I returned to sleep, huge cranes were moving clumps of earth, to construct a new British embassy for the postimperial order.

The next morning, when I awoke—my body only slowly following my mind—the clock showed 4:00, 4:45, 6:00, though inside my stomach it didn't feel like 4:00 a.m. or 6:00 p.m. or any time I could recognize. For hours, my dreams had organized themselves around the sounds of transmissions coming in from around the globe. And all through the night, the phone by my head had kept ringing, though every time I picked it up, all I could hear was the shrill tone of a fax, or, in one case, a friend of mine, from the far side of the world, calling and calling my name (to be answered by a sharp mechanical whine).

On TV, one channel was showing a live image of the lobby, and another some still life of an apartment building. O. J. Simpson was on one channel, and on another the London Monarchs were playing (American) football against the Rhein Fire. Somewhere a woman was talking of rape.

I called up a Chinese friend whom I'd first met in Nepal (where he'd been working on an Anglo-Italian film about the Buddha), and his Japanese-American wife picked up.

"What time is it in California?" she asked me sweetly.

"Four p.m.," I said, looking out at the early light.

Already, behind the TV screen, workers were moving poured concrete on the forested hillside to erect the future.

Basil suggested we meet at the Foreign Correspondents' Club, on Lower Albert Road, in the heart of the area still known (on the maps) as Victoria, and when I opened the heavy institutional doors, it was to walk into my school again, decorated in the local style known as "Anglo-something." The notices on the board offered club ties and cuff links and umbrellas; the crested letter paper reminded members to place their orders soon for mince tarts with rum butter and sliced smoked Scottish salmon: this part of Hong Kong belonged to Graham Greene's Abroad.

All around the slightly dusty dining room, wooden boards listed the names of club officers through the ages much as, at the Dragon School in Oxford, they'd listed the winners of prized scholarships to public school.

But the characters living and working within this museum case belonged, more and more, to the Empire that had made all this redundant. Basil, coming in stylishly from the ferry—having dropped his daughter off at school—and ordering breakfast for us in Cantonese, was just off the road after spending most of the year past traveling around the world with a member of Monty Python's Flying Circus; he was now about to spend a few months photographing hotels around Asia. His wife, an expert at finding Philippine settings for Hollywood movies set in Vietnam, had just found a Bhutanese boy in Hong Kong to act as the Dalai Lama in one of the latest international productions. Thinking of his daughter's schooling, as his Chinese compatriots moved in on Hong Kong, Basil was wondering whether to move his clan to Singapore, to Seattle, to San José in Costa Rica.

We had much in common, if only because we'd both grown up with a sense of half-belonging everywhere (Basil had been cast around the world by his exile family); we spoke of our faraway English schools—and the (Kenyan) schoolfriend Basil had met by chance in the Rangoon market—as if one of us was not Chinese, and the other was not Indian. Occasionally, worn Chinese waiters in

stained white jackets—identified by their name tags as Carson or Edmond—dropped off on our table plates of baked beans and fat sausages, or triangles of toast. Scholarly old women and pink-faced colonial types resettled themselves with their faded copies of *The Times* in thick leather armchairs.

"Hong Kong," I said, "must have been a lot more English when you were a boy."

"A lot more Chinese, too," said Basil.

After finishing breakfast, I made my way down the steep sidewalk, past the New World Centre, to Queen's Road Central, walking up tall flights of stairs, through passenger bridges, in and out of a never-ending web of walkways, across access buildings, up ramps, past a whirl of foreign faces until, quite without meaning to, I found myself in the Worldwide Building, which stands at the heart of Central, between Alexandria House and the Prince's Building.

Inside was as poignant a network of little shops as ever I have seen, and, shaken out of my imperial daydreams, I was brought up against the force of a much more urgent form of wistfulness. The Worldwide Building is a virtual monument to the fact that a world with a hundred kinds of home will accommodate a thousand kinds of homesickness. Its shops—stalls, really—were brightly emblazoned with names like Filipino Shop and Worldwide Filipino Club and Little Quiapo and Romance Boutique, and on every side were young women from the Philippines, most of them in tight jeans, with gold crosses above their Hard Rock Café and Planet Hollywood T-shirts, at home in this Little Manila. The signs on the storefronts told them when they could catch a Filipino star on ATV-World, or how to "Apply for Peso Loan" or convey Tele-Money to their children back home. Posters of the beaches of the Philippines were hung up in the windows, and smiling Filipinos invited you to BRING A FRIEND TO THE PHILIPPINES; stores were stacked with "Legal

Love Romances” and offers of “Christian Song Love Song Karaoke,” and they were called Your Shoppe and Fanny and Friendly Remittance Company.

I felt drawn into this world for all the ways it contradicted everything around it—a Trojan horse, it seemed, of romance and sentiment and devotion; of escape, really—and all the ways it grounded what my time in Pacific Place suggested: the lucky go around the world to find the props of home available round the clock; the less lucky stand at the service entrance staring through the railings for any piece of home common to Makati and Manhattan.

In some of the shops were piled precarious towers of jars, containing Phil brand purple yam jam and sweet jackfruit and sugarplum; in some, there were greeting cards offering “Christ Is Born Today” and letter-writing paper with “Remember to Pray” on every sheet. There were signs offering DOOR TO DOOR REMITTANCES TO CAGAYAN DE ORO CITY, and others listing all the ships sailing to Manila; with a few adjustments, I could have been in a Vietnamese shopping mall a friend from Da Nang had introduced me to once in Melbourne, or any of a hundred minimonuments to Iranian/Guatemalan/Korean plautiveness in LA.

The girls were everywhere, no taller than my shoulder, mostly, holding hands, staring at Panasonic radios or National blenders in the windows, counting out coins to get “Talk-Talk” cards to call back home. At one of the remittance centers, the line was eleven deep—as if outside a U.S. embassy—and young women were chatting about four-year-old tyrants who dragged them into Kentucky Fried Chicken, and children a thousand miles away. The windows of the cashiers’ kiosks were plastered over with handwritten messages on scraps of notebook paper: BECAUSE FULL NO MONKEY BUSINESS AROUND OUR SHOP or NO BUYING-SELLING OF PESO. A Lebanese trader in the next booth had pinned up signs that said WANTED URGENT: 3 HOUR PER DAY. GOOD LOOKING. BELOW 25 YEAR and WANTED GOOD-LOOKING POLITE HONEST.

The Filipinos who live and work in Hong Kong—130,000 of them in all, most of them rented mothers and vicarious housewives—tend to get lost in all the official equations involving Empire and Emporia; “domestic outsourcers,” as the chilling euphemism has it, they tend to fall between many of the publicized categories in a city that conjugates all the ways one does not belong, as expat or exile or refugee or stateless person. They’ve come here by choice, after all, to support the families they’ve been forced to leave at home, and, like Filipino nannies and nurses and go-go dancers everywhere, they belong to a kind of unofficial economy, which provides the human services that the official world likes to delegate. I’d seen Filipinos running most of the stores and security checks at San Francisco Airport and spinning the roulette wheels in Reno; in Osaka’s airport, I was used to seeing Filipinas from the local bars perfectly imitating the inflections of fourteen-year-old Japanese girls as they giggled their good-byes to the gangsters who kept them, and boarded planes with stuffed animals in their arms. In Hong Kong, gathering around the fifty-story glass towers, they could seem the most visible and voluble inhabitants of Central, stuck in the throat of the global metropolis like a piece of the global village.

The next day in the paper I read an article headlined DEATH-LEAP MAID COMPLAINED OF SHOUTING, and describing how a local professor had slept through the night while her Filipina maid, on only her fifth day in the city, had thrown herself out of a twelfth-floor window (“Police found a pair of scissors and a chopper lying on the maid’s bed”). The professor told investigators that her worker seemed happy, and protested, “I had no time to shout at her as I was always away till nine o’clock.” Another incident to get filed next to the numberless cases of Filipina maids attacking their employers and molesters in Singapore and Arabia, where local values were not always made for pious Catholic girls from Asia.

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on

Here in the Worldwide Building, though, the women were smiling, mostly, as they snapped up copies of the souvenir *Filipinos in Hong Kong* yearbook, and sparkled back at Instamatic cameras as they flashed. You could almost hear them preparing stories for the sweethearts back home, or anxious parents, about the city where there were more Rolls-Royces per capita than anywhere else in the world, and where even a spot in the local cemetery could cost eighty thousand dollars. Study Bibles, wedding dresses, cream for removing stretch marks; a sign near Best Friends Jewelry saying NO PRETENDING FRIEND.

HK

I suppose one reason I had been drawn here was the same reason that had pulled the Filipinos: namely, that it was the rare city that had been built up almost entirely by people from abroad, and so had become a kind of Platonic Everyplace, the city-state as transit lounge: for foreign businesspeople at least, Hong Kong felt like a hyperconvenient luxury hotel, a shopping mall-cum-conference center-cum-world trade center where there were no taxes, few real laws, and no government other than the freest of markets. English was spoken, even minor credit cards were accepted and, just around the corner from me, there were three 7-Elevens and a Circle K, open at 4:00 a.m. Entering Hong Kong could feel a little like going on-screen, into a world buzzing with options and graphics, itself a kind of rough diagram of the digital city of the future.

The place meant something very different for the Chinese who swarmed through its back streets and outlying villages, of course, but for outsiders at least, the perpetual colony remained a curious artifact: less a capital of empire, increasingly, than an empire of capital, which, with a survivor's versatility, had managed to change identities to fit the shifting of history's tides. In the nineteenth century, the "little England in the eastern seas," as the future King George V called it, had been the definitive Victorian outpost, facilitating the narcotics trade of Empire, and in the twentieth century it had turned

into a Cold War listening post, at the heart of the American Century (and briefly occupied by the Japanese). In recent years, it had come to look like the next (postnational) century, a city without citizens in a world where ideology was obsolete and economics trumped all. The central question raised by the handover to China was whether this hybrid nest of Global Souls could pull the Middle Kingdom into the twenty-first century before the Celestial Empire pulled it back into the nineteenth.

And unlike most places, which grow organically into themselves and settle into their grooves as a person does, Hong Kong had based its identity on everything it wasn't. For generations of British FILTH ("Failed in London, Try Hong Kong"), it had simply been an alternative marketplace where black-sheep sons could find the opportunities unavailable to them at home (not least in the company of pretty Filipinas); for the Chinese who'd poured in after the ascent of Mao, making it by some counts the fastest-rising city in history, it was a perfect counter-China, as free of politics as the Mainland was drowned in it. For the Filipinos who came here, it represented a job market unimaginable at home—especially with so many foreigners around, in need of domestic help—and for the more than 200,000 Vietnamese who had fled here on boats, it was simply—irresistibly—not Vietnam.

And what was the result of all this willy-nilly multiculturalism? Pure mishmash, till I felt, sometimes, as if I were in a city whose local tongue was Esperanto (or "fusion culture," as *Concierge*, the magazine of the Hong Kong Hotels Association, more optimistically put it). Wasabi Mousse Caviar and Crème Brûlée flavored with lychee and pomegranate and mango; Matins in Mandarin at St. John's Cathedral, and Holy Eucharist in Pilipino; "HK/British system when addresses given in English script," as my map carefully informed me (distinguishing between ground floors and first floors), "American/Japanese and also the Chinese system when address in Chinese characters." Hong Kong was the portmanteau city par excellence, identified by people called Freedom Leung and Philemon Choi and Sir

Run Run Shaw—the perfect site for “market-Leninism” and all the other improvised hyphens of the age.

The latest artifact of Hong Kong, the superfashionable new movie *Chungking Express* came at one much as the city did, in Mandarin and Cantonese and Urdu and Japanese and English all at once, giving one the jostling, indecipherable sensation of being on any of its mingled streets, and serenading one with a synthetic blast of “masala music,” Canto pop and “California Dreamin’.” Named for one of the city’s most infamous hotels for transients, it played out its quick-change scenes in all the classic Hong Kong locations—the convenience store, the fast-food stall, the check-in area, cities click by on departure-boards, Indians surrender their passports for cash, and the camera whirls back again and again to CD player and Coke machine, boarding pass and tiny toy plane. The three main female characters are a Chinese woman in a blond wig, a girl who works at a late-night junk-food outlet (that calls itself *Midnight Express*), and a Cathay Pacific stewardess who likes to make love to the sound of a safety announcement.

Now, as I walked behind the New World Centre—New Worlds were everywhere in Hong Kong—I saw a Chinese man kissing his short-skirted love, eyes wide open as his briefcase banged against her back. A group of Sikhs was seated in a circle on the ground, enjoying a picnic amidst the debris of McDonald’s containers and old beer bottles. An African was lying flat out on the pavement, his Chinese girlfriend brushing him tenderly with her hair.

Not far away, in one of the many new blue-and-gray high-fashion movies shooting in the colony, Vivian Wu was playing a Japanese girl who gets her British boyfriend to write on her back in French, English, Japanese, and, finally, Yiddish. The Italy France Japan Fashion Square was open till 2:00 a.m. around the corner and the Harbour City mall invited one to “Go around the world in one day” by sampling its six hundred shops. Everywhere, I felt, a crush of multicultural props offering one goodies that answered every need except for

the ancient, ancestral ones that convenience and speed could not wish away.

When I arrived back in my friends’ apartment, my hostess (herself long a stateless soul of the more ancestral kind—when her family had been displaced, for the second time in forty years, by the Iranian Revolution, she found herself alone in London, thirteen years old, with nothing to protect her but some papers that said, not very ringingly, “Travel Documents: Citizen of the World”) was nowhere to be seen. When at last she returned, quite late, from the office, we turned on the TV to see when Richard would be back (Kai Tak arrivals were shown on Channel 6). That didn’t help, though, because neither of us knew which country he’d be coming from.

When at last he did come in, off the plane from Tokyo, he was hungry and tired, and the number of places where we could eat was diminishing quickly. “Anywhere,” he sighed, “so long as it’s not a hotel.” Hotels, though, were the most convenient option—so close and yet not closed—and so, sometime after 11:00 p.m., we found ourselves in the sixty-one-story tower block next door.

“How are things in the office?” Richard asked his wife.

“Everyone’s getting frazzled,” she said. “Having to work till six o’clock every morning.”

“Oh well,” said my friend, always a kindhearted manager. “I’ll go in and tell them to go home.”

It was long after midnight then—8:00 a.m. for me; who knows what time for him?—but Richard got up before dessert was served and went to tell his workers to stop working.

The next morning, when I followed him to his home from home, I found, as he had warned me, that he really did have no office other than his head; his only workspace, as the Asian head of a booming American company, was a tiny desk jammed against a window, with a map of Tokyo posted to his wall and a laptop somewhere under a pile

of faxes from Coca-Cola Vietnam (transmitted, I couldn't help but notice, by AT&T Easy Link Services Australia, Ltd.).

I also couldn't help but notice, as an unbeliever, that most of the messages he received seemed to have to do with the difficulty of receiving messages—the state-of-the-art communications facilities seemed to be adept at communicating communications mishaps. “Resend” reverberated around the office, and “abort.” “Your call is being diverted,” said his phone; “Your call is being transferred.”

“Can you print out my itinerary?” Richard called out to a secretary, and when it came juddering out, I counted 139 border crossings in the previous year alone.

“I don't know how you keep up with all this.”

“Nor do I,” he said cheerfully. “Last week I went to the airport to fly around the world, and simply changed my mind and came back home instead.”

“Sharon must have been surprised.”

“She was shocked.”

Richard had had to petition for special dispensation from the Foreign Office, he told me, to carry two passports simultaneously—he went through their pages so quickly; his money was deposited in some offshore account in Jersey, and he paid taxes everywhere and nowhere.

“You can call me in Hong Kong,” he said, showing me his Global Access number, and speed-dialing his secretary to fix up a breakfast appointment with his wife, “and get me in eighteen different countries.” When he got onto his dollar account in Hong Kong, though, and the thirteen countries where he'd be in the next thirteen days, I began to feel a little seasick.

To anyone who hadn't known him for thirty years, I thought, to anyone who hadn't seen him with his family, or read his warm and funny letters, Richard could seem like a creature out of science fiction; yet I kept thinking of the two portraits in his mother's house of ancestors who'd served as governor-generals in India. On the other

Richard
his
4 weeks
5/12/2000

side, his grandfather had been Dean of Durham Cathedral, and his father a knighted civil servant who'd devoted all his extraordinary talents to Queen and country. Here, again, the same pattern as in the city all around us—service to the Church of England, and then Her Majesty's Treasury, turning into a roaming job for an American consultancy whose international clients just happened to be everywhere (“ex-patriots,” as the Freudian misspelling had it).

Richard and I had lived in the same house at school (and when his parents had moved to Washington, we'd been the only students in the school returning for holidays to America); we'd been to the same university, in the standard English way, and when I'd gone across the Atlantic for graduate school, Richard had suddenly shown up in the same university two years later. Sometimes I felt that our main formal ties were global ones, and our destinies twinned as those of actual neighbors might have been once upon a time (I went to Japan, and Richard showed up as the head of his Tokyo office): it was as if we were riding parallel horses on some cross-cultural merry-go-round, always about to meet up at the next departure lounge.

“It's funny,” he was saying now, giving me his access number in Kazakhstan. “I've just closed five bank accounts and I've still got six more. We don't live in a normal world.”

A little later, I would hear the same line delivered in almost exactly the same context by the Saint, in the ludicrous movie of the same name (“I don't have a name, I don't have a home,” the postmodern hero mumbles as he switches from an Australian to a Russian to a South African and then to a Southern self in the film's opening scenes). Before I could respond, though, Richard was off to Singapore.

Outside, as the lunch hour approached, the whole amped-up, fast-forward, quick-cutting music video of a city seemed to be going into overdrive, and I felt myself all but overwhelmed by the press and

push of bodies, signs, beepings as I threaded my way through crowds ten times denser than in jam-packed Tokyo. I climbed a flight of stairs to a central walkway, linking tower block to tower block, and walked along a pedestrian bridge leading to a mall in which a moving staircase transported me to another walkway, and then down a ramp into another overpass, with people streaming everywhere in all directions all at once, out of Kodak Express, into Maxim's Express, through a While-U-Wait color photo stall, into a place that sold *Time Express* (my employer turned into a monthly in Chinese).

Sometimes, in this Universe Express, I felt like a digit spinning round in some calculator, a unit clicking over amidst a whirl of bar codes, area codes, and tracking numbers. Asked to identify myself, I'd press in my PIN number, or my password, key in my fourteen-digit World Phone number, or the sixteen digits of my Visa card: "What is the city over the mountains / Cracks and reforms / and bursts in the violet air / Falling towns / Jerusalem Athens Amsterdam / Vienna London / Unreal." I could be in Toronto, in Wellington, in Sydney; I could be at home.

This sense of abstraction, of moving through a city of ideas and images where the faces faded into the background and the people became units in some higher (and unseen) equation, was intensified by the allegorical nature of its names. The Chinese like to name their buildings after sturdy Confucian ideals, and when these are translated into English, they give main streets, often, the feel of a modern pilgrim's progress, as one walks past the Sincere Insurance Building and the Efficient Building, with buses that say DOUBLE HAPPINESS and PROSPEROUS HOLIDAYS on the side, streaming past Filipinas and their grinning Englishmen, taking out their Happy Meals. On the same block, the Wesley Hotel, with the Methodist Book Store attached; down the little alleyway next to it, the Lofty Virtues Publication Centre.

Even the certificate in the elevator I entered was signed by one Yu-Wing Law, whose signature looked like "U.U. Law."

In order to steady myself in the midst of such impersonalities, I stopped off in a mall and put through a call to a cousin who'd recently moved here with her family. They too, like so many now, were half-inadvertent internationalists, the husband living for years at a time on ships, my cousin recently moved from Sharja, in the Gulf States. Her parents were currently in Zimbabwe, having moved down from Nigeria. From her window, she said, she could watch the ships sailing across the world, carrying bodies to every continent; her own daughter had spent each of her six birthdays in a different country.

As I waited for the elevator up to their apartment, I caught sight of a bulletin board by the parking lot.

"I am a Filipina maid with release paper, looking for a job. I worked with the same employer for four years. Be released due to financial problem."

And "I am hardworking and can tackle all the household chores like cleaning, washing, cooking and marketing, and can also take care of children."

There were notices of Ikea goods and Habitat side lamps—the mobile props of people moving on; one ad was soliciting a new home for some puppies. Most of the little scraps of paper, though, were handwritten messages strikingly similar to the ones in the Worldwide Building, and ending, nearly always, "Thank you for your kindness and consideration."

That night, with Richard away and Sharon in the office, I went down the street to Wanchai, the area where foreign Hong Kong relaxes after work. The savory old domain of Suzie Wong and her sisters had been radically refurbished for a multinational age, and most of its habitués now were not would-be artists sketching Hollywood backdrops, but traders used to foreign homes. The street gleamed with new establishments made for every kind of business: Joe Banana's, Carnegies, Big Apple, open all night, often, and spilling out blond

party girls and tie-loosened stockbrokers into the early hours; “pubs and discos” called Neptune and Strawberry, with sliding entrance fees posted outside their entrances (“Lady \$50; Guest \$100; Armed Forces \$100; Non-Member \$300”) so that the boys on bar stools could decide whom to let in and keep out, whom to call “Guest” and whom “Non-Member”; the more discreet and elegant nightclubs down the streets catering to a more punctilious kind of expense-account being, called Kitty Lounge and Club Cherry and with a large neon sign of a geisha above them (the Wall Street Bar was in Kyoto Plaza); and, most conspicuous of all, jammed into Lockhart Road between streets named after forgotten dignitaries—Fenwick and Fleming and Jaffe—gaudy little bars called New Makati, San Francisco, Waikiki, some of them with video monitors at their entrances so you could inspect the goods inside without pulling back the thick velvet curtains.

The dancers, on almost every stage, in skimpy bikinis and smiles, were Filipinas, and the deejays, very often, were American or Australian; the customers were in many cases Brits, murmuringly talking of Unilever in their suits; and the ones behind the cash register were nearly always Chinese. The global marketplace in mufti, practicing supply and demand as ever, though with need inflected differently than in the daylight hours; the age-old transaction—unchanged since Maugham or Kipling—whereby the Third World gets its own back on the First once the lights go down.

The next day, at lunch, I would hear the aftermath: “He came over here straight from Oxford, to work for Jardine’s, a bit wet behind the ears, father this classic cold-fish type who was a fellow of some Oxford college. She was thirty-five, a mother many times over, from the Philippines. He only wanted to be loved, of course. Never really had a girl before. Now they’ve got a child, so there’s more to be broken up if they do break up.”

Englishmen sipped thirty-dollar drinks in the Firehouse and spoke in the language of school again (travel always a shortcut for

moving back in time). “Get a look at those legs!” or “Even the wedding ring looks good on her.” A girl got up on tiptoes to wipe the lipstick off her customer’s mustache, so he could return intact to the missus. Another, pouting, turned her back on a man in a shabby jacket, who sat alone at the end of the bar, looking at her. Men in striped shirts and silk ties talked about closing prices and what might be a reasonable opening bid.

I didn’t have the heart for much more of this, and as the night wore on, I knew, the smiles would grow more plaintive, the ones that said, Be kind to me, please, and I’ll take good care of you bouncing against the ones that said, How ever did my need bring me here?

I’m sure the girls in thigh-high boots and G-strings were still circling lethargically to “You can ring my be-e-el, ring my bell . . .” when I woke up the following morning, in my hotel-room manqué, where Phil Donahue was discussing extramarital affairs on Channel 8 and another channel showed the building’s lobby. There were 282 British Airways flights to Europe, the morning paper told me, and article after article talked of “astronauts” and “parachute children” (in other words, Hong Kongers affluent enough to acquire second homes abroad). There is a putting green in Palm Springs Airport, the *Asian Wall Street Journal* told me, and a Massage Bar in Seattle. In Frankfurt Airport, you can go bowling or do your dry cleaning or see a porno movie. There is even a whole book—*Stranded at O’Hare*—that tells you where you can find a Russian-speaking nightclub between planes.

I went out into the fresh subtropical morning, and stopped off in the Pacific Coffee Company for breakfast. Like more and more of the service industries in the heart of Hong Kong, it was staffed by “white coolie” waiters from Britain and Australia who’d taken over the mental jobs in Hong Kong now that the lines of power were being redrawn. As white sons of Empire danced attention on

Chinese customers, I picked up a daily paper and read, "Being almost British is like being homeless" (next to a picture of a Chinese schoolboy in a British uniform); another paper featured ads for "Submissive Expat" and "Decent-Looking Chinaman."

It was such a vertiginous world here, sometimes, the American Restaurant serving Peking food, and Ruby Tuesday offering "authentic American food at genuine American prices." Whenever a new customer walked into the place, I never knew what kind of voice would come out of her—Roedean, or University of Michigan, or pure Kowloon—and she, of course, was no less in the dark with me, not knowing whether to expect South London or Silicon Valley or Calcutta. Cabbies in Hong Kong used walkie-talkies so that passengers' requests could be translated into Cantonese at HQ, and at the cinema, where I chose my seat by pressing my finger on a computerized hologram, Chinese-speaking Indians pointed me towards the auditorium. The Grupo de Teatro Macunaima, the paper informed me, was performing *Little Red Riding Hood* in "Gibberish."

"I begin to feel increasingly at home in big cities," Kazuo Ishiguro once told me when I asked him if he felt himself a foreigner everywhere. "Perhaps because big cities have become the place where people of different backgrounds tend to congregate." I think I know what he meant, though he, of course, is 100 percent Japanese, just as I, who'd seldom been in India, was 100 percent Indian.

Almost everyone who lives in Hong Kong—6 million of its 6.2 million people—is 100 percent Chinese, and yet, I realize, I have written all these words without very much acknowledging that Hong Kong is a Chinese place. To this day, many local businessmen pay more than \$1 million for auspicious license plates, and even the managing director of Cathay Pacific moved his office four floors because of a geomancer's warning. In one temple alone in Hong Kong, there are 12,500 Buddhas, and on the streets of Kowloon

there are 350 jade vendors. Two-thirds of the land in Hong Kong is parkland, and much of it is a bird-watcher's paradise.

And yet the fact remains that a foreigner can spend days—the better part of years—in Hong Kong and hardly take this in. If you fly Connoisseur Class, if you stay in a fifteen-thousand-dollar-a-month apartment like my friend's—if you're a Global Soul thrown this way and that by the global marketplace—you dwell in a kind of floating International Settlement where you never have to worry that 98 percent of the people around you can't understand a word you say. The word for foreigner in Hong Kong, *gwei-lo*, famously means "ghost"

'ghost' in floating world!

I notice, too, that I've written all this without really making mention of the fact that Hong Kong has passed back to the Chinese. When I returned to the city after the change of management, it was to find that its puckishness—its nose for turning everything to profit—hardly seemed dented at all. The new cathedral of "Long March Chic" was the store Shanghai Tang, right at the heart of Central, with its motto of "Merrily Opened by Chinese," and its photos, just past the Sikh doormen, of Margaret Thatcher and Prince Andrew kowtowing before its Hong Kong owner; the PRC sign I came across late one night in Causeway Bay was for a People's Republic of Chic store offering 50 percent discounts until midnight. Club 97 had just changed its name to Post 97, and, riding on the Mid-levels Escalator one day—the Hong Kong contraption that climbs all the way from downtown to the mountainous suburbs, through a series of twenty connecting moving sidewalks—I bumped into a Red Star Café, opened the day after the handover and bright with campy Mainland videos and mock-propaganda posters (HEY, GIVE ME A RED) amidst its "Revolutionary Chinese food."

An old schoolfriend's son was still going back to school in England on the "lollipop special"—soon to leave from what Norman Foster had called his "horizontal cathedral," a new airport as large as

Heathrow and JFK combined—and another cousin of mine had arrived here from Bombay, by way of Houston (and soon to be transferred to Cape Town). And at the luxury apartment complex in Repulse Bay where I waited to go up to a twenty-seventh-floor party, the sign said “MANY YEARS EXPERIENCED WORKING IN HONG KONG. I HAVE WORKED FOR ONE EMPLOYER FOR TEN YEARS.”

A few months before, the Black Watch (having played at a special banquet for sixty of our school's alumni nine hours before) had struck up the melancholy strains of “The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, Is Ended” as the HMS *Britannia* set sail for the final time. That same morning, the outgoing governor had taken the new British prime minister—in what sounded like a carefully diplomatic vote for the kind of future the British favored—on a tour of Pacific Place.

On one of my final afternoons in Hong Kong, I drove out to the farthest edge of the New Territories, not far from the Chinese border, to see how the Vietnamese boat people were faring. There were very few left here now—a far cry from the days when sixty thousand had been here, and twenty thousand had been kept in virtual cages, awaiting screening at the Whitehead Detention Centre—but what that also meant was that those who remained were the “hard cases,” in the apt phrase of the UNHCR official who briefed me. “Someone once said you never notice the rock when there's a flood,” he said. “But when the water passes, you see the rocks below.”

The rocks, in this case, were mostly drug addicts or convicted criminals who, as official undesirables, were not claimed by third countries, and not welcomed back by Vietnam. They lived now in long rows of numbered two-story blocks, out at the end of a long expressway, in a scrubland of lychee trees and tall housing blocks where Hong Kongers from villages and boats had been resettled. As my UN escorts carefully pointed out, their “open camp” was scarcely any different from the “temporary housing” of many of the local

people, and many of the refugees, though not officially assimilated into Hong Kong, had regular jobs, especially in the construction industry, and especially helping to build the new airport nearby. Some of them even made a living by selling their refugee passes to real citizens, hungry for “refugee benefits.”

The camp was by no means squalid. Because of the age-old racial differences that all the bureaucracy in the world could not paper over, it was divided into two areas, one containing Vietnamese refugees and the other “nonnationals,” which is to say ethnic Chinese from Vietnam who had been more or less pushed out by the Vietnamese government. Tall fences separated the two areas of blue shacks. But on both sides of the barrier there were cheerful school-room doors, brightly painted over with Santa Clauses and dancing bunnies and happy tigers, and when a Vietnamese interpreter led me round, he took pains to point out a piano room, friendly with Seven Dwarfs and Hello Kitty details, and even a computer room. Couches had been put out in the dust between the barracks, to make the place feel like home, and residents had even set up noodle shops and impromptu cafés. One woman had put up a table outside her small room where she sold pomelo and sugarcane and caramel corn, and outside nearly every room was a rusty washing machine with modern clothing (Santa Barbara Polo and Racquet Club) fluttering nearby.

“We used to have a lot of violence,” the Durable Solutions officer from India who was showing me around said. “Even murders. It was sad: children were being used by their own parents as couriers—for drugs. But now we've installed the Gurkhas, things have been much better.” A nice imperial irony: the Nepali hill tribesmen who'd so long been a fiercely loyal part of the British army, based in Hong Kong, were now working as private agents for Jardine's Securicor; they waved at us as we passed, their small blue security kiosk covered with a huge poster of Princess Diana and her sons.

As everywhere in the colony, there were signs all over reading POISONOUS RAT BAIT, but there were also signs, in Vietnamese and

English, saying THE FUTURE IS IN YOUR HAND. The UN was eager now, I was told, to instill in the refugees a sense of self-sufficiency—not, in short, to look after them too much—but there was still a bright clinic run by Médécins sans Frontières and staffed by friendly Filipinos and young locals. “Our hope,” an official told me, “is that soon the children will be reciting classical Chinese poetry.”

The only trouble was that there was no end in sight to the problem of the refugees’ official identity. Some had had the chance to leave a few years earlier, but, gambling that they could get on better here, had chosen to stay on, only to find the doors close behind them. A few women had married out of the prison of the detention center, only to find themselves living with junkies or hardened criminals. Even schoolchildren in Hong Kong had protested the presence of Vietnamese kids in their classes, feeling that the British were slamming the door on refugees from China while letting in those from Vietnam.

Yet the biggest problem of all was simply—insolubly—money. Though the first wave of boat people, in 1979, had generally been fleeing war and uncertainty at home, the second large wave, around 1990, had not been fleeing Vietnam so much as seeking out affluent Hong Kong. Ironically, they were coming only because of relaxed travel restrictions and greater freedom at home. And when word got round that the UN was paying \$360 resettlement allowances to every refugee who agreed to go back to Vietnam, more people came here in order to be paid to go back home. The \$360 they could get for being professional exiles was higher than a whole year’s salary.

The UNHCR, formed as a temporary agency in 1951 to deal with the refugee emergency in Europe at the end of the war, had received mandate after mandate to keep going. It now had offices in 115 countries, and the number of refugees, just 2.5 million in 1970, was up to 27.4 million, having doubled in just the past eight years. Refugees, a UNHCR official told *Time*, “are one of the growth industries of the ‘90s.”

The woman selling pomelo smiled sweetly at us as we inspected her goods, syrupy Vietnamese music floating out of the shacks and, here and there, used needles on the ground around us. She’d been here for eight years, she said through Tom, the Vietnamese interpreter who’d chosen to come back from Canada to work with refugees, and she was very much happier than in Whitehead (where people had lived four or five to a bunk, and behind five or six security posts, with nothing to separate them from the next family). But she was still a resident of limbo.

“I am wondering when I can leave Hong Kong,” she said, searching out my eyes. “My mother is very old. My girl is sick all the time—ever since the screening center she has headaches.” She looked at me with hopefulness. “My husband has relations in San Francisco.”

My handlers, at this point, tried, understandably, to cut the discussion short, but, before they could do so, the woman wanted to ask a question. Where did I come from? England, I said.

“England is fine,” she said, looking up at me expectantly.

Back in my room, I picked up the book I had been carrying round with me, *L’Enracinement* (translated as *The Need for Roots*), by Simone Weil. For most of her thirty-four years, the French Jewish Catholic had taken pains to live no better than the peasants and factory workers around her, and so, during the war, while in England, she had been asked by General de Gaulle to write a report on the possibilities and responsibilities of the French after they were liberated. Anticipating the death of certain fixities, she had written, “No human being should be deprived of his metaxu, that is to say, of those relative and mixed blessings (home, country, tradition, cultures, etc.) which warm and nourish the soul and without which, short of sainthood, a human life is not possible.”

Such issues, inevitably, were on many minds after the Chinese handover. “What are the values we stand for? And what is the social

where is this? (10/20/90?)
 fabric that ties us together?" the new chief executive of the Special Administrative Region, Tung Chee-hwa, had asked aloud at the Asia Society. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which I reencountered several times in the UNHCR literature, said, simply, "Everyone has a right to a nationality."

Richard and Sharon, I knew, were solid and inwardly rooted enough to live with any change; now, in any case, they live in London, with a son, as firmly grounded as anyone I know. But what of the others who don't have their gift for adapting, the ones I knew who called their own answering machines several times a day, to be greeted by their own voices, or were crowding in, even now, to Jolly Air Cargo and the Pansy House and San Tropez to send remittances back to Manila? I thought of the friend who'd called me up once to say, "Yesterday I was driving towards the Hollywood sign, and I had a cell phone in one hand and a laptop in the other. And I thought, What am I doing? Who is this? It's not even like I had anything to say."

LA That same friend had once flown so many miles that he'd won the ultimate frequent flier award—thirty days of unlimited flying around the globe—and had told me of a dream he'd had under jet lag which was "not a 'Where am I?' dream, which you'd expect, but a 'Who am I?' dream. I couldn't remember who I was."

It was no surprise to me that nowadays he was spending much of his time (as I was, too) on retreat in a monastery.

My last day in Hong Kong, I celebrated my birthday together with Richard (born on the same day of the same year—my global twin), as we had done almost every year for a quarter of a century, in small tea shops in Berkshire, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the Oxford Motel in San Francisco. Now we went to one of the restaurants in the four-hundred-dollar-a-night hotel next door, to find the largest transoceanic buffet I'd ever seen, while Richard's clients in Indonesia called on the cell phone and his wife disappeared to check on the man who was checking on the hard drive.

"I really don't need to exist in real time or real place at all," my friend concluded, putting the phone away. "Probably the strangest thing is when I'm sitting right here, and Sharon's over there"—he pointed to a chair across the table—"and I leave a message for her by calling her voice mail in Boston."

"Because you can be more specific?"

"Yes. And she can listen to the message repeatedly, and take down a lot of concrete information."

A little later, I had to get up to go to Bombay, where a cousin of mine was getting married.

"You know where you can find me," Richard said.

"I do. I can call you up from anywhere."

"Eighteen countries," he reminded me. Just in case, though, he gave me his number in Tokyo and his office number in Tokyo. He gave me his fax number "at home," his fax number "at the office" and his home and office numbers in Hong Kong. He gave me his fax number in both places, an 800 number for his voice mail, his mobile number, his mother's fax number, his office fax number in London, and his E-mail address. He even gave me a toll-free number for calling his voice mail from Japan.

Somehow, that left no room in my address book for his name.

lost self / lost roots!
 a mistake