

Southbound Truck

A cold wind blew the cigarette embers through the cracked-open window, the red sparks flying briefly upward before winking out. The cigarette had burned down nearly to the filter, turning the two fingers that held it red, starting to sear the callused skin. Fai took another drag before casually flicking the butt through the narrow opening. The cigarette and a trail of sparks arced through the air, landing a short distance away in one of the dirty puddles along the roadside.

The bright blue sky had turned slowly to black, but no stars were out. Night was gradually obscuring the long, straight road as he depressed the clutch and started the engine. He shifted gears, rolled up the window. The motor hummed, vibrating the objects on the dashboard. With the wind shut out, the cab slowly began to warm up. He blew into the palms of his chapped hands, moistening them slightly, then drew on a pair of gloves. He rubbed the jade good luck pendant hanging from the rearview mirror, adjusted his seatback, gripped the steering wheel, and steered the truck onto the road.

He wasn't taking the highway this time; he was on a back road. The lights along this road were dim, just the area in his truck's headlights clearly illuminated, the slight reflection from the worn route markings on the asphalt road pointing the way. Chimneys gradually came into view, outlined against the faint glow in night's far-off depths, the dense smoke pouring out of them barely visible.

The truck rolled along, the roadside lights receding into the distance. Feeling a bit sleepy, he pulled a cigarette from the pack of Double Happiness smokes in his breast pocket, stuck it between his lips, then held the lighter to its tip. He took a deep pull. Switching on the CD player, he chose a playlist to match the sour bite of the tobacco.

Taking back roads meant no tolls, no checkpoints, few people or vehicles. Policing was more relaxed. If the order wasn't urgent, there was no real need to take the highway. But if you took the back roads and weren't at a rest stop, you didn't get out of your truck, no matter what. If you saw a dead body or someone hurt, you pretended you didn't. That's what Tak had told him in Dongguan, at the Little Hong Kong bar.

Right after he'd said that, Tak had pulled up his sleeveless T-shirt and showed him a raised scar, covered by a tattoo.

“Someone steal your kidneys?” Fai joked. In those days, he’d only just figured out when to crack a joke, to make light of something in conversations with Tak.

“Jackass! Would I still be alive to talk about it?” Tak laughed as he pulled his shirt back down. Then he punched Fai in the arm and took a pull on his cigarette.

“Your liver, then.” Fai gestured with his own cigarette at Tak’s belly.

Tak grinned and turned Fai’s comment into a dirty joke, ashing his cigarette with a couple of taps. Fai grinned too as he took the joke several steps farther.

“That day I saw a man who’d collapsed next to the highway. A woman was there, crouched down next to him. I got out of the truck, and went over to take a look. Had no idea that once I got close, the guy was gonna stand up and pull a knife on me. I gave them all the stuff I had in the truck that was worth anything—phone, cigarettes, loose change, watch. They took it and turned to go. Then you know what happened?

Fai took a sip of his drink and gave the customary shake of the head, his eyes on the ice in his glass.

“Then the woman asks him, is he gonna remember us? And the guy turns around and stabs me.” Tak took a deep pull on his Chunghwa cigarette. “The knife didn’t go in all that deep. That woman sure had pretty eyes, though.”

Someone came up to Tak after that and wanted him to dance, so he went over in front of the big screen TV, his arm around a nicely padded woman with a big chest. The EDM version of “A Potion to Forget Love” was playing at a volume that grated on the ears. Tak’s leather belt was as usual too loose, so he had to hitch up his trousers from time to time while he was dancing. The colorful lights caught and held the eye, throwing reflections over the woman’s white, form-hugging dress. Tak’s hands moved in slow motion. The woman looked a bit tired. If they went on dancing, her expression would probably slip, revealing her disgust.

Fai had just joined Tak’s fleet of drivers back then. They were in Dongguan, hauling electronic goods. It was short distance with plenty of volume, the fleet had a good relationship with the people at customs, plus everyone said the truckers in this group stuck together. They didn’t just play fair when it came to dividing up the orders, they also had your back. Ten years before, a Teochew gang said one of Tak’s drivers had smashed up their truck. A fight broke out. Tak still talked a lot about this incident, said he’d been

fighting one against two and then laughed about the Teochew always being the “sick man of East Asia”.

Fai had sat there alone, watching the shadowy forms of the people in the bar, drinking, eating peanuts, smoking, reading the words on a metal cigarette case.

The road in front of him was hazy now. A light fog had rolled in as night fell. He turned on his fog lights, the double beams penetrating the damp, heavy air. Vehicles occasionally swept past him in the other lane, creating a loud whoosh from the impact of the wind. He croaked along with the CD as the singer’s voice rippled up and down like water.

Tak had been right, but he’d forgotten that it wasn’t just the back roads. Dongguan was also a place you shouldn’t stop and hang around in. This or that would end up getting you stuck there, and getting yourself out of the trap was no easy task.

For a while Tak had been seeing a woman called Bing. Their relationship had been pretty hot and heavy. One time she got drunk and said she wanted to go to Hong Kong. He hid her in the sleeping berth behind his cab’s seats, took her through customs, then after a few days smuggled her back to Dongguan. Back then there wasn’t any free movement over the border, so there was no easy way of going to Hong Kong if you didn’t have family there. Later, Bing cheated on him. Tak took a meat cleaver and went looking for the guy, who happened to be a mainland cop. The moment the other guy saw Tak’s cleaver, he pulled a Black Star automatic, and shot him dead. Afterwards one of the guys went to identify the body and noticed a chunk of Tak’s skull was missing. Those Black Stars are really something, the guy said, then immediately realized his blunder.

Fai and his wife went to Tak’s funeral.

Inside the funeral hall, he saw Tak’s memorial portrait. His teeth, stained yellow by cigarette smoke in real life, were an unnatural white in the photo. He and his wife bowed to Tak’s portrait, then went up to Tak’s wife to offer their condolences. Fai had never seen even a photo of her. Like other guys, Tak seldom talked about his family. As Fai got closer, he realized she looked a little bit like Bing, especially her eyes. Tak’s extramarital affair had evidently been a sort of trip down memory lane.

“I’m Fai, one of Tak’s drivers,” he told her.

“Is that so?” The left side of Fai’s face caught fire.

Tak's kids pulled their mother away. Fai's wife stroked his reddened cheek.

"Does it hurt?" Fai's wife asked.

Fai gently pushed her hand away.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said quietly.

They sat for a while, then left. At the door he saw two kids throwing gold and silver joss paper into a small furnace for burning offerings to the dead. The firelight had turned their faces rosy red. As they passed by, he paused to throw a pack of Chunghwa cigarettes into the flames. He'd bought a soft pack, and the bright red packaging immediately shriveled and turned black. Watching the flames, Fai said "Happy trails"; his wife said something too, her eyes luminous in the light from the fire.

It was a hot summer evening. After they left the funeral home, he drove them home in their newly purchased second-hand car. He looked at his wife. Tears glistened in her eyes. Her head was at an angle, tilted slightly away from him.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

She shook her head. The lights flashing by outside the window reflected in her eyes.

"Can't you look for work in Hong Kong again?" she asked after several moments had passed.

Fai leaned back. The air conditioning hadn't been on long, and the car's interior was still stifling hot. The bamboo seat pad felt warm on his back, too.

"There aren't any jobs," Fai said.

His wife was silent again for a time, then said, "Didn't you say your friend drives a bus in Hong Kong?"

"Don't worry, I'm not going to do what Tak did."

"I didn't say that."

"Then what are you afraid of?" His patience was running thin.

The car's interior gradually chilled.

"A bus license means passing an exam, I told you that." He felt his tone had been too harsh the moment the words were out of his mouth. "Even if I passed it, I'll be retiring soon."

"Let's talk about it later. You're worn out today," she said.

Sometimes she preferred him to get mad so they could have a fight, but he pushed the anger down, letting his insecurity and sadness show. She couldn't bear to scold him, so she reined in all the words that wanted to come spewing out.

He didn't say anything else, focused on driving. His once callused heart had grown more sensitive at some point, but he still couldn't find words to express his feelings – a jumble of things that defied categorization. His eyes were starting to water a bit. He stuck his hand into his breast pocket but took it back out with nothing in it. He had said he wouldn't smoke in this car.

She reached over and pulled a cigarette from the pack in his pocket, put it in his mouth, and lit it. The cigarette clamped between his lips, he rolled down the window. The hot wind streamed in.

The lights along the road bled into each other as the truck sped south. He thought of the sudden, scorching pain in his cheek the day of the funeral. Later, people told him she'd slapped several of the guys who went to pay their respects.

The town's bright lights lay ahead of him. Pass through them, and he'd soon be in Shenzhen.

The Little Hong Kong bar was in this town. Not long after it opened, several second- and third-tier display screen factories had also opened nearby, and the whole area was suddenly booming. He drove through the town. All the bars and dance halls along this road had either closed down or were in a state of disrepair. The people who had initially flocked to the town, all those men and women, were nowhere to be seen. The neon lights were as bright as ever, although a building here and there was dark or had a couple of tubes out.

His heart twisted for a quiet beat, and he slowed down a bit. Quite a few of the buildings along the road were only half finished. Up ahead was a giant black shadow. He'd heard people say it would have been the biggest shopping mall in town if they had finished it. Rumor had it that when the owner saw no one was renting any of the stores in a neighboring mall, he immediately cut and ran with the money, all the way to Thailand. Fai had been talking with a guy from Taiwan once. The two of them were having a drink together at the Little Hong Kong, and the Taiwanese guy had told Fai that Dongguan wasn't going to make it. Labor was too expensive.

“How do you figure that?” Fai had asked.

“Go to Vietnam. Vietnamese women are pretty,” the Taiwanese guy said with a grin. Fai forced a chuckle.

Fai hadn’t believed the good times would last forever, but he also hadn’t believed the town would go downhill so fast. Factories had gone up, turning rural villages into a bustling town. Then the factories were vacated, and the noisy crowds were a thing of the past.

Before long, he was in the town’s outskirts, where there was a small, brightly lit store on the ground floor of a compact building turned a grimy black by industrial emissions. Next to the store was a large parking lot. He had often parked here in the past, always going into the store to buy something before picking up the truck – cigarettes, mineral water, things like that. He also bought a sausage for the dog at the entrance.

One time, he’d just put a hundred RMB bill on the counter to pay for his stuff when a woman got in line behind him. She was fishing around in her wallet for coins, something tucked under one arm. He looked at her face, without a trace of makeup on it, and figured she probably worked at one of the display screen factories. He told the clerk he didn’t need change, then looked at the young woman behind him, indicating he’d pay for her stuff, too.

At the time, Hong Kong truck drivers already had a bad reputation. People said they never spoke a true word, would cheat you and then disappear. Dongguan factory workers were making a decent wage by then, and no one was going to take a bunch of old men seriously.

As he was leaving the store, she called out to him.

They chatted there in front of the entrance, the dog asleep between them.

“Do you get tired driving at night?” she asked.

“I’m used to it,” he said. “It’s late. You don’t want to head back?”

“I was assigned a roommate from a different province. We don’t get along, so I came out for some air.”

“Yeah, you gotta speak the same language to get along,” he said. “You from Guangdong?”

“Have you ever heard of Shaoguan?”

"I've heard of it, but I've never been there."

"What do they speak where you're from?"

"Hakka."

"I understand a little bit of Hailufeng Hakka."

"Ours is different."

He fished the sausage out of his pocket, threw away the wrapping, tore off half, and put it in front of the dog. The dog went right on sleeping, ignoring it. She asked him for the other half and waved it in front of the dog's nose. The dog, still half asleep, ate it. She held up the first half, and the dog ate that too.

"I have to go soon." He crouched down and patted the dog's head.

"Want to exchange contact info?" she said.

He fished a pen out of his breast pocket and tore two pieces of stiff paperboard from his pack of cigarettes. They each wrote down and confirmed their information, then said goodbye. She held out his pen, he took it, and they said goodbye again.

He received a letter from her first. Afraid she wouldn't understand traditional characters, he made a special trip to the book store for a simplified-character dictionary. While there, he picked up a book of poetry quotations, too.

He sent her several postcards; they all had scenes of Hong Kong's most famous tourist attractions on them. Some were places he never went.

During this period, he would meet up with her every time he passed through the little town. On holidays, he would rent a car to take her somewhere fun and they'd stay for a day or two.

A short while later, he told her they needed to talk about some things and arranged to meet her at a restaurant.

He handed her a Nokia phone and said it would make it easier to communicate, but she handed it back to him.

"I don't want my coworkers to see it," she said.

"What's the problem if they do?" he asked.

"People will say stuff behind my back."

"But aren't we together?"

"Yes."

"I'll hang on to the phone. If you decide you want it and it's too old a model, I'll buy you a new one," he said, and put it back in his pocket.

"This is for you." She pulled a jade good luck pendant out of her pocket.

"Thank you." He took it and looked at it.

"It's floating flower jade. I asked my sister to buy it when she was in Yunnan."

"It's nice. I'll hang it on my rearview mirror, to keep me safe."

That day he held her hand as they walked back to her dormitory. Summer or winter, her hands always felt rough. Her rough skin made him think of the metal wire melted by a soldering iron.

Back in Hong Kong again, he kept thinking about that conversation, wondering why she hadn't taken the phone. He meant to ask for a clearer answer in a letter but didn't know how to put his question. She was different from the other women he'd been involved with. Her heart seemed to hint at things, only half of which could be understood, like listening to Hakka.

Later, Tak broke it down for him. "If she takes the phone, people will think she's after your money," he told him. "If she gets letters, people will think she's found herself a guy who's interested in a serious commitment." Tak clapped Fai on the shoulder, chiding him for being all kinds of idiot before he went on. "What you're calling 'together' and what she's calling 'together' are two different things, understand? You mean she's your girlfriend. What she wants, though, is a place, an identity. She's twenty-five. In the rural areas, everyone's married by eighteen. You know that."

The truck picked up speed, its exhaust expelling warm, toxic fumes as he left behind the town fallen on hard times. His wife had later told him she'd heard there was a guy who fed the dog at the store entrance, so she went there sometimes to try her luck. Fai said he'd be sure to thank the dog by buying him even better stuff to eat, but then the dog had disappeared, and he didn't feel he could ask the store owner about it.

His wife had started losing weight after coming to Hong Kong, her face hollowing out as she sat at the window all day, day after day, looking at the mountain behind their block of flats. He didn't know why she was so sad.

They lived in a tiny flat. But even though it was just three hundred or so square feet, he spent a substantial sum decorating it. He had a dressing table custom made for her in

Guangzhou, and went to Jiangmen to custom order a rattan chair, but his wife had never used either of them.

Their flat faced the mountain, where a strong wind sometimes rippled the trees like waves.

One day he came home to find the dishes unwashed and a single, dim light on. His wife was sitting in front of the window, looking at the mountain. The lamplight turned her face sallow.

"I'm back," he said.

She nodded. Wind blew in through the window, carrying hot, muggy air and night's silence. In the past, he'd look at the bed when he got home, searching for any telltale signs. For a while she had gone to church and been taking Cantonese lessons. He was afraid she'd meet someone. But later, he no longer looked at the bed. She didn't go to church, and he found himself wishing she would go out a bit more.

"I'm going to take a shower."

She seemed to have lost the faculty of speech. He turned on the overhead light and was met only with her wan face. She was wearing a baggy, wrinkled sweatshirt and a pair of too loose trackpants, two weak, skinny legs sticking out of them. He'd heard of mental illnesses, but wondered if medicine could really cure something like that. He doubted it.

He looked at the window, ran his fingers over the screws in the window grille.

"I found a job in Hong Kong, as a taxi driver." He said this as if it were something he'd thought over carefully beforehand.

He pulled off his shirt and sat on the edge of the bed. He felt a slight warmth as she pressed herself against his back, felt the sharp angles of her breastbone beneath a thin layer of cloth.

"You don't mind my dirt?" he asked?

"Go shower," she said.

He took her hand and stroked it. It was no longer rough, the skin now seeming brand new, but he still thought of solder-reddened skin and that unpleasant odor.

He could feel her tears on his shoulder. She was shaking, and he knew that even if he was working in Hong Kong again, she still wouldn't be happy.

This might well be the last time he drove this route. Next week he planned to sell the truck and make the switch to driving a taxi. The truck was old. He'd get only a couple hundred thousand Hong Kong dollars for it.

He had a heavy load today, maybe even an overload, so the truck was heavier than usual. Even so, he had to maintain speed while turning, or the cops would get suspicious.

As a taxi driver, he could retire a bit later, work a few extra years. He'd heard people say a man gets old after he retires. Driving a taxi was a good job, he thought. A profession. But the taxi wouldn't be his. There wasn't all that much difference between paying rent for a vehicle and working part time for someone else.

The route he was driving seemed longer than usual, and he kept glancing in his rearview mirror.

Wanting to get to Shenzhen a bit faster, he sped up. The lights along the roadside whipped past, unspooling into a long, continuous line behind him. His playlist had ended and was starting a new loop.

Over time, his hands had worn the truck's steering wheel to a smooth, well-oiled sheen. He felt a twinge of nostalgia – for Tak, for those days of glorious freedom. But a person always had to stop somewhere. They couldn't keep going forever. Like Tak, having an affair at fifty-something then looking for revenge when his woman left him.

Fai remembered a night a few days before Tak's death, when the two of them were at the Little Hong Kong. Dongguan had already seen a change by then, and the little town's factories were several months behind on paying out salaries.

Fai lifted his glass and looked at the light reflected in it.

"Bing and I split up," Tak said.

"Please accept my heartfelt condolences," Fai said with a grin. He hadn't realized at the time how invested Tak was in the relationship. Tak took a swig of brandy and put his glass down on the bartop. Ice sank and floated back to the surface of his drink while he watched a nineties-era music video playing on the big-screen TV. Back then the Little Hong Kong didn't have much in the way of women. Just a few who would flick half-hearted flirtatious glances at the customers. Tak's eyes filled with tears. Fai had never seen Tak sad,

much less seen him cry. Tak was smoking that day, taking deep drags on his cigarette so that the end glowed bright red. He was unusually silent that evening, his hair a mess.

The next day, Fai got the call telling him Tak had been shot and killed. Fai was silent after he received the news.

The fleet had disbanded after Tak's death, each of the drivers going their separate ways.

The number of vehicles on the road with him was increasing. He'd be in Shenzhen before long. Despite the late-night hour, the lights up ahead remained bright, silhouetting the edges of the clouds. The clouds drifted slowly from one end of the sky to the other.

He remembered that it had been Tak who had taken him this route the first time, talking nonstop the whole time about vehicle maintenance, the old days, rules of the road, routes, past relationships, exotic game meats, different ways to get past customs with smuggled goods – one topic sliding right into the next. Andy Lau and Jacky Cheung were Tak's favorite singers; he hummed the melody to "Kiss Goodbye" as he drove.

"How many women have you kissed goodbye?" They were a bit sleepy that night, and Fai was casting around for something to talk about.

"I forget." Tak grinned.

"Which one has been the hardest to forget?"

"The one at home, because she was my first love."

Fai thought he'd understood and hadn't asked him anything else, but thinking it over later, he realized Tak had homes – and a first love – in both Dongguan and Hong Kong.

As Tak drove into Shenzhen, the commercial buildings dwarfed his truck, making it appear insignificant. The urban villages of the past had all been razed and redeveloped.

He passed by a disco he used to go to, its huge sign, once so bright it hurt the eyes, now turned off. He'd heard the building was going to be turned into a highrise.

Fai hadn't gone to places like that since marrying his wife.

They'd tied the knot in Dongguan not long after they started dating, and held a small wedding banquet at an old restaurant in Houjie. People from both the trucking crew and factory came. He was the youngest driver in the crew, and once everyone was drunk, they started telling every kind of bawdy joke there was. Fortunately, every so often Tak would

thump the table, let out a string of profanities, and tap someone or other on the shoulder so that nobody went too far past the line.

They had their picture taken in front of his truck that night. The picture ended up being a bit blurry because the camera wasn't held steady; otherwise, she would have taken it with her to the interview for her one-way permit.

If he were to name a time he now remembered with fondness, it would be when they lived in Shenzhen after the wedding. The one-way permit hadn't been approved yet, and they had looked forward to that day with a certain eager anticipation. If he had it to do over, he wouldn't pay to speed up the permit process. He would stretch those days out a little longer.

He hadn't been home all that much while they lived in Shenzhen, either. They usually talked on the phone. When he got home, they would have a meal, then sit on the sofa and watch TV. He didn't have time to catch up on what was happening in the shows, so his wife would fill him in. But when it came to Louis Cha, everything was reversed. Once he started talking about the author's iconic *wuxia* novels, he didn't stop, and his wife would shush him, saying that if he said too much they weren't fun to read anymore.

At night, lying in bed, she would move a bit closer, and sometimes he couldn't tell if she wanted it, or it was just that she wanted him to be satisfied.

When Tak and the other guys found out about the wedding, they gave him a box of ED pills they said they'd bought at People's Hospital in Shenzhen. Tak had added that, needed or not, they were a good thing to have on hand. Fai had thought he wouldn't use them, but he had. She didn't seem to mind. Later, she even took the box to the pharmacy to get a refill for him.

One hot summer night, they turned on the air conditioner. Clean air that leached all desire from a person slowly filled the room. They were both exhausted and lying on the bed. He took out a red box, purchased in Hong Kong. He held it out, opened it. The small bedside lamp shone on a medium-sized diamond. He put the ring on her finger. She inspected the ring. He watched her face.

"If you think this style is too old-fashioned, we can exchange it. I kept the receipt," he said.

"It's not too old-fashioned. It's beautiful," she said. "Why give me this all of a sudden?"

"We're going to Hong Kong soon. A fresh start."

"You mean my permit is going to be approved?"

"We went through proper channels. They can't reject it."

She pulled the ring from her finger and returned it to the box, which she set on the bedside table.

He felt her hand under his shirt and put his hand over hers.

"I'm tired tonight," he said.

"You didn't take one?" she said.

"No."

They lay on the bed, not saying anything.

"Anything on your mind?" she asked.

"Not really," he said. "But are you sure you want to be with me?"

"You still have to ask?" She moved a bit closer as she spoke. "Could you come to Shaoguan with me? They want to have a wedding banquet. They talk about it every time I call.

"That means ten tables for the guests." He ran his hand down her spine.

"They need some financial security in their lives, too."

"Don't you send them money every month? We can give them a bit more if it's not enough."

"They didn't get any cash gifts for the wedding."

"I'll take care of it."

"Not too much. You have to take care of your parents too."

"It's no problem," he said. "But have they been good to you?"

"Not especially good, not especially bad."

The bus left Shenzhen, got on the highway, and headed towards Shaoguan. His wife was sound asleep, her head on his shoulder. He fell asleep too. They used to play Teresa Teng on buses. Nowadays, though, he couldn't understand any of the words in the pop songs. Asleep, he dreamed he had arrived in Shaoguan several times over already, but woke to see his wife still sound asleep next to him.

When they reached Shaoguan, they waited at a bus stop for a bus to her village.

It was a village in the remote countryside, already in decline for some time. Not many new houses.

That night, they had a wedding banquet in the open area in front of the village hall. Only the elderly and children still lived there, and even with people from the neighboring village, they didn't have enough guests to fill all ten tables.

They were tired and a bit drunk by the time they retired to their room. They lay down on a bed spread with a red quilt, made ready for them by her mother and father. Outside, her parents said something in Hakka.

"Nothing has changed," she said.

"How long has it been since you were back?" he asked.

"I've been back only a couple of times since I left."

"It's a long way, and a tiring trip."

The wedding banquet was over, but her father was still drinking and speaking in Hakka with someone outside their door.

"You know what? I really wanted to get out of here when I was young," she said.

"Now you have," he said.

The cicadas thrummed.

"When I was young, an Aid Education teacher came here from the city, from South China Normal University. At first we thought he was great, but then he told me and my best friend that if one of us took our clothes off, he'd take her to the city."

"Did you do it?"

"No, but later my friend went with him to Guangzhou. I don't know what she's doing now."

"How come I've never heard you talk about this before?"

"I'm remembering a lot of things, coming back here."

"It's in the past."

He patted her on the back, imagining another version of this story. He didn't ask her any more questions, and the voices speaking Hakka outside the door eventually faded. They slept.

The truck wasn't far from Hong Kong when it suddenly began to drizzle. The city's bright lights were ahead, each raindrop condensing the light and encapsulating the whole city. He turned on the windshield wipers. The tiny points of light were rubbed away.

Suddenly, there was red and blue light on his right.

He tried to think where the pack of Camels was. Tak had told him about the time he was stopped by mainland police while carrying smuggled goods. He'd grabbed a pack of Camels, the kind from Japan, and handed out a few cigarettes to each of the cops. Problem solved.

"Why not Huanghelou cigarettes?" Fai had asked.

"That's obvious! Everybody knows you're doing something shady. Giving them cigarettes shows you're friends. But cross a certain line, and it's a whole different story. Don't make things complicated. You can give them Liqun cigarettes, but you absolutely can't give them Huanghelous," Tak told him.

Fai had the pack of Camels out, but the police car kept going and didn't stop. He breathed a sigh of relief.

He opened the pack, took out a cigarette, and slotted it into his mouth. He took a gentle pull after lighting it, and exhaled. It had a clean flavor. Probably because of the cold weather, the smoke he breathed out was especially dense.

Fai inhaled and let out a long, slow breath. The CD player was repeating the same song, so he switched it off. The night was suddenly still. He hadn't finished his cigarette yet, and decided to savor it. He'd be at the border soon, then he'd drop off his cargo at the scrap yard in Kam Tin.

He rubbed the jade good luck pendant again and pressed down on the accelerator. Taking another pull on the cigarette, he rolled down the window and tossed out the butt. Reluctant to lose the pure, fragrant taste of tobacco that filled his mouth, he let it linger, unswallowed. A good way to give the cold, wet night some flavor.