

Moses Wong

Chapter 2 - The Ship of Hope Set Sailed

The moment we broke the paper ribbons tying the shipboard passengers with our dear folks and friends down at the dock, I knew my fate had been sealed and my future life chartered in a brand-new direction albeit undetermined. Our huge Ship maneuvered gingerly around Victoria Harbour and sailed eastward through the narrow Gate of Lay Yu and onto the edgeless ocean.

Recovering from the parting excitement and with a slight remorseful feeling of not able to see my family again soon, I collected myself and started to observe and absorb my surroundings. There were about 400 young persons on board mostly students going overseas to “elevate” their schooling. Almost one-third of them were girls. Everyone was wearing a beaming smile with highly spirited and energetic movements.

I began to assess my presence among other passengers and started to make friends who seemed to attract my attention most. Well, you guessed wrong – not the girls, because the majority of them were pretty stuck-up with eyes seemingly growing on their foreheads and behaved like royalties. They were hardly approachable.

We were divided into groups and ushered into our living quarters. “What a huge room”, I cried to myself. As a matter of fact most students bought the cheapest Third Class fare and were assigned to occupy the “Big Cargo Space” at the rear of the ship above the engine room (the constant rumbling noise from the engine had become our nightly lullaby !). There was one big Cargo Room for the boys and one for the girls. No cross-visiting was allowed. Within the room, hundreds of narrow beds were set up in rows from wall to wall. Each bed was assigned to be bunked by 2 persons.

I was “lucky” enough to sleep with an East Indian boy in a 6 and 9 configuration and God forbid, not in a 99 position. Every night I occasionally got to smell the foot of my Indian partner when his foot touched my nose. But I didn’t really care much because my mind was transfixed with something or on somewhere far beyond and more aloft than the current inconveniences and annoyances. I thought I was actually enjoying myself !

Dinner time came and we were ushered into the dining room with mixed companies. The food they served was very sumptuous and plentiful. It was the first time I tasted celery and strawberries in their freshest states. Without reservations I chomped down sticks and sticks of celery and other vegetables as if we were going to face a famine. Some girls giggled and pretended they didn’t notice me as if I was just released from a 2-year term of incarceration.

At the long tables I began to notice the girls more closely with much interest. Even as a handsome young man of 20, I did not get any glance or an occasional stare. Most of the Hong Kong girls were preoccupied with their own socializing and they did not seem to notice there were boys around, except one blond white girl.

Her name was Nancy and she happened to cast her glance in my direction with a piercing look and warm, welcoming smile. After dinner we finally exchanged conversations and I discovered she was an 18 year old American student returning to the States after visiting her relatives in Hong Kong. My English skill at that time was fluent enough to socialize and even flirt a little. We became shipboard buddies instantly from that moment on.

Nancy loved literature and arts and she was even a good painter and dancer. Me, I prided myself in expert dancing of the Cha Cha Cha. Soon we were partners in the shipboard parties and future dancing competitions. Every evening there were entertainment programs to keep the kids occupied but we were not allowed to venture beyond the Third Class section. We later learned that the front end of the ship was the First and Second Class sections where passengers enjoyed quality accommodations and services. But there was a barrier we were not allowed to cross. Well, who really cared ? We had our own world to spin.

As we approach the Sea of Japan we were to moor at Yokohama and spend a day ashore. The next morning we were ushered in groups for a sight-seeing tour of Japan. Nancy and I paired up and tried to distance ourselves from the group. On one of the stops we stayed around a shop far too long and became disengaged from the main group. It started one of the most unforgettable episodes of my life in a foreign country.

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