ON THE TRAIL

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WHEN I WAS WORKING IN CHINA, it seemed that everyone I needed to see was not where he was supposed to be. He was away, at the county seat, or at the provincial capital, or visiting relatives in a distant region. Or I couldn't find out where he was, exactly, but he certainly was not here, in this office or bureau or work unit I had travelled 1000 miles to reach. 'Here' was always past the edge of a town where stores sold nothing but tractors, motorcycles and spare parts for trucks – gleaming new manifolds, greasy axles and engine blocks, laid out in the swept dirt before a darkened showroom, beneath a red banner advertising Donfeng and First Automotive Works. Then I passed factories that seemed abandoned. And then subdivided collective farms cultivating crops I didn't recognise. And then a winding dirt road until, finally, I arrived.

And despite all my previous disappointments, the regularity with which I had failed to meet with any of those officials or politicians or civil servants I had set out to interview, my hopes would rise as I drove through the gate, past the indifferently manned guard house, to the parking lot in front of the ministry or bureau or people's hall. I remained optimistic as I climbed the three concrete steps to the unlit, dusty lobby and then waited a few moments at the reception desk. I stayed enthusiastic while the middle-aged man with the huge mug of tea, muddy with what looked like chewed tobacco, mulled my request and then shook his head because he didn't know if the official or civil servant or administrator or deputy director or under assistant or section leader or work-group subchief was in today. He would tell me where the office was – inevitably it would be on the 5th floor, and there was never an elevator. And I climbed, fulsome with aspiration, and I reached the door, stained wood with perhaps a few simple documents tacked to it outlining recent regulations and new ordinances and changes in the schedule and the announcement of a clean-up-the-city campaign and an end-littering drive, and then I knocked on the door. And I waited.

And he was not there.

And nobody knew when he would come back.

And no, under no circumstances, would they give me his mobile number.

Writing my book about the deadly new virus that would later be called SARS – tracking down through government officials the first patients afflicted by this mysterious disease – meant 100 of those trips, long voyages of hope that ended by crashing into closed office doors.

And then we would retire, my assistant and I, to a local restaurant, where we would order the local hotpot delicacy, some freshwater fish cooked with chillies, some rabbit stewed with scallions, some chicken knuckles mixed with hot peppers, and try to figure out how many *li* away was the county seat, the provincial headquarters, the big city offices. (A *li* is, technically, the distance a fully burdened imperial porter could travel in 24 hours; I don't know that anyone actually uses *li* as a measure of distance anymore, but I've always liked the sound of it and it works very well to express my exasperation at the great Chinese distances I always had to travel.) The food was always pleasantly surprising. The distances daunting. Six more hours in the back of a smoky hired car with the driver's cassette of that German song that goes 'Da da da' on autoreverse. Could he change it?

Yes, he said, but then I will fall asleep.

And so we let him play 'Da da da' all six hours, until we were at the county seat or provincial capital and then I would find out that the official, the deputy director, the workers collective boss, he was gone. And then another night in a local, even smokier hotel where I couldn't pick up a mobile phone network and the internet connection was a slow-speed dial-up that wouldn't let me read any sites that weren't in Chinese.

Is there a word for hopes that persist though we know they are certain to be dashed? It is with such totally unjustified optimism that we drive today to the village, at the end of a two-lane macadam road, past the shops selling spare truck parts and the women who have laid out a crop of some sort of red beans by the

side of the road to dry in the few hours of late autumn sun. We climb the concrete steps and query the informationless receptionist, and then ascend two more flights to the office of the deputy director of the local branch of a government agency dedicated, at least nominally, to fighting infectious disease.

We knock once and then walk into a narrow, sunny office with two tall windows facing south. On his desk is the tea mug, thick with its composting vegetative matter, an ashtray, a pack of Panda cigarettes and a plastic lamp with a calculator and paper calendar built into its base. And he is here! The sight of him, smoking his cigarettes, sipping his tea, poring over a medical-supply magazine, is as reassuring to me as finding a cheque in the mail from a magazine that has published a story of mine – unlikely yet still, despite everything, expected.

He is a squat man, with a short neck and a boxy, fleshy head so that if you had to render him very quickly you might start with a rectangle as his abdomen and then a smaller rectangle as the head, topped with a few quick pen strokes representing shocks of black hair combed at a 45-degree angle down and to his right. He appears well fed and has a sleepy air that could also, in a pinch, serve as a buffer to keep unwanted visitors from overstaying.

We bow. I explain myself and my project in terms that will in no way be perceived as politically controversial. This is dry, academic stuff, he should understand, of interest only to scientists, doctors, public health officials – very unlikely, in other words, to ever catch the attention of government officials in Beijing. Yet I need to appeal to him, to his vanity, to any lingering pretensions to serving the commonweal that have survived his decades in the Chinese civil service. His cooperating with me should be understood as a totally risk-free salve for whatever might still be troubling his conscience.

He listens in his somnambulant manner, once even closing his eyes for a few seconds, and then he rouses himself and offers me a cigarette. I have a fondness for Panda cigarettes – Deng Xiaoping's brand. They were traditionally available only to high Chinese

officials and a tin of them openly displayed on a bureaucrat's desk used to be an unsubtle display of connectedness – *guanxi*. The cigarettes can today be purchased in some duty-free shops and from the myriad tobacconists and cognac vendors lining the corridors connecting Hong Kong and Shenzhen in the south.

Those Pandas sold in the south, however, have a stale quality absent from the cigarettes I smoke in the presence of those officials I have met. Also, those Pandas sold on the market come in flat aqua tins while the officials always have big, round, red cans. The cigarettes from these cans, somehow, taste like illicit privilege; you know anyone smoking these cigarettes is someone or knows someone.

And now, sitting in this distant office, I know someone.

He opens his flip phone and reads out a mobile phone number.

'Is this the patient?'

'No,' he shakes his head, 'this is the neighbour of the patient. Or the patient's parents, anyway. They live in a godforsaken place, a trash heap practically. It has a name like Wasteville – no, that's not it. Waste Land? Garbage Town? Trash Village?'

It sounds like that. The man I am looking for, he has no phone. Nor do his parents. It isn't even a village, where they live. Just a collection of shacks, lean-tos. These people are not even native to this place which doesn't have a proper name, only a few words denoting that it was built around things other people don't want.

'This is the person you need to talk to,' the official explains. 'I have the number of the man who owns the land where all these people make their shelters. They are dirty people. Filthy.'

'Is he there? The patient?'

The official nods in a way that means maybe, maybe not.

And I know that means another 10 hours sitting in a car, driving through the Chinese night, looking for a place and a person who I hope will be there, but who I am sure will not.

I changed assistants a month or so ago. My first was a rough woman named Hu who dressed like a boy and seemed indifferent

to whether we succeeded in any of our intended visits. She walked with a rolling gait, like a cowboy, and she never carried a pen or notebook into any of our nonappointments. This shouldn't have bothered me. These were, after all, nonappointments. No one was ever there so there were no interviews so why should she have bothered to bring a pen or paper. But I felt it jinxed us, somehow, to not even maintain the pretence that our official, our deputy director, our little mandarin, might actually be here.

My luck was rotten, I concluded, so I needed to change it. And I hired this lovely little Sichuanese woman, Zhu, with pointy shoes, a narrow waist, wavy hair and big, round, brown eyes. And she was still excited enough about the idea of journalism, of working on a story, a book even, that she always carried a little dossier inside of which was a pen, a fake leather notebook and even a few extra pens.

And here she sits, leaning forward in her chair, her little notebook open before her, those big eyes beaming at this Panda-smoking official. His phone is flipped open, and Zhu asks in her sweet little voice, does he have any other phone numbers that might be helpful, other doctors, government officials, hospital directors, epidemiologists? He takes a drag on his cigarette, looks us both over, lingering for a while on Zhu's exposed calves, and then begins to read off the phone numbers he has saved in his mobile, his web of contacts and secret phone numbers.

We scribble furiously, at least two dozen phone numbers, names and titles, many of them names we have read in newspapers and World Health Organization reports. I don't know that Zhu understands what we are being given; part of her charm is that she takes for granted her access and ability to win confidence. I also try to take it in stride but I am overjoyed and can't help but feel that finally, all those journeys of 10,000 *li* have not been wasted.

We start with the very first number he has given us, the phone of the man who knows the man I want to see – the first patient, possibly the index case, the embodiment of emergence, at which the incident that I am writing about begins.

Another long drive, this one with a taxi driver who does, at one

point, fall asleep for a few seconds before alert Zhu nudges him awake from her seat beside him in the front. Every 100 kilometres or so, there are huge pyramid-shaped gas stations at the side of the road, little pennants drooping from nylon cords attached to the broad eaves. Sometimes, as in the West, convenience stores are attached, with their antifreeze and cans of motor oil and packs of cigarettes and cans of Pringles. (Pringles are everywhere in China. I don't know how or why, but there they are, on sale in myriad flavours next to baskets of live grub beetles and strands of dried roots and bound coils of copper wiring.) Finally, we pull into a parking lot, rent rooms at a hotel, and I crawl into a wood-framed mattress that smells of nicotine, in a cold room with a concrete floor that has an open drain in one corner. All night, I imagine that I am hearing insects crawl from the drain into my room. In the morning, when I wake up, there is a centipede halfway out of the drain, its antennae whirling in the frigid air. Before it can finish its reconnaissance, I bring the heel of my loafer down, making a wet crunching sound much like smashing a grape.

At breakfast, the driver sits at a separate table and slurps down a bowl of rice porridge between cigarettes as I drink green tea and eat Pringles from a can.

We drive another four hours and arrive, finally, at the bottom of a foothill covered with pale trees that look, from a distance, like stunted spruce trees. At first glance, this little mountain looks pleasingly sylvan, the high ground beside a slow-moving channel of greenish water. There are numerous trails of smoke rising from what I imagine are cooking fires, the hearths of the encampments of the hardy woodsmen living in this alpine hamlet. We call the number given by the official, and the information we receive is the usual vague information cloaked in what we take to be the standard suspicious misdirection. The man may be here, members of his family certainly are, somewhere. We may find them. We may not.

Now we have to find the man who knows the man. But he, alas, is now away. At a meeting. In another town. Many *li* away.

We do learn where we might find the first patient or at least his family. They are up the hill. Zhu and I start climbing a muddy, switchback trail, and very quickly I realise how mistaken I was about the bucolic nature of this little mountain. First of all, these trees aren't stunted but have been systematically denuded of any material that might serve as fuel. What I had taken to be a ground cover of foliage is actually a form of refuse I have never encountered, the discarded, broken-up plastic shells of old computers, televisions, fax machines, high-tech waste of familiar brand names, slightly burned, muddied and trod into the ground. I have never seen this sort of trash extruded and dumped in this manner, as if birds had defecated vast amounts of plastic guano.

At the first encampment, we see that what I had assumed to be cooking fires are actually smelting pots in which bright, liquefied metals shimmer like undulating tin foil. It is beautiful. It smells lethal. We ask a withered fellow sitting on a cement block and wearing sandals made from an old tyre for the man we have come to see. He does not know him. But he knows his clan. They are further up the hill, at another encampment. And we climb some more, the plastic casing cracking underfoot. Finally, near the top, where another pot simmers a liquid that is more dull and pewterish in colour than that which cooks down the hill, we find another scavenger who has bundled himself in a drab, olive parka as he sits on a bench made from what looks like the casing of an old, orange iMac computer. He does not greet us. Not knowing where to stand, and feeling out of place in my fancy loafers, blazer and pea coat, I pause for a moment by the fire and warm my hands until I inhale some of the fumes emanating from the cauldron. The poison makes me take a quick step back.

Zhu asks the man if he knows the patient for whom we are searching.

'Yes.'

'Is he here?'

'No.'

'Will he be back?'

'I don't know.'

'Does he have a mobile phone?'

'No.'

'Oh.'

Zhu tells him who I am, what I am doing, and I suggest that we will pay something for the man's time, if and when he ever returns.

We descend the foul mountain.

Over a dinner of some sort of ground poultry cooked in a stew with cabbage, I wonder whether I will ever gather what I need to write this book from a country so impenetrable and vast, where no one is ever where they ought to be, where appointments are rarely kept and phone calls never returned, where, when I am bivouacked in lonely towns like this, there is not a soul I know besides my assistant for 1000 miles. But I have already invested months seeking and interviewing those who could be located. My ego is linked to the completion of this book in a manner that makes me embarrassed to consider abandoning it. Books, I tell myself, are more the accumulated product of overcoming these moments of doubt and insecurity than they are the star bursts of inspiration.

Also, I have already spent a good portion of the publisher's advance.

The restaurant has rough plank walls festooned with fading beer posters. There is a woman seated behind a gouged wooden desk, which has soda and beer bottles lined up along one side and an abacus in the centre. Just as we are finishing our chicken and cabbage, three men in drab grey and olive clothing enter the restaurant. They recognise Zhu and before they can sit down at another table, she very quickly rushes to them and, it seems to me, forcefully guides them to our wobbly table. Ah, these are the men from the mountain! I recall them seated before their steel pots, melting down their salvaged precious metals. In the fluorescent light, their creased faces are sharply contrasting, narrow bands of white and shadow. I hurry to the girl at her desk and gather three

bottles of beer and three more glasses. Once the men have each downed a drink, I pour another round, and then another.

They are taciturn, bashful around Zhu and a foreigner, but also, as they drink, they become less reluctant to express their curiosity about why I am here, what I am doing. They remember the virus, of course, for they themselves have a close relative who has been stricken. But they are vague about where he is, this first patient, this fellow who had the virus before it even had a name. When he fell sick, one of the men explains, everyone just assumed he had caught one of the innumerable coughing diseases that burn through China in the winter.

As Zhu pours them more beer, and encourages them to order whatever they wish, they forget for stretches that I am even there. I slide my chair back to make myself less obtrusive, and look down at my pants, study my hands, fold them, wiggle my fingers. I never make eye contact with the men who are chatting eagerly with Zhu, peppering her with questions about Sichuan, about her village, about the sorts of dishes they prepare there, and then about Beijing, where she lives, and whether she misses her family and what her parents think of her living in the city. They assume she lives in a dormitory, with other women who have jobs like she has, and they say that if they were women then perhaps they would seek that sort of job, an office job, instead of tearing apart old computers, monitors, fax machines and printers and stripping their CPUs, circuit boards and disc drives of traces of aluminium, copper and gold. They are able to extract about five *jiáo* worth of metal from each CPU or circuit board, that's about a half-penny for each man. The work is dirty, and, the men worry, unhealthy. They have been told by a doctor who travelled up to see them that they are at risk of being poisoned by the fumes that rise as they burn off the precious copper and gold. It is mercury, they have been told, and it will kill them slowly. This doctor had offered to sell them medicine but the men found it too expensive.

'And whose land is this?'

'It belongs to a mining company a few hills over.'

That was where they used to work, they explain. Two of them are even entitled to minute pensions. They supplement those irregular payments with the work up the hill.

'Does it have a name, this place?'

'Jianxi Area Mine #6.'

'No, the little mountain where you work.'

'No.'

From the woman behind the desk I collect four more bottles of beer. Since we are now the last party in the restaurant, I also slip her 400 *kuài* notes, as a tip for letting us stay late. This turns out to be another stroke of luck, as she orders the kitchen to produce a dish far better than any we have eaten so far: a hotpot of some sort with at least two medium-sized fish stewing in chillies and peppercorns. I don't know where in this landlocked province they caught these fish, but their arrival signifies that this dinner has turned into a banquet of sorts. I dish out the seafood into the chipped porcelain bowls, giving the men almost all the meat. They slurp it up happily.

'If I worked in an office,' one of the men comments, 'I would always eat seafood.'

As I gaze at the men gathered around this scratched wooden table, each of their faces withered and creased and shiny from the grease and red from the beer, I feel for the first time a pang of guilt at seeking to manipulate them by sating their hunger and thirst. Why should I take advantage of their appetites? And in a larger sense, who am I to assume that I should be able to extract from this vast country, the hardship of which is embodied in the faces of these three men who ply starvation wages from high-tech waste, anything that I could then take back to America and sell to those enjoying easy lives?

'Forget it,' I tell Zhu, 'don't worry about it.'

She looks at me strangely. She points to a fellow with a crew cut removing a fishbone from his mouth with a pair of chopsticks. 'But this is him.'

That dinner in that remote province is where my luck changes. Zhu and I begin a series of interviews and meetings where instead of closed doors and absent officials and doctors and hospital chiefs always in distant cities, they are at their desk and are happy to meet with me. We are handed documents and hospital admission forms and official communiqués and, twice, top secret, internal memos. And when I return home from these trips, I begin to write down what we are discovering, to make sense of the information we have gathered. As hard as it was before, it is inversely easy now. A friend of mine, an accountant, loans me a little office in the central district of Hong Kong where I unpack my files and open my computer and begin in earnest. I can write this book, I now feel. What I am typing might actually amount to something. Oh, it is awkward and forced and full of sentences, paragraphs, entire sections that have no place in any published work, and it is unwieldy and unsound in the way that a bridge constructed from just one bank might appear. But it is slowly, accretively, emerging, on my hard drive, 10,000, 20,000, 30,000, 40,000 words. I am nearly halfway to a finished manuscript.

In the afternoon, when I am finished writing for the day, I take a walk up Pedders Street to the Foreign Correspondents Club, where I can check my email, or I cut over to Lang Kwai Fong where I can buy a coffee at Starbucks or browse in the Front Page bookstore. I love that sense of a day's work done and stored in my computer, diligently backed up on an iPod, and of just dawdling for a few minutes, watching the pedestrians, admiring the women, scanning the crowd for anyone I might know. It is a totally earned waste of time. I'm not expected anywhere for a few minutes, and I have nothing to do.

It is on an afternoon like this that Zhu calls me and tells me the most improbable news yet. A very high official, a mandarin among mandarins, has agreed to meet with me. He wants me to come to Beijing, tomorrow, to see him.

I go, of course, packing my computer and roller bag and taking the plane from Chep Lap Kok to Beijing and then a car to the St

Regis, where I sleep fitfully. In the morning, I meet with Zhu and together we go to the ministry. I am greeted by several officials, the most senior of whom is a woman with a stack of curly hair and wire-frame glasses, who gives me her card. We are led into a meeting room where there is a mural of the winding Great Wall on the southern wall and a bank of windows facing east. The seats are upholstered with white doilies laid over the chair backs so that as I sit down, I feel the bumpiness of the stiff fabric against my shoulders. Cups of tea are positioned on small, dark wood tables arranged between each chair.

The four officials sit down on chairs beneath the east-facing windows. I sit with Zhu beside me on a bank of chairs opposite the mural. Finally, the minister himself enters, makes a very slight bow in the direction of his colleagues and then comes over to where I am standing and shakes my hand, bows again and takes the seat beside me. He wears a dark blue suit, white shirt and shiny silver tie. His jowls dangle slightly over his collar, so that when he sits I can't see his neck. One of his underlings strolls over and hands him a folder which he leaves unopened on his lap.

The interview itself does not provide me with much new material – he repeats the government position that it did everything it could, that no-one could have known this was a new disease, that the cover-up was the work of misinformed local officials who have been punished, and that the circumstances that allowed for this outbreak have been altered. Yet the meeting is symbolically significant for me. I have secured access to one of the highest officials in the land. And he is here, right where he is supposed to be.

I decide to return to Hong Kong via Shenzhen, to make another visit to one of the neighbourhoods that had been among the earliest points of infection. I have come to know this area well. The collection of eight-storey tenements is a grid of dank, wet, unpaved alleys just two metres wide. There are numerous barber poles skirling red, white and blue. (The barber pole, in China, very often denotes a house of ill repute.) The hookers in skin-

tight lycra pants and tube-tops grab my arm as I walk past. Because I am a foreigner, they proffer *'Amore, amore*' – Italian here, for some reason, being the language of love. There are several tiny piecework factories of three sewing machines each; the workers sleep under their machines at night. There are four fellows who can repair your shoes, and one fellow who converts old tyres into sandals. There are a half-dozen key duplicators. And no less than a dozen doctors in one-room offices – 50-square-foot shop fronts featuring, usually, a bench covered with newspapers, a cabinet full of pills, maybe a diploma on the wall and a stool on which the MD sits, smoking cigarettes. They all specialise in treating venereal diseases, besides a frightening few who practise cut-rate plastic surgery. But it would be easier to bypass the doctors and head straight for any of the half-dozen pharmacies that do a thriving business in aphrodisiacs and antibiotics. There are the pay-by-the-call phone centres, the pay-by-the-hour hotels and the pay-by-the-tablet ecstasy dealers. You can buy one of anything here: a cigarette, a nail, a phone call, an injection, a piece of paper, an envelope, a stamp, a match, a tablet, a stick of gum, a bullet, a brick, a bath, a shave, a battery, even a feel.

There are shops punched through the walls where for a *kuài,* you can pick out a DVD or VCD from a box and watch it on a monitor and listen to the audio through headphones. You take a seat in a darkened room alongside others who are killing time. I flip through the box at a VCD parlour and choose the latest *Matrix* instalment. When I pay my *kuài* and am seated in my moulded plastic chair, I find myself instead watching *Zoolander* – in Korean. I try to explain to the proprietor, a kid with spiky black hair and knock-off Oakleys, that Stiller and Ferrell in Korean are no substitute for Reeves, Moss, Fishburn and Agent Smith, but to no avail. In the end, I have to pay another *kuài* for another flip through the box. I end up watching the first 10 minutes of *Outbreak*.

I walk a few *li* through crowded streets to the border crossing at Lo Wu, past the corridors of tobacco- and brandy-sellers with

their tins of Panda cigarettes, where I catch the last MTR train back to Hong Kong. I listen to a few songs on my iPod and watch as the businessmen around me replace the Chinese SIM cards in their mobile phones with Hong Kong versions.

When we come screeching to a halt in the bowels of the station, I slip off my iPod headphones and shove the music player into my briefcase, next to my computer, sling the black briefcase over my roller bag and disembark, heading up the escalator.

There is a long, cavernous hallway down the western side of the station that is open to On Wan Street and the numerous bus lanes between that and the wider avenue beyond. In the dull fluorescent light, the commuters' tan trench coats and leather jackets are shineless and muted, seemingly as fatigued as their wearers scurrying from the late trains to the taxi stand at the front of the station.

I am also tired but with a sense of wellbeing. My many trips to nowhere Chinese towns and often futile attempts to locate officials and administrators are now paying off in the book that is growing on my laptop, right here beside me. That it will all – the reporting, the writing, the fretting – somehow add up is as optimistic an outlook as I can ever have as a writer. I stop at a corner where the corridor intersects with another from Hong Chong Road to replenish my subway and railway pass at a vending machine. I set down my rollerbag beside me, leaving my briefcase perched on top, and then fumble in my pocket for my wallet. I slide the card into the ticket machine along with a red hundred-dollar note. A few other commuters walk behind me, one coming close enough so that his coat seems to brush mine.

I turn around, shoving my wallet back into my pocket.

My briefcase is gone.

My computer, my iPod – my book has been stolen.

I howl. I have never made such a sound before.

I look both ways. There are at least a dozen people walking away from me, going in any of three possible directions. I grab my rollerbag and run down one hallway towards the bus lanes,

but stairways descend from this covered walkway every 20 metres. Whoever stole my briefcase could have made off in any of a dozen directions. For some reason, I keep returning to the site of the theft, as if in so doing I can turn back time.

I felt him for a second, I think. I can almost see the person, his black coat just glancing off mine, or was that my own bag that I felt being pulled away? Why hadn't I turned sooner?

The thief can have no idea of the value of its contents. He would be delighted at the US$700 in travellers cheques stashed in a zippered pocket, at the $2500 or so Hong Kong dollars in an envelope, at the Gucci sunglasses, the Palm Pilot, the iPod and, of course, the computer. He wouldn't even be aware of my book, my transcribed notes, the thousands of hours of work that digitised information represents. These are as valueless to him as the notebooks in which I have sketched images of Guanzhou and Shenzhen, as the collection of business cards I have amassed. A magnet will be swept over the computer's hard drive to erase it, the notebooks will be tossed into a waste bin.

The police station is brightly lit, with cartoon posters advising what to do if you are cheated or in a traffic accident. There is a Cantonese couple seated in plastic chairs before a white counter, speaking rapidly in Cantonese to a uniformed officer who nods once in a while and keeps attempting to draw their attention to a form he has laid out on the counter in front of him. Behind him is a plain white wall and beyond that, I imagine, is the rest of the station. I had assumed that the two officers who had responded to my complaint would have radioed ahead to let the station know that I was coming before they put me into a van to the station. But now I realise that I am just another robbery victim and will have to wait my turn to file my complaint.

Finally, the Cantonese couple rise to leave and I take a seat. I explain to the officer why I am here, what I am doing, and he asks if I would like to file a report.

'Yes.'

He asks to see some identification. I hand him my Hong Kong ID card, which he takes with him back into the station while I wait.

I am led to a small room where I am told to sit down and the officer says, 'Robbery?'

I nod. 'Yes.'

'Did you see?'

I shake my head. I shrug. 'Sort of.'

He doesn't understand me.

'Not really,' I say. 'Is there anything you can do?'

He doesn't seem to understand this either. He looks over my ID card and begins writing my name and other information on an official report.

'What taken?'

'A computer – my book,' I tell him, almost crying again, 'my book.'

'One book,' he says, carefully writing it down. 'How much?'

I shake my head. 'My book was on the computer. I'm writing a book, and this book was on the computer.'

'Com-put-er.' He carefully enunciates as he writes. 'How much cost?'

Later, I will be told by others who have dealt with the Hong Kong police that you have the option of writing the report yourself, which would have saved an hour of watching Sergeant Yiu struggle to write, '1 pom pirate adres book w/ kebored'. But after a while, I realise that these hours of dealing with the police, of laboriously transcribing what has been stolen, of explaining, over and over, that I am writing a book and that my book was on that computer, this is part of the grieving process. I recite the litany, sounding out the words to help Sergeant Yiu phonetically spell out Macintosh, travellers cheque and Tumi. I watch as he laboriously transcribes the contents of my briefcase, never once writing down the most important thing stolen.

When he is finally finished with the report, he leaves the room and returns with a photocopy of the report and a card, which has

his name, the report number, case officer and the station's telephone number and Sergeant Yiu's mobile phone number. I take the card and look at it for a moment. It is what I have been given in place of thousands of miles of travel and thousands of hours of research. I slide it into my wallet.

'Do you ever catch them?' I ask. 'Do you ever recover the stolen stuff?'

He shrugs. 'Sometimes. But I have to be honest, not so much.'

I don't know why, but I didn't expect that when the police were finished taking my report they would simply show me to the door. I'm not sure what I expected, but I wasn't ready for that to be it, for my book to be gone and the actual police response to the theft to have amounted to this. But Sergeant Yiu led me to the door and out into the waiting room with the cartoon posters and then I walked out into the street, a narrow, sloping road glistening from a steady rain that had started while I had been in the station. It was four in the morning and there were no taxis in sight and I was disoriented, not even sure which direction I should walk in to find a cab.

It didn't matter really, which way I went, because I was totally lost.

I have that card Sergeant Yiu handed to me now, more than two years later. I still carry it with me in my wallet. The Report Number is 03027895. There is his name, his DPC number, whatever that is, and then a line reading DVIT 2/HH DIV, which I believe refers to the Hung Hum Division, though I could be wrong. There are the phone numbers and, at the bottom, for some reason, a fax number. There is no date on the card but I will always remember that: 18 November 2003.

On 19 December 2003, I began to rewrite my book.