

## GROWING UP IN THE CITY OF DARKNESS

**Hong Kong, 1957**

I was born in the middle of the raging typhoon Gloria, which in 1957, devastated Hong Kong and left a trail of destruction in its wake. Dark clouds gathered in the heavens and thunder roared through the ceiling of the house.

In the late 1940s, my parents escaped communist China to Hong Kong after World War II like millions of other refugees from the Pearl River Delta. They were from the small village of Niu Wan in Xinhui. They were wed through an arranged marriage, which was the norm then, when mom was eighteen and dad was a year older. The houses they grew up in stood in the middle of rice paddies.

My grandfather had three wives and twelve children. A hundred years ago, long before the country's one-child policy, China was often devastated by a plethora of natural disasters and famine, so it was good to have numbers on your side.

Mom often told us, "I never had the chance to go to school and I had to learn everything on my own. Crop cutting by hand, reaping, and threshing the paddies were part of my daily job, along with taking care of my younger sisters."

When Civil War broke out between the communists and

nationalists all across China, many along the Pearl River Delta pondered whether to escape to nearby Hong Kong, which was then a British colony. In 1945, there were only 600,000 people living in Hong Kong after four years of occupation by the Japanese. The influx of refugees escaping the Civil War swelled the population to well over 2.1 million.

Soon after getting married, my father heeded the advice of his parents to leave their simple yet cosy home village to start an unknown life ahead of them.

“The communists will likely take over China,” said my grandfather. “You are my only son. Please bring your wife and get on one of the many boats sailing to Hong Kong. You must take the risk. That’s what men do.”

Mom tearfully said goodbye to her sisters. “As soon as we settle in Hong Kong you must come and join us there, especially our youngest sister.”

The Pearl River is an extensive river system in Southern China traversing the land from West to East, where it eventually flows into the South China Sea. It is China’s third-longest river and second largest in volume. A vast network of tributaries and distributaries crisscross the flat land of the delta. Our hometown is situated in one of the many inlets.

The boat ride took days meandering the delta to get to Hong Kong. Desperate refugees sometimes swam across the narrowest gaps on Deep Bay (now Shenzhen Bay) to reach Hong Kong. Some were picked up by passing boats; others were inter-

cepted by bull sharks.

At that time the Pearl River Delta was a poor farm region; little did we know that this region would grow from an agricultural backwater to become the “world’s factory” and now a tech-innovation hub for China and the world.

The British Crown colony faced the daunting task of absorbing the millions of refugees, which included political immigrants, “escapees”, and even fugitives. It became clear to the colonial government that the refugees were coming to stay and that their full integration into the community was the only solution.

Settling into Hong Kong, my mom gave birth to the first of six children, my eldest brother George, in 1950. My parents had to move from place to place to live as the income of my father, who was a small trader of metals, was unstable. He often had to escape to nearby Macau to try his luck at the gambling dens or get away from ruthless loan sharks. In those days, loan sharks used cunning and intimidation to milk the needy and the desperate down to their last drop of hope. In fact, one of my sisters, Denise, was born in Macau precisely because of our financial predicament.

When Denise was about a year old, they managed to rent a small room in an old tenement building beside a live chicken market. In the narrow alley where the vendors kept the cages, they had to tread carefully to avoid stepping on the landmine of bird poop and feathers that littered the floor.

One morning, while mom was heating some rice porridge for baby Denise, the fat lady that lived in the adjacent room in their subdivided flat knocked on their door.

“Wah, it looks like a sauna in here,” the fat lady remarked as the fresh steam that filled the room greeted her as soon as the door opened.

“Sorry about that, I was just preparing some breakfast for Denise. George must have closed the windows again,” mom replied.

“Not at all. The steam is good for nasal congestion, especially in this biting cold. By the way, there’s this man outside looking for your husband. He says he has a job for him.”

Mom’s ears pricked up. “Really? That’s good to hear, but he’s not at home right now.

He’s gone to that new construction site near Lee Theater, but he should be back before nightfall.”

Suddenly, she heard a voice from behind the half-opened door. “I was there yesterday, at the construction site. And once again this morning. Your husband was not there, Ms. Wong.”

The voice came from a man who introduced himself simply as Mr. Fung, a rough-looking man who wore a flat cap and a wolfish grin, with silver hair growing out of a mole on his chin.

“Are you the one with the job for my husband?”

“Not me, but my boss. In fact, it was my boss who offered your husband this job at the construction site. It’s a good job, a better deal than your husband deserves. All he has to do is