

CHRISTINE ERWIN

## Fire Is Not Predictable

I THINK SOME PEOPLE read mysteries and detective stories for the kick of seeing things sorted out. The bad guy is nabbed or, at the very least, his identity is determined. Justice is served up. This line of thinking could be what attracted my dad to them more and more. Being a cop, you'd think he'd crave Westerns or even biographies, material far removed from his kind of work. But then again he'd been stuck behind a desk for years, a back injury, and maybe he simply missed the action.

I never knew what department he worked for in the Royal Hong Kong Police Force. Didn't care. What impressed me as a kid was how he always had a sharp pencil waiting behind his ear. Sometimes when he worked at home on the dining-room table, he'd toss on a record and type to the beat of the music. It was easy, he insisted, but I found this hard to believe. I couldn't even type my own name without losing interest halfway through. Despite his reluctance to talk about his work, he'd let loose gruesome facts. If a body falls twenty stories down to the sidewalk, it doesn't splat wide open. It remains intact. The skin holds everything in although the innards are jelly, liquid even.

I've still got one of his manual typewriters although I only use it as a doorstop. In one of my drawers somewhere is his ash-tray—the one decorated with coloured tiles. It sounds as if I'm expecting him to drop by, to have kept it this long, but it's one of the few things I've got which I recall him using. He used to smoke 555s, more and more of them the older I got. Or perhaps my mother worried about his habit after the first heart attack, and so I took

note of him lighting up. I try to focus on what I recall. What I can have to myself, what I know was true and not smudged by other fingers.

Our house was in the countryside, an area called Sai Kung, where a snail was the size of a medium lemon. The shell. I don't recall stamping and crushing them, but every day there was at least one black smear on the walkway. My two brothers and I had free rein of the yard and surrounding mountains; the only curb was our fear. I remember the afternoon a cobra slunk out of our bougainvillea hedge and startled the dogs. It bit the puppy and killed it, and was going after the older dog when my dad grabbed it—don't ask me to explain how—and held it down with the help of a stick. My mom phoned the police, and they sent a special force with rifles to take it away. My dad dug a grave for the puppy, and everyone else stayed in the house but me. Neither of us spoke. I remember glancing at the old dog and thinking, this should have been for you. It isn't right.

I'm not sure what happened to my dad, the snake man. I guess that part of him got shoved to the back of a closet, worn out and white like a pair of jeans. Come to think of it, my parents did tend to dress up, more than down, as I got older. There seemed to be tons of parties and late-night functions, and whenever they were out, we were babysat by Chinese university students. We went through a lot of different ones. My mom told us they usually refused to come twice, and I could tell, when she mentioned this, she was fishing for a confession; such as, yes, we don't listen to them, only for your station wagon pulling into the driveway before throwing ourselves into bed. I told her another truth, which was that all the sitters ever cared about was their homework. They were boring.

After that talk though, my brothers and I tried harder. My youngest brother would sing if asked to, and my other brother would share (read bore) them with his stamp collection. I baked fairy cakes from a recipe in my Brownie guidebook and felt conned more than flattered when they asked me to go back into the kitchen to make another batch. Sometimes I'd catch them watching one of us in a hard and thoughtful way as if we weren't quite human. Of the dozens, the one I still recall is Amy, who taught us how to fold paper cranes.

One night I was heaving into the toilet bowl for the second time when my parents arrived home. As soon as my mother's hand

was cool and tender on my neck, I forgave them for leaving me with a practical stranger. My dad drove the sitter back to her dorm at the university, and then my parents looked in on me before heading to bed.

"She's sleeping," my mom said. There was a pause. The sheet tightened across my chest as one of them, probably my mom, tucked it in.

My dad cleared his throat.

She continued with their conversation: "So, let's say we bought property, a cottage. Put our savings into that. We've been careful and we've got a fair amount put aside. Would that make you feel better?"

"I just want it out of here," he said, sounding weary and impatient. The same way he responded when we'd run out of boiled water, and us kids were hanging out in the kitchen waiting for him to fix our thirst.

"Me too. But I think you're a little paranoid, love." Her voice faded in and out as though she were scanning my room—taking in the mess, no doubt. She sighed, not being impressed, I guess. "Where's this coming from? Let's . . ." They moved into the next room, the kitchen, but left my door half-open. I was easily spooked as a kid.

"I want you and the kids to have something away from here. Some security."

"I hate when you do this. You stand there talking like you're about to die, and you light another cigarette. Good thinking. There's no reason you won't have another heart attack. You don't exercise—yes, Keith, it would help. Dr. Langford told you. I was there, remember? I don't know what you're playing at."

"I don't want to fight with you."

"God forbid," she snapped. "God forbid. A conversation. Then I might figure out what the hell is going on."

"I'm wiped. That's what's going on. I need to go to bed. Now."

"Keith."

"What?"

"Are you having an affair?"

I suppose this was the worst thing my mom could think up.

"When would I fit that in? You know my every move as it is."

"That's not true." Her voice had a smile in it.

"Come to bed, you crazy woman."

Thinking back now, there's no way she could have guessed what was on his mind. That despite his innocence at work, or perhaps his decision not to snitch on his colleagues is a better way of wording it, he expected the worst. I'm sure he figured his name would be dragged down with the rest of them.

Perhaps because of my age, or perhaps the simplicity of the Bible club stories didn't help, but I was confident I'd recognize evil like you would measles. Or lice eggs. Anyone with eyes could line people up like the school nurse did and check us. They'd search behind your ears for dirt or eggs or some mark and call out, "Fine .... Fine .... This one's okay .... Oh. Here's one. Go stand over there." Calm selection was how I envisioned the scene at the gates of heaven. Those destined for the boiling mud of hell would be firmly but politely (angels have manners) sent on their eternal way.

These types—given half a chance—ate human flesh. They belonged in the same category as the legendary monster of Chinese New Year. It used to charge into villages and rip people's heads off. Chance and close observation helped the villagers discover what scared this thing. Loud noises, the colour red, and fire. My mom told us the whole story one evening after supper. She was translating a book of Chinese folktales and was so engrossed in the job, she'd often retell them to us.

My mom leaned forward with her elbows on the table and appeared a bit low in her chair. "I want to ask you something." She addressed us all. "What do you think would cause a monster to eat humans?"

"He liked the raw flavour?" one of my brothers said.

My youngest brother sat on his hands. "He was lonely."

"And had no social graces," I added.

My mom answered her own question while staring directly at my dad. "I think it was just a bad habit. It didn't want to change."

"Well? What about you?" my mom accused, and for a second I thought she was prodding me. I was about to say, he's a monster. That's what monsters do. But then I realized she meant Dad.

He'd put a fresh cigarette in his mouth, but he took it out. "I'm supposed to explain a monster's brain?" He leaned back in his chair. "He probably doesn't even have a brain. It's probably the size of a pea. 'I want. I eat. I eat. I eat.' There's his thought pattern. 'Burp! I no eat more. No eat—'."

He could always make her laugh.

"I didn't say he had a language problem. You haven't answered the question properly. Why doesn't it just eat, say, grass?"

"Why don't *you* just eat grass? See how you like it." Then he got serious. "I think most animals, even people, especially people, don't hold to their principles very long. People are either very weak or very greedy. I see it all the time at work. It's discouraging."

The day Dad disappeared was as regular as any other. I've gone over it so many times, studying it from every angle, but all the seams lie flat. I'm beginning to think what I'm looking for isn't to be found in that particular day anyway, but it's a mountain I need to go over whenever I think about him. He drove us to Beacon Hill School as he always did, chasing us into the car. None of us seemed to have inherited his morning-person qualities, and I'd been up late the night before memorizing verses for the Bible club. I got the front seat because I beat my brothers to the door. Rain drizzled enough that my dad turned on the windshield wipers.

"Simone, stop that," he said, quietly.

I was following the wipers back and forth as though I were watching a tennis game. "I can't help it. I'm getting hypnotized. I can't stop."

He glanced at me a couple of times. And I made sure I concentrated on them now I'd found something to tease him with. Without saying a word, he switched them off. I remember laughing then, pleased because I'd tricked him, also surprised such a little thing got under his skin. He didn't smile or shake his head in his usual way. I said, "Don't worry, Dad. I wasn't really hypnotized." He looked in my direction, but didn't seem to see me. So I looked out of my own window the rest of the way.

In a television show, or better yet, in the never-to-be movie version of my life, the father would step out of the car at our school and surprise each of us with something small but nifty. A token of his love. A bear hug, even. Some tip-off which we'd only later understand and appreciate. In reality, we each kissed him on the cheek and scrambled out of the car while he called after us, "You guys got everything? Careful when you cross the road."

The school day was par for the course. I forgot to do the homework, probably because I was engrossed in getting the next Bible club badge, and was ordered to sit out in the hall with the other dorks whom I didn't generally want to be associated with. The rain pounded at the windows, and the desks and tiles were

slimy the way concrete looks after a snail has inched across it. By the afternoon, the sun had cut loose from the clouds, and I loped down the hill to Joy Club (the Bible club) with my friends. We crossed Cornwall Street—there may have been a crossing guard, I don't recall—and stopped at the park tuck-shop to buy cola fizzies. I don't know whether you can buy them anymore, but the idea was to fill a glass with cold water, add one tablet and within seconds you'd have Coca-Cola. We must have looked diabolical with these huge effervescent tablets on our tongues, our mouths foaming with brown scum.

My favourite part of the club was listening to the stories. I was also a regular at asking Jesus into my heart. I expected a wave, a sweeping change, an unquestionable ember to implode inside me. The first time, nothing happened. I tried again with a different leader. That time, while Auntie Ruth prayed for me, I shut my eyes so tight I heard a whirr in my ears. The sound of an insect in flight. Again nothing. I felt duped. They'd said there was someone, Jesus, knocking on our hearts, on the door, but whenever I opened it, there was nobody there. Just me. And that was okay; I only wished somebody had clarified and said, it's inside of you already, you've got the smarts and the love given to you from day one. Keep an eye on Jesus, that's all, he had some good ideals.

That day I recited my verses and earned the next badge. Jesus' hands in the position of praying. I secretly thought he might be clapping for me too, given how hard I'd worked for this. When I got home, my dad wasn't there. I've never seen him since.

Within the next three months our station wagon was stolen, we got another dog (in that order), and the Hong Kong police force was split wide open. Like a body which falls to the pavement, the police force may have looked sound on the outside, run smoothly, but inside it was riddled with corruption. Bribes were commonplace, and it seemed there was no person too high up to be tainted. There was an inquiry and so on, and a number of men were brought to trial, including my dad, in absentia. You'd think his disappearing trick would have sealed his terrible guilt, but in fact it was decided that, given the testimony of his colleagues and superiors, he had not ever accepted a bribe. His crime—too strong a word, I think—was in not knowing how to combat the mess, and so doing nothing.

His sentence was light, less than a year, and I felt like running outside and shouting, "Okay! It's safe to come out now. We'll

visit.” But I’m sure he was halfway around the world by then. And I knew my mom wouldn’t ever be able to forgive him for “the pretence,” as she worded it, that everything was fine. I’d swing to rage at him for abandoning us, even if, and this was my darkest thought, he’d committed suicide or a kind of accidental death on a slippery slope on Lantau Island. And then I’d swing the other way to admiration and gratitude to him for making sure we were looked after and untouchable. He must have realized the shit was going to hit the fan, and I’m sure he never thought he’d come out of it clean-cut. It was too big by then.

I remember one afternoon (before he left for good) joining my dad on our rooftop where he was reading. “Schlock Holmes to the rescue,” I teased, dragging the other deck chair over.

He eyed me. Then, since I didn’t say anything right away, he went back to his pocket book. Sniffed. Found his place again, his eyes darting back and forth. He licked his finger, rubbed the top corner of the page a moment, then turned it. He softly cleared his throat.

“Dad? Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

I looked ahead at the calm mountains, rugged and barren near the peaks. “Let’s say there was this girl—this is hypothetical.”

He nodded.

“And she set fire—I don’t know why—to a piece of paper, and it got too hot, it was burning her fingers, and she tried to blow it out, but already it was too late, it was out of control and so what she did was she had to get it out of her hands—it was hurting her—so she threw it into the garbage basket. And then she, she thought it would go out, it wouldn’t get enough oxygen, but instead, the flames got bigger because there was more paper in the garbage which she didn’t realize, and the garbage container wasn’t metal, it was rattan. It was woven rattan.” I paused.

“Right,” my dad said.

“Well. The stupid garbage container caught on fire, and then she panicked because the floor was wood, I mean, the whole room could go up, the whole house, maybe.”

“What’s the question, again?” he said.

“I haven’t gotten to it. So, the only thing she could think of to do was to leave, she couldn’t put it out unless she got a big bucket of water. But she’d have to leave the fire in the garbage container for a minute. Everyone else was busy, and she just wanted

to handle it, so she ran down the hall to the bathroom and she filled something with water and she rushed back and by then the whole container was on fire, but she threw the water on it and it doused the flames.”

I glanced at him.

“Once the flames were out, she saw that it had burned the wooden floor. There was a big black circular mark like charcoal in the middle of the room. There was no way to get it out. So she moved the rug and covered it. She felt sick because she’d wrecked the floor, it costs money to fix. But it wasn’t on purpose, I mean, it wasn’t really her fault.”

We were both silent. I felt like he was waiting for something, and in a way so was I.

“Do you think she was a very bad person?” I said, finally.

“No.” He appeared surprised. “I think she handled it fine. Fire is not predictable. That’s its danger. Nobody was hurt, that’s the most important thing. Did you ask your mother this hypothetical question?”

“No.”

“I probably wouldn’t.”

I was relieved to have it out and to not be in major trouble, and as if this wasn’t enough, I suddenly wanted more. I badly wanted him to call me funny farmer. It was an expression he rarely used, and if he just said it, or I could get him to say it, then I’d definitely be in the clear. He didn’t, of course. I knew if I flapped his ears he’d say something, but it probably wouldn’t be what I wanted to hear, so I left him to his book and climbed the metal ladder down to the ground.