



The Eurasian

by Robby Charters

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The world of the late 21st century is divided between Greater China, the Western Block, the Islamic Block and the Southern Free States of Africa and South America. The Western Block is dominated by the multinational corporations, who have created a paradise for its citizens -- so everyone thinks.

Mickey O'Brien is the Eurasian, half Asian and half Irish. He has a problem with that, because all his friends are fully Asian. However, no one has actually met each other -- only their virtual projected images they show on their on-line classroom environment. He and his classmates meet each other for the first time as they go on a class trip to America. It turns out they all had things to hide.

In America, they accidentally discover what the Multinationals have been trying to hide. Their hover van is hijacked, and they are left trapped in the great American outback, a vast area of what was once U.S.A., now divided between countless republics. Some are Nazi, some are militant Christian and other redneck cowboy states, some Native American Nations, Mafia kingdoms, etc etc. The wild west is again wild. Once having stumbled in, can they ever find their way out again?

It's a story of finding out what's real, and discovering true faith as they become involved in an espionage war trying to prevent a Nazis takeover.

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Excerpt (first 5 chapters):

1

The Fruit Orchard

Mr. Singh appeared right on time, out of thin cyberspace.

'Good morning class. Everyone present? Ah, I see Derek Hong has yet to join us.'

'Logging in soon I think,' said Lo Peng. 'Just talked to him --

had to water the flowers.'

'Virtual?'

'Man eating?'

'No. Have real ones la.'

The sixteen of them -- minus one -- appeared to be sitting in a semicircle facing the instructor's console.

'My friend, Kim --' whispered Philip Kumar, leaning over to Mickey, '-- he have botany design game -- makes carnivorous...'

'While we wait,' intruded Mr. Singh -- his on-line presence was a stout, majestic, grey-bearded gentleman who, apart from his turban, could have passed for Professor Dumbledore -- 'I'll load the module for today, so we can start as soon as Derek gets here.'

Immediately, the space next to the professor began filling up with the usual script code, and an image began to materialise: a map of the North American West Coast.

'America? Wa! I thought *Extension of Chinese...*'

'Even did homework la!'

Mickey heaved a sigh of relief. He hadn't finished his.

'I'll explain it as soon as -- ah! He's logging in now. Good morning Derek. Glad you could join us.'

The space next to Lo Peng began materialising into the shape of Derek Hong.

'So,' began Mr. Singh, 'You're all wondering, why a map of North America? You'll remember that three months ago, we, as a class, put together a proposal for the field trip of our dreams. Well, it appears that someone in high places, in the Department of Education, in consultation with the Department of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, thought that it fit right in with their policy to enhance the West's perception of the Chinese half of the globe. In short, you will be taking your graduating class trip to North America. The official name for us will be the China Cultural Exchange Tour'

There was general cheering, both vocal and otherwise. Half of the seated images degenerated into fireworks, stars and other graphic images, the finale of Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture resounded from where U Ta Gladstone sat, while Jimmy Khoo morphed to both look and sound like a collection of horns, bells, whistles and airborne confetti.

Mr. Singh brought the class to order by tapping the 'muffle' icon. Everyone reappeared in their assumed shapes.

'We'll have a lot of planning to do, special training, extra reading, you'll each receive an orientation packet that you'll be expected to view on your own. There are restrictions on what you're allowed to take with you; books, for instance. Today, we'll talk about your itinerary. Today's lesson, *The Extension of Chinese Sovereignty -- Mid 21st Century*, will roll over to tomorrow. Those who haven't completed their assignments -- I won't mention any names, as I'm sure Mickey would find that embarrassing -- you have one more day. Now, your itinerary...'

Both the city of San Francisco and Mickey's face, lit up in red.

'You will begin your trip here, on the Northern tip of the island of Baja California, which, as you can see, is separated from the North American mainland by the San Andreas Straight...'

The professor droned on, but Mickey had lost his concentration. Dreaming about this was all very well. Apart from Riu, his closest neighbour right here in Chantaburi, he had never actually met any of his classmates face to face. What did they really look like?

He knew that the real live Jonny Lim didn't resemble the cartoon character Astro Boy, and Lucy Kanda probably didn't look like Marilyn Monroe, nor Albert Fong, the younger version of Jackie Chan. Mickey O'Brien was the one student everyone assumed looked like himself -- whereas in actual fact, he had carefully modified his image to get rid of all his Eurasian features, making himself look the product of the Thai Chinese side of his family.

That sort of worried him.

* * *

Lounging on the veranda, Grandpa Abe watched the monkeys swing on the bamboos across the lake from their fruit orchard. Mickey sat on the swinging chair with his e-tablet on his lap, loaded with his delinquent homework assignment.

'Grandpa,' he started. 'You were around, weren't you, when China extended their sovereignty to all of East Asia?'

'Hah! *Extended!* I like the choice of words!'

'You don't sound very positive.'

'Well, I suppose change is inevitable. I was born Thai, I live the life of an Irishman, I'll die as a Chinese.'

'But our family is part Chinese, aren't we?'

'I suppose we are -- and it was only a matter of our motherland catching up with us foreign born Chinese. It's just too big. That's all. Now, Ireland, that's a nice small country. Manageable. Thailand used to be a small country once, not as small as Ireland, but now we're part of the giant super-power. Lost our uniqueness -- not that we had much of that left. I suppose we were ripe for a good take-over.'

'How?' queried Mickey.

'You got your history book there. What does that say?'

'It gives some background. I suppose the political crises in Thailand in the first quarter of the century, with the demise of the monarchy, and then the rising sea water, which flooded most of the central planes, and then the massive influx of non-Malays from the Malay Peninsula fleeing from the tide of radical Islamic repression...'

'Yes -- the entire Chinese as well as the Indian populations of the East Indies, bringing with them their English fluency, and their Chinese ways, to welcome the Southward expansion of the Beijing Empire as they "came to our rescue". The sleeping giant not only awakened, but took charge.'

'The -- what?'

'They used to call China the "sleeping giant". It woke up, just

as everyone was afraid would happen, and now here we are, with Beijing central bureaucracy.'

'But it's not so bad, really.'

'Yes, the bark was worse than the bite. Thank Chinese pragmatism for that. But, of course, you grew up with all this. You've never known anything else. Me? I've been to dozens of countries in my time, all small, independent...'

'You know, our class is going on a trip to North America.'

'You're -- what?'

'Just announced today. We had this proposal that we wrote -- you know, just for the heck of doing a proposal. We didn't think anything would come of it. But, I guess, the Department of Foreign Affairs liked the idea -- you know, to educate them about us.'

'Ah, part of the propaganda machine. Probably what they need -- the Americans. They still think we all dress in green pyjamas with a wee red star on our caps, if we're not up to our knees in a paddy field somewhere. So, when do you go?'

'Twenty-eighth of next month.'

'So you'll get to help Uncle Jiu harvest the durian and rambutans first.'

'I guess...'

After a long pause, Mickey said, 'Grandpa, do you think my friends will like me when they've seen me up close?'

'Why wouldn't they?'

'I mean -- if they suddenly know I'm Eurasian.'

'Don't they already know that by your surname?'

'They know me as Mickey Mao.'

'As in -- Mickey Mouse, or Mao Tse Tung?'

'Ha ha -- both.'

'Oh! Listen to you! Why do you think they won't accept you as you are?'

'Well -- the jokes they tell, and -- well -- the virtual classroom is the only place I don't hear *farang dong, farang dong*, everywhere I go.'

'So you don't look like a -- er -- *pickled guava* on-line?'

'No one looks like themselves on-line.'

'So there you go. They've all probably got deep dark secrets to hide from the world.'

* * *

Two hundred years earlier, most Europeans in Siam were French. The Thai word for a Frenchman, *farang*, was identical to the word for guava, the fruit. Later, *farang* came to apply to all white Europeans and North Americans. The pun, *farang dong*, was a European type who had been 'pickled' in Thai culture, either by staying a long time, or as the result of a mixed marriage.

The edible variety could be bought from a street vendor.

* * *

The whir of a hover scooter sounded from the driveway, as it died down to a stop. The two looked up in time to see Reverend Pongsak step up to the veranda.

'Good afternoon, Pastor,' said Grandpa.

'I think you not do road repair since you stop using rubber tires!' commented the clergyman.

'What brings you this way?'

'Pastoral visit.'

'Ah! Not see us for two weeks, ah?' Grandpa always reverted to the regional Pigeon English when the occasion called for it.

'Yes, ha ha, notice that too. But how are you? How your cousin, Jiu?'

The said Cousin Jiu, Abe's partner in business, was napping in the hammock strung out between two of the pillars supporting the older, traditionally built, half of the house. He was surrounded by oil cans, tools, engine parts and a pile of early ripened durian.

'We all well, la. Next week very busy. Pick durian. But this Sunday you see us.'

'Ah, well -- Your sister, Rosemary. You hear from her?'

'Yes -- the thorn in your side.'

'You know, EFT churches, government recognised. We allied with Three Self Patriotic Movement in Beijing. We must keep good relations.'

'What's that to do with Rosemary?'

'She must come under covering of EFT. Officials asking questions, la.'

'But there hasn't been a crackdown on house churches since -- when?'

'Not in long time. That's true. But we must keep peace, la. House church? No control!'

'They acknowledge Christ as head of the church.'

'Ah! Christ the head! Christ the head! Christ the head of earthquake destroy Tokyo!'

'I forward your concern when I see her. Here! Let me pick out a durian for you. Your family, they like durian, ah?'

'Oh! No no, you mustn't!'

'No, I insist.'

Grandpa Abe walked to the pile next to where his cousin Jiu rested. He began to pick up various ones by their stem, tapping them with a long stick.

Uncle Jiu sprung to life and took a large durian from near him. '*Look nee sook raeo...*' telling him, in Thai, this one was ready to open today, and the other one should be ripe in two days.

Reverend Pongsak drove away with two durians.

'What's he got against Aunt Rosemary?' asked Mickey, standing at Grandpa's side.

'Your Aunt Rosemary has done many times more for the church than that Pongsak ever will. She's a woman of God. Takes after her grandmother, after whom she was named. Our Grandmother Rosemary, in turn, followed the footsteps of her mother, Ma Hanna.'

'That was an awful long time ago.'

'1913, same year the Titanic sunk. She started a school for

girls in Lampang. Later, she came back with her husband. My grandmother, Rosemary and her twin were born in Lampang. Later, Grandma Rosemary come out and marry Grandpa Willie in Tak province. They start new churches there. Your great grandpa, Boz born. He married Bless, Thai Chinese, so I'm the first Eurasian. The rest of us, Eurasian, down to you, Robby and Rosie.'

Mickey had heard the story hundreds of times, but Grandpa Abe seemed to enjoy telling it.

'Now you,' Grandpa went on. 'You have a great heritage. Don't be ashamed of being Eurasian.'

* * *

The sound of the hover-car coming up the driveway was unmistakably that of Papa, returning from his office job in the nearby town of Makham. That was followed by the sound of footfalls on the gravel. But the sound was slower and more deliberate, and the taking off of his shoes on the veranda seemed to take some effort.

Mickey went out to look. Papa was struggling with a large box. Yet more books.

Over the last ten or so years, there had been a surge of used books on the market -- English language and, according to various handwritten notations, from places in California, Canada, Texas, Mexico. According to the electronic tags...

Mickey could remember first trying the scanning program one of his classmates had hacked. They revealed an intriguing history. The second to the last entry was always something like, 'Property of San Diego Archives', or 'Property of Vancouver Archives' -- always property of somewhere-or-other archives. The last entry was invariably, 'To be destroyed' and a date.

'Pity to destroy such great books,' Mickey had commented.

'Obviously, someone did the right thing in sending them here instead,' Papa had replied.

Now the family library included the complete works of Charles Dickens -- two or three of some titles, though never matching sets -- H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Arthur C. Clark, Agatha Christi, Stephen King, J.R.R. Tokein, Brian Adlis, John Grisham, William Gibson, William Shakespeare, Tobias Buckell, Peter O'Tool, Michael Crichton, John Scalzi, J.K. Rowling, C.S. Lewis, Cory Doctorow, John Wright, Billy Whistle, just to name a few. There were also Bible commentaries, encyclopaedias, works on ancient history, and even a few tractates of the Talmud.

Mickey took the box from Papa, brought it inside and set it on the floor. Robby and Rosie ran over and began rummaging for any children's books. As usual, Mickey had his scanner.

Again, he noted the date on the 'To Be Destroyed' label. Always 2055, give or take a few months. Some had 2056, or 2057.

'Why did they suddenly decide on that date to destroy all these books,' wondered Mickey out loud. He had just scanned *Idoru*, by William Gibson. He set it on his own to-read pile, and

then picked up *The Brick of Heaven* by Billy Whistle.

'What's that one there?' said Grandpa Abe, pointing at another.

Mickey picked it up, a paperback, with a headline and subtitles meant to shock: *The Coming Purge*, by Dustin Smith. The subtitles read, 'This may be the last book you'll be allowed to read!' 'Massive brainwashing campaign', and 'Major rewrite of history!'

'I remember him,' said Grandpa. 'A prophet of doom. We thought he was a ranting crack-pot.'

The book looked brand new, as though it had never been opened. Mickey looked at the inside front cover. There were prices pencilled in, crossed out, replaced by cheaper prices, no owner's name.

Mickey scanned the destruction tag: August, 2055.

'Same year as the rest,' said Mickey.

'Hmmm -- wonder if that was his prophecy, come true?' said Papa.

'You know, they won't let me take any books along to America,' said Mickey.

'None?'

'They say I can download as many e-books as I like when I'm there, though.'

Mama piped in, 'Make sure you download a Bible, then.'

Just like her to say that, thought Mickey.

* * *

Mickey put on the head set and took his seat in the VR console and went off to visit his classmate, Philip Kumar.

The names of all his friends scrolled down through the air before him. He stuck his finger into the icon next to Philip's name. It turned to red to indicate that the call was going through. He knew Philip wouldn't be far from his console, as they had agreed to meet -- or if he happened to be downstairs, it would page him through his mobile.

The large body of Philip appeared, and his deep voice resounded, 'Hey! Mickey Mao! What gives?'

'New books, la.'

'What kind?'

'You have one, William Gibson, *Idoru*? One after *Virtual Light*.'

'Have already. Still no have *All Tomorrow's Parties*. You have?'

'Don't have. Sorry. But I have this -- weird. My grandpa says written by crackpot prophet of doom. But I think he prophecy about why we get so many books.'

'Cool! Let me see!'

'Here. I put on scanner, you download.'

'Okay, la!'

The machine began flipping rapidly through the pages.

'Ready for America?'

'Y-es.' There was a bit of hesitation in Philip's voice.

After a pause, he suddenly perked up and said said, 'I hope we

can meet Monterey Jack.'

'Who's that?'

'Someone I talk to on-line. Live in California.'

'But California different Internet system!'

'He have to hack. He know we come. He tell us a lot!'

Bangkok Metropolitan Tower

Mickey had a window seat next to Riu. The hover-bus sped along in as straight a line as could be navigated, sometimes over the mud flats, sometimes over sea, but swerving around the islands. A line of hover-vehicles before and behind them showed that they were in the correct lane for traffic in their direction.

Ahead of them, he could see Pattaya Island. On this side, what was once Jomtien Beach, now an archipelago of ruined buildings standing in the water. Then, they saw the built up town of Pattaya Island, then beyond were similar ruins demarcating what used to be the great tourist resort of Pattaya City. Further along, was the island of Laem Chabang, then the dyked cities of Sriracha and Chonburi.

Generally the sea was to their left, in Mickey's plain view, and only where they swerved significantly inland could he see the mudflats, generally to their right, though covered with water at high tide. These were dotted by settlements consisting of buildings on stilts and platforms, families living off their plankton extractors or harvesting seaweed, taking the said produce to market by boat, buying what they could with the proceeds, but otherwise living primitively.

Both Mickey and Riu were silent. Mickey tried to break the silence.

'Wonder what they'll all look like,' he quipped.

'Dunno,' answered Riu.

Mickey wondered if Riu was bothered by the same concern as he. Though he already looked quite handsome in real life, Riu's on-line image made him look like some old movie star or other. He shouldn't be that concerned. Why was he so quiet?

On their next to last class session they had discussed the idea of coming to their last session looking like themselves. No one could bring themselves to do it. So now, they were on their way to meet one another with no idea what to expect.

Mickey remembered his grandfather's words, *They've probably all got deep dark secrets to hide from the world*. He didn't feel so bad now.

So, why was Riu bothered?

'What's the matter?' he ventured, finally.

After a pause, Riu said, 'Grandma not well.'

Riu lived with his grandma, Mickey remembered. She was all he had. His parents were both dead.

'Is it bad?'

'Yeah. I want to stay with her, but she want me to go on this trip.'

'She be okay when we get back, maybe?'

Riu sighed. 'I hope.'

They could now see the Bangkok Metro-Tower in the

distance, growing steadily larger as they drew near. At high tide, the mud flats were indistinguishable from the open sea making the Bangkok Metro-Tower look, from this distance, as though it were standing on its five legs in middle of the sea. The pentagon formed by the legs was about three kilometres in diameter, and the structure, itself, was about five kilometres high, consisting of millions of cellular compartments suspended in a vast network of hydraulic tubes. Some had called it an overweight version of the Eiffel Tower.

As they came closer, they could see, sticking out of the water below the belly of the tower, the derelict buildings, parts of the old express way system, the Sky-train track, and bits of everything else that once stuck up in the air. Some of the more intact buildings were now fishing villages, some old Sky-train stations housed plankton extractors, or had become warehouses for harvested seaweed -- communities living their primitive lives under the shadow of ultra modern technology.

As they approached the Metro-Tower, the hover-bus aligned itself with one of the hundreds of portals leading into the lower levels. After entering, it zoomed on through semi darkness, past lit up areas, scenes that went past their eyes too quickly for observation, curving here, turning there, and finally coming to a stop. It was dark outside, but that wasn't the end of the line. The craft suddenly began to ascend like a lift. It reached its level, then it went on taking more turns, until they finally arrived at the hover-bus terminal.

Mickey always wondered why such a big place as a hover-bus terminal didn't have a direct route to the outside instead of so many twists and turns. It was a huge place.

The passengers disembarked on to a platform, and the two students, shouldering their backpacks, started off to the point where they were to meet Philip Kumar, Geoffrey Wong and Marisa Srisomboon. It was a café on the opposite side of the terminal from where they were -- a long walk.

The place was crowded. Mickey walked a bit behind Riu, keeping his hand on his back pack so as not to lose him. On his right was a boy wearing thick glasses, apparently by himself. Indian, by the look of him, hardly bigger than Robby. *A bit young to be by himself*, thought Mickey.

They were about to meet some of the others for the first time. Mickey wondered if some of them were nearby. Philip Kumar, maybe? He glanced about for someone who fit his perceived description of Philip -- large, broad-shouldered, with a deep voice -- even if he did show childish excitement at times. That tall man up ahead maybe? He looked a bit Indian. And was that Marisa Srisomboon over near the tall man who could be Philip? If it was, she was a dish!

Mickey continued walking, his hand on Riu's backpack. In his mind, he was following the tall man up ahead.

There was the café -- but the tall man kept right on walking. So did the lady he had hoped was Marisa. Riu and Mickey went in.

Table eleven -- there it was. There were two people sitting there already.

'Hi,' said Riu. 'I'm Riu, you must be ...?'

'Marisa,' said the long haired skinny girl that had looked a bit like Cleopatra on-line.

'Geoffrey,' said the fat boy with close-cropped hair.

'I'm -- er -- Mickey,' said Mickey.

'Wow!' said Marisa.

'*Orang puteh!*' said Geoffrey. 'Cool!'

So far not so bad, thought Mickey. *Orang puteh* was Malay for *farang*, meaning literally 'white man' -- not a derogatory term like the 'N-word'.

'We wait for Philip, then?' Mickey suggested.

'I guess,' said Marisa.

They sat down.

Mickey looked towards the door, and then around the room. No sign of anyone fitting the description.

About three metres away, between two other tables, was the boy he had noticed earlier, with the thick glasses.

No way!

He was standing there looking at them, terrified.

Mickey called out, 'Philip Kumar?'

The boy nodded, and walked slowly towards them.

'Er -- Hi, Philip. I'm Mickey.'

'Hi,' said Philip, in a voice that sound as far from the deep manly computer generated voice as could be imagined.

'You're kidding!' said Marisa.

'Wow!' said Geoffrey.

'Yeah -- wow!' said Riu.

'You do good job with virtual image, leh' said Mickey.

'No, lah, *pian jia pian jia* only,' said Philip, being unpretentious, smiling for the first time.

'So,' said Geoffrey. 'Go where?'

'*Makan*, I think, la,' said Marisa. 'They order for us already. Then, get shuttle go to other terminal.'

'Okay,' said Mickey. 'I tell the hostess.' He did.

A lot of Malay/Hokkien/Straits Chinese vocabulary had arrived in Thailand over the years via the mass migrations from the Southern Peninsula -- words like *makan* for 'food' and such.

They sat about the table nervously while the meal was brought -- fried noodles with seafood. They ate in silence.

After that, they walked to the inter-terminal shuttle. Philip walked close to Mickey's side, almost as though he were clinging to a big brother for security. Definitely not the image he projected in the virtual classroom.

'You don't look eighteen,' said Mickey.

'Actually, I'm thirteen,' said Philip. He looked small even for that.

'You -- er -- advanced quickly, then?'

'Yeah.'

'An exceptional child?'

'Ah.'

At least this explained his childish giddiness in class.

They boarded the shuttle and again they were speeding, twisting and turning, lifting, until they were at the Northern Terminal. Being that this one serviced journeys to more distant places that required travel permits, they had to go through a check-in area, where they showed their papers. Then, they had to wait in a transit lounge.

Philip had to use the men's room, but didn't want to go by himself. Mickey went with him.

While Philip went into one of the stalls, Mickey used the urinal, and then went to the sink to wash his hands.

'Ah, Mickey! There you are!' A woman's voice. The tone of her voice sounded as though she had been expecting him.

A glance in the mirror told Mickey it was *Aunt Rosemary!*

'Wow! What are you doing here?'

'I work here now.' She produced her mop as evidence. 'Here. I have something for you.' She began reaching into her apron pocket.

'But -- how did you know I was here?'

'Abe told me two weeks ago you were going, so I took a job here to give you this.' She handed him a brown envelope.

'But -- I didn't even know my travel plans then! We could have left from --'

'Never mind that! Keep this with you. Put it in the inside pocket of your blue jacket. Don't open it until you get to Cactus Head.'

How did she know I had a blue jacket? Where the heck is Cactus Head? 'You got a job here just to see me?'

'Oh, no. The pressure was getting a bit high in Sakeo, so I decided to spend some time in Bangkok. We now have a group that meets in the staff lounge of this terminal. I must go now. Have a good trip. Remember, Cactus Head. Open the envelope there, not before. I'll be praying for you.'

She rushed out the door, just as the toilet flushed. Philip emerged.

'Who was that lady you talk to?'

'My aunt Rosemary,' said Mickey, still in a daze.

'She surprise you?'

'Yes, she did.'

'We better get back. Bus leave soon I think.'

They went back into the waiting area.

Hong Kong would be cooler than Bangkok, so Mickey decided to put on the blue jacket right away. He looked again at the envelope. The handwriting on the front said, 'Open in Cactus Head.' It fit perfectly in the inside pocket.

The departure to Hong Kong was announced, so the five students boarded. Philip still stuck close to Mickey and took a seat next to him.

The hover-bus took the coastal route, around Cambodia and Vietnam. Mickey recognised all the old sights, including Chantaburi, as they passed.

About half way to Hong Kong, Mickey and Philip were once

again talking about all the things they used to do when Philip was a deep voiced giant and Mickey was a brown-skinned Thai: simulations, classic science fiction, and prophecies of doom.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong was the official point from which to start any long trip. It was the one port still open to non-Chinese nationals of the buffer states, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, India and Singapore. Occasionally, they allowed visitors from the Islamic republics, and even from the Western Block into Hong Kong. Any excursions into other parts of China required special visas. Singapore was really a part of China, but being that it was an island wedged between the great Indochina Islamic Republic and the rebellious states (claimed by China) and rogue sultanates; Singaporeans entered the rest of China through that port for security reasons. Likewise, all outgoing travel Eastward originated from Hong Kong.

While the entire journey could have easily have been completed in one day, the plan was to spend the night in Hong Kong to make sure everyone made it.

* * *

'Woah! So you a *gweilo* ah?' was Johnny Lim's first reaction on meeting Mickey, followed by 'Woah! Who is this?' on seeing Philip.

Mickey lightened the atmosphere by asking after the classmate that looked like Astro Boy, which Johnny Lim looked like anything but. His shyness over what he really looked like also took the edge off his cockiness. He was tall and lanky to the point of being somewhat awkward. Lucy Kanda, Mickey could tell, would have preferred to appear in the nude, but looking like Marilyn Monroe, rather than to show her physical body fully clothed. Besides a little bit of acne, she really didn't look too bad.

After meeting them in the VIP lounge the five from Bangkok, along with Lucy, Johnny, Jimmy Khoo, Derek Hong took their vouchers to the local food centre where they wandered about the stalls and ordered their choice from the respective stall owner. After sitting around all evening, they retired to their bed sized cubicles near the VIP lounge.

* * *

'*Adoi! A mat salleh!*' exclaimed Albert Fong, on meeting Mickey.

The Singapore translation of *farang*, *gweilo*, and *orang puteh*, the word was commonly thought to be a corruption of 'mad sailor', from the early days of British colonialism.

Then, Albert noticed Philip. 'Wa! Who bring their little brother along, ah?'

'That's Philip Kumar,' said Mickey.

'You Philip Kumar? Ha ha! You only a *ku ku chiao!*' -- the Hokkien equivalent of 'pipsqueak'.

Philip simply glared at him as he went on to size up his other

classmates.

Far from sporting a Jacky Chan physique, Albert was short, fat and barely into his adolescence. Though Mickey knew that *mat salleh* wasn't necessarily a derogatory word in itself, Albert had the nack of making it sound like the N-word.

* * *

U Ta Gladstone arrived from Chingmai later that morning, via an old fashion aeroplane.

* * *

The last to arrive looked like a recent university graduate, thin, with only the beginnings of a beard, and his uncut hair tied in a ponytail. His Indian features threw everyone off.

'Who are you?'

'I know -- Philip Kumar!' said Albert Fong.

'Here already la!' shouted Philip.

'Then one of you is...'

'Class, class! Don't you know your dear professor when you see him?' said the newcomer.

'You kidding!'

'No!'

'It's me, your own Mr. Singh, in person! Alright. Everyone here?'

'All but Lo Peng, Martin and Nerender,' said Marisa.

'And Philip Kumar,' added Albert Fong.

'Hoi!' started Philip.

'I've been informed those three won't be joining us. Now, did everyone do as instructed, and pack only essential clothing and toiletries? No one has any reading material apart from the travel manual on your e-tablet?'

'No books, la!'

'No books.'

'All my naked girlie magazine, delete just now la,' said Albert.

Laughter.

Mr Singh continued, 'As soon as we are ready, we can board our vessel.'

'Already?'

'What departure time?'

'There are no scheduled flights to North America,' replied Mr. Singh. 'Departures are on a need-to-go basis. We need to go -- so they've provided a flight. So, does anyone have any last minute business? There will be no going to the toilet on the flight.'

After some sorting out of bags and belongings, and trips to the toilet, they were off down the corridor towards the flight terminal.

'Have any of you ever been on one of these flights before?' asked Mr. Singh, as they stood on the conveyor belt.

'Flew aeroplane from Chiengmai,' said U Ta.

'I wouldn't call this an aeroplane. You'll feel the weight below you as you ascend to above the atmosphere, then you'll feel pressure from behind as the craft accelerates to a tremendous speed, followed by weightlessness as we descend. The entire

flight will take two hours, during which time, no one is to leave their seat. In fact, your seatbelts will be locked, and the backs of your seats will adjust automatically so as to give maximum support for your body. Any questions?'

'Nice view, I bet,' said Lucy.

'I don't know,' replied Mr. Singh. 'Haven't ever been on one myself. They were developed a bit late to be used as commercial aircraft -- the way the world has been divided up.'

'Not true, la,' said Philip to Mickey. 'But because China consolidate all into one part of globe, for us only, not practical. But Western Block use them -- trips from Australia to North America to Germany. Islamic Block use them, from Europe to East Indies. Also Southern Free States, flights from South America to Africa.'

'How you know so much?'

'Monterey Jack.'

'You meet him -- how?'

'He hack, know we coming, know details.'

At the end of the conveyor belt, the group walked to the big door. For the first time since arriving in Hong Kong, the group stepped outdoors. Ahead of them was a massive platform, or was it a deck, mounted on the side of the metro-tower. In the middle was what was apparently the craft Mr. Singh had been describing. It looked like a sawed off version of the old space shuttles NASA used to send up.

Mickey and Philip were next to the guard rail, from which they caught a glimpse of the ground. From here, they could tell that the platform, on which they stood, was, in fact mounted on one of the three legs of the metro-tower. This leg was planted in the middle of Wan Chai on Victoria Island, and rose at an angle towards the main body of the tower. Perched on the leg in step formation were towers that blended in with the ancient skyscrapers that still stood on the ground. The tops of the highest of them were at eye-level. The other two legs came down in Tsim Sha Sui and North Point. Below the belly of the metro-tower was the Hong Kong harbour. Mickey could see ships coming and going, and even a few old fashion junks.

Much of Hong Kong was high enough in elevation to have not been so badly affected by the rising sea water. However, there were many house boat communities lining the edges of the land masses.

Mickey wanted to look some more, but Mr. Singh was calling them to the craft.

They ascended by steps near the front of the craft. Once inside, a hostess directed them into two separate compartments running along either side, separated by what Mickey guessed was the rocket motor.

Despite the size of the craft, there wasn't much space inside. The compartment Mickey and Philip entered had only twelve rows of two seats with the aisle on one side and the window on the other. Across the aisle was the inner wall. Even though Mickey couldn't remember seeing the windows from the outside,

they were quite large, enough for both passengers seated together to see out. There was lots of room between each pair of seats, each had its own arm rests and lower leg support.

Philip was still clinging to Mickey's side.

Stuck with you again! Can't I sit with one of the girls just once?

'I take window seat okay?'

Hoi! Sit with me AND take window seat?

Mickey let him in without complaint -- all because Albert Fong didn't know when to stop.

Everyone settled in, and fastened their seatbelts as requested. These consisted of two shoulder straps as well as one that went around the waist and between the legs. Once everyone had fastened themselves in, they heard an audible 'click' as they locked. Then, a safety bar came down in front of each passenger, and the back and lower leg support automatically adjusted.

The craft lifted off vertically. They saw portions of the metro-tower, and parts of Hong Kong and the rest of China from the window on their left. They kept rising until they had cleared the tower. Then, the craft tilted upward, while the seats adjusted by tipping forward slightly, so that the passengers were no longer seated behind one another next to an aisle, but above and below each other, in semi-reclining position like a very tall bunk bed.

Then, the deafening roar, the G force, the speed. The cabin pressure automatically compensated for altitude, so there was no discomfort to the ears. That couldn't be said for the rest of the body, which felt like it had become a seat for an elephant.

As the world below began to look like a TV weather map, the craft slowly tilted forward again, and the seats, back. The pressure on their bodies lessened, but only for so long. Now; forward thrust, but that was more bearable, more like that of an ordinary take-off down a runway, though sustained for a longer period of time.

Finally, they were at cruising speed.

'Cool!' said Philip.

'So this is outer space, ah?'

'Yeah.'

'Wonder what America like?'

'Just like Hong Kong, I bet.'

'What does your friend say?' said Mickey.

'Who? Monterey Jack?'

'Yes la.'

'Not much. Just talk about what's behind it. He say, "Everything fake", like everything *The Matrix* one.'

'You mean everyone, like, attached to wires and tubes, and they only *think* they're walking about?'

'No la. Not that bad,' replied Philip. 'Just everything not what it looks like. And that book you send me, about no more print books, and change history, he say, "Happened already".'

'No kidding!'

'That's what he say.'

'Whole Western Block?'

'Whole North America. Maybe not Australia, Ireland, Germany -- I think they buffer zone, just like China have Japan, Korea...'

'In all North America, no print books, only e-books?' asked Mickey.

'Yeah, I guess.'

'How do they change history?'

'Dunno.'

They sat in silence, gazing at the view below. The girls in the seat ahead of them had closed their window. They could hear Albert Fong a few seats beyond, chatting with Derek Hong.

'Albert Fong, he very the scumbag one la,' whispered Philip. Then, they began their descent.

San Francisco Metropolitan Tower

On arrival, their hosts took them to the Bay View Inn, where they were assigned two or three to a room. They had a day in which to recover from jet lag before their adventures were to begin.

As usual, Philip clung to Mickey's side to ensure they shared a suite.

Mickey knew such things existed, but had never expected to experience it: the bed automatically adjusted to the size and shape of the body lying in it, and something intuitively began massaging the body right where it need it. When Philip stepped out of the bathroom dripping wet from the jacuzzi, searching for a towel, something in the floor immediately began sucking the carpet dry. He had to wipe himself with his own shirt. When Mickey tried the jacuzzi, he discovered the body dryer, a frame that folded out of the wall, and that blew air on him as he stepped through it, drying him almost immediately.

They spent the rest of the day watching TV on the wall sized 3D screen. Situation comedies followed info-mercials, followed again by action adventures, and weather, news and sports. The characters of the sitcoms all lived in sprawling suburban dwellings with interiors not unlike the suite Mickey and Philip were in. The difference was the view through the French doors: a patio leading off to a swimming pool, surrounded by luxuriant gardens. The sprawling estates seemed to be the norm.

There were few advertisements. Instead, the characters were all either pictured dining at McDonalds or KFC, trying out the latest feature of their Microsoft Personal World, eating breakfast cereal with the brand name shown full face, using the latest gadget from whatever corporation, in every case making a comment on the said product, and how wonderful life was for all.

Only occasionally did they depict a character, usually a lazy, jobless addict or a misfit, living in a two room flat high up in a metro-tower. Even they seemed to have everything they needed to survive. Their poverty was defined by their lack of this or that from Microsoft, or having to eat generic food out of a can, or worse yet, growing their own food.

* * *

Mickey browsed the list of e-books under the heading of 'Public Domain'. He already had the ones by Charles Dickens at home, but he tapped on *Oliver Twist* anyway -- and *Little Dorrit*, and *Tale of Two Cities*. They downloaded immediately.

Other random selections: the Bible, a few plays by Shakespeare, a history of China.

Mickey's dad had read their copy of *Little Dorrit*. Mickey had tried, but found it heavy with old English terms and long

descriptions. He had watched the old mini-series on their home theatre. Looking at this e-book version, he could see that it had been greatly simplified. He could probably read the whole thing in two days.

He started immediately.

* * *

Meals were in the hotel café, after which they'd wander about enjoying the gaming arcade, looking at items for sale in the boutiques, or sitting about the pool on a deck high above the San Francisco Straight. No one had told them they might need any swimming gear, so they just sat looking at the water, or enjoying the view below. Albert Fong suggested jumping in with nothing on, but the girls and Mr. Singh vetoed that notion. Nor did they have any local currency to buy anything apart from what was provided. That being the state of affairs, most of them, including Mickey and Philip, opted to return to their suites to see if anything else interesting was on TV, or whatever.

Mickey tried reading *Little Dorrit*, but that tended to put him to sleep. He wanted to force back his jet lag.

After managing to stay awake through the daylight hours, the two went off to sleep with dreams of what a perfect world they had found themselves in. The special features of their beds kept them asleep throughout the night, so by morning, they were over the worst of their jet lag.

* * *

The twelve sat at their usual three tables, each with room for six. The girls sat at one table, Mickey and Philip sat with U Ta, Riu and Seymour also suite mates, while the other two sets of suite mates sat together at theirs. Breakfast was scrambled egg and sausage, which they helped themselves to from the buffet.

Seymour's ancestors were South Indians who had migrated to Malaysia in the old days of British colonialism. U Ta was Karen, a tribal group native to the borderland between Thailand and Myanmar. Back in the days when the two were independent states, one of U Ta's forbearer was an officer in the Karen National Union, trying to create a third country.

Mr. Singh arrived after the students had begun eating. With him was a tall dark thin woman with long wavy black hair, tight clothes, athletic build and Hispanic features. She was wearing a silver band covering her eyes and ears -- obviously see-through. The moment she arrived, she slid it upward, revealing her eyes.

'Yorba Linda, allow me to introduce you to my class, the China Cultural Exchange Tour.' Then he raised his voice. 'Class, this is your hostess for the next two weeks. Say hello to Yorba Linda.'

The class responded with a chorus of greetings.

'Will you join us for Breakfast, Yorba Linda?' invited Mr. Singh.

'No thank you. I just had mine at home.'

'A cup of tea then?'

'Okay.'

The instructor and the tour guide sat at the girls' table.

Everyone went on with their breakfast.

Mickey stole a glance at Yorba Linda at the next table and got a side view of her. Not bad looking.

* * *

The group entered the boardroom where a smiling gentleman in a business suit welcomed them.

Yorba Linda did the introduction. 'Mr. Jensen, the China Cultural Exchange Tour. Mr. Jensen is the CEO of San Francisco Metro-Tower.'

'Good morning,' Mr. Jensen returned. 'It's our privilege to welcome you to our city. Please take your seats around this table.' He was also wearing the silver band over his eyes and ears.

They took their seats.

'The first order of business is to distribute your ID bracelets. They serve, as electronic identification tags, and you can use them in electronic transactions. Each one as been credited with a small amount that you can use to purchase a few souvenirs during your trip to our sector. They scan in at any check out counter in retail stores as well as vending machines. All entrances to important places and check points will automatically detect and scan your access code. You all have level three access, which will allow you to take the tour of our entire sector, including all public places. Ms Kirkson?'

A woman in a business suit came in with a box, which she placed on the table in front of her. She took a bracelet from the box, held it to a small electronic gadget, and said, 'Seymour Williams.'

Seymour raised his hand. She handed it to him.

'Marisa Srisomboon...!' She continued until everyone had their bracelet. They consisted of a curved metallic strip, round, but leaving an opening just big enough to admit the wrist. The moment they put their hand in, the gap closed up and adjusted to the size of the wrist.

Mr. Jensen added, 'For your safety, the bracelets are designed to not come off unless removed with a special device. Don't worry, they're water proof, so you can swim, take a bath, get dirty. Now, your VR sets.'

Ms Kirkson had fetched a stack of boxes which she proceeded to hand out. The ornate packaging featured the headline *My Own World*, with a picture of a silver band, like Yorba Lind and Mr. Jensen wore. Inside each box was the band itself.

Mickey realised that this was a slightly different version of a VR headset that came with some gaming machines. His own family had one, which Robbie and Rosie always fought over.

'These are a small gift to you, from the City of San Francisco,' Mr. Jensen said. 'You may run the demo program on your own time to explore all the features. If you put them on now, we can get on with your geography lesson. We request that you keep these on for the duration of your visit. They will sync automatically with your ID bracelets.'

They put on their *My Own World's*, and soon found that the whole room had taken on an additional layer, a hologram map of the world shone behind him. Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Taiwan, Philippines, North America, Mexico and a few parts of Europe were highlighted.

'This, of course, is the Western Economic System, known to you as the "Western Block".

The inclusion of Japan, Taiwan and Philippines on their map, was puzzling to Mickey.

The map enlarged so as to include only North America. The Southern half lit up.

'You are here.' A bright red spot appeared just off the West Coast, on the Northern tip of Baja California, 'on the Western coast of United States of America. In spite of the uniform regulations, enabling freedom to move, live and do business throughout the entire Western Economic System, each nation within the system, remains culturally distinct.'

Now, the map enlarged again so as to show only the United States.

'The United States, which you see on the map, has a history that is unlike that of Canada, to our North, or Mexico, to the South. As you travel, you'll find many interesting things to see and do. For instance, here...'

A large area, stretching from the coast of the mainland all the way to Texas, changed colour.

'...you'll find typical American farming communities, cattle ranches complete with cowboys, and Native American tribal peoples living and working like their ancestors have for the last three hundred years.'

As he mentioned each aspect of American life, 3D animated holograms appeared in various parts of the room. This went on for about half an hour.

Later, when Mr. Jensen paused for questions and answers, Jimmy Khoo asked, 'When do we see cowboys and Indians?'

'That will be after your next stage of your journey, next week, when you arrive in Dallas.'

'Why you want to see Indians?' said Albert Fong in a low voice. 'Have enough right here, la, with *Ku-ku Chiao!*'

'Hoi! Shut your mouth!' said Philip.

'Go fish!'

'*Tch tch!*' chided Mr. Singh.

* * *

No tour of a metro-tower is complete without a trip to the top to enjoy a view of the surrounding country. So began their tour of San Francisco. The group was just small enough to fill one lift, occupying all the seats in the two concentric circles, with Philip reluctantly sitting on Marisa's lap. The G force reminded them of their ride in the semi-space ship.

'Which of you is Philip Kumar?' inquired Yorba Linda.

There was silence.

'How do you know about Philip?' asked Mickey.

'From someone who goes by the name, "Monterey Jack".'

Philip said, weakly, 'Er -- I'm Philip.'

Yorba Linda looked at him, and broke out in laughter.

Philip looked like he would start crying. Mickey put his hand on his shoulder.

'I'm sorry,' laughed Yorba Linda. 'Do you know the name, Monterey Jack?'

'Yes, la!'

'You know, he made me promise not to tell, but I'm going to tell you anyway. Do you know how old is?'

'No?'

'Fourteen years old, and he's no bigger than you.'

'How do you know him?'

'He's my step brother!' Oh, he's a choice one! You never know what he's going to do next, who he going to hack...'

'When will we meet him?'

'His father won't let him out of his sight. Also -- believe it or not -- he was afraid of you seeing how old he really is!'

'Really?'

'But he did hack the system, and,' she sighed, 'he's the one responsible for me being your hostess.'

'"Monterey Jack" that's a kind of cheese, isn't it?' asked Marisa.

'A type of cheddar, popular with Mexican food,' said Yorba Linda, 'and it's white, like his skin. Because he tried so hard to act like a Hispanic, we gave him that nick-name. That was before his father married my mother.'

'He still do?'

'Hah! There's no telling what he'll be into next!'

The lift slowed as they reached the top -- time to admire the view.

* * *

In the café during their free time, some of the students ran the demos for their *My Own World*.

The first thing that happened: a brilliant blue circle appeared in the upper right corner of the periphery vision. A voice said, 'Touch that ring with your finger.' On doing so, a menu screen came up. That was the starting point for configuring their *Own World*.

As various features introduced themselves, Mickey realised it was much more than a gaming device. As it did in the boardroom, it gave the environment a new dimension. If they were lost, all they had to do was ask, through the menu, how to get to a certain location, and an arrow would appear in the air, like in a taxi driving game Mickey had played at home. For texting, and certain other functions, a touch pad would appear, visible only to the user, but sensitive to the location of the user's fingers.

Another feature did for them what their virtual classroom did back at home. They could project their on-line image so that anyone else wearing a *My Own World* headset would see them that way. Had they been given these much earlier, they could have carried on their their on-line images while physically

meeting one another instead of reverting to their real world looks.

Mickey tried another feature. Suddenly, the room about them appeared like a haunted house, and all his friends looked like zombies. All his friends were recognisable as themselves, but a zombies -- except for Seymour Williams, who looked like an Elvis Presley zombie. Elvis was the image Seymour had already chosen to project.

Another setting and everyone looked like aliens, and the décor of the café changed accordingly. Seymour looked like an alien version of Elvis Presley, and now, Albert Fong looked like an alien Jackie Chan. Another setting, again, turned everyone into cowboys.

* * *

Mickey, Philip and Riu walked down the street to test their various settings in the public areas of the metro tower. The default setting, generated by the metro tower itself, made them think they were outside. The sky above was blue, with a few clouds, the houses were two and three stories high, made of various materials that Mickey didn't remember seeing without his head set.

He took it off momentarily to check, and sure enough, cold steel and plastic, like before. With the head set, the place looked like a variety of brick, stone, wood, marble, like an old fashion city would have looked, or down town Chantaburi, or Hong Kong at ground level.

The cowboy setting turned all the buildings into old time San Francisco. The signs over each shop were hand painted on wood, the style of the windows, everything was Old West.

Another thing Mickey noticed when he took off his head set momentarily was how some people were dressed -- or not dressed. Some were wearing stylish virtual clothing but little otherwise. At least one person had only his underwear.

He hadn't noticed this before, probably because there weren't so many people out when they left their hotel that morning. On their way through the city, the hover van had sped so fast, they didn't see the people very clearly.

Back inside, Mickey mentioned it to Yorba Linda.

'Ha ha!' she responded. 'I know some who like to go out stark naked.'

'Naked? Cool!' said Albert Fong.

'Like in *The Emperor's New Clothes*?' suggested Philip.

'Exactly,' said Yorba Linda. 'But, a word of warning: some people have their head sets tuned to ignore virtual personal imaging. In my close circle of friends we consider it uncool to depend solely on projected clothing. In fact, I often use mine as a head band and pull it down when I need information from the city network.'

'The street doesn't look as nice that way,' said Mickey. 'No blue sky above.'

'But at least it's real.'

* * *

Late evening, back in the suite, Mickey was puzzling over one of his downloads. His dad had said that the mini-series they watched was actually quite close to the book version, but Mickey was noticing some striking differences between that and the electronic version of *Little Dorrit* he was reading now. In fact, it was hard to believe that the book was set in the early 1700s.

The main character, Arthur Clennem, had arrived from China, and was describing it to Mr. Meagles as a place most un-conducive to any sort of happiness. If Mickey wasn't mistaken, he seemed to be describing classical Marxist Communism.

Did that exist in Dicken's time?

Arthur had begun to have some serious misgivings about his history while talking to his ailing father on his deathbed.

Okay, that was in the video.

Then, there was the Office of Circumlocution, the big government office Arthur Clennem had to do business with, and that so much of the story revolved around. From the mini-series, it was obvious that Charles Dickens did have a bone to pick with government bureaucracy -- just from the meaning of the word 'circumlocution' --, but somehow, the text of the ebook made out that it was bureaucracy that kept the common people from the consumer goods that would enrich their lives.

Mickey didn't remember anything about consumerism from the mini-series.

In the midst of this, was the life of William Dorrit and his misplaced hope in his aristocratic roots, which aristocracy, according to the ebook, was responsible for reserving luxuries and life enhancing pleasures to themselves instead of releasing it to the consumers, the rightful recipients. Reinforcing the state of things, until his bubble broke, was Mr. Merdle's financial empire, and assisting him, the House of Clennem, and their unholy alliance with the Chinese -- until that house fell.

Here, Mickey had to shake his head. In the mini-series, it was Mr. Merdle's pyramid scheme that bore any resemblance to consumerism.

In the end, Arthur Clennem's marriage to Little Dorrit, both having been liberated from their respective family's bondages, and Arthur's partnership with the inventor Daniel Doyce and his multinational company, represented the rise of global consumerism.

The only reason Mickey was able to read so far was because it was so easy to read.

* * *

The neighbourhood reminded Mickey of an old film he had seen, *Back to the Future II*. Several of the houses looked exactly like the settings of one or two of the sitcoms they had watched in their hotel room. They were single storey, but took up a lot of space, and had broad lawns lined with verdant shrubbery. Robotic gardeners roamed about silently cutting grass or trimming hedges. One was on its extended telescoping legs shaping a tall evergreen. Each house had its own swimming

pool.

A boy sped by on a hoverboard, followed by a robotic dog. An elderly couple was lounging on the front yard nearby, drinking something with ice.

A couple of the houses were open for tours, and Yorba Linda led them into one. After watching so much TV in the hotel room, there was really nothing new to see.

Yorba Linda pointed out some of the fixtures and explained their use. She seemed to notice the lack of interest.

'In China, well, do they have these kinds of things?'

'Yeah, la,' said Geoffrey Wong.

'Our house have that,' said Lucy Kanda, pointing to the *Mr. Butler* robot.

'I know someone have chair like that,' said Derek.

'Local sports club, have carpet, self-cleaning one, just like here,' said Albert Fong.

'Maybe not everyone has all these things in one house,' said Mickey, 'but we're happy.'

'Hmmm!' said Yorba Linda. 'That wasn't the impression I had.'

They stepped outside again.

Mickey was sure he recognised the house down the street, but not what was behind it. Instead of a snow capped mountain range, there was a giant blue fence running along the back of several properties, hiding everything behind it.

'Did they show that house on TV yesterday?' he asked Yorba Linda.

'Yes. That's our next stop, the set of a popular TV program, *Janny and Joey*.'

'Ah! I see that la!' said Jimmy Khoo. 'But that one have mountains!'

'That what blue tarp for, stupid!' said Albert. 'Make it anywhere you want!'

'I must say, I've heard some of the most colourful speech from your group,' commented Yorba Linda.

'Asia English,' said Albert. 'Only way to talk! Americans have lot to learn!'

'I keep hearing the word, "la".'

'From Chinese,' said Lucy.

Mickey added, 'English words, but spoken with Asian grammar structure and syntax.'

'*Wah lan eh! Mat Salleh* know all about Asian grammar and syntax!' said Albert. 'Can say in Engrand so *cheebilised* ah?'

'Yes, *very* colourful,' muttered Mr. Singh.

If they weren't standing in some stranger's house, Mickey was sure he would have had something colourful to say himself. It wasn't as though he had *asked* to be a *Mat Salleh*.

* * *

There were two people at work on the set when the group entered, one with a small camera, another apparently doing the acting. A small monitor show what the camera was catching.

The actor was drably dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, and was

talking to an empty space. 'Look, Hon, we've been over this before! Do I have to tell you again?'

The disembodied voice of a woman answered, 'But that was before you brought that ludicrous -- what do you call it?'

The monitor showed something entirely different -- the same room, a leisurely dressed gentleman that looked nothing like the drably dressed actor, but going through exactly the same motions, talking to a scantily clad woman. Mickey recognised them from the TV show.

The man with the camera said, 'Great! Let's go with that. Next scene.'

The actor walked over to the window and looked out. Suddenly, the monitor showed, not the well dressed gentleman, but an old wrinkled man.

'If I had my way,' said the actor, 'I'd have done it long ago!'

The camera man answered, 'Well, if you had your way, we'd all be stuck in that rat-hole they call a rhinoceros hive!'

'Huh! A man can get no respect around here!'

'You'll get your respect when you deserve it!' said the camera man. 'Okay, good. Take the other part.'

The drably dressed actor walked over and occupied the air that he had been talking to as an old man. The old man reappeared on the monitor, this time, addressing the scantily dressed woman.

Then the disembodied voice of an old man sounded out, 'If I had my way, I'd have done it long ago!'

This time, the drably dressed actor answered, 'Well, if you had your way...'

* * *

The e-Bible only contained the New Testament. Mickey couldn't find any that included the Old Testament, apart from the Psalms, so Mickey read what he had.

The translation was refreshingly modern. It was in the same style as *Little Dorrit*.

Mickey's favourite part was the Christmas story, which was, conveniently, at the beginning.

It was certainly different, especially the passage, ...*the mystics from the East arrived, saying, 'Where is the one born to be king of this land?'*...

King of *this land*? That was different, to be sure. Mickey read on, intrigued by more choices of words.

After a while, he began to notice the absence of any reference to Jews. The entire narrative sounded like it could have happened in Chicago, or Norway, or Bangkok.

Well, I suppose that makes it up close and personal.

Then again, he remembered *Oliver Twist*. The version he skimmed neglected to mention that Fagin was a Jew. What about Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*?

So I'm a banker. But I have feelings, don't I? If you pinch me, I say, 'Ouch!'

At first, Mickey thought they were just being politically correct. Now that he couldn't find references to Jews in the New

Testament, he was wondering.

He looked up 'Jews' in the on-line encyclopaedia. *An adherent of Judaism, a family centred religion, dating thousands of years. Adherents attend worship services on Friday evening and Saturday morning, in a Synagogue, where they participate in prayers and chants in an ancient language called Hebrew, and readings from their holy books in the same language. Teachings include belief that a deity with a name too holy to pronounce made the universe, and issued commands (called 'Mitzvot') for adherents of Judaism to follow.*

The entry on 'Christianity' read: *A religion based on the belief in an afterlife, and that becoming a devotee of Jesus, the founder of Christianity, will ensure one will live in heaven after death. The teachings are found in their holy book, called the 'Bible'. Adherents attend worship services on Sunday morning.*

For all his searching, Mickey could find no reference to any connection between the two religions.

* * *

Mickey was sure that had they been the same size and evenly matched, Philip and Albert would have engaged in a fist fight during breakfast. Philip had discovered a name that Albert hated, *Fatty Bom Bom*.

'...yeah! You no brains, only big ugly blubbery *fat!* *Fatty Bom Bom!* That's what you are!'

'Shut up *Ku-ku Chiao!*'

'Fatty Bom Bom!'

'*Ku-ku Chiao!*'

'All right all right! Settle down, you two,' said Mr. Singh. 'Hah! Like a bunch of small children! You're supposed to be secondary school graduates!'

They were at different tables, but Mickey could hear Albert Fong muttering, '*Hong kan lah, Ku-ku Chiao!* Call me that again, I just grind you between my toes!'

They finished their breakfast in silence.

As they walked to the van that would take them to their first destination of the day, Philip clung all the closer to Mickey's side.

So, when did I choose sides?

* * *

Mickey wondered why the classroom was so bare, then he looked at it through his *My Own World*, and found it wasn't. The entire space of one wall was now a three dimensional view of the Milky Way galaxy, with the various sectors labelled with floating signs. Another opened into a meadow where a group of 18th century farmers were fighting a regiment of red-coat Englishmen. Another showed various geometric shapes and angles. The fourth was a view of the earth similar to what they saw from the semi space ship, but with labels. The fifth was a microscopic view of a human artery. The sixth side of the hexagon was an opening into another part of the study area. The group of them, students who belonged to this classroom and those visiting, occupied the six sided space that appeared to be a

portal between six worlds.

Mr. Singh introduced his students, and then the classroom instructor for the host class introduced his. Then, they divided them all into four groups, each with four or five of the visiting group with about six of the host students. Each group went to one of the four walls.

Mickey managed to give Philip the slip, but found himself with Albert Fong, along with Jimmy Khoo and U Ta Gladstone, with a number of the host students, standing by the wall that had the globe. At least he knew it was a wall, but its close proximity gave him vertigo. He kept a few feet away lest he trip and go hurtling into the earth's atmosphere -- which they were already doing.

Someone had adjusted the picture so that it was zooming in on a particular part of the earth's surface.

'What would you like to see?' asked a boy.

'Hong Kong!' suggested Jimmy Khoo.

They began to descend on the coast of China. As they got closer, Mickey could make out Victoria Island and Tsim Sha Tsui, and the other islands. But there was no metro tower.

'Very old picture,' said U Ta Gladstone.

'Old? How?' said one of the local girls. 'This is quite recent!'

'Where's the metro tower?' said Jimmy Khoo. 'And the shore line -- it's from long time ago, before...'

'Metro tower? You have metro towers?'

'No way! Metro towers are an American technology!'

Now, they were coming down to street level. Motorcars on rubber tires were noisily plying Nathan Road, construction workers were fixing the façade of a 20 story building whilst perched on bamboo scaffolding, all the while a team was performing a dragon dance across the street in front of an office complex.

'This is out of Jackie Chan!' said Jimmy Khoo.

'Yeah, all those cars, very old!' said Albert Fong.

'This is a satellite picture in real time!' said another local.

'Real time? But this is street level!' said Mickey. 'That's Hong Kong 100 years ago!'

'Our satellites can do that!'

'And the water level's way down, like before global warming,' added Jimmy.

'You're having us on!' said another local boy.

'They sent you here to spread Chinese propaganda, didn't they!'

'No way!' shouted Albert Fong. 'You brainwashed with propaganda!'

Things started to get out of hand until Mr. Singh and the local teacher came to restore order.

'They say that's modern Hongkong!' said Jimmy Khoo. 'They say it's from satellite!'

'It is,' said the local teacher.

'I think not,' said Mr. Singh. 'Right there is where one of the legs of our metro tower is planted. They had to removed that

whole neighbourhood.'

'Metro tower? I didn't know you have ...'

Mickey walked over to another group. They were viewing the interior of America as they would probably be seeing it during the next leg of their journey -- to Dallas. It was a view as would be seen from a hover car, flying over lush farm land, Indian reservations, colourful wilderness, slowing down over towns so as to see the shopping centres and places of entertainment. Thus the scene swept across Arizona, New Mexico and into Texas.

Since they'd be viewing this from the hover van anyway, Mickey wandered to another wall. Now, it looked like the two teachers were having an argument over the accuracy of their satellite image. Some of the students in the third group were drawn in -- all except for Philip, Seymour and a couple of the local students in their group. Mickey joined them.

They had gathered in a corner. One of the locals said, 'I don't care what it is. I just make my own world anyway. Here, I'll show you China in my world.'

A window opened up in the wall in front of them. A group of ancient warriors were displaying fancy swordsmanship. Some had staves, which they were twirling about, others were floating through the air, performing advanced Kung Fu, and some had weapons that Mickey doubted had ever existed in China. The battle even joined by a dragon which proceeded to torch several enemy flanks.

'That's part of my report on the rise of the Mongol Dynasty,' said the student who had turned on the view.

'That's -- *history*?' queried Seymour.

'Yeah. That's Kublai Khan, riding on the back of the dragon.'

'Creative Writing, I think,' said Philip.

'Alternative history, maybe,' said Mickey.

'When I finish school, I'm gonna write a new history of China, and this will be in it.'

'How can it be history if it has dragons in it?' said Mickey.

'Same way everything else is. No one living today was there, right? So who's gonna say I'm wrong?'

'The other history books. The history experts,' said Seymour.

'Hah! They just spout out what they want you to hear anyway. Everyone knows that!'

'But, history is what really happened!' said Philip. 'How can that there really happen?'

'We just change it to what we want,' said one of them, 'like we change "right now" to what we want by redoing the settings on our headsets.'

Now, Yorba Linda was getting everyone's attention.

'Attention, China Cultural Exchange Tour! It's time we went on to our next stop.'

The room quieted down. The visiting group said a subdued good bye, and left.

Mr. Singh didn't look happy at all.

'What do you think of all that?' he asked Yorba Linda.

She heaved a big sigh. Finally, she said, 'I can give you the

official version right now. If you want my *personal* opinion, we might need to find some place quiet where people wouldn't hear us.'

* * *

The interior looked much the same as any church hall Mickey had seen back home. Free standing buildings on the ground would have an exterior as well as an interior, but they were mostly alike inside. This one was in the metro-tower, occupying a hexagon shaped maxi-compartment not far from their lodging.

It was evening, after a day of touring about. Mickey walked about the place, looking for any hint of an answer to his new found queries. Was the Jesus they worshipped here Jewish? Did they have the Old Testament? Where did they keep their books, anyway?

The place was empty, except for an old man, seated in one of the pews, who looked like he was asleep.

He couldn't find a single book. No hymnal, no Bibles.

The meeting room had the same type of seats as those back home, all facing the front, where the pulpit and holograph screens were located.

'Is this your first time here?'

Mickey turned around and saw the pleasant faced gentleman.

'Yes. I'm with a tour group from China.'

The old man in the pew perked up.

'China! How interesting! We don't usually see many people from there. I'm Pastor Ned. And you?'

'Mickey O'Brien.'

'That doesn't sound Chinese. Nor do you look it for that matter.'

'Both parents were half and half. On my father's side, they came from Ireland.'

'Welcome to North America, at any rate. Let me show you around.'

'I don't see any Bibles,' commented Mickey.

'They'd all be in electronic format. Do you have an e-book reader? I can let you download a copy.'

'I got an e-copy, but only the New Testament. Do you have Old?'

The old man had walked up. 'You know a lot for a Chinaman. They teach Comparative Religions there or what?'

'Er -- we do have several copies of the whole Bible at my house.'

'Wow! I thought they didn't allow that in China!' said the Pastor.

'I'll say!' Said the old man. 'They're commies! Don't allow religion!'

Mickey responded, 'Some parts have strict rules about it, but they hardly enforce them. But your country ...'

'This is a free country, it is!' said the old man.

'...they wouldn't let us bring any books.'

'Cause we won't allow Communist propaganda. That's why!'

'I mean, my Bibles. Where can I find the Old Testament?'

'We only have the New Testament,' said the pastor. 'The Old Testament will soon be made available here. It's had to be thoroughly gone over and edited for the general reading public.'

'Why?'

'It's been a long time since I had the opportunity to study it myself. The original version had parts that were hard to understand like wrath and judgement. In fact, reading some sections, there are parts that would appear to condone genocide! Have you actually read it?'

'Yes la! All the time! That's why I'm looking for it. They wouldn't let us bring our own books here.'

'What do you make of it?'

'It shows God is holy! Lots of things we must take all together, and see the whole picture!'

'The New Testament does that for us. In it, are the basic truths of our salvation, how to be born again, and be assured of going to heaven...'

'What about the prophecies -- and God's demands for righteousness?'

'All that comes by faith in the New Testament. We'll have the Old Testament available to us in the near future. A team of scholars as been revising it to make it user friendly.'

'Like they did with the New Testament?'

'Yes.'

'But the electronic copy doesn't even say Jesus was Jewish!'

'Don't you know how much evil was done in the name of the church over that very issue? The Inquisition! The Holocaust! By making the Bible and other books politically correct, it reduces public consciousness of ethnic groups such as the Jews, so we can guarantee there won't be any such incidents in the future.'

'I suppose copies of the Koran don't have anything about *jihad*?'

'*Jihad*? What's that?'

... and Beyond

It was their free time. Mickey had resigned himself to the role of Philip's bodyguard, especially since Albert was being equally obnoxious to him as well. Now they were walking down a boulevard somewhere at the centre of the San Francisco Metro-Tower, within walking distance from the hotel. It was a different world from the sprawling suburb, depending on the setting of one's *My Own World*.

By far, most people had their headsets over their eyes. Mickey and Philip could only notice them when they didn't have their own on. Otherwise, they only saw the projected images.

It was more fun not to wear the headsets. Right now, they were following a fat young teenager wearing only a scant pair of underpants that covered half his bum. With their head sets on, he was tall and slender and wore an ankle length black satin coat.

"It looks like the emperor's wearing his new clothes today," Mickey mumbled to Philip.

Philip broke out giggling -- but stopped short.

Up ahead was Albert Fong and Derek Hong walking towards them.

'Hoi! Here comes Fatty Bom Bom!' Philip whispered, as he pulled Mickey by his arm into McDonald's.

He could just hear Albert's voice. 'Hah! Such *ya ya papaya* -- duck into McDonalds!'

They each had been given some vouchers to spend, so they decided to try something.

'Hi!' A female voice resounded from one of the stalls. It was Yorba Linda, seated with their own professor.

'Get something and join us!' said Mr. Singh.

They did. Mickey ordered a Hash McBean platter, and Philip, McPig Nuggats. They took their trays and went to sit with Mr. Singh and Yorba Linda.

'How are you two enjoying the trip?' asked the latter.

'Okay, I guess,' said Philip.

'Different,' said Mickey.

'How different?' asked Yorba Linda. 'I was gaining the impression your part of the world already had the same technology.'

'Yeah, but, still different,' said Philip.

'Here, it's like, all the things you showed us, like, we have them but --'

'Like here -- must have, must have. If not have, you not cool!'

'Like, old fashion, quaint.'

'Yes,' responded Yorba Linda. 'The media does push things. My Uncle Rodrigo complained about that as well,' -- she looked at Mr. Singh as though that were the topic of their conversation -- 'which is probably why I've always noticed it myself.'

'You don't have books printed on paper here, do you,' commented Mickey.

'Actually, my Uncle Rodrigo kept a few. I'm not sure what happened to them. About twenty or so years ago they had the "anti old" campaign. At least, that's what my uncle called it. They encouraged people to discard all objects older than ten years. They said antiques were unhygienic, and paper causes dust allergies and all that. We got rid of all wooden furniture, fixtures, ornaments -- all paper books had to be replaced by e-books, which are better on the eyes and don't create harmful dust.

'2055?' asked Mickey.

'Yes. That was the year paper books were to be replaced by e-books. You knew about that?'

'We got them,' said Philip.

'Lots of used books,' added Mickey. 'All of them with an electronic tag, "to be destroyed, 2055".'

'Well! I'm glad someone benefited from them. I heard they busted a large smuggling ring that was exporting old books.'

'But the e-books I've downloaded aren't the same as the old paper books,' said Mickey.

'My Uncle Rodrigo noticed that. He spoke out about it, wrote some articles, had a big following...'

'What happened to him?' asked Mr. Singh.

'He was offered a job with a research company. He had to move to a different city. We haven't seen him since.'

'Didn't keep in touch?'

'He said he would, but -- well -- my half brother, Monterey Jack, claims to have been in contact with him. You can't believe much of what he says, though.'

'What about his following?'

'Sort of lost interest.'

'No one talks about the differences between -- you know --' asked Mickey.

'No one seems to care. Look at them.'

Through the plate-glass they saw another couple walking by, wearing VR headsets. One was in his pyjamas, the other in his underwear. *The emperor...*

Just then, a group of about fifteen people came in and took seats in the stalls behind them. The area had been roped off, but they simply unhooked the rope and walked in.

'Oh no -- them again,' sighed Yorba Linda.

'Who?' asked Philip.

'A religious group.'

'Christian?'

'They say they are, but the respectable churches don't accept them.'

Some of the group were arriving with trays piled over with food.

'Are you a Christian, Yorba Linda?' asked Philip.

'Yes. I belong to my local Assemblies of God.'

Someone of the group behind them spoke above the

background noise. 'Brother Ralph, will you bless the food and drink?'

'Sure. Blessed are you, our Lord and our God, King of the universe, who as provided these soyaburgers and fries, which we now partake of in remembrance of your Body, which was broken for us, and we receive this cola, as your blood, shed for the sins of many.'

There was a resounding 'Amen' from the whole group. They tucked in.

'They do Eucharist with a burger and cola?' asked Mr. Singh.

'Yes,' sighed Yorba Linda.

'I downloaded a Bible,' said Mickey. 'But it only had the New Testament. I couldn't find any Old Testament on line.'

'My Uncle had one.'

'A paper one, no doubt,' said Mr. Singh.

'Yes. The church emphasises that in all matters of faith, we rely on the New Testament. There's not been any demand for the old -- I guess.'

'And the Bible I downloaded, it doesn't even say Jesus was Jewish!'

'That he's -- what?'

'Jewish -- you know, Judaism. Like they have in Israel.'

'What does that have to do with Jesus?'

'He was from Israel, wasn't he!'

'I didn't know that!'

Mr. Singh exclaimed, 'I though everyone knew that! I know that! I'm a Sikh!'

'Yeah,' said Mickey. 'Where do they teach you Jesus was from?'

'They don't. He belongs to the whole world. But, why Israel, of all places? That's a rogue state! Not a part of the Islamic block or the Euro-American block!'

'They do associate with the African Free States,' said Mr. Singh.

Now, the leader of the religious group was making an announcement. 'Brothers and sisters, today, we wish to welcome John Ferguson into our fellowship. He has stated that he wishes to become a disciple, so, John?'

A middle aged man approached the leader.

'John,' said the leader. 'Do you understand the commitment you are making?'

'Yes,' responded John.

'Do you, willingly renounce the worldly ways of Consumerism, the ways of the flesh, the status symbols of this world, to take on yourself the yoke of the Kingdom of God?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Our Master once said, "Whoever will be my disciple, let him take up his cross and follow me," and "Whoever will not disregard his father and mother, even his own life, is not worthy to be my disciple." Do you now forsake all to follow the ways of our Master?'

'Yes...'

'That's not in the Bible, surely!' whispered Yorba Linda.

'Actually, it is,' said Mickey.

There were a couple more questions, which made Mickey wonder if the leader weren't trying to talk John out of joining their group, but John seemed determined.

Finally, the leader said, 'Andy, the water.'

Someone brought him a plastic cup.

'John, I hereby baptise you in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.' Then, he poured the contents of the cup on John's head. The group applauded.

'A baptism service? In McDonald's?' said Mickey.

'They're known as radicals,' said Yorba Linda.

A police man walked into the restaurant and looked about.

Then, he walked over to the group.

'What are you doing here?' he asked in an intimidating tone of voice.

'Just a group of us dining out together,' said the leader. 'Are we being too noisy?'

'Samuel McFadden,' said the officer. 'This wouldn't be the first time. We've had reports of unauthorised religious activity outside of a church premises.'

'Well, like I said...'

The policeman turned to Mickey and his table. 'You're not with them, are you?'

'No,' said Mr. Singh.

'Have you observed any odd behaviour?'

'No Sir,' said Mr. Singh.

'Nothing,' said Mickey.

'Just enjoy enjoy,' said Philip.

'Well, okay. I'm warning you, Samuel, I'm watching you closely.' He began to walk slowly out.

The group slowly went back to their table conversation.

'You folks live around here?' It was Samuel, the leader of the group.

'No la,' said Philip.

'From China,' said Mr. Singh.

'Wow! What brings you here?'

'On a graduating class tour.'

'Why don't you sit down?' said Yorba Linda.

'Thank you.'

The four of them introduced themselves.

'We enjoyed your service,' said Mickey.

'Believers?' asked Samuel.

'I am,' said Mickey.

'Me too, I guess,' said Yorba Linda.

'You -- guess?'

'Well -- different church.'

'Okay. You as well?'

'Sikh,' said Mr. Singh.

'Hindu,' said Philip.

'Welcome to America,' said Samuel. Turning to Yorba Linda, 'You sound like a local.'

'I'm their tour guide.'

Mickey had an idea. 'Where can I get a full electronic Bible? You know -- Old Testament and all?'

Samuel sighed. 'Hard to get.'

'Do you have one?'

'I could get a copy of it to you, I suppose.'

'Where do you get it?'

'We have to hack.'

'Why is it so hard to get it?' asked Mr. Singh.

'The only electronic copy that officially exists is embedded in the code they use to scan for illegal copies on the Internet. We obtained our copy by backwards hacking, and then did a little decoding.'

'You're quite trusting of us,' said Yorba Linda.

'I have a good feeling about you.'

'You know Jesus was Jewish?' piped up Philip.

'Shhh -- yes, and I know one or two Jewish people who know that too. As for your copy, I'll get it on to a memory chip and bring it to you.' He went back to his table.

They had finished, so they went back to their lodging.

Mickey suddenly remembered, he hadn't given Samuel McFadden his address to bring the memory chip to him!

* * *

They were together at the Transport Centre, ready with their back packs, all but Yorba Linda. The latter was supposed to meet them there to accompany them on their trip to Dallas.

'I have the seating list for the two hover vehicles,' said Mr. Singh. 'Why don't we go ahead and board? The one that Yorba Linda is supposed to get on can leave a bit later.'

He read off the lists for the two vehicles, and the students arranged themselves accordingly. Mickey found himself boarding car number two, along with U Ta Gladstone, Lucy Kanda, Marisa, Riu, Tammy and Seymour Williams.

Hah! Finally got rid of both Philip and Albert.

There were no windows in the vehicle, so they sat with the side door open.

Philip's head appeared in the opening.

'What are you doing here?' said U Ta. 'Aren't you supposed to be in the other one?'

'Change places la. Albert Fong -- that Fatty Bom Bom -- such a scumbag!'

'Full already!'

'Someone change with me -- pleeeeeease!'

Mr. Singh joined Philip at the door. 'There are two empty places in ours, why don't two of you girls join us, Philip can come here, as well as Yorba Linda, when she arrives. It's better if there's a supervisor in each car.'

The girls went off to the other car. Mr. Singh, apparently, didn't notice it was all three.

'We'll go ahead and go. You folks follow as soon as Yorba Linda joins you. The journey's been programmed already, so she'll start it with the push of the green button. See you there.'

'Bye!' they all chimed in.

Philip, with a sigh of relief, sat down next to Mickey.

Mickey heaved a quieter sigh -- *the kid's hard to get rid of!*

They heard the whirr of the other car departing.

Just then, Albert Fong stepped in and sat down. 'The girls -- so *ya ya* -- they force me out. So I'm back with *Ku-ku Chiao*, lor? Yeah la! Scoot up close to *Mat Salleh* for protection la! '

Philip groaned.

Another head appeared at the door -- *Samuel McFadden!*

'Wah! How you find us?' exclaimed Philip.

'Find you?' said Albert. 'He use microscope!'

'Hoi!'

'I've got the e-book you asked for,' said Samuel, handing Mickey a small bare memory chip.

'But -- '

'You'll be needing it soon, but don't load it just yet. Put it somewhere safe -- like that envelope in your coat pocket. You'll need them both at the same time.'

'What envelope? -- Oh!' Mickey had a feeling similar to when he ran into his aunt at the transport centre in Bangkok.

'We'll meet again!' he disappeared.

The envelope in his pocket was the one his aunt gave him. There was just enough room at the end of the sealed opening to slip the chip in. What did he mean by, *need them both at the same time?* How did he know about the envelope anyway? It was inside his coat!

'How did he find us, anyway?'

'Dunno!' said Philip.

Yorba Linda interrupted any further pondering. 'Don't tell me the other car left already -- and ...' she consulted her e-tablet, 'I'm supposed to be in the car with Mr. Singh!'

'Gone already la!' said Albert.

'I was specifically told not to alter the seating arrangement! Oh well.'

She got in, shut the door, pressed the green button, and they were off.

'Why no windows in this one?' asked Seymour.

'I don't know why cross-country flights don't have windows,' signed Yorba Linda. 'However, you can look out via your headsets.'

They pulled their headsets over their eyes and viewed the landscape in silence, the sprawling residential estates, an occasional metro tower, amusement parks ...

The vehicle slowed down and came to a stop over a picturesque picnic area. Suddenly, the scene from their headsets blurred to nothing.

'Only forty minutes!' said Yorba Linda, who hadn't been wearing her headset. 'It's suppose to be a two hour trip!'

There was a *clunk*, as though they had landed on something other than a hover dock.

The door opened, showing anything but what their headsets had shone -- yellow and brown rocks and sand, and the most

motley group of men they'd seen since Clint Eastwood.

'Everyone out! Move it!' said a man with close-cropped hair, and the scar on his face.

'Oh great! A load of freak'n *chinks*!' said another one.

'Don't worry, we'll modify the biometrics,' said a more elderly man, who looked like their leader.

'What the hell is going on?' exclaimed Yorba Linda.

They were holding weapons. One of them had a swastika tattooed to his shoulder.

They got out into the hot sun, carrying their backpacks.

'Hold it. Let's see what's in those,' said one of them.

'No way, you scumbag!' said Yorba Linda.

Someone held a gun to her. They began searching all the bags. Another one began collecting their headsets.

A man with a swastika tattooed to his cheek went through Mickey's. 'What's a nice white boy like you doing with a load of goons?'

The girl going through Philip's bag said, 'No way. He's not white. He's a...'

'Sure he is! Just got a deep tan, that's all.'

Mickey wanted to shout that he was Asian, but he was frozen with fear.

The man came across Micky's e-tablet. 'This'll do.' He helped himself to it. The others' e-tablets, mobile phones and gadgets met the same fate.

No one dared resist.

'Now,' said the oldest one, 'your ID bracelets.' He had a swastika on his eyelid.

He held up a gadget, went to the one closest to him, Albert Fong, grabbed his wrist, clicked the gadget on his bracelet, which unwrapped itself. One by one, he got everyone's bracelet.

'What do you think you're going to do with those?' said Yorba Linda.

'Make our entry into Multinational Consumer Land, of course, thanks to you and our man inside!'

'To put a lug wrench or two between the wheels of your Zionist controlled machinery!' said another.

'Us, and who?' exclaimed Yorba Linda.

'Wait a minute!' said the leader. 'There's supposed to be three females. I see only one here. Melinda and Julie, you'll have to go as men -- hold on, this one's aged 13. Julie, you can pass as a 13-year old -- wait, a name like Kumar -- Margaret, you've got the deeper tan, you're Philip Kumar. We'll get you a haircut. And, "U-Ta" -- what kind of name is that? Julie, you're U-Ta.

Dammit, our man inside said three girls!'

'Hey, Frank! They're closing in,' said one of them holding a scanning device.

'What man inside?' demanded Yorba Linda.

'Wouldn't you like to know! So long.'

The gang boarded, and the students and their guide stood, watching their conveyance take off and disappear into the distance.

'Oh my god -- we *kena sai man!*' Albert began. 'And its all you fault, Kumar. You change cars you get us into this mess! You son of a ...'

'Screw you, you freak'n bastard,' Philip screamed back at him, and then followed that by more choice words mixed with unintelligible wailing that finally subsided with, '...I just want to go home!'

So sudden was the barrage that it left Albert speechless.

Mickey put his arm around Philip's shoulder as he continued to sob at lower decibels. Seymour and U-Ta also looked close to tears.

The sun was scorching, and there was no shade.

'Where the hell are we, anyway?' said Yorba Linda.

'*You* don't know?' said Albert.

'It's not in any of my geography databases. The only place I've ever seen people like that is in old movies about Neo Nazis!'

'Yeah, Nazis,' said Seymour. 'I see swastikas on them.'

'But they don't even exist!' said Yorba Linda. 'Then again, neither does this place!'

'Cactus Head?' said Riu.

'What?'

'Cactus Head. That sign say "Cactus Head, three miles".'

Mickey looked at the faded, hand painted sign standing next to the dirt road.

Cactus Head! Where had he heard that name?

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