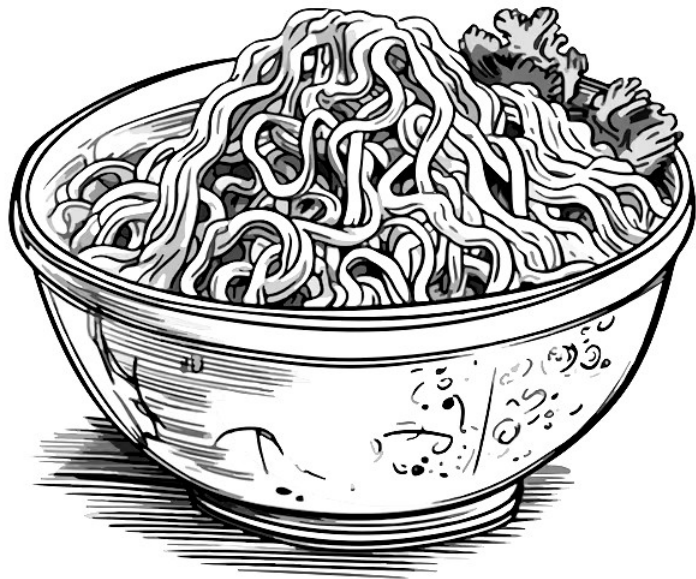


To top up their mystic level the men passed round jugs of applejack and pipes of ganja, and by midnight we were all rather highly exalted. A slow and graceful extemporaneous dance began, and for the first time amongst the mendicants I felt compelled to join in. Moving the body under the influence of the mixture of drugs and music indeed induced a state of bliss.



Night Market Noodles

by
Le
Peter
de
Lamborn
Wilson



Night Market Noodles
by Peter Lamborn Wilson

retrieved from 96thofoctober.com

1

The room in which I found myself was suffocated in decay. Its corners were blurred with concretions of dust and broken shards, or filthy black cobwebs saturated with grease. The walls seemed tubercular, the floor a pox of dead linoleum. A chair and bed were covered with tallow'd rags and grime. Do I live here? The thought drove me out the door. I nightmared myself into a long corridor of rotten concrete, dimly lit as if with fungal phosphorescence.

I found a stairwell and ascended. Soon I was lost in a gridded labyrinth of hallways and more stairs, all featureless and gray as bone. Would I ever find a way out of this mildewed maze? I had to remind myself to breathe.

2

Finally a rusted metal door — creaking on loose hinges — let me out of the vast building into a back alleyway, narrow, dark, rat-haunted, garbagestrewn. Then I came out in the open.

I gaped around me and across a wide plaza of uneven dirt and broken pavement. All around the huge trapezoidal space great cyclopean ruins of buildings ranged, vaguely classical in form but behemothic in size, gargantuan, decayed, raddled as if by decalcomania or frottage, some completely collapsed, others still standing but as if in dull pain, abandoned and meaningless. Kudzu vines grew everywhere, softening jagged broken edges of concrete, marble and granite with a graygreen gangrene of parasitic florescence. The sky loomed close and metallic, the tops of some buildings grew vague in a pendulous mist.

3

A few humans could be seen in the distance. I could make out their dress and suddenly realized I myself was similarly attired. A sort of cloak woven loosely of scraps of old plastic and swags of badly cured fur — squirrel perhaps, or feral cat — barely covered my body. I had to hold the flaps together with one hand in order to cover

my genitals, since I was naked beneath the ragged cape. My feet were bare and caked with dirt.

Feeling chill, I began to walk across the vast almost-empty plaza toward an enormous building that looked like a Greek temple, except for its heavy and ungraceful proportions. It still held its shape, although as I drew near I noticed that the frieze of statuary beneath the Parthenon-like roof was melted with age and blurred beyond recognition. The palace-sized stairway was smothered in kudzu except for one narrow brokeback path up the midway toward a black gaping gate — apparently the building was still in use.

As I at last drew near this edifice however, I noticed to the left an opening in the ground like an uncovered grave surrounded by a half-collapsed metal fence — it was a subway entrance! As if unable to control myself I made for the hole and plunged down its stairs.

4

Down, down I descended into the shadow. The light never totally died, since dusty feeble shafts of dim day sluggishly penetrated the gloom from above. Again I was lost in a labyrinth. I could only pray it held no minotaur. At last I found myself on a platform beside a

ruined track that vanished into a dark tunnel at both ends. A few shrouded figures appeared to be waiting for a train, so I joined them.

A creaking, dull clanging rattle sounded from the tracks. I looked over the edge of the platform and could just make out two cables, apparently woven of metallic strands; one was slowly moving out of the left-hand tunnel mouth and toward the right, and the other in the opposite direction, heavily snaking along the ground between the tracks.

We waited. The cables continued to move. Time seemed to pass. Perhaps an hour?

5

At last a louder clanking was heard on the left. I peered down the tunnel and saw two head lamps like a dragon's eyes slowly approaching at the slow pace of the cable. The lights were of flame, not electricity. There appeared to be no electricity in this world.

Now there rumbled and jolted into view a single subway car, rusted and patched, emerging slowly from the tunnel like a decayed tooth from a diseased jaw; its

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“Uh... shocking indeed,” I answered. “I’m from... the Mainland and unfamiliar with customs of the City. Is there perhaps a religious rule here against the, the alienation of labor?”

“Well, of course. It is a sin. Here OR on the Mainland, or anywhere,” she croaked, giving me a suspicious glare.

“Most reprehensible!” I quickly agreed.

“But... does no one seek revenge for the cook’s murder?”

No one, she told me. Her attitude seemed to be that it was dirty work, but that someone had had to do it.

cavities were broken-glass windows lit dimly from within by primitive oil lamps. The body of the car had once been painted with zig-zags, starbursts, and jagged lines in meaningless symbols (meaningless to me, at any rate). The car, drawn by its cables, creaked to a halt in front of the station platform. Its sliding doors were missing and the car gaped open. All the shadowy waiting figures on the platform entered the car, and I followed them.

6

Inside the car a few men were sitting — dressed in rags — before big baskets of fish. I saw some green crabs and oysters and a writhing mass of still-living eels, as well as mud-flecked, silvery mullet and rubrous snapper. The car stank of seaweed and dying fish. The men, who appeared to be of mixed Black and Chinese ancestry, nodded over their catch as if exhausted and did not look up at the new passengers.

At the front of the train a driver, dressed in a cloak not unlike my own and a brimless hat of fur, used both hands to throw a switch that creaked and jerked and (apparently) re-engaged the car with the ever-moving

cable. We began to rattle toward the righthand tunnel mouth.

The driver now turned away from his “controls” and allowed the train to proceed on its own. He walked back toward us new passengers, holding out his hand, obviously expecting some payment. He was White and heavily bearded and resembled a tatty old bear.

A fat woman standing near me (and dressed in what appeared to be burlap sacks and rat skins) reached into a purse held around her saggy neck on a cord, took something out and gave it to the driver-conductor. In a panic I scrabbled into my own rags and to my surprise discovered I too was wearing a leather bag on a string of sinew around my neck. I pried it open and poured out its contents onto my palm.

I was fascinated by the results. The little collection of strange objects included a number of worn coins cut roughly into quarters; the blurred inscriptions appeared to be Chinese — in any case I couldn't decipher them. Later I learned that all the local “coins” were very old and Chinese, but I never heard any explanation of them. Also in my purse I found a few small uncut but roughly polished garnets and bits of crystal and some

Curiosity overcame me and I caught the subway that afternoon.

On the outskirts of the Market I found a tea-stall run by an old woman who looked like a witch, bent over at a 45-degree angle, toothless and snapjawed, balding and half-naked, tending a little fire, one cracked pot, and two dirty cups. I pegged her as a gossip, and stopped to drink a cup of her brew. In answer to my simple question, “What news?” she spoke at length. Kingdom Goul was dead. The wife was probably innocent. She and the daughters were happy at last.

“Is there no one investigating the murder?” I asked.

“Who would bother? No one wants a blood feud, not even his stupid sons.”

“Are there no... police? No government?”

The old harridan gave me such a blank peculiar look that I coughed and pretended I'd said nothing.

“The rumor is that he tried to pay someone wages. Can you imagine such perfidy?” she demanded.

a cliff (as the silly things are wont to do) are they ever eaten, and mutton is reckoned a great treat.

I fell onto a couch of rags and covered myself with the robe. At once I plunged into sleep, dreamless sleep. I didn't wake until evening. Kawn then fed me generously on a stew of scallops, oysters, cuttlefish, crabs, tomatoes, potatoes, and milk, flavored with a large bunch of fresh parsley. With it we shared a bottle of red wine, and at last I felt recovered and even cheerful.

The next day and the next, I stayed with Kawn Fay at the Dagon Temple. We experimented with ink and began to read the Sutra together. I found its doctrine of nothingness quite soothing.

On the third day, my acquaintance, the mendicant Antoneen, showed up at the Temple with a message for me. Father Foo and Solomon Chang both hoped to see me soon. Nothing was said in the message about the murder, so I quizzed him for news.

"Most folks believe the wife did him in, and no one especially cares. Anyway, the shop is open again and the women are serving food as good as Goul ever cooked, so he won't be missed!"

ornamental beads, apparently quite antique. Wrapped in a green leaf was a little lump I realized was a plug of ganja, which I decided at once to keep for my own use, not as "money."

Just then the conductor loomed in front of me, reached into my palm, and plucked up one of the cut coin-bits. In rough but perfectly understandable English he said, "To the Night Market?" and I nodded yes. I sat down on the bench and decided to try to smile at my neighbor, the fat lady. She smiled back. At least these ragamuffins seemed to be human! I asked a question.

"I'm from... out of town. Is it far to the, the Night Market?"

"Oh yes," she answered. "Evening will be closing in before we're there."

"What time is it now?" I ventured, but she gave me such a puzzled look I coughed and pretended I hadn't said it. Uneasily we fell into silence and finally she seemed to doze off.

After some indeterminate time had passed, at the next station the car again clanked to a halt and two new passengers entered. At once I assumed these were holy men, since their necks were adorned with numerous strings of beads, bearclaws, and sharks'-teeth, wreathes of leaves, and large crude crosses; their hair and beards were long and matted and woven with feathers and twigs; but aside from that they were completely naked — their bodies caked in mud. No one seemed bothered by their dangling genitals. They each sported a ritualistic-looking staff with attached bones, pebbles, feathers and shells hanging and clinking.

They made their way to the back of the car, where I suddenly noticed for the first time a small shrine built into the upper corner of the wall. A niche of carved wood held a little idol, which I immediately recognized — it was a primitive Satan, naked, horned, tailed, goat-footed and painted bright shiny red. It seemed to me that as lord of the underworld he made an ideal patron for the subway system.

One holy man carried a bowl (was it the top of a human skull?) full of ashes — the other poured some powder into it from one of several pouches around his neck and stirred with his finger. Hot coals beneath the ashes

dead City to stop or enter any of the buildings. I saw a few faint lamp-lights at a few broken windows, but I never paused. Was I lost? Never mind, I told myself, I was on an island and needed only to keep heading in the same general direction.

Around midnight I found myself on the bank of a river, flowing to my left, and continued to follow its acheronic course for several hours.

Dawn appeared opalescent and hesitant.

At last I reached the tip of the island and found myself approaching the village of the fisher people.

Kawn Fay was already awake. Solicitous and avuncular, he never asked me why I'd walked so far and long, but simply welcomed me. He gave me a pail of water and I bathed myself behind the Temple. Shivering I came back inside and he wrapped me in a fine ecclesiastical-looking robe of gray wool trimmed with gray wolf-fur. It fastened at the neck with a clever brooch crafted from a giant thorn. Later Kawn insisted I keep the cloak (since winter was approaching). The first time I wore it in public someone offered me a live cow in trade for it. I found that woven wool is highly valued because sheep (and weaving) are rare. Only if the beasts drop dead or fall of

sprawled out behind the counter. Some wise-acres were suggesting she might have done it. "She hated him!"

When I at last won through to the counter and peered over it, sure enough, there lay the Master Cook face down in the dirt. A nicely crafted antique dagger's hilt protruded from between his shoulder blades. There was almost no blood.

Goul's three women were seated in their usual places at the noodle-rolling table, but for once their hands were idle. The daughters were weeping, but the wife sat staring blankly at nothing. As I gasped at the sight of Goul's body, she suddenly looked up and focused her eyes on mine. She gave me a look as cold as her husband's flesh, and despite myself I could not at first tear my eyes away from her gaze.

At once I decided to make myself scarce. I turned my back on the scene of the crime and strode away through the excited crowd.

I'd missed the subway. Without hesitation I set out walking down-island. I walked all afternoon through the ruins, seeing almost no other living figure (besides a few deer). Evening discovered me still walking. Night fell. I continued to trudge, now weary, but too spooked by the

caught the incense (sage and juniper?) and a cloud of smoke roiled up. The priests genuflected to the idol, then circulated around the car soliciting alms from the other passengers and were given a few bits of metal; I noticed they were not asked to pay fares.

At the next stop, three figures entered the car: two men and a woman. They were obviously Indians, the men with "mohawk" haircuts stuck with kingfisher feathers, faces painted with red and white stripes, wearing breechclouts and carrying bows and quivers of arrows. The young woman wore a dress of off-white doe-skin sewn with purple and white beads like wampum, her hair in braids, her small breasts bare. They dragged through the doorway an enormous dead deer, still leaking blood. No one appeared to find this strange or alarming.

8

Finally the train emerged into daylight, or rather into late afternoon, almost dusk. The sky still kept overcast and the atmosphere appeared pearlescent in a soft perpendicular mist.

We found ourselves in an open plain or wide meadow punctuated here and there with ancient shapeless ruins,

some surrounded by groves of trees, others covered with vines like moldy green loaves of half-eaten bread. To our right loomed a broken cathedral, one of its spires collapsed in a heap of weedy rubble, its windows broken, its wide steps choked in kudzu. To our left I glimpsed a gaggle of bark-roofed huts like Indian wigwams or long-houses, with smoke rising in columns above them from interior fireplaces.

The train clanked to a halt and the passengers began to disembark. No sooner did I step down onto the cracked, weedy concrete open-air platform than I looked ahead and all at once saw how the entire subway system actually worked. The end of the line was literally the end of the double cable, which was wrapped a few times around a gigantic capstan, which in turn radiated eight long horizontal wooden arms or spokes, to which were harnessed 16 huge muscular black horses, massive as percherons but with “feathered” legs like clydesdales. As they circled they must turn the cable so that each strand moved in the opposite direction. Our car (which must have been the only one on the whole line) could engage or disengage from either cable according to whether the train was headed up or down the track. The horses had just been brought to a halt by their human attendants and were huffing and sweating in place.

me up considerably. We chatted for a while about nothing in particular, till he excused himself and went back to his slow sweeping.

As I stepped out of the gates onto the staircase in the soft rain, I heard a commotion — a distant uproar of voices coming from the Market. A deacon came running from that direction, in a tizzy, waving his arms. He was shouting to all and anyone: “Murder! There’s been a murder in the Market! Murder!”

23

For a moment, in my still weakened condition, I thought I might faint. Then, as if in a nightmare or trance, I ran down the steps and hurried toward the Market. Somehow I guessed what had happened and I made my way through the maze of tents direct to the Night Market Noodle Shop. And my surmise proved correct. It was indeed Kingdom Goul himself who’d been slain.

As I pushed and elbowed through the excited crowd, I gathered from overheard remarks and exclamations that Goul’s wife had risen late and found his corpse

Father Foo frowned like a gargoyle.

“Do you mean,” he hissed, “that that villain tried to *purchase your labor?*”

Once again I must confess that veils of drugged amnesia have blotted out the remainder of what must, I suppose, have been an awkward conversation. I’ve since learned that moonflower often has this effect, and that only the most spiritually advanced practitioners can make use of its vision-inducing powers and also remember the visions! In any case I must soon have blacked out and fallen into a veritable stupor. It could have been noon when I awoke and found myself alone in the graveyard.

I felt as if the previous night had been all a dream. I shook off the sensation of unreality and in the cold light of day went forth in search of breakfast. At the Cathedral I found that Chang had gone off on business — something about a farm the church managed somewhere up-island — and the vast ruin was nearly deserted. But the old deacon was pattering around with a broom in the nave, and greeted me warmly. He gave me a bowl of cold cornmeal mush topped with a bit of fruit compote and a cup of hot rosehip tea, which perked

Feed bags were being fetched. It seemed clear to me that the system must have been built very long ago (the equipment all so old and worn, the metal parts so extremely pitted with age) and I reflected that when some major part of it finally broke down, the train would cease to run forever. Surely such apparently primitive people would never be able to repair or replace worn-out metal. (And indeed I was to discover that metallurgy — other than the simplest tinkering — was a lost art in this... this world.)

9

Beyond the capstan, on a low hill a couple of acres in extent, I beheld spread out before me what I assumed was the Night Market. In the gathering dusk I could make out rows of open-sided tents, each covered by rudelystitched and badly-cured hides (they stank with a mild reek I could already detect in the atmosphere). Some tents were backed with gaily-colored hangings, and some flew painted pennants from stripped tree-trunks.

Evening was indeed drawing in as I approached the tents; torches and lamps were being lit here and there,

making the whole scene begin to glow. By full dark the Market would be streaming with radiant tremulous light.

Along with some of my fellow passengers (including the fishermen with their baskets and the three Indians with their dead buck) I entered the Market. I began to wander and stare. The first booths I approached were given over, as I soon realized, to “treasure” — meaning a gallimaufry of rubbish and valuata dug up by scavengers from the vast ruin of the city. The merchants included a few filthy beggars sitting on the ground in front of ragged blankets strewn with bits of rotten plastic and discolored enigmatic bits of metal — but others boasted real shops, with merchandise laid out on rough shelves, including antique vases and pots, some of porcelain, almost intact; an assortment of utensils and knives, re-polished and gleaming; bottles and glass ware, most of it cracked or chipped, but clean and gem-like in the torchlight; actual gems and jewelry, re-constituted from old bits and pieces, some of it quite grand, emeralds, pearls, topazes, and agates set in silver and gold. Aside from the ancient stuff there were heaps of river-pearls and wampum, sold by Indians, along with new-tanned hides, beadwork, wooden bows and arrows, baskets and moccasins; White merchants were hawking brooms, wooden buckets, wooden

the garden of the religion. St Expedite has answered my prayers!”

More cheers.

“Yes indeed. Of course,” I added jocularly, “I could have taken up another offer and instead become a roller of noodles.”

Chorus of laughter.

“Brothers, can you believe that no less a figure than Kingdom Goul offered me his daughter’s hand in marriage.”

The beggars gasped in amazement.

“When I naturally refused,” I blurted, “didn’t he raise the stakes and tempt me with a salary of fifteen quarters a day?”

Sudden silence.

Through my entheogenic haze I dimly realized I’d broken my promise to the Master Cook — to keep his offer secret.

My next memory flash shows the dance finally over, and a few of the beggars sitting at a little campfire and passing a pipe, while others were already collapsed and snoring around us. My tongue was loosened, and I addressed Father Foo and his companions with an enthusiastic tirade. I descanted on the brilliance of the witches' brew, the dance, and the virtues of their way of life in general. I gushed with gratitude to them for allowing me to share their mysteries. I testified to a new-found veneration for Jesus and Satan. Each of my encomiums was met with a chorus of approval, and I rambled on.

“Father Foo, I must be forever in your debt for introducing me to the great Solomon Chang. He has urged me to embrace the holy life, and I have decided to ask him to initiate me as a deacon of the Cathedral.”

A chorus of drunken hurrahs met the announcement, and Father Foo himself embraced me with holy fervor, too moved to speak.

“Yes,” I continued, “I have discovered my vocation at last. Moreover, now I need no longer abuse your generosity and hospitality, since I will be fed and cared for by the High Priest while I . . . that is, while I labor in

mallets, small bags, clay pipes in the shapes of birds and animals, and other crafts. I saw very little woven fabric but a great deal of wretched old plastic and synthetic shreds (such as I myself was wearing) heaped up like rats'-nests. I saw no working machines but a great many broken pieces of what might once have been radios, computers, sewing machines, vacuum cleaners and the like; I got the impression that no one knew what these remnants signified, but acquired them to use as bricolage — for instance, I noticed a portable stove made out of a gutted television and jewelry created of electronic trash and cogwheels.

As for the merchants themselves, they appeared to be a cheerful lot. Most shops were run by families, husbands hawking the wares, wives bargaining over the trades, babies in the dust. They were dressed, like nearly everyone I saw, in the same rags and tatters — a bit cleaner and more colorful than the average, perhaps. As I watched business proceeding, I realized that most exchanges were based on barter. For instance two dead pigeons were traded for a glass beaker; a bag of grain or seeds bought a handful of arrows; a scavenged necklace, after much haggling, purchased a nested set of fine baskets. Nothing seemed to have a fixed price, and each sale tended to turn into a lengthy and

sometimes acrimonious dialogue. By eavesdropping I learned that the cut coins in my purse were not treated as “money” but simply as trade tokens. They appeared in only about a fourth of the deals I witnessed and mostly only in small transactions.

I saw nothing here that tempted me, so I wandered on till I came to a section of the Market clearly devoted to entertainment. In one tent some musicians were playing — drums, flutes, and stringed instruments with small gourd resonating bodies and long thin necks. The music sounded, to my surprise, rather slow and stately; it reminded me vaguely of Turkish classical music — clearly modal — and I noticed a number of the listeners were weeping.

In another tent a woman was telling a story. For a bit of coin I purchased a drink that turned out to be rather excellent beer flavored with some odd herb — the effect, I learned, was slightly psychotropic and very pleasant. A number of children were sitting happily on the ground and also drinking beer. The story, to my bemusement, strangely resembled a märchen or fairy-tale-type usually known as “Cinderella,” although here the heroine was called Ashley, and the Prince was re-configured as an Indian chief. The narrator proceeded

was enhanced by some sort of hallucinogenic fungus and pinches of hellebore and moonflowers, then cut with beer.

Soon the drumming and chanting began, but much more inward and meditative than the usual holy uproar. Minor modes were favored, and complex rhythms designed, I thought, to slow one’s heartbeat.

After an hour or so I realized I needed another cup of the elixir in order to really fully appreciate the way the cemetery was throbbing to those rhythms. Soon the very graves might begin to dance. Recklessly I took yet a third cup.

To top up their mystic level the men passed round jugs of applejack and pipes of ganja, and by midnight we were all rather highly exalted. A slow and graceful extemporaneous dance began, and for the first time amongst the mendicants I felt compelled to join in. Moving the body under the influence of the mixture of drugs and music indeed induced a state of bliss.

Some hours passed — or rather I assume they passed, because in retrospect I realize I have no precise memory of their doing so.

land as we do those of the sea; and the Christian Satanists rule (or are ruled by) the sky and the underworld. Perhaps we can launch a new universal faith . . . based on *books*.”

22

When I got back to the Market and walked over to the graveyard, I found that the pilgrims were still there and had erected a rough, open-sided tent against the rain, next to an ivy-grown cracked marble cenotaph. It appeared that yet another anniversary was under weigh — this one celebrated exclusively by the mendicants, in honor of the person supposedly buried in the cenotaph (all inscription long since worn away by centuries of bad weather) — a great saint named Rudolph Bliss. According to Father Fou, Bliss was one of the founders of their esoteric order, and he’d died a hundred years ago — but I’m certain the tomb was older than that. Perhaps it had been re-used?

I was just in time to share with the beggars a cauldron of brew they’d spent that day in preparing. Not wishing to appear pusillanimous, I glugged down a beaker of the stuff without asking what was in it. It tasted fairly vile. Later I got the recipe: ganja soaked in distilled liquor

with great leisure and many clever variations and the tale was but half-told after an hour had passed; so I finished my beer and moved on, feeling warm and slightly tipsy.

10

Realizing I was hungry I followed my nose to the section of the Market devoted to food. Here I found Black Chinese fishermen now engaged in cooking seafood — frying, grilling, stewing, boiling their variegated catch, squid, crab, skate, clams, sea-bass, etc., served with or without vegetables and slabs of cornbread. For a little garnet traded from my purse I was served with 12 shelled, plump oysters garnished with a sauce of vinegar and chives. Appetite whetted, I moved on to a booth serving meat stew ladled over bowls of cornmeal mush — I recognized the Indians from the subway and greeted them, and they welcomed me like a guest rather than a stranger. The delicious stew was made with turnips, garlic, and blueberries, as well as a strong dose of chillies.

The Indians introduced themselves as Talking Thunder, Two Ravens, and Charming Water (the young girl, their sister) and told me they hunted in the north of “the island” where ruins gave way to forest. Thus I first learned that I was on an island.

“Do you also hunt for treasure?” I asked.

“Most of that stuff is badly haunted,” said Two Ravens, the elder brother. “Bad luck. We don’t touch it, usually. We believe in things that are fresh and holy.”

I’d explained to them that I was “from out of town,” which caused them no surprise. “The Market is a great place,” said the young woman, “and people come from everywhere to enjoy its pleasures or trade, even from far away. We, however, prefer to live on the edge of the forest where the world is more clean.”

When I mentioned that I was tired and would seek a place to sleep, my new friends told me that one of the long-houses I’d seen earlier served as a free dormitory for travellers; and with considerable ceremony we bade each other goodnight.

But now I had business and made my way to the Dagon Temple at once. Kawn Fay wasn’t busy (“our services are held at dawn and dusk”) and invited me at once to share his lunch — sacrificial fish straight from the altar to a little fire under a tent behind the Temple, where we grilled them on sticks and tossed the heads and bones to several Temple cats. With Solomon Chang’s blessing and permission I filled him in on our new plans — to translate the Temple’s texts for the Cathedral Library. He was overjoyed to learn the world held more books than he’d dreamed of, and suggested we also translate the Cathedral’s texts into Chinese!

We agreed to keep our activity secret, at least for now, rather than try to explain to anyone our hopes. He mentioned that he could produce a good ink from squids and lampblack, and I told him that Chang had a collection of fine virgin parchment. “We’ll begin with the Hsin Ching,” he said. Ignorant as I was, I could only agree.

“Come back here as soon as you’ve been made a deacon and I shall induct you officially into our Cult as well. Then you’ll have spiritual power in both religions. Eventually you should seek initiation from the Indians as well. It is said that they consort with the spirits of the

the subway down-island to see Kawn Fay at the Temple of Dagon and arrange with him to start work on the Chinese texts. Chang readily parted with a handful of cut coins, and I bowed to him in gratitude.

The weather had turned wet again, and by the time the subway emerged into its final open-air run downhill into the fishing village, a great fog had enveloped the City. The ruined buildings to left and right looked even taller because their broken pates were hidden by lowering clouds; the air tingled with refrigerant mist.

The ferry had come into port the night before and was anchored just offshore, taking on cargo and passengers via small boats. It proved to be a large log raft, about sixty feet from stem to stern, with split-log railings all around, bluntly pointed at the bow, with cabins at either end, and an open deck in between where boxes, bales, bags, and a few unhappy cows were chaotically dispersed. One tall mast must hold a single square sail, I judged.

Briefly I wondered about the ferry's destination, which I'd heard called "the Mainland," without more detail. Perhaps some day

11

As I made my way toward the dormitory however, and was passing between the Market and the village of bark huts in the dark, I suddenly found myself on a path leading through an ancient graveyard, in which all the stones and statues were crazily tumbled and cracked and melted by (it seemed) centuries of corrosive weather and invasive weeds. As I stumbled along, I came to a camp fire on my right, surrounded by a shadowy group of about a dozen figures.

A distinct smoky odor (beside that of the burning and aromatic campfire) assailed my nostrils: nutty, slightly bitter, green and enticing: — the campers were smoking ganja.

On a whim I approached the fire and at once perceived that the figures were all male, all naked, all longhaired and bearded — all holy men. In fact I spotted the two pious beggars from the subway and greeted them, extemporaneously, "Hail, brethren! Will you share with me some of the holy herb?" The pair of them recognized me and welcomed me with suave condescension.

I produced my little twist of ganja and turned it over to my new friends, who sniffed and approved it and stuffed

it all into a huge clay pipe in the shape of a crucifix! A hot coal from the fire was tamped down on the pipebowl (with a naked thumb) and the weed began to circulate. As guest I went first, and after I'd passed the fuming pipe, I was handed a cup of tea, ladled out of a clay cauldron on the edge of the fire, which turned out to be brewed from sassafras and sumac.

I assumed that holy men here, as always and elsewhere, would prove to be great gossips, and I was not disappointed. With a few innocent questions I learned a great deal about my new life.

The men called themselves priests. When I asked if there existed no priestesses, they said yes, but that the women "travelled on their own." It quickly became clear that they lived a precarious but easy existence as holy beggars, taking advantage of peoples' desire for ritual and healing, avoiding any real work, "meditating" with the aid of grass and liquor, and practicing what appeared to be sheer hoodoo — although they seemed perfectly sincere believers in their own magic powers. None of them were plump, and a few positively emaciated, but they clearly were not starving — their skull-bowls were full of scraps of meat and fish and

parsnips, sour cream, fried onions and apples) — and give me your answer then. Wait!" he hissed.

"Don't breathe a word of what I've said. People would be envious They wouldn't understand. Keep it secret! Promise?"

I promised. I yawned. I excused myself. I went away.

As I fell asleep that dawn, I reflected that St Expedite had worked overtime for me. I'd started the day destitute and was retiring with three possible futures open to me: disciple of Kawn Fay, Deacon for Solomon Chang, frycook for Kingdom Goul. I was determined to take up the two religious roles, which promised food and shelter in exchange for doing what I like to do, and give Goul's noodles a miss — except as a customer. As a holy beggar, no doubt I'd be able to afford his excellent cookery at least once in a while. Contented, full of booze and eels, I dropped off into deep dreamlessness.

Next morning I arose at a reasonable hour, shook off my hangover, traded my last (really my last) bead for eggs and tea, and walked over to the Cathedral. I found Solomon Chang in good spirits, and I told him I intended to seek initiation from him in the near future. He seemed quite pleased. I asked him for a few bits so I could take

“Master chef, you flatter me — but,” I added dryly, “I’ve no intention of wedding just yet.”

“Never mind that,” he gestured dismissively. “I don’t blame you. The matrimonial state proves less blissful than some think it, to be sure.” He grimaced. I felt sorry for his wife and girls, but not sorry enough to join the kitchen crew.

“You must eat,” he said, “and to eat you must work. Listen . . .” he leaned over the counter and whispered to me, “I have a proposition. I’ll start you off rolling noodles, but I’ve no doubt a fellow with your good taste will soon be promoted to assistant cook. What do you say? Food for labor.”

I hated the idea (especially since I’d decided to become a Deacon), but I’d just been fed for free and felt I had to be polite. I hemmed and hawed

“Not a sweet enough deal, eh? well....” He leaned over even further till I could feel his breath in my ear.

“I could . . . I could *pay* you. Let’s say — ten quarters a day... well then, fifteen. That’s fair, I think. Wait! Don’t answer me now. Go sleep on it. Come back tomorrow at this time. (I’ll be serving the noodles with rabbit,

gobs of mush which they offered generously to share with me.

Some of them I thought were White (though caked with mud); others were Black or Chinese or Indian or of mixed ancestry, and one of them a beardless adolescent. My subway friends were called Antoneen and Jubrious (I may be misspelling them) and the others I forget. According to their tribal origins, it seemed, they specialized in different devices. The Whites “worked” Jesus and Mary and Satan and their families. The Black/Chinese fisher people worshiped a single god called Dagon. The Chinese pure and simple knew of a thousand buddhas. The true Blacks mentioned Saturday, Venus and Obeyah, and the Indian described his Manitoos as Nature Elementals, nymphs and fauns, animal totems and ghosts. But they all accepted each others’ beliefs. This world seemed resolutely pagan.

All of them had wandered hither in order to make pilgrimage and celebrate a Saint-Day at the ruinous Cathedral I’d seen earlier, in connection with which they mentioned with obvious deep respect a high priest called Solomon Chang.

About midnight, as I judged, a new comer to the circle loomed out of the dark, a white-bearded pot-bellied elder they greeted as Father Foo, bearing with him a huge heavy jug of what turned out to be potent distilled corn liquor, apparently a rare and welcome treat. The level of jollity was notched up, raucous hymns were sung or rather chanted to the accompaniment of a log drum, stumbling dances were attempted. One by one the priests passed out and began to snark and snore, till Father Foo and I alone remained to kill off the jug. We were now comrades for life.

12

Next morning when I woke, however, Foo was long gone — to the Cathedral, I learned, for an appointment with the Archpriest Chang. I treated my bad head with Brother Antoneen's fresh brewed hot tea, and then napped till later in the morning. When I again roused myself, I was alone in the graveyard.

Wandering into the market looking for breakfast, I discovered I was not the only late sleeper. Hardly anyone was a-stir there, other than a few children playing some game with knucklebones and a shopwife sweeping out her booth, who directed me to "Kingdom

"Have you ever practiced as a chef, perhaps?" he asked.

"You flatter me. But I'd say that anyone who enjoys food can cook it, eh?"

"No doubt," he hesitated, then went on. "Listen to me. I am the richest man in the Night Market. True, the subway tribe and the Cathedral gang are well-off — but I personally am worth more than any one of them. My sons run my farm up-island — wheat, pigs, cows, vegetables, chickens and ducks and geese, squash, beans, even corn. . . . We have it all, except wild game and fish, which I obtain by trade. My wife and daughters," he waved at the slumbering women, "roll the noodles, wash the dishes, chop the onions. Ha! I thrive because I work hard, unlike the other peasants and layabouts here. But I've reached the point where my own family won't suffice to meet with my ambition. I must expand the business, or it will begin to shrink. I could marry off my daughters and bring in some new men. Or else. . . ."

He paused. "Now you, for example, seem to lack get up and go. But you have talent. You would make a good cook, I've no doubt. . . ."

Too hungry to stand on pride, I quickly plopped down on the bench and watched him at his wizardry, conjuring up for me the promised dish. Ah, the aroma! The sizzle! — the noodles tossed so high, and landing so neatly in the pan. I felt faint with anticipation.

He plunked down the bowl of noodles and side-plate of duck. I attacked at once. The eel was crisp-fried and cut in sections which I picked up with my fingers and sucked off the bones; the artichokes complemented the eels' greasiness with their suavity; the noodles and broth followed to fill up empty spaces; the sticky red honeyed bits of duck contrasted with the saltiness of the eel — and a mug of beer appeared as well.

The cook watched me, partly vexed at his own generosity, partly pleased by my enthusiasm. As I finally began to slow down, then sat back once in a while to sigh and belch, he poured me another beer and said: "Young man, I like the way you appreciate good food. Most of the clods and fools around here might as well feed on hay as my real cuisine. Tell me, what do you taste in the green sauce beside coriander?"

"Hmm. Garlic, of course — and lemongrass — and... yes, basil. Just a touch of pepper."

Goul's Night Market Noodles." She added, "He never sleeps, that bastard!"

The noodle shop proved to be the biggest and grandest tent I'd seen so far in the Market. Benches surrounded a long plank table set before a veritable rank of brick stoves topped with pots and pans and backed by a long counter strewn with utensils and boxes and bottles and heaps of greenery and roots. Three old White women were sitting there with sour expressions on their faces, rolling long noodles on flat stone platters. A tall, gaunt, jaundice-faced man meanwhile stirred a pot on one of the stoves.

I suddenly realized that the shop displayed no sign or menu board — that I'd seen no signs or written labels anywhere in the Market — not one scrap of writing.

"Could I get some breakfast?" I asked.

"Can you pay for it?" he snapped.

I took out my purse and tipped a cut coin into my palm. He sniffed. I squeezed out another. He sneered. I added a single red bead. He grudgingly relented. I felt annoyed with myself for spending nearly half my remaining

fortune on one meal, but I'd been unable to slink away in shame before Kingdom Goul's disdainful demeanor.

The proprietor leapt into action. With a basketweave fan he blew the fire up — then into an ancient cast-metal bowl he threw: a lump of lard which began to sizzle, a large pinch of chopped garlic, ditto of red chillies, ditto of green herbs — then a spoonful of smelly, fermented fish sauce, chopped onions, shredded pork; and at last a handful of pallid cooked noodles — he stirred it all up vigorously and tossed it a foot in the air — he added a clump of pre-scrambled eggs — he tossed again — he sprinkled with green onions and chives — he dumped all of it into a clay soupbowl and plunked it down in front of me steaming and odoriferous, along with a carved wooden spoon and a cup of beer. Wordlessly.

The dish was unspeakably delicious, but I tried to express my appreciation nevertheless, between slurping and sucking up the spoonfuls of noodles and pigmeat. The cook unbent a little in the warmth of my praise.

"I dare say," he admitted, "you'll not find a dish like that anywhere else in the entire world."

"Oh? How so?" I asked. He frowned, and I added, "I'm from out of town and unfamiliar with the local economy."

One tent however was still lit up and open for business — Kingdom Goul's Night Market Noodles. A few sleepy customers were slurping at steaming bowls — the three ladies were drowsing heavily at their table, heads on arms, red and swollen fingers loosely curled — but Goul himself, manic as ever, was chopping vegetables with a dirty cleaver as if they were the heads of his enemies. He spotted me coming.

"Ah, young man! You're just in time — I was about to close up shop. Sit down and I'll serve you the last of tonight's noodles, with eel and some of these artichoke hearts in coriander sauce — and a side of candied duck. What say you?"

"Master Goul," I replied, "I'd like nothing better, as I deeply respect your culinary genius. But you see me a pauper at last, down to my final quarter bit. I shall spend it on fried cornbread, then bed myself in the public dormitory."

He gave his usual scowl and was about to let me go, when suddenly he changed his mind. "Wait! I detest waste even more than penury, so I shall treat you to a bowl of noodles — gratis. I have something to say to you"

stertorously and clutching the empty applejack bottle. Quietly and steadily as I could, I arose, let myself out of the chamber, wove through the near-pitchdark Cathedral and forth into the night.

It was so late I could feel earliness creeping up in the blackness and chilly rain. In the distance I could make out the shapes of the Market, with a few vague lamps still burning.

After a night of serious drinking on an empty stomach one feels a lust for something hot and greasy. Maintaining a steady course (though my head was spinning) I set out toward the tents.

20

Because of the Pilgrimage, the Market seemed to have done a roaring business earlier in the evening (to judge by the heaps of trash strewn about) — but by now the rush was over, and only a few late (or early) shadows were to be seen here and there, sweeping up or breathing clouds of breath over cups of tea at little stalls.

“How so?” He sputtered. “Know then that I am the only noodle maker in the Market, the City, and (as far as I’ve heard) the universe! The secret of noodles will perish with me!”

“Is the art that recondite?” I ventured.

“Indeed. Have you seen anywhere else a food confected of wheat? My farm up north of here is the only place in the world where it grows. Elsewhere you’ll eat maize (fit only for Indians and cattle!) or at best a clotted mash of wild seeds that’s called bread. Bah! I can bake real bread. I can roll noodles. No one else! No one else possesses wheat.”

Unpleasant megalomaniac though he appeared, I had to admit that Kingdom Goul was a brilliant chef. His Night Market Noodles struck me as a masterpiece, and I mollycoddled him by telling him so. We parted on good terms.

13

Later that day I headed down to the subway station, and near it I came across a small crowd engaged in an impromptu horse race. I realized that the elite of the City owned horses, but I noticed no wheel-drawn vehicles.

Perhaps the technology had been lost? (In fact, some days later I witnessed a crude solid-wheeled ox-cart hauling potatoes and hay from farms in the upper City.)

The train was preparing to depart, as it did every day “about noontide” as I’d been told. I greeted the driver, paid my bit of copper, and boarded along with a gaggle of other passengers. I decided to ride the whole line and see the other end of it.

After a long dull, rattling ride through the stygian murk, we passed “my” stop (where I’d discovered the train only yesterday) and continued south. At a certain point the train emerged from the tunnel at the top of a gradual incline, and I could see the tracks running down the slope between rows of ruins and burgeoning woods straight into the distance. The driver threw the crank that dis-attached the car from the moving cable, and we began to drift freely downhill. We picked up speed. Compared to the slowness of everything else I’d experienced lately, the car flew at a vertiginous velocity, clanking and swaying rather dangerously — I thought — although we never jumped the track. The tall, gutted empty buildings raced past and seemed to twirl in place like dizzy skeletal dervishes. The sky had turned blue, with scuds of cirrus, the air felt cool and exhilarating as

sparkled with gold and silver inks. Already tipsy, I swore I could create something equally beautiful.

Chang told me how he’d been taught literacy by his “initiator,” the previous High Priest, and he urged me to keep secret the Library and my ability to read.

“We may find worthy intellects capable of acquiring and sharing this magical talent, or we may not — but there is no reason why people in general should be informed. Books can be dangerous things, or so my teacher insisted.”

We finished off the brandy, and Chang picked another bottle out of his casket — “Applejack,” he announced. We staggered up the stairs and made our way to a little room somewhere in the bowels of the Cathedral, an anchoritic den where he kept his narrow cot and two chairs, and then we proceeded to kill the bottle while chatting volubly on various erudite subjects.

At some point we must have passed out. (This seemed to be the usual *modus operandi* with holy folks around here!)

Some time much much later, I came to, still woozy, to find Chang stretched out on his cot breathing

wooden chest I hadn't noticed, squatting in a far corner of the crypt.

The heavy lid of the chest once thrown back, we looked down at a collection of a score of old glass bottles, plugged with cuts of hemp rope and beeswax. The Archpriest carefully picked one up by its neck, carried it to the table, and held it poised against the candle flame. The antique, pitted clear glass revealed the heart of a golden yellow liquor, like a caught ray of sunshine.

"Dandelion brandy," he confided. "Ten years old."

I pulled out the plug, and he insisted I take the first sip: sweet and fiery and with a hint of bitter flowers. We passed the bottle back and forth. Over the next hour or so we examined a few of the library's treasures. Besides the Bible I saw various pious tracts, including an *Imitation of Christ* and a few sheets of the *Rig Veda*. A damaged folio contained part of a work called *Heliogabalus, or the Crowned Anarchist*, which appeared to be a text of Satanism. *Hexes and Spells*, a conflation of handwritten sheets, rubbed shoulders with a broken print of *The Golden Treasury of Poems*. The chief treasure of the collection, however, an illuminated manuscript of parchment entitled *Hagiographies*,

it blew into our windows. Some children amongst the passengers cheered with excitement.

The sea came into sight (The sea! The sea!) — or rather a broad and islanded bay.

The train drifted toward a halt in the middle of a meadow; the driver reengaged (and then released) the clamp to the cable at the last second to brake our residual momentum, with an ear-piercing screech. We bumped gently to rest against a bulwark of unplanned logs, and began to disembark.

The driver told me he'd begin the return trip "after I have my tea," so I decided to wander about a bit. In the end I stayed over-night in the village of the fisherfolk, and didn't get back to the Night Market till next day.

14

As I mentioned before, the fisherfolk appeared predominantly Black/Chinese in origin, although I discovered that some "pure" Chinese also lived here. To my excitement I saw now for the first time written signs — but in Chinese, so I couldn't read them. They were painted in red and yellow on wood and hung over a few buildings, mostly small dining-booths. When I asked the proprietors what the signs meant, I learned that the

people spoke Chinese as well and could barely understand me. At last, however, I learned that one said “Dragon Well of Exquisite Fish,” another said, “Temple of Dagon.”

This last turned out to be a ruin of considerable size, fairly well-preserved, with tall pitted columns flanking a broken but still portentous entry-way. Inside I found a statue of the god, a giant wooded, bearded merman, looking a bit like the figurehead of some ancient ship, surrounded by vases of flowers and pots of smoldering incense (which failed to mask the reek of dead fish that had been offered to Dagon on his altar). In chapels along both sides of the nave there appeared shrines to various buddhas, who were also carved and painted wood; I recognized them from my own dim memory — some beneficent and smiling, others fearsome, multi-armed and demonic.

The robed priest in charge of the temple, a Black man in the prime of life, muscular and tall, beard tinged with white, greeted me affably, and I engaged him in conversation. He seemed to assume I’d arrived there “on the ferry boat,” and so was not surprised at my ignorance of local customs.

“I could if I had a pen and paper,” I answered.

Chang closed his eyes and appeared to commune for a time with unseen spirits. I waited. At last he returned, as it were, to earth. He said,

“If you were to become a deacon here at the Cathedral and were to employ yourself in copying our books and perhaps writing new ones, I would promise to feed and clothe you and keep you from winter’s woes. You could also help in our garden and dairy, by which we feed ourselves, but only if you like.”

“The priest of the Dagon Temple showed me books written in Chinese. He can read them. What if I were to study with him and translate his books into . . . the Language? Would this be useful to you?”

“You mean. . . Kawn Fay, is it? You mean that he too can read? What a day this has been for shocks! Praise to St Expedite!”

19

After a few moments he exclaimed, “We must celebrate. Help me open yonder casket,” he added, pointing to a

4. And his disciples answered him, from whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness;

5. And he asked them how many loaves have ye; and they said, Seven.

6. And he commanded the people to sit downe on the ground: and he tooke the seven loaves, and gave thanks, and brake, and gave to his disciples to set before the people.

7. And they had a few small fishes: and he blessed, and commanded to set them also before them.

8. So they did eate, and were filled: and they tooke up, of the broken meate that was left, seven baskets.

9. And they that had eaten there were about foure thousand, and he sent them away. King James, Mark VIII 4–9

“Marvelous!” exclaimed the Archpriest. “Praise Jesus and Satan! A wonderful talent! How rare and miraculous! And can you write as well?”

“Can you read the characters in which the sign over the temple is written?” I wanted to know.

“I can indeed,” he told me, “although I am nearly the only person here who can. In fact I painted the sign myself. I learned from the last High Priest, who passed away some while ago.”

“Can you read English?”

He looked puzzled. “I mean the language we are speaking,” I explained.

“Ah, you mean The Language. No. I don’t believe anyone can still read its written remnants.”

“Do you have books?”

“I have several. Would you like to see them?”

The “books” proved to be fine carved boxes containing loose leaves, stained and yellowing, many torn and incomplete, obviously carefully and lovingly preserved for... who knows how many aeons? . . . and all, hand-calligraphed in Chinese.

“These are sacred texts of the buddhas,” he told me. “I could explicate them for you if you had the will to learn.”

“I might well wish to hear what these books say,” I answered. I felt a pang of severe disappointment. I used to love to read and suffered now because these precious sheets held for me no more meaning than fly-specks. What had become of books?

The priest, whose name was Kawn Fay, proved a most genial companion. He clearly longed for intelligent converse and had the spare time to indulge his taste. He began at once to “expound the Doctrine” to me, and I found him a fascinating teacher. I won’t try to record his voluble remarks here, but will simply note that we formed that day a friendship which would soon prove valuable to me, as I shall relate.

As evening began to gather itself again over the shores of the village of shanties and huts, and the gulls came screaming and wheeling over the rooftops, Kawn Fay invited me to supper. To celebrate our new friendship we repaired to “the best” eatery, the Dragon Well, and he treated me to steamed hake and wild rice, with several jugs of excellent sweet grape wine. By nightfall we’d grown tipsy on food and drink, and returned to the

“Come with me,” he uttered.

He lit a candle with a flint and spill. We rose to our feet and he led the way out into the Cathedral nave, then to a stairwell I hadn’t noticed before, behind a sort of roodscreen. We descended into what can only be called a crypt.

Taking a large old key from his pocket, he unlocked an ancient and ponderous door. Holding the candle aloft, he lead the way into a cold humus-and-rock-scented darkness.

He moved the candle in a wide arc so I could see that the crypt held three crude bookcases. Wooden book boxes were arranged on the shelves, along with a few codices bound in heavy leather. Perhaps 50 or 60 volumes in all. He placed the candle on a table, moved to the first shelf and picked up a box. He carried it to the table and opened it. Like the boxes at the Dagon Temple it contained loose leaves, some hand-written parchments, a few ivory sheets of actual printed paper. He picked out one of the latter and set it gingerly on the table under the light. He gestured at the page. I leaned forward — “It’s the Bible,” I realized, “and it says:

Chang seemed so sympathetic that I found myself openly admitting that I feared destitution and hoped to find a niche for myself somewhere in the City. He asked me, "What do you enjoy doing?"

"Well," I answered, "I've already met another priest, at the Temple of Dagon, who has offered to teach me about the buddhas. But I was raised as . . . a Christian, can I say?" He nodded encouragingly. "So I was wondering if perhaps you might have need of someone who can read books?"

Chang's face registered such unguarded surprise that I wondered if I'd violated some taboo.

"You . . . you can *read*?" he sputtered.

"And write. Or at least... I used to be able to do so. I've wondered why there seems to be no writing here."

"Young man, until today I believed I was the only person in this City able to read books." He stared at me. His face underwent a series of transformations. First he looked at me with suspicion, perhaps mistrust. Then he pondered. Then he seemed to resolve on some momentous action. I liked the fact that he made so little attempt to hide his thoughts.

Temple for more religious chat. At last we grew tired, and he showed me to a bed-like nest in back of the holy fane, where I passed at once into a heavy slumber.

15

Early the following morning Kawn Fay woke me and took me down to the shore to meet some of his cousins, who owned fishing boats. The vessels there ranged in size from bark canoes to sizable pirogues or sampan-like barques fitted with single masts. The fishermen (whom I'd thought of as taciturn and slightly sinister) turned out to be pleasant and affable, and I enjoyed my chat with them. Later in the morning they decided that "the ferryboat will not arrive today," so they voted to go fishing. The larger boats raised single fore-and-aft sails, the rattiest-looking affairs imaginable, seeming to be woven of reeds, and the flotilla set out onto the Bay with a brisk off-shore breeze.

The Priest invited me to lunch, but I declined, saying I had to return to the Market. But I promised to come back as soon as possible to begin "studying the Doctrine" with him; I meant it sincerely, and he was very

pleased. He saw me off at the subway station, and the train pulled out around high noon.

As we disappeared into the dark, I wondered why I “had to return to the Market” — and suddenly realized that my purse was nearly empty, that I would soon be faced by the puzzle of how to live and eat in the moribund City. Unconsciously, I’d assumed that my best chance of a solution to this problem must be found at the Market, where food and opportunities to earn it seemed abundant.

But what could I *do*? I knew nothing about fishing, hunting or farming — nothing about horses or cattle: I could try searching for “treasure.” I was beginning to suspect that I might be the only person in this world who could read and write what once was called the English language — but so what? Who needed such a skill? Perhaps, I mused, my best option was to become a holy beggar like Father Foo; the idea of running around in the nude no longer seemed to bother me as much as the prospect of starvation. Could I devote my life to Jesus and Satan? or the 1,000 buddhas? Perhaps I should go back and ask Kawn Fay to accept me as his disciple; I could take up the service of the Fish God . . . and I might even try to learn Chinese!

over, they dragged and ported it all outside behind the Cathedral and threw the food pell mell into a huge stone cauldron, under which they’d built a jolly fire. The bottles were uncorked and passed around (a few were added to the soup), and I realized that the celebrants meant to enjoy a feast at their own expense.

Old Father Foo found me in the crowd and grabbed my arm. “You must come in and pay your respects to the Archpriest,” he said. “I’ll introduce you.”

18

Solomon Chang was meditating in a little gothic chamber behind the altar, which served as his vestry (and office, if such a word still had any meaning); but he received us with a gracious smile. Close to him now, I could see he had reached early old age — his face wrinkled but his aura still vibrant. Although clearly Chinese, he spoke the best English I’d heard so far in the City.

Old Foo left us alone. We sat down on a rough-hewn bench, and the Priest waited for me to speak. I told him I came “from out of town,” that I’d fallen in with Foo and the mendicants, that I felt a certain attraction to the holy life and had admired the ritual at the Cathedral.

winter!) The vast nave was empty, the floor swept clean. Around the walls I spied niches filled with saints and demons looming in the gloom.

St Expedite was ceremoniously presented at the altars where idols of Mary and Baby Jesus, flanked by Satan and an archangel (Gabriel, I later learned) presided over banks of flowers and ranks of candles. Now I spotted a man who must be the High Priest Chang, in a gorgeous robe that looked like actual cloth of gold and a mitre to match. He appeared to be Chinese, I thought.

Chang now presided over a service to the Saint involving long prayers (some of the congregation followed suit), clouds of incense, thrumming of drums. To my shocked surprise, the ceremony culminated in the sacrifice by knife of six chickens and a rooster, their blood spritzed over the altar stone, their corpses laid before the deities.

I noticed that the priests made no attempt to collect offerings from the people — but spontaneously (or so it seemed) the faithful filed forward to contribute food, vegetables, fish, meat, herbs, bottles of wine, etc., and a crew of deacons collected it all. When the service was

I resolved to consult my holy friends and other denizens of the Market. Necessity would help me, no doubt, decide on some kind of *métier*. Already I could feel anticipatory pangs of hunger.

16

When I got back to the graveyard that afternoon I found the holy ones busily preparing for the Saint's Day celebration at the Cathedral. Some of them had walked for days or even weeks to attend the holiday. They were coating their bodies with dust and ashes, weaving flowers into their matted locks, preparing skull-bowls of hot coals and incense, and loudly praying. Joyfully they invited me to tag along with them to worship "Saint Expedite," who helps all petitions to be answered with utmost speed and dispatch. Perhaps, I said, the Saint will help me find a way to live — and the mendicants assured me he would.

"Moreover," said Father Foo, "you will meet a living saint, the Archpriest Solomon Chang, and no doubt his blessing will avail you greatly." So, after passing around several gargantuan pipes of ganja, to shouts of praise for a dozen deities, we set out in a noisy parade through

the Market, which was just beginning to prepare itself for the night.

The weed made me feel a bit shy, unable to join the celebrants in their cavorting and gyrating and chanting, and so I fell a bit behind the rout. As we approached Kingdom Goul's Noodle Shop, I saw the cadaverous chef himself beckon to me and heard him praising his fare: "Special tonight! woodchuck and raccoon with soup! For you, only three quarters." I nodded to him and indicated that my purse was depleted. He scowled. I passed by.

17

As it unfolded, the festival of the Saint began to strike me as deeply archaic, and I found it quite moving. A crowd had gathered on the worn steps of the Cathedral, spilling out down onto the bare space below, dressed as well as possible, bearing flowers and banners, cheerful yet pious in mood. Music was heard from within: drums and pipes in a high-pitched, exciting march. A procession emerged from the tall, arched doorway: first, a choir of chanting children; then the band; then a small phalanx of cathedral dignitaries dressed in

robes, ribbons, and peculiar pointed hats, with large pectoral crosses.

The crowd parted to make way for the parade. Slowly there came forth from the Cathedral a sort of large sedan chair borne by four deacons (as I learned the dignitaries should be called); on the seat squatted the statue of St. Expedite, a rather featureless figure carved in wood and painted to look vaguely human, crowned with feathers, flowers, chains of beads, and seven lit beeswax candles.

Now followed a clutch of naked holy men with tall staves a-flutter, ululating in a trance of glee, with their own little orchestra of drums, rattles, flutes and scrapers to keep rhythm to their dance. My own holy companions fell in behind them, capering and shouting sacred syllables. And the crowd ranged itself in a long straggling parade behind the mendicants.

We circumambulated the entire Cathedral slowly and ecstatically. Then we all filed inside the building, singing and cheering.

The Cathedral still possessed its roof, but the arched or rounded windows had lost their glass so long ago that not a shard remained. (How the place must freeze in the