

IV. 7: INVASION OF THE SOULSNATCHERS

“May the Force be with you.” My tone had an intentional mock solemnity.

“Huh?” one of them replied.

I don’t think that they get that sort of salutation very often in the streets of Kennedy Town, the harborside town at the west end of Hong Kong island.

Kennedy Town is a couple of tram stops to the west of ‘my’ neighborhood, Sai Ying Pun, and I decided to begin my reconnaissance of the vicinity by ‘tramping’ over there and making my exploratory way back on foot. It’s a gritty, working-class little “town” by my first impression. Much of the development is of recent origin, particularly the high-rises along the waterfront, which is given over mostly to containers and workboats.

I went there thinking that it’s nice of the locals to name their entire town after our beloved, assassinated president, when many other countries have honored him only with a segment of a street, or perhaps a square. But it is a good thing I didn’t express to anyone my country’s gratitude for this salute, because the honored Kennedy, I learned later, and not by means of an embarrassing *faux pas*, is a former English governor of the Crown Colony, not our departed JFK.

“May the *Force* be with you,” I repeated.

“Oh, uh-huh.”

Despite my ambiguous salutation the two guys kept advancing from across the street. I was conflicted: part of me wouldn’t mind an encounter with Westerners, and English speakers, even after just a couple of days in Hong Kong; but part of me wants to tell these to guys to “fuck off!”

The second part is my reaction to any religious evangelist. These two happened to be Mormons, but my disgust with evangelism is ecumenical; I despise all evangelists. These guys are young, pasty-faced, short-cropped, and more business-like than reeking of a smarmy, “howdy and hallelulleh” piety. They are adaptable enough not to let the encounter falter. The dark haired one catches the allusion: “. . . and with you, too,” he replies, taking care not to use the term “The Force.”

“May the Lord be with you, too,” the sandy-haired one says, making sure to separate his deity from that of George Lucas. They’re young, but not stupid. They are college-educated (even if that did take place in Salt

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Lake City), they have learned to speak passable Cantonese, and at least they don't have that Southern "wouldn't-you-like-to-go-deer-huntin'-with-Jesus" version of American Protestantism.

"*Et cum spiritu, tuo,*" I fire back. "So how goes the soulsnatching business today?"

They're well-trained and not easily deterred by insults. They ignore this one.

"What brings you to Kennedy Town, Sir?" 'Elder John' asks as if he never even heard my insult. The little plastic LDS badge on his clean, white dress-shirt identifies him. The only one he's elder to is his companion, who is just earlier in his twenties.

"You can bet your good book I'm not out shopping for a nice new religion." I find that I'm not saying this with enough acerbity, and I ask them if they can recommend a good, clean brothel in Kennedy Town.

They smile, undaunted, and continue with the opening gambit.

Where you from in the states?" sandy-haired 'Elder Thomas' asks.

"You guys trained to alternate questions like one's a ventriloquist and the other is the dummy?" It's another insult, but I have a half-smile when I say it. I can't stand soul-snatchers, but these guys don't seem that offensive. Maybe they are getting the best of me despite their youth and my attitude. Maybe their training is really good. And, maybe I just want to have a conversation in my own language. In any case I know in the back of my mind that they are no less "victims" of their own religious upbringing than I am. It's all indoctrination as far as I'm concerned and if I'd been born in Utah rather than New York I'd probably be "Elder Jim" and bugging the shit out of some poverty-stricken slob with a metaphysically-compromised immune system in some godforsaken country.

Actually it is they who are anxious to speak a little English; they have been doing the work of the Lord and Joseph Smith all morning in Cantonese.

A truck that looks like the type that the Red Army uses pulls up and begins unloading fragrant bags of dehydrated sea food—squid, scallops that look like little brown buttons, shrimp, and tiny silver fish the size of baby fingers with big, dead eyes staring in surprise.

The proprietress of the shop we are standing in front of comes out half-shouting some Cantonese imperatives at the deliverymen. She is compact and bow-legged, strong-looking, as she pushes and pulls the large burlap and plastic sacks, adjusting them to their places on the sidewalk and sticking little handwritten price signs into their contents.

She gives us her fishwife glare and says something that would come across in any language as “if you’re not interested in today’s special on dried sea slugs why don’t you guys park your *gweilo* asses someplace else!”

Elder John smiles. “She would like us to move out of the way.” But I am already moving.

“Doesn’t look like you have a convert in that one,” I say as we slowly move under the awning of the next shop. I also couldn’t help noticing the little Buddhist shrine at the foot of the front door jam of the lady’s fish shop. Spent incense sticks lay in fragments in the little sand pot below some prayers written in gold ink on crimson paper.

Elder John says something back to the lady in Cantonese. He seems to speak it easily and confidently. I’m impressed, but the lady isn’t, and she dismisses him with a fishtail waggle of her hand and disappears into her shop.

“She says I’ll scare away the customers, but most of the people here are very nice to us.” Elder Thomas doesn’t look like he agrees, but his Cantonese is not nearly as good, he says, so people are more impatient with him.

It’s a nice opening for me. “Maybe if you just let these people be with their gods and goddesses they would be even more hospitable. When the hell are you people going to stop accosting people all over the world on their own streets and telling them ‘Boy, do I have a super new god for you!’”

Elder Thomas goes into the chapter and verse on Mormon evangelism and how they have their missionary work to do. There are, I learn, about 150 of them snatching souls in Hong Kong and the New Territories

I know that if I was a high-ranking cadre in the PRC, these guys, and the rest of the soul-snatchers that have plagued China like locusts for centuries, would be out of here or facedown in a rice paddy. I’m not just picking on the Mormons, either. Even my own teachers, my revered Jesuits, are included. They, in fact, were probably first soul-snatchers in these parts, arriving in the 16th century in their black robes and using their brains to learn the languages and dialects. This was before the Europeans pried open China for trade in opium and other goodies in the 19th Century and exacted concessions that permitted their various churches to peddle metaphysical opiates to one of the last great supplies of unwashed souls.

Literally hundreds of missions were opened by a stew of evangelical churches including The Daughters of Charity, the Société des Auxiliatrices des Ames de Purgatoire, the Carmelites, Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and Lazarists, the Marists, Salesians, which were only a

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few of the Catholic orders. The Baptists included the American Baptists, Gospel Baptists, the Seventh Day Baptist Missionary Society, and the English Baptist Missionary Society. There were Wesleyans, Presbyterians, Adventists, Methodists, Quakers, Lutherans, that were Free, Reformed, United, Allied, or whatever, and from nearly every country in the western world. And if the Confucians weren't yet confused enough and the Buddhists bugged enough by this ecumenical free-for-all of soul-snatching there were the YMCA, the YWCA, and to prove that niche merchandising is not a 20th Century invention, The German Mission for Blind Females in China.

They did some good and were often well-intentioned, but I would have sent them all packing. But the Chinese for the most part did not. They did appear at times to have a bit of fun at the expense of these pious invaders. When the Jesuit Matteo Ricci⁶⁷ asked the authorities in Peking for a site to build a catholic church the authorities complied. What the Jesuits didn't know was that the ground allotted to them had once been a place of execution of criminals, and therefore, to the Chinese, accursed ground. The church that stands there today is the third, the others having been destroyed by fire and revolution. One hopes the Chinese are still having a good snicker at the hex and putting one over on those 'foreign devils'.

"What is it that brings you to this part of the world, Sir?" It's Elder Thomas again with the "Sir". My age must be starting to weigh on him.

"Research, and a little lecturing. I'm on sabbatical."

"Research on what?" he continues.

"I'm an urbanist. I'm interested in the effects that the handover of this city to its mother country is going to affect various aspects of urban life here.

"What sorts of things?"

⁶⁷ Ricci was no dope otherwise. He had assembled what was probably the first Chinese dictionary and spoke the language. He had a feel for the culture as well, knowing that the Chinese were interested in ways to improve memory (what people wouldn't who had thousands of characters in their written language to remember). And so he pitched his memory system to the emperor who was eager to learn. Of course the system requires some information to memorize and Ricci had the perfect book from which to get names and stories—The Holy Bible. Ricci's story is told in Jonathan Spence's *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*.

“Well, for one thing I’m curious to know, now that Hong Kong has gone back to the People’s Republic of China, if you guys are going to get your butts ejected all the way back to Utah.”

They just look at each other. But I add: “But I don’t find that very likely. It looks to me that the mainland as well had made its Faustian deal with capitalism, so they are probably going to find a use for a religion that validates it. And as we all know, your religion has no prohibition on making a buck.”

“So you don’t think they will purge the missionaries . . .”

“Not if you render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s . . .” I immediately regret how sententious that sounds. I sense that they are more “up” on their Book of Mormon than on geo-politics. “But if it were up to me . . .well, let’s just say that I can think of few behaviors more ethnocentric, arrogant and plain culturally-disrespectful than evangelism. Where do you people get off thinking that some religion that some guy supposedly got from an angel named Moroni a hundred years ago is superior to what these people have been believing for fifteen hundred years? The only soul-saving they need is from evangelists.”

They invite me to dinner and one of their socials. Jesus, these people just don’t get it. But I also accept their invitation because I realize that I haven’t had this much fun arguing religion since I was back in the dorm at my Jesuit college in New York. So I take their address down, ask them if all their wives will be there as well, and head for the tram.

When the date came I didn’t go to their dinner. There was a time conflict with a better religion I had found: something called The Hong Kong Rugby Sevens.

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