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The House on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet

Written by Jamie Ford

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Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet

A Novel

JAMIE FORD



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13 Charlotte Mews
London W1T 4EJ
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The Panama Hotel

(1986)

Old Henry Lee stood transfixed by all the commotion at the Panama Hotel. What had started as a crowd of curious onlookers eyeballing a television news crew had now swollen into a polite mob of shoppers, tourists, and a few punk-looking street kids, all wondering what the big deal was. In the middle of the crowd stood Henry, shopping bags hanging at his side. He felt as if he were waking from a long forgotten dream. A dream he'd once had as a little boy.

The old Seattle landmark was a place he'd visited twice in his lifetime. First when he was only twelve years old, way back in 1942 – ‘the war years’ he liked to call them. Even then the old bachelor hotel had stood as a gateway between Seattle’s Chinatown and Nihonmachi, Japantown.

Two outposts of an old-world conflict – where Chinese and Japanese immigrants rarely spoke to one another, while their American-born children often played kick the can in the streets together. The hotel had always been a perfect landmark. A perfect meeting place – where he'd once met the love of his life.

The second time was today. It was 1986, what, forty-plus years later? He'd stopped counting the years as they slipped into memory. After all, he'd spent a lifetime between these bookended visits. A marriage. The birth of an ungrateful son. Cancer, and a burial. He missed his wife, Ethel. She'd been gone six months now. But he didn't miss her as much as you'd think, as bad as that might sound. It was more like quiet relief really. Her health had been bad – no, worse than bad. The cancer in her bones had been downright crippling, to both of us, he thought.

For the last seven years Henry had fed her, bathed her, helped her to the bathroom when she needed to go, and back again when she was all through. He took care of her night and day, 24/7 as they say these days. Marty, his son, thought his mother should have been put in a home, but Henry would have none of it. 'Not in my lifetime,' Henry said, resisting. Not just because he was Chinese (though that was a part of his resistance). The Confucian ideal of filial piety – respect and reverence for one's parents – was a cultural relic not easily discarded by Henry's generation. He'd been raised to care for loved ones, personally, and to

put someone in a *home* was unacceptable. What his son, Marty, never fully understood was that deep down there was an Ethel-shaped hole in Henry's life, and without her, all he felt was the draft of loneliness, cold and sharp, the years slipping away like blood from a wound that never heals.

Now she was gone for good. She needed to be buried, Henry thought, the traditional Chinese way, with food offerings, longevity blankets, and prayer ceremonies lasting several days – despite Marty's fit about cremating her. He was so *modern*. He'd been seeing a counselor and dealing with his mother's death through a support group of some kind. Talking to strangers sounded like talking to no one, which Henry had some firsthand experience in – in real life. It was lonely. Almost as lonely as Lake View Cemetery, where he'd buried Ethel. She now had a gorgeous view of Lake Washington, and was interred with Seattle's other Chinese notables, like Bruce Lee. But in the end, each of them occupied a solitary grave. Alone forever. It didn't matter who your neighbors were. They didn't talk back.

When night fell, and it did, Henry chatted with his wife, asking her how her day was. She never replied, of course. 'I'm not crazy or anything,' Henry would say to no one, 'just open-minded. You never know who's listening.' Then he'd busy himself pruning his Chinese palm or evergreen – houseplants whose brown leaves confessed his months of neglect. But now he had time once again. Time to care for

something that would grow stronger for a change.

Occasionally, though, he'd wonder about statistics. Not the cancer mortality rates that had caught up with dear Ethel. Instead he thought about himself, and his time measured on some life insurance actuarial table. He was only fifty-six – a young man by his own standards. But he'd read in *Newsweek* about the inevitable decline in the health of a surviving spouse his age. Maybe the clock *was* ticking? He wasn't sure, because as soon as Ethel passed, time began to crawl, clock or no clock.

He'd agreed to an early retirement deal at Boeing Field and now had all the time in the world, and no one to share the hours with. No one with whom to walk down to the Mon Hei bakery for *yuet beng*, carrot mooncakes, on cool autumn evenings.

Instead here he was, alone in a crowd of strangers. A man between lifetimes, standing at the foot of the Panama Hotel once again. Following the cracked steps of white marble that made the hotel look more like an Art Deco halfway house. The establishment, like Henry, seemed caught between worlds. Still, Henry felt nervous and excited, just like he had been as a boy, whenever he walked by. He'd heard a rumor in the marketplace and wandered over from the video store on South Jackson. At first he thought there was some kind of accident because of the growing size of the crowd. But he didn't hear or see anything, no sirens wailing, no flashing lights. Just people drifting toward the

hotel, like the tide going out, pulling at their feet, propelling them forward, one step at a time.

As Henry walked over, he saw a news crew arrive and followed them inside. The crowd parted as camera-shy onlookers politely stepped away, clearing a path. Henry followed right behind, shuffling his feet so as not to step on anyone, or in turn be stepped upon, feeling the crowd press back in behind him. At the top of the steps, just inside the lobby, the hotel's new owner announced, 'We've found something in the basement.'

Found what? A body perhaps? Or a drug lab of some kind? No, there'd be police officers taping off the area if the hotel were a crime scene.

Before the new owner, the hotel had been boarded up since 1950, and in those years, Chinatown had become a ghetto gateway for *tongs* – gangs from Hong Kong and Macau. The city blocks south of King Street had a charming trashiness by day; the litter and slug trails on the sidewalk were generally overlooked as tourists peered up at egg-and-dart architecture from another era. Children on field trips, wrapped in colorful coats and hats, held hands as they followed their noses to the mouthwatering sight of barbecue duck in the windows, hanging red crayons melting in the sun. But at night, drug dealers and bony, middle-aged hookers working for dime bags haunted the streets and alleys. The thought of this icon of his childhood becoming a makeshift crack house made him ache with a

melancholy he hadn't felt since he held Ethel's hand and watched her exhale, long and slow, for the last time.

Precious things just seemed to go away, never to be had again.

As he took off his hat and began fanning himself with the threadbare brim, the crowd pushed forward, pressing in from the rear. Flashbulbs went off. Standing on his tippy toes, he peered over the shoulder of the tall news reporter in front of him.

The new hotel owner, a slender Caucasian woman, slightly younger than Henry, walked up the steps holding . . . *an umbrella?* She popped it open, and Henry's heart beat a little faster as he saw it for what it was. A Japanese parasol, made from bamboo, bright red and white – with orange koi painted on it, carp that looked like giant goldfish. It shed a film of dust that floated, suspended momentarily in the air as the hotel owner twirled the fragile-looking artifact for the cameras. Two more men brought up a steamer trunk bearing the stickers of foreign ports: Admiral Oriental Lines out of Seattle and Yokohama, Tokyo. On the side of the trunk was the name Shimizu, hand-painted in large white letters. It was opened for the curious crowd. Inside were clothing, photo albums, and an old electric rice cooker.

The new hotel owner explained that in the basement she had discovered the belongings of thirty-seven Japanese families who she presumed had been persecuted and taken away. Their belongings had been hidden and never

recovered – a time capsule from *the war years*.

Henry stared in silence as a small parade of wooden packing crates and leathery suitcases were hauled upstairs, the crowd marveling at the once-precious items held within: a white communion dress, tarnished silver candlesticks, a picnic basket – items that had collected dust, untouched, for forty-plus years. Saved for a happier time that never came.

The more Henry thought about the shabby old knickknacks, the forgotten treasures, the more he wondered if his own broken heart might be found in there, hidden among the unclaimed possessions of another time. Boarded up in the basement of a condemned hotel. Lost, but never forgotten.



I Am Chinese

(1942)

Young Henry Lee stopped talking to his parents when he was twelve years old. Not because of some silly childhood tantrum, but because they asked him to. That was how it felt anyway. They asked – no, told – him to stop speaking their native Chinese. It was 1942, and they were desperate for him to learn English. Which only made Henry more confused when his father pinned a button to his school shirt that read, ‘I am Chinese’. The contrast seemed absurd. This makes no sense, he thought. My father’s pride has finally got the better of him.

‘*M-ming bak?*’ Henry asked in perfect Cantonese. ‘I don’t understand.’

His father slapped his face. More of a light tap really,

just something to get his attention. ‘No more. Only speak you American.’ The words came out in *Chinglish*.

‘I don’t understand,’ Henry said in English.

‘Hah?’ his father asked.

‘If I’m not supposed to speak Chinese, why do I need to wear this button?’

‘Hah, you say?’ His father turned to his mother, who was peeking out from the kitchen. She gave a look of confusion and simply shrugged, going back to her cooking, sweet water chestnut cake from the smell of it. His father turned to Henry again, giving him a backhanded wave, shooing him off to school.

Since Henry couldn’t ask in Cantonese and his parents barely understood English, he dropped the matter, grabbed his lunch and book bag, and headed down the stairs and out into the salty, fishy air of Seattle’s Chinatown.

The entire city came alive in the morning. Men in fish-stained T-shirts hauled crates of rock cod, and buckets of geoduck clams, half-buried in ice. Henry walked by, listening to the men bark at each other in a Chinese dialect even *he* didn’t understand.

He continued west on Jackson Street, past a flower cart and a fortune-teller selling lucky lottery numbers, instead of going east in the direction of the Chinese school, which was only three blocks from the second-floor apartment he shared with his parents. His morning routine, walking

upstream, brought him headlong into dozens of other kids his age, all of them going the opposite way.

'Baak gwai! Baak gwai!' they shouted. Though some just pointed and laughed. It meant 'white devil' – a term usually reserved for Caucasians, and then only if they really deserved the verbal abuse. A few kids took pity on him, though, those being his former classmates and one-time friends. Kids he'd known since first grade, like Francis Lung and Harold Chew. They just called him Casper, after the Friendly Ghost. At least it wasn't Herman and Katnip.

Maybe that's what this is for, Henry thought, looking at the ridiculous button that read 'I am Chinese'. Thanks, Dad, why not just put a sign on my back that says 'Kick me' while you're at it?

Henry walked faster, finally rounding the corner and heading north. At the halfway point of his walk to school, he always stopped at the arched iron gateway at South King Street, where he gave his lunch to Sheldon, a sax player twice Henry's age who worked the street corner, playing for the tourists' pleasure and pocket change. Despite the booming activity at Boeing Field, prosperity didn't seem to reach locals like Sheldon. He was a polished jazz player, whose poverty had less to do with his musical ability and more to do with his color. Henry had liked him immediately. Not because they both were outcasts, although if he really thought about it, that might have had a ring of truth to it – no, he liked him because of his music. Henry didn't

know what jazz was, he knew only that it was something his parents didn't listen to, and that made him like it even more.

'Nice button, young man,' said Sheldon, as he was setting out his case for his morning performances. 'That's a darn good idea, what with Pearl Harbor and all.'

Henry looked down at the button on his shirt; he had already forgotten it. 'My father's idea,' he mumbled. His father hated the Japanese. Not because they sank the USS *Arizona* – he hated them because they'd been bombing Chongqing, nonstop, for the last four years. Henry's father had never even been there, but he knew that the provisional capital of Chiang Kai-shek had already become the most-bombed city in history.

Sheldon nodded approvingly and tapped the metal tin hanging from Henry's book bag. 'What's for lunch today?'

Henry handed over his lunch box. 'Same as always.' An egg-olive sandwich, carrot straws, and an apple pear. At least his mother was kind enough to pack him an American lunch.

Sheldon smiled, showing a large gold-capped tooth. 'Thank you, sir, you have a fine day now.'

Ever since Henry's second day at Rainier Elementary, he'd been giving his lunch to Sheldon. It was safer that way. Henry's father had been visibly excited when his son was accepted at the all-white school at the far end of Yesler Way. It was a proud moment for Henry's parents. They wouldn't

stop talking about it to friends on the street, in the market, and at the Bing Kung Benevolent Association, where they went to play bingo and mah-jongg on Saturdays. ‘They take him *scholarshipping*,’ was all he ever heard his parents say in English.

But what Henry felt was far from pride. His emotions had gone sprinting past fear to that point of simply struggling for survival. Which was why, after getting beat up by Chaz Preston for his lunch on the first day of school, he’d learnt to give it to Sheldon. Plus, he made a tidy profit on the transaction, fishing a nickel from the bottom of Sheldon’s case on the way home each day. Henry bought his mother a starfire lily, her favorite flower, once a week with his newfound lunch money – feeling a little guilty for not eating what she lovingly prepared, but always making up for it with the flower.

‘How you buy flower?’ she’d ask in Chinese.

‘Everythingwasonsaletodayspecialoffer.’ He’d make up some excuse in English, trying to explain it – and the extra change he always seemed to bring home from his errands to the market. Saying it fast, fairly sure she wouldn’t catch on. Her look of confusion would coalesce into satisfied acceptance as she’d nod and put the change in her purse. She understood little English, but Henry could see she appreciated his apparent bargaining skills.

If only his problems at school were solved so easily.

For Henry, *scholarshipping* had very little to do with

academics and everything to do with work. Luckily, he learnt to work fast. He had to. Especially on his assignments right before lunch – since he was always dismissed ten minutes early. Just long enough to find his way to the cafeteria, where he'd don a starched white apron that covered his knees and serve lunch to the other kids.

Over the past few months, he'd learnt to shut his mouth and ignore the heckling – especially from bullies like Will Whitworth, Carl Parks, and Chaz Preston.

And Mrs Beatty, the lunch lady, wasn't much help either. A gassy, hairnet-wearing definition of one of Henry's favorite American words: *broad*. She cooked by hand, literally, measuring everything in her dirty, wrinkled mitts. Her thick forearms were evidence that she'd never used an electric mixer. But, like a kenneled dog that refuses to do its business in the same place it sleeps, she never ate her own handiwork. Instead, she always brought her lunch. As soon as Henry laced up his apron, she'd doff her hairnet and vanish with her lunch pail and a pack of Lucky Strikes.

Scholarshipping in the cafeteria meant Henry never made it out to recess. After the last kid had finished, he'd eat some canned peaches in the storage room, alone, surrounded by towering stockpiles of tomato sauce and fruit cocktail.

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Keiko

(1942)

When Henry arrived in the school kitchen that afternoon, there was a new face, though because it was turned toward a stack of beet-stained serving trays, he couldn't see much of it. But it was clearly a girl, probably in his grade, about his height; she was hidden behind long bangs and the black strands of hair that framed her face. She sprayed the trays with hot, steaming water and put them in the dish rack, one by one. As she slowly turned toward Henry, he noticed her slender cheekbones, her perfect skin, smooth and lacking in the freckles that mottled the faces of the other girls at the school. But most of all, he noticed her soft chestnut-brown eyes. For a brief moment Henry swore he smelt something, like jasmine,

sweet and mysterious, lost in the greasy odors of the kitchen.

‘Henry, this is Keiko – she just transferred to Rainier, but she’s from *your* part of town.’ Mrs Beatty, the lunch lady, seemed to regard this new girl as another piece of kitchen machinery, tossing her an apron, shoving her next to Henry behind the serving counter. ‘Heck, I bet you two are related, aren’t you?’ How many times had he heard that one?

Mrs Beatty wasted no time and fished out a Zippo lighter, lit a cigarette one-handed, and wandered off with her lunch. ‘Call me when you’re all done,’ she said.

Like most boys his age, Henry liked girls a lot more than he could bring himself to admit – or actually show to anyone, especially around other boys, who all tried to act cool, as if girls were some strange new species. So, while he did what came naturally, trying his best to show indifference, he was secretly elated to have a friendly face in the kitchen. ‘I’m Henry Lee. From South King Street.’

The peculiar girl whispered, ‘I’m Keiko.’

Henry wondered why he hadn’t seen her around the neighborhood before; maybe her family had just come over. ‘What kind of name is Kay-Ko?’

There was a pause. Then the lunch bell rang. Doors were slamming down the hall.

She took her long black hair in equal handfuls and tied it with a ribbon. ‘Keiko *Okabe*,’ she said, tying on her apron and waiting for a reaction.

Henry was dumbfounded. She was *Japanese*. With her hair pulled back, he could see it clearly. And she looked embarrassed. What was she doing *here*?

The sum total of Henry's Japanese friends happened to be a number that rhymed with *hero*. His father wouldn't allow it. He was a Chinese nationalist and had been quite a firebrand in his day, according to Henry's mother. In his early teens, his father had played host to the famed revolutionary Dr Sun Yat-sen when he visited Seattle to raise money to help the fledgling Kuomintang army fight the Manchus. First through war bonds, then he'd helped them open up an actual office. Imagine that, an *office* for the Chinese army, right down the street. It was there that Henry's father kept busy raising thousands of dollars to fight the Japanese back home. *His* home, not mine, Henry thought. The attack on Pearl Harbor had been terrible and unexpected, sure, but it paled when compared with the bombings of Shanghai or the sacking of Nanjing – according to his father anyway. Henry, on the other hand, couldn't even find Nanjing on a map.

But he still didn't have a single Japanese friend, even though there were twice as many Japanese as Chinese kids his age, and they lived just a few streets over. Henry caught himself staring at Keiko, whose nervous eyes seemed to recognize his reaction.

'I'm American,' she offered in defense.

He didn't know what to say, so he focused on the hordes

of hungry kids who were coming. ‘We’d better get busy.’

They took the lids off their steamer trays, recoiling at the smell, looking at each other in disgust. Inside was a brown, spaghetti-like mess. Keiko looked like she wanted to throw up. Henry, who was used to the putrid stench, didn’t even flinch. He simply showed her how to dish it up with an old ice-cream scoop as freckled boys in crew cuts, even the younger ones, said, ‘Look, the Chink brought his girlfriend’ and ‘More chop suey, please!’

At the most they taunted, at the least they sneered and glared suspiciously. Henry kept silent, angry and embarrassed as always, but pretending he didn’t understand. A lie he wished he believed – if only in self-defense. Keiko followed suit. For thirty minutes they stood side by side, occasionally looking at each other, smirking as they served up extra-large helpings of Mrs Beatty’s rat-scrabble slop to the boys who teased them the most, or the red-haired girl who pulled at the corners of her eyes and made a hideous bucktoothed face.

‘Look, they don’t even speak English!’ she squealed.

He and Keiko smiled at each other until the last child was served and all the trays and pans were washed and put away. Then they ate their lunch, together, splitting a can of pears in the storage room.

Henry thought the pears tasted especially good that day.