

GOOD TO SEE YOU OLD FRIEND: BACK IN ASIA

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THE LAST TIME I saw you was over a quarter of a century ago, and to be fair, it's been a long while since we properly sized each other up. I found you quirky back then. It seems nothing much has changed after all.

I still can't work you out and feel sure you find me just as odd. We seemed to like each other and got on well, though there were inevitable misunderstandings. In the blink of an eye you could go from doing my head in, to showing me something so outrageously fascinating that my brain lit up with curiosity and awe. Something about opposites attract perhaps. After spending a full day with you I am as perplexed as ever. At the end of it you have somehow won me over and whet my appetite for more. Being around you brings out the life in me.

It started like this: the hotel staffer spent five minutes explaining to me why I should catch one train, no two trains, no wait, maybe one will do but only if that doesn't veer off to the other line half way. He said a taxi would take much longer. How long would it take? About 30 minutes. And the train or trains? About the same he thought. His argument for me taking a train to the bus station seemed to me like an argument as to why I should take a taxi to the bus station. I opted for the taxi.

I moved out into the moist Kuala Lumpur morning with gentle rain falling. It was steamy but not overly sweat inducing, *just yet*. How come I can walk past one of your best hotels and still trip over a broken piece of footpath and then get a waft of sewage from an uncovered drain? I waved down a taxi. I had an amount in mind to accept. The taxi driver's price was 50 Malaysian Ringgits. I thought of saying, 'Tell 'em you're dreaming,' but refrained. 'Very far place.' I walked on thinking maybe I was doing the dreaming as he did not follow up with a counter-offer. Next cab came along and I told him my destination. Straight back he came with 35 MR. Deal. He then said, 'Very far place.'

I noticed a passenger in the front as we eased in behind a truck that had edged another taxi. 'This my wife. She good woman. No English,' came the driver's explanation. I was comforted by this for had she been a bad woman I am assuming she would not have been in the car. Or, if he had said she was a bad woman, would I have remained in the car? Or was she a good woman because she didn't speak English? Here we were, trying to converse in this 'language of the bad people' that she could not comprehend, yet by not doing so was keeping her good. Tricky. I felt safe with her anyway. She spoke no English but chuckled at whatever it was her husband was telling me in functional taxi-English. She was the mother of his two sons, who were good boys. They even took the taxi driver and his wife to Alaska not that long ago. Looking at him from the back seat, I thought the change in both climate and scenery may have put him out of his comfort zone. He did not have anything to add so I asked him if it was cold and he said it was.

I then realised I had got a very good deal for 35 MR. For the next ten minutes I got the world according to 'Uncle Low'. How did I know that was him? Because it was written on his card; the one he passed over the back in case I wanted his services again. Good work Uncle—I had not even known if your first service was any good as I had not yet reached my destination. So, I called him Uncle Low from then on. He asked me how I knew his name. I told him it was on the card.

So, what was the world according to Uncle Low? It was simple really—the first bit anyway. 'I pray at church, temple, mosque. I pray and I make a donation. When I pray, I pay. First Buddhist but that not

matter now. I pray all place.’ A few more like Uncle Low leading some medium-to-large religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, and we could be onto something—like peace and understanding. Has a taxi driver ever won a Nobel Peace Prize?

Then came the clincher. I am nominating Uncle Low. ‘Number one, be happy. Number two, money. More number two make you not happy. I not much money, but I happy. Much money man not happy. He worry too much. I not worry, I not much money.’ On accepting his prize, Uncle Low may need to flesh it out a bit when questioned by the paparazzi. I believe his no nonsense persona and philosophy will hold him in good stead.

I doubt he would manage, though, without his ‘foundation’. Yes, Uncle Low seemed to already be considering his acceptance speech, because he pointed to his wife and acknowledged before her—in a language she did not understand—that she was his foundation. She looks after his boys and his five grandchildren—sometimes. She looks after Uncle Low and the house. Without that, Uncle Low’s ‘happiness-o-meter’ would not be reading so high. He seemed, at this point, insistent for me to know that he really didn’t like his second daughter-in-law. I asked no questions and he offered no elaboration. We understood each other.