



The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

When one is young, the world is one's oyster, to be trite. Flesh is firm; the sap is rising; and, one knows everything that there is to know of just about everything. The vivaciousness of youth! And the ignorance and arrogance of youth! It is only when one gets to be my age that one realises how little we, actually, know and understand. I think that I may have never told you this before, but I enjoy sitting in busy hotel coffee shops, watching youngsters, feeding themselves with copious quantities of cold lobster, salads, sushi, ice cream, cakes and what-have-you. I derive a great deal of enjoyment in noting a little boy of about 3 years, carrying a plate, back to his table – with just one, small roll on his plate, the plate, being almost as big as his 2 arms, put together. Oh! The dignity of the scene as the little dear struggles with the forces of nature to keep his balance without bumping into other people which may result in him, losing his prize! He is satisfied with his little 'treasure'— that one little roll, balancing in the middle of one large plate. He will eat the roll with relish, no doubt. The innocence of youth! I sit mesmerised as I watch a young lady, just approaching maturity, sitting with her male companion at a table, looking into his eyes as if to say: 'Ah! You are my hero!' Ah, youth! Where have you gone? For what reason did I waste my youth! Wasted youth, now, too late. One cannot back the clock. One cannot recapture time that has fled. My Dear Grandchild, while there is time, enjoy this period of your life for age comes much too quickly. With the death of youth, there is plenty of time for sleep.

Hongkong, today, yearns, one is told, for more freedom and, to this end, some people are willing to sacrifice part of their lives in trying to achieve that seemingly elusive goal. The importance of Universal Suffrage is so high on the list of priorities of certain Hongkong (would-be) politicians that they are quite willing to devote a great deal of time and effort in trying to persuade the powers-that-be of the importance of allowing the qualified people of Hongkong to choose their leaders, of inculcating into the political fabric of Hongkong, the rights of the ordinary man and woman to certain basic, natural attributes, those attributes, one is told, having been the fervent dream of all men and women, all around the world, of all times. Universal Suffrage, one is told, is that state of nature from which a social contract arises: Natural law. However, the nature of man is such that it is only in times of adversity and/or discontent that he sits up to complain, vociferously ... and allows part of his life to be drained down the gutters of time by making demands of the government of the day. But, when the winds of time have blown and the discontent and adversity vanishes, man, more often than not, becomes the prostitute of his environment. It is only civilised man who strives for a modification of his political regime whether or not such a modification would be in his best interests. Meanwhile, the child of man is happy with his one, little roll, resting on an oversized plate.

Hongkong, for all of its faults, is a happy place. The people are relatively content with their lot, for the most part, in spite of the fact that, for the past decade, they have been ruled by a form of benign, paternal dictatorship. This form of government contrasts with the situation in Singapore, quite markedly, actually. Singapore is a terrible, authoritarian regime which brooks no dissenters. The ruling power of the State is the Family of Lee Kuan Yew. This Family has ruled the political roost since 1959. In Singapore, they hang certain felons, cane youth for certain acts of wrongdoing, and the draconian laws make it fairly easy to bankrupt a person with the approval and oblique connivance of the Singapore court system where a single judge makes determinations. Former politicians of this State have been drained of their life savings in trying to defend statements, deemed by the Lee Kuan Yew Family Faction as being libelous or demeaning of the government of the day, or a member thereof, and, when legal, pecuniary judgments cannot be met, then, it is

the end of that politician's life as he once knew it because he is declared an undischarged bankrupt. Hongkong has yet to hang anybody; caning is not on the statute books; and, one is free to voice one's opinion without fear of being castigated by the opposition, political or financial. But, it is true: Hongkong has yet to embrace Universal Suffrage. What shall be the acceptable price of this political plum? Hongkong is not an independent state: It is a political carbuncle on the arse of the People's Republic of China. When, on July 1, 1997, the people of Hongkong rejoiced at the 416 square miles, being reunited with the Mainland, and the British raj left the territory, forever, nobody cared much about Universal Suffrage. During the one and a half centuries of the British rule, Universal Suffrage was never an issue. With Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa at the helm of the good ship, Hongkong, this gentleman, having been the 'appointee' of Beijing, the people of the territory appeared to accept the situation with confident poise. Today, one is told that there is widespread discontent among the 'citizens' of the territory and that the only way to rectify the situation is, inter alia, via Universal Suffrage. It is only with the express encouragement of Beijing, however, that such a political change may become a reality. For Beijing to condone Universal Suffrage, it must be proven that (a) it would be in Beijing's interest to agree to a change in the Hongkong 'constitution' and (b) that there would not be an adverse, knock-on effect in other parts of the China to permit Hongkong to enjoy a political system that other parts of China may not enjoy, by law. The path to Universal Suffrage, therefore, is not via the Hongkong Legislative Council or by people, walking through the streets of the territory, chanting slogans, stentoriously, but via consultations with the high muck-a-mucks at The Great Hall of the People at Beijing. Beijing is the starting place for any political change for Hongkong; it is there that the laws of Hongkong may be changed in accordance with the aspirations of the people of these 416 square miles. Beijing, as with the Lee Kuan Yew Family of Singapore, will brook no violent demands for political change, especially from the small group of Chinese inhabitants of that former British Colony in the south of the country. The solution to the problem of Universal Suffrage if, indeed, it is a problem, is not by making demands of Beijing, but by diplomacy and an impartial and objective exchange of ideas. Beijing, for all of its faults and foibles, wants a prosperous and peaceful Hongkong in order that, inter alia, the territory will continue to be a window for the world to see that which may be achieved by the Middle Kingdom which, during the next few decades, will surely be a financial challenge to the United States of America.

The young children of Hongkong will mature into fine young ladies and gentlemen and that single roll, once on their plates, will be replaced by other, more exotic foods, no doubt, but what could taste better than that first little roll, carefully and lovingly carried back to that young child's table with loving tenderness for the first time? Waste not youth; too soon does time, surreptitiously, rob us of that treasure.

Talk to you, next week.

Chief Lady

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