

Shiny Man

I was visiting the migrant detention centre. It should be called a 'prison camp for those who might die if they don't come here'. But many had even given up hope here, because of the length of their detention. I am a human rights lawyer, specialising in refugee status issues. The new government commissioned me to help speed up the process of getting these people out into the community, or back where they came from if they really were charlatans.

I was almost living in the place, speaking with families and with individuals, taking down such details as were relevant to the process, and dealing with story after heart-rending story.

One old Chinese man was there on his own. He had come out with a boatload from Vietnam five years earlier. His English was good and he kept staring at me as we talked and I took notes. There was something about his face that niggled at me.

His story was typical – he had been a teacher in Ningming when Mao came through with his army. He fled, ending up in Hong Kong. He found work there as a gardener for an Australian ex-pat family living near Hong Kong airport. When the Chinese perpetrated the atrocities in Tiananmen Square, he agitated against the regime; when Hong Kong returned to Chinese control, he had to flee again.

Was it possible? My father had worked at the airport in Hong Kong and we had a Chinese gardener who had been a teacher in China. I asked him to tell me some more about the family he had worked for. As he talked, the hairs stood up on my arms and I shivered. The old man grew silent and looked hard at me. Then he nodded. "I am who you once called Shiny Man."

I was five when my family moved to Hong Kong, where we lived for four years. My mother used to send me outside to "help the Chinaman"; to me he became Shiny Man.

I loved being in the garden with him. I followed him around as he trimmed the shrubs, propagated cuttings, planted new flowers and pulled out weeds. He taught me Cantonese. He also showed me how to tell which plants were weeds and I was happy to sit for hours pulling these out. Over the years he taught me a lot about Chinese culture and about life. I grew to love him.

One day when I was eight, I was playing on the seawall near our house and I slipped and fell in. I couldn't swim. I was floundering and repeatedly going under. Then a hand grabbed me by the arm and dragged me out. It was Shiny Man.

Tears came to my eyes as I remembered all those years back. I realised that in many ways things can come full circle, as the two of us had. I told him in Cantonese, "Now *I* can save *you*."

This story was highly commended in the Gold Coast Writers Group Paint 'n' Prose Competition - July 2008 and was subsequently included in the Paint 'n' Prose Exhibition on the Gold Coast.