




## Travelblog

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FROM SATURDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL  
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‘Body of Canadian businessman found hacked to pieces in Shanghai alley.’

Not exactly the way I want my 15 column inches of fame to read. But as the gangster's fingers approach my ankles, it wasn't looking good.

Three hours after arriving in Shanghai, I'm in a taxi weaving through the neon labyrinth of China's largest city. The driver has promised to deliver me to a pub near my hotel where I can take the edge off my jetlag. Instead, he deposits me in the middle of a dark alley.

“Beer here,” he says, jabbing his finger to a shabby doorway. I ask him to wait while I check it out. I find a deserted room with a bar, a shabby couch, and a plastic coffee table. A lone fluorescent bulb dangles overhead. I'm about to leave when a weedy little bald man appears. The barman. He smiles as I walk out the door. No more taxi. I'm lost in Shanghai.



I return and ask the barman to call me a cab. He nods while he pours me a pint of brackish ale. Just then, in walks a Shanghainese homeboy, all blinged out, a cigarette dangling from a cocky sneer. He's accompanied by a sumo-sized posse of three. Now I'm lost in Shanghai with the triads.

“You want nice girl?”

“No thanks. Just leaving,” I say, draining my pint.

Too late. A sallow teenager in a cheap cocktail dress wearing too much makeup appears, looking terminally bored. The barman pours me another pint, mixes the girl a fruity little “lady drink,” and then produces a plate of stale nuts. Ten minutes later, I ask for the bill. It's 500 American dollars.

“There must be some mistake,” I stutter, pointing to the tally. My pulse is already racing.

“No mistake,” hisses Homeboy, exhaling a cloud of smoke in my face. “You pay for drinks, food and girl's time. \$500.”

As the gravity of my predicament sinks in, I accept a cigarette from Homeboy, figuring it might be my last. Fifteen hours ago I was sipping a latte in Vancouver Airport's international departures terminal. Now, I'm all alone on the far side of the planet getting shaken down by Chinese gangsters.

“I haven't got it,” I reply, my voice cracking. I show him the contents of my wallet — about \$40.

“Credit card? We go to bank machine. You take out money.”

As a caution, I had locked my credit card in the hotel safe, along with my ticket and passport.

“Stand up,” he barks, growing agitated. I comply, and he pads me down like a movie detective while his gang watches. I'm clean. This fleece is evidently not golden. Relief washes over me. Surely, now they'll be satisfied to take my \$40 and let me go.

“Take off shoes,” he growls. Relief turns to panic. Before I left the hotel, I stuffed a wad of bills into my sock and wedged it beneath the arch of my foot. Emergency funds, in case I got mugged. It's a safe assumption that when Homeboy finds it he's going to be very disappointed in me for lying to him.




I'm visibly shaking now as I remove my shoes and step up onto the coffee table. Homeboy's fingers run over my ankles, and across the top of my stocking feet, brushing within a millimetre of my cash stash. Nothing.

Homeboy barks an order at one of his goons, who goes outside (to fetch the choppers, I reckon). Then, inexplicably, Homeboy starts laughing and smiling at me. "Okay, you go now. No problem."

I'm dumbfounded. One minute I'm mentally composing my obituary. The next, I'm tying my laces as fast as I can. We head outside together to wait for the cab they've called for me. In a moment, it pulls up. Handshakes all around. Grins and more laughter, like they're seeing an old comrade off. As I climb in (and lock the door), he sticks his face up to the window and grins. "Have good time in Shanghai!"

I plan on doing just that after I stop hyperventilating.

*Special to The Globe and Mail*

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