

the
down  **side**
of
UP

A Comic Novel of Outrageous Fortune

Dain Dunston

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Green Curry Crab

I need to take a deep breath, he thought. The stress is starting to get to me. Why else would I be standing on a street corner in Hong Kong, drenched in sweat, having my fortune told and thinking it might mean something?

The little Indian man in the pink turban and dusty suit had accosted him on the way to the Star Ferry and made a show of reading his palm.

"You are going on a long trip," the little man told Paul David Lavallier, forty-three-year-old corporate speechwriter.

"I just flew here from Dallas."

"You are going to come into a great deal of money."

"Today?"

"Very hard to say."

"Get away from me." Paul tried to push past, but the man still held his hand.

"You will find a great love."

"Don't talk to me about love," Paul snapped.

"If you give me ten dollars I will say a special prayer."

"Go away. I'm an American."

"In that case, make it just five. I know times are tough in America."

Paul handed him a local bill with one hundred printed on it. The man snatched it and ran to a pair of German backpackers.

"You are going on a long trip," Paul heard him say.

He should have taken a car to the meeting, but when he had looked out at the sparkling waters of Hong Kong Harbor from the cool comfort of his room in the Grand Hyatt, he decided to walk. I mean, come on! How many times do you get the chance to stroll along the Hong Kong waterfront?

"We have a car available, sir," the doorman said, pointing to a sleek black Mercedes idling in the forecourt, after Paul asked directions to the Star Ferry piers. The driver leaned forward and reached for the gear shift.

"No, thanks. I'll walk."

"It's more than a mile, sir."

"That's all right. I need the exercise."

"It's quite hot, sir," the doorman insisted.

Paul laughed. "Hey, I'm from Texas."

Of course, being from Texas, Paul should have had a firmer grasp on what a hundred degrees and ninety percent humidity would do to his crisp white shirt. By the time he'd gone just a couple of hundred yards, it was clinging transparently to his chest and back. By three hundred yards, he was ready to concede that he had made a mistake.

It was hot. But what made it worse was that there was no waterfront, at least not for walking. There were government buildings, land reclamation projects and a building with a sign which, with sweat in his eyes, Paul mistakenly read as 'The Chinese People's Lubrication Army.' He had to look between the buildings for a glimpse of the bay.

Still, he was in *Hong Kong*, not Dallas!

This was Paul's third trip. The last had been a decade before, for a hotel company meeting, and the first when he was seven years old.

Back then, Victoria Harbor was a boy's delight—full of bright red sails on Chinese junks that bobbed back and forth across the water as helmsmen sculled hard at their tillers. In the streets, women wore silk *cheongsams* in turquoise, lavender, yellow and red; men wore black pajamas or gray western suits. If you wanted to go somewhere, you rode in a red lacquer rickshaw being pulled along by a small running man. Paul had taken one such ride with his father deep into Kowloon to have his first suit made. The

streets smelled of hot cooking oil, steaming ducks, hundred-year-old eggs, sewage, garbage and sweat. Dressed in his white Naval officer's uniform, his war-hero father had beamed as his son was fitted in a blue seersucker summer suit. The smiling man with chalk and pins promised to cut the suit so Paul would have room to grow. A year later, when he tried on that same suit for his father's funeral, it no longer fit.

Paul could feel the perspiration gathering at his waistband and worried that it would stain his khakis at the crotch. He had plenty to sweat about without adding humiliation to his list of troubles.

There had been a time when Paul considered himself affluent. Not *wealthy*, of course, but well off. He had seventeen years of PR writing and drafting speeches for corporate executives behind him. His income had risen most of those years, enabling him to buy a house on a corner in north Dallas—its clean contemporary lines shaded by towering pecan trees—that had doubled in value and then nearly doubled again. He dined in the restaurants where the rich ate, drank better wine than most of them (and knew what he was drinking!), sat next to them at the theater and the opera, and drove a car like the rich might drive (although, lately, he had noticed that valets no longer parked his aging black BMW in front of the restaurants).

But the crash had not been kind to him. He was in New York City the Monday morning Lehman Brothers folded, the first day Paul saw the word 'depression' printed in the papers. Jogging past the Lehman building on his way back from the Park, he had seen a man holding up a placard with a message to all those investment bankers upstairs.

It read: "Jump, you fuckers!"

Paul thought the comma was a nice touch.

Even in tough times generals had to harangue the troops, he had reasoned and figured he'd be all right. As usual, he figured wrong. When, a week later, bailed-out executives at AIG decided to attend a routine sales incentive meeting at a seaside resort, the cries of outrage were so loud, they shut down an entire industry of corporate meetings and company gatherings. Paul's business went flat.

He was broke.

And then came the divorce.

As Paul's income dwindled, so did Julianne's interest. On the very day he was going to suggest they take a weekend in the wine country to put the romance back in their lives—the very day!—she told him she was leaving. The thought that they just needed some quality time in bed was, literally, swelling in his head when she popped his balloon. There's an old Persian saying—or was it a Tolstoy short story?—that if a couple of newlyweds put a bean in a jar every time they made love in the first year of marriage and then took one out every time they made love in the years that followed, they'd never empty the jar. That's how it had been for him and Julianne. One year of great sex, six years of beans.

Julianne had taken what was left in the bank account and headed to Los Angeles with a guy who was a second-unit director on a teen slasher movie being filmed in Dallas. And then found a Beverly Hills lawyer to sue him for divorce.

He'd always been stupid about women, he knew that. He never knew what they wanted. Even in college, if a woman had walked into his room, taken all her clothes off and lain down on the bed, he still wouldn't have known what she wanted. But after seven years with Julianne, he had become an expert on what women wanted. Today, if a woman were to walk into the room, take off all her clothes and lie down on the bed, he'd know *exactly* what she wanted.

She wanted to go to sleep.

"What the hell happened to you?!!"

Duncan McKisson, his client, couldn't believe what he was seeing. Paul was not surprised. He looked like he'd swum from the hotel; sweat was puddling at his feet.

"A fortune teller told me I was going to find great love."

"Your shoes squish when you walk."

McKisson was the vice president of marketing for a company called Aggro, which made an awful lot of tractors and, in good years, sold them.

This had not been a good year.

"Why didn't you take the car?" McKisson asked.

He shrugged. "I didn't realize how hot it is."

“Well, let’s go aboard. The AC will cool you down.”

They stepped into a space-age, air-conditioned catamaran, a high-speed ferry that shuttled commuters and tourists to Lamma Island, outside the harbor, where Paul and McKisson were going to eat crab. They settled on a hard red bench beside a large, somewhat salty window that looked out at the harbor.

“You need a towel,” McKisson pointed out.

Paul was dripping on the bench. He went in search of the men’s room and returned with a wad of brown-paper towels. He mopped up the seat and then tried to smooth out his hair and stem the flow on his brow and neck.

“I thought I might get a suit made while I’m here,” McKisson offered when Paul sat down again. “Have you ever done that?”

“Once.”

The ferry docked at Yung Shue Wan, a pretty fishing village at the northwest end of the island. There were pastel houses on the hill above them and a curving waterfront lined with cafés beneath brightly colored awnings. Paul and McKisson followed the small crowd of tourists, British expats and Chinese teenagers down the pier. They took a seat at the first restaurant they came to and ordered two big Foster’s Lagers to cool them down while they read the menu.

“In San Francisco, the seafood gets better the farther you get from the wharf,” Paul pointed out.

“I know it’s counter-intuitive, but believe me this is the place.” After the waiter brought their beers and took their lunch orders, McKisson told Paul how much his CEO, Peter Kavanagh, liked the speech Paul had written.

“Really? I was getting a little paranoid because he never got back to me about it.”

“No, he said you nailed it.”

Kavanagh had just taken the reins at Aggro. Paul had worked for the previous CEO, too, and it was always risky when a new guy took over. Most times they brought their own team and that meant Paul was out of a job. But Kavanagh had been hired from within the company—he had run their international business for

the past three years – and took McKisson’s advice about retaining Paul. Paul asked how Kavanagh was doing so far in the new job.

McKisson took a deep breath and a long sip of his beer. “How should I know? I just make the brochures.”

“Come on, you’re the VP of marketing.”

“With ten percent less in the budget and a hiring freeze. I’m down from fifteen people to ten and I’m supposed to produce twenty-five percent better results than we did two years ago.”

It wasn’t a new story by any means. Paul heard it from almost every client – pressure on profits and performance. Crash or no crash – that was nothing new.

McKisson continued to unload as their food arrived. Paul had ordered the green curry crab, figuring it would be the perfect blend of two favorite worlds. But what arrived on his plate was not what he was expecting: a whole cracked crab up to its eyeballs in thick green curry sauce.

How are you supposed to eat something like that?

The waiter brought them two more cold ones. The sun was bouncing off the glittering water; it was getting hotter. A layer of herb-flecked oil glistened on the surface of the bowl. Paul sniffed the incredible aroma appreciatively, pushed his dark glasses up his nose and dove into the crab-filled lake of curry.

McKisson droned on, detailing the various budget cutbacks and productivity initiatives Kavanagh had imposed. Paul had heard it all before – he wrote all the speeches for the meetings after all – so he focused on his crab. It was possibly the very best thing he had ever tasted. The problem was he now had curry sauce halfway up his wrists and across most of his face from cracking the crab with his fingers and fishing out the meat, and his dark glasses were slipping down his nose as the heat of the spices kicked the perspiration up a notch.

He pushed his glasses up with his arm again and ended up smearing the lens with curry. He looked around and caught the eye of the waiter. As the waiter came toward their table, Paul noticed that his green-slimed beer glass was empty again. He hadn’t planned on having three large lagers at lunch, but the ice-cold beer seemed necessary now, so he ordered another and a large supply of paper napkins.

“And here’s what frustrates me the most,” McKisson was

saying. "Of course we want the top line to grow and we want profits to grow, but shouldn't customer satisfaction grow, too?"

Yeah, yeah, yeah, thought Paul. How many times had he written *that* speech over the years? People tried cost-cutting their way to success instead of asking basic questions: Why do our employees hate us? Why do our customers hate us? Or the one they almost never asked, at least not until it was too late: Why do we, as a company, suck?

That was the speech Paul *really* wanted to write: 'Why We Suck and How We'll Stop It.'

The waiter returned with the beer and napkins, and Paul cleaned himself up as best he could. McKisson was still talking about Aggro's board and its mysterious decisions. Nodding like he really cared, Paul launched into the body of the crab, breaking it in half and extracting, with his fingers, the sweet meat from where the legs joined the torso. Sweat beaded his forehead and trickled down his nose, mixing with the curry sauce around his mouth to create a green film on the lower half of his face that was no longer worth the trouble of wiping away. Far better, Paul concluded, to just get to the end of the meal and wash up after he had spooned the last of the curry sauce out and licked the bowl clean.

With each mouthful, his glasses slipped farther down his nose and, with each bite, he lost whatever little interest he had in listening to McKisson. Paul reached a green hand for some more beer and took a long gulp. The heat and the light and the beer were starting to go to his head just a little. I need to slow down and calm my mind, he thought, and focus on what McKisson is saying.

He tried to concentrate again.

Uh-huh. So, that doesn't work.

Paul was starting to feel a little dizzy. He decided to take a large hit of cold beer, hoping it would wash some of the slurp away from his lips. Somehow, there were no napkins left. He raised the glass to his lips, tilted his head back and saw, through the green glass, the outline of a man and a woman standing over them.

McKisson struggled to his feet. "Hello, Peter. Mrs. Kavanagh."

It was the CEO and his wife.

In his surprise, Paul felt his beer go down the wrong way. He choked, sputtered, then heaved forward as beer ran out his nose. His dark glasses slid down his ski-jump nose, spiraled into the bowl of green curry crab and sank out of sight. He stood, his hands and face green with sauce and, reeling slightly from having stood up too quickly, tried to keep from passing out.

Peter Kavanagh was a slight and pleasant man in his sixties. Beside him was a somewhat older-looking woman—in a Barbara Bush sort of way—wearing a tan cotton muu-muu and a big pink hat. She recoiled perceptibly when Paul started to extend his hand.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. Then added lamely, “Green curry crab.”

“Well,” Kavanagh said. “Looks like you’re enjoying it.”

They offered a few more pleasantries while Paul cast about for the waiter for a fresh supply of napkins. Or a five-gallon fingerbowl and a bath towel, for that matter.

“I read the speech on the plane,” Kavanagh said. “I love it. I just have a couple of changes. We have a rehearsal this evening?”

Fortunately, Paul was able to remember what time the CEO was needed in the hall and told him. The Kavanaghs excused themselves and headed off around the cove to get lunch. Paul stood with McKisson and watched them go; it didn’t seem the opportune time to tell them that the first restaurant on the cove was, counter-intuitively, the best.

When they sat down again, Paul fished his dark glasses out of the goop with chopsticks. A strand of onion slid down one lens, while the tiny last leg of the crab hung from the hinge at the bottom, as if trying to pull the glasses, and Paul, back into the green lagoon.

“Well,” Paul offered, breaking the awkward moment, “the world’s smartest writer strikes again.”

Paul stood in the center of the cavernous grand hall of the convention center and watched Kavanagh rehearse on the distant stage. There was no gentle way to put it; the speech sucked. It sounded terrible. Flat. Vacillating. Weak. Paul couldn’t figure out the problem until he walked to the production table and started

following it on the page.

"Anyone who works around agriculture knows there are good years and bad," Kavanagh was saying, "and so we know there are ups and downs in business. Now, we have a great crew in you and your Aggro dealerships around the world. We've got a great organization and we've got everything we need to meet our goals. Now, our products are great, there's no doubt about that ..."

Kavanagh was adding a 'now' in front of every declarative sentence concerning the company.

"When you do that," Paul explained as he handed Kavanagh a bottle of water and led him outside, "when you start a sentence with 'Now,' our brains instinctively know there is a 'but.'"

"It makes it sound like I don't mean what I'm saying."

Paul nodded. "It makes a declarative statement a conditional statement. 'Now, you're doing great ...'"

"But!"

They walked out into the evening heat on the convention center terrace, and Paul leaned against the railing, trying to figure out what to say and how he could help.

"But what?" he finally asked. And waited.

When he had gone to the stage to stop the rehearsal, Paul noticed Kavanagh's skin was blotchy, his face was damp and his eyes looked wild. The man had been having a panic attack. What would make the CEO of a global company panic?

Kavanagh was leaning on the railing, too, his head between his forearms.

"Now," he said. "But."

"Uh-huh. But what?"

"*But ...* I don't think we can do what I'm saying. *But ...* I'm making promises up there I don't believe we can keep."

Great, Paul thought. I screwed up the speech.

"Did I not state the case correctly? Because sometimes that can happen ... it looks good until you hear it out loud."

From where they stood on the terrace, he could see a red fire-boat coasting along below them, a hundred yards off the seawall. A thin man in a blue jumpsuit squatted on a box in the rear, smoking a cigarette and looking at the wake behind him, which jostled in the criss-crossing chop.

"No, it's not that," Kavanagh said. "We had a board meeting

last Saturday and the parent company declined to fund the new initiatives.”

Paul couldn’t understand that. “But you can’t *not* improve your customer service and your supply chain, if I understand the problems as everyone’s explained them to me.”

“You’re right. We have to improve them. It’s just that they want us to do that without spending any more money.”

Jesus, thought Paul. He was getting a glimpse of the pressure someone like Kavanagh could be under. Standing there, far from the glamour of the jets and the executive suite, it looked like being the captain of the Titanic.

Why? Why would a board refuse to spend money to improve service in a company that was actually turning over more than \$250 million in free cash flow every year? Why would they jeopardize the brand, the employee base and the dealer organization just to generate an extra \$100 million or so? It didn’t make any sense, unless...

Paul looked at Kavanagh and spoke softly. “Peter, is the board getting Aggro ready to sell?”

Kavanagh’s head whipped around and his eyes went wide. “You did not hear that from me and I’m not going to confirm it.”

“Wow,” said Paul. “So they are.”

“Yeah,” Kavanagh admitted miserably, “by the middle of next year. So you see my problem with the speech.”

Paul took a moment to send a text to the producer saying they’d need more time, and then rewrote the speech on the spot, turning the lost initiatives into ‘key areas of focus’ for both the company and the dealers. It wasn’t much, but it would get Kavanagh through the meeting, though God knew what the man was going to do in the year ahead, given the challenges he was saddled with.

Paul hoped Kavanagh had a good golden parachute.

Back in his room later that night, Paul stood in the shower and let the water run over his head, watching it trickle in rivulets down his chest and belly. It had been a very long day.

He felt empty and unreal. The memories of that one childhood

trip had brought up things he didn't often think about. His father. Those few, last days. The promises little Paul had made and been unable to keep.

He towed off, pulled on a pair of boxers and slung the towel around his shoulders. Looking out the streaked glass window, he watched the riot of colored lights chasing up and down the cityscape like the rides in an amusement park. He walked to the desk and called his mother in San Diego. It was early morning there and he caught her on her second cup of coffee.

"I'm in Hong Kong."

There was a silence. Finally Paul broke it.

"Do you remember when we went to that floating restaurant?" he asked. When he was a child, they had taken a water-taxi to the Tai Pak, a floating restaurant in Aberdeen. When they reached the restaurant, they were handed out of the boat by white-gloved dock men in red uniforms. Paul's father, in his brand new tan summer suit, had stepped confidently up on the deck, then turned to help Paul and his mother, who looked beautiful in a light blue silk dress and pearls his father had bought that day.

"I have a picture in my mind of you getting off the boat in that blue dress when we got to the restaurant and taking Dad's hand," Paul said in a quiet voice, "and I think it was the happiest I ever saw you. I guess it's been a long time since you've thought about that."

Another pause. And then—

"I think about it every day. Why do you think I never left San Diego? The dress was black."

"You never talk about him much."

"I used to talk about him all the time. You got tired of hearing it."

"Did I?" Paul didn't remember that. There was a moment of silence on both sides of the Pacific, and then Paul asked, "How's Bernard?"

After Paul left for college, his mother moved to La Jolla and married a craniofacial surgeon named Bernard, a polite and distant presence in a life Paul no longer shared.

"He's playing tennis. I'll tell him you called. I have to get going. There's a fund-raising committee meeting in an hour."

No one was more committed to raising money for causes than

his mother. Breast cancer, childhood tumors, multiple sclerosis; whatever disease it was, she was the one to have on board.

Paul said goodbye and sat by the window, looking at the fleets of black Mercedes as they glided beneath the street lights below, carrying men of wealth who were probably no smarter than he was, but who *acted* smarter.

How had he let himself get into this situation? All his friends thought this life was glamorous—traveling to exciting destinations and meeting famous people. But when he got home, there was nothing very stylish about the empty house and the growing stack of bills, the aging car and diminishing prospects for the future.

I need something to happen, he thought. And it can't happen soon enough.