



The Christmas Market



“And boys! Boys, listen! You can forget about smuggling in any alcohol. It is strictly forbidden in this vicinity and you know what you’re gonna get for breaking the rules,” and with these words, Jason’s Maths teacher, Mr. Wong, ended the last lesson before the Christmas party.

The holiday came as a relief for Jason as the past month had been rather tumultuous. Being a Form 4 student was like being caught between childhood and adulthood. One sometimes had to cross some boundaries to know one’s limitation. Around All Saints’ Day, when the subject of faith was discussed over the dinner table, Jason had made what he thought to be his first “adult” decision. He announced to his family – mom, dad, sister Jane and brother Charlie – that he would stop partaking in any religious activity as he no longer considered himself a Catholic.

“I can’t go to Church anymore. I don’t think I share your faith,” as he spoke, he stared at Charlie who had made the same decision two years ago.

His faces froze at this rebellious statement. From deep down surged the unpleasant feeling of having your children wring free from your protection and the pain of seeing them stray from God’s path. “Son, if you’re doing this to prove you are a grown up, then it’s a very stupid thing to do,” said his father who was making an effort to suppress his anger. “I am not trying to prove anything, dad! I just want a different life for myself!” After delivering his new found creed in a very loud voice, Jason left the table.

Numerous one-to-one “counseling sessions” followed. It was the devout Jane who first offered some guidance. Then Charlie also dropped a few words of advice, “I know I have set a very bad example but you have no idea what you’re doing. You’re hurting mom and dad.” Mom also suggested a talk with Father Ferguson but all the good-natured advice only annoyed Jason all the more.

To demonstrate his will of iron, Jason later announced that he would not be joining his family for Christmas dinner. He would instead be working at the Christmas market at the city centre. This part-time job was an offer he got from a classmate whose father was one of the organizers.

The Christmas market lasted three days from the 24th and Jason was responsible for the stall that sold Santa’s hats and various items that glow in the dark. Having to stand there from 6pm to past midnight was not at all pleasant but the money at the end of it did appealed to him.

Only two hours into his job, Jason already came to the conclusion that his customers were mainly youths in groups or pairs who came out to get away from home rather than to share the Christmas spirit with their family. Of course, Jason could not see the irony in his own observation as he too was out here to get away from his family.

Towards midnight, Jason could see in a distance families on their way to the Church, most probably for the midnight mass. Standing in the cold at his stall, he suddenly had a strong desire to be with his own family and to enjoy a hot bowl of congee with them after the mass,



something the family had always done ritualistically. When sat in a circle at the restaurant, all five of them formed a complete unit. It was warm and lovely; but tonight, Jason would have to go home on his own.

On Christmas day, Jason went to work in a funny mood. He felt isolated from the people visiting his stall, and almost angry at the youths who hung out with friends instead of their family. He dared not let it show of course but had displayed little enthusiasm as a salesman. Then around 8 o'clock, he could discern four familiar figures among the crowd. They were looking in different directions, obviously trying to spot Jason. Shame had caused the boy's face to blush and he was dying for a place to hide. "What are they doing here?" murmured Jason, whose comment brought his classmate Doug's attention to the approaching family. "Isn't that your brother and sister?" asked Doug and as waved towards Jason's family. Now it was too late. There was nowhere for Jason to hide.

"Hello Doug! Looks like the business is going rather well," greeted Jason's father. "But don't worry, we're not here to steal your partner away." The father then turned towards his son with an even bigger smile, "Jason, we've decided not to start the dinner without you, so hurry home after work, okay?" Ignoring the red hot colour on Jason's face, the father and brother both tried on a hat and left the boy to his work after paying for the items.

"Boy, aren't you very lucky! They've come all the way to lend you support!" Doug exclaimed as he betrayed a sense of envy. Yet Jason could not hear his comment, because by then, he was already sitting on the floor, with tears of guilt and shame rolling down his face.

