

# BANANA BOYS

a novel

香蕉仔



Terry Woo

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

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**Terry Woo**



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*To Gabe, Vince, Dave (Eye), Sam/Zeke, Calv, Alan, Schen,  
Mi, Pat, Scott, Ed, Lewis, Arvie, Gord, Pete, Sam C., Erick,  
Dave Bro, Larry and tens of thousands of others.*

*There's a place for us out there. I know it.*

*And if there isn't, we'll damn well make one.*

“... rage, for better or worse, generates a future.  
The victims are the ones who’ve given up on the future.

Instead, they’ve joined the dead. And the rest,  
look at them: unless they’re enraged and acting on it,  
they’re useless, unconscious; they’re dead themselves  
and they don’t even know it.”

— RUSSELL BANKS, *THE SWEET HEREAFTER*

“... you’re not Chinese and you’re not white ...  
what the hell are you, anyway?”

— BERNARD CHANG

## He's Dead, Jim.

**T**he first thing you have to know is that I did love him. With no reservations. *Almost.*

But in my eyes, he wasn't a normal person, my big brother. In my eyes, he was like a mannequin; a well-crafted, well-behaved, impeccably dressed mannequin. Smooth, handsome, well-dressed. Attractive and plastic and filled with explosives primed for detonation.

In my eyes, he was filled with nervous, anxious, restless energy, seething beneath that plastic exterior, past the good looks, polite smile and graceful mannerisms. His actions were cool, confident, moving at a stately twenty miles per hour, his mind probably moving a thousand times that.

It frightened me. I suppose his eyes gave it away.

Yep. Definitely the eyes.



One afternoon, some years ago, I found Rick on the porch of our modest Scarborough home, tranquil amidst the car washing, the sprinklers, the hedge trimming, the screaming kids playing road hockey a few houses down. He was unwinding on the Zellers swing-chair, swinging slowly, knees flexing rhythmically, eyes glazed, smiling faintly, wearing the fast-food uniform from his after-school

job, replete with apron and name tag — “Hello, my name is Richard Wong” — and that standard ugly clip-on tie which was askew on his collar. He was taking large hits from a 26-ouncer of vodka.

“Shirl,” he said with a vacant smile, “*Mm bo yup hui-ab* (Don’t go inside).”

I was only a giddy youngster back then, in Catholic plaid, my hair in pigtails, oblivious to many things.

“Why?” I asked in English, snapping my gum.

“Because you might not like it,” he said. He hadn’t blinked once.

I went inside, expecting a broken vase or tinfoil in the microwave or something. I stepped past the coat rack, the mirror facing the stairs, the fish tank facing the door. Everything looked okay. The vase was fine. I went into the family room. There was a fire in the fireplace. It was June.

I saw our rotary telephone, the cord wrapped tightly around the plastic receiver several times, melting beside an empty bottle of vodka. The acrid smell of toasted plastic hung in the air. Apparently, he had doused the telephone with the liquor and set it on fire.

“I doused the telephone with the liquor and set it on fire,” he explained. “Didn’t work, so’s I hadda use some gasoline as well.” He motioned to a plastic gas-can we used for the Lawn-Boy, tucked underneath the swing-chair. He giggled, tugging at his tie and missing by four inches, sliding off the swing onto the wooden floor.

I bit my lower lip, tears welling up inside. “What happened?”

“I received a call from the McCapitalistic powers that be,” he said, staring at the sky, still smiling. “My employment has been terminated.” He reeked of liquor. He was only sixteen.

Lying on the porch-floor, he explained the situation to me, calmly and carefully. He talked about a lot of things I didn’t understand at the time — economics, the transient nature of the service sector, the exploitation of the student class by the bourgeoisie, racism in the workplace. He talked about school, its demands, requirements to get into the university program of his choice, extra business credits, the declining hours at his job. He talked about his supervisor, a middle-aged McCareer person who didn’t understand, or even care, as he

off handedly fired him. He talked about resisting the impulse to grab the motherfucker by the neck and slam his head into the deep fryer.

He continued to say that his termination of employment — these were his exact words — would by no means set back his “Master Plan ... about money, about cars, about babes, about school, about future employment, promotion and eventual World Domination.” He did this while casually unbuttoning his shirt, taking it off, pouring the rest of his vodka on the pile of clothing and trying to set it on fire with a Zippo lighter.

The confused, fearful expression on my face melted away, replaced by an empty look that crawled into my eyes which widened several inches. The tears, flowing freely a few seconds ago, leapt back from where they had come, never again to emerge. I shuffled my brother inside, away from the prying eyes of the neighbours, extinguished the smoking clothes, doused the fire in the fireplace, opened a few windows, threw away the bottles, and escorted my brother to the shower. He was still rather pleasant, still hadn't blinked once.

As I was cleaning up the porch, I noticed a bag of McTakeout by the swing-chair. Underneath a few burgers, I found hundreds of dollars in small bills, wrapped up in standard cashiers' bundles. I didn't know where he'd got the money, and I didn't really care. I did what was expected of me. Impassively, I took the bag upstairs to Rick's room and stuffed it under his mattress, beside some other interesting items: Safety deposit box keys. Bags of capsules. A clip of bullets, but no gun.

From that day, I quietly managed affairs, cleaned up the occasional mess, always helped him if he asked, watched him skillfully manoeuvre out of numerous potentially messy situations, always to his own personal advantage. I observed him, expressionless, emotionless. I watched my big brother in his smooth, scheming, intelligent, hypomanic way, build up his status and fortune and power until he finally self-destructed.

Now, he's just another slab of meat on God's cutting board. It was disturbing.



I stood there, one row back from the coffin, expressionless, emotionless. My mother was convinced that my paleness was from not eating enough. My father guessed it was because I knew something other people did not.

“You have sensed the inherent emptiness of the world,” he said, eyes focused on infinity. He had just taken his daily dosage of Lithium and was calm and uselessly poignant, as always. I guess it was perceptive, but I couldn’t understand why he had never been able to tune into the core of Rick’s problems.

Not that Rick ever told anyone about anything, of course. Except for his little sister. Told in odd, sporadic revelations of the damned. *Why me*, I often wondered. A calculated gesture? A cry for help? Services rendered for the cheques that are putting me through school? Sadism? I don’t know. I suppose keeping the secrets and managing the insanity was how I became so expressionless and emotionless in the first place.

Something strange happened to Rick when he turned nineteen.

He became convinced that he could time-shift out of his present consciousness into a future one.

“Shirley,” Mike said drunkenly over the phone, one night after they’d gone off to university, voice slurred but reflecting a sense of panic I was feeling myself.

“Yes?”

“It’s Rick.”

“Rick?”

“I think he’s fucked. We’re in a bar, we were just talking, and he says he’s from the future or something ...”

“What?”

“The future,” he repeated. “He says he’s working in some company downtown, getting promoted, signing contracts, sleeping with beautiful women ...”

“Have ... have you guys been drinking?”

“A little. I don’t know. He’s fucked. I’m gonna take him home.”

*Click.*

I hung up, confused. That was how it started — Rick claiming he was shifting forward in time, to future tasks, assignments, jobs, milestones, like completing his CMA exam, graduating from university with Honours, going to Taiwan for the *Chien Tan* “Love Boat” tour, completing multi-million-dollar deals over a Scotch or six at a trendy downtown bistro.

At first, he would claim that he asked people like Mike to orient him — where he was, what he was doing, what the date was, what his age was, etc. — and scared the living daylights out of them. Then he got smart and started scaring the daylights out of me instead.

“Shirl,” he instructed, calmly, presumably in the present, “I need you to keep track of me at certain points in my life.”

“Mmm.”

“Keep track of where I am, how old I am, what my status is — school, job, finances. Partners, friends. Enemies.”

“Mmm.”

“These time shifts never last longer than an hour or so.” He continued, smiling slightly, his voice still a paragon of maddening reason. “I need this information to find my bearings, and then I want to seek out information about my successes and mistakes, to use in the present.”

“Mmm.”

“Nothing as small-time as finding out stock prices, don’t worry,” he said, trying to sound reassuring and sounding anything but. “That would be cheap. But you have to admit they’re an excellent thing to take advantage of.”

“Mmm.”

“Can you do this for me? I know it’s hard to believe, but it is true, and I *really* need your help.”

“Okay.”

“You’re the greatest, Shirl.”

“Thanks,” I said, while my heart screamed.

He only called a few times. But I kept my Promise. Except I hadn't heard from him recently. Then I thought about Richard shifting into the morgue freezer or his cremation jar or into internalized madness or wherever. I shivered, pulling my jacket tighter around my shoulders.

I looked at him there, lying in his casket.

I hate him.



That's not true.

I *could* have hated him for everything, if I were capable of feeling something as visceral as hate. Maybe I hated myself for being unable to do anything to stop his downfall. Maybe I'd actually caused it in some way, quietly and efficiently taking in his insanity.

But seeing them beside me, mom sobbing uncontrollably and dad consoling her, tears in his eyes, made me almost hate Rick. As much as I loved him.

People started to arrive for the funeral service: the Chans, the Ngs, the Wongs (no relation), the Yeung-Stevensons, the Brubakers. They all came up to my parents, offering condolence. Tasmin Lee, Rick's fiancée, arrived, fashionably dressed and very distraught. She walked up with her friend Thomas in tow, tears streaming down her face, and threw herself into mom's arms, almost toppling over her (my mom is very short). A number of people I didn't recognize, presumably some of Rick's former co-workers, Hong Kong friends and ex-girlfriends, also arrived.

And then there were the Banana Boys.

Sheldon arrived first. He looked kind of out of it, fairly sad. He offered his sympathies, patted me on the head and then sat down, staring into space.

And then came Dave. He looked distracted and irritable. He was wearing a pair of jeans with his jacket and tie, and scuffed Converse high-tops — only Dave would do that for a funeral. When he shook hands with us, I noticed he had brown paper bag shoved in his left pocket. Squinting at the coffin, he took a seat beside

Sheldon and frowned.

Luke looked strange in a suit — considering I'd always seen him in leather, flannel, or Mountain Co-op gear. He made his way up to my family, squeezed my hand, looked at me, and then at his suit. Raising an eyebrow, he smiled slightly and sat down in the front row beside his sister Janice, who had arrived earlier. I almost smiled, despite the sombre circumstances.

Mike must've come in just after Pastor Wong (no relation) started the service. I saw him later, hiding in one of the back rows, discreetly avoiding his parents and his sister, who were seated up front. Hands dug into the pockets of his dress pants, he noticed me looking at him. His face reddening a little, he managed a helpless shrug.

"... Richard Wong was a good boy, a strong boy, filled with direction and ambition," the pastor orated in an impassioned, accentless voice. "He knew where he was going. Truly, his death could not have come at a sadder time, when his future seemed so bright and promising." Many guests acknowledged this comment gravely, some nodding their heads. Tasmin, lower lip quivering, her lovely face streaked with tears, clutched Thomas's arm and choked.

As Pastor Wong went on, I stared at the fifth and final member of the Banana Boys. Rick was lying in a half-open oak casket. The warm April sun shone through a window, reflecting off his perfect complexion. He was surrounded by flowers, some with white ribbons with Chinese characters scrawled in black — good luck for the afterlife, or something. The Chinese are rather big on luck. Rick's suit obscured the horrific wounds sustained by the lower half of his body, caused by the metal, broken glass, his curious impalement on a statuette.

He looked as graceful and confident as he ever had been in life, and at peace; this was probably because I couldn't see his eyes. I wondered if he'd died with his eyes open. I hate when that happens. Mom told me that in Chinese folklore, people who died unpeacefully, or with unfinished business, did so with their eyes still open. In my mind's eye, I could see Rick in his posh downtown condo, coughing and writhing in pain, shaking with alcohol-induced convulsions until he took his last gasp. His eyes were wide open, unseeing, and

he was lying among shards of glass in a pool of blood and vomit, a long translucent pyramid protruding from his bloody abdomen, the life drained out of him.

I sighed inwardly again, feeling the tears form in my stomach, knowing that they wouldn't — *couldn't* — come out. Very few ever have in a long time. I have stayed cool and controlled and emotionless for a long, long time.

Rick is my brother. I have his blood in my veins, his flesh on my body. I don't love him. I don't hate him. I don't feel strongly about anything. I don't think I ever have.



Pastor Wong adjusted his glasses, his voice quavering with boundless Christian emotion. My thoughts drifted to the other Banana Boys. There was Luke, Dave, Sheldon, Rick and Mike. No joy, no luck in this club — they went to school together, worked like maniacs, drank a lot, complained about everything, sometimes acted like complete pigs, sometimes exhibited moments of caring and tenderness. Hit the books hard, hit the bottle even harder. Watched hockey games together, agonized over women together, dreamed about bigger and better things. Together. Until now, I guess.

My first encounter with the Banana Boys was after they had met each other in their first semester at the University of Waterloo. Rick invited them down one weekend when mom had taken dad to this clinic in Montreal that treated bipolars, and left the house in Rick's capable hands for the weekend. He had a party, of course, with a bunch of his high-school friends. The Banana Boys definitely stood out, not least because they were the only Asians there.

From then on, whenever I encountered the Banana Boys, together or individually, there always seemed to be this weird bond between them. Call it a sociology thing, or an ethnic thing, or an alcohol thing, or just wild coincidence, if you like. But it was as if they were always playing this large game of Twister, and however contorted and split and mixed up they got, all the parts still joined up, somehow.

I usually differentiated those guys from Rick's Real Chinese

Friends because the Banana Boys didn't *really* seem Chinese. At least they didn't act like it, mostly. They were all CBCs, Canadian-born Chinese, "Bananas" — yellow on the outside and white on the inside. *Jook-sing*. Translated literally, it means "hollow bamboo" in Cantonese. Hardly a flattering label. It's based on a metaphor that compares Canadian-born Chinese to a cross-section of a bamboo — hollow on one end, hollow on the other, empty through and through. In the eyes of "real" Canadians and "pure" Chinese (whatever that means), *jook-sing* have no consistent culture, no substance, no essence. They stand between two groups, not quite Canadian, and certainly not Chinese, marginal and maybe kind of messed up, belonging to and accepted by neither.

Maybe you've seen them. Many don't seem to ... fit in, at least not well. They pronounce the "j" in words like *jook*. They eat burgers and steaks one day and funky foods, like chicken feet and pigs intestines, the next. They listen to Country-Western and Heavy Metal, and despise Karaoke. They analyze and overanalyze the racial dynamics of a song lyric, a cup of coffee, or a particularly bad episode of *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues*. They cook bacon with chopsticks, and read Hong Kong magazines only for the pictures, flipping pages left to right.

Which is not to say their experiences are worse than those of most other social sub-groups. Oh no. I mean, many of them come from middle-class families, went to school, had money to spend, food to eat, clothes to wear — to certain eyes, their lives would read like one big slightly-ethnic John Hughes movie.

"... we pay our last respects to Richard," Pastor Wong continued, his eyes reddening, voice trembling, "... as God claims him as His own. We all have our place. We all have our time. We may not wish it was Richard's. But it was. And we know that God will take care of him." Mom started crying again. Tasmin was already bawling uncontrollably, face smeared with makeup. I just stood and stared at Rick, somewhat depressed.

*We all have our place. We all have our time.*

*Hollow, or not.*