

FORTUNE COOKIE

Once a week, usually on Tuesday, Harold Evers ate lunch by himself at the Bamboo Tree, a nondescript Chinese restaurant a few blocks from his office.

As a partner in Jenkins & Price – a bustling business law firm located in midtown Manhattan – Harold was aware he was in violation of the firm's tacit lunch hour policy: *If you can't take a client or prospective client out to lunch, eat a sandwich at your desk so you can bill the time.* But Evers – 53, balding, overweight, brown eyes framed by bifocals, and clad in one of his three identical off-the-rack gray suits – liked the idea of getting away from the office by himself. He found the formica tables and potted palms of the Bamboo Tree relaxing, a good spot to catch up on back issues of legal periodicals.

There were seldom more than a few customers at lunchtime. Harold always sat at the same table, well-positioned for reading under a bright fluorescent light. The sole waiter was an East Asian man of indeterminate age, medium height and slim build, with a distinctive large mole on the left side of his chin. Harold didn't know the waiter's name, but – in an uncharacteristic moment of whimsy – had privately dubbed him "Mao."

Each Tuesday, Harold and Mao held the same brief conversation.

Mao: "Greetings."
Harold: "Hello."
Mao: "You take usual?"
Harold: "Yes."

The "usual" was a plate of steamed mixed vegetables – heavy on the string beans – some steamed shrimp, steamed bits of chicken and steamed rice, plus a small dish of hot mustard. Evers had concocted this tasteless mélange from the unobtrusive "Diet" section squirreled away on the last page of the Bamboo Tree's menu. He was allergic to MSG. Although a footnote to the menu asserted that it was no longer used in preparing the food, Harold had suffered a severe headache the one time he dared to order an unsteamed dish. This confirmed his belief that remnants of MSG were

too deeply ingrained in the saucepans and woks of the Bamboo Tree to be totally banished from any dish containing spice or flavoring.

After Harold had speared the last string bean with his chopsticks, Mao would remove the dinner plate and slide in a small dish with a single fortune cookie in the center. Harold enjoyed the ritual of breaking the cookie open, extracting the tiny strip of paper, and checking the message. The words of wisdom contained in the Bamboo Tree cookies were relentlessly banal, counseling him to be of good cheer, seek moderation in all things, and the like.

On the first Tuesday in April, 1977, Evers spent his usual lunch hour at the Bamboo Tree, reading an obscure essay on the rudiments of tort law in ancient Carthage. When his fortune cookie arrived, Harold noticed a slight difference in its color and shape from the usual offering. He had a brief comical vision – the restaurant laying in a huge supply of cookies at its grand opening *circa* 1972, anticipating hordes of customers who never materialized, and the supply finally running out half a decade later.

Cracking open the unfamiliar cookie, Harold immediately noted a novel form of italicized printing on the slip of paper. Still, he was unprepared for the text:

"Lucky boy. You in for big surprise this week, worth plenty bucks."

Harold looked up, startled. Unlike the generalized pablum he was used to, this cookie's message was specific, predictive and seemingly aimed right at him.

He glanced around the small room to see if anything else was awry. The premises appeared unchanged. The few other customers were eating quietly. Mao was back in the kitchen, where he seemed to spend most of his time.

Then it struck him. *Why, it's April Fool's Day! These Chinese have a sense of humor after all . . .* Harold chuckled, washed down the cookie fragments with a gulp of lukewarm tea, paid his bill and left the restaurant.

The next day, Evers was contacted by a lawyer in Cleveland he hadn't heard from since law school. The classmate was calling to retain him

to handle a major lawsuit in the New York courts. It represented a real windfall for Harold – a significant case that would boost his standing at Jenkins & Price, entitling him to a larger share of firm profits in the years ahead.

When Harold had a few moments to reflect on his good fortune, the discarded prediction in the Bamboo Tree's fortune cookie naturally bubbled back to the surface. This new lawsuit had certainly come as a "big surprise," occurring "this week," and destined to be "worth plenty bucks." But Harold quickly brushed aside any linkage between the cookie and the case – chalking it up to the often baffling but recurring role that coincidence plays in everyday life.

Evers was, after all, a man of reason, who clung to what was explicable, with little patience for the mystical. He scorned ouija boards, chided his wife for tossing salt over her right shoulder after a spill to ward off evil spirits, and once got into a spirited debate at a cocktail party with a zealous advocate of the Bermuda Triangle. Harold had resolutely declined to see the two hit science fiction movies of the past year – *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The unwavering rationality of law school and legal practice had smothered any interest he might have had in the occult; logic was his sole mistress now.

On the following Tuesday, Harold returned to the Bamboo Tree, although without any lofty expectations. The waiter was as expressionless as usual throughout the meal. When the fortune cookie was placed in front of Harold, he could see that it resembled the previous week's rogue confection. Cracking it open, he read the italicized message:

“Hey, big fella, you about to get nice promotion.”

Howard indulged a momentary flirtation with the possibility of supernatural intervention, but quickly reverted to the cold voice of reason. After all, he noted, promotions were something that occurred in corporations, not in law partnerships once you make partner. The firm's litigation practice group was headed up by Stan Matson, a vigorous man in his late 50's, and the three other partners stood in no special pecking order. *So much for these dessert doodles*, thought Harold, oddly relieved that the current prediction was so unfulfillable.

That afternoon, Stan Matson suffered a sudden massive stroke at his desk and was carted off to the hospital. The next morning, Harold Evers was summoned to the office of the firm's managing partner, Bill Price. A vigorous 75, Price wore his trademark vest and peered at his visitor over the top of his low-cut reading glasses.

"We all feel terrible about Matson, of course," Price said. "The doctors hope he'll eventually regain the power of speech. Meanwhile, life goes on, and your group needs leadership. You've performed admirably in recent years, Evers, and I'm promoting you to group head."

Harold, suddenly light-headed, gripped the arms of the chair to steady himself. He had spent a troubled, sleepless night reflecting on Matson's sudden misfortune, hardly daring to confront what it might mean to his own position in the firm. Now he knew. And with Price's explicit reference to "promoting" him, the linkage to yesterday's fortune cookie was unavoidable.

Harold immersed himself in his new duties, working late each evening, trying not to think about the cookies. But as the following week began, he knew he'd have to make a luncheon decision. Two in a row hadn't yet turned him into a full-fledged convert to the inscrutable; nevertheless, he felt it clearly merited further investigation. The hook, as they say, was in.

But now the left side of his brain, which appeared to have taken a short sabbatical, reasserted itself under the guise of intellectual curiosity. As a lawyer, Harold typically approached thorny problems by isolating the elements of significance and then tinkering with the variables to see how this affected the result. One recurring element here was the day of the week. Harold found himself speculating as to whether the portents worked only on a Tuesday. So he decided to wait until the next Wednesday to dine on the tasteless steamed fare.

When Harold arrived at the restaurant, Mao, who was standing near the door, gave him an odd look. The waiter seemed even more puzzled when his patron broke the mold again by opting to sit at a different table than was customary. Harold, secretly enjoying his taste of devil-may-care unpredictability, then startled even himself by ordering a bowl of won ton soup.

When the meal ended, Mao placed a fortune cookie in front of him. It resembled last week's model. On an impulse, Harold said to the waiter, "I don't like the looks of that cookie. Please take it back and bring me another." Mao exhibited as much surprise as he seemed capable of, the skin crinkling in the vicinity of his mole. Honoring the request, he returned from the kitchen with a replacement cookie. Harold broke it open eagerly, sugarplum visions of even grander prophecies dancing before his eyes. He was unprepared for the italicized words:

"Unlucky week, bad thing to happen at work."

Harold sat there stunned. Somehow, he had failed to contemplate the possibility that the fortunes could turn negative. After a few moments, he called the waiter over. Shrugging his shoulders and spreading his hands – as if to imply that Mao should humor him – Harold said, "Look, this may sound odd, but remember the fortune cookie I returned a few minutes ago? Would it be possible to get it back? I may have been mistaken about its appearance, and I'd like to give it another try."

It was by far Harold's longest utterance in the minimalist dialogue that marked their relationship. But the waiter was unsympathetic, replying briskly, "Not possible. Cookie in garbage disposal."

Panicked at what might lie in store for him, Evers virtually shut down his practice for the next few days – refraining from giving any advice to clients, deferring delivery of all papers. Still, late on Friday afternoon, he received a call from an outraged client, who claimed to have suffered a large financial loss because of a contract he said Evers had improperly drafted earlier in the year. Harold was unable to mollify the client, who threatened to bring a lawsuit against him and the firm for malpractice.

Harold spent the weekend working out a settlement under which the client dropped his claim in exchange for the firm furnishing him additional legal services without charge. It was a resolution Evers and the firm could live with, but the incident was clearly disturbing. And, without conceding any potency to the occult, Harold couldn't help but wonder whether his tinkering with the variables had broken the favorable pattern.

So the next week, Harold resumed his old ways. He lunched at the Bamboo Tree on Tuesday, sat at his usual table, ordered just the steamed

fare, and meekly accepted the first cookie offered. Nevertheless, the thin paper strip contained an ominous portent:

*“Some days good, some not so good.
Today lousy.”*

Harold grimaced, silently mouthing a few choice expletives. He paid his check and left the restaurant deep in thought, eyes unfocused, pondering what he could do to change his luck. Thus occupied, he failed to notice a wet spot near the curb, slipped on the slick, and – while trying to break the fall – landed heavily on his wrist.

Fortunately, the X-rays revealed no fracture, and the sprained wrist was his left one, so he could continue to brush his teeth, use a spoon, and write legal briefs. Still, the injury was quite painful, making it difficult to dismiss the incident as something other than the fulfillment of a negative prophecy.

Evers now tried to review the situation coolly, as if it were something happening to a client who had sought his advice. He tallied up the score: four straight weeks, two favorable and two unfavorable predictions, all of which came to pass. But he couldn't help wondering whether these occurrences might have taken place in any event, no more than pure coincidence.

The next week, to test this theory, Harold avoided the Bamboo Tree entirely. It was a week in which nothing of significance happened in his life.

Harold then pondered the question of whether it was the restaurant or the cookie that was dictating his fate. He decided to try another experiment. Returning to the Bamboo Tree the next Tuesday, he sat at his usual table and ordered the steamed plate. When he had wolfed down the last string bean, Harold signaled to the waiter. "Sorry, I'm in a rush," he said, slapping some bills down on the table and fleeing the premises – all before a bemused Mao could serve the little plate with the cookie.

The balance of the week proved as uneventful as the previous one. Clearly, Harold deduced, the cookie was the culprit.

Lunching at the Bamboo Tree the following Tuesday, Harold hit on a further permutation. This time he allowed Mao to serve the fortune

cookie, but, blatantly ignoring it, he exited the restaurant with the uncracked pastry forlorn on its plate. For the next few days, he searched anxiously for a sign – up or down – not knowing what to anticipate. Late Thursday, he received news that the district court had ruled in his favor on an important motion in a big case he'd been handling for several years. Harold was delighted with this result, as it was unlikely the other side would appeal the verdict. But he was annoyed with himself for not saving the cookie to verify its forecast of the good news.

He rectified this oversight the following week. After Mao served the cookie, Harold popped it into a small leather pouch he had once used for pipe tobacco. For several days, he kept the pouch unopened in his desk drawer, avoiding the temptation to peek at the fortune.

It was still in the drawer on Thursday when Mike Purdy, an associate who worked for Evers, burst into his office.

“Bad news, chief. They’ve decided to appeal.”

Surprising everyone, his adversary had challenged last week's favorable district court decision. This had the effect of leaving matters up in the air for another year, a big disappointment for Harold.

Mike Purdy seemed anxious to linger to discuss strategy, but Harold craved privacy to open the drawer and find out whether the bad news had been foretold. Although he briefly contemplated pulling out the pouch in Purdy's presence, Harold restrained himself – concerned that the associate might misconstrue the spectacle of his boss consulting the fortune cookie. After what seemed to Harold half a lifetime, Purdy finally took his leave.

One millisecond after the door closed behind the associate, Harold opened the drawer, retrieved the pouch, untied the drawstring, cracked open the cookie – with his right hand, so as not to put undue pressure on his sprained left wrist – and read the message:

“Something smell sweet one week, turn sour the next.”

Deeply shaken, Evers took the rest of the day off. He no longer doubted the power of the occult; the cumulative evidence was simply too compelling. The pertinent issue now was how to manipulate these phenomena to achieve optimum results.

Seated at home in his favorite rocking chair, a yellow pad in his lap, Harold worked at devising a strategy. Lawyerlike to the core, he worked his way down the page, posing a series of relevant questions: Are these happenings specific to me, to the Bamboo Tree, to the waiter? Is there enough of a pattern to influence the timing of my Bamboo Tree visits? Might there be a way, after receiving a negative prediction, to prevent a bad thing from happening? Late into the evening, Harold continued to explore the various permutations and combinations.

Two issues in particular appeared to merit further testing. The first was whether the Bamboo Tree alone was capable of serving up the clairvoyant cookies. To test this, when the next Tuesday rolled around, Harold decided to try his luck at Hunan Heaven, a modest establishment with comparable décor a few blocks away.

The waiter was polite but otherwise unmemorable. Although Harold ordered a reasonable facsimile of the "usual," he suspected that the chef might have sprinkled a few specks of MSG on the broccoli, which was too flavorful for the bland taste he associated with steaming. The fortune cookie was served on a little plate – a dead ringer for the Bamboo Tree version. Harold ripped open the confection, prepared to collect his latest good fortune. The thin paper strip offered up this morsel of wisdom, in unitalicized print:

"Hard work is its own reward."

So much, thought Evers, for Hunan Heaven – and Chinese cuisine in general, for that matter.

The second issue was whether just Harold had been singled out, or whether others might be receiving similar treatment. So, on the following Tuesday, he invited a guest along to dine at the Bamboo Tree – his associate, Mike Purdy. Purday was flattered to be asked to lunch by a partner, but his enthusiasm paled visibly when he realized they weren't headed for Four Seasons.

Seemingly unmindful of the restaurant's seedy atmosphere, Harold played the jovial host, urging Purdy to disregard his own steamed plate and order some of the chef's zestier specials. Harold even bantered lightly with the waiter, which seemed to catch Mao by surprise, producing a puzzled facial expression that cast the mole in bas relief.

When it was dessert time, the waiter placed one fortune cookie in front of each man. Trying hard to appear casual, Evers ignored his plate, sipped some tea, and held forth on the merits of a recent court ruling. At one point, as he paused to permit Purdy to respond, Harold reached down nonchalantly, cracked open the cookie, took a bite, and glanced down at his fortune.

*“Money not the only reward for hard work,
as you find out soon.”*

Harold pursed his lips to avoid betraying elation. He pondered what might be a reward other than money. Then, recalling that the purpose of the lunch was to see if other diners received similar treatment, he looked over at Purdy. The associate had placed his napkin on the table, apparently finished with the meal and uninterested in his cookie.

The waiter brought over the check. Harold made a show of reaching for it, placing a few small bills on top to cover the skimpy total. Then he asked, "Aren't you going to eat your fortune cookie?"

Purdy shook his head, lifted the plate, and offered it to Evers. Accepting it with a weak smile, Harold murmured something like, "Really hits the spot at the end of a Chinese meal." He cracked open the cookie, extracted the fortune without reading it, and tossed the paper dismissively onto the table. Then he swallowed the second cookie – although one was his usual limit – washing it down with the rest of his tea.

As they rose to leave the restaurant, and with the associate briefly facing away from the table, Harold speared Purdy's fortune and dropped it into his jacket pocket. He waited until reaching the privacy of his office to read the plain text message:

"Patience is a virtue worth indulging."

As he pondered this thought – a timeworn maxim that seemed unlikely to result in speedy gratification – the office door swung open and his secretary appeared.

"Good news!" she said, "Your article on non-competition covenants has been accepted by the Law Review."

Evers was jubilant. Here, in less than an hour, was his non-monetary reward, neatly juxtaposed against the banality of Purdy's fortune – thus confirming that the special treatment was his alone.

Harold was now hooked on his weekly mystic moment. Although unable to discern a sufficient pattern to influence the timing of his visits, he was pleased to see that the positive events continued to outnumber the negatives in the following weeks. And though he never devised a means of blocking a baddie, they generally weren't as bad as the good ones were good – making his decision to continue patronizing the Bamboo Tree a no-brainer.

Just the next week, for example, Harold extracted the first of a promising new line of fortunes:

*“Life not all work and no play. You see,
something good happening at home.”*

That night, Harold's wife told him she had found a new housekeeper, who "cooks like a dream," to replace the incumbent, whose culinary skills were less than stellar. Harold reacted with an "I told you so" look that appeared to puzzle his wife. He had not taken her or anyone else into his confidence, fearing that disclosure might mean the end of a good thing.

In the weeks following, Evers found a long-lost favorite windbreaker and made an eagle on the par 5 dogleg 17th hole at his golf club. His dog Duke did suffer a paw bruise that caused the animal some discomfort for a few days – nothing earth-shaking, though, and the goods continued to outperform the bads (although Duke might not have concurred in that assessment).

Prospering on all fronts, with occasional affordable setbacks, Harold ceased analyzing the mystery of it all and allowed himself to enjoy the fruits of his good fortune, which showed every sign of becoming a permanent bounty.

And then, one sultry Tuesday late that summer, Evers made his weekly pilgrimage to the Bamboo Tree, only to find it closed and padlocked. A crude sign in the window said it all: the restaurant had gone into bankruptcy.

The news hit Harold hard. He reread the notice several times, uttering muted oaths, then staggered away in disbelief. As his head cleared, he could see, with the clarity of hindsight, that the habitual dearth of other patrons should have served as a warning.

But Evers, a tough litigator in court, wasn't about to give up his bonanza without a fight. For the balance of the year – five months in which almost nothing of note came his way – he tried one Chinese restaurant after another, searching for a Bamboo Tree surrogate. His real objective was to find Mao, who he suspected was the key to the whole business. But Harold didn't know Mao's real name nor where he might have gone, although he assumed the waiter had sought employment in another of the city's countless Chinese restaurants.

Evers worked his way up one avenue and down the next. Chucking his old taciturn self, he now struck up conversations with waiters and cashiers, asking if they remembered the Bamboo Tree. Few had even heard of the place. To those who did recall it, Harold would probe whether they knew his favorite waiter – a man about 5 foot 8, with slicked back hair and a mole on the side of his chin. But his inquiries bore no fruit, and the year ended with Harold in despair.

Shortly after the New Year's holiday, Evers attended a partners' lunch in the firm's large conference room. Half-way through the meal, he became aware of a conversation taking place further down the table among several of his colleagues. Cary Jensen, one of the partners in the litigation group Harold supervised, was holding the floor. His monologue was punctuated by bursts of laughter and expressions of incredulity from the other participants. Harold perked up when he overheard the words "fortune cookie," but he was seated too far away to get the gist of the discussion.

When the lunch broke up, Harold approached Cary Jensen. "From their reaction, that sounded like a good tale you were entertaining the guys with."

Jensen replied, "It's really fascinating."

"I always love a good yarn. Cary. Would you mind repeating it for me?"

Jensen glanced at his watch. "I've got some time now, chief. Come up to my office, and I'll give you the whole story."

A few minutes later, feet propped up on his desk, Jensen started in. "It appears that some higher being is communicating with me through the medium of – would you believe? – fortune cookies! I'm receiving predictions of future events – predictions that turn out to be highly accurate."

Jensen then told him a tale that closely paralleled Harold's undisclosed story. It was occurring at the Won Ton Palace, located across town from the office – not one of the restaurants Harold had yet sampled in search of Mao.

"That's amazing," said Harold. "By the way, do you always have the same waiter?"

"Yes, he's the only one there at the Palace. An ordinary-looking guy, except for a big mole on his chin."

Harold rubbed his eyes with an open hand to mask any telltale reaction. *Imagine that*, he thought – *my Mao, showing up at the Won Ton Palace*. He wondered whether he could whisk over there now for a little post-lunch repast, just to get the process going again.

Jensen chuckled and said. "This'll kill you, Harold, but just yesterday I got a fortune that said I was in line for a promotion. Can you believe it? Anyway, keep me in mind if there are any openings. . . ."

Evers barely made it out of Jensen's office. He remembered only too well what had occurred the last time the word "promotion" had figured in a fortune – foretelling his own elevation to group head after Matson's ill-fated stroke. Unconsciously, Harold attempted to take his own pulse. His left knee, aggravated by an old lacrosse injury, began to ache. He recalled that during 1977, the year just past, two of the greatest comedians – Charlie Chaplin and Groucho Marx – and two of his favorite vocalists – Bing Crosby and Elvis Presley – had all passed away. He went back to his office, checked to see that nothing crucial was coming up on his professional calendar, and decided to change his life.

A few hours later, having packed a small canvas bag, Evers took a taxi to the airport en route to a prestigious health spa he'd heard raves about. For the next two weeks, Harold subjected himself to a rigorous physical regimen – exercising every muscle and organ of his body, eliminating cholesterol, fat and excessive calories from his diet. Alcohol, caffeine and salt became things of the past. He even refrained from taking

any business calls that might serve to boost his tension level. When he returned to the city a fortnight later, he felt great.

A few hours into his first day back at the office, Evers got word that Bill Price, the head of the firm, wanted to see him. He bounded into Price's office, the picture of good health and energy. Price, flashing a look of disdain, growled at him, "We're very disappointed with you, Harold – disappearing for two weeks, just when all hell broke loose – orders to show cause, questionable affidavits, declaratory judgments, the works."

"But it was for my health," Harold protested.

"That may be," replied Price, peering over his reading glasses, "but you've shown yourself to be someone we can't depend on in the clutch. As a result, effective immediately, Cary Jensen is replacing you as head of the group."

Evers left Price's office, his mind reeling. He took the elevator to the lobby and staggered out into the street, coatless in the frigid January weather. The wind swirled around him. After walking a few seemingly aimless blocks, he realized he was headed in the direction of the Won Ton Palace.

Harold was half-frozen by the time he arrived at the restaurant. One glance at the interior confirmed that the Won Ton Palace was almost a replica of the Bamboo Tree. Then he saw the waiter coming out of the kitchen. The mole on the side of Mao's chin was even more prominent than in the old days. Harold was sure Mao would recognize him, but the waiter's enigmatic expression masked any sign of familiarity.

Mao motioned the lawyer to a table – a well-lit one, Evers noted, although all he really needed now was enough light to read the fortune. The waiter said "Greetings," but after he replied "Hello," Mao did not ask if he would take the "usual." Harold ascribed this to Won Ton's menu, which required somewhat more work to latch on to the same kind of bland fare he had dined on at the Bamboo Tree.

When Evers finished his meal, the waiter brought out the fortune cookie. Its appearance resembled the prophetic ones he'd been served at the Bamboo Tree. Harold popped it into his jacket pocket, flung some bills on the table, and fled the Won Ton Palace. Outside in the cold,

his hands trembled as he cracked open the cookie and fingered the slip of paper. Its unitalicized message read:

"A faithful friend is a strong defense."

"Damn!" Harold exclaimed. He considered returning to the restaurant to protest, but eventually decided to go back to the office unfulfilled. Whatever magic he used to possess appeared long gone.

The next morning, Evers walked down the hall to Cary Jensen's office. They hadn't spoken since Jensen replaced him as group head, although Cary had left several unanswered messages with Harold's secretary. Harold congratulated Jensen – avoiding any mention of how Cary's promotion fulfilled the prediction – and invited him to lunch the following Tuesday.

"That's great," said Jensen, seemingly appreciative of Harold's good sportsmanship. "Where would you like to go?"

"Well, I'd be intrigued to try that restaurant where you get the loaded fortune cookies."

"Absolutely, although I must admit it's no great bargain food-wise."

When they arrived at the Won Ton Palace the next Tuesday, Evers acted as if it were his first visit. So did the waiter, who greeted him in cursory fashion and refrained from characterizing his prior week's selection as the "usual."

The conversation between the two partners was forced and awkward, both eating in some haste to get the meal over with. At last, the fortune cookies came out, one placed before each of them on little plates. A look of anticipation lit up Jensen's face.

Before either cookie had been touched, Evers suggested, "Why don't we switch cookies to see if the magic works on me?"

"No," said Jensen, "I'm afraid to tinker with the system."

"Oh, come on, Cary," Harold chortled, "take a chance" – and as he spoke, he reached across the table for Jensen's cookie.

"I said 'No'!" Jensen barked, slapping Harold's hand away. Jensen then grabbed his cookie off the plate, stuffed it into his jacket pocket, left money to cover the check, and said, "Come on, let's get out of here." Harold, pocketing his own cookie, followed him to the door.

They emerged from the Won Ton Palace with Jensen leading the way, topcoat still on his arm, crossing the street about 20 yards from the corner. Suddenly, a car bore down on them full throttle, the driver attempting to beat the yellow light. The car seemed headed for Harold, but at the last minute swerved and hit Jensen hard, knocking him into the gutter, limp and unconscious.

Evers, unharmed, ran to Jensen's side, arriving before any of the other onlookers. While making a show of feeling Jensen's forehead with his one hand, Harold reached into Jensen's jacket pocket with his other. He extracted the remains of Cary's cookie, which had been mashed by the impact of the car, and dropped the crumbs into his own coat pocket.

After a few minutes, Jensen began to stir fitfully, as if waking from a deep sleep. An ambulance arrived, and Harold accompanied his partner to the hospital. The doctor's verdict was that Jensen, though badly battered, would survive.

It wasn't until he returned to his office later in the afternoon that Harold was alone for the first time since leaving the Won Ton Palace. He took both his own cookie and Jensen's crushed one from his coat pocket. Cracking open his own, he extracted the slip of paper. There was no writing on either side. In all his years of patronizing Chinese restaurants, Harold could not recall ever having drawn a blank.

After pondering the significance of this briefly, Harold turned his attention to the italicized fortune that emerged intact from the crumbs of Jensen's cookie. It read:

"Better linger over tea extra ten minutes today."

At that moment, Harold lost all urge to ever return to the Won Ton Palace. The stakes had gotten too high for his taste; he didn't want to play this game any more. His flirtation with mysticism had left an unpleasant aftertaste. It was time to return to a rational universe. To emphasize his determination, Harold took the Guide to Midtown Dining

from his desk drawer and ripped out all the pages referring to Chinese restaurants.

The next day, Bill Price called Evers into his office. "That was a terrible accident Cary Jensen had," said the head of the firm. "Imagine, just leaving a restaurant and then, bam!" Harold mumbled his concurrence.

"Well," Price said, straightening the creases in his vest, "be that as it may, in view of Jensen's unavailability for an indefinite period, I'm reappointing you as acting head of the group. Don't let us down this time."

Evers, the reconfirmed rational man, threw himself into his work, relieved to be free from the pressures of the occult. The cycles of expectation/fulfillment/disappointment had wearied and distracted him. At last he felt comfortable again, his own man.

He still indulged himself in a regular noontime break from the office routine. With the steamed vegetables a thing of the past, Harold now began to develop a strong craving for the raw fish served in Japanese restaurants. Rather than sit at the sushi bar, he preferred a well-lit corner of the room, where he could peruse his periodicals. There was one restaurant in particular, named Rising Sun, that he began to frequent almost as often as he had the Bamboo Tree.

One Tuesday in April, Harold was enjoying a plate of sushi at the Rising Sun, his mind absorbed in a timely article analyzing recent trends in legal fees. He had saved for the last bite his favorite morsel – the delectable sea urchin called "uni", perched on rice wrapped in a cylinder of seaweed.

As he raised the uni to his mouth with the chopsticks, Harold thought he heard a faint voice. He paused in mid-bite. The voice then spoke again, the accent unmistakably East Asian. He tilted one ear toward the chopsticks to obtain maximum clarity. The words, which seemed to emanate from the uni, were now unmistakable.

"Lucky boy. Nice thing soon happen to you at office."

Harold was stunned. He examined the urchin with care, but it looked perfectly normal. There was no customer or waiter nearby who might have been an amateur ventriloquist. What's going on here, he wondered – is my mind playing tricks on me?

He gazed over to the sushi bar. The main sushi chef looked as impassive as ever, absorbed in fashioning complex maki rolls. Next to him was someone with a bandana around his head whom Harold had never seen before. A new apprentice sushi chef, he thought. Just at that moment, the apprentice turned his head slightly in profile. Beneath the shadows cast by the stark neon light, Harold saw on the man's chin a large dark mole. . . .