

## 16 *The Blended Elixir*

“*Càn*, I promised my brother that I would find you a good husband, and for him that meant someone who would carry on our way of life, our Chinese way of life. I know you two are lovers, but that doesn’t matter.” During meetings in his private study, Mr. Zhang is usually plain spoken if not gruff. Neither of us was prepared for this.

Sunny responds sharply, “Doesn’t matter? What kind of tradition says love doesn’t matter? In fact I can answer that: one for the benefit of old men and the suffering of women.”

“Your father and mother cared about our tradition, and so I do.”

“My father and mother! To this day, I have no idea whether they loved each other. Uncle, *I* don’t have to live like that.” He can’t prevent our marriage or force her to marry someone else, but his disapproval hurts us both. It seems hopeless. Again.

“A real Chinese would never think about marriage with a problem like Pan still hanging over his head. You two can’t even go out in public together.”

It’s the most demeaning thing the old man has said in front of me. But this is a family matter, and all the respect I’ve shown him and the work I’ve done for him stand for nothing against that.

“Yes, sir, I know that I’m a ‘phony’ Chinese, at most a ‘boiled egg’ as Mo tried calling me. But let me ask you a question, Mr. Zhang. If I were an overseas Chinese who didn’t even know the language, would you approve of us then?” I’ve suspected for some time that he objects to our affair for more reasons than my past or present. I’m not surprised when he doesn’t answer.

“As much as you would like to deny it, you can’t. In your heart you can’t accept me because I don’t look Chinese, no matter how much of the language, behavior, culture, and history I know and practice. It comes down to that, doesn’t it? What’s really galling is that except for looks no one knows what it is to be Chinese. Even *Sūn Zhāng Shān*<sup>1</sup> couldn’t see any more than ‘common blood.’ If there is more, please tell me. Tell me what to believe, how to act, and what to do to make me Chinese!”

The old man remains silent. Guessing that Sunny will want to talk to him alone, I leave.

Later in her apartment, Sunny surprises me by defending her uncle though upset with him. “Thomas, you’re mistaken about uncle; partly at least. Yes, he would prefer you to be Chinese, but the real problem is the future. He sees none for us, not only because of that madman but also because he doesn’t believe a marriage between a Chinese and a foreigner can last for a lifetime. And if we tried living together, the consequences would be horrendous, not only for us but also for uncle. The responses of friends and business associates would be more sophisticated than those of the villagers towards the nurse and you but just as self-righteous and unmerciful.”

I answer with a quote.

*A pity beyond all telling is hid in the heart of love.*<sup>2</sup>

And she counters with another.

*Anyone ensnared by love can come to no good end!*<sup>3</sup>

“This is no time for humor.”

“It isn’t funny. *A Dream of Red Mansions* is symbolic

of this country's history, where love was usually defeated by power and money. Life here is still often that way because relatives—and everyone else for that matter—still interfere.” Yes, I've seen love with Chinese characteristics.

“But I will not end as a monk, like Bao Yu, and you will not die, like Dai Yu,” I declare. It doesn't help, and she asks me to leave without us making love.

Perhaps like most dogmatic statements, mine contained the opposite truth: if I lost Sunny after having lost Jun Yan I could well become a monk. Even with her love, I seem to have nowhere to turn.

Since Doctor Su's diagnosis of “potential amnesia,” I've been unable to determine whether it was nonsensical Chinese medicine of the kind that prescribes eating animal penises for human impotency<sup>4</sup> or the thoroughly sensible kind that prescribes a life-long program of mild exercise, stretching, and massage for a long, healthy life. Western medical information from the Internet has also done nothing to help me understand my relationship to Dragon Full Glory.

In Lili I suffered from a straightforward case of retrograde amnesia for ego experiences occurring before regaining consciousness in the hospital. The *Merck Manual* on the Internet says, “Treatment of amnesia of all kinds involves management of its underlying cause. Most patients with acute acquired organic amnesia improve spontaneously. For those who do not, no specific measures can hasten the process or improve the end result.” Although the spontaneous return of my memory must have been a consequent of healing, physically, emotionally, or both, the presence of remaining symptoms and the nature of one in particular suggests that the process wasn't complete.

The symptom that hints most of the doctor's analysis is my occasional inability to remember an English word until I've written it down. It's unsettling to know that I

don't have the same problem with Chinese characters and to see my hand remind my mind of something very basic. Other symptoms that I recognize are a heightened state of aggressiveness and the sense of having lost part of myself. I suspect that they are all interrelated.

What the underlying cause of these symptoms could be, I can't even guess. According to the doctors in Chongqing, I have nothing for surgery or drugs to cure. The defining diagnostic feature of post-traumatic stress disorder in people who have survived horrific events is memory distortion, which can range from vivid feelings of reliving the trauma to complete amnesia concerning the event. Emotional distortions must also be a feature of these disorders.

Neither massage nor meditation, both of which I still occasionally perform, has had any effect. Using intense pain or great fear remain possibilities, though I don't dare mention them to Sunny again. I must have felt both at the time my amnesia first developed. Pain for example could help drive specific healing mantras deep into my mind. For the moment, these ideas remain wild speculations.

Although I have no emotional direction for the moment, I have a physical one, the mountain. There I can drink the blended elixir of meditation, clean air, quietness, and loneliness.

*Hoping that he would show me a road to  
immortality,  
He said that the elixir is in one's own body.  
It is a waste of effort to seek it outside.<sup>5</sup>*

And apply that most Chinese of balms, visiting old friends.

*Three years without paying a*

*visit, and relations are no longer relations.*<sup>6</sup>

\* \* \*

It's late spring, well over a year since I was there last, and well after I should have returned to pay my respects to friends, and mend an old wound. Shi Xiong has loaned me his car for the trip, and the driver is about to drop me off in Lili to see Jing Lian. It will be a difficult meeting.

Through Mr. Zhang's contacts with the Chongqing police, specifically Assistant Chief Yu (who was delighted to be of help to the *lǎo dà*), Shi Xiong was able to obtain information about the Lili doctor that has only added to my bewilderment.

Jing Lian is, as he claimed, a native of Lili. Along with his martial skill, it explains why Pan was afraid of him without knowing that he was also a policeman. Pan is from nearby Daxian, and as they say in the villages and small towns of this country, "You can never beat the local boy." It also suggests that the doctor wasn't lying about once being in love with Jun Yan's mother or about his feelings for Jun Yan.

On the other hand, Jing Lian was originally conscripted into the police force not to investigate Pan but to collect evidence of subversive activities by the monastery. The "Special Investigator" must have seen me as a golden opportunity both to catch Pan and his gang and to gather information on the monks. Now I understand my own reluctance to talk about Master Liu's teachings: Jing Lian's interest was too calculated. I can imagine a rare visitor to the temple reporting that Master Liu was teaching seditious doctrines because Daoism is fundamentally anti-political. But I can't imagine anyone considering the Master to be a threat to the Communist Party. It must be another example

of appearance being more important than substance.

After the initial surprise and embarrassment, Jing Lian invites me into his home.

“This is a celebration of friendship. Anyway the clothes may not fit!” I tell him when he tries to refuse the gifts, all practical goods, like cooking utensils, dried food, silk and wool cloth, and jeans. After the customary four or five refusals, he finally accepts them. When his wife and son finish examining the gifts, he suggests to his son that he show the presents to friends and to his wife that she go to the market. He then invites me to sit while he prepares tea.

“Jing Lian, I came here to apologize.”

He turns around from the sideboard where he is making the tea and looks at me for a moment. Then looking away, he confesses to being sorry for putting me in the monastery. “I wasn’t blind to your friendship with Jun Yan but was to the extent of Pan’s madness.” He hands me a cup and sits across the table from me.

The closest I can come to a similar confession is an oblique question. “How did you find out?”

“Remember the day I told you about going to Liujiacun? You didn’t have your staff with you, which seemed not only foolish but also quite unlike you. Even today you’ve brought a staff for your climb to the monastery. There was also your wild, distracted look, fear I thought at first but then something very menacing. And your friend Lao Zhou provided some unintentional clues. It doesn’t matter what now, and don’t blame him: you’re the nearest he has ever had to a son and he loves to talk about you. I stopped looking after that.”

“You guessed that I would go after them?”

“Let me explain. I’ve suspected for a long time that Pan had ties with a local gang, just as he did during the cultural revolution, though then they could disguise themselves as Red Guards. In Daxian there were rumors of his gang killing political opponents and robbing the

wealthiest homes in the district. Pan has of course been more cautious since then, that is, until you came here.”

During the cultural revolution, as many as two million people were murdered by torture, starvation, or being forced to commit suicide (as had Deng Xiaoping’s own son), and I have often wondered what the even greater number of perpetrators now feel about their actions. In a society where public shame holds far more dread than private guilt, it seems unlikely that many are repentant.

“I wasn’t greatly worried about you because you were safe in the monastery and also more experienced after the attack. But to answer your question, I expected you to come to me with any evidence.” With a grin that gradually dies as he speaks, he adds, “I guess my judgment in criminal matters isn’t very good.”

“Jing Lian, we have both made mistakes.”

“Yes. Let’s put that behind us.”

I too am glad to forget about it and quickly look for another subject. When I mention resuming *xīn yì* practice everyday, he suggests that we go outside and spar to see how much progress I’ve made.

“And, Thomas, I’m sure you know the saying that ‘If you don’t fight, you can’t be friends!’” He laughs.

Unlike Shi Xiong, who practices Chen style *tàijí*, Jing Lian practices Sun style, which is commonly believed to have borrowed movements from *xíng yì quán* and *bāguà zhǎng* and thus to be the most combative of the “shadow boxing” forms. Like Shi Xiong, he is evasive, quick, and cunning. But again my *xīn yì* applications and *bāguà* footwork enhanced by my size and natural strength prevail. After several rounds, he admits defeat.

Putting his hand on my shoulder, he laughingly comments, “*Xīn yì* really is ‘*jiāng hú hēi quán*.’ So be careful when you use it, my friend!” As before, his actions and voice suggest an observation and nothing more, though it reminds me of Master Li’s story of sparring with a

famous *tàiji* master in Beijing when Li was quite young. During the contest, the master increasingly resorted to tricks from other styles to avoid defeat but still lost. Every martial artist is proud of his own style, and that is how it should be as long as that pride is accompanied by *wǔdé*, martial virtue. Although Jing Lian is disappointed in himself, unlike the Beijing master he has kept his *wǔdé*.

My appreciation of my friend's character prompts me to wish aloud that I had a brother like him. In reply he suggests that we formalize our relationship as "brothers." I agree, though I haven't heard of the practice. The official ceremony includes bowing and presenting incense at a Confucian temple, but since Lili has none we skip to the unofficial ceremony.

Inside the apartment Jing Lian fills two glasses with *gǒuji*. Using a needle, we each make a prick in our thumbs and drop blood into both glasses. "To brothers," we cheer and then drink.

Our *guānxi* is now as serious as kinship, Jing Lian announces. The Confucian ideal is that loyalty is the first virtue of all true men, and that means loyalty to authority and friendship to the extent of sacrificing one's family if necessary. Chinese literature is full of examples of both, he contends. From the *Three Kingdoms*, he quotes, "Brothers are like arms and legs; wives and children are merely garments that can always be mended. But who can mend a broken limb?"

I suspect that the literature contains more genuine accounts of another kind of "blood relationship," that between men bonded by violence. Our brotherhood is founded on revenge, self-protection, protection of others, justice, and the taking of life, all acts that evoke man's deepest emotions if not always his loftiest. Like soldiers who have killed yet believed they did so for a noble cause, our bond will be maintained by our shared dishonor and honor.

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After breakfast the next morning with Jing Lian and his family, I change into the clothes that I was wearing when Lao Zhou found me, pick up the bag Jun Yan and Jing Lian had given me, and head for the porter's shack. I believe that the old man will appreciate the joke not only because we are friends but also because he has gone beyond or never had the brazen avarice so common among old peasants.

After warming up, I begin running in spurts, working on the welcomed ache my legs will feel tonight and tomorrow. I pause to feel the hard, uneven stone. Although it is possible to become tough in a gym with extensive cross-training, athletes eventually need the field, track, court, or whatever. And I still need the mountains to get a dose of physical and psychological toughness to clean away the pollution of city living and my weaknesses. I cannot remain what I've become.

I begin with my focused walking exercise, something I couldn't do in Liujiacun or Chongqing. Step by step I'm tearing down my body and building it up. Step by step I'm tearing down my mind and building it up. It is how I imagine Lao Zhou endures his life here, through the meditative sound of step after step, year after year, decade after decade. How many steps do I need to repair my life? Back in Chongqing, that life was polluted with ambition, anger, confusion, and violence. Even with my contaminated history on this mountain, I feel that there are still answers here for me, still enough *qi* for me to live forever needing so little, except her love. Is it possible to love passionately and be tough at the same time? Neither Daoists nor Buddhists believe so.

Tough. I love that word, but only the strong side that means resolute, resilient, durable, cohesive, and physically

hardy; not the weak side that means aggressive, unrefined, unyielding, bad luck, and the image of the tough person as obstinate, arrogant, and unpleasant. The same two views may not exist in the Chinese mind because like so many traits toughness in this race is internalized. Behaviorally tough means controlling one's actions. Mentally tough means restraining one's emotions. And physically tough means enduring hardships between the good times. Yet there must be something more to real toughness, much more, something like the ultimate that man can obtain: the complete acceptance of whatever is beyond his control, including death. Guan Yin! That sounds like Master Liu's Daoism.

The problem is that Master Liu and Abbot Zheng and all the other monks in the world are devoting their lives to that goal. I remember the Abbot saying that toughness requires training. He forgot to mention commitment. I don't have that and perhaps never will, though I suppose the man would reply: "Thomas, you can become tougher physically, emotionally, and mentally than you are now, and can become increasingly tough—at least emotionally and mentally—throughout your life. And you already know how." Yes, the blended elixir. As Zhuang-zi wrote, everyone knows to search for what they don't know, but few know to search also for what they already know.

Here is Zhou's place.

Approaching the cabin, I yell out, "Lao Zhou! I need your help!" The old man emerges with a deep grin. After hugging him, I rush him inside to play out the rest of the game. When he asks how I've been, I reply, "So-so, but please accept these few, small gifts from your unworthy friend." I begin pulling presents out of my overstuffed bag and hand each to him with both hands while bowing. There are slippers, kitchen utensils, bowls, an ax, a sharpening stone, nails, ginseng, tea, cigarettes—and soap as interim

assistance to the “soap god.”

“I wanted to bring more, like a new wok and bedding but couldn’t carry them, not being an old mountain goat like you! No problem. I’ll leave some money with the Abbot so you can go shopping for whatever else you need!”

The sight of his destitution sharpens both the shame and pride I feel about my own prosperity. I’m reminded of the inscription outside the God of Wealth Hall in a Buddhist temple in Chongqing: “If you have morality, good luck and treasures will come by themselves. Without morality, even if you beg me I won’t help you.” Somehow I’ve eluded the god’s injunction. And yet I’m proud of having friends among both the rich and the poor. It is possible of course because of my experience and being a foreigner who will always be outside both disparate worlds. Yet there is something more, and that is an egalitarianism that is a greater part of my nature than commonly found here, despite the Communists’ efforts over the past fifty years. Perhaps Confucianism runs genetically deep after so many centuries of distilling the Chinese character.

Not much has changed on the mountain. Jing Lian came by several times but learned nothing, or so the porter believes. To avoid reviving his interest in Pan and the bandits, I don’t tell him about Jing Lian being a policeman or about Pan following me to Chongqing. Instead I caution him to forget about them, for my sake.

Despite what I’ve just said, the old man insists on reminiscing, and to my dismay mentions that he still has remnants of the bags from which he made the vest. I immediately rummage through the cardboard box, retrieve the obviously patterned pieces, and put them in my pocket. Here is one of Jing Lian’s clues. My worry now is that the killings will become general knowledge, and then I will need the full force of my brotherhood with Jing Lian to save me.

Before leaving, I offer to give him enough money to

stop working for the monastery. He declines, saying that he would have nothing to do then; and life in Xishan with his sister has no appeal. He truly is a solitary, old mountain goat.

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At the monastery, the apprentices make a big fuss over me as I pass out bags of candy and dried fruit with the promise to bring more during the week. All the boys look bigger, with Xiao Yang both taller and less stocky. The boy is anxious to show off his improved fighting skills, but I tell him to wait until I've seen the Abbot.

The monk looks and sounds the same, a rock in body and mind. As before, he speaks directly and with uncanny insight: I have lower shoulders, more supple waist movements, and best of all greater stability.

“You’ve been practicing regularly. *Bāguà zhǎng*, I hope.”

When I answer still *xīn yì liú hé quán*, he makes a slight frown, and speaking as though I haven't been away says that *xīn yì* channels emotions outward rather than subdues them. He encourages me to study *bāguà* or *tàijí* instead because their external softness creates internal tranquility. “Thomas, many martial arts in this country were developed by Daoists and Buddhists, not soldiers. They are a way of life, a system of living that trains the mind as well as the body. *Xīn yì* is considered an internal martial art because of its generation of physical not emotional strength. It's not for every one, my friend.”

It's my old problem of being a wounded animal with a weapon. “*Hēi quán*” fits both my body and mind-set, at least for now.

He examines me again and declares that although I look physically better than last year I'm still fearful.

I tell him about the *qìgōng* doctor's diagnosis but not

Pan.

“Thomas, I’m not a doctor or a *qìgōng* master, but I doubt that your mind is that fragile. Whatever its present condition, meditation will strengthen it.”

“Yes, Abbot. I’ve been looking forward to discussing some ideas about meditation with you. They’re based on the *Yì Jīng* reading you helped me with. Remember the advice about living in the moment and *wúwéi*?<sup>7</sup> I finally realized how these two seemingly different pieces of advice are one and the same.”

According to Buddhists, I explain to him, living in the moment, mindfulness, is the basis of all happiness, even the creation of happy memories because being mindful means that we can draw the most out of the present by attending to it and not to guilt about the past or fear of the future. I add a quote (which is the only one I’ve found to date that offsets Buñuel’s contention that without memory we are nothing):

*He is blessed over all mortals who  
loses no moment of the passing life  
in remembering the past.*<sup>8</sup>

This seems to me also to be very Daoist because “mindfulness” allows us to harmonize better with the ever changing world.

“Yes, Thomas. I know that many Daoists have been and still are obsessed with living very long lives, becoming ‘immortal’ on earth. Some of us on the other hand don’t believe that we live fifty or a hundred years, rather only moment to moment. My master didn’t know how old he was and didn’t care. Up until his death, he felt little different than when he was young because he always lived in the present. When apprentices first come here, they have poor attention and consequently must face the feeling that life is passing them by. They also learn slowly because

much of their life is out of focus. Whenever I leave the monastery, I feel sad seeing young people so incompetent at living because their eyes are fixed on the future.”

“It isn’t just boys,” I observe. “Almost everyone in this country seems to have both an obsessive social compulsion and an obsessive activity compulsion. They talk while doing everything, eat while doing many other things, and perform small activities simultaneously whenever possible. But as the *Yi Jing* says, ‘Whenever any action reaches its extreme, it begins to change into its opposite.’ And thus monks were created!”

The Abbot smiles.

“Abbot, I’ve read that mindfulness can be developed by concentrating on physical movements. Whenever you remember, you’re supposed to observe and feel them quietly and objectively for as long as you can. After some time, you don’t need to turn your attention on. You will in fact gradually include thoughts and emotions as if they were physical events, like movements. The key is observing without analyzing. If you’re nonjudgmental, it doesn’t matter what you focus on, and eventually you’ll see everything for what it is. This is apparently the great paradox of mindfulness: only intense awareness of feelings, actions, and surroundings can loosen their control over our lives.” I suddenly remember the brief period of indifference I felt in the Lili jail and now recognize another absurdity, that detachment may be either of two kinds, one created by meditation that leads to the full recognition of reality or one created by insanity that leads to great delusion.

“Thomas, Daoists believe differently. Meditation gives us the intuition to act naturally through spontaneous insight. We don’t need conscious effort. *This* is *wúwéi*, observing, accepting, and acting naturally.”

“For me, meditating while sitting and focusing on my *dāntián*, a mantra, or a ‘magical’ formula isn’t natural. I need movement, either meditating while walking or

mindfulness while doing anything.”

“That’s fine. Our goals are the same, to make the whole of life a natural, meditative experience that goes beyond attachments.”

I explain to the Abbot my “toughening program” of focused walking at specific times and of mindfulness during the day (whenever I remember) and particularly during *xīn yì* practice. *Wǔshù* requires considerable attention to the moment, and while the moment is always changing it’s changing to a pattern and according to one’s will and experience, both of which make the concentration deeper than with unforeseen external events. So he taught, and I now believe.

The Abbot is glad to hear that I’m focusing on the forms rather than the intent of *xīn yì*, though he would still prefer that I practiced *tàijí* or *bāguà*.

When I ask him about the concept of ultimate toughness, he relates it to his master, “who showed what you would call ‘ultimate toughness’ by remaining cheerful even when he was dying. He was able to do that because he experienced every moment in peace. Thomas, you must know from your lessons with Master Liu that this also is *wúwéi*.”

“Yes, Abbot. I just prefer my own words because I feel as if I discovered the concept, the practice I mean, myself.”

“The names are not important.” And then in a shocking revelation, he says, “Like my master, Master Liu is remaining peaceful in the moment.”

“Though he’s dying?”

“Yes.” His expression remains unchanged.

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Except for the bed and a small dresser with a single book on top, the room is completely bare, lacking even drawings or photographs on the walls. Here is a man with

no attachment to things, or to life I surmise from his comments about his impending death. Master Liu's liver cancer, which his doctor believes to be a legacy of repeated bouts of hepatitis as a child, has metastasized. The pain occasionally makes him twitch involuntarily as he lies on the hard, wooden bed. He is covered with a thin sheet. What little muscle the man had has mostly wasted away, though there remains in his leathery face a suggestion of internal toughness.

Not many months ago, he could do *mǎbù* far longer than I could. Now he can't even stand. I want to cry. Although I didn't live in the monastery for long, I've often thought about this gentle, affable, and seemingly indestructible man. It's incredible to me that Master Qiu is still alive, and I shamefully wish that I could trade the one life for the other.

"Thomas! Stop thinking! Get the notebook and open it to the marker. Please read it carefully."

On a dingy piece of old paper that has been pasted into a folded scroll, I read the writing of a child:

*Father, please don't die.*

*My precious child, don't you remember  
what I taught you about death?*

*Yes, father.*

*I will die.*

*I will die alone.*

*My hour of death is uncertain.*

*My only possible victory over death is to  
overcome my fear.*

*I can subdue my fear only by facing it  
over and over.*

*And by facing the deaths of those you*

love.

“That’s an imaginary conversation I wrote after my father died when I was twelve years old. I loved my father very much and was trying to understand his death and how to cope with it. I keep it as a reminder of how clever and wrong I was.”

“But it seems so sensible. What else can we know about death?”

“Is it sensible to die and be lost forever? Yes, you will die some day, Thomas, and some day you won’t.”<sup>9</sup>

When I object that reincarnation sounds like wishful thinking, he says that evidence exists for those who want to see. The monastery’s own Master Qiu can remember all his previous lives, including one as a famous *bāguà* practitioner in Hubei Province. When he was a small boy, he could perform a complete *bāguà* routine after watching it once. His progress in martial arts became legendary. Now because he has gone through all those lives and is close to a higher existence, he needs to sleep, eat, and drink very little.

“What about dying alone?”

“My young friend, don’t you remember our lessons together? To die is to be reborn and eventually become not part of all existence but *to be* all existence. The human spirit is then filled to its true fullness and finds transcendent bliss. It’s the ultimate opposite of being alone.” And anticipating my next question, he contends that he has known for a long time exactly when he will die. It’s a commonplace experience among Daoists and Buddhists.

“And the real victory over death is becoming one with the *Dào*?”

“I believe that we are reincarnated indefinitely until we begin practicing meditation and the three jewels. Remember Lao-zi’s warning that to abandon the three

jewels means to die? We are then reborn with souls progressively closer to the final state of existence, union with the *Dào*. Our internal progress is reflected externally in increasingly better lives, more opportunities for doing good, and higher goals. But the transition is very slow. As a way of sobering overly excited apprentices, I tell them that it is nearly as difficult as the transformation from non-life to life.”

“What about souls who have made terrible mistakes?” It’s a sanctimonious question because as much as I would like to believe the old man I still believe the child. I wonder what questions that child would have asked his older self. Where do new souls come from? If they have a vested interest in Heaven, *Dào*, enlightenment, or whatever, why don’t they help the bodies they inhabit? If a person is not aware of his soul, how does he know that he has one or that it has any value to him? Somewhere and somehow between youth and old age, he found his answers.

“Thomas, your soul is hungry to resolve the imbalances in itself, and if not fed with the three jewels, or worse fed evil thoughts and deeds, it will eventually shrink to nothing. Every thought and act of anger, hate, unkindness, jealousy, and the rest must be healed. I believe so.”

And perhaps I believe in hypocrisy: what he says is inane *and yet...*

He looks very tired, and I offer to leave.

“Thomas, I’m happy that you came to see me today, but you mustn’t come again.” He puts his thin hand on top of mine to stop me from going yet. After a few minutes, he continues. “Remember, Thomas. The essence of Daoism is meditating and doing good deeds.” And then reciting from the *Huà Hú Jīng*,<sup>10</sup> he says, ““Abandon fancy theologies and imaginary ideas and do ordinary work. Do this work with unswerving kindness and unending patience.””

His eyes close and his breathing gradually slows as, I

presume, he enters a meditative trance. I remove his hand and quietly leave.

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Some Daoists believe that beings have two “souls,” one that disintegrates with the corpse and one that enters a higher realm to apotheosize or await rebirth. Alone, the Abbot carried Master Liu’s body to Xishan for cremation yesterday. This morning we buried the ashes not far from the little enlightened pine. Since the tree looks the same as last year, not at all corrupt, perhaps its transitory soul is still about and will help the Master’s permanent soul on its journey.

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I have two more duties related to death on the mountain.

Whether going to the inn is a desire to relive an old, morbid excitement, repent sins, or bury old ghosts, I can’t say. Whatever the reason, the result is not what I had hoped, which was indifference, the feeling that I no longer needed to come back or stay away. Seeing the old building leaves me wondering how different I am than the men who died here at my hands, or Pan or Chen. In appearance and intent we are all bizarrely different and pathetically the same.

There is little more comfort seeing Jun Yan’s grave. Unlike during my last visit, life is everywhere, life that for a brief moment I resent as I use to resent beautiful women on her behalf. I damn the butterflies for their incompetent flitting, the robber flies for their arrogant darting, the grasshoppers for their brainless hopping, and even the vegetation for its overbearing vitality. They are curses from my shame.

After cleaning the grave, I light two sticks of incense and set them in the mound. I bow to her grave with the renewed promise to keep her love undiminished in my heart and with a new promise to try to live as she would have wanted, with her sweet “amnesia judgments.” I know now that the living can pledge more in the name of the dead than remembrances and revenge. We can also vow to live a better life in their memory.

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On the way back to Chongqing, I make a short trip to Liujiacun by the same route and possibly the same buses as a year or so ago; and wearing the same clothes. Like the mountain, Liujiacun has changed little. The children are bigger, but the buildings, the Lius, and Comrade Qi look the same. I have few presents to give the farmer and his wife except a *hóng bāo* that I estimate is thick enough for the old man to get back one of his father’s rice fields.

I’m disappointed but not surprised by the farmer’s tepid thanks: his expectations must have been astronomical. Suggesting to him that my gift is comparable to the rate of a four star hotel during my stay in his home would give him a better perspective, except that he has never stayed in a hotel of any kind.

Meeting Comrade Qi tests my resolve not to respond to hostility as I would have in the past. When he returns my pleasant greeting with an acrid expression, I manage to hold my tongue, with not a single offer to contact the Ministry of Internal Policy for him.

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“It was my special elixir,” I tell Sunny when she declares that I appear happier than when I left. I explain, and then compliment her in turn. “You look radiant. What

has happened?" We are standing in her living room, and I begin pulling her towards the bedroom. First we must see her uncle.

"Can't that wait? I need to make love to you, and tell you so much." And I'm in no hurry to see the man.

"No. Please let's go now, and when we come back I'll keep you in bed for a week!" Although she won't tell me what the meeting is about, she is obviously excited in a happy way.

Mr. Zhang greets me warmly, this time in his living room. I return his friendliness because it's impossible to stay angry with such a charming person.

"Tell him your idea, uncle."

"Thomas, if you're willing to wait until the problem with Pan is resolved, I'll approve of your marriage to my niece. Also I think we had better find you another job; something outside of my organization."

Sunny hugs him. I bow to thank him but am puzzled by his about-face.

"I guess you want an explanation?" he remarks with a laugh. "Here is a lesson for both of us, Thomas: never underestimate the power of a Chongqing woman. Sunny swears that you two will live together if I don't bless your marriage." Guan Yin! She blackmailed him! "You could also say that I had forgotten what passion feels like! Unlike my brother and sister-in-law, my wife and I were in love with one another." She blackmailed him just enough to open his heart, it seems. It's an astounding disclosure from a traditional man in a reactionary society. In comparison to the Abbot and Master Liu, Mr. Zhang is, like me, a weak man. But with help even weak men can sometimes overcome the ugliness that they have created in their lives or let shape them.

Mr. Zhang invites us to have drinks with him, and as part of the celebration tells us a story.

"It's called 'Amnesia,'" he says with a broad grin,

“from a book of humor called *Master Ai*, written during the Ming Dynasty. The story concerns a man from the State of Qi who had a very bad memory. His wife had heard that Master Ai was a learned man who could even bring the dying back to health. ‘Why don’t you go see him,’ she suggested to her husband. ‘Good idea,’ the man said. The next day he set off early on horseback with a bow and arrow in hand to travel the dangerous thirty li to Master Ai’s village. Along the way, he stopped to relieve himself. He dismounted his horse, hung the bow on the saddle, stuck the arrow in the ground, and crouched down to defecate. When he finished, he saw the arrow and cried, ‘What a lucky escape! That stray arrow nearly hit me.’ When he saw the horse, he declared, ‘Wonderful! Though I’ve had a fright, I’m now being rewarded with this windfall of a horse.’ While preparing to leave, he stepped in his own excrement, and stamping his foot, he cursed, ‘Damn! This pile of shit has soiled my shoe.’ While cleaning his shoe, he got turned around and rode off in the wrong direction. Soon he arrived back home. Pacing back and forth in front of the house, he muttered to himself, ‘Whose house is this? Can it be Master Ai’s?’ At that moment, his wife saw him, and guessing that his memory had failed him again, she began to abuse him harshly. Very upset, the man complained, ‘I’ve never seen you before in my life, lady. Why insult me like that?’”

“The lesson, I assume, uncle, is that if I become too shrewish, Thomas can always profess to have amnesia again!”

“I wouldn’t dare.” Or dream of it because now I belong to her family and am finally a Chinese of sorts.

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<sup>1</sup> Sun Yat-sen.

<sup>2</sup> W.B. Yeats.

<sup>3</sup> *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Tsao Hsueh-chin and Kao Ngo.

<sup>4</sup> For the rich, tiger penis is preferred, but for the poor “almost any penis will do,” dog, donkey, rabbit, and so on. [Unnamed source]

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<sup>5</sup> *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en.

<sup>6</sup> Chinese maxim.

<sup>7</sup> Usually translated as “without acting,” or “doing nothing.”

<sup>8</sup> Henry David Thoreau.

<sup>9</sup> Many Daoists believe that each person has only one shot at attaining immortality and failure means extinction of that person's spirit.

<sup>10</sup> Author unknown.