

Liang Xiao

Liang Xiao quickened his pace as he walked. The breeze at his back was icy cold, the sky heavy with the certainty of rain. Already the light was fading about the town even though it was not yet noon. Very few people were out and about in the gloom and winter chill but Dave Gorman gave him a wave from the glass front of his butcher's shop as he arranged the display for the day. Otherwise, the streets were quiet. He hurried on past the tennis courts and turned onto the rough path that wound its way down to the brown river.

Soon he was standing under his favourite trees; ancient gums with leaves that crackled in the wind and roots that snaked towards the riverbank. He had come to this place almost every morning for the last forty years to practise his breathing exercises and stand as still as the trees while the river flowed on. This morning, under the lead grey sky, his *qigong* seemed to summon ghosts from the air and the earth. He remembered a morning so much colder than this morning, in another life, another world. They were young, he and his beloved Mai, but when she got the lung sickness her *qi* faded until only a tiny spark of it remained. Yes, the morning had been cold and flurries of snow had blown against the mud brick sides of the house deep in Sichuan, the wild, beautiful Sichuan. She had lain in sodden sheets, burning up in a fire of her own body's making. Xiao remembered the doctor from the village and the smell of his herbs as they brewed on the stove. He had listened to her rattling chest, inserted needles, and propped her up to tip the black herbal tea down her throat. She had died silently well before midday, needles still in place.

That was the winter of 1968 when The Great Helmsman decreed that students such as Liang Xiao and his wife should move to the countryside. Down with thinking. Down with study. Down with the old. At first the rough mud cottage, surrounded by apricot trees, seemed pleasant enough. Mai would stand on the wooden verandah and watch the setting sun turn the distant, snowy peaks into gold, then pink, then crimson. But a time came when the snow fell heavy for weeks and the wind wound around the house like a marauding dragon. Then, she fell ill and the wind and damp entered her lungs and clung to her small body so tight that she never saw another spring. Liang remembered the strings of bright blood that hung from her lips as she coughed the last threads of her young life into an old, wooden bowl. How many millions perished under The Great Leader's hand no one truly knew, but Xiao had heart for only one.

He realised that his mind had been wandering so he took a long, deep breath and refocused on the movements and the respiration. The brown river moved in its watery *tai chi*, past the riverbank and the gums. Even in the chill air he could feel his belly, hot like a furnace, the *qi* surging through his body. Then, he stood unmoving, arms hanging at his sides, eyes closed, allowing his mind to rest and his spirit to embrace the cosmos. At last a kookaburra pieced the quiet with a throaty laugh that spoke of the rain that would come. Xiao stirred from his meditation. He rubbed his hands together and massaged his face as the pain of memory slowly faded. High on the wind a hunting eagle spiralled down toward the distant, winter-brown hills and he watched it until he could see it no longer. Then, he bowed once to nothing visible and walked back up the track.

Last evening an old quarrel had returned when Xiao spoke with his daughter on the phone.

“Dad, it’s crazy you living in the middle of nowhere, all alone. Craig’s finished the granny flat. It’s brilliant. You’d have total privacy.”

“I’m sure it is wonderful, Lucy. But I...”

“I know. I know. You are perfectly happy living five hours drive away from us in that crumbling ruin of a house.”

And so it went, this ancient argument born of a daughter’s love. Lucy was born in China in the Year of the Goat, the year before the bitter winter, but she had grown up Australian and knew nothing else. Even her name had shifted cultures. After the insanity of Mao had subsided Liang Xiao paid men many *yuan* to smuggle him and his daughter onto a ship and away from the land that he loved, the land that held his Mai. After months of hardship they arrived in Australia to a new life. Xiao found work and a home in a small, dry town west of the mountains, never remarrying, never leaving, even after his only child moved away to the big city. He grew to love the desiccated landscape, the dry hills, the great dome of sky; intense blue in the day and alive with stars in the night. He had also grown to love its people, who, despite constant ribbing about his food, his clothes, and his customs, made him feel more like a human being than any of his old countrymen had ever done. He worked at the local abattoir where his workmates would chide him endlessly.

“Jeezus, Xiao, how much bloody garlic have you got in that lunch?” one would ask, and they would roar with laughter, pat him on the back, and try to coax him into giving them a taste. After a while Liang Xiao learnt to give as much back as he got. Long after retirement he still met with them from time to time to play cards and pretend he liked the bitter Australian beer they drank. Occasionally he would cook some Sichuan noodles for them and they, on cue, would pretend to recoil at the smell. The truth was that these men, raised on meat and three veg, had become addicted to his peppery, rich food and looked forward to the times when he invited them for lunch. Sizzling Sichuan braised pork, with pepper so strong even as it cooked in the wok, kung pao cauliflower like no vegetable they had ever tasted, sumptuous dan dan mian noodles with chilli oil, sesame paste and peppercorns curling the taste buds from twenty paces. Xiao had a limited repertoire but what he cooked, he cooked well. The only part of the meals his mates rejected was the oolong tea, endless cups of oolong tea, preferring their beer.

Liang pushed open the wooden gate to his front garden and paused to look at the camellia hedge that lined the path to the front door. Among the shiny, green leaves hundreds of flowers in soft pinks, rich reds, and whites with a blush of pink seemed to gather intensity as the gloom deepened. The mountains of Sichuan were covered in stands of camellia in spring after the winter thaw, their white flowers gleaming in the clear air. His back yard was dedicated to things he could eat. Winter greens and herbs grew side by side, beans swarmed up bamboo trellises, and garlics grew among the onions. Already, small green oranges, limes and mandarins could be seen on the citrus trees that lined the fence and gave him some privacy from neighbours. He picked up his worn pitchfork and turned his compost heap a few times, until the first fat drops of rain began to fall. With a suspicious glance at the sky he turned and went through the back door into the warmth of his house.

Before dinner Xiao made his usual three prostrations before his home made altar; an old wooden coffee table with fresh flowers, incense, and a small, plastic figurine of

the goddess Kwan Yin. After the third bow he lingered on the rug and thought about his argument, the perpetual argument, with Lucy. Then his mind wandered back to Sichuan and the snow and the loss. He upbraided himself for his monkey mind and went into the kitchen to prepare his dinner. Something to tonify the kidneys, he thought. In winter one must nourish the kidneys.

The morning was silent when Xiao rose from his sleep. The wind had dropped during the night and the air was sharp with cold. Xiao made his tea and sat by the heater to warm his feet and sip from his china tea bowl. He moved it in the growing light, admiring the gold dragons intertwining against a background of rich earth colours. He knew the potter's mark; he had played with him as a boy. The silence outside deepened as Xiao poured a second bowl of tea from the stainless steel teapot, a gift from his Australian neighbour. It was an ordinary thing, so unlovely compared with exquisite Sichuan pots, but he liked it very much. It was practical, utilitarian, and it kept the tea piping hot. It pleased him to see it on the table, side by side with his elegant tea bowl.

Down by the river Xiao moved with the fluid grace of the practised *qigong* master. The wind had dropped in the night but the air was delightfully cold. He turned around the four compass points, moving his arms, drawing in elemental energy and tasting the clean air as it found its way to the bottom of his lungs. When the time felt right he stopped moving and stood in the stillness and allowed *qi* to move through him. Then he smelt something he had never smelt in his adopted land: snow. He recognised it immediately. He opened his eyes and saw snow falling like a dream. At first only a few flakes, but as he stood and watched in amazement, many more. By the time Xiao had made it back to his house it was snowing heavily. His neighbours were out on the street laughing and talking and turning their faces up to the falling miracle. Snow had been known to fall on the hills in deepest winter but never, in living memory, in town. One of his neighbours, a younger woman, saw him and called out.

"Mr Liang. Have you ever seen anything like...?" She always called him Mr Liang. He quite liked it.

"I have, yes," he answered as he joined the throng in the middle of the street.

"Here?" his neighbour asked.

"No. Not here."

The snow had piled high against the side of the hut in the year of the "Down to the Countryside" movement. The local barefoot doctor was lucky to make it through. He had cured a good many people in his years in the village but when he saw the young woman writhing in her bed, burning up, drenched, he knew that he would not save her. Still, he had brewed herbs to clear the lungs and inserted needles to unblock her *qi*, as much to assuage her husband as any real hope of curing her. At the last he felt her pulses and knew that her life was almost spent. The remaining spark winked out and she was gone. The grief of the man was a hard thing for him to bear, he who had saved lives and lost lives. Finally, he left the man to his suffering and fought his way through the blizzard and back to the village. Xiao had sat by Mai for hours with their daughter in his arms as the wind howled around the hut and the snow piled up at the front door.

Xiao sat with a bowl of Suan La Tang on his lap and watched the news. Between slurps of the hot, sour broth he caught footage of a snowy landscape where there were usually endless, dry paddocks and stands of straggly gums. Kosciuszko was enjoying record snowfalls and even places like Canberra and Orange were getting snow in the streets. Someone reported sleet in Western Sydney. An icy wind had blown up from the south in the afternoon and it moaned through his eaves and wires. Yes, there were definitely ghosts abroad tonight but they weren't malevolent. The sharp memories of Mai, of Sichuan, of that terrible day, hadn't come back to haunt him, but to bid him farewell. He would always remember his beloved but the pain was leaving him as if the snow had cleansed his *shen*. He would always remember her but now without the heartache. He put down his bowl of soup and turned the sound off on the tv. The white images flickered in the darkening room. Images of Aussie kids tobogganing on body boards in thick snow made him smile, their faces alive with the joy and the cold. Xiao picked up his bowl and finished his meal. In the morning he would call his daughter.