

Sherry Marie Gallagher

Death by Chopstick

A Felly van Vliet Mystery series

CONCEPT



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For more information please contact:

MEDIATOR MEDIA
R. SCHUMANLAAN 73
4463 BD GOES
THE NETHERLANDS
E: info@mediatormedia.nl
W: www.mediatormedia.nl

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'The object of a journey is not the end but the journey itself'

ONE

From my window seat I had a clear overlook of Stockholm, its thick dark forests so inviting and interlocking islands dotting up with sailing vessels atop such a calm looking canvas of blue. We were arriving in Sweden's capital with a five hour layover. Yet, I knew it would take longer when a sudden yellow light flashed before me followed by sparks appearing to fill up the sky and block my vision. Unconsciously, I lurched back in my seat.

"What's this?" blurted out the passenger beside me, mouth dropped, equally mystified.

We glimpsed each other in horror, unable to speak another word as turbulence made the plane shake us into popup pieces on a child's board game. The man beside me and had been lightly flirting with me up until then and now I saw him with his stupefied expression, turning inward like sap storing up for winter. The captain's throat cleared over the intercom, and he began speaking a practised calm. "We're going to make an emergency landing," he announced in both Swedish and English. A flight attendant was heard next. "Make sure that all carry-ons are in overhead compartments, fasten your seatbelts, please, and remain seated."

I had never been in a plane crash before. Was I going to die? I tried texting my fiancé but my fingers shook and swelled. I still clutched the mobile, staring out the window while mesmerised by the bumpy ride and confusing scene. My thoughts wouldn't clear to think anything rational, and all I could see was a continued haze of sparks and flashing light. I glimpsed the flight attendants securing themselves in their own stations. Their faces were like stone. Oh, oh, oh. Was this a bad sign? I swallowed, trying to focus on a repeat of instructions in both languages as if it would clear my mangled thoughts.

"Remain seated! Keep seated! Stay seated!" instructed a voice now sounding unreal as it betrayed panic while increasing in volume, loud and shrill, it became, as if cursing at us. And through it all I had such an incredible urge to pee. I prayed instead, quietly mouthing words I knew from childhood: *"De Heer is mijn herder'- the Lord is my shepherd.* Thoughts of my Irish friend Aidan suddenly came to mind, who I knew would have managed to get us all laughing even in the midst of such alarm with his 'Father, Son and Holy Ghost, whoever eats the fastest scarfs the most.' This was certainly no prayer, yet brought a soothing but fleeting smile to my face. The prayer went round and round like on a Tibetan wheel. "My God," I whispered in the air, "I'm going to die!"

"Brace yourselves," spoke the captain again. "We're coming in on partial landing gear."

I hunkered down and locked my arms over my head, hearing engines whine and trying not to look out windows where shadows of sparks shot across our faces like ashen death rays. Then oxygen masks dropped, and we grabbed for them like lifesavers. I put mine on and returned to a semi-foetal position. Descent, descent, descent...*Oh Father, Son and Holy Ghost!*

The plane hit the ground hard, bouncing us all up and down again, its impact having a whiplash effect. Everything now happening in hyper drive yet taking on timeless qualities of slow motion in parts that would later give me nightmares. And then, just as quickly, it was all over. We stopped taxiing and were still alive. I felt around me, checking my limbs. It's incredible looking back and remembering all the inane things one does in a panic. I'd forgotten about my belongings, only interested in getting out to solid ground. I looked at all

the panicking people. I was searching for an emergency exit in-between them, wanting to get the hell out of that plane! Visions of exploding gas tanks in remembered film scenes raced through my mind. My eyes locked again on the passenger in the aisle seat blocking my exit. He looked distinctly Swedish with his light-haired, light eyed features, and I realised that we hadn't spoken a word to each other after the captain's emergency announcement.

"Don't panic," he warned. "We'll get out okay despite the chaos." I wasn't taking this Swede's word for it, and I rose to leap over him if he didn't get up, but he did. "Leave your luggage and follow me," he said sharply. "Our lives are more important."

"Of course they are!" I hated people telling me what to do, even if in an emergency situation. Perhaps this came from being second born, this repugnance for being bossed at, even though I was a twin and born only minutes after my brother.

The flight attendants were screaming at us again. "Leave all your parcels. We'll retrieve them for you. Leave everything. Please, just get out! Get out, please!"

My God, I got out, right after the Swede who draped my arm across his broad shoulder when my legs began to wobble. God, was this embarrassing, my heels clacking half on the ground, half off like a little girl dressed up and dancing with her father. But we made it out all right. I blinked – opening and closing my eyes to register the lights shooting all over the night sky. Ambulance sirens were wailing as the Swede kept dragging me along with him. I must have been like a limp doll without realising, because he said: "Come on, just a little further now. They want to check us all in to hospital."

"I'm fine," I whispered, my voice shaking and chattering. "I just need to make my connecting flight."

"Come on," he repeated. "We'll ride together."

He was still half holding me up as we followed several others to the emergency van, someone on a bullhorn announcing they would take those who weren't hurt bad enough to need stretchers. Once inside the van we huddled together like post-war victims. A woman suddenly burst into tears, but no one comforted her. We said nothing, just looked on as the van started up and drove off.

After several minutes, I remembered my manners. "Thank you," I breathed out to the Swede.

"Ja, ja. We made it," he answered, as if still convincing himself. "I'm Stefan, Stefan Karlsson. And you are?"

"Felicia...Felly, my friends call me, Felly van Vliet."

"Ah, I suspected you were Dutch, but you have a lovely English accent."

"I...oh my God. I'm going to miss my connecting flight to Beijing."

"Hey, small world. I'm going there too. I'm teaching a seminar in Swedish literature at a language university there."

"That is a coincidence. But what were you doing in Amsterdam?"

He grinned. "Dutch girlfriend."

"Of course. Why not? I have an Irish boyfriend, myself."

"Don't worry about the missed flight," he said. "They'll book us onto another one, maybe even first class because of the accident."

"Oh, but I've got a chauffeur waiting for me and.... This really is incon...."

"And so is death." He interrupted with a smirk.

I shut up then because he was right, but leave it to the Nordic races – his so very like my own – to be so direct. When arriving at hospital we all took turns filling out forms, being x-rayed and ending up having to spend the night in hospital beds. A physician appeared after I'd settled in for the night. Her prognosis good, reporting only minor bruising and stiffened muscles. The stiffness could be eased by massage and physical therapy. I told her I'd be in China. So, she left and returned with a card written in Swedish but with pictures of simple neck and shoulder exercises that I could follow. I thanked her and was then visited by an airline PR person. He wanted to know how badly I thought I'd been hurt and reassured that the airline would be paying hospital expenses and, if need be, follow-up medical fees. I'd also be flying first class to Beijing the next morning with all ticket fees reimbursed. I told him my university paid my airline expenses, but he said the reimbursement would be placed in my

personal account and asked for my address in Beijing if a representative needed to contact me further. We Dutch weren't typically sue-happy people, and I told him so. He laughed a quick laugh and insisted we exchange business cards, regardless.

True to their word, the hospital and airline had me on an early morning flight to Beijing with suitcase and carry-on retrieved and on the flight with me. Not only that but I saw the Swede was on the same plane with me, and this time it was in the luxury of first class. "Hello," I told him. "Deja vous?"

"I hope not." He laughed. "I wouldn't want to repeat that experience a second time."

"Me either. All is good with you then?"

"A slight case of whiplash, maybe, but that's all."

"A little bruising and stiffness for me. Nothing I can't deal with."

"Sit down," he said, motioning to the seat next to him.

I glimpsed my boarding pass. "They've got me a few seats behind you, I'm afraid."

"I'm sure we can get whoever is beside me to change seats."

I sat next to him and ordered the same drink he was having.

"Skool!" he said.

"Cheers," I replied absently. Jesus, what a thing to have happened."

"Yes, and we survived it with minimal collateral damage."

"It's going to take awhile to sink in. I'm still numb from.... Stuck landing gear was all it was?"

He nodded his head. "That's the buzz I heard, that the left side malfunctioned."

"Jesus," I repeated. "We could have died."

"Or worse."

"What could be worse than dying?"

"Suffering first. We could have burned and suffocated before dying. Thank God none of the above happened, ja?"

I shuddered. "Thanks for that cheery thought. Nothing morbid like a Scandinavian perspective."

"Skool!" he said again. We downed our drinks together and ordered another. They appeared to be on the house.

"So, Ms van Vliet, what are you doing in Beijing?"

"I've been invited by a university science and humanities department to teach a module on debate writing."

"Really? In English?"

I nodded my head.

"That's unique for a Dutch woman."

"Not if you're a linguist. I'm observing language acquisition, actually."

He half cocked a brow, laughing. "You mean you're a spy?"

I laughed with him. "It's for a paper I'm writing on cultural perspective for my university back home."

"Are you a grad student then?"

"Oh no. Thank God those years are behind me. What about you?"

"Surely I don't look that young."

"Mm, well. Anyway, I'm submitting an interdepartmental piece, more by order than request, and this was as good an excuse as any to postpone it and go on another what I call 'away mission'."

He laughed and we quietly sipped our small glasses that were more suitable for vodka than the economy class plastic cups I was used to drinking out of. "It's my first time in China," Stefan said suddenly. "How about you?"

"Second. The first being just before the Olympics and right after the SARS epidemic. Old colleagues tell me a lot has changed since then. I'm anxious to see...." All of a sudden tears welled up and began unexplainably flowing down my face. I was mortified.

Stefan said nothing, only handing me a tissue.

"Thanks," I said.

"We could have died in such an accident."

"Incredible, isn't it? I mean, if you can call it that."

He nodded his head, agreeing with me. "And you have beautiful hair, the colour of chestnuts, I believe."

I paused, shooting him a brief smile. "I had a five hour layover before my flight to Beijing, and I was going to ask a taxi driver for a quick tour. I've never been to Sweden before."

"What a pity, but you wouldn't have seen much. The airport is quite far from the city centre and it would have ended costing you more Krona than it was really worth. You might have even missed your connecting flight then."

I brushed away tears. "Really? That far from the airport?"

"Stockholm consists of 14 islands that are closely linked but separated by Lake Mälaren. It's this particular layout that makes for such incredible beauty but also the difficulty of circumnavigating, even a day. You need a good week to explore our land, at least."

"Well, I'm sad for the missed opportunity."

"You'll just have to come back is all."

"Yes, I really should." I took off my shoes and sunk into a very cushy seat. There was plenty of legroom with everything spread out like it was. Individual viewing screens were at our convenient disposal as well, and this included a menu of private selections of top billings of films, documentaries and news programmes. There were even computer play stations to entertain the child or techy. Before the main meal was served I wanted to check out my own laptop to make sure it hadn't suffered any damage, but I stood up too quickly and sat right back down when feeling a sharp pain shoot down my spine like a rocket.

"Ooo, I think I need a readjustment."

Steven said, "Would you like me to rub your neck?"

"Only if you don't think I'm flirting with you," I replied matter-of-factly. "I'll have to find a masseuse when I get to Beijing."

"It's not a problem. Just tell me if it gets too sore."

Admittedly, Stefan's hands felt good, and I relaxed and let them work deep into the knotted muscles of my neck and upper back. I could purr like my fat little Persian if she were there.

"Aren't you sore too?"

"Nothing I can't live with." Then he confessed, "But I think I'll search out some kind of sauna when I get situated. Which university are you teaching at?"

"BSHU, which is northeast of the city centre. I believe yours is closer to the zoo."

He stopped massaging my neck. "Have you been there before?"

"Once is all. The language university has a diverse campus. Lots of foreign students and their facilities, which can be fun. I'll be teaching medical and psychology students, who'll be primarily Chinese. I imagine you'll have other foreign students wanting to learn Swedish in your class, ja?"

"Maybe so, but I'm doing a series of readings, not grammar studies, and commenting on the predominant philosophies."

I was surprised. "In your own tongue?"

"In English," he said. "Okay, I may teach them a few words and phrases...only if they're interested."

The one thing I've always known and loved about Chinese students is that they seem to be interested in everything. "I don't think you'll have a problem with that," I confessed. And I thanked him for the rub while fishing in my handbag for aspirin and handing him one while taking the other myself.

"Is that my tip?" he laughed.

"Consider it so," I laughed back.

Besides the Asian looking man in front of me, I noticed that I was the only non-Swedish passenger in our cabin. I pointed this out to my companion. "And just think," he said, "if it weren't for that accident we could both be sitting in economy with all the 'tool club' vacationers."

I puzzled. "Eh?"

"Tool club vacationers," he repeated. "I'm no member myself but I do like their discount packages."

"Are you telling me I'm sitting next to a DIY poser?"

"Something like that."

"My friends believe me a Bohemian for all my living out of a suitcase in the guise of a teaching job."

"And full of biting envy, no doubt. But I know these tool clubbers all have great times with their touring, which they'll be doing while you and I are scraping chalk and grinding pencils."

"Mm, true, but we have our big holiday soon after we start."

"When's that then?"

"Chinese national holiday, which is sometime in early October."

"Maybe we'll run into each other again then."

"Maybe. Beijing isn't the largest city in the world, only 13 million citizens."

He whistled. "That many?"

I nodded my head. "It's almost at international status, right up there with Shanghai and Hong Kong. So I'm curious to see how much has changed."

"Yes, you said that."

"It's been heavy on my mind." The stiffness was subsiding as I felt the drink mixing with the aspirin I'd just taken. "A change not so much in architecture," I yawned out, "but in perspective, is what I'm interested in."

My yawn was contagious as Stefan began yawning too. "A definite change as its economy grows and competes more and more with the West."

"I imagine so, yes." My eyes were weighting down my face. "Sorry," I said, reaching for a pillow. "I'm suddenly so tired. This has all been a bit much."

"Good idea. I think I'll try catching a few, myself."

I didn't know about my companion, but I fell into such a deep sleep that I didn't wake up again till we were almost landed. I awoke with a start to the overhead address announcing our arrival and cried out before remembering where I was.

"It's okay." Stefan was awake and reassuring. "We're safe," he whispered.

I looked around, the panicky feeling melting away being replaced with a blush.

"We'll be all right," he said again. "Just a few aches and pains. They can be mended."

I smiled back. "Of course."

Though we'd both just weathered a plane crash together, I didn't want to leave Stefan with the impression I was coming on to him. It was just...*by God, it was just good to be alive!* And such an indescribable feeling was dangerously cavalier, like two war veterans sharing an intimacy that would have never otherwise been shared. Relationships are tricky that way. Still, Stefan had his girlfriend in Amsterdam. I had my fiancé Kieran who had definite ideas about my abandoning him till the holidays, which he'd insisted I come home for.

Kieran was an inspector on sabbatical from the police department, or Gardaí as they say in Ireland, to study European Law at the University of Amsterdam. He could have done the same in Dublin and with less hassle. Yet, he wanted to be with me and we'd been together the year on my houseboat, docked close to the University of Leiden where I taught, that is, when not abroad. Kieran was still home when his acceptance letter came through the post. "Bloody hell, UvA!" he'd cried out after SKYPEing me. I'd secretly hoped he'd chosen my own university, but Amsterdam Law University was top-notch. It was also the final impetus to get him packing his bags and joining me by way of an acquired student visa.

Are there jokes about an Irishman leaving the auld sod? I'm sure there are and plenty of them. I honestly love Ireland for all its charm. Yet, I too had to leave the land of fairies and elves to hand in an inner departmental report on my summer in Youghal. There I'd been a guest lecturer at a seminar, entitled: *Signs of Modern Thought in the Western World*. My return home also meant that it was time to rekindle the research I'd shelved for too many months. I worked dutifully on the project all throughout Kieran's first year, with him learning to take the commuter train back and forth to Amsterdam. As his culture shock subsided, I progressed to needing to do more fieldwork. This time I would be going back to China. There I would observe, through a teaching module, how attitudes in the Year of the Tiger had altered.

When we arrived in Beijing I knew I'd have no driver meeting me there. I'd missed the flight he'd be looking for, leaving shortly thereafter when seeing I hadn't shown. If I'd been thinking

clearly, I would have asked the airline PR person to contact my university and let them know of my delay. I'd been in such shock throughout, only now realising my mistake. Yet, this was no big problem. I could hail a cab easily enough, just billing the fee to my university.

I practised what Mandarin I knew, which was minimal, on the driver I tracked down. He only smiled politely and gave me the thumbs up. This wouldn't do. Lucky for me, I had my coordinator's business card with the university address printed below her name. I showed it to the driver, thinking to find a very patient Chinese tutor as soon as possible. My stilted words and odd sounding tones must have sounded pure gibberish to the man. I knew his was a culture raised on oblique courtesies while perhaps cursing within what a stupid foreigner I was for not learning his tongue. It was a culture so unlike my own, as we Hollanders weren't known for being subtle. Kieran daily reminded me of this very fact, complaining of the finger wagging he'd receive when doing something wrong, such as the day he tried giving the old post woman a letter that he should have taken himself to the post office. She scolded him till he apologised, telling her he was foreign and didn't realise. To his surprise she answered that he had no excuse not to learn the ways of her country soon enough. So, I taught him how to say: 'Laat maar!', which roughly translated: 'Back off!' Yet, the Irish too are culture bound in their way of being mannerly, such as the indirect use of flattery to put another in his or her place.

Studying Mandarin was very 'in' at the moment, and there I was in the midst of what seemed an overnight sensation. It was purely economically based, as China was interesting because it was currently leading every other country by the economical nose. Thus, the old and exotic language of the People's Republic was a tongue becoming not only desirable, but monetarily practical to the western world. Although discouraged early on by my own lack of progress with spoken Chinese, I was told that accessing it did get easier. Yet, quite honestly, Mandarin still hurt my brain trying to learn. What fascinated me most though were the characters rather than the tones and language structure. When first introduced to basic characters that even a pre-schooler knew, I copied them all wrong with a flourish.

"No, no, no! You must connect from left to right, above then below," my teacher admonished. "The lines are more important than the dots. All must flow together."

I mused on this for some time, the lines being more important than the dots.

When the taxi chauffeur comprehended where I wanted to go he shifted into a precision driving style not too dissimilar from the Belgians. He weaved in and out of multiple lanes, sometimes wedging himself in and causing other drivers to drop back so as not to plough into him. He was also free with his horn, honking for others to move out of his way because of driving too slowly for him and blocking his path. I'd forgotten how the Chinese navigated their vehicles, and my mouth hung open till arriving at the university. Amidst all of this, he turned around, nodding his head at me and laughing as if letting me in on a private joke. Did he know I didn't understand a word of what he was saying? I laughed back, wanting to show amiability while searching in vain for a seatbelt I never could find.

Knowing very little about hard versus soft in the martial arts, I'd envisioned traffic in China as flowing like water, and what seemed to be a terribly chaotic and dangerous mess was, indeed, a continuously moving stream. It was the same when I rode a bike in the cycling lanes that, in the past, had been overrun by taxis and donkey carts. And where were all the hundreds of bicycles, rickshaws and donkey carts these days? At the airport I'd heard snippets of conversation about what the Chinese were calling 'sustainable growth', which to me was more like a euphemism for 'embracing capitalism'. Was it so that if you blinked an eye half the country would be already transformed into something else? There were so many changes in Beijing, but these subtle ones, such as the roads appearing wider and the highway cleaner, were already amazing me. Reacquainting myself with the principle of 'river flow', I tried to relax and appreciate the cabbie's effortless cruising for what it was, thinking this a good principle to approach life in general.

I glimpsed a street sign, reading: 'Please no spit and do not drive tiredly'. Spitting was a 'pre-Olympic' national pastime, Asians being master hackers and spitters, coughing up mucous in unbelievably ear-splitting manners and releasing their phlegm demons in the most inappropriate places. The year before my first visit was during the SARS epidemic when the

police cracked down on public spitting and individuals were heavily fined. Yet, the elderly and sometimes deviant youth were hard-pressed to break the habit. Villagers were always notorious spitters. At times I'd lose my appetite in hutong, or neighbourhood, restaurants with the occasional patron clearing his throat and hacking up what could make any pimple-faced youth proud before spitting it on the floor and continuing on with his meal. It might have been entertaining for the traveller with the proper spirit. It only made me want to vomit right then and there. My stomach had always been somewhat sensitive, and I was glad my university presented me this time with a flat including a small kitchen.

Reaching my new digs – the Foreign Faculty of Experts – didn't take long, and the cabbie deposited me and my luggage at the front gate. I asked for a receipt when paying him off, glad that I'd remembered to bring enough yuan with me collected and saved from my last visit to China. If I could understand the language better, I would have thought the driver to be telling me; "Good luck, redheaded foreign devil. You're in Beijing now where anything can happen."

And I wanted to reply: "Show me your worst, Chinaman. I've already survived a plane crash and lived to tell the tale." But I said, instead: "Xièxie", thank you.

"Bùyòng xiè," he replied.

We didn't speak each other's language when we smiled and both departed with a farewell head nodding of "zàijiàn!"

In time I'd visit my department coordinator, explaining what had happened while presenting her with the cab bill. As it was, no one was there to greet me. Only perched on the low cement wall of the resident faculty inner courtyard were seven feral looking cats. Even they ran off when they saw me, this stranger with her bulging luggage. I walked into the guardhouse to get my key with the guard on duty showing me a piece of paper and pointing to the time written on it, which was a morning hour. I'd gathered he was trying to communicate that the department chauffeur had come home empty-handed, but I wasn't certain. Like a clown, I tried pantomiming the plane crash. He eyed me with slight fascination mixed with astonished trepidation. I again tried to explain, but he gave me a look, seeming to say: *What the hell are you telling me, foreign lady! Are you crazy, or what?*

So, I stopped and shrugged, wincing a little with a sheepish grin on my face.

He shook his head and pointed at my luggage. When I nodded my head up and down, he simply picked them up and walked with me to what would be my flat. Turning the key in lock, he opened the door, shoved in suitcase and carry-on and handed me the key. I swore the cases had taken on added kilos during the trip, but I thanked him profusely and tried giving him the remainder of my yuan as a tip. He waved his hands in the air, refusing it. When I insisted, he refused even more and walked off to the guardhouse, swearing under his breath. Okay, so be it.

I looked around at the solid hardwood chairs dominating what was now to be my living room space, at the table and bookcase of the same heavy wood but even more thickly shellacked. I noticed a television too, looking almost new. Next to the entertainment centre it perched on was a big brown desk with working lamp and computer hook-up. With all this huge furniture overtaking the room there was little space to walk around in, not that I demanded it. I only needed to have the hook-up working, which I'd planned to have switched on as soon as I could visit the campus computer shop for internet access. This would no doubt be in the morning when Kieran would also be getting my full report of the accident, because until then we'd only be texting each other short messages.

And I had an enclosed patio with trees all round. When I opened the door leading out to the patio, I could actually hear birds singing instead of the traffic noise beyond. We were that insulated and isolated in our own private university world, which I loved. But jetlag and aching muscles were now overcoming me, dictating each and every move as I shifted into slow-mo, all actions taking twice the usual time to do. I'd unpack later. I decided, instead, I'd rather go to bed. I went into the bedroom and slid within the sheets of the tightly made-up bed of box springs atop a thick wood base. I reached past my head to feel the moveable headboard, thinking; *This will have to go*. The blankets were thin and the sheets slightly over-starched, but, oh, did it feel good to be lying down and in no plane to speak of.

I couldn't remember how long I'd been sleeping when I woke up to the sound of banging at the front door. I looked around, disoriented. Where was I again? Oh, China. Beijing, BSHU, oh yes. My grogginess was wearing off as I rose somewhat stiffly, finding my way down a small hallway and wondering who could be visiting me already and on a Sunday. Surely it was no official wanting my passport photos to register with the police. Oh, God, no. I couldn't deal with that right now. Agitation turned to anger. "Bloody hell!" I cursed aloud, as my fiancé Kieran would say. The fact was that, now in Beijing, almost anything could happen with me not totally understanding why.

My eye looked to the peephole, peering through. But what I saw no longer angered me. I smiled and opened the door to a grin bigger than mine and wide enough to humble *Wonderland's* Cheshire cat. "Di!" I said. "Come in, come in!" And I gave my old colleague the Dutch kiss, one on each cheek and then again.

Diane plied me with yellow mangoes, the kind you only find in Asia that are sweeter than the darker coloured mangoes of South America. She asked for a knife as she headed for the small kitchen, not waiting for an answer but paused when seeing nothing but the sink, cooking range and huge silver tea kettle with black stopper that rested on a burner and came with every flat. "Of course you don't have silverware yet. Well, we can peel the mangoes. That's doable. So how was your flight?"

"Other than my plane crash, you mean?"

"What now?!"

"Yes, when entering Stockholm the landing gear froze on the left side and we sort of crash landed." I saw her almost drop the mango she was still holding. The rest she'd placed on the sink. "God Almighty, are you all right, Felly?"

"A bit stiff and sore, and I still haven't checked out my laptop to see if it's suffered any damage. Other than that I'm miraculously all right. The best part was that I got to fly first class all the way to China. Oh, and I met this cute Swedish professor, not that I'm interested, mind you. Are you dating anyone right now?"

She stood staring at me, eyes wide open. She was literally dumbfounded. "Whoa, whoa, whoa...uh, and whoa."

"Gosh, it's good seeing you again," I said, mostly to filter through the shock.

"Yes, same here. But, man, do you come in with a bang."

I laughed. "And a fizzle. You found me jetlagged and catnapping. How about you? Did you go back to the States for summer holiday?"

"Every summer, that is, unless I find someone to distract me."

"So, you never answered my question. Have you?"

She paused as if considering. "No, not really. And you, are you sure you're all right? What a story, Felly, which, as you see, is taking some time to digest.

"Um, um, um. So how did it happen? Anyone seriously hurt? And what about this Swedish professor?"

"All I heard is that the landing gear suddenly locked on the left side of the plane, and we made an emergency landing. I don't think anyone was seriously injured. Must have been excellent navigating because I think there were some breaks and whiplashes, bumps and bruises. That sort of thing. Stefan, the Swede, said he suffered minor whiplash, but I only had a few cuts and bruises. Even so, he helped me out of the plane because my legs buckled, which I think was more from shock more than anything else. We spent the night in hospital where we got checked out and released. Then off to China in grand style."

She nodded her head, soft brown eyes boring into me. "That was the least they could do, considering. Company's probably scared to death of being sued by you all. But, yes, we all travel so much that the odds of such an occurrence happening to any one of us are greater than most. Knock on wood that nothing like this does, and, for your sake, never again repeats itself. God almighty," she repeated, shaking her head. "Well, other than your crash that would put white hairs on my head, you're looking good, girlfriend. And I'm looking pretty damn fabulous for my age too, don't you think?"

"You always look fab," I told her.

"And you can just keep those compliments coming."

"The Dutch don't go overboard with flattery, Di. I'm serious when I say you look great."

"My oh my, how time does fly. How long's it been? Four years now? And why the hell am I still here? Good question, but don't answer that." She grinned at me sidewise.

"I don't know either, because you only cause trouble."

"I told you not to answer that. And what's this? A wedding band?" She eyed my Claddagh ring with interest.

"I'm engaged. We're waiting for...but I have so much more to tell you. Can you stay awhile?"

Her eyes bounced over my sparsely decorated flat and back to me. "I have a better idea. I'll take you to dinner. We've got an international restaurant around the corner that opened last year. It's not bad eating at all."

"Sounds great. Do I have time for a quick shower first?"

"Take all the time you want. I'll turn on your TV and suck on a mango."

"I won't be long, I promise."

Diane was still eating one of the mangoes she'd brought when I walked out in my robe, towel drying my hair. She reminded me of a Gauguin painting, so colourfully dressed in her yellow, orange and burnt sienna blouse, the sienna matching the colour of her skin. She'd brought along napkins, I saw, which were piled atop her lap, soaking up smatterings of juice that would have otherwise stained her slacks. She licked her lips and rose to wash her hands in the sink. "So let's go. I'm starved."

I threw on jeans and a red cotton blouse that I snatched from the now opened case laid atop the unused of the two twin beds. The shower had refreshed me, and yet I felt I'd stepped into a sauna when we walked back outside into the late Beijing summer. It wasn't unpleasant but, for me, unexpectedly warm and moist, the evening air leaving me tingling. "It's fall weather at home," I told her, "windy and rainy. How lovely it is here right now. What is it, about 30 degrees Celsius?"

She nodded her head. "Something like that. The midday sun is still unbearable without an umbrella. I hope you brought one. If not, you can always pick one up at the Unfriendly Store next to the student dormitories."

"The Unfriendly Store?"

"That's what we call it, yes. Where you're greeted with a snarl instead of a smile and a sliding scale of overinflated prices. It's our campus nightmare yet admittedly convenient, especially in a pinch."

"I'll have to remember that."

"You won't forget it, believe me. I did a little experiment once by having a Chinese student purchase the very same thing I'd just bought. Guess what? My ticket price was double. And when I complained to the clerk she only looked at me blankly, pointing at the receipt as if I couldn't read it."

"So why go there?"

"Like I said, it's convenient. Not only that but it's run by the same people owning the café that's our campus hangout across from the Foreign Faculty."

"Also unfriendly?"

She nodded her head. "Grimace and Grumble is what we nicknamed the owners. Charming couple."

"How can the school let them operate like that, especially these days with so many more international students attending?"

"Who knows how anything operates in China, Felly? My guess is nepotism. Chinese relatives and friends are endlessly connected. If you're at the bottom of the food chain my guess is that you either starve or become very clever. There's little social welfare here, as you know, which I'm hoping the new government is working on."

"Do you really think so?"

She held up her hands and shrugged.

"Well, I hope so too. Everything does appear to be more open now."

"We'll see, yes. But so far, I see more talk than action."

"Couldn't you say that about every government?"

"Mm, but this is not a democracy, which is one helluva difference."

"Right." As we walked, I noticed the open and friendly smiles of students, some even waving to Diane. She waved back. "So, are you contracted for the whole year?" I asked her.

"Unless I get a better offer I'm here as long as they'll have me."

"And why wouldn't they?"

"Because I say what I mean and mean what I say. Not just your culture has frank people in it, Felly-bo-belly. It has to do with the human heart, and I wouldn't have it any other way, that is, unless I'm playing devil's advocate."

"Devil's advocate?"

She crinkled her brows with the look that more was there than she was telling me. "Surely you've heard of it?"

"Yes, of course. Latin was obligatory learning in prep school."

"Well, Latin itself went out of our curriculum in the '60s."

"What a pity. It's at the core of so many of our languages."

"What is the term for 'devil's advocate' in Latin then?"

"Advocatus diaboli', it being a form of locution that Catholic priests used to argue contrary to the defence of the dead, making sure all sides were examined before a saint could be canonised."

"Geez Louise, see what our American schools are missing?" she said, laughing in sarcasm.

I laughed back. "You're right there."

"But I don't remember you being such a know-it-all."

"And here's me thinking I was famous for it."

"You're famous for getting me into trouble," she teased.

"Ah, but we had some good times together. Don't you remember?"

"I'll never forget that trip we took to Inner Mongolia together with the old gang. Weren't they a riot? But that was a ride in a half that I don't want to repeat. I don't think I ever warmed up once while I was there. Still, it was worth seeing The Steppes – a vast amazing land – miles and miles of flat horizon everywhere you look."

I nodded my head in memory. "I loved it when we stopped at the border and I stuck my foot inside the fence, literally stepping into Siberia."

"And you were lucky those nasty looking Russian guards pointing rifles at us didn't shoot your foot off."

"What an idiot I was, eh?"

"I know you'd taught a year in Russia, but have you ever been to Siberia?"

"No, I never went East of Moscow, just North to Saint Petersburg and South to the Volga. Such a lovely country though, and as mysterious in its own way as China is to me now."

"I grew up with so many rumours about Russia."

"And probably all true." I laughed.

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm sure the spy versus spy era of the Cold War had well meaning people on both sides of the Wall."

"I wouldn't want to be a Communist," I told her.

"Neither would I, but capitalism gone awry can be a curse as well as the downfall of my country, mark my words."

"I sincerely hope not. And if I had to choose I'd rather live in a democracy any day. It's finding a balance that appears more the problem than anything else."

"That, pure greed and all power tripping that seems part and parcel to the human, rather than humane, experience."

"My country too has its dark secrets. It's known for its tolerance, but dig into our near distant past and you'll read about the VOC, our Dutch East Indies company dirtying its hands in a lot of mercenary dealings, not only coffee and spices but slave handling as well, which none of us are proud of."

"They certainly don't tell us everything in our history books either, but similar stories were passed down to me through my grandparents, as all my ancestors were slaves."

"Not all of them, I'd imagine. You look like you have European blood, yourself. Maybe

Spanish even.”

“And maybe Native American too.” She shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Have you ever traced your roots?”

“Why bother? I’m sure it’d only end in heartache, and I’ve had enough of that to last a lifetime. But when students debate I challenge them to see if they actually believe what they’re telling me. Sometimes I see all those little mouths just mimicking what I know they’ve heard their parents saying. Or, even worse, what they think I want them to say. They just drive me crazy in that way. So to hell with cultural protocol. Damn straight I provoke these kids. If I don’t who else will?”

As we turned the corner, I imagined what such interchanges in class with her would be like.

“I’ll be interested in meeting all my students this coming week,” I told her.

“Are you teaching rhetoric again?”

“No, debate writing.”

“Have fun with all the paper grading. It’s not like the days of 15 students per writing class. Expect more like 30, maybe even more.”

“That many? But how do you get to view all their writings?”

“Group work, I say. Put ‘em all in small groups and make them do most of the assignments in class. They can grade one another’s papers too. Nothing wrong with that.”

I nodded my head, feeling the dampness of my skin and hair mixing with the spongy air, now leaving me with the odd sensation of being in a fishbowl. “But a little of that goes a long way, surely.”

“It does. So here we are, the I-HOP café, just like the American pancake house, but it’s not. It’s....”

“It says ‘I-HOPE café’.”

“Details, details, Felly. You always were a stickler for details.”

“And do they serve pancakes?”

“Well, no. But they serve a great mango shake.”

“And hopefully a fairly decent meal to go along with it?”

“Just like the name, you can always hope.”

I scanned the colourful menu, which I couldn’t decipher and was rescued by pictures of what I thought I’d like to sample. All the dishes, as I remembered, were affordably priced as if scaled down to accommodate the student budget, though most ate in the cafeteria. In general, the cost of living was much lower in China than in the West, but so was the average salary. Economically, I guessed everything equalled out with the exception of the exploited factory worker and those sequestered in sweatshops. I decided on an oddly composed but tasty concoction of fried potato strips, tuna and sliced cucumber in seasoned white sauce. Diane ordered baked chicken. I looked suspiciously at her plate when it was brought to the table in a heap of dark bones, but she didn’t bat an eye while picking through the pile. We both ordered mango shakes, though I expressed concern over the milk put in it because of a recent article I read of a scandal about imported Japanese thickening agents found tainted and currently banned from big supermarket chains. These thickeners had been used in products like yoghurts, ice creams, cheese (which the Chinese ate little of), and even certain baby foods.

“You should be here in the spring to see the landscape workers cycling around with barrels containing DDT they still spray on all the flowers.”

I dropped my fork. “Oh no. You’re kidding.”

“I’m not,” she said.

“So, are you glowing yet?”

She laughed. “I have yet to be canonised.”

I was halfway through the meal when I felt the jetlag returning. It was as if everything drained from me, and I lost my appetite altogether. “I’m so tired,” I confessed. “Would you mind if I called it a day?” I was drooping more than from the weather, and my thoughts were turning back to the hard but surprisingly comfortable bed I’d been sleeping in when Diane had awakened me.

“I’m finished here too. Fuyen!” she called out. And a girl in black skirt who had first waited

on us appeared as if out of a corner closet. "Can I have a doggy bag?"

I laughed. "A what?"

"They know me here. I don't even have to speak Chinese." Sure enough, the girl came back with a small Styrofoam box and began scraping the chicken remainders into it.

Diane insisted on picking up the tab, and we were out of the restaurant and walking back to the Experts building when we bumped into a man who made even me in my stilettos feel like a dwarf. There was an air of strangeness about him, giving me Goosebumps.

Diane only nodded to him as we passed him by.

"Who was that?" I said.

"Only the creepiest man on campus. Douglas Whelan, head of the Health Sciences department. You don't want to know him."

"A real flesh and blood Dr Who."

She lifted a brow. "The doctor is rumoured to have come into some kind of inheritance and will no doubt be leaving for Scotland soon."

"Lucky him. Wouldn't it be nice to be a trust funder?"

"Mm-hm," was all she said as we walked on.

I felt my limbs stiffening up again and thought of ingesting more aspirin. Perhaps another hot soak in the tub, and then I'd sleep off more of the grogginess. When we rounded the corner and were back at the flat, Diane and I hugged once more and turned each to her own quarters. "Night, Di. It's going to be such fun working with you again."

"And with you too, Felly-bo-belly. Don't let the starch bugs bite."

I laughed at that, thinking: *Good times ahead, yes.*

'One that would have the fruit must first climb the tree'

TWO

The first time I came to Beijing, when everything was new and wonderful and awful, just the same, I was also handed a list of instructions addressing what I could and could not discuss in the classroom. This included a staff warning that class monitors were Party members who took notes and reported in what we said if it could be either suspected or construed as anything 'off-colour'. Now, five years later, I was under the distinct impression that 'anything goes'. So, what had happened? Well, the International Olympic games held in China for one. There was also the rising economy and the modern government's desire that the rest of the world take it more seriously as a player more than competitor for another.

I continued to be surprised and energised by what students were debating with little fear of being reprimanded or expelled. By their own volition, individuals argued against online censorship, labour rights, the issue with Taiwan and the current appreciation of the yuan. Class monitors were ever-present, yes. Yet none appeared leery of my presence, nor were they jotting down copious notes to report possible miscreants to the Party. Rather, this newer generation of monitors had become involved with the class and its curriculum. I found them more approachable, friendly even, leaving me with the distinct impression that 'I'm one of them' had replaced 'I'm apart and watching'. So what had changed in the Far East since my last visit? Well, everything.

"Miss van Vliet?" One of my students interrupted my thoughts, and I turned to her.

"Yes?"

"Are you a Christian?"

"What?"

I was left speechless by this blatant query, as it had always been taboo to discuss one's religious persuasion in class in any culture, well, except for mine that took on the more pragmatic attitude that 'all came out in the wash'.

This student didn't wait for me to respond. She said simply; "If you want to come to my Bible study this Sunday I'd just like you to know that you're most welcome."

"Uh, thank you," I blurted out dumbly.

She smiled and drifted off to another class as I watched in stupefaction. Was I being tested? I grew suddenly paranoid then shook off the feeling because I knew I was in a university environment full of young, inquisitive minds – nothing more and nothing less. I saw no hidden agendas. Yet was I living in an academic bubble? Perhaps China's majority didn't really share such a global view and changed optimism. I spoke out these thoughts to colleagues lunching at the noon pause with me under the roofed terrace of our campus 'Unfriendly Café'. Unlike its nickname, the mini-restaurant was inviting in its deceptive way of looking as if it sat in the middle of a nature reserve instead of a campus garden. Its rustic calm had less to do with furnishings and more to do with the charming little winged prisoners in birdcages singing all-round. Diane was right about the snarling staff, whose underhanded remarks about having to serve big-nosed foreigners didn't get past Gwen either. I was blissfully ignorant till she replied in a passionate string of colourful expletives that made their faces pale and legs rush back into the kitchen. Gwen's grasp of the native tongue astonished me. She let nothing slip by her, nor did she take anyone's bigoted criticisms lightly. Her eyes now glued to the man of mixed Asian race handing out menus. But he wouldn't look at her,

angering her further. And she quipped; “The biggest nose at our table I’d say is ala carte.”

But even Gwen agreed that times were changing, despite the philistine attitude at the café. “Big cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong are like cocoons,” she said. “It’s the rest of China – its largest terrain – that’s dirt poor and why everyone who can is moving out of the rural areas. So, what does the government do? It makes paltry attempts to come up with incentives to keep the farmers ploughing their fields. Admittedly, it’s really becoming a problem.”

“What a pity,” I said. “But if I were a dirt farmer I’d be hitching a ride to the big city too. Who in their right mind wants to starve, Gwen?”

“Of course no one does.”

“My apologies for sounding smug, but you can’t help but applaud a government trying to resolve its situation.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear, Felly, especially on English-oriented networks,” Colin said in his clipped Australian accent. He was visiting Gwen for the week, as his classes in Dachang, a neighbouring city, didn’t start till the following week, and he was dressed in work shirt and blue jeans. His stylishly punk girlfriend, with her Paris green skirt and black lace-up boots, was a sharp contrast in attire, bringing a smile to my face. “These channels may be informatively entertaining,” he said; “but they’re still heavily censored.”

“I’m only amazed by this new openness,” I told him excitedly. “Professors invited from Western universities to speak their minds on CCTV alongside PhD economists from Peking and Tsinghua U? Now that’s just brilliant. You never would have seen anything comparatively five years ago.”

“And yet you and I still can’t get on Facebook or Youtube. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“Inconvenient, yes, but nothing stops you from purchasing a VPN and using a re-router. Channels are only blocked if a person doesn’t want to pay the piper.”

“The ‘piper’, in this case, is illegal,” said Gwen.

Diane rolled her eyes. “And do you really think they’re going to arrest us for that, Gwennyrey?”

“Okay then,” said Colin. “What about reportings of labour strikes? And I know there are many, just look at Shandong.”

“Shandong? Where’s that?”

“Case in point, Felly, meaning that it gets little coverage.”

“Across from my homeland, South Korea.” Gwen told me.

“I thought you were from Berkeley.”

She shrugged. “Okay, my parents’ homeland.”

We all went quiet when lunch was served. Colin opened his sandwich then winked at his girlfriend. “I’m just checking to make sure no one spit in it.”

“What?” she said, and did the same.

My salad looked all right, which was an item Diane had advised me to order, saying that she’d never had any problems with it digestion wise. I picked through the freshly washed greens, quartered tomatoes and corn with my chopsticks. “So,” I smirked. “Doesn’t anybody order Chinese food in China?”

“Not if we can help it,” they all replied at once.

Diane added; “A steady diet at the local goes a long way.”

I crunched on the lettuce, equally enjoying the taste of the tomato, mayonnaise and relish dressing. “This is an interesting flavour,” I said.

“We call it ‘thousand island’ back home,” she said, shaking her head at me and laughing. “Don’t you have that in Holland either? Girl, what do you folks eat there, anyway? Don’t tell me. Let me guess. Cheese, potatoes, eel and Brussels sprouts.”

“I eat everything but the eel, Diane.” I turned back to Colin. “I have to honestly say that I’m impressed with China, so far.”

He bit into his sandwich. “In what way?”

“In not wanting to be seen as an Eastern aggressor, for one.”

“By calling yourself a ‘team player, you mean? That’s the buzzword going around right now.”

"I see," I said. But did I? I wasn't sure.

Gwen had ordered something looking like humus.

"That looks just like...."

"Humus? It's a Uigher dish. We have a minority Islamic population here as well." She dipped a piece of round flatbread in the chunky green sauce and chewed. "If seen as an aggressor, the country would be viewed as working against itself. And that wouldn't do because, frankly, they need us...for now."

"We need them too," I told her.

"It's a savvy government," Colin agreed. "When all is said and done, China needs Western trade. I doubt if they'd bite the hand."

I contemplated Gwen and Colin, who'd been travelling through and working in a good part of China these past few years. Compared to them and Diane, who had starting working at the university the first year I taught there, I knew too little about the country's underpinnings. I was determined to keep an open mind, weighing everything while appreciating what I did see changing for the better...I hoped.

My afternoon class was full of academics from the softer sciences, and I started them off with a role playing activity. My plan was to evoke reactions from otherwise shy individuals. The theme had to do with values clarification and centred on a woman having an illicit affair who'd been shot while crossing a bridge designated 'off limits' to the public. Small teams of students took on personas of the adulterous wife, her lover and husband. Included in this was a soldier doing his duty by shooting the trespasser, as well as the boatman refusing passage to the penniless woman while ferrying others across the river and back for a fee. As students argued and justified their opinions of actions taken by each of these fictional characters, I observed them and took notes on their reactions. One of the teams saw the wife a mere victim to a negligent and philandering husband. The other stressed the duty of the soldier whose decisions, they felt, were made by obeying the orders of a higher authority. Others claimed the lover to be a calloused manipulator wanting the best of both worlds while contributing to none. There was even a group casting the boatman as a greedy capitalist who made his fuel expenses a priority over the woman's personal crisis. Like Diane playing devil's advocate, I challenged students, forcing them to back up their thoughts and feelings with merited choices. It was sometimes difficult to put native opinions into second language form and was, at times, stressful for them. Yet, all enjoyed the activity so much that they clapped their appreciation at the end of the lesson. One of the students lingered after class, a young man slightly taller than his mates. His face was round and thoughtful as he asked if I wouldn't mind him walking me out the door. His name was Zhang Dainzin, but he wanted me to call him 'Andy', a name given him while learning English in primary school. He was curious about my thoughts on the Dalai Lama, and I asked why not bring it up as a subject for debate the next class meeting. It was then he dropped his voice, saying he felt better discussing such things in private. "You never know," he said, looking over his shoulder.

"Really?" My curiosity piqued, especially after lunch with Gwen and Colin. "What don't I know, Andy? What am I missing here?"

He answered by saying that he thought I was beautiful, instead. Avoiding the subject, was he? Or was he just getting round to admitting a schoolboy crush. Yet, I was used to the Chinese being free with compliments that weren't meant to go anywhere else. "Are you flirting with me?" I teased.

This made him blush. "No," he said. "It's just your..."

"Hair?" which the Irish were forever complimenting me for.

"No, your eyes are the colour of turquoise. I've never seen such eye colour before."

I thanked him in slight discomfort. After all, I was his teacher.

He didn't make much more of the compliment though, only asking if he could walk with me further if I wasn't busy. I had little else on the day's agenda except the eventual need to soak my still sore muscles in the tub again and sorry now that I hadn't asked at lunch for the recommendation of a good masseuse. Yet, I could do with something to quench my thirst, and suggested to Andy that we head back to the Unfriendly Café for an iced tea.

After ordering tea, he said; "Does it seem to you that we can all freely speak our minds with little consequence?"

"Well, yes," I admitted.

"Then tell me this, why is it that I was taken aside last year and told not to discuss my grandfather's imprisonment?"

"Your grandfather is in jail? What did he do?"

"He's Tibetan," he said as if uttering a dirty word. "You wouldn't think so by looking at me, would you?"

Perhaps if I were Chinese I wouldn't, but I honestly couldn't see any difference between Andy and his other classmates. He was slightly larger than the average thin-bodied male, but not by much. I'd assumed he was from a white collar class, raised on a healthier diet than one coming from a common labourer's family as most university bound students came out of the more élite social sectors. "Dutch boys are tall too," I said. "But your grandfather being in jail is no laughing matter."

"No, it is truly not. He spoke out and against the Dalai Lama's exile in his village. For that he was judged to be inciting a riot. His one and only crime. He is a good man, and this should not have occurred. Can you believe it?"

I shook my head, watching the waiter glare at us while setting down our tea. Andy paid him no mind, not like Gwen. So, neither did I. "And how long do you think he'll remain locked up?"

"Who knows about these things?" He held the handle of his glass and took a sip.

"Oh, but this is hot tea. We ordered..."

"No matter. Hot tea is good too."

"But surely you can protest."

"About the tea?" he said with a sidewise smile.

I laughed at the unexpected wit.

He continued. "And lose my scholarship? You must be joking?"

I looked at him with clearing head. "But what can you do?"

"I can be careful, for one thing. Shouldn't we all?" I didn't know if he was including me in the picture when Andy confided; "Change doesn't happen overnight and perhaps it never will."

"I've seen a dramatic change."

"You said you were away five years and have just returned? Ah," he sighed dreamily. I would so love to go to Europe."

"Perhaps you can through an exchange programme, or working for a foreign-based company after graduation."

"That would be nice, but there are many who share my selfsame dream, many who have more funding than I have available to accomplish mine."

"It's possible to find a sponsor when you graduate, don't you think?" I lifted my glass to him. "Never give up hope."

He lifted his back, repeating. "You are so right, teacher. Never give up hope."

I stumbled across an article discussing a scandalous work-related suicide in the *China Daily*, an English-oriented newspaper, before meeting Andy's next class. 'Trouble at Foxconn' read the caption, and the news story reported the ninth worker of Apple Inc.'s South China based iPhone factory to have jumped from a window to his death. The 'ninth worker'? Leave it to Communism to dehumanise such an individual, even after his sad death. As for Foxconn? It was definitely under scrutiny, losing face for all its disclosed publicity causing public outcry. I was beginning to understand this to be a 'see no evil hear no evil' society, meaning that as long as it wasn't brought to public attention such occurrences would continually be brushed under the rug and not dealt with. It wasn't a question here of right or wrong but more one of mercenary greed and what could be gotten away with. Perhaps the topic would be a good one to discuss in class. I thought we could debate workers' rights and the need to improve them, discussing as well how a raise in salary might affect the buyers' market. Increased prices and export reductions would also logically follow.

"Is cheap labour akin to slavery?" I blurted out soon after the mandatory taking of

attendance, though few were ever absent.

A quick hush settled the room as I looked around me at all the stunned looking faces. I glimpsed Andy, who looked to have something on the tip of his tongue. When I opened my mouth to speak he looked out the window. "Lewis?" I asked another, whose real name was Lao Cheng. "Is this why workers are jumping out of windows, do you think?"

"I do not know, teacher," he answered.

I was flummoxed. But, no, I wouldn't let them get away with this. I scratched my head, releasing the tightly pulled together bun. "Are we exploiting the common man, people? The average labourer?" I saw them mesmerised by the gloss of my nut-brown hair as it fell across my shoulders. I would have been amused if not agitated. "Well, are we?"

"Ahem, teacher." A girl I didn't recognise addressed me, her voice squeaking but it was firm. "My twin and I are sitting in on your class at Professor Tabor's suggestion. Is this all right with you?"

"Yes, yes. Anything else?"

She smiled. "If you will permit me, I should like to say something."

The unaccustomed politeness would be over-the-top in my country. And why was Diane sending students to my classes? "By all means," I said. "And your name is...?"

She cleared her throat, looking across her shoulder then back at me. "Chintz."

"Chintz? Like the fabric?"

"Yes, Chintz," she said. "And my sister," she said, waving a hand to where she now suddenly glanced, "is Chi-chi." She didn't laugh. And, I swear, I didn't either. Letting her continue. "You see, Foxconn has shut its doors because of losing face."

"I know that. But does it make it right what they've done?"

Andy found his voice. "And are still doing. They're just moving location."

"Outsourcing the outsourced?" I smirked. "Now that's what I call truly scandalous."

"We're not proud of it," said the girl.

"And do you, or anyone else in this class, actually have relatives working at Foxconn?"

No one answered.

"Well, I for one am glad that this company's intolerable working conditions have been brought to light."

"Why teacher?" said the mirror image of Chintz from in back.

I glued my eyes to her, sighing. "Instead of me telling you and your classmates what I think, I'm going to let you break into groups and talk about a plausible 'why' amongst yourselves. You'll need a note taker, and we'll break in fifteen minutes to discuss each group's thoughts and conclusions before writing them down as a homework assignment."

I expected students to moan and groan. Instead, they locked heads and began to quietly argue while one quickly chosen group member dutifully wrote everything down.

This surprised me once again. *Will I ever understand this culture?* I peered over each shoulder and eavesdropped on the varying conversations. *Probably not, but I may learn something from it. And will it, or should I say, these particular students, learn anything of true value from me?* I sincerely hoped I had something worthwhile to pass on to these future generations, wherever they were going and whatever they ended up doing with their lives.

Class ended with me emphasising the writing assignment, but not before pausing and contemplating Diane's warning not to overload myself with paperwork. When Chintz waited for her sister, who was indeed the look alike from in back, I motioned them up to my desk.

"Why exactly did Professor Tabor send you to this class?"

"I hope you don't take a care," answered Chintz for them both.

Chi-chi picked up the slack. "We are in her advanced reading course and have grammar problems."

"But this isn't a grammar class."

"Our writing skills are poor," they both said together.

Chintz added; "She said we should bring our work to her. She said not to burden you."

"That's very thoughtful."

The sister piped in. "She is a dedicated teacher."

"Yes," said Chintz, "but some say she is rude."

“Rude? Meaning that she challenges you all to think?”

They nodded their heads together with the gravest of looks.

“And do you think me rude too?”

“No, teacher;” Chintz assured. “We would never presume such.” She looked to her sister who nodded agreeably.

They were carbon copies from shoelaces to hair ties. I bit my tongue from laughing. In my country, no twin their age would dream of dressing alike. My own brother and I had outgrown such desires in early childhood. “I thought Dr Tabor might have put you up to this knowing that I’m also a twin.”

“Really?” They both giggled as if I’d just shared with them the most delectable secret.

I must be serious, I told myself. But, in truth, I found them adorable. “So, you two really are legit?”

They both giggled and nodded heads again.

“Then consider yourselves a welcome addition to the class.”

I ended up texting Diane with lots of exclamation marks and laughter, that is, right after texting Kieran. He’d been keeping close tabs on me ever since hearing about the plane crash, choosing to place a long distance call, although it cost a bundle, when I initially texted him. He’d even caught it briefly on an international news channel, he’d told me. It was a puzzling malfunction, and no one knew why the left landing gears had stuck. But no one was reported seriously hurt. There were a few broken ribs and bones in various places. One man suffered a mild heart attack even, and there were several reported whiplashes. The rest were like me, left with bruised and strained muscles. Because of the accident, Kieran had taken to texting back as soon as I contacted him. This time, however, his note was hastily transcribed. ‘So sorry, LV. Bzy, bzy - mssng u – bd cat ok! Sundy SKYPE? XOXO.’

I knew he was immersed in what I’d teased him about by calling it ‘legal mumbo-jumbo theory’ his second year of law school before I made my decision to return to China. The course module he showed me looked like he was up against a lot of matchstick opening eyelids reading and memorisation of key terms. Practise would come later, of course. In a way, I was glad not to be underfoot in our small houseboat with all that concentration needing to be done. Still, I missed him and my naughty little cat. Diane was delighted I accepted whom she called ‘her twin’s in my class. In return, she gave me the private number of a massage therapist who did house calls and invited me to a jazz concert.

Diane had organised an outing with a small cluster of friends to attend a free concert at the Peking Music Conservatory. A tribute was being given to American jazz performers of the 1920s by a Chinese music professor and a few of his handpicked students. Public television was filming the occasion. So I was surprised to see only a comfortably sized crowd attending, most looking like Western expats. Mob behaviour had been a focus of my graduate studies with me loathing huge gatherings and being rather paranoid in the midst of them. Small groups I could handle, even enjoying their close-knit interaction. Still, I thought that the professor may have been disappointed by the sparse turn out though he didn’t seem to let on. He welcomed us all graciously and introduced his topic by giving a short historical account of twentieth century jazz and how it had had a particular influence on the Chinese music culture.

At the start of the performance, a computer-generated PowerPoint presentation flashed photos of key performers of the time, such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Thelonious Monk. We viewed their images on a drop down screen while the professor and his fellows played piano, cello and violin in unique rhythm structures that attempted to recapture a mood of civil unrest, pain and misunderstanding. A spiritual undertone washed through each piece, which I thought fitting, as looking to God’s promises for strength and joy in an otherwise oppressive environment was central to the age. Out of curiosity, I took in the expressions of my colleagues. I saw Gwen texting on her mobile. Was she taken by the music or merely bored? Diane beside her was staring fixedly at the screen, her eyes wet and glistening. I brushed away my own wandering tear as the professor struck a D-minor chord with his violin that penetrated my gut. I actually gasped. *How could music slash and wrench one so?* It did.

The maestro and his students went on to impress us with a sultry rendering of jazz mixed with sorrowful, bluesy riffs. Their combinations of notes played out and painted on our senses like a virtual canvas of such a stormy period that weathered America's past. I was moved beyond measure, wanting to rise and sing, leap up and dance. I was riveted with emotion I didn't know what to do with. And, at the close, I shouted: "Brilliant! Bravo!" as everyone stood up and clapped. The ensemble bowed together as the teacher made sure to thank each and every one of his students. They then left him to conclude with a solitary piece in honour of those he labelled the jazz 'queens and kings'. These greats, he confessed to us in a loud whisper, had made an indelible impression on his humble soul. There was no need for an encore, because he and his students continued on to play themselves out and leave us all brilliantly feasting and sated.

The night was no longer young when the performance finally did end. Metro lines had stopped altogether. Our group was forced to ride home on city busses, but we didn't mind as we sang Negro Spirituals all the way back to BHSU. A smattering of late night bus riders looked on in quiet curiosity. Perhaps admiration? I would never know, as I only observed disciplined faces masking these Beijingers' feelings and emotions. There appeared to me nothing in-between. My own was beginning to contort in pain from a body still reacting from the plane crash. I was now stiffening in certain muscle groups where I'd never had problems before. Time to definitely phone up Diane's massage therapist.

"Did I tell you he's blind?" she said.

"He is? No, you didn't. How does he get around?"

"Oh, really, Felly. How does anyone sightless get around in these days? With a guide dog and white cane, of course."

I realised I was still acting the part of the outsider still amazed at the simplest things taken for granted back home. Why should China be any different? Diane went on to tell me an amazing story about how government sponsored research had discovered that, while relying on senses that sighted people often ignored, those at varying levels of sight-impairment were found to make brilliant masseuses. Her own therapist had been licensed at one of these very training centres. "And he's damn good," she said. "Mr Lou speaks very little English. So our conversations are stilted. Yet, he seems to find out the areas I need working on without me even pointing them out to him. His hands are what are so amazing, firm yet like butter."

"He IS amazing," Gwen agreed, "our own EM, empathic masseuse."

A woman I didn't know was nodding her head up and down. "I'm Bobbie," she said, extending a hand to me. "I work with the New Life programme here in Beijing, and I've been having massages from Mr Lou about as long as Gwenny has." She looked to the woman beside her. "Almost two years now, wouldn't you say?"

Gwen smiled back. "And counting."

"Okay, I'm sold. What's the New Life programme?" I asked, thinking it some Christian organisation, as I knew there were many cropping up all over Beijing within the last few years.

"I'm teacher managing a facility that helps kids of the hùtong continue their education. It's harder for them here in the big city, and they can fall through the cracks and forgotten so easily."

"I had no idea. Do they graduate and attend university then?"

She shook her head. "There have been a few miracles, brilliant kids with outside grants we're networked into. But money is scarce and most of these kids end up managing family shops, working alongside their parents. Yet they can read and write, some even communicating English to their foreign customers."

"It's a great programme," said Gwen. "Colin and I volunteer there sometimes."

I looked to Diane. "And you?"

She snapped; "Not if they don't pay me, I won't."

"Oh! Okay. So, Di, do you think I could get Mr Lou to come tomorrow?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Call him yourself and ask."

"And how are we supposed to communicate if he doesn't speak English and can't see my text message? I don't speak much Chinese, certainly too little that's understandable."

“His wife speaks English. I think she does the translating for him. But he can and does text in Chinese Braille. I’ve seen him do it, myself. And that man is fast.”

“Wonder what that looks like. Is it similar to Western Braille?”

She locked her eyes on mine and sighed with exasperation. “I have no idea, Felly, but I have never had trouble communicating what I want with these people. Braille or no Braille, where there’s a will there’s a way. Just make it happen.”

And, sure enough, when I texted Mr Lou he responded right away. His message was clipped yet efficient. ‘No tomorrow. Wednesday 10 AM, OK?’

Mr Lou also telephoned Gwen to affirm that I understood his message. He then explained to her that he was booked solid till midweek. When he did show, I was expecting someone young and virile at the door with a German shepherd in harness. Instead, I answered to a short, squat middle-aged man with white cane and longhaired dachshund. I had no idea such a ‘people’ canine could be a good guide, but Shih Tzu, translated ‘lion dog’, Lou told me in haltering speech, had been trained along with him at the school for the blind. Shih Tzu stayed close to his master. Yet, sometimes I observed him going the wrong way, leading his master into a corner. I tried not to laugh. Other than being overly friendly to me, Shih Tzu didn’t get in the way of the man’s work. The dachshund only chose to give me a little lick – a farewell kiss? – at the close of each session, which endeared him to me. I’d grown up with parents who had raised show dogs for a living before retiring. I was raising a spoilt cat myself, but I did know a thing or two about canine discipline. I had to laugh at Mr Lou always showing up late, because Shih Tzu would invariably get him lost and going in the wrong direction. But they did show up eventually, and I never complained. At the end of each session, Mr Lou let me give Shih Tzu treats I bought especially for him, whom I’d nicknamed ‘Achoo’ because it was easier for me to say. The doxie soon looked forward to them, nuzzling me over to the bureau when I’d pretend to forget. There was no losing his way there, and the ladies and I later had a good laugh with me telling them that ‘Achoo’ knew his way around the biscuit tinny good enough.

I felt odd, at first, inviting in this complete stranger to work on my sore and stiff muscles. I’d already moved one of the twin beds into the living room, converting it into a makeshift couch. It was quite heavy with its thick oak wood frame, just like the rest of my apartment furniture. Tossed around were several odd sized cushions collected at flea markets, and the extra bed adapted perfectly as the couch I thought I needed but didn’t have. Mr Lou and I used it for our massage sessions too. I just tossed aside the cushions and set a chair and foot tub in on the floor beside. I found out from Mr Lou that there were several BSHU teachers who called on his services. It was a matter of integrity with the Chinese not to abuse one’s trust, and I felt perfectly safe with the man. Those few who did cross the line were harshly punished when caught. Mr Lou was always mannerly yet what I surmised a master at his profession, and he was both convenient and affordable. His routine I learnt and quickly adapted to, filling the kettle with hot water just before he arrived. The hot water he mixed with herbs in a foot tub, having me first soak away any soreness while he worked off the tension from my neck, shoulders and arms. He ended by pulling on each finger, making a clicking sound that, Diane told me later, was an action related to the nerves in the neck.

After Mr Lou dried my feet, he instructed I lie down on the couch, where he used fingers and knuckles on the inner soles of each foot to target pressure points that leave a tingling sensation up and down my legs to my toes, travelling up my spine, neck and arms. Sometimes I’d even flash on an image, like the time I closed my eyes and saw a flaming image of a phoenix in white and crimson colours, which caused me to gasp reflexively.

“Pain?” said Mr Lou. He stopped and paused, waiting for me to clarify.

I shook my head. How could I clarify a flaming phoenix in my halting Chinese? What a pity I couldn’t. I just smiled and said nothing more as he moved to the next stage of massage. It was so relaxing that I could have easily drifted off to sleep. Diane told me she did once, even snoring before he woke her up, grinning as he asked if she’d roll over on her side so he could work on her spine.

Mr Lou rounded off his one and a half hour stay by having me lie on my stomach while he massaged the areas that really hurt. This was the only excruciating part of my otherwise

enjoyable sessions. Often I'd grit my teeth and try rekindling the flaming image of the beautiful phoenix.

"Pain?" he'd gently ask.

If I said, yes, he would proceed to concentrate on that particular area and work on it even harder. So I learnt to keep my mouth shut, and with watering eyes, I'd answer; "No. No pain, no pain!"

CONCEPT