

Pearl River Blues

By Gregory Holden

1.

*Be glad, O barren woman,
who bears no children;
break forth and cry aloud,
you who have no labor pains;
because more are the children of the desolate woman
than of her who has a husband.*

--Galatians 4:27

East, West, just points of the compass, each as stupid as the other.
--Dr. Julius No, from the script for the film *Dr. No* (1962)

The emergency room is only ten minutes from my family's house, but as such trips go, it seems to take an interminable length of time to get there. Not because there is any great urgency. My mother does not seem to be dying—at least, not at this time, in January. Her rheumatoid arthritis has grown so extreme that she can hardly take a step without crying out in pain. That is how the journey starts. “Oh, I can't stand it!” I hear her cry from upstairs as she came out of the bathroom for what seems like the fourth time that afternoon. “Larry, why won't you take me to the hospital?”

My father, Larry, sits in one recliner and I in the other. He is watching the movie *Pride of the Yankees* on TCM. He sighs and mutters unintelligible words, his hands brushing his face. He took her to the emergency room the previous week, and again, the

week before that. I can tell his bones are weary. His face hurts from lack of sleep. He hungers for a nap. He longs for quiet. He dreams of his trailer, of Arizona, of the Superstition Mountains.

It was Mom who had called me. “He won’t take me,” she had said in that high-pitched, anxious voice that always made me nervous. “Will you take me, please?” I took a deep breath. “Yes,” I had said.

“Why does it hurt so much, Larry?” Her voice ascends in pitch with the peculiar rising anxiety of a child. I flash to a vision of her as a seven-year-old girl, running up to a nun in a crow black habit in the orphanage on Napoleon Street in New Orleans, asking, in the same voice, “Sister, why does it hurt so much?”

As you will see, I have many such visions.

I hear the shuffle of my mother’s feet as they clump with effort on the carpet. Her fingers, swollen with the arthritis, are bent at acute angles around the handles of the elevator chair as it descends the stairs. She is nearly 80. She has shrunken to approximately the same number of centimeters in height. Her face is twisted in a way I have come to know well: knit brows, narrow Oriental eyes, pursed lips. Her gnarled fingers grip her cane, which probes the floor.

“You’ll take me, won’t you, Greg?”

“I said I’d take you.” My voice sounds disembodied, coming from far away.

She rises unsteadily, cries out, attempts to climb down the stairs, totters, nearly falls. I jump to my feet too late. Her head hits the metal edge of the chair lift with a sickening clunk. An explosion of distress fills our ears, the room, and the expanse of Orchard Street. She cries, she moans, she frets. I pull her frail bones back to an upright

position. A bright red wound about an inch long lines her forehead. “At least we’re going to the emergency room anyway,” I say. I slip her overcoat over her narrow, stooped shoulders. At one time it seemed to fit; now it is three or four sizes too big. She is folding up like a flower at the end of its bloom, like an accordion, the bellows expelling their last tones.

Outside, her feet move forward no more than two or three inches at a time. I stand in front, holding her forearms as she gingerly steps down the stairs in her huge orthopedic shoes, moaning, then whining, with each movement. I look around: no one is watching this drama. Though I do not realize it, this is the last time she will ever leave her house.

In the car, her voice seemed far away. “I don’t know what’s going to become of me...they’ve got to stop this somehow...can’t take the Vioxx...it’ll hurt my stomach, you know? It makes me sick...call that rheumatologist, Goldstein, will you?”

Let me pause for a moment and tell you how I would have reacted to this at different stages of my life:

- Age 8: “What’s wrong, mommy? Are you sick?”
- Age 18: “Leave me alone, you bitch! I hate you!”
- Age 35: “You think you’ve got problems? These kids are running me ragged.”
- Age 45: “Vioxx, is that one of those new ace inhibitors? Can I try one of those for my backache?”
- Age 52: I take a deep breath and meditate on the Buddhist verse from the teaching

Lines of Experience that urges patience:

Born again and again in endless cycles of life,

Constantly tortured by the three sufferings,

All our mothers are in this plight.

Please generate ultimate compassion and love.

I reflect: Buddha's mother never had arthritis. This is what it means, what the Dalai Lama talks about: compassion. Well, maybe now I can undo all those years of yelling at her, of hating her.

Sunday afternoon, the emergency room is a place of stasis, of controlled discomfort. You get plenty of stomach issues, hangover after-effects. People sit, staring into the westerning orange sun, waiting, unmoving, staring at this or that failing body part.

To my surprise, mom is shown to a treatment area right away. The nurse recognizes her. She is not what you would call a good patient, but apparently she is a memorable patient. "My hip hurts so much," she says.

"We'll take care of it, dear," says the nurse. Her ID tag reads *Marnie*. I have a vision that she has just gotten off the phone with her husband. They have had an unpleasant talk: money.

Mom smiles, childlike: her smile is always her best feature.

Machines are wheeled in, band-aids applied, blood pressure taken, many questions asked. Then, the waiting.

"What will happen to me, Greg? Will I be all right?"

I take a deep breath. I visualize the storm cloud of her anxiety dissipating and then moving on. "Yes, you'll be all right."

After a moment's silence, she begins to moan again: "What's going to happen to me?"

Years ago, I learned the art of misdirection from my own children: if they clamor in the car for ice cream, distract them with a word game, with anything.

"I've been doing some genealogy," I say.

"Some what?"

"Family history. I found out about your father's father."

"Dad?"

"No, your Chinese grandfather—the one from China. The father of your real father. Not the other father."

Her face softens, her long cheeks narrowing to her chin. Her crooked mouth is just like that of her father and exactly resembles that of her grandmother, in one of the photos I have obtained from the National Archives. The connection between those Chinese immigrants to the woman lying on the gurney—and through her, to me--makes sense now that I have researched it, then filled in the details with my visions.

"What did you find out?"

"He was born in Canton, or in a little village near it."

"But my dad was born in Hawaii."

"Yes, but his parents came to Hawaii from China, back in the 1880s."

"Oh really? Ow!" She cries out as a nurse placed a catheter in her wrist. I begin to suspect that more is wrong with my mother than just her hip. I do not want to ask Marnie what is going on, though, in front of her. My brother and sister and I have long since learned to regulate and avoid her anxiety. "It's amazing how you find out all these things.

Such a smart boy.” The rare smile lights up her face for just a moment. Then the worry lines reappeared: “What are they doing to me? Can you ask?”

“I’ll ask in a minute. Do you want me to tell you about your grandfather?”

The lines around her eyes soften, her face relaxes. The pulse on the Dynamap EKG monitor descends: 110, 106, 101. “OK, tell me the story.”

“Your grandfather’s name was Low Moon,” I begin. He was born near Canton, in southern China, near the Pearl River delta, around 1864.”

“But dad’s name was Lau, William Lau,” mom cuts in.

“That’s what’s on his birth certificate, and on some papers he signed,” I say. “The Chinese put the last name first. His name was definitely Low. At some point it must have been changed to Lau.”

“Oh,” she say. Her eyes grow wide and seem to gaze far off.

I go on.



Low Moon was known as the most accomplished liar in the entire monastery. He was so good at spinning tales and answering questions with answers that seemed to go in half a dozen different directions that the other novice monks frequently came to him for help.

“Low Moon, I missed the morning prayers because I slept too long,” gasped Chao Chui one morning, running up to him out of breath, one sandal on and one sandal off, his brows knitted in anxious furrows.

“A spider bit your foot in the night and you could not put on your sandal or even walk to morning prayers,” Low Moon replied.

“The sandal. I did not even think of it. You have covered two tears with a single patch. Namaste.” He bowed, palms together, as though thanking one of the Buddhist gods whose statues stood watch over the inner courtyard.

“Low Moon, my parents asked me to pray for a good harvest, but the rice crop was just as bad as last year,” said Po Chan.

“Tell them their prayers will be answered, but you do not know when. The gods respond in their own time and you don’t know if it will be this year or next,” he said, barely without thinking.

“I bow to the lotus of your foot,” said Po Chan.

The best answers came to Low Moon in a flash, without apparent effort. The truth was that he was not devious enough to be a liar. He had a gift for sensing what people wanted to hear and telling it to them. Words blossomed in the fertile garden of his skull. The novices knew it, and he knew it, but to the senior monks, he was a lazy, poor student who would never amount to anything.

Unable to memorize the complicated chants or quotes from the Buddhist sages, Low Moon appeared to have no intelligence at all.

“Take this, it is all you are fit for,” said Shi De, the monk who had been his guardian since he arrived at Chih Chih monastery as a little boy, handing him a broom

made of several horse's tails fastened to a pole. "Sweep away delusion. Sweep away distraction," he instructed. "You are like the monk, Lam Chung, who could only clean and was not fit to study. He achieved enlightenment."

"Just from sweeping?" asked Low Moon.

"Just repeat, 'Clear the dust, clear the dirt,' as he did, and it is possible."

Low Moon thought a moment. "Is that really true? It sounds like a tall tale."

The monk's fat hand cracked across his left temple. "We do not lie in the monastery. We deal in truth."

Then I have no hope of enlightenment, Low Moon thought as he swept the maple seeds and cherry blossoms from the corners of the courtyard. He never felt he belonged in this place. He was thin and angular; the other monks all grew fat on the rice and food donated by the peasants. Like many of the novices, he had been sent there by parents too poor to care for him, and desirous that he receive a better education than they could provide.

"Tell me again how I came here," he asked Shi De while he swept.

"I have told you many times, do you not remember it?"

"I like to hear it," said Low Moon.

"In those days the Pearl River delta was not as crowded as it is now. There were just a few junks going to and from the harbor, almost no sailing ships, no sailors from around the world."

Low Moon knew this was not exactly true. Canton had been a trading post for the west for at least two decades, since the 1860s when the first laborers left the Sám Yap, or

the Three Towns, the districts that made up the province of Kwangtung, to work on the American railroads. But he did not want to accuse Shi De of telling an untruth.

Around them, only a mile or so from the delta, the farmers working their terraced fields lived a quiet life of the sort that had gone on for centuries. Cranes and herons stalked lazily along the shore. The bells hanging from the thick necks of oxen returning from the fields clanged dully. Chih Chih monastery, which had stood since the great flourishing of Buddhism in China in the ninth century, a great stone outcropping with a high wall and narrow windows like those in a medieval castle, loomed on a bluff at a bend in the river.

“I went down to the river to wash and do my prayers,” Shi De continued.

Low Moon revisited the scene in his mind’s eye. It was a scene he had envisioned many times since he was a boy. At a quiet spot upstream from the river bend, a fat monk in maroon robes hobbled down to the water in wooden clogs that sucked in the sand and finally stuck fast, his bare feet leaving them behind. He carried a candle in one hand, a stick of incense and a long stick as thick as a forefinger and a dipping cup in the other. As he clambered down the bank, his maroon robes coming loose in the cool night breeze, he could be heard continually muttering a stream of words that would have sounded like gibberish to all but the initiated Buddhist practitioner. They were a mixture of sacred mantras and self-abuse of his own devising.

“*Om mani padme hum...I am so bad...Om mani padme filth and degradation...hum. Om mani beat me hurt me wound me bad bad bad padme hum...*”

Shi De had been given his name by his fellow monks as a joke. He was named after a famous Chinese Buddhist poet of the thirteenth century. The original Shi De was a sort of folk genius who wrote poems about mischief and happiness such as this:

Ha ha ha.

If I show joy and ease my troubled mind,

Worldly troubles into joy transform.

Worry for others--it does no good in the end.

The great Dao, all amid joy, is reborn.

In a joyous state, ruler and subject accord,

In a joyous home, father and son get along.

If brothers increase their joy, the world will flourish.

If husband and wife have joy, it's worthy of song.

What guest and host can bear a lack of joy?

Both high and low, in joy, lose their woe before long.

Ha ha ha.

The joke was that the monk Shi De was rather dense and never smiled. Rather than laughing at life, he looked for gloomy meaning in every event and gesture and preferred to wound himself by the riverbank in the evening rather than nap before bedtime prayers. His clogs sank deep into the swampy loam and freed themselves from his feet as he shed his robes and entered the water. He lifted the candle to the heavens and intoned:

“*Om ah hum...* Filthy disgusting sack of butter fat...*Om ah hum...* Please forgive me...*Om ah hum...*”

He laid the candle and incense on the river bank and went into the water. He dipped water in the cup and poured it over his head. Then he poured water over his shoulders. Then, with the other hand, he began to smack himself on the chest, the arms, and the back.

“*Om ah hum...* I pray for a better rebirth quickly, quickly...”

Shi De began to smack himself harder and chant the mantra of Manjushri, the Buddha of wisdom. His focus on this practice was such that he did not notice a rustle in the bulrushes upstream.

Om a Ra Pa Sa Na Dhih...(Smack!) Manjushri bring me wisdom

Om a Ra Ra Sa Na Dhih...(Smack!) Manjushri, wisdom through pain...

“A bank of clouds parted, and the moon came out,” Shi De continued. “Then I noticed something floating in the water. I went up and I...caught it!” At these last two words he reached out and pinched Low Moon’s nose, just as he always did, and the novice grinned like a child.

“It was a baby, naked, wrapped in very large *buddleia* leaves, the kind my mother used to call Spring Promise. There was a bamboo shoot between the baby boy’s tiny lips and beneath him was a special raft fit for king, a toilet seat made of wood.”

“And you thought I was Manjushri himself,” laughed Low Moon.

“Of course I did,” said Shi De. “You came when I said your mantra: Om A Ra Pa Sa Na Dhih. And your first word was Dhih! The moon and the water parted ways. The moon rose higher in the sky. I walked up to the monastery, calling you Manjushri.”

“What about that woman?” asked Low Moon.

Shi De pretended not to understand.

“That woman you said appeared suddenly when you came up naked out of the water who took the baby from you, remember?” asked Low Moon.

“Oh yes, the cleaning woman. What of her?”

Low Moon, who had been thinking about this matter for a long time, took a deep breath and sighed. “That woman who just happened to be there. Do you not think she was my mother?”

Shi De looked at him blankly. “I never thought of that,” he said.

The woman had gasped, seeing Shi De’s naked bulk. She took the baby while he put on his robes. She was the cleaning woman for the monastery. She would become Low Moon’s unofficial guardian as he grew up. Low Moon had always wondered if she was his mother, who put him in the water so he would be discovered and brought up in the comfort of the monastery. But he had never asked her, and she had never said anything about it. Now he thought: was it not all a lie? Didn’t everyone tell untruths in order to get along in the world? Why should he be any different?

Low Moon had heard the rest of the story: how Shi De had carried the baby into the monastery, claiming it was Manjushri.

“It looks like a peasant baby to me, abandoned by its mother,” said one of the monks.

“It was wrapped in buddleia leaves, leaves of the Buddha himself,” said Shi De.
“It is a sign.”

“You’re crazy,” said another. “Everything is not symbolic of something else. Everything doesn’t mean something important.”

“But that is what we study all day,” said a third. “That is what we are taught. Everything does mean something. Perhaps this does too...” Shi De left them to argue and hurried off to dry the boy and wrap him in dry clothes.

The next morning, when the monks had seated themselves cross legged in their usual places, in the dark meditation hall covered with paintings of various deities and with the air thick from sweet-smelling incense, Shi De’s spot was empty. The lines of the maroon robes and bald heads had a gap in one row. He arrived ten minutes late, carrying the baby bowing profusely. One hundred eyeballs looked toward him and at the bundle in his arms.

“I am sorry, I am very bad, so useless,” he said, bowing before the high lama, who sat on a platform of pillows and towered above the others, looking stern and grave, raising his heavy eyebrows in surprise. “What happened to your robe?” asked the lama.

Shi De looked at his robe, which was torn, exposing his bare leg. He looked at this as though for the first time. Then he held up the baby, who was sleeping. It was wearing the remainder of his robe as a diaper.

Some of the monks gasped. “It is a serious non-virtue to tear your robes,” one said.

“But he is exercising compassion. He is caring for the child,” said another.

“He is not using skillful means, however,” said a third.

The monks immediately began to debate the spiritual benefits and downfalls of having a baby in their midst. Should they raise the child or take it into the city to the orphanage?

“If the child goes, I go,” proclaimed Shi De.

The high lama rocked back and forth, looking at Shi De, at the baby, and up to the heavens as though for guidance. “If Shi De wishes to keep this child it will be a good teaching experience for him. In order to learn compassion we must practice it first on those who are dearest to us. If this child becomes dear to him, he will learn. Plus, he will never have the opportunity to be lazy again,” he proclaimed finally. The other monks nodded.

“Besides, the cleaning woman said she would watch the child during prayers,” he added.

“Bring this child to me,” said the high lama. Shi De approached with timid steps. The lama gazed down and smiled. “And what shall we name the little one?” asked the high lama.

“He came to me with the moon, Manjushri’s moon, the moon of wisdom. Yet he is humble and unassuming,” said Shi De. “I would like to call him Low Moon.”

This became the baby’s first name, his milk name. To the Chinese, one name is insufficient, and how it is spelled and pronounced is not especially important. So the baby was also given the Buddhist name Dai Nam: Great Devotion.

The word *Nam*, of course, is the first word in the chant repeated constantly by the followers of the Lotus Sutra, who parrot this phrase when they hope to win the lottery, hope for a boy to be born rather than a girl, or hope to win the affection of a boy or girl:

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Dai Nam is also short for *Dai Nam Lan Namgye Shakya Man Lho*, which is loosely translated as Great Auspicious Emanation Water-Borne Transforming Marvelous Good Fortune Deity.¹

Over the next few weeks Shi De came to morning prayers with his robes in tatters. Each day he tore off a new strip of cloth to use as a diaper. The monks saw this as a sign of austerity and compassion. Finally, when he came to prayers in only a loin cloth, the other monks begged that a supply of fresh cloth be given to the baby and Shi De given new robes. The fortunate baby was thus able to be raised in the monastery, with plenty of food, shelter, and a fine education at his disposal, instead of the crushing poverty that afflicted Canton and the other villages along the Pearl River Delta, including the village where the cleaning lady and her family struggled for a few bowls of rice and vegetables each day.

¹ This, too, is only an abbreviation. The full name is Great Ancestor Auspicious Circumstance Modest Commanding Perspective Intelligent Emanation Water-Borne Transforming Glorious Welcoming Marvelous Expanding Good Fortune Emperor.