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THE DEER AND THE  
CRANE TOGETHER  
CELEBRATE  
SPRING. HARMONY,  
PEACEFUL WORLD,  
PROMISING FUTURE

*Chapter 8 and the story of the unsinkable man with the  
unforgettable smile*

A man smiled at me at six one morning. Although it was just a small smile, it was kind. His face was familiar to me because that middle-aged man was something of a legend in those parts.

I saw him smiling, and although I would have sold my grandmother (no, never that, Connie!) to talk to him and get his story, that morning I didn't pay him too much attention because I was to begin Tai Chi lessons with Li Bing, whose Chinese name meant *radiant*. To her English-speaking friends she was known as Henna. I'd invited Sam to Henna's lesson, but he wasn't interested in the fun that can be had at sunrise in China. Naturally, I was disappointed. Sam was a problematic hero; in almost every respect he let me down (or maybe, more fairly, I should say that he being mortal did not fulfil the expectations of fiction), but he was still my hero of convenience. Lori had been keen to do Tai Chi, however, a few minutes before our moment of departure she phoned to say she was still in bed and wouldn't make it.

When not teaching Tai Chi at daybreak, Henna Li was a senior lecturer in the physics department. In return for lessons I lent her DVDs of English-language films from my burgeoning collection topped up weekly at a stairwell-stall in the basement of a mazy electronics store in the sprawl.

For our lesson location, Henna had selected a concrete plateau outside the library, a building made of great squares of mirrored glass. On my way to meet her I found a world of dawn people. There were older women and men in traditional loose clothes exercise-walking, stretching arms and fingers as they went. In the courtyard at the front of the multimedia building, a tape played folk tunes like ‘Serene orchid meets spring’ and ‘Lofty mountain, flowing water’. A man in a white, pyjama-like suit was instructing a group of slowly dancing women with feathered fans. Behind them another group was doing Tai Chi. On the sports track, basketball and volleyball teams were busy with warm-ups.

Most extraordinary, though, was that from every direction I could hear strong voices speaking determined, robotic English. At first I could not see who was speaking, but gradually I saw them: students, each one sitting or standing alone but for a book, in some quiet corner, near a tree, on a bench, on the steps of a waterless fountain. They were reading out loud, practising their English at six in the morning. Such dedication was inspiring but concerning, because I was not convinced that reading out loud in this way was helping them. I’d heard it before – the most diligent of my now two hundred and thirty students, when they arrived at class early, would bring out their books and read lines like a body-builder would bench-press weights. Each word and every sentence, regardless of meaning, was an equal weight, an object of exercise. Somebody had told the students that reading out loud was the way to perfect English. That and speaking fast – students seemed to think that speaking slowly indicated poor grasp of English. I had one student, Cui Jing, an aspirant CCTV Business Beauty, who had good pronunciation and an excellent grasp of the language but insisted on speaking English so fast that it was impossible to understand her. Cui Jing said her school English teacher had taught her to speak fast. Cui Jing never believed me when I said that good spoken English was not about speed but about effective communication, not quantity but quality.

As I stood under a wilted tree, listening to one of those dawn readers going at a text with very admirable determination but no sensitivity, I thought of the time when I had seen Nelson Mandela addressing an audience of thousands in London’s Trafalgar Square. He had spoken slower than any speaker I’d heard before, but every word and all his long pauses were immensely meaningful. There was almost a noble silence

between his phrases, allowing them to resonate in our thoughts, and he was spellbinding.

The student reader did not once glance up from her abridged version of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and I continued on to Tai Chi but decided I must say something to my students about this. I would not give up on telling Cui Jing, the anchorwoman of the future, to speak slower and with more meaning.

Henna Li had come on her bicycle and was waiting. 'Alex, you are late! I think you have changed your mind?'

'I was distracted by the fan dancers and the readers, I'm very sorry.'

The sun came up as we began a lesson of twenty-four-form Tai Chi, a simplified national standard for the People's good health. The full sequence has over a hundred moves.

'First you must know in Tai Chi, soft overcome hard,' Henna said. 'Everything is soft, knee too, no tension. Fluid. Motion constant.'

I watched in the mirrored windows of the library as she demonstrated a meditative flow of shapes inspired hundreds of years ago by the creatures of some Chinese Eden.

'You do move on one side, East, then repeat on other side, West. This make equality. Balance.'

Henna named the forms as she moved. *Wild horse shaking its mane. White crane spreading wings. Repulse the monkey. Grasp the sparrow's tail left. Grasp the sparrow's tail right. Hands like clouds. Stroking the horse's back. Snake creeping down. Golden cock stand on left leg. Snake creeping down. Golden cock stand on right leg. Picking up a needle from the ocean floor. Unfolding arms like fan.*

The sequence ended simply. She turned, crossed her hands, put her feet together, and let her arms rest at her sides. 'Now you do with me.'

So the menagerie of cranes and monkeys, wild horses and sparrows and snakes unfolded again on the shimmering liquid-blue wall of the library building.

My first attempts at the sequence were a muddle and I mistook the fluidity of her movements as something derived from physical beauty. Much to her displeasure, I imbued my movements with what I thought was a rather elegant balletic quality. As a child I'd been quite good at ballet, even though my feet didn't turn out quite as far as they should have (a sin punishable by a ruler slap on the ankles from my ballet teacher).

‘No point toes!’ Henna said, concerned and impatient. ‘No strong hands! Soft! You are the water, flow everywhere.’

Trying to be the water, I became too floppy.

‘What this, no energy?’ Henna moved my arms for me. ‘You know, the water soft, flow, but not weak, powerful. Soft overcome hard. The water continue motion constant can cut through the mountain.’

Learning the steps of the twenty-four moves was so preoccupying that it was a long time before I really began to understand what Henna meant.

‘Not too much on first lesson,’ Henna said. ‘Tomorrow, your legs are very sore.’

I must have looked unconvinced.

‘Yes, really! Lot of bending. Tai Chi make very strong legs. You see. Never mind you not so good now, it take years.’ She patted her thighs again to convince me. ‘Very strong legs.’

Like Cui Jing, my student who didn’t believe me when I suggested she would communicate better if she spoke slower, I did not believe my Tai Chi teacher. After all, I walked a lot, I was reasonably fit and it seemed that we had done very little in our first lesson, so I doubted my legs would be sore after a few watery moves, or that they would get strong. I underestimated Tai Chi and I continued to underestimate it, just as my student continued to speak like a commentator at a horse-race. Only now when it is too late because I am broke and I do not have the good fortune of free Tai Chi lessons with Henna, have I finally begun to understand the truth of what she was saying.

There is some hope in that maybe anchorwoman Cui Jing will one day believe in the power of the pause.

After Tai Chi I went to the market and while I was buying fruit for my breakfast, I saw that man again. He smiled at me. It’s easy to soften to a person who smiles like that. Maybe if I’d known more about him I wouldn’t have been so quick to like him, but his smile stayed with me. It was an unforgettable smile. From Sam I’d heard the man liked swimming, particularly in the ocean. So he and I had something in common, because I love swimming in the sea: it is so refreshing and water is a magnificent thing, so cool and contradictory. Even with the promise of a Great Chinese Story it would have been hard, impossible actually, for me to have ever talked to a man like that – for one thing I didn’t speak Mandarin. Whenever I saw him, he was always alone, a solitary man with a smile he shared indiscriminately.