

KEEP
DANCING,
*Lizzie
Chu*

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Someone to Watch Over Me

I poured the boiling water into the rainbow teapot that had a small chip on the spout. Our three random mugs also had chips. Chi, my other bestie, always said I should throw them away and get new ones. But I just couldn't. They might not have been perfect, but each one held a special memory for me. The mug with the cats on it was my favourite. Grandma Kam had bought it because she loved the dancing tabby cat on the front. The other cats on the mug were doing cat-like things, such as playing with a ball of wool, another one was licking its fur, but the dancing tabby stood out. Grandma Kam said that cat was just like her. That tabby cat was different from the rest. She said it was okay to be different and not follow the 'other cats' even though that's what some people thought you should do. Even though it had a tiny weeny chip, I couldn't throw it away.

Wai Gong was unpacking the shopping bags. He held up the bruised marrow.

‘What is this? Wah, is this a giant courgette?’ he said. He held it like a green baby Hulk in his arms and started rocking it from side to side.

I nodded. ‘Yep.’

‘It’s about as heavy as you when you came to us, and much cuter!’ He began cooing at the marrow. ‘Ha! I’m kidding! You were such a quiet baby. Never cried. Kam was worried that you didn’t make a noise. But I knew you were strong. Being noisy doesn’t always mean best.’

‘But at least I wasn’t green and bruised . . . don’t drop the baby!’ I laughed nervously. It always made me feel strange when Wai Gong talked about me as a baby, because I’d come to live with them when I was just twelve days old. Grandma Kam said, ‘Sometimes life is hard but we’ve got to carry on.’ I knew my mother had died giving birth to me. My nameless father was never found, my grandparents had no idea where to look either. But I couldn’t complain: I’d had a LOT of love. If you had a family that loved you that’s all that counted; it didn’t matter if it was your grandparents raising you or if you were adopted like Tyler was. What mattered was having people who loved you.

‘Kam wanted to teach you some of our favourite dances, didn’t she? Before she . . .’ Wai Gong held the marrow close to his chest.

I nodded. Wai Gong had a melancholic look in his eyes. He started waltzing the marrow around our small kitchen. I watched in silence; I didn’t want to interrupt his moment.

I could tell he was thinking about her – he had that faraway look that he had during her funeral. When he stopped, he gently placed the marrow on the chopping board. His hands were shaking, and he sat down at the half-folded wooden table.

I poured some jasmine green tea into the dancing cat mug and passed it to him. I wondered if he was feeling chilly, and if that was why he was shivering.

‘Shall I put the heating on?’ I asked.

‘No, no. I’m not cold. We can put it on later when we need it.’

‘Are you all right, Wai Gong?’ I asked.

‘Of course, I am always all right. Strong as an ox I am!’

‘Stubborn as a mule!’ I added. That’s what Grandma Kam always added when he said he was strong as an ox. I often found myself saying things that she used to say. I think it was my own way of remembering her.

‘That I am, that I am.’ He sipped his tea and his hands eventually stopped shaking.

I wondered if I should bring up the subject of his keys. Wai Gong didn’t like being told he was wrong.

‘Wai Gong . . . bending over the curb onto a busy road was dangerous, you know. That bus . . . it could have . . .’ Even thinking about it made me feel sick. My belly flopped with anxiety.

‘But I had to find my keys. I’m sure the bus driver would have seen me. I’m not a little guy, you know. People think because I’m Chinese that I am weak, that I can’t take care of myself. But I can. They underestimate me. Look at this

muscle!’ He flexed one of his arms like a bodybuilder. I laughed as he wasn’t skinny, but he wasn’t exactly massive though.

‘No, it’s not that. You could have been hurt. You’re not invincible.’

‘Actually, I need to look for them again.’ He put his mug on the table and got up.

‘No, wait a minute!’ I said, holding my hands out to stop him. ‘I found your keys here in the flat.’ I ran to the hallway, grabbed his keys and jogged back to the kitchen.

‘You’ve got them!’ he said. ‘I knew you would find them,’ he said, holding his palm up for a high-five. He seemed so happy that I didn’t want to tell him they were in his pocket this whole time. I gave him a little pat with my palm.

‘There must be a way for you not to misplace them again . . . I know, I can put on this Baby Yoda keyring from my set. Chi gave it to me, but it lights up in the dark so you will be able to see them better.’ I took the keyring off my set and added it to his.

‘She won’t mind?’ he asked. Well, she probably would mind because she was always trying to get me to be as fanatic about *Star Wars* as she was. But I wasn’t fussed about it either way, unlike Chi who wanted to live in the outer reaches and had watched *The Mandalorian* series about a gazillion times. ‘How is Chi? I’ve not seen her for ages.’ Chi came over a lot, but he was always out. He said he was trying to find a new job, but I knew he was mostly browsing through the CD racks in charity shops or walking around the local parks.

‘She’s fine, and she won’t mind.’ My stomach made a

gurgling sound. 'I'll get the dinner going. Then we've got *Strictly Come Dancing* to look forward to later; it's Musicals Week!'

'I can't wait to watch it. But first, I'm going to my room,' he said, changing the subject. 'I need to talk to the gods and goddesses.' He walked out of the kitchen. His abrupt departure made me frown. I followed him to his room and peeked around his bedroom door. He was kneeling in front of his altar: it used to be in the living room, but he'd moved it to his bedroom a few months ago. The white shiny porcelain gods and goddesses looked down on him with glazed eyes. In the middle, Guan Yin was serene and beautiful, her long black hair hung straight down with the front pulled up in a golden flower, white flowing material cascading over her head like a waterfall.

'I know I always ask for your help, dear beloved Goddess, but please can you give me better luck. I promise I will bring you fresh juicy oranges next time,' said Wai Gong. In his hands he held two lit joss sticks. The smoke wafted around like ghost snakes in the air.

'Please watch over Lizzie, she's such a good girl. And if you can hear me, Kam, I miss you, I wish I could dance with you again in Blackpool, like in the old days. We had such a good time, didn't we? Tomorrow is a new day, yes, I can do better tomorrow. It will be special.' I accidentally stumbled forward, moving his bedroom door a little.

'Come in, Lizzie, I know you are out there, I can hear the floorboards creak!'

I gingerly entered his room. I saw his trio of Chinese

deities. Ji Long was a god who looked after the poor. He carried a gourd and was probably tipsy because he was always shown smiling wildly. The fat buddha, Budai, was for wealth and happiness, and Guan Yin was the goddess of compassion and mercy. Wai Gong liked her the best.

‘I am praying to the goddess because my fortune is very bad lately, Lizzie. I didn’t get that job stacking shelves in the Oriental supermarket. I have another job interview lined up though. I hope I can get that one.’

I sat on his bed. ‘Wai Gong, we don’t use the word “Oriental” any more. It’s outdated. It makes people that look like us appear like exotic objects. Rugs are oriental, not people. I already told you.’ I was constantly telling him not to use that word, but it was hard when other adults used it too.

‘But that is what the shop is called. What else should they call it then?’ he asked.

‘East Asian is better. Or Chinese supermarket.’

Mrs Begum, my teacher, had told us, ‘Words matter’. I wasn’t exotic or from some fictional place called ‘the Orient’, I was just like everyone else. Chi and I were always being mistaken for one another at school even though she’s got long hair and I’ve got shorter wavy hair; I’m Scottish Chinese and Chi is mixed Welsh and Vietnamese.

‘Okay, I will try my best, Lizzie. You’re such a clever girl for knowing these things. No more Oriental from now on.’

I didn’t tell him that Chi and I had been called names in the street last year by some older boys dressed in black

hoodies and tracksuit bottoms. They called us much worse things than ‘Oriental’. I didn’t want to worry him as back then he was spending a lot of time visiting Grandma Kam in hospital. Chi shouted back and the leader became sheepish, appearing foolish in front of his pals.

‘Anyway, Guan Yin was looking out for me today. She made sure you saved my life, and you found my keys,’ he said, distracted. He was talking about his favourite deity like she was real. Sure, it was lucky that I was in the right place at the right time, but she was just a figure in the stories he told me.

‘I don’t know why the goddess is not helping me find a job. My luck is still bad. Fifty per cent bad luck. I need to pray harder to be one hundred per cent lucky.’ I rolled my eyes. Not again with this silly goddess stuff. Whenever Wai Gong had something negative happen to him, he thought it was because he hadn’t given a good enough offering to his gods. He even blamed the torrential rain on bad luck: he should know by now that this was Glasgow. It was famous for its horizontal rain that soaks your trouser legs in less than a minute. It wasn’t bad luck – it was just Glasgow weather!

‘Wai Gong, wait. Before we have dinner and watch *Strictly*, will you tell me a wee story first? The one about the peacock?’ It was one of my favourite tales about the goddess. Getting him to tell me his Guan Yin stories was one way to get him to spend some time with me.

He smiled, and sat on his bed. He closed his eyes, took a breath, and then opened them wide.

‘Let’s begin,’ he said.

Guan Yin and the Brown Bird

Before humans populated the world, ten thousand different kinds of animals roamed free. They were happy and watched over by the goddess Guan Yin. She cared for them and told them how unique each of them was. They loved her deeply. One day, Guan Yin knew it was time to leave her earthly duties and return to heaven. She bid the animals farewell and ascended into the sky. The creatures lamented, 'Who will look after us now?' Chaos ensued. The animals began to fight, they were confused and felt abandoned. They called out for Guan Yin to come and help them. She floated back to earth after hearing their cries, her compassion and mercy spread to the animals and soon they were back to their loving and cooperative ways.

Guan Yin returned to the heavenly realm. But again, the same thing happened. The animals fought, hated, misunderstood, and forgot all about compassion. Guan Yin knew she had to do something more. She gathered the animals together. Before her feet a dull brown bird sat and watched the upset animals who were already wondering what they would do without their beloved Guan Yin. Suddenly, the goddess gently placed her hand on the brown bird and in an instant transformed it into a beautiful peacock. It opened its feathers wide and proud. On the end of each one an eye.

'I shall always be watching over you through this bird. Be kind, be loving and be compassionate to each other.' The ten thousand animals felt relieved that Guan Yin would always be watching over them.

When he finished, he squeezed my shoulders.

'She's watching over us, Lizzie,' he said. Then he got up and went to his room.

I wondered if Grandma Kam was like the peacock, watching over us? I loved listening to his Guan Yin stories. They made me feel special somehow. His parents had told him the same stories; hearing them made me feel like I was connected to my ancestors.

Thinking about family and Grandma Kam suddenly made me sad. I went back to the kitchen and saw the empty chairs. I felt cold and alone. My eyes became wet, but I blinked the tears away. Then I looked at that marrow. There was no time for crying. Dinner needed cooking.