

Thursday night man

Jennifer Fell August 2012 (Victoria)

Ling Lu shivered and peered through the round window to survey the night's patrons. He was there again. Same as last week, same as the week before. Ling Lu looked around to see if any of the other staff had noticed her but the kitchen was empty apart from her son was busy throwing noodles about in a steaming wok behind her. Younger than her grandson, he always sat in the same place and always ordered the same meal: her own speciality of sweet-salty pork with greens, steamed rice and a pot of jasmine tea. Ling's face went red as she caught herself staring at his small beard and remembering how he wore a black hat like an American gangster.

He had lovely hands too. In fact that's what Ling Lu had noticed first. The way his hands moved brought to mind her late school teacher husband, Chen. So long ago now, the memory of Chen had almost faded away to nothing. Married for only one short year until he died in a village flood, until she'd watched Thursday night man's slender fingers writing, she'd almost forgotten what her husband's hands had even looked like. But now, as an old woman, it was as if she was seeing Chen again. She was caught and couldn't look away. Clear as the light on a spring day, she could see Chen resting under a tree, his practised fingers moving in the air as he practised his brushstrokes. The only drawback was she couldn't read what Thursday night man had written, which was obviously a message from Chen.

When the redhaired waitress Alice brought Thursday night man's plate into the kitchen, Ling's bony fingers snatched up the serviette. She pulled her glasses up from their string around her neck to look through but dropped them again just as quickly.

"Bah!" she exclaimed, hands dropping to her sides. All she could make out was a stick figure holding a balloon. Next to that was a kind of scrawl that looked like birds feet. English words. The ones she couldn't read.

Thirty four years in rural Victoria, helping her son Shanji to run their small town's only Chinese restaurant, hadn't left Ling much time to learn to read English. She'd tried on and off but it was hard enough just to speak it sometimes, let alone teach yourself to read it in your spare time. It hadn't seem too important before. Alice, the talky-talky waitress, rushed past in search of clean glasses and called out.

"Talking to me, Grandma Lu?" Alice was the latest of their waitresses. When not serving, she'd be out in the back courtyard talking and smoking with Lu's grandson, Charlie.

"No, no." Ling said, sliding the serviette up her sleeve. A bell tinkled, and Ling waved Alice out to the front.



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Ling Lu knelt down to pray before the hallway altar. She opened her jewellery casket and took out a small photograph stuck to a piece of thick black card. Schoolteacher Chen her husband in his official school photograph. Her fingers ran down the crinkled border. "You came back I see." She drew out the serviette, its papery edges getting more and more ragged and she slipped them both into the casket, next to the jade Buddha. "I remembered you today. One day I'll read what you wrote to me." She put her hands together.

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The following Thursday, when Alice brought in the man's plate, Ling felt the waitress's eyes on her as she slipped the serviette from his plate to a dry shelf. There was no sketch this time, just a long line of marks running across one edge. As she studied the lines, a clear picture of Chen rushed into her mind, as quick as an autumn village wind. He was sitting, smiling serenely in her uncle's garden. His green trousers were pressed neatly and draped over his skinny knees. A tired pink camellia was resting on his knee and the air was filled with the smell of honey and cooked rice. But when Ling tried hard to make the inky lines into English words, the memory vanished. Her eyes hurt and she plunged both hands deep into the sink. Ling slumped in her washing up chair until she was alone in the dark restaurant.

The next morning, Ling switched off the Chinese soap opera that her cousin from Datong had sent and sat waiting in the kitchen for Shanji and Charlie, to return from the market. Shanji hauled the boxes in and slid them across the steel benchtops; the first ones overflowing with leafy greens, the last one full of chicken carcasses.

"Mama" He said and handed her an apron from the hook. He began to fill a large boiler with water.

"Shanji." Slipping the apron over her neck, she pulled the box of chickens towards her.

"Son, I have a request."

"Go on" He said without looking up. Charlie entered, a white shopping bag hanging off his wrist and both hands enclosed around a hamburger.

"I want to try again to study." Ling said.

"Again? Find you a teacher again?" Her son and grandson looked at each other. "Charlie, you tell her."

"Grandma, remember the last time?" Both were as short as she was and had her black eyes, but only Charlie had Chen's nose. They had not forgotten the time she'd fled the community centre class, or the time Shanji's Australian ex-wife had tried every weekend to thump the English words into her. Nor had they forgotten the time when Charlie had tried himself to teach her reading just a few years ago. "It seems like it's pretty hard for you, Grandma." Charlie finished the last bite of his burger and wiped his mouth.

"I felt too old before," said Ling, unsure how else to explain.



“Too old before? You didn’t get any younger.” Shanji said. “What’s changed?” Ling couldn’t tell him about Thursday night man. Shanji didn’t have time for that kind of thing. Ling silently reached across to the chickens.

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On the night of the next Thursday, Alice put the serviette on top of the spice shelf to keep it away from the wet sink. Ling narrowed her eyes. Alice backed away with her hands on her hips.

“The dragon has a long memory.” Alice said slowly. “That’s what he’s written. That’s some Chinese proverb?”

“I don’t know.” Ling paused. “Go back out there.” Ling followed Alice out only to find Thursday night man’s chair empty. On the other side of the restaurant were the other Thursday night regulars, three fiftyish women who over-ordered and over-talked who were always the last to leave. Ling set their take away containers out next to the till. Hadn’t Chen’s nickname for her been little dragon?

“Bah,” said Ling, crumpling the serviette up.

“I can teach you to read that you know, Grandma” Alice said. Ling didn’t respond. “If you want to, that is.”

“Ok, teach me.” Ling said, finally.

The next afternoon, Ling came down to find Alice sticking pieces of paper up onto the wall-sized fridge.

“Grandma Lu! Okay, let’s get started. I’ve written a word on each piece of paper,” Alice began. “On this side of the fridge, put the words you know.” she indicated the left side, “and on the other, put all the words you don’t.” Ling couldn’t keep her confusion from seeping across her face.

Alice asked, “You understand, right?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Ling felt a flutter of excitement at this new beginning. It didn’t last long. She looked them over from left to right again and again but, nothing. She did not recognise many words at all. None, in fact. Houses they looked like, or ants. Ants crawling. This wasn’t reading. It wasn’t supposed to be easy. She was going to take it one word at a time but what if she couldn’t even find the first word? As the dinner rush passed, Ling completely avoided looking at the fridge. Maybe Thursday night man’s words meant nothing at all. It was all a figment of an old woman’s degenerating imagination.

“Grandma Lu? I am sorry.” Alice said, catching Ling’s arm. She started moving the words around. “Some are upside down. I was in a hurry.” Ling was stunned.

“You know this word, don’t you?” Alice showed her a piece of paper. Ling was afraid to look. “Grandma?” The piece of paper came right under her nose. She pulled up her glasses to look. The rows of ants locked into lines. Yes, it was familiar. And yes, it looked like a word. She grabbed at Alice’s arm. “It’s *menu*.” Alice told her.

“Yes, yes.” Ling said. “I know, *menu*.” She tapped the piece of paper a few more times to make certain and then she slid it to the left side. Then something happened Ling Lu



wasn't ready for. Another word leapt out. It was *yes*. How had she missed that? She moved it next to menu.

"You see? You can read." Alice said, picking out a small word and putting it next to the others. "This one is *egg*." Alice put the rest of the words away. "I've seen you always eating eggs. That's the word for egg."

"Three words." Ling's fists were clenched in triumph and she was smiling as Charlie walked into the kitchen. "Three words today, Charlie." She took up a pen and started to copy out the three words.

"Well done Grandma." he said, offering Alice a cigarette. "Looks like it's not too late, after all."

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"There's something I want to ask you," Alice said what Ling recognised as her teacher's voice, "What about Thursday night man? When are we going to read his notes?"

"I'm not sure." The wooden casket upstairs hadn't closed for weeks now.

"Grandma Lu, you are just stalling now." Alice wagged a finger in front of Ling's face. Ling knew Alice was right.

"Yes, yes. You're very smart for such a young teacher." She replied.

The next day, in the back kitchen with Alice, Ling took out her carefully saved serviettes and laid them out on the bench. She took a deep breath and looked over the first one. She read the three words printed next to the boy with the balloon.

"Spring wishes grow wings."

"Spring wishes grow wings?" Repeated Alice as Ling copied out the phrase. Ling read it again in her head and a throaty laugh burst out of her. Partly because she was really reading but also because another memory had returned to her.

"What does that mean then?" Alice asked. Ling did not want to tell her that when she had accepted Chen's marriage proposal, he'd said that Ling had made the wish of his springtime come true. Ling shrugged her shoulders, feeling happier than ever.

"Oh well, onto the next one." Alice said, handing it over.

"A dragon has a long memory." Ling read out.

"Hang on." Alice went out to dining room. After a moment, she called "Bring them Grandma. Bring them out here." Ling followed her. "Look" Alice said, pointing to a framed engraving above the fish tank. Ling looked; the dragon was similar to the one on the serviette.

Ling took out the third serviette. "I think it's about fish." She glanced at the fish tank next to Thursday night man's table. "Fish swim in dance." Alice screwed her face up again.

"Whatever that means..."

"Fish swim and dance." Ling laughed to remember sitting with Chen by a fishpond when she was pregnant with Shanji. He'd said something similar? Long ago yes, but how clear the fishpond looked to her now, the reeds and the insects flitting across the murky surface.



"I think he must be writing about the restaurant." Alice said, "I bet that's what they all are." In the next half hour, they sat at the Thursday night man's table reading. Sure enough, each note found its partner in a feature of the dining room. What Ling found more magical was inside with each note she read another forgotten piece of her short marriage to her patient scholarly Chen was returned to her. Ling closed her eyes. "How do you feel?" Alice asked. Ling waved one hand around in a way that Alice took to mean overwhelmed.

Alice went on talking, flicking through more serviettes. "Maybe he's a poet? I do like a poet. What would he think if he knew you've kept them?"

"Oh no," Ling shook herself upright. "We can't tell him. What if ... he stops?"

"True..." Alice agreed. Ling picked up the pen and imitated Thursday night man at his table.

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The next Thursday night, Ling tied an apron on and walked up to the Thursday night man. When he looked up, Ling noticed how old-looking and calm his eyes were.

"Good evening." Ling said.

"Good evening." Ling took his order and haltingly, repeated it back to him. He nodded quickly before his attention was caught by the shimmer of orange fins darting in the tank. Thursday night man looked back at her, and rubbed his ear with his writing hand. "Is there anything else?"

"No." Ling Lu said, giving a short, small bow. "Thank you." She said, "Thank you very much for coming." She walked back to the kitchen, ignoring Shanji's confused face at seeing her out in the dining room. Ling watched Thursday night man pen his next note. After, Alice appeared with his plate.

"Thank you too, Alice." Ling took up the yellow serviette and opened it, ready to read. A dragon was flying above a jagged cliff. She read: Little dragon soars.

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