

Chapter one.

Mrs Lim's tea house, a sanctuary in the rain.

“Lobbu!” came a voice calling from behind the counter. Disturbingly enough I looked up immediately, having become so used to Mrs Lim’s mangling of my name by now that I was beginning to wonder if I would react when I got back to a world where people called me Robert. Who knows where I’d drifted off to for the last half hour?

Oh yes, the rain. The interminable pounding rain that had battered Taipei continuously it seemed since the moment I had arrived. I had been warned about the weather of course but this was getting ridiculous. It felt like it had been going on for months already. How could it still be hammering down like this?

I was half asleep a lot of the time because the roof of the apartment where I was staying was made of sheet metal and the rain crashed into it with a noise that sounded like repeating gunfire or continuous thunderclaps.

Apartment, hah! That’s a good one! That was what they called the sardine can that I was going to be calling home for the duration of my stay. I was still building up the courage to complain about my lodgings when I returned one evening to find the door to the next apartment open and discovered that it was being shared by four Taiwanese students.

I decided to count my blessings, meagre as I considered them to be. I thought to myself, “at least I’m not living entirely on instant noodles like these guys”; then one night the students invited me in for dinner and I was immediately hooked. The next morning when I passed the store it took a conscious effort to not go in and buy a whole suitcase full

of the delicious little packages of twisty noodles with their magical sachets of powdered chemical yummy goodness. Whatever substance the manufacturing company put in those things just had to be illegal; it was so addictive.

All my good shoes were ruined. They were well made, but obviously no match for the angry rain gods of Taiwan. The laces were all falling apart and the soles were coming away from the uppers. I was becoming gradually resigned to squelching with every step I took and as I sat wringing out my socks each evening, I wondered if I could cope if this were to be it from now on, the rest of my life lived soggy and miserable. Then I started worrying whether I had always been such a mopey git. Perhaps that was the reason I was such a loner at school. Perhaps I've got SAD, that's a real thing isn't it?

It was in the depths of one of these self-inflicted periods of moping despondency that I made the most wonderful accidental discovery. Trudging up the Lin Shen North Road looking for the address of the chap I was supposed to be interviewing that morning, I took a wrong turn. Then as a particularly fierce downpour caused the world beyond my outstretched arm to vanish before my eyes, engulfing it in an impenetrable grey mist, I stepped backwards to shelter under the extending eaves of an old house.

Most of the buildings I had seen were nondescript cubes of grey concrete, but this looked like it was a traditional old Chinese house. Being set slightly back from the alleyway gave rise to the covered porch area which was now my refuge. Having no training in architecture I was unable to tell if this were really an old building which had somehow survived despite the manic drive to redevelop that was evident everywhere, or a clever façade applied to a new building, but after a moment of standing and looking at the place I caught sight of a collection of beautiful teapots in

the window, realized that it was a tea house and decided to step in. I never did get that interview done.

Opening the door caused it to set a cluster of tiny hanging bells ringing and as it closed, the noisy slashing violence of the rain outside was almost completely silenced. Inside it was invitingly warm and dry and the air hung with the blended smells of incense and tea and Chinese food cooking. Apart from a paved pathway tracing a sinuous curve across the room, the floor was completely covered in tatami, Japanese straw mats which I saw used in many Taiwanese homes.

Just as I was wondering what to do about the state of my shoes and socks, a young girl appeared and with a gesture directed me to place my shoes in a rack which stood off to one side. I call her young, going only by the clues of her bob haircut and uniform, which marked her as a senior high school student I thought; I had no ability whatsoever to distinguish the age of most of the people I met by looking at their features. She had a round face the shape of which was accentuated by the way the bob hung; her bright eyes were a perfect almond shape and she had a tiny smiling mouth. As I stood there, wobbling on one leg and peeling off my sodden socks with my fingertips, she moved off behind a wooden counter and was back a moment later with a towel in her hand.

“You should really get yourself some slippers,” she announced in perfect English, with an accent that I couldn’t quite place. My Chinese was coming on ok, but her fluency had rendered me entirely unable to do anything but continue the conversation in English. I wasn’t immediately sure what she meant by slippers, my mind going off to the warm fluffy things that my granddad used to wear around the house, until I caught her pointing at a pair of plastic looking flip-flops.

“Oh we call those flip-flops where I come from. Where did you learn to speak English so well? Honestly if I was talking to you on the phone I’d be hard put to place you. You almost sound as if you have a regional accent but I can’t quite put my finger on it.”

She introduced herself as Sofia and explained that she studied at an international school and that her English teacher was from Dublin. That explained the hint of the brogue which became instantly recognizable.

Sofia led me through the tea house to a little booth, where cushions were strewn about on the tatamis and a low table sat in the middle of the floor. The walls of the booths were at my shoulder height when standing, so sitting down on the cushioned floor created a very private feeling.

“If you’d like to eat, the kitchen is open. All the food is vegetarian, oh and no MSG!” She proclaimed the last as if it were of the utmost importance and by my beaming smile in response she could tell I agreed with her.

The best restaurants I knew all around town stood out because they didn’t flood the food with monosodium glutamate, the single most abused ingredient in Taiwanese cuisine; easily as bad as my Scottish grandparents’ deadly abuse of salt in their cooking.

“Do you know what tea you prefer, or would you like some help choosing?” I said I’d like some help and Sofia spent some time introducing me to the various varieties of tea available and relaxing me into my newfound oasis, as I relaxed myself into the pile of cushions and started salivating at the thought of food to come.

As I waited after ordering my food and choice of tea, I sat and soaked up my surroundings. Whispers of conversation in Chinese and English floated in from other booths,

mingling in the air with the constant yet barely audible refrain of what sounded like a religious chant being played on the CD player and the occasional interruption of the cluster of bells hanging inside the door. Jingling to announce each arrival and departure they made my mind wander back to childhood and to watching "Peter Pan" being performed onstage, where the part of Tinkerbelle was played by a spot of light and her voice was a similarly soft tinkling, translated for us children by Peter.

The brief wait was more than worth it, perfectly cooked Chinese dumplings "shui-jiao" swimming in a bowl of steaming broth appeared before me. I sat and inhaled the heady aromas of the soup and a grin of satisfaction came to my face as I lifted one of the plump dumplings up with my chopsticks. With dry feet and nerve endings throughout my body tingling at the pleasure-fest which was about to ensue; I had completely forgiven the angry rain gods of Taiwan for forcing me to miss my interview and offered thanks for having stumbled upon this sanctuary.

After I had finished eating, Sofia came back and introduced her mother, the proprietress whom I was to address as "Lim Tai Tai" (meaning Mrs Lim). Mrs Lim was Taiwanese through and through and spoke Chinese with such a thick Taiwanese accent that my fledgling Mandarin skills had no hope of understanding her and we were soon reduced to sign language. Sofia clearly took after her mother, although where Sofia's face seemed to be simply a place for her smile to be, Mrs Lim's face carried very complex expressions which made me think she had lived a difficult life. Through Sofia we exchanged pleasantries and after explaining that I was in Taiwan to learn Chinese and work as a researcher, I let slip that I was also very interested in learning about Chinese philosophy, particularly Buddhism and Taoism and how these were expressed in

everyday life. A curious look passed over Mrs Lim's face at that moment and I wasn't sure if I had said something wrong, until Sofia said that her mother liked me and that I should be sure to come back often.

I did go back to Mrs Lim's tea house very often. The food was great, the range of Chinese teas on offer was amazing and it was cheap. Mrs Lim's tea house became my home from home and I felt like I was becoming one of the fixtures and fittings. I took to doing all my paperwork there and as much of my research as possible, hauling heavy bags full of Chinese texts borrowed from the library, along with the occasional English book when I allowed myself the luxury of non-research related reading time. I began to recognize others who visited regularly and soon found that I had a social life, which revolved around the appreciation of Chinese tea, occasional games of chess and long conversations about various aspects of Chinese culture. I became Sofia's informal English language tutor and she in turn kept introducing me to folk who spoke little or no English and thus helped my Mandarin along enormously.

It was at this time, just as I was starting to settle in and feel comfortable in my surroundings that a familiar, yet long unheard inner voice began to surface. The seeker in me was waking up hungry. Perhaps it was all the conversations with so many folks about the Chinese myths and legends in the literature I was studying, perhaps it was simply the lightening of my mood in general which had happened as the really severe period of rain had finally eased off, but something in me had stirred again for the first time in a long time and I knew it would not rest until I had satisfied it.

I started making it clear during conversations that I was interested in doing more than mere book learning and would really like to experience some of the things I was reading about at first hand. Of particular interest to me were the

Chinese martial arts and specifically those known as the internal family, whose roots were suggested by some to be steeped in Taoist mysticism and appeared on the surface to be the most accessible; after all people did Taiji everywhere, every day.

In fact I made remarkably little headway. I had really expected that one of the tea house regulars would be able to introduce me to a teacher, with whom I would at least be able to begin learning something, but time after time for whatever reason my conversation and chess buddies simply were not in a position to help me. I couldn't tell if it was something in my approach, some faux pas that I was unconsciously committing. I thought about just randomly wandering down to the park and hanging around until someone took pity and talked to me, but that didn't seem to be the right way to approach things and I began to get frustrated with myself.

Then one evening I had the dream. Perhaps it was more of a daydream. I would call it a vision but that seems to be going a step too far, even for me. In my daydream I was at Baguashan (Bagua Mountain) and had found what I was looking for. Bagua, as well as being the name of this particular mountain and the mystical symbols found in the Taoist classic the I-Ching, was also the name of a martial art, possibly the most mysterious of the internal family of arts by which I had become so intrigued. It was settled; I had to go to Baguashan.