

Chapter fourteen.

The ninth method.

A great black crow.

A few hours later Shun Yuan stirred. Watching him rouse himself I was reminded of my family cat as he gave a huge stretch in his chair, which included opening his mouth as wide as it would go in a vast yawn. Then he dropped to his knees on the floor and I watched quietly, not wanting to disturb his morning prayer routine.

He gestured that I should join him on the floor and rather than praying as I had expected, took me through more cat-like stretches which had me arching my back and drawing in my stomach as far as I could.

We stood then and went through a series of exercises which Shun Yuan referred to as "Welcoming the Dawn" and told me would prepare my body for the day ahead.

We started off massaging and rubbing our heads with our fingertips until I could feel a gentle buzzing in my scalp. Then we clenched and stretched our facial muscles and anyone looking in the window at that moment would have thought we were completely insane or perhaps competing for the world's ugliest face competition.

After this we performed movements which felt somewhat more normal to me, gently loosening up the whole body from the neck down, starting at each joint with gentle slow movements which we gradually increased in speed.

At the conclusion of the sequence, Shun Yuan had me do an exercise called "nail rasping", which literally meant

vigorously rasping the fingernails of my two hands against each other. We did this for a full ten minutes and when we were ready to stop, he had me very slowly open up my hands from their semi-clenched position and gradually stretch them into the expansive open hand posture that I used when doing my circle walking.

The sensation was intense and very pleasurable. It felt something like "pins and needles" but without any of the attendant mild discomfort that I associate with that.

"We work both ways at once Rob" he said while I stood enjoying the feeling in my hands, "from the core outwards and from the edge inwards. Look how engrossed you are in your hands now, almost like a baby who has just discovered he has hands! Remember shortly after I first met you and I told you that you were too much in your head? This is what I was getting at. You are really IN your hands now."

I was nodding my understanding even as I heard myself internally asking why he hadn't just shown me nail rasping back then and replying that I probably wouldn't have understood the point anyway.

The sensation started to fade and I when I mentioned this to Shun Yuan he nodded and said, "Over the course of the day you'll forget you even have hands. Tomorrow morning you can remind yourself again with this exercise. Try to rediscover yourself at every opportunity Rob, whether physically, emotionally or intellectually in small ways or large. You will be rewarded with a profound sense of wonder at what you find."

We went outside then and after observing my circling for a while, Shun Yuan showed me a simple sequence of movements which resulted in me changing direction.

I had gone clockwise up until now, with my right hand extended to the centre of the circle. Going anti-clockwise was another new learning experience, although not as

difficult as learning from scratch.

My left arm complained hugely at being held in the correct posture though and I tried to remember if I had had such difficulty with the right one.

I asked Shun Yuan how much time I should spend going each way and he said, "Your left side will soon catch up with your right, so do half and half, but do at least one hundred cycles in one direction before changing to the other."

I looked over to where Wayne and Master Hong had come out and started their own exercises. Shun Yuan explained that Wayne had now begun learning the "Five Element Fists" and that the chopping motion he was currently working on was the first of the five and related to metal.

"Metal is the first element to learn and the last one to master" he said, adding "but Wayne is really doing incredibly well."

After we had spent some time working on our exercises Master Hong called a stop for breakfast. He served us up huge bowls of do-jiang and a kind of seed bread which he baked himself and which had filled the house with a wonderful rich smell.

As we were eating I recalled Shun Yuan's comment the night before, that this would be a long day and asked "What's the plan for the rest of the day then?"

"You have study and work to get on with and I have somewhere I have to be until later this evening, when we will meet at the tea house. Mrs Lim is making a donation tonight at an initiation ceremony where some lay folk are taking up robes to become monks of their Order. Mrs Lim's nephew will be among them, he's joining for the next year as I understand it."

"I'm not sure I'm invited" I said. I didn't recall Mrs Lim having mentioned anything about the event and didn't want

to gate-crash.

"Of course you're invited" Shun Yuan replied, "It's the whole family, even Sofia will be there, she's come up by train to attend."

I felt really strange then. I did continue to feel a bond with Mrs Lim and her family, but did I feel that I was actually part of it? I decided it couldn't hurt to go along with being the latest adopted member.

Just then I had a flashback to the events of the night before and assured myself that however crowded, I was unlikely to see drunken violence at a religious initiation.

Once we had finished breakfast I made use of Master Hong's shower, instantly regretting the decision as I discovered the water was freezing cold. I gritted my teeth hard and stayed in as long as I could, before leaping out and shivering wildly, my teeth chattering all the while I dried and dressed myself.

I couldn't remember the last time I had been that cold and although this might be a moment that Shun Yuan would call a rediscovery, I thought to myself that there must be others which did not involve getting quite so close to hypothermia.

The cold had served one purpose; I was really wide awake despite not having slept. A quickly guzzled cup of Wayne's spectacular coffee further energized me and I had to remind myself to slow down several times on the drive back to the tea house.

When I arrived Mrs Lim was anxious to know how I was doing and I could tell that she was feeling guilty about the night before. I told her I was absolutely fine and that there was no way she or her brother could possibly have foreseen what had happened. I hadn't taken a scratch and that was all that mattered. I told her then that Shun Yuan had

mentioned the ceremony which was to be held later and admitted that I couldn't recall if she had told me before. I also said that I felt I didn't deserve to be treated by her as well as she did.

She laughed this off and thanked me for coming and then caught me completely off guard by giving me a warm hug. That dissolved any remaining hesitance I might have had about my adoption and I looked anew at her.

"Call me auntie" she said, tousling my hair as if I was a little child.

"Auntie" I replied, "I have a lot to get through before tonight so please excuse me now" and I went up to my room to get my things together and go off about my day.

The time flew by. Despite working as quickly as I could, it was early evening before I had returned to the tea house and flung my things into my cupboard.

When I went downstairs Mrs Lim told me that Sofia was not going to make it because of a problem with her train. To my concerned look she reassured me that there had been no accident, just a technical hiccup which had left Sofia down in Kaohsiung. Then she told me that Shun Yuan was sitting in a booth by the door and I walked over to see him.

It was an odd sensation, walking up to his booth again and seeing him sitting there, this time reading a book. Just as he had before, without looking up from the page he raised his arm and a single extended finger indicated to me that I should wait while he finished what he was doing.

I reached down and grabbed at his finger and he twisted his arm and grabbed my sleeve, pulling down on it sharply. This caused me to topple forwards onto my knees and my dignity was further thrashed by Morning walking past behind me at that very moment and letting out a loud snort of a

laugh.

"What have you done for her?" Shun Yuan asked and to my shame I had to admit that I had forgotten completely about it. His shaking head and pursed lips were more than enough chastisement and I promised to work something out within the week.

Trying to change the subject I mentioned that while reading that day I had come across reference to a monk known as "Hangzhou Tianlong", meaning the Heavenly Dragon of Hangzhou. He was apparently famous for using a single raised finger to answer the questions of his disciples and I wondered if there was any relation to Shun Yuan's Heavenly Dragon.

Shun Yuan shook his head, "No, there is no relation, just the coincidence of a shared name" he said, "and you should be glad of that Rob."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because that Master is famous for having helped one of his disciples achieve enlightenment by chopping off his finger!" I hadn't come across this while reading and to the worried look on my face, Shun Yuan's expression in response became an evil grin.

"In the end Rob" he said, "You'll have to lop off a lot more than a finger."

"It doesn't feel like stuff is getting lopped off" I said.

"I mean you've given me so much already." Shun Yuan then told me that everything I had learned, all the exercises, were tools to whittle away at myself.

"Until I bring out the perfect shape" I said.

To that he replied by telling me the story of a Master mason, who had been asked to create a perfectly round stone ball to adorn the court of a nobleman. The mason began by chipping at a huge block until he had created the basic shape of the sphere, then began gradually working

with finer and finer tools until he was polishing the ball with his finest polishing cloth.

He called for the nobleman to come and inspect his work and the nobleman asked his little daughter to run her fingers over the surface of the sphere. She complained that it was still rough, so the mason went on polishing.

When he thought it was ready he called for the nobleman again. Once again he brought his daughter and she complained that the ball was still too rough.

Determined that his work would not be rejected a third time, the mason worked day and night on the ball, losing himself completely in his work.

When finally the nobleman's daughter, now grown into a woman, came one day to tell the mason that her father had died, she found him sitting on the dusty floor of his empty workshop with a smile on his face.

He asked the noblewoman if the ball were now smooth enough and she agreed that it was and paid him his fee.

Little Rabbit turned up just then with some food and we sat enjoying our dinner together, Shun Yuan making little noises of delight now and again and reminding me of a little baby as he smacked his lips and grinned to himself.

I knew there were a ton of things I had intended to ask him, that my journal was full of questions to be posed or clarifications requested, but I just sat there enjoying his company and the food until Mrs Lim came to tell us it was time to get going.

We went outside to where Mrs Lim's car was parked and a huge suitcase stood next to it. I stood looking at the suitcase for a long time, as if perhaps by the intensity of my stare I could shrink it down a bit. There was no way it was going to fit in Mrs Lim's car. I wasn't even sure that the

three of us would fit.

In the end Shun Yuan and I heaved it onto the roof and tied it in place, needing to leave the windows slightly open and pass the ropes through them because the car had no roof-rack. The car sunk into whatever little suspension it had with the weight of the suitcase and I thought there was no way it could possibly take us all as well. I clambered into the back, which seemed to have been designed for carrying Mrs Lim's handbag.

"How long is the drive?" I asked, wondering if I would be able to straighten myself up again after doing the journey curled up in the foetal position. Mrs Lim misunderstood me and said that we had plenty of time to get there before she had to present her donation. With Shun Yuan and Mrs Lim now in the front seats I felt the little car straining even more.

We set off then, Mrs Lim making a comment that I only half understood, something about the steering which left me worried again at the ability of the vehicle to get us to our destination.

Crunched up as I was I couldn't see anything out of the window and I was opening my mouth to try and start a conversation to take my mind off my discomfort when we hit a vicious pot-hole and I felt something in my side pull.

I let out a little gasp and when Shun Yuan asked if I was alright I did the polite thing and said I was fine, all the while cursing myself for not having slept the night before as he had suggested.

After what felt like hours I mentioned that it didn't feel like we were moving very fast and Mrs Lim told me that the traffic was particularly bad, but that we still had enough time to reach the ceremony on time.

Eventually we escaped the traffic jam and began making better time, which I could tell by the frequency with which

we went over pot-holes and I had to clench down on my need to squeak in discomfort. The time dragged on and I could feel the pain in my side slowly getting worse until I thought I couldn't take it any longer and would have to ask Mrs Lim to stop.

"We're here" said Shun Yuan and I silently thanked all the gods as the car came to a halt.

It took me a long time to get out of the car and as I tried to straighten myself I felt a strong twinge of pain down the left hand side of my back. Shun Yuan noticed me wincing and I admitted that I had hurt my back. Mrs Lim looked worriedly at me and I tried to assure her that I would be ok, but my back had started to spasm and I winced at every twitch which seemed to alarm her greatly.

While Mrs Lim applied her hands to my back, which gave a very small bit of relief, Shun Yuan untied the ropes and slid the suitcase off the roof of the car. It thumped loudly on the ground as it landed.

I looked around, not knowing where I was and unable to make out much in the dim light.

"Point me in the right direction" I said, to which Shun Yuan pointed at the sky with his finger. I thought he was making a joke or a reference to the monk we had talked about earlier, but as I peered over at him I realized that we were parked at the bottom of a long flight of steps that ran very steep up the side of a hill.

"No way" I said gesturing towards the suitcase, "I might just about drag myself up there by the end of the night, but there's no way we are getting that thing up there. I'm afraid my back is done for and unless there is someone else here to help" I left the rest of the thought unspoken, completing my meaning with a shrug and a look around. Shun Yuan walked over to the suitcase and said "Everyone else will be inside already." Then he told Mrs Lim "Take care

of the cripple” and with that he hefted the case up against his chest and raced up the stairs, disappearing into the deepening dark.

I was just thinking to myself “no way”, when Mrs Lim gave a little cry of surprise.

“Oh, it’s like a great black crow has flown off with my baggage” she said. As she helped me up the stairs I was left to ponder the weight of my own baggage and to what extent I continued to be limited by the preconceptions I carried around in my head.

We got to the top of the stairs, which didn’t take as long as I had feared it might, but was a very difficult climb nonetheless; every step I climbed eliciting a new twinge of pain. I looked around for Shun Yuan and spotted him standing at the doorway of a building, the suitcase being carried inside by two other people. He was gesturing as if to say “come on slow-pokes” and I could only laugh, which made my side hurt like hell.

We were indeed the last to arrive and even as I gingerly knelt down on the bright orange cushion provided for me the ceremony had begun.

This was a noisy affair, with trumpets blown and bells rung and incantations which it seemed to me were shouted as opposed to chanted.

The noise was only outdone by the colour scheme which was wild. The walls of the hall were red and a mass of multi-coloured pennants hung, each one bearing a different symbol, which I did not recognize and which Mrs Lim whispered were magical wards.

A large golden Buddha statue sat in the centre of the far wall and surrounding him were countless figurines of deities which reminded me of Master Hong’s shrine.

A ledge ran around the edge of the room at about shoulder height and held dozens of tiny brass dishes which

contained wicks burning in scented oil.

The monks of this Order wore a reddish coloured robe and had yellow hats. The only similar thing I had seen was pictures of Tibetan monks and although the décor of the place was also highly reminiscent, I did not recognize anything that I saw as being specifically Tibetan.

The new initiates, barely visible through thick clouds of incense smoke, prostrated themselves in front of the Buddha as the Master spoke incantations and wove his hands in a continuous series of mudras.

The whole thing would have been completely fascinating if I could have ignored the pain in my back, which was now constant and causing me to clench my hands and teeth and squeeze my eyes shut in an effort to master it.

When the ceremony ended I was unable to get up without Shun Yuan's help and he led me to a side room and laid me down on the floor.

One of the monks came in and offered to help with some massage and I groaned as he rolled me onto my stomach. He probed and prodded different spots on my back, telling me that this was his method of diagnosis and causing me to moan in pain each time one of his knuckles hit a particular area.

"This is going to be quite energetic" he said, "please prepare yourself" and as I winced with the expectation of pain he laid his palm on my back and made a sudden movement. There was no flash of new pain, in fact the relief was immediate and caused me to laugh out loud.

I thanked the monk for his massage and Shun Yuan reached a hand out to me to help me up saying, "I'll bet you've forgotten that you have hands but you are more aware than ever of your back."

I accepted his help up and said, "I'm not sitting in the back. Why don't you jog home? You can have tea ready

for the rest of us when we get there.” He laughed at that and I said, “Honestly how the hell did you get that thing up the stairs?”

“It didn’t come for free Rob” he replied. I pushed him for more of an explanation and he said then, “Do you remember what happened with Gareth that second time?”

“When you almost broke his leg?” I asked.

“There was no danger of that” he said, “but yes, that’s the time. Tonight was something like that. It’s a bit like taking all the energy that you might expend doing your circling during one whole session and coiling it all up and letting it all go at once.”

“How do you do that?” I went on and he replied only, “By deciding to.”

All the way back as I rode in the front with Mrs Lim, I found myself thinking about his simple statement. Even as I struggled with the idea I found myself thinking about the changes that I had made in myself by deciding to do so, about the radical changes I saw in Wayne which were clearly a result of his decision to reshape his life.

When we arrived I got out and stood at the side of the alley to watch while Shun Yuan poured out of the back of the car as if he was made of honey. Then as he straightened up he did a weird twisting movement which spiralled through his body and made him look like he was possessed by the spirit of a snake, leaving me wondering where Mrs Lim’s crow or the cat of earlier that morning had gone.