Do no harm...
Honor your teacher...
Cut without mercy...

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1

The young boy's soul emerged from his body, hesitated as if getting its bearings, made a circuit of the operating theater, and flitted upward toward the radiance of the halogen lamp like a wispy white pigeon homing in on the sun. I have often wondered about that ineffable thing I know to be present in the living and absent in the dead, but the shock of seeing the ethereal transit so clearly cost me the grip on my scalpel. The blade slipped inside the turgid surgical stage, and a tiny cut was born. Blood from a vertebral artery shot me in the goggles, a thin, angry stream hissing fast to the glass before I could even duck. Vicky Sanchez, one of the hospital's best surgical nurses, used her clamp bravely, I sutured in fast motion, but the monitors screamed and the boy came crashing down and neither the paddles nor my desperate blows to his heart could bring him back.

"No more," Vicky said at last.

I put my finger on the boy's carotid artery, hoping desperately but finding no pulse.

"Let go now," she said gently.

I stood there, breathing hard, feeling hollow and desperate and angry. He was only eleven; Rafik, the little Russian boy. Despite how much I relish their grateful looks when I go and pat them on the cheek in recovery, this very risk and unpredictability—this flying in the face of all that is medically rational and right—is what makes working on kids so tough.

I tried to sort out the order of events. The white wings flapped off before my slip-up, I was sure of that. I couldn't help wondering if that meant that the soul was prescient, knew what was about to happen, and simply took wing in the face of death. The encumbrances of medical practice—insurance regulations, legal considerations, and institutional politics—are usually unfair, but I wouldn't be able to blame anyone for believing the boy died after I cut him, and not before.

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I bent close to the blonde peach fuzz at the base of his neck. His head and face were swollen and distorted by the most furious array of dents and cuts and holes I had ever seen on a patient, yet for all that he managed to look almost angelic. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, knowing hearing is the last sense to go.

I closed the skin flap and made my way out of the theater. In the changing room, I tore off my mask and splashed my face with cold water, letting it run down my chest. I collapsed onto the bench by the lockers and relived the operation sequence, growing less sure of it by the moment. Maybe the white wings I saw were merely a mote in my eye. Maybe my brain was scrambling the order in which things had unfolded because I couldn’t handle it any other way.

Roan Cole, the anesthesiologist, came in. One out of five conversations with Roan give me a sense of déjà vu; honestly, if I didn’t know better, I’d say we’d known each other in a previous life. The last time we worked together, it was on a woman with a mass in her head. The procedure started as a look-see; turned into cancer removal. The tumor was the size of a pomegranate, and I needed to take out a chunk of her brain along with it. It was hard to know if I got it all. Keeping his eye on the numbers the way sleep jockeys do, Roan said she’d be a drooler if she ever woke up, a carrot stick if she didn’t. Roan’s a good man, but his sensitivity scores are low enough to get him into trouble, especially when alcohol is present. Usually I pocket my opinions, but that time I got angry with him. Even though the proof of it keeps rolling in, I’m the only member of the team that believes people hear things while they are asleep on the table.

“Rough one,” he said.

“You got that right.”

“It wasn’t just that artery, Zee. He was in pieces. A busted leg and one arm too, ribs looking like a butcher shop, damage around the middle. We were just the first in the rotation. Jeff Ketchmer was waiting for you to finish, and Franks was right behind him.”

Ketchmer is an abdominal surgeon. I’ve seen him fashion recognizable organs out of red mud. Pete Franks worked for one of the sports teams, mostly on knees, sometimes on shoulders and elbows and wrists. I had read enough of the boy’s file before going to work to know that speed was

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of the essence, but the way things worked, surgical patients were most often reduced to fields of flesh and organs eerily disconnected from the rest of the body.

"Well, you can call those guys off," I said.

I went back out to the body. I pulled off the drapes and towels, revealing systematic destruction painted in sickening greens, yellows, and blues.

"The parents said he fell off his bicycle," Roan said, appearing at my elbow.

"I'd say somebody beat the shit out of him."

"Agreed. Paralysis and respiratory failure were just waiting to happen. The autopsy will confirm that."

"Still, it may have been my bleeder that put him over the edge," I said.

Most surgeons would never make such an admission, not even to their intimates, not even in the freshness of the moment. Tort law has glued our lips, crippled our hands, too. Still, when it comes right down to it, I'm the kind of man who would rather take responsibility than duck it.

Roan shook his head. "He was shocky coming in. You didn't kill him; someone else did. I'll put that in writing."

"Listen, I need to collect my thoughts. If you run into the parents out there, will you stall them for me?"

He nodded as I stripped down for the shower. Doctors who don't put their hands inside people can afford to pack it on, but surgeons tend to be fit. No doubt this is because of our intimate relationship with fat, with the oozing yellow of it, the way it bogs procedures down, doubles, even triples our work. Surgeons exercise because we don't like fat on ourselves any more than we like it on patients; I exercise more than most.

"You're looking leaner," Roan remarked.

"I've added a morning workout."

Soaping up, I began to rationalize my mistake, to convince myself that Rafik's death really wasn't my fault. Surgery is a nuts-and-bolts affair; you can't live with doubts in your fingers, you have to work the angles and command the odds. The boy had died before I made him bleed, and if he hadn't, his injuries would have cost him any kind of

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normal life anyway. Perhaps it had been a vision rather than an apparition, a miniature weather front whose associated vortices and winds spawned gossamer threads. Already the white of it was growing less distinct, less concrete. Memory will do that; will toy with you until uncertainty creeps in to replace the crisp edges of an image, an odor or a sound. Give it enough lead and memory will render even the most palpable truth as insubstantial as a sigh.

When I came out of the stall, Wu Tie Mei was waiting. My teacher wore the green silk outfit she'd died in, but her eyes showed no holes. As always, she smelled of fresh almonds. I wiped my eyes, took a breath, and opened them again. She was still there. I felt my heart pound and my mouth go dry. I steadied myself against the locker with one hand and reached out to her. She shimmered more brightly as my hand grew close and I found no substance.

"Is it really you?" I asked.

She smiled. "There are so very many ideas of me."

"You've been dead ten years," I said.

"And you dream of me less and less often."

"Perhaps I'm dreaming now. I work so much and sleep so little I can't trust myself sometimes."

"That's why I'm here. To help you trust yourself more. To help you remember who you are."

"I know who I am."

"You only think you do."

"This is because of the Russian boy, isn't it? I didn't kill him."

"I know."

"It's a tragedy—probably it's a crime—but I didn't do it."

"Of course not," Wu Tie Mei soothed.

I withdrew my hand and used it to tighten my towel. "I know what's going on. I'm having a stress reaction. That's what this is. I'm having a little breakdown. Goddamnit if I could get some decent sleep I'd be stronger than this."

"You're about to get stronger," said my old teacher. "It's not going to be easy, but big change is coming."

She faded after that, and no amount of rubbing my eyes would bring her back. I pinched myself; I wondered why she had come to this cold

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and antiseptic place to mark the death of a child she did not know. I worried that she might come back suddenly, perhaps even when I was talking to the boy's parents. The thought scared me. I could not with any confidence hold both past and present in my hands at once. I waited as long as I dared, but felt no sea change within me. At last, I dressed and went out to meet the Petrossovs.

They were waiting on blue plastic chairs, leaning slightly toward the television, which ran a daytime soap with the sound turned off. On a different day they might have radiated wealth and power, but all I saw was exhaustion. The mother was a small, wiry blonde vibrating with intensity, and three degrees off beautiful. Fleshy, big, and white, the father had a broad Slavic face and a high forehead. His little ears cupped forward and his jaw receded, lending him the appearance of someone who had been vertically compressed nearly to the popping point. Only his fine suit saved him from hoggishness, along with a thin, elegant, wristwatch.

"How is he?" he asked, managing a certain charm. "How is my son?"

The chart said his name was Vlexei. She was Natalya. Because my own father had come over from Lvov, I knew how to pronounce their names, hers with the accent on the middle syllable, his with the accent on the last. I considered addressing them in Russian, but decided it would introduce an element of inappropriate intimacy.

"I'm Dr. Xenon Pearl," I said. "I operated on Rafik's neck."

"Will he be all right?" Natalya's accent was so heavy I got the question from her look more than her lips.

"His injuries were severe," I said. "There was a great deal of damage."

She began a small, hungry rocking. "What are you saying?"

"We worked it right to the end, but I'm afraid we lost him. I'm so very sorry."

She gave me a strange look, then slid to the floor without a sound. Her husband made no effort to help her.

"You could have struggled," he said. "You could have fought."

"Believe me, we tried."

I waited for the usual spasms of grief to seize him, waited for the inevitable quiver of the chin, the tiny twitches of the skin under the eyes that children set off when they die before their parents do. Instead, the rocking turned to rage as Petrossov dropped his charm like a hot coal,

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gathered my scrubs at the collar, and lifted me clear off the ground. He had big, ropy farmer's forearms; adapted to city life, to American life, but after his own fashion.

"You don't know what trying is," he said.

My training kicked in at once, and I sensed the direction he was moving, the slightest, subtlest turn of his fingers. I knew how to follow those movements, and how to use them devastatingly against him, but I left his grip alone. The pain helped clear my head of doubt and confusion, and anger rushed in to fill the void. "Would you like to tell me what really happened to your son?" I asked, looking calmly into his eyes.

Petrossov put his face so close to mine I could smell the knots in his stomach on his breath.

"Forget my son," he said. "And hope we forget you."

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2

It might have been the energetic imprint of the Russian's fingers on my arm that sent me off to see the swordsmith after lunch, but more likely it was my teacher's reference to change. I don't like change, even when a person long dead suggests it. I may not get much sleep—indeed I have my issues with Morpheus even when my surgical schedule allows me some shuteye—but I always sit with my back to the wall, and if some kind of transition was nigh, I felt the itch for a weapon.

I left the hospital for the waning sun along an asphalt river that was once grass and filled with alligators and frogs. I ride a bright yellow Triumph Thruxton, the most powerful of the famous marque's retro offerings. I love the rhythmic thumping of its twin cylinders, and the forward urge they provide. My colleagues tell me I'm a fool to live on a motorcycle in Florida. They cite the statistics, point out the blue-hairs driving west in the eastbound lane, cluck at the coked-up kids weaving from lane to lane, generally rehash what I of all people know so damn well about head injury. They're right, I know they're right, but the blast of the wind on my flesh satisfies some visceral yearning my martial training doesn't. Besides, riding adds nuance to my relationship with gravity, and if gravity is not on your side, you cannot possibly win a fight.

I made it to the Fort Lauderdale bedroom community of Plantation, and rang the doorbell at the address I was after. A woman in her late twenties answered the door. She wore work boots and overalls but even so I could see she was lovely; built like a swimmer, tall and lean with big shoulders, thin hips, light brown hair cropped short enough to barely challenge a cap.

"Yes?" she said, using her foot for a doorstop.

"I'm looking for Thaddeus Jones," I said.

"My father died two years ago. What can I do for you?"

I rocked the full-face helmet off my head and wiped the sweat off my forehead.

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"I'm sorry for your loss," I said. "I heard his work was fine."

"And you are?"

"Xenon Pearl. Speak it with a z, spell it with an x."

She took me in, up and down. "I'm Jordan," she said. "Xenon's a noble gas, isn't it? Inert, rare, glows when electricity goes through it, doesn't want to react with other compounds?"

"I don't meet a lot of people who know that."

"How did you get a gas for a name?"

"My dad made an investment in a technology stock back before half those companies were scams. The outfit made xenon light bulbs. Shares went through the roof the day I was born; dad took it for a sign."

"I can't tell yet if you're rare, but you don't seem to be inert. Now, how can I help you, Xenon Pearl?"

"I have an interest in swords."

She took her foot away from the door, but aside from that, nothing changed."

"Are you a collector?"

"I wouldn't say so."

The foot came back, and on top of that, Jordan's eyes grew narrow.

"Your father's card has been in my wallet for a long time. I hadn't realized it was years. Are any of his blades still available?"

"They are not. But I've taken over his forging and have a few of my own for sale."

"People claim the living are more important than the dead," I said. "I'm not so sure that's true. Life and death are two sides of the same coin. Each is what makes the other important."

"What are you talking about?" she hugged herself impatiently.

"Family traditions are very valuable. I'd be happy to look at your work if you're willing to show it."

A drizzle started. She appraised me long enough for my head and shoulders to get pretty wet. "I don't usually let strangers in," she said. "But I have a piece of sword steel heating and I've got to get back to it. You can come in and watch me forge, if you like."

The house was *un salon des fleurs*, it was as simple as that—one big greenhouse with skylights, an arboretum filled with tropical plants: bromeliads, ferns, philodendrons, and small palms and cycads by the

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windows. It was remarkable, even for Florida, and I said so. She reached out to touch a large purple orchid. “This is a species specimen,” she said. “Breeders are all about crosses, but I like my plants the way nature intended.”

“So you’re a purist.”

“A naturist, maybe, although I’m not keen on labels.”

We went through a door and into what had once been the garage. I have been in a couple of other shops. Usually they are as charred and masculine as a side of beef, dirty too, with flat dusty tables, bruised benches, pin-up calendars on the wall. Jordan’s place was immaculate.

“I do my finish work here,” she said, her finger dragging across the rows of little drawers. “It’s where I store the handle materials, sheath leather, too. I like semiprecious stones like chrysoprase and citrine, also oosic, fossilized mastodon ivory and stag.”

“Oosic?”

“Fossilized walrus penis.”

“Bet it feels great in the hand.”

She shot me a look, but I beat it back with a grin and followed her out to a little shed in the yard. The heat from the forge was so ferocious I had to wait in the doorway.

“See the lemon-yellow of the caowool?” Jordan asked, pointing to the material lining the glowing oven. “That means the temperature is right.”

She slipped on a pair of gloves, donned welder’s glasses, and pulled a glowing billet the size of a thick pack of cigarettes out of the fire by the handle. She put it between the dies and hit it with a power hammer. The muscles in her forearms bulged. Sparks like stars lit up the shed, and a moment later lightning came under the door, and then a thunderclap shook us.

“What type of metal is that?” I asked.

“My proprietary Damascus. I like a combination of water-hardened high-carbon tool steel and low-carbon oilrig scrap. Gives me a beautiful contrast and the flexibility and edge-holding so important to the Asian masters.”

A burning ember of white-hot slag flew into the cuff of her welding glove. She barely even winced.

“Probably should take care of that,” I said, smelling her flesh burn.

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"Later," she replied, watching the glowing metal. "I have to work with it before it cools. There's only a short window before molecular changes take place."

I dodged the debris flying from the forge, not wanting an ember to land on me. I dug a piece of chocolate out of my pocket. It was a bit the worse for wear from the heat and the ride, but still serviceable.

"Maybe this will take your mind off the pain," I said. I went to put it in her mouth. She hesitated and then let me. I saw her tongue and her even white teeth.

"Goodness." She rolled deep gray eyes.

"It certainly is. Made by a boutique company in the Midwest from Hawaiian fruit: 70 percent cacao, very little sugar; the dark, pure stuff. Chocolate has medicinal properties modern medicine is only just beginning to fathom."

"Swords and chocolate," she mused.

"I hope that makes you think I have both depth and complexity."

"You're pretty smooth," she said. "I'm not sure that's good."

She took a chop saw to the billet then, and sparks flew as if in some intimate cosmic collision. She cut it, folded it, and heated it again. I watched her go through this twice more, and when she had the layering she wanted, we retired to the living room. I sat down on the couch while she broke a piece off an aloe plant and put the fresh ooze on her burn.

"What do you like?" she asked me.

"I like you, if that's what you're asking."

She blushed. It was charming, tough as she looked in those overalls. "I meant in a sword."

"What's your specialty?"

"Japanese styles, like my father."

"May I see?"

She went out for a minute and came back with three magnificent samurai swords. The hamon, or temper line, was clean on each katana, and the traditional stingray handles well done.

"These are beautiful," I said.

"I've loved swords since I was a child."

We stood in awe of the specific gravity of the blades, their beauty, their familiar shape. Finally, reluctantly, I broke the spell. "I wish I had

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your talent. Could you create a sword for me in a Chinese design?"

She looked at me in surprise. For most collectors, the katana is the thing, but then most collectors don't have my particular history.

"Chinese? Really?"

"I know about Japanese purity of line," I said. "I know how the master smiths of yore prepared for forging with forty days of meditation and ablution. But Japanese blade designs were constrained, the result, I think, of the kind of short horizon that comes from living on an island. The Chinese had a bigger universe. There are so many distractions in that vast land of theirs that nobody spent forty days preparing to forge. On the other hand, the Chinese smiths were sensitive in what they picked up about nature and creative in the way they put the lessons they learned to steel."

"I've never heard it put quite that way," she said.

I smiled. "I think about the subject a great deal. The sword I'm after needs to be a straight sword, double-edged, flexible, with a voice through the air."

"How flexible?"

"I need it to be able to bend ninety degrees and then snap back to true."

She frowned. "It's very, very difficult to make a blade like that. The grind lines alone…."

"I understand," I said, standing up. "It's got to be a hell of a sword."

"I'm not saying I can't do it."

The more closely I looked at her work, the more certain I was that she could. She had a wonderful eye, a great sense of balance, and the ability to create lively steel out of inanimate materials; a conjury really, magical and rare.

"So you might give it a stab?"

"You won't feel like punning when you get the bill."

"That's all right."

"It is? What are you, last of the Internet millionaires?"

"A surgeon."

"Really? What, boobs and noses?"

"Brains and spines," I said.

She crossed her beautiful legs, uncrossed them, and crossed them again.

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"A neurosurgeon?"

"That's right."

She looked at me as if in a new light. I get that a lot, riding a motorbike and dressing as casually as I do.

"Even so, there are people ahead of you," she said at last.

"I did feed you chocolate. Maybe that's worth a bump to the head of the line."

She gave me a smile as natural as a greyhound let out to run after being cooped up in the house for too long. "I'll think about it," she said.

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3

That night I rode south on the interstate through a gap in the rain. I crossed Biscayne Bay on the causeway to North Miami Beach, where my father, Asher, lives in a senior residence. The place is a frenzy of mad motion and energy, so busy even death has to wait in line for a room. At any hour, but especially late, the canasta tables are crowded, bridge players in demand, chess queens are on the prowl, and old cocks are, too. I've seen lower libidos on the Riviera and met smaller egos on Wall Street.

Dad was on the patio when I pulled up, deep in a novel, reading by the light of a Tiki torch, his feet on a table made from an old Cadillac grill.

"A man and his Caddy," I said.

He glanced up at my helmet. "Less dangerous than a bike," he said.

"Don't complain. I got here on time."

He glanced at his watch. "Barely."

"Mom knows we're thinking of her whenever we do it, and it's still an hour to midnight."

He got up and we hugged. "Can't argue about the time, but you know I hate riding on the back of that thing."

"So we'll eat here."

"The cardboard food is killing me. I haven't shit for a week."

"Eat more fruit and stop hanging out with old people. Why don't we go somewhere fun?"

"Because I'm scared of that bike."

This is a sham. Actually, he loves to ride. He doesn't think I know that he used to ride an orange BMW R90S when I was young and he was younger. It was a famous bike, because it represented the last gasp of European racing dominance before the Japanese completely took over the field. The bike, rare and expensive even in its day, came only in orange, and a less-desirable smoke color. I found one just like it in the paper in

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very rough shape, paid too much for it, and put it in the garage. Someday soon I plan to restore it to its former, burbling glory.

"I'll go slow," I said. "And I'll buy dinner, too. Make it worth your while. What do you say?"

"If you're buying, how come we're still standing here?" he grinned. He dog-eared his Irving Stone novel, glanced around like a spy, saw nobody was watching, and tucked it under a cushion. I gave him my helmet. He made a show of wiping it out with his shirttail before sliding it on.

I drove him over to Calle Ocho, the heart of the Cuban section of town, and parked in front of Versailles, a crammed-together restaurant filled with high-volume Spanish and smelling of garlic chicken and yucca fries. We got comfortable and I ordered a half-pitcher of sangria. I poured most of it in his glass when it arrived, saving just a splash for myself on account of my strict rule on biking and boozing.

"Happy Birthday, Mom," I raised my glass. "We miss you."

He clinked with me. "If you really want to show her you love her, sell the motorcycle. She wouldn't like that you're a thug."

"I'm not a thug, Dad. I'm a doctor."

"A doctor and a thug, with all that kicking and punching."

The comment was a revelation. Throughout my childhood, Wu Tie Mei had secretly shared martial information of great power and importance, and demanded utter discretion from me.

"What are you talking about?"

"Come on," my father snorted. "I know that nanny of yours taught you that kung fu chop suey."

I took a deeper slug of sangria than I had planned to while I formulated a reply. During thousands of hours and over a period of sixteen years, Wu Tie Mei passed to me a good grasp of Chinese history, a useful everyday philosophy entirely absent from my Western schooling, and exquisite martial training; a blend of many famous styles. She also shared the principles of Chinese medicine, always making clear that to be a martial artist—as opposed to a thug—one had to equally adept at hurting and healing, to be fully ready and able to undo any harm inflicted. She taught me that in China last names come first, that her given name, Tie Mei, meant Iron Plum Blossom, and she taught me to be sensitive to the delicate interplay of opposing forces in the world, the male and female, the hard and the soft,

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the lean times and the full. She taught me values I didn't get anywhere else—compassion and justice among them—but most important, she taught me the difference between right and wrong.

"Nanny," I said. "Is that all you think she was?"

"You two thought you were fooling me all those years."

I wondered how he could know about the training. I was certain she'd never told him, and the two of us had been so careful; I couldn't imagine he had seen us. At first I kept my mouth shut because I was in awe of the knowledge, bowled over by the moves. Later, I honored the confidence because we both feared my father would dismiss her if he found out.

"She helped me with my school lessons, if that's what you mean."

"You loved her and you were loyal to her, but you're a grown-up now. You don't have to lie for her anymore."

"I'm not lying for her," I said. "I'd have never made medical school without her."

And in truth I have kept my pact with Wu Tie Mei all these years, not merely to honor her memory, but because I have come to realize how miserable the lowest common denominator of human exchange really is. Alone at night, and sleepless as always, I watch television news, and too many of the victims of gunshots, car accidents, and domestic outbursts end up on my table, where I become intimately acquainted with their shattered spines, severed nerves, crushed heads, and useless limbs. I know violence all right, and I know how to keep my counsel.

My father picked an orange out of his wine glass and sucked the meat off the rind. "Fine," he said. "Have it your way. But your mother's in heaven and she hears your lies."

The reference to being watched made me long to tell him about Wu Tie Mei's visit that morning. I turned away and watched a big Latin family come in, the little girls dressed primly in lace, the boys in tiny dark suits. I wondered what people had thought of our little family when I was the age of those boys, my father, the petite Chinese woman, and me.

"A patient died on my table this morning," I said.

"Spare me the morbid talk. I'm surrounded by *alte kakkers*."

"You're just there because you're too lazy to cook and clean up after yourself."

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"Hymie Grossman had a stroke today, right in the middle of a hand of bridge at lunchtime. Sixty-two years old and we don't know if he's going to make it."

"My patient was a little boy. The parents said he fell off his bike, but that's not what happened. Somebody beat him with a pipe."

"A pipe?"

"A pipe, a wrench, something hard."

"This world," he said. "There are times I wish I could leave it already."

"Don't be in such a rush," I said. "You've got plenty of living to do."

An army of waiters pushed three of the tables near us together for the giant family. They sat down, and their chattering made me grin.

"You need a barber," my father said, rumpling my dark hair. "Ponytails went out with the hippies."

"When I'm your age I'll cut it short."

"When you're my age you'll put in your teeth in the morning and pray it doesn't rain because of what the low pressure does to your elbows."

"The boy was Russian. The way the mother dresses and the father comes on, I make them Mafiya. I'm thinking of making a police report."

"Stay away from gangsters."

"The kid's brain was bashed in. The law says I have to report abuse. Anyway, it'll all come out in the autopsy. The cops will get involved after that."

"Just stay clear of the Mafiya. Promise me that."

"Sure," I said.

Our waitress showed up with black-bean soup for two.

"My darling wife, Helen, died twenty-six years ago," my father told her, sprinkling his bowl with onions. "You never smelled such sweet breath, may she rest in peace. You never saw such an angelic face."

The way she smiled, I could see the waitress didn't understand a word of English, not my father's heavily accented English at least, barely softened at all by decades of absence from Russia.

Cuban white bread came with dinner. It was crispy at the crust, doughy in the middle. My father covered his with butter. I dipped mine in my soup.

"You still know any Russian people?" I asked. "Someone who could check on this guy Petrossov for me?"

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He looked up at me, startled.

"Petrossov?"

"What, you've heard of him?"

"It's not an unusual name," he shrugged.

"Where did you hear about him?"

For two full decades my father owned Pearl's Suits and Ties, a men's clothing business on Miracle Mile in the wealthy Miami community of Coral Gables, where I grew up. He provided fine tailoring, sold silk shirts and leather accessories, Italian suits of 140-point wool. As both he and his customers got older, he also offered a line of elastic waist slacks he kept in the back and never put in the window.

"I didn't say I heard about him," my father shook his head.

There was no pursuing this, I'd learned that much. When my father shut up, he shut up. He was more stubborn than a boulder, more opinionated than a priest, more judgmental than a gas gauge, tighter around a roll of dollars than a thick gauge rubber band.

"I miss Tie Mei as much as I miss Helen," I said.

"Soup's good," he grunted.

"You can say you miss her. It doesn't diminish what you had with Helen."

"You sound angry when you call your mother by her name like that."

"I'm not angry. People die. In a way, I got to have two moms. "

"Bullshit you're not angry," my father said. "I got news for you."

Once again, I almost told him about seeing Tie Mei at the hospital, about how she still smelled like almonds, about how her body still looked tight and fit and strong, about how her skin still had the glow which would have gone so well with the name Pearl if my father had done the right thing and given it to her.

"You should have married her," I said.

"If you got more sleep you wouldn't talk about things you don't understand."

I wanted to argue. The little taste of sangria might have been at fault. "I understand plenty," I said.

"You get some sleep, your thinking will clear."

"I inherited your insomnia."

"So now it's my fault? You work too much, you can't relax, you drink

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too much tea. Take a pill, for God's sake. You're a doctor."

My father isn't so good at taking blame. He's a dodger, which I attribute to growing up in a communist country where blame was shared, rewards were few, and power and money distributed themselves along the most cynical of lines.

"I'm not blaming you, I'm blaming your genes. There's no fault involved. And caffeine doesn't juice me that way."

At the long table next to us, the children fell on the steaming hot bread like starving dogs.

"You're a doctor," my dad said. "Take a sleeping pill."

"There's poison in pills," I said. "And no long-term cure."

"Listen, Zee, I'm getting married."

Later, I thought he might have deliberately waited until my mouth was full of black beans, but whether he did or not, I sprayed them across the paper tablecloth in surprise. It took time for my coughing to stop. Through it all, my father just watched me, his arms folded across his chest.

"All I've got is a big-shot son who works night and day," he said when I was finished. "I'm all alone and I've got life left in me—you said that yourself."

"You've got Grandpa too."

"Don't even speak his name."

"Does he know about your plans?"

"I said don't speak his name."

The waitress came again, and I gave her an order for fish in garlic sauce. My father ordered a Cuban sandwich, layers of cold cuts and cheese on a roll.

"So who is she?" I asked when I was ready.

"You remember Rachel."

"The knish baker?"

"She's a real estate agent. Her baking has to do with exactly nothing."

"It sure can't hurt."

"She's very proud you're a doctor."

"You showed me a picture of her once. She was wearing a taupe pantsuit."

"All that time I had the store, and now you've got a nose for clothes?"

"Does she have children?" I asked.

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"She has a condo with an ocean view."

"So that's what this is about? Waterfront property?"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that. You've got a new brother coming. A new sister, too."

"Can't you just live together?"

"Why should we?"

I thought about that question, and I couldn't come up with a good answer.

"So you break this news to me on Mom's birthday?"

He took a long draught of sangria. "When Rachel was a toddler, she went to the concentration camp at Belsen with her parents. The Nazis tattooed a number on her forearm. She knows how important it is not to waste time. She just wants to be happy. I want the same."

I couldn't help noticing his beatific look when he talked about her. It so surprised and compelled me that I totally forgot to tell him that I had finally had confirmation of life after death; I'd seen a human soul that morning.

It had wings.

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Please sign the guest book at www.thecuttingseason.com to be kept informed of the next installment of Dr. Xenon Pearl.

About the Author

Arthur Rosenfeld is a martial arts teacher, writer, speaker, and coach. His martial arts training spans more than twenty-seven years, and includes instruction in Tang Soo Do, Kenpo, Kung Fu, and Tai Chi Ch'uan. Rosenfeld is a critically-acclaimed, best-selling author of six novels (Avon Books, Bantam, Doubleday Dell, Forge Books), two non-fiction books (Simon and Schuster, Basic Books), several screenplays, and numerous magazine articles (*Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Parade*, and others). He consults for the pharmaceutical industry as a recognized expert on aspects of chronic pain. Arthur Rosenfeld resides in South Florida.

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