

La Chi

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-At the school they teach us God.

-God is trouble, my child.

-They call him Seigneur.

-I suppose they tell you he love us?

-He love all peoples, Ye-ye. Why you think he can't love everybody?

-La Chi my child, the Buddha teaches us love all things, but bow to no god.

Today, the nuns had arranged a visit from a handsome Capitaine who gave a little prayer to God and told of their culture, how they live in their own land, with great boulevards, arches and mansions, opera and théâtre. She would visit there one day, take her Ye-ye before he passed on, up to the big church of the Sacred Heart on the hill overlooking the city. When he finished his talk, the Capitaine mixed with the class, talking in Mandarin like all the occupiers. It sounded quaint to her ears, all him and her and them, the old-fashioned style. She quite liked it and was good at it in class. The Capitaine paused by La Chi.

-Hello. What is the pretty miss called?

-Her name is La Chi. Sir.

-La Chi is elegant and graceful.

-She thanks the Capitaine.

He was about to move on.

-Please sir? May I ask question?

There had been talk among the top class about an *offensive*. Our forces would gather in the hills overlooking the great valley and the occupying forces would surely trap them.

-My child?

-Will there be offensive?

-It is not for La Chi to think of these things.

-But if they gather forces sir, will you attack them?

-La Chi should know that insurgents will always be controlled, they will not succeed in splitting La Chi's country. Nor in upsetting La Chi's education.

He moved closer.

-Nor in furrowing La Chi's clear brow.

He gently stroked across her forehead with his palm and moved on. The chattering children stopped, looked over towards her in surprise. No-one ever touched the girls, not even the nuns. But the Capitaine was a gentleman, his touch must be a blessing, like a father's, nothing to disturb the class. Still, La Chi felt a blush rise in her cheek.

She talks with her grandfather.

-Ye-ye, some of the girls talk of a big offensive.

-There is rumour of such a battle, my child, near Dien, when the leaves fall. They plan to trap us. They are bad people.

-Can they all be bad, Ye-ye? Does not the Buddha teach us to seek the good in every living thing?

-These people have raped our country, they murder our people and steal our beliefs and now in Dien they plan worse. Where is the good?

-I saw a good man today, a Capitaine. He visited us, he was kind.

-Which Capitaine?

-Capitaine Piroth.

-I have not heard his name. New, I suppose.

-You know all soldiers' names, Ye-ye.

-It is my work.

-He talked to me.

La Chi stood up from the evening table, picked up the hand-ground wooden bowls and the used bamboo sticks. This was their home, this

one-room hut by the river and it had been Ye-ye's entire world since his accident. People visited him and La Chi cooked and cleaned and washed his body, here in this room. It was homely now, at the dry time of year before the rains came, a little dusty but easy enough for La Chi to keep clean. She slipped outside to rinse the bowls under the

tap and as she held them to dry she looked across the valley to the town. At this time of night, the lights were quiet enough not to drown the music of the stars and she strained to hear the tinkling that signalled that all was at peace. She closed her eyes and smiled, a smile always helped her little meditation on the night. Here it came, mixed with the rise and fall of her breath, the individual lick-lick of each star, chattering to its neighbour, tingling across the space. Under her lids she saw their pinpoints, heard the miniature bells that dangled from their rays, felt them pulse through her body. She fingered the bowl's smooth curve.

-La Chi!

It was time to wash Ye-ye and get him to bed, just like her mama used to do. She gave a deep breath for the memory, for their life and for her meditation on the stars.

Across the river, the troops' caserne shines brightest of all, lighting up evening dinner. Piroth dislikes the formality of the officer's salon and since his arrival he prefers to eat with the men. He can share a glass of absinthe before sousing in country wine, he can laugh at their rude tales and provoke arguments. The drink breaks barriers.

-So sergeant, how many Vietminh have you killed today?

The sergeant, a short wiry man in thick glasses, snorts into his wine.

-You blague, Capitaine, do we count the cockroaches in the larder?

-Don't fool me. You're forever writing in your little book.

-C'est different, I keep there only names.

-You suspect everybody, the honest maids, the old men and women?

-They are the worst. Eh! You a virgin, you know nothing. You want understand this scum you ask me, I been here three years and I learned the hard way. You show kind, they use their sly ways, you be nice, they cut you. Look at this!

He pulls his collar down on the left side, bares a thin angry scar the length of a man's hand, a knife slice.

-Can we not give them their dignity? says Piroth.

-Dignity? The sergeant spits his mouthful on the floor between them, moves his stool so he can go nez-a-nez with his adversary.

-What the hell you know? Go in Saigon, you see what they really want, bumlickers on each corner, flesh with their legs already open, after a quick score. I see it every night, gangs and knives and sex, these Chinos all the same. I piss on your dignity.

He lifts the glass to his chin and tips the contents into his open throat. He closes on Piroth again, sprays in his face as he talks.

-You learn how they are, then come back, tell me. Virgin!

He turns away, falls from his stool. Piroth looks down at him.

-All right, I will learn for myself. Tomorrow, I go with you as observer, under your command. And after, I show you how we can be civilised with these people.

The sergeant hugs his ribs and shouts from the floor.

-What! Under my command? You obey my orders? Bon. You will surely learn. Dignity, hah!

In the early morning air, La Chi dragged herself slowly up the rise towards the hut, a flour sack balanced on her head, both arms upstretched, the weight pressing deep into her neck. Today would be hot, she already felt the moisture sticking to her sleeve. She had risen early while it was still cool, seen the town lights again but this morning they hadn't twinkled for her. In truth, she'd hardly slept, thinking of unhappy things. The last time Ye-ye had warned her of a fight he'd been right, they had bombed the city, put out all the lights. She'd heard the shouting and wailing all across the river, it had made her cry for days, thinking of the people burning. Now it would happen again and it confused her. How could men like the Capitaine send down fire bombs on our houses or kill our people, he was like pa-pa, and how could someone like pa-pa kill, just like that and for what? Ye-ye must be wrong, yet he was always right.

She heaved the sack in through the door and dumped it. He'd be in bed waiting for his morning congee. She slipped over to the barely warm stove, bent and threw fresh sticks in the top. La and Ye-ye were the only ones in their alley to have a stove, because he was an elder. It helped, the warmth in winter, cooking all year round. She sat the tin day-pot on the flat blackened surface, drew a new wooden spoon, stirred the meal and stole a taste as it started to heat. She thought of the day ahead, wondered what new things the others would know about the fighting today. One girl knew a lot, her father was something in the revolutionary army, so she said, but La wasn't sure she could always be trusted. She turned the spoon. Why was it people tried to be more than they really were, told stories to create an impression, like what they did with boys, when it was plain to see they were lying? She dug into the pot. What is it that makes us pretend? Maybe she should try to be more like that.

-Good morning my peach. Ye-ye stretched his good arm to the sky as La came to his bedside.

-Good day my grandfather, I brought your congee. She would recite the same reassuring words every morning.

-This morning I have some visitors. I want you to welcome them and then leave us for one hour after.

La Chi was deflated.

-But you know I have school.

-You will be late for school, I will write a note.

La knew that Ye-ye did things for the village. These days more people visited, talked openly. About the occupiers, about when they would leave, when a big push would throw them out. Maybe Ye-ye was now doing more important things. She wished he would talk to her.

-Ye-ye, who is coming this morning?

-Some men, important men.

-What will they talk with you about?

Ye-ye paused.

-My child, this is not for La Chi to think about.

-Ye-ye, I am grown now, you tell me.

-This matter concerns men. It is not to disturb a young girl's brow. Now prepare, our guests will arrive soon.

There. Every one treated her the same, didn't they know she was growing up, couldn't they see? La Chi bowed slightly, like she always did when Ye-ye scolded her, shuffled back to the stove, shook the last of the old flour from its box, mixed it with the water and beat the pancake that she would offer to Ye-ye's guests. She beat it flat. While it rested, she would change her clothes behind the screen. She had taken to washing and changing behind Na-na's old dragon screen. Today, she would wear the white undervest and the fine silk cream lotus smock that you could see through, it made her look older. She smoothed down her front, pushed out her growing bumps. Soon she'd be a woman.

She heard deep voices at the hut door. The guests already.

-Is this the house of Lo Chi? asked one. Ye-ye's formal name.

She swept her hair flat and moved into the room, standing back as she saw the visitors framed in the doorway. There were two men, soldiers, one with small thick round glasses who'd spoken, now squinting into the dark of the hut. In the background was the other man, face peering through. Oh, it was the Capitaine.

-Capitaine, she said. She could think of nothing else.

From the interior came Ye-ye's voice.

-Who is there, girl?

One of the men answered.

-It is your friend the sergeant, he giggled.

Silence from within. Ye-ye was not welcoming these men, they were insinuating their way in, these must not be his guests. The men stood full square in the floor of the hut. The Capitaine looked straight at La Chi, she felt a chill. And bowed.

-My grandfather is in bed. She shuffled quickly behind the curtain to Ye-ye's bed. He made no noise but waved at her, saying No, send them away. She bent over, laid a hand on his, straightened, slipped through the curtain and turned to the men. They darkened the door and window spaces. She swallowed.

-My grandfather is expecting guests. Might you call at another time? She was facing the Capitaine now, his kind eyes. But it was the sergeant who spoke and giggled again.

-We know his guests, and they are our guests too. It is for this that we visit Lo-Chi. Don't worry, we come to his bed and wait with him.

-No! said La Chi. She had been taught that a person's bedroom was his private space, his protection. But that made no difference to this rough soldier. Then, a voice from heaven.

-Sergeant, we will wait outside.

-Capitaine. Orders.

-But there is no need to be uncivil.

-This man is a collaborator, as are his guests. We have orders.

The curtain to the bedroom was pushed slowly aside and Ye-ye's head appeared from behind. He was in his bed shirt, leaning on a thick knobbled bamboo stick.

-Ye-ye, you must sit. La Chi went quickly to support him and eased him into his habitual chair by the table. He sat, his good hand resting on the stick. La Chi looked up at the Capitaine.

-What you want with my grandfather? You see he hardly move, what harm is he to you?

At last Ye-ye spoke.

-My child, this is not your business.

-Wise words, old man. Your whore of a child must learn when to shut her mouth. The sergeant giggled and held back the Capitaine's arm.

He sat down directly opposite Ye-ye and began. Opened his notebook and read out the names, asking Ye-ye when he had last seen this one and that one, where were they, were they Vietminh? No answer. He stopped reading and smiled, looked down at his shoes, inspected them as he talked.

-Old man. I know what you think. You think, why answer, what harm can come to me? I can suffer pain, even death is a gift. Very well. Only. I tell you what I think. Your whore child, she has her whole life ahead, it is shameful you let her be spoiled by your

obstinacy before she even starts, a shame to see her damaged, this lotus flower.

He leant over and brushed La Chi's cheek with the back of his hand.

-*Quelle fille charmante*. So, these men, what can you tell me?

La Chi looked sideways at her grandfather. He stared ahead, his eyes blank.

-Peace Ye-ye, she breathed.

-That's right, old man, you think. In the meantime, Capitaine, please. The sergeant threw a short length of rope at him.

The Capitaine had been leaning forward ready to intervene, but now he stood straight, paused for a moment and stepped towards La Chi, held her gently by the wrist. The sergeant spoke again.

-Old man, talk to me or you know what will happen. You have heard the stories, I tell you that they are true. Soldiers need it, they take it by force. It was ever so.

Ye-ye was silent. La Chi knew that he would never talk, and she knew that the Sergeant knew too.

-Now, Capitaine.

The Capitaine did not hesitate this time, took the short rope, brought her wrists together at the small of her back and tied them. He was matter-of-fact now, doing a job.

-Face her to you.

The Capitaine turned her to him, looked down at her face. She stared at her feet.

-Old man, she will be harmed, trust me. You know we will catch your friends. It is not you we want, nor your girl, it is these others, who make your lives a misery, who will be found and dealt with. You can be hero, Lo Chi, help keep the peace, prevent a massacre.

Ye-ye closed his eyes, jutted out his jaw.

-Slap her face.

The Capitaine immediately lifted her chin and searched out her eyes. Her eyelids refused to lift. He stroked her cheek with the palm of his hand.

-Slap her!

The palm came back slowly and this time hit La Chi's left cheek, knocking her head to the side and down, wrenching her neck.

-Look up at me child, said the Capitaine quietly.

She raised her head, looked up into his grim face for a second and lowered her eyelids once more. He did not move. The Sergeant leaned over to Ye-ye.

-You save her or save your friends. Your choice. Again Capitaine. This time the Capitaine called out.

-Look at me child, *regarde-moi!*

She shook her head and continued to look down at the floor.

She felt the suck of air as his arm swept back ready to pound his hand into her face. The hit knocked her to the floor.

-Stand up! He struck again, the other cheek. This time she stood firm. In the pause that followed, she wanted to cry out for the sting on her cheeks and the throb in her jaw, but knew she must look up at him. She raised her head and stared into his eyes.

-Do you challenge me girl? he shouted down at her.

At that moment, she thought of Ye-ye. What was he doing, was he watching or had he turned away, what was churning in his mind? She couldn't look over at him, she had to keep looking up at this man, to defy him, this changeling soldier.

-You want it girl? he was yelling now. She suddenly thought, all the people in the alley could hear. They would all know.

He slapped her left cheek again. This time he caught the edge of her jaw, a searing blow. A finger slipped down and caught her silk slip, tearing it at the frayed edge. She looked down to the side. The sergeant was now shouting at Ye-ye and the Capitaine yelled again, this time not words, a roar, and grabbed at the edge of her slip under her chin and pulled downwards. The thin material submitted easily and tore without a sound. He took his hand away, leaving her child's body exposed, her womanhood open. The old silk hung in a shred from her waist. The sergeant broke the moment's silence.

-My Capitaine, you learn well. So, old man?

She drew her arms up to cross over her breasts and looked over at Ye-ye. He was still in the same position, staring ahead, resting on his

stick. She saw only a small drop in the corner of his left eye. She listened to her breath, like she had been taught in classes, saw it drawing in clear thoughts and pushing out evil.

-No Ye-ye, she breathed. She could now look up at the Capitaine.

-Does the Capitaine have a daughter? she hissed in Mandarin. Does the Capitaine's daughter know what he does?

The Capitaine stood erect and stepped back, looking deep into her face, puzzled, as if somehow surprised at her defiance, as if he really expected her understanding. She understood all right.

-Eh bien, enough, we take her away, said the sergeant. Old man, I shall return and tell you what has happened to your whore.

The capitaine stood, searching La Chi's face.

-Capitaine, said the sergeant.

He did not move.

-My Capitaine, our job is not yet finished. Bring her!

No movement still. The sergeant raised his hand to La Chi's hair, took a handful and pulled her towards the doorway. The Capitaine still stared into the space left by her body. As she was dragged out, she managed a look over to Ye-ye. His eyes were half-closed, she would always remember the grief held in his face at that moment. She knew that whatever happened to her, it would not be as bad as the pain that he would suffer. In this moment of her greatest danger, she found herself wondering who would bring him his congee, how would he eat, who would wash him in the morning, kiss him goodnight. Her mother's face came back to her, her na-na, her friends, the nuns. None of them could help her or Ye-ye now. She saw the Capitaine's face, this time shouting at her, calling her whore, hitting out, angry, out of control, and she saw a little girl looking at her pa-pa spitting and hitting, standing crying as she watched.

In a flash, she felt herself at the centre of a whirlwind, the still, powerful heart, with all around clashing and storming. She knew with a deadly certainty that she was alone there, everything out of reach, nobody to call to, to rely on, that finally she would stand on her own.