



The morning had been slow. I spent it over a pot of *bo-nay* tea, examining a particularly fine set of cracks in the top of my wooden desk. Phyllis was gone for the day, getting her hangnail attended to. It wasn't until after lunch that things picked up. I could almost have called it busy.

Perfect set of abs

First through the door was Betty Corusca. Betty was a young fit girl who sold organic olive oil and spent a lot of time working out. But she'd been different at the last appointment; she looked drawn and pale. A few days before, she'd been side-swiped on her sales route, and got whiplash as a souvenir. She called it fluid on the neck, and she had a hard time

moving her head, especially to look up. The aching all over her back kept her awake, and by the time she saw me she was exhausted.

What really got to her, though, was the effect on her exercise program.

Her pulse was deep and choppy, her tongue unremarkable. So I'd used an injury formula my grandfather taught me, keeping the doses small to allow the herb effect to reach the upper body:

<i>Zì Rán Tóng</i>	10g Pyritum
<i>Sān Qī</i>	6g Notoginseng Radix
<i>Gǔ Suì Bǔ</i>	10g Drynariae Rhizoma
<i>Sān Léng</i>	6g Sparganii Rhizoma
<i>Piān Jiāng Huáng</i>	10g Curcumae Longae
<i>Sū Mù</i>	6g Sappan Lignum
<i>Dāng Guī Wei</i>	6g Angelicae Sinensis Radix rootlets
<i>Guì Zhī</i>	6g Cinnamomi Ramulus
<i>Yán Hú Suǒ</i>	6g Corydalis Rhizoma
<i>Sheng Huáng Qí</i>	12g Astragali Radix
<i>Xù Duàn</i>	10g Dipsaci Radix
<i>Yù Jīn</i>	6g Curcumae Radix
<i>Cu Bái Sháo</i>	10g Paeoniae Radix Alba, vinegar-fried
<i>Hóng Huā</i>	3g Carthami Flos

Today she bounced in smelling like freshly cut grass. I realised it was the olive oil.

"Betty, how're you doing?"

"Good, Mal. The neck's a lot better with those herbs."

"How much better?"

"Maybe 90 per cent." She looked smug. "I tested the neck with 50 sit-ups and did an almost perfect set of abs this morning! It was great."

Blood in the sunset

Next in line was a very worried Glenda Francis. She'd come in about her vaginal bleeding. Thing is, she was 72 years old. I frowned. That could be nasty. But the GP had done exhaustive checks, and nothing. And there was something else. I checked her file. She'd had a hysterectomy 25 years before.

I turned back to Glenda. "So when did you have this bleeding, and how long did it last?"

"About five weeks ago, for about two minutes."

"Any bleeding since?"

"None."

I sat back in my chair, relieved. This was nothing but ...

"Mal? My daughter says I'm crazy, but I think it was the sit-ups."

"What sit-ups?"

"I couldn't fit into a dress for a wedding, so I tried doing a few sit-ups."

Sit-ups again! "And the bleeding?"

"That happened a couple of minutes later."

I shook my head. "Glen, it was nothing but a little blood vessel you burst. It leaked out, healed up, and that's it."

If it hadn't been sit-ups, I thought, it would have been spicy food or something else unusual for her, just enough to cause a leaking capillary.

Glenda stood up. As she reached the door she turned back to me, a slight smile on her old face, her eyebrows lifted. She had a curious sparkle in her eye. "Mal, you know I've always wanted to ask, but who are those people in that photo?" She was pointing at my old family photo.

Oh brother, here we go again.

"That's my family."

"But ..."

"I know," I sighed. "Glen, I might not look it, but I am actually three-quarters Chinese ..." I was about to go into the family history, my Irish grandfather, his Chinese wife, my Chinese mother, but caught myself. It was no use.

Glenda smiled gently. "It's ok, Mal. I know marketing is everything nowadays." Then she looked concerned. "But you might try something a bit more plausible. Training at a secret monastery high in the Himalayas or something."

The longshoreman's digit

The last patient of the day wore a faded black tee-shirt that had a ship's wheel design, the edges of the short sleeves frayed over his pumped-up biceps. His leg tapped nervously as he looked out the window at the fading sun.

"Hi Jimmy. Don't tell me: you've been doing sit-ups, right?"

He looked puzzled as he stood up and fol-

lowed me into my office. "Sit-ups? Not since this."

He waved his hand in the air.

"So how is the finger?" I asked, as we sat down.

"Man! Gotta hand it to ya, dude."

"Why, did it fall off?" I said.

"Har har."

That was his type of joke, and I knew it.

Jimmy and I went way back. In the schoolyard and on the streets, Jimmy Dominguez had stepped in more than once to save my hide. I'd gone on to college. He went into the navy, and then became an active member of the militant Local 10.

Jimmy'd been in the week before, with intense pain from a broken finger, smashed on the dock. They'd removed the fingernail, but when the surgeon found they couldn't reconstruct the tip of the finger, they'd put a sort of thimble over it and replaced the nail. The pain, Jimmy said, had been excruciating. No drugs had helped, until they did a nerve block, an injection straight into each nerve that went to the fingertip.

That had lasted a short 12 hours.

"And when that wore off, it hurt like hell, I'm tellin' ya, Mal," he said. "I went back to the office, found the nurse and forced her to call the surgeon at home. Then the guy goes and says that nothin' can be done, except another nerve block, and that would be almost as painful, what with the nerve injections, and even then would only last another 12 hours." He rolled his eyes and shrugged. "When I saw you the next day, I was running on fumes, man. I hadn't slept all night."

I believed him. He'd looked about as good as last week's egg sandwich, the one you find in your lunchbox on Monday morning. I didn't rub it in.

"What about now? Getting much pain?"

"Not since those herbs. You know, I really didn't think they'd do a thing." He looked a bit sheepish. "I mean, they even gave me morphine after the operation, and that didn't stop the pain. But right with that first cup of your concoction it didn't hurt so much. Later I took another cup and the pain was gone."

I checked the prescription. It was another of my grandfather's injury formulas. The old man was on a roll.



It's trouble at the docks, Mal.

<i>Sān Qī</i>	6g Notoginseng Radix
<i>Dāng Guī Wei</i>	9g Angelicae Sinensis rootlets
<i>Chuān Xiōng</i>	6g Chuanxiong Rhizoma
<i>Zé Lán</i>	10g Lycopi Herba
<i>Hóng Huā</i>	3g Carthami Flos
<i>Yán Hú Suǒ</i>	12g Corydalis Rhizoma
<i>Jié Gěng</i>	6g Platycodi Radix
<i>Xī Yáng Shēn</i>	10g Panacis Quinquefolii
<i>Guì Zhī</i>	6g Cinnamomi Ramulus
<i>Sū Mù</i>	6g Sappan Lignum
<i>Yù Jīn</i>	6g Curcumae Radix
<i>Xù Duàn</i>	12g Dipsaci Radix

We were done. I shuffled his case notes into their file and half-stood. Jimmy's foot was still tapping nervously. I looked at it then sat down again.

"Ok, Jimmy. What's up?"

"It's trouble at the docks, Mal." He shook his head. "Something wrong. Especially with the new kid."

I looked down at my desk. "New?"

"Lamont, dude. You know Lamont."

I lifted my head. Fourth of July. Softball at the union picnic. "Oh yeah, he was the black kid that tapped me out at third." Tall, gangly; cocky smile as he straightened at the base. I nodded.

"That's him. I'm worried Mal. Haven't seen him for a couple of days. Missed his shift last night. You doin' anything right now?"

I wasn't. I locked the office and we rode up to North Point in Jimmy's old Chevy, and climbed two flights to Lamont's apartment. We knocked. After a minute, Jimmy tried the door. It opened a few inches, then stopped. He pushed again and the door bounced back gently. Something happened to Jimmy. The tough guy was gone. "You look, Mal."

I pushed the door and jammed my foot in the space to keep it open. Then I looked.

Lamont had his back against the door, propping it closed. His knees were up. He'd been beat up, bad enough that it was obvious even at that angle. It was also pretty obvious that he was dead.

"Jimmy, let's go."

"But what about Lamont?"

"Lamont doesn't care anymore."

We called the cops from a payphone down the street, then hung up.

We ordered coffee at a diner a few blocks away. Then I tackled him.

"Jimmy, what's this all about?"

He hesitated, then leaned forward and said in a low voice, "Couple of days ago, Mal, some guys came around to talk to Joey, you know, the union president. Leaned on him hard. Joey ain't no lily, but he was scared. And Joey ain't scared of nobody. Those guys who talked to him must be..." He shivered.

"What were they talking to him about?"

"Until we found Lamont, I didn't know. Now I do." He looked around. His voice was barely audible. "No one else knows, Mal, just me."

"Knows what?"

"I'll get to that." He sat back, his voice now normal. "Lamont was a good kid, I guess, honest enough, if you was his friend. But he'd heard about all this great stuff you could rip off."

He bit his lip and looked down. "It was me that told him, Mal. Should never have opened my big mouth. But I never expected ... he went and got into one of the containers, knocked off a new TV. He was bragging to me about it."

He folded his arms, turned his head and looked into the distance, took a rough breath.

Jimmy was taking it hard.

I said, to ease the tension, "I thought they were security-sealed. Customs and all."

He turned back to me, grateful. "They are. But the seal is on the lock. You just skip the lock and drill through the rivet to the door handle. You leave the whole seal intact and just open the door. Takes less than a minute. Once you're out with the stuff you put a new bolt through the rivet hole, touch it up with a bit of red paint and no one's the wiser ... at least till they open the container."

Jimmy tried to grin, but it didn't take. He leaned forward, took his head in his hands, spoke through them at the table. "But Lamont, he told me he found something weird ..."

His voice choked.

I waited for him to go on. He looked up and said quietly, "It was me that killed him, Mal."

I started.

He shook his head. "No, I don't mean it that way. I didn't kick him to death or do whatever it was that killed him. But it might as well have been me, ya know?"

His upper lip curled in disgust at himself. He stood up abruptly and walked across the floor of the diner to the window.

Outside, the night was as dark as night could be.

