

THE GIRL ON THE CONCRETE SLAB

FROM THE CASEBOOK OF MALORY CHAN

The red neon reflection on my wall flicked off. Hands cupped behind my head, I turned toward the window. Across the street, Eb was closing his pawnshop. I took my feet from the desk, leaned forward, and flicked a dead fly onto the floor. I stood and stretched, shoving the filing cabinet closed with an empty bang. I'd sent Phyllis home an hour early, the end of a slow day at the end of a slow week. Soon old Eb would be giving Grandpa's gold watch his bored look again.

THAT'S WHEN I heard the chair scrape the floor of the waiting room. I poked my head out, and there she was: tall, classy-looking, mid-twenties. Her clothes were good, but with that slight strain around the edges

that whispered clothes before rent.

She had come in about a month before. Pain in the abdomen, low and to the right, an intense throbbing dull ache, worse at the end of the day, and unbearable at the end of the week.

It was the end of the week.

"Lyla, how're you doing?"

"Not so good, Mal." She rose and followed me into my office. "The herbs don't seem to be doing much. I thought they were helping, at first, but the pain just keeps coming back."

No good

The first thing I'd tried was tonification, on the premise that pain increasing at the end of the day was pain getting worse as the energy and blood waned. When that did not help much, I gave her increasingly strong herbs, herbs that usually were quite effective for this type of pain, including a few tricks my grandfather had taught me. The combination of vinegar-soaked *Yan Hu Suo* (*Corydalis Rhizoma*) and *Wu Ling Zhi* (*Troglodytes Faeces*), wine-fried *Dang Gui* (*Angelica Sinensis Radix*), vinegar-prepared *Bai Shao* (*Paeoniae Radix Alba*) and dry-fried *Gan Cao* (*Glycyrrhizae Radix*). These were combined with qi and blood movers such as *Wu Yao* (*Linderae Radix*), *Xiang Fu* (*Cyperus Rhizoma*), dry-fried *Xiao Hui Xiang* (*Foeniculi Fructus*), *Tao Ren* (*Persicae Semen*), *Hong Hua* (*Carthami Flos*) and so on. Grandfather said that for right abdominal pain an old effective method was the combination of wine-fried *Da Huang* (*Rhei Radix Et Rhizoma*) and *Mu Dan Pi* (*Moutan Cortex*) which I had tried over the past few days, but it appeared from her face that this, too, had not worked.

I was missing something.

A deeper dig

"Ok, Lyla, let's start from the beginning. You said the pain began two months or so ago. It is there all the time, gets worse with your period. Periods are a bit late, a bit clotted, nothing remarkable, but the clots are medium-small, dark red, and shiny."

“Less clotting with the last period, Mal,” she said. Her eyes searched my face as if she felt bad for me that the herbs were not working.

“And you’ve had a couple of scans at the hospital.”

“Yes, and they found nothing.”

“But what happened two months ago, before the pain began?”

“What? Nothing. It just gradually came on. I first noticed it going home on the streetcar. It was a couple of weeks after I’d started my new job in Nob Hill.”

New job?

“An art gallery. Very up-market. They insist I dress like this. I’m more of a jeans and cowboy shirt girl. But they liked my fine arts degree.”

Her face spasmed. She pressed her right hand to her body, in front of her hip. She opened her eyes and looked at me apologetically.

“Sorry, Mal. Is there anything you can do for the pain? Like right now?”

The treatment

As she got herself organised in the treatment room I prepared the cones, rubbing the moxa between my hands, seeing in my mind’s eye the wrinkled hands of my grandfather making the same motions, time after time. Each of his cones would be perfect, finely textured, a little pyramid. He’d examine the collection in front of me and sigh. My cones made slag heaps look refined.

“*Yatding yeu wat, yeu dai di!*” he would say in his Sanwui dialect: no, must be smooth, must be big.

“Not big, no good,” he had said in English, to make sure I got it. Now I heard his voice every time I rolled moxa.

Having finished Lyla’s cones, I cut the fresh ginger, thick slices from a large root, big enough to fit the cones. I poked holes in the slices with a thin piece of wire. The cones and ginger slices were carried into the treatment room in a shallow wooden box, convenient for deployment.

After needling *Hegu* (LI-4), *Taichong* (LIV-3), *Sanyinjiao* (SP-6), *Diji* (SP-8) and the extra point *Zigong* on her abdomen, I lit a cone and placed it on the ginger, then used the same flame to warm the underside of the ginger slice somewhat so that it would

not be shockingly cold on the skin of her belly.

As the smoke from the cone curled upward, I asked her about her job.

“Oh, it is very interesting,” she said. “So many famous people come in. Last night we had a big opening for a show, a few celebrities were there.”

“Like who?”

“Well, the one I remember was Ed Carroll, you know, that district supervisor who is always in the news? He’s a friend of the owners. I remember because he was presented with one of our best Oriental pieces, and I had to handle the transaction. But the check was signed by Anthony Wu, the businessman. He was very charming.”

A flood of memories distracted me.

Taking my silence for disinterest, Lyla went on. “Anyway, the rest of the time my job is pretty boring. I just sit on my bench, do some paperwork and wait for people to come in.”

Getting to the bottom of it

The cone had almost burned down to the ginger. I told her that when it became hot she should tell me, and I would shift it. Then I said “A bench? Don’t you have a chair?”

“No, it’s a bench. Its starting to get hot now, Mal.”

I shifted the ginger slice with the red and smoking remnants of the moxa from *ah-shi* point to *ah-shi* point around the right hand lower abdomen, waiting for that point to become hot, then shifting it again. I could see the moxa oil and ginger juice becoming absorbed by the skin.

“That heat feels great, Mal. Gets right down to where the pain is.”

“How is the pain doing?”

“I can’t feel it now. That heat really helps.”

The cone burned out. I removed it and started a new one. Something nagged at me.

“So you have a desk, and the desk has a bench? Isn’t that a bit weird?”

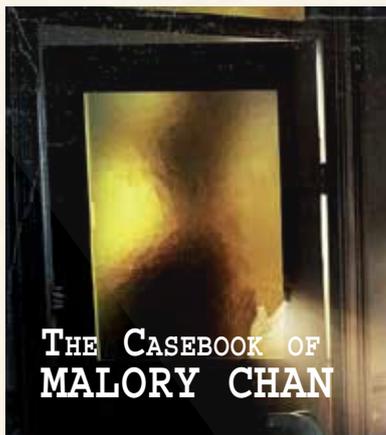
“You’d have to see the whole place, Mal. It is all raw concrete. Concrete walls, naked air ducts; my desk is concrete, my bench is concrete. That’s the look they want.”

“Sort of like they want you dressed up.”

“Yes. I just wish they’d let me have a cushion or something. That bench gets



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pretty hard after an hour or so.”

I must have heard wrong.

“You don’t have a cushion?”

“Nope.”

“You sit on the raw concrete?”

“Yep.”

“But, it’s like *winter* now.”

My voice must have betrayed my incredulity. She became apologetic again.

“I’ve asked them for one, and they say it would ruin the look. They don’t even have rugs on the floor.”

I was shaking my head. Unbelievable.

“Lyla, that’s where your pain is coming from.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the cold. Concrete just sucks the heat out of your body, even in summer. Chinese medicine knows that cold is active. It’s not simply a lack of warmth. This cold gets into your body, finds a place to hang out, and starts squeezing.”

She was quiet for a while. “You mean, all this pain I’ve been having is coming from my job?”

“Well, yeah. That’s probably why it is worse at the end of the day, and at its very worst at the end of the week.”

It is also why the clots were shiny. I kicked myself. Grandfather had told me that, and I’d forgotten: shiny clots meant cold, dry matte-surfaced clots meant heat.

“Those bastards are going to pay!” The voice was not that of quiet, classy, apologetic Lyla. This was pure she-wolf snarl. “I’ll sue their asses to hell and back.” She sat up. I scrambled to catch the burning cone, fumbled it into a porcelain cup, and got my other hand on her shoulder.

“Lyla, take it easy. Just lie back.”

Over the next half hour I got her calmed down and finished the cones. When she stood up, she pressed on her abdomen tentatively, then again more forcefully. She smiled.

“Feels pretty good, Mal.”

“Lyla, I think moxa will be the best treatment. Finish the herbs you have, but let’s concentrate on this approach. See you in a few days.”

Memory dump

After she left, it was time to go home. But

I didn’t. I brewed a pot of aged *bo-nay* tea, sat back at my desk, looked out at the dark street and thought of the charming businessman Anthony Wu.

Tony Wu. School-yard beatings. Lunch-money shakedowns. Once he had graduated to selling drugs out of his trunk in the high school parking lot, he’d moved out of my circle of personal experience. He moved into the circle of Triads, I heard, only to emerge a decade later as a pillar of the Chinese community. Now here he is charming young women and presenting district supervisors with expensive gifts. I shook my head. None of my business, and nothing to do about it even if it was. It was long past time to go home.

End of the line

Two weeks later, Phyllis popped her head around the door.

“Lyla’s here, Mal. She’s all square for those treatments, so if you don’t mind, I’ll hit the road.”

“Thanks, Phyl. Send her in. See you next week.”

In those two weeks, we had done four more moxa sessions with the big cones and ginger slices. The pain went each time, and stayed away longer. We’d stopped the herbs, and even the needles, relying solely on the moxibustion.

Lyla looked different in faded jeans and a vintage cowboy shirt.

“No more job?”

“No more job. They paid up, too.”

“Good for you. How’re you feeling, Lyla?”

“No pain at all since last treatment, Mal. It’s incredible, when I think how bad it was.”

I told her that we were done, as long as there was no sign of the pain returning; she thanked me, and left happy.

It was a mild night. I stepped outside for some fresh air. Old Eb across the street was closing. He looked over at me hopefully, but I just waved.

