

The Damo Staff Story

Preface:

This story was created by Tse Qigong Centre student, Caroline Forbes. It is woven around the names of the Chun Yuen Quan form, Damo Staff, and was inspired by her own practise of the Chun Yuen skills.

Seaside towns have a tidal flow about them, an energy born when sea meets earth and sky together and all three observe the goings-on of people drawn to live on their perilous borders. Cities, on the other hand, are giant whirlpools, sucking everything into a maelstrom of life and colour. People seldom know what they are about when they stray from one to the other.

One such person was Ruby Pike. A woman, as they say, of a certain age. Actually that is only what Ruby would say. To everyone else Ruby was just old. Proper old. Eighty years? Maybe more, who knows. It is simply not polite to ask a woman like Ruby Pike how old she is. She had lived in the seaside town her whole life. Had grown up with a father who fished for crabs to sell in the market, had married Jack who rowed the ferry across the river.

Neither man had lasted past fifty as they both spent most of their time in the pub, but she had not wept much. There were only less clothes to hang out in the small back garden, less mess to tidy, less noise and clatterings about at the weekend. But it must be said, there was not less love as that had always been in short supply for Ruby. Now Ruby had been alone for so long she was as comfortable with it as mustard with sausages. She missed no-one, wanted no-one, needed no-one. Or so she thought.

She lived in a flint cottage overlooking the putting green, where summer visitors idled afternoons away that were too blowy for the beach. She had become a feature of the town, like the pier or the little art deco cinema. Her life had taken up a shape, like a mattress moulding itself to the same body. It was not exactly that she did the same every day. Some days she walked the beach path, some days she idled along the main street to window shop the cheeses in the delicatessen. On Wednesdays she always went to the cafe for tea and toasted teacakes, and a gossip with Florrie Manchester who lived above the fish and chip shop. It was just that the energy was always the same. Ruby's pace did not quicken and neither did her pulse. Ruby was one of life's observers, is what Florrie said if you asked her. Someone to whom not much happened. And Florrie was right. To all appearances Ruby's life was ambling downhill with a walking stick and a tartan shopping trolley, fading away till it would gently disappear beneath the horizon.

But if an Indian monk can walk all the way to China to bring Chan Buddhism to the Shaolin Temple with only a staff for his support and protection, we must not make

too many judgements about what Ruby Pike might do with a tartan shopping trolley and a walking stick.

In the end she blamed it all on Florrie Manchester because it was Florrie who had persuaded her to book the day trip to the city in the first place. Florrie was always trying to get Ruby to do more and Ruby's policy was to give in once every three tries, just to keep her happy. And then Florrie had had to cancel at the last minute because her dog ate five fish suppers put aside for a family from Newport and needed Florrie's constant attention.

But although Ruby humphed when Florrie rang to confess she couldn't make it, she could also feel a little frissance of excitement. A trip to the city on her own. It must have been years since she'd been. So, on the morning of the trip, she buttoned her coat - All women in Ruby's kind of seaside town wore sensible button up coats whatever the weather - and walked along to the bus stop. She was in a ready standing position for the number 53 long before it arrived. She kept a tight grip on her stick, feeling its staff Qi rising up inside her. Ruby Pike is having an adventure she thought, and not before time.

The bus arrived and with a lightness of step and a Liao of her stick, she almost sprang on board, stowing her shopping trolley in the rack next to the driver and claiming a window seat. The conductor smiled and said good morning as he clipped her ticket. And, before you wonder about a bus with a real live conductor, in fact a conductor with the presence, fortitude and courage of a Jin Gang guarding the Buddha, remember we are in the world of our heart's own seaside. Here all buses have conductors.

When Ruby turned around back to the coast she saw a small child waive up to the Jin Gang conductor holding his position proudly. A little Louhan waiving his arm in a left and right Liao, proud of a father who can turn his body and sweep the root of danger from his life.

The bus was half empty. Because why would you leave the seaside town for the city unless you had to. There was a family behind Ruby with teenagers who moaned about everything making Ruby cluck in annoyance.

'Young people these days.' Was what she thought, as though she had never been young herself. In front of her she could see the smooth bald head of an older man whose body sat easily in his seat and rocked gently with the rhythm of the bus. Had Ruby known it was Wu Chun Yuen would that have made her journey any different? He knew she was there of course, that is how things are.

As the bus turned inland, Ruby's view changed from a gentle sea of blue and green to an industrial sea of yellow rape seed and purple sugar beet. There were few hedges running between the fields and everywhere were great yellow combines and tanks of chemicals and fertilizers. Ruby knew this wasn't how the countryside should look. And if the countryside was this changed then what would the city be like? She began to feel a little uneasy as to what she had done. When a storm blew up from

nowhere, thunder hitting the ground and the rain pouring down she closed her eyes. Not looking was one of Ruby's favourite ways of dealing with life.

Only when the bus stopped with a jerk like a Weito benging his staff did she wake. They were in the centre of the great old city and everyone else was filing excitedly off the bus. Ruby saw the family get off and the teenagers run straight for a McDonalds as though in fear for their lives. She clucked again. The old man in front of her got off. She could see now that he was holding the hand of a little girl who turned and smiled such a smile at Ruby that she could not resist smiling back. The Jin Gang conductor collected her trolley and, as he helped her down the two steps to the pavement, he wound two sprigs of honeysuckle round her walking stick.

' Treat that stick like a Two Steps Flower Staff in the city.' He said, stamping his foot as though testing the ground. 'In this place you need all the protection you can get.' With that he was back on the bus and pulling away. And Ruby wished with all her heart that she was with him. Reluctantly she set off across the bus depot to see what she could see.

Now we must leave Ruby and travel far across town. To where the pavements are cracked and rubbish clogs the drains. Ricky was running. He was too terrified to see the monkey king looking back as he dashed across the waste ground and cut down past the shops. All he knew was that running away was the best solution. Fear coursed through his blood making him reckless in his escape. He was not calm enough to sit with Guan Yin on lotus or disciplined enough to take orders from Guan Yu guarding the position.

All he could think about was the gang on his heels. 'Wait' cried Guan Yu, 'At least take this' And he threw Ricky a tall wax wood staff. 'One kick, catch staff and go.' He cried as the boy grabbed the staff and headed for the town centre. Guan Yu watched after him, reassured to see the spirit of the monkey king jump over a bollard and follow the fleeing youth.

Guan Yu's staff did bring a new energy to Ricky's feet. But, as he rounded the corner, he could feel a spiral wind coming from the ground. The gang were catching up fast and with the storm breaking over his head again and thunder hitting the ground he knew he was in big trouble.

Which, we have to say, was nothing new for Ricky. He was still young, only just out of school and had found no path for himself in life. His father was nowhere, leaving his mother struggling to look after him and give him structure. Weito benged the staff many times in their little flat but Ricky was too wild to listen. When a boy is like this no-one can keep the back door safe. Not even the monkey king jumping over the clouds is enough to hold him down. Ricky was a ball of fire, a rush of unstoppable energy, and, as is often the case, energy that had taken him into a world of petty crime. His mother had known that if he didn't turn around and sweep the root, if he didn't turn around and block the demon three times then a greater foe would turn the hands and hit the opponent's head. It had been a nightmare she hugged to herself in the small hours in the nights when he had not come home.

But now even his mother was gone. Not all stories can end happily and the day after he left school he came home to a small note propped on the kitchen table. He could stay in the flat but she could no longer cope with him. She said she would pray he would change the body and Chan Za. She said he needed help, he needed guidance from someone like Jin Gang holding the staff. But that she could no longer be there for him. At the time he cried in his room, buried his face in his faded Superman duvet cover. And then he went out, stole a BMW and blamed his mother. His gang became everything, but the day he didn't play their game he became nothing, he became prey.

Ricky hurtled through the city centre. With a back kick and a lift of the staff he was past the old man selling socks outside the railway station. A front kick and change to his shoulder and he was down the alley by the supermarket and into the main square. He felt as though he was flying, his trainers barely touched the ground, and with the Buddha pushing his staff onwards he was suddenly right in the middle of the square.

Where there were some solid oak park benches. The kind of benches favoured by older people enjoying the gentle warmth of summer. The kind of bench favoured by Ruby Pike who was currently ensconced on one, eating an egg and cress sandwich, her shopping trolley at her side.

Let's get it straight here and now. Ruby did not mean to trip Ricky. Ruby did not mean her walking stick to catch his flying feet making a big wheel to turn his body. In fact no-one was more surprised than her when Ricky's accidental cart-wheeling carried him across the bench. He came around with cause and effect; turned around and around, till gravity finally took it's course and he collapsed at her feet. If Ricky was more surprised, which he well might be, he never said

Looking back it was like a magic catch. There are times when things come together as they should. And this was one of those. Wind blows, leaves fall and sometimes lives can change. As a bruised, shocked Ricky faced a highly perturbed Ruby it was a chance, like a game of dice where they had two turns and could go back again.

'Beng, Chan, Shau and Za!' Yelled Ricky, part wanting to cry with pain, part feeling the humiliation of his fall, but mostly furious as he struggled to his feet. His favourite T-shirt was ripped, his knees bruised and bloody.

'Don't you speak to me like that, young man,' retorted Ruby. She was from a seaside town, remember, she was used to wind, lightening, rain and thunder. She was not going to let the antics of this young tyke trouble her.

'You have no idea what you've done.' He shouted at her, seeing the gang heading across the square. He tried to run but cried out as soon as he put weight on his ankle.

'Come and sit by me,' said Ruby, because she did feel bad about the accident and wanted to make some small amends. 'Have a sandwich,' said Ruby, because, when she looked, he was one of those piece of string boys, and she always wanted to feed them, like she fed the birds in her little garden at home. 'I'm afraid you've just done a one kick ground sweep and I don't think you'll be going anywhere for a little while.

'You don't get it, you silly old woman, there are ten thousand things needing to look back. Over there!' Ricky pointed across the square past the fountain as he ducked down behind the bench.

And this time Ruby did look. What she saw was a motley group of lads wearing those zippy things with hoods, and jeans that looked like they were just about to fall down round their ankles. She picked up her walking stick and made one point, turned round and Za'ed at the group. 'Aha,' she said, in a slightly ominous tone, 'is that the problem?'

Since she had got off the bus Ruby had had an eye-opening visit...even for a woman with a strategy for closing her eyes to avoid anything unpleasant. But you couldn't do that in the city or you would hit a building, or a car, or any number of shops and street signs, or people selling everything under the sun. At home she would sit on the bench at the seafront and doze, missing the children stealing from the ice cream man. She would close her eyes at the bus stop to avoid the smile of Lev who sold a magazine made by homeless people. Because she did not want the peace of her tidal home disturbed. Things could go on under the waves but Ruby did not want to know about them.

But in the city she had seen people begging in the street, and young girls shouting with loud empty mouths, and enough dirt and rubbish to sink a battleship. And she couldn't close her eyes, and she couldn't look away from the crying of children dragged round supermarkets, and the tired women and sad lost men of the city. She had tried to enjoy her window shopping but then all she saw was more things and gadgets and knick-knacks than the world could ever need. All in one shopping precinct.

Though, she had loved the two men singing and doing strange acrobatics by the tube station, and had stood for ten minutes or more watching them. Wang Ping and Wu Ren were not performing for money but just for the joy of summer. Ruby could not understand why no-one stopped to applaud them as she did. It was all too much for her.

She knew she would not come to the city again. She felt lost in the jungle of its buildings, confused by its streets, harassed by its people flowing everywhere. It had shaken her and she had returned to the square with her sandwich to wait for the bus.

And now this young creature, this beautiful boy with his flying feet and wild brown eyes had crashed into her reality. His fear was hitting her like a cold wet towel and

she could feel a tide of fury rising inside her, like Jin Gang holding the Staff ready to defend the Buddha.

Ricky could not believe what happened next. In fact in future years when he told this story to his friends and family he often found himself changing little bits, as we do when we want things to sound less fantastical. But truth was, Ruby grabbed her honeysuckle walking stick like a flower staff and took seven steps towards the gang. Of course they didn't even see an old person like her. That is the truth in the city. But when her left-right heat and thunder grew closer the boy at the front suddenly took notice.

He laughed back to his mates and they all pointed at Ruby, ignoring the Beng, Chan Jie of her walking stick. Which was a mistake. Because sometimes in the world, when an old woman who has finally decided that her life must start and makes one strike against ten thousand, the heavens will turn around to balance the scales. And, as Ricky watched amazed, she was joined by the monkey king who turned his staff and hit the head of the leading boy, making him retreat swearing loudly. And, as Ruby's just fury roared across the square, General Guan Yu arrived to turn round with the scales; stepping back to sweep the legs away of two more thugs threatening to attack Ruby.

Ruby herself was not shy of entering the fray, dealing a neat waist level hit to a sour-faced lad who came at her with a knife. As he doubled up the monkey king stepped forward and, almost casually, dropped his staff across the boy's behind and sent him packing. When Wang Ping and Wu Ren swept up on the left flank the gang knew they were history.

It was all over in a flash and Ruby, Ricky, General Guan Yu, Wang Ping, Wu Ren and the Monkey King was soon sitting on the bench sharing a flask of tea and a packet of digestive biscuits from the tartan shopping trolley. Ruby had never met a general, let alone seen the magic tricks of the Monkey King. Her trip to the city had taken on a new and wonderful aspect.

Ricky lay back on the bench and kicked up to the sky. White clouds scudded across as he felt his life turn. He sat up to see Jin Gang holding the staff. Except it wasn't, it was a funny little old lady in a buttoned-up coat holding a walking stick. She was about the most un-cool Jin Gang look-a-like you could imagine. He laughed out loud and then Ruby laughed with him, and between them they made a big tornado kick of giggles. Just like you get in the very best of families where everyone is safe and there is toast and marmite for tea.

By the time the bus came and the wind and rain was falling from the sky it had become the obvious thing to do. Ricky had limped back to his flat for a carrier bag of clean underwear at Ruby's insistence, General Guan Yu had escorted Ruby to the bus depot while the Monkey King checked that the gang was well and truly dispersed.

Then Ricky and Ruby climbed on board and the General and the Monkey King did their most fabulous heaven staff earth sweeping kick in farewell as the bus pulled away. Ruby craned her head and saw, suddenly standing next to them, the old gentleman, Wu Chun Yuen and the little girl, both waving goodbye. And when she looked down the flowers on her stick had changed into the most beautiful of orchids. She smiled and settled into her seat. The trip had worked out better than she could have possibly imagined.

Sitting side by side, the energy of the new grandmother mixed with the calm of the new grandson, and they were both aware of the enormity of what had happened. They had been so empty and scattered, like the chaff blowing across the fields they drove through. An old woman who had never experienced anything of love and a young man already scared by the sorrow of life.

As they passed the little child waving to his conductor father, still the faithful Louhan holding his position, they knew they could hold and support each other. Without speaking Ruby knew that Ricky would make her decaying years sweet with life and laughter. And, as Ricky caught his first glimpse of the beautiful blue sea stretching into an endless future, he knew that his wildness had finally found a home.

'So, you had a successful trip then' said Florrie Manchester who had come to meet the bus outside the Rose and Crown. She was eyeing Ricky with interest as he collected the staff from the conductor. Ruby just smiled and nodded. 'See you Wednesday,' is all that she said.

These days Ruby and Ricky are out on the beach most mornings, their staffs swooping and swinging as they seek the peace of nothingness where sea meets sky and earth.

By Caroline Forbes
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