



## Without a Father

by Carolyn Cooper

"A father without a father  
Has difficulty balancing.  
A master without a master  
is dangerous."

We look up to our parents, our teachers, and our leaders with trust and expectation. Their responsibility is to guide us, educate us, and even make judgments on our behalf when circumstances are uncertain. Ultimately, they are to bring us to the point where we can make our own decisions, based on the wisdom that they have helped us develop ...

Deng Ming-Dao  
, *365 Tao Daily Meditations*

Peter Caine closed the last file and set aside his pen with finality, but with little satisfaction. His report was finished, but not complete. It would never be complete. He could never set down a police record of those twenty-four hours. Certainly, not to Captain Simms. Certainly, not now.

Outside, from the street far below, came the scream of brakes followed by the gut-wrenching thud of one piece of steel slamming into another. Two years ago, Peter would have been on his feet, calling it in, even as he raced to the accident scene. But now he simply turned toward the window, listening, waiting, until moments later he heard the siren's approach and turned back to his paperwork. A phrase leaped forward from the lessons of his childhood. "Though a mountain should fall at his feet, he who is one with the Tao will be unmoved." What was that from? The Seven Taoist Masters? The Jade Emperor's Mind Seal Classic? Cultivating Stillness? He should know this. But he didn't. And it didn't matter anyway. Peter suspected he was not so much "flowing with the Tao" as numbed from the emotional and psychological rapids it had carried him through in its hellbent race for an unknown, unknowable destiny. So much had happened in the last two years, perhaps too much.

He took a deep breath of the stale air of his apartment and stood, stretching the way a cat stretches after prolonged rest, extending his pressed spine to its fullest, arching stiff muscles, even yawning wide revealing all his bright white teeth. He rubbed his weary eyes, pressing hard as if to rub away the vision that floated before him in the darkness of his closed eyes, of his dreams, of his mind. He didn't want to sleep. The dreams would come. He didn't want to stay awake. The thoughts would come.

Reflexively, he glanced at the wastebasket. It, the paper, sat there, crushed into a tight hard ball, absorbing his anger as it had absorbed his tears. First had come the fear, but during those strange events in Shambhala there had been time for little else but focus on the here and now. So much happening, so much to absorb and accept without question. He became like that piece of paper in the wastebasket, a conduit for pain or joy, good or evil. Not of itself good or evil, but simply there, like the Tao. Peter knew that was how he should treat the paper. But he couldn't. Like the Tao, it was everywhere, a part of him that he could not deny or ignore.

For minutes that seemed forever, Peter had hated that piece of paper.

But that had come later. After the pain. After the anger. After the tears.

Peter went to a drawer and pulled out a candle, chunky, white, and hard. His nails bit into the wax as he placed it in a holder. He lit it and then went about the apartment turning off switches until the candle was the only light remaining. The scent of burning wax following him, filling him with old memories, pushing out the new. Thoughts of candlelight and the scent of burning wax and incense, of the sounds of male voices repeating rote in a sing-song pattern, of gongs and drums and bells, a longing he'd suppressed for many years and yet he knew would never die enveloped Peter. He could no more lose "gentleness overcomes



strength" than Mary Margaret could lose "Our Father who art in Heaven." The lessons of our childhood are buried deep within us. Peter realized he could either flee from his roots or embrace them, but he could never destroy them without destroying his spirit.

Peter sat upon his sofa, legs crossed under in a half-Lotus , what the Western children called Indian-style , and stared at the flame. Time passed in the silence of the apartment. Or near silence, Peter noted, for you can never find true silence in a city this size or in an apartment complex as large and active as his. He could hear the water running as a neighbor started a shower; the flush of a toilet; the roar of a plane as it drew close, circled and moved away again; the slamming of a door to shut out others. The normal sounds of normal people living normal lives. And in that moment Peter knew, well and truly knew in the depths of his soul, his life would never be like theirs. It had never been and never would be. It was not his destiny. And for just a moment, one last, small cry of rebellion came from his heart. He could have a normal life, quiet, mundane with wife, family and golf with the guys , a regular life, without guns or battles, mercenaries or monks, mysteries or mysticism. He only had to walk away.

Like Paul Blaisdell.

A shock sparked in Peter's heart. Some bitterness lingered and Peter tasted the bile of his own petty jealousy and anger. He had taken his pain to Paul. He had confided his own confusion and fears. Why couldn't Paul come to Peter? Why didn't Paul offer the same trust? Maybe then Peter would have a clue as to why. And some hope of destroying the guilt in his heart, the sense that somehow he should have known, should have felt Paul's agony and doubt, should have found the right words, the right gesture to help him. Reason labeled these feelings and fears absurd. If Annie could not help Paul come to terms with his demons, what chance did Peter have? This was Paul's battle. Paul's path. But his heart knew no reason. Peter could only sit helpless and hope the path would some day lead Paul back into his life. At least Paul had said his goodbye in person.

Unlike Peter's father.

Peter glanced again at the wastebasket. The letter sat there. Each word another nail in Peter's own personal crucifixion. (Alternative: Each word another stroke in Peter's personal flagellation.) He was a grown man. He was strong. What was one more response in the litany of loss in Peter's life, of lovers, of friends, of co-workers...of family? Peter thought again of Paul Blaisdell. For sixteen years he had been the mooring in Peter's often stormy life. No lessons, no judgment, no testing, simply an open ear and sheltering embrace. Twice before when the rope to Peter's past was released, Paul had been there to help Peter ride the tempest, to guide him safely to shore. And now he was gone.

And now he was going. Again.

The melted candlewax spilled over, scarring the table top. Peter stared at it for a moment, then closed his eyes. The letter arose like a specter in the darkness, the large, open, sweeping handwriting that looked more like Chinese calligraphy than cursive, fading in and out of focus. He didn't need to see the words. He knew them now by heart.

The rage erupted once more. Peter's eyes snapped open and he reached out and crushed the candle flame with his hand as he had seen his father do, savoring the momentary flash of heat and pain. His hand rested for several seconds on the extinguished candle stub. His eyes adjusted to the faint illumination offered by the city lights peeking through the blinds, turning the objects in the apartment to outline and shadow. Peter lifted his hand and set it back in his lap, absently picking the dried wax from his palm. As quickly as the anger flared, it died. A deadness followed, a feeling of nonfeeling, like the flesh around a trauma wound; the nerves severed to allow the heart and mind to survive, to accept the inconceivable.

Peter sat in the darkness for a for a very long time, the minutes turning to hours unnoticed. He thought he'd dozed off at one point, but conscious of every sound, every breath, he realized he'd been meditating. Something else ingrained in childhood, another legacy from his father. As dawn broke, Peter unfolded his legs and silently showered, shaved and dressed for work. He picked up his files and his report, his glance falling once again upon the wastebasket. He stood staring for a moment, then put the paperwork back down and bent to pick the crumbled ball from the debris. Carefully, Peter unfolded the letter, smoothing it as best he could. Once again he read it. Then he placed it resolutely beside the candle on the table. Peter spotted the hardened wax on the tabletop beside the letter and dug his nails under it, pulling it up, and with it a small patch of the varnish, marring the table forever.



Peter sighed, tossed the wax and bit of veneer at the trash. He missed. The hardened fleck bouncing into the carpet, buried in the fibers. Peter ignored it. The cleaning lady would vacuum it up. He picked up his folders and headed for the door with resignation. He anticipated a very long day.

"... But the potential for abuse and mistakes is very great. What person can be right all the time? A simple lapse at the wrong time can cause confusion, psychological scars, and even great disaster."

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, *365 Tao Daily Meditations*