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Frank Brennan  
Excerpt  
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## Quick Man Tan

Everybody called him 'Quick Man Tan' when he was a young man. That was a long time ago. Now people called him by his real name – Caleb Tan.

Caleb liked to talk about the old days. He talked to anybody who was interested. He told them that when he was younger he could catch a fly in his hand.



That was how quick he was. Sometimes tourists came to his café for coffee or maybe some chicken with rice. When they had a meal was best. Then Caleb had more time to tell them how quick he once was. 'I was the best,' he told them. And, just to show them, he moved his hands in the air. He moved like the fighters in *kung fu* films.

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‘Nobody could fight like me,’ he always said. ‘I was the best in Singapore.’ But he wasn’t very quick now. He still knew what to do, but he was slower.

Usually, people smiled at him and finished their chicken with rice. But sometimes someone told Caleb he was a stupid old man. At those times he went back into the kitchen and May May, his wife, talked to them. ‘Please don’t mind my husband,’ she laughed to them. ‘He just likes to think of the old days. He *was* good when he was young. But he’s old now. He forgets . . .’ She laughed, but she didn’t feel happy.

Caleb Tan was seventy years old. He had photographs of the Chinese Lion Dance all over the walls of his café. He was once a lion dancer himself. He danced with the best. He *was* the best. Everyone said so. Years ago, everybody wanted Quick Man Tan to dance the Lion Dance for them. It was their favourite dance and Caleb could dance it better than anybody else. At Chinese New Year he was everybody’s favourite dancer. He danced under a big Chinese Lion’s head made of paper. He moved his feet in a quick and beautiful way that everybody loved.

Then, after the dance, he did some fight moves. They looked like dances, too.

Caleb loved all the moves. But most of the fighting he did was in his head. He thought about fighting but he didn’t often fight. He really could fight with his hands and feet. But he didn’t fight very often. Only once or twice. That was enough for Caleb. He preferred to dance. He didn’t really like fighting people. But he *did* like talking about it.

That was what he liked to do now – talk about the old

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days. The café was his business but all Caleb wanted to do was talk. As he got older, his hearing got worse and his voice got louder.

Caleb talked to anybody who wanted to listen. Sometimes he talked when people didn't really want to listen. May May knew that most of the things he said were not true. But Caleb believed it all. It was more real to him than his business was. To Caleb, his café was just a place where he could tell stories. But May May knew they needed the café. It made them just enough money to live on.

Sometimes Caleb did a Lion Dance with children who were interested. He was slow, but you could see how good he once was. All the children liked to see the old man. He was something from the old days. There were not many like him around now.

\* \* \*

Chinese New Year was always a busy time for everybody. It was one of the few times of the year when the café could do good business. May May worked more than ever at New Year. This year she really wanted Caleb to help her. She couldn't do everything. Sometimes people left the café after waiting too long for their food. All Caleb did was talk. People wanted their coffee and lunch, not his stories.

For Caleb, Chinese New Year was his favourite time. He had lots of people to listen to his stories. Sometimes other Lion Dancers came to the café. Then he shouted with happiness as he told them how to dance. And, of course, how he could dance better than anybody else.

'You see, my friends,' called out Caleb to a table full of bored tourists, 'it's all in the way you move. Like a circle,

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like a wheel – like this . . .’ And Caleb then turned round with his hands in front of him. His hands went right into May May and what she was carrying. The food was for a table full of tourists next to him. Everything fell to the floor. May May did her best to help the tourists but they left. Other people left, too. For once, Caleb was quiet and helped her.

May May was unhappy.

‘It’s not right!’ May May told her husband that night. ‘While you tell your stories I do all the work! There is too much for me and Henry to do.’

Henry was the cook. He was also their only son. He cooked everything. He was very good, but he had a lot to do in the kitchen. He needed someone to help him.

Henry dreamed of having the café to himself one day. He was already forty years old and still not married. There was no wife to help. There were no grandchildren to do little jobs. There was not enough money to pay for help.

Henry was a little like his father. He had his dreams. But he kept his dreams about the café to himself. In his head, he was always far away while he worked.

But now Henry was asleep. He couldn’t hear his parents shouting. He couldn’t hear Caleb tell May May to be quiet. He couldn’t hear the hurt in his mother’s voice. All Henry could hear was the sound of cooking in his dreams.

\* \* \*

The words *Gong Xi Fa Chai* were written in red and yellow letters all over Singapore. This was Chinese for ‘Happy New Year’. Sometimes old friends of Caleb and May May left *hong bao* in the café at this time. *Hong bao* are little red

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bags, usually with money inside. People always did this at Chinese New Year. Sometimes people left money, sometimes not. But they always left something. Poorer friends left oranges in place of money. Oranges are lucky. But May May was pleased when they got money. They always needed money. This year they got a lot of oranges.

Henry and May May wanted the café to do well this New Year. Henry worked very hard. He cooked more good food than he usually did. Lots of people came to the café. And Caleb couldn't talk to *all* of them. May May smiled a lot. She was busy but she was happy. Maybe business was getting better after all.

This time, Caleb *did* try to help. He brought coffee and food to the tables. He smiled as he worked. But then a young father with his children asked about the Lion Dance photographs on the walls. Caleb stopped what he was doing. He started to talk. May May heard him but she couldn't stop him. She was too busy. She wanted Caleb to get back to work before he did anything stupid.

It was early afternoon and there were lots of hungry people in the café. It was hot. But that didn't stop the rain. The rain started all at once. It came down and down on the roof of the café and made a loud, heavy sound. More people came in. They wanted to get out of the rain and have something to eat or drink. Caleb was happy. He could tell his stories while people stayed out of the rain. They could enjoy a good story while they ate their lunch. Why not? He thought it was good for business.

A young father and his two small children listened as Caleb talked. And talked. And talked. They were getting hungry. Caleb started to show them moves from the Lion