MY QUINN LEE STORY

Bridgit M. Burke

An early childhood development expert would tell you that the most important developmental years for a child are from birth to age three, but for me the most important years were from age four to eleven. That was when I knew my father. My father was a biochemistry professor at Southampton College who loved to sail. He often took me out of the house at sunrise when my mother and six brothers and sisters were all sleeping to walk on the beach with the sweet smell of beach-plum roses in the air. Those were the years that when I asked him for money for a school trip, he told me to ask my teacher,

“What are the poor kids suppose to do?”

One Saturday, he took me to a Vietnam War demonstration in Central Park. One Sunday, he sat beside me during my first Holy Communion mass and joked about how bad the host tasted. He only went to church to celebrate a family occasion like a wedding or communion. Usually my mother sat next to him and this silenced his tongue. On this Sunday, however, my mother was sitting in the pew behind us with my twin sister.

My father loved all kinds of food. He could make the best tomatoes and meat sauce that I have ever had. If my parents did not go out on a Friday night, we had Tootsie roll night. It was a night full of lox, bagels and cream cheese with Tootsie rolls for dessert. Each year on the day after Thanksgiving he took the nine of us to New York City’s China Town. After we ate our dinner, he bought us elephant ears for dessert.

But, perhaps the most important thing, which my father did for me during that time, was to tell me the story of Quinn Lee. I look back at those years and it is not hard for me to understand how I came

---

1 In 2002, this prose won Second Place. The author would like to dedicate this story to her father, who prepared her for life and death, and to her sons, through whom her father lives on.

2 Professor Burke is an Assistant Clinical Professor at Albany Law School. Also, Professor Burke has been a Director for the Civil Rights and Disability Law Project which educates law students while providing protection and advocacy to individuals with developmental disabilities.
to be a clinical professor at a small law school in New York. Although it is clear that my father’s early messages of social justice played a major role in establishing my values and professional calling, it was really the story of Quinn Lee that provided me with the most important lesson of all. I could not have imagined as an eight-year-old girl the importance of that story. In truth, like many stories that are told over and over again, the Quinn Lee stories I heard back then changed with each telling.

My father, William Thomas Burke Jr., was the only child of Mavis (Quinn) Burke and William Thomas Burke Sr. He was born in 1926 in Rochester, New York. His maternal grandparents, Anne (Brown) Quinn and John Quinn, raised three daughters, Mavis, Louise and Flora and three sons, John, George and Walt. William Senior’s parents had come from Ireland. He spent most of his time at his pub telling his stories and listening to the stories of the clientele.

An Irish heritage was clearly passed onto me with my hazel eyes, reddish brown hair and a white freckled face, not to mention my name Bridgit Mavis Burke. But as an eight-year-old, I did not pay attention to such details.

My father liked to tell me all about my ancestors. He told me that John Quinn’s real name was Quinn Lee and that Quinn Lee was in the Chinese Mafia. Quinn Lee had lived with my father as a child until the man with the black glove had taken him away. When he was a child, Quinn Lee had warned him that the man with the black glove might come. Quinn Lee told him to be on the lookout for the Olivrine. Throughout my childhood Quinn Lee’s adventures were relayed to me. In one story the Olivrine tried to capture Quinn Lee when he was sailing from China to America. Quinn Lee escaped by diving into the sea and surfing to shore on the back of a harpooned whale. In each of these stories the mysterious villain, the man with the black glove, was directing the Olivrine to capture Quinn Lee and return him to untold horrors.

As you can imagine, these stories had quite an impression on me. An impression, which was only made stronger, by my father’s tendency to warn me to watch out for the Olivrine or the man with the black glove when I was wandering out of his sight or engaged in an activity for which he believed a cautionary tale was needed.
The story also created quite an impression on my third grade teacher. Mrs. Lynch was teaching us what it meant for the United States to be a melting pot, when she asked if any of us knew what countries our relatives were from originally. My hand immediately shot up. When called upon, I shared that my relatives were from China.

Mrs. Lynch responded with a hesitant stare and then with a patient tone she asked, “What makes you think that your relatives came from China, Bridget?”

“My grandfather, Quinn Lee, was in the Chinese Mafia and was kidnapped by the man with the black glove”, I earnestly replied.

At that, Mrs. Lynch let it go and moved on to Kim Baker, a creepy girl that sat behind me and liked to play in the coffins at her family’s funeral parlor and home.

For American Chinese relations, the years 1969 to 1973 were fairly significant as well. The Chinese Cultural revolution came to an end in 1969. Despite the Cold War and our war in Vietnam, Nixon decided to establish relations with the Peoples Republic of China in 1969. In 1971, the State Department put an end to restrictions on U.S. travel to the Peoples Republic of China and the United States lifted a 21-year embargo on trade with that country. The People’s Republic of China was voted in as a member of the United Nations and Taiwan was expelled. George Bush, Sr., as the U.S. ambassador to the UN, unsuccessfully tried to convince the other members of the UN that both Chinese nations should be allowed to be members.

Even before Nixon’s 1972 trip to China, the American Ping Pong team’s invitation to China was described by Time Magazine as the “Ping heard around the world.” Although Nixon’s resignation and Ford’s presidency slowed improved relations down, by 1979, the United States and China established full diplomatic relations. I have no way of knowing if all of this drove my father to strengthen the ties that my family had with the Chinese people, but I suspect that it did.

I have forgotten many of the details of my childhood. Perhaps I only remember Ms. Lynch because she called our home and questioned my mother about my imagination. My class participation was shared with my father, three older brothers, two older sisters and my twin. My father praised me for telling the truth.
I will never forget, however, that when I was in fifth grade, college students from China came to visit Southampton College. My father acted as their host. When they came to our house for a barbecue, they presented my mother with a pien-fu, which was a kind of silk robe with a red and gold dragon brilliantly displayed on the back. For my father there was a wooden carving of the Buddha. I doubt that my father shared his Quinn Lee story with them. He would have been concerned that he would have offended them. His carving of the Buddha was given a place of honor in his office at the college.

The details of the Quinn Lee story with all of its excitement, danger and intrigue, however, did fade from my mind when my father tired of warning me about the man with the black glove. The family tradition in China Town was set aside. I started having crushes on boys closer to my own age and became disheartened that my father seemed unconcerned with the right wing leanings of the Democratic Party. My father still had his Chinese Buddha in his office and Quinn Lee was referred to from time to time. During these years, however, he did not share the full details of the story. Simply mentioning the name Quinn Lee was enough to draw a picture in each of his children's mind. It did frustrate him, when I would try to revive the story and I would refer to the Olivrine as screaming meanies. I was aware that at one point he had written down the Quinn Lee story for the older grandchildren, but I never read it.

Eventually I finished school, started my career and married. After I gave birth to two sons, I got wrapped up in my career. I was never as close to my father as I was from the ages of four to eleven. Not surprisingly when my father became terminally ill with lung cancer, I was overwhelmed with regret, fear and anger. My sons Sam, who was six, and Noah, who was three, would find me crying morning, noon, and night.

My father was not willing to go without a fight. He had surgeries and several courses of chemotherapy. For each of his surviving six children and his wife he had a medallion made which we were given as a reminder to focus our positive energy on his recovery. The medallion resembled a cross between a Chinese character and some surreal dragon. He instructed us to wear it and focus on good news or cleansing waters. We all wore them. Every time he was waiting
for results from the latest scan or heading off to chemotherapy we wore them.

During my father's illness, I regularly made the trip with Noah from Albany to Southampton to be with my parents. Noah was great. He would sit with my father and force him to play with clay. My father would make blocks and balls that Noah would build into something. Considering that my father had never really warmed to playing with my children before, this was quite a touching site.

Even after my father was very ill and the doctors persuaded him that he should seek no more treatment, he would not allow me to acknowledge that he was dying or to speak to him about how much I loved and admired him. When he lost the ability to read to himself, I occasionally read to him. I wanted to keep him company, but could not stand the mundane words that came to mind when I tried to chase what was truly on my mind away. I would read him anything that was at hand. One day I opened a drawer and came upon the story of Quinn Lee. Although I had heard that he had written it down several years ago, I had never read it. I thought my father would love to hear the excitement, danger and intrigue of his tale.

With Noah playing on the floor, I settled in on the couch next to my father and read this story of Quinn Lee aloud to him:

_It's tricky not unlike the opposite ends of a telescope where if you look into the smaller end things seem larger and closer, but if you look into the larger end, things are further away and smaller. When I think back all those years, memories of my grandfather are like that. If I stand back and look at my memory of him, I recall him larger than life, bigger than other people. He is occupying space that was almost a landscape, massive walls and wide, deep overstuffed chairs. The further away I get; the bigger he becomes. A dominant figure, strong, persuasive. He knew!

He would say what he knew. "This is the way it is" or "This is how it should be."

He was in charge. He would say "I'll fix it" or "I'll show 'em."
“Don’t you worry my beamish boy,” he’d said, “Don’t you worry, I’ll take care of it.”

That is one end of the telescope, which I point at my grandfather. He was Chinese. An enormous man with a head of straight black hair, big black eyes and a great white mustache which covered his whole mouth when his mouth was closed, which wasn’t often. He had white teeth, which showed when he roared. Roaring was the only way he spoke to everyone. He could be heard. He spoke loud! He had a noble carriage, a man of bearing and presence.

Funny, he didn’t look Chinese, not at all - Quinn Lee. Some people called him Mister Quinn. He didn’t look Chinese. He couldn’t be Irish. Not this guy, but still... Quinn Lee, a big sure Chinaman, that’s my grandpa. Ask anybody. Ask my kids. Ask their kids, my grandchildren. They are so far out on the small end of the big telescope that when they look back at gramps, he is really something, and Chinese.

My grandfather was Chinese - Quinn Lee. And he spent his life running and hiding. That is he spent that part of his life when I knew him running and hiding. He was killed when I was five years old. The Olivrine killed him. “The dreaded black hand,” he would say “The dreaded black hand and their silver needles.” I was only five. I didn’t know him for all that long. I became aware of him when I was three or four year’s old. My kids never knew him at all. Of course, my grandchildren didn’t know him either. They didn’t even know Annie Quinn. Annie Quinn, my grandmother, lived to be 87 and so did her sister Helen.

I didn’t really know Annie Quinn when I knew Quinn Lee. That’s funny, isn’t it? There they were my grandparents, Annie Quinn and Gramps, in the same house and married to each other and Flora and George and Walt and all. I mean, I knew her, but I didn’t really know her. I can’t remember her at the time I remember him, Quinn Lee. George wasn’t home “when Pa died.” George knew damn well that Pa didn’t die. The Olivrine got him, and George knew it. Those little gray men got gramps on a smoky winter evening.
By 4:30 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon it was dark, really dark. The lights went on flickering white. The snow came down hard and a clean white powder covered the porch steps. Tiny drifts formed in corners of the porch. The lilac bushes stared leafless but beautiful with ice like transparent shining coverings along the branches. Large double, triple or even quadruple icicles hung down from the porch roof. Annie Quinn kept the porch and the front sidewalk shoveled and swept. Quinn Lee wanted it that way.

Quinn Lee was Chinese I'm sure of it and he was knocked off by the Olivrine when I was five years old and Annie Quinn was in the old kitchen stewing tomatoes and George was at the club playing gin and winning without taking his overcoat off. Walt was playing basketball at the Knights' Of Columbus. Flora was in the Sagamore Grill Room with the guy we called the Big Train.

Quinn Lee was on his old iron bed with his clothes and some World War One blankets on his legs. His head of black straight hair rested on big pillows. There was a crucifix on the wall behind the bed and some palm stuck up behind the crucifix from last Palm Sunday. Another partially broken, tarnished crucifix was on the dresser across from the bed with a frayed scapular wound around it. Annie Quinn's rosary beads were on a white lace doily on a stand next to the bed. On the wall next to the door was a white china holy water holder with a statue of the Virgin Mary with Child on top. It was empty - dried up. There was a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the wall.

Sacred Hearts was the name of the church on the other side of the park toward Main Street. They all called it the French Church because the priest didn't speak English very well. I doubt he spoke French either.

Quinn Lee never went at all. That's why I know he was Chinese. The old man was so different from the rest of them he had to be Chinese. They'd never serve him stewed tomatoes, not even chicken or tuna fish salad which they all ate a lot of and sardine sandwiches. They ate sardine
sandwiches and raw Bermuda onions sliced on a plate with vinegar on them. But not Quinn Lee, when he ate, he ate roast beef with gravy, peas and mashed potatoes. He never ate salad or corn on the cob even in the summer.

He wasn’t eating anything that December when I was there. He was lying on the bed, fully dressed with his vest on and his Ingersoll watch and chain. He wasn’t even smoking a cigar. Just lying there with his eyes closed breathing funny, deep and fast and with a kind of gasp.

The Olivrine came up on the porch and right into the house and down the hall. Damn it’s scary just to think of it. The thing about the silver needles is their instability. Not instability exactly, but they don’t last after they’re used. They dissolve, get absorbed into the blood stream, and disappear. That’s what happened when the Olivrine got to Quinn Lee.

There must have been four or five of them, all Olivrine, little men with small features, quick, determined, almost rodent like, but intelligent rodents. They came all together in a swirl out of the silvery snow. Swish! One ran to the back porch and knocked. One moved quickly into the shadows. One coming up the porch, away from the light spilling from the living room. The others kept right on going, right through the front door, into the hall, past the closed door to the living room, past the door to the cellar stairs down the hall, to Quinn Lee’s and Annie Quinn’s bedroom. Once the Olivrine came in out of the dark and cold, they scurried down the hall, rushed into Quinn Lee’s bedroom and used their silver needles. Quinn Lee was dead! Dead? Murdered! Not murdered - assassinated!

The myth had been fed. What an effect that night had on future generations. Quinn Lee went in moments. Moments! From a live grandfather to an ancestor. An assassinated Chinese ancestor. That’s the stuff of which legends are made. Epics! A story to pass down to my children, grandchildren, to their grandchildren, whom I will never see. On a cold, snowy December night, these men did my grandfather in. Those silver needles began to dissolve in his blood and it was
like someone had stopped winding a clock. It was going. If you listened, you could hear it ticking. And it would run forever. An epic! In the slip of a silver needle, the scratch of tiny rat hand, my grandfather went from a big, loud, all-knowing Irishman, irreverent and gregarious to a Chinese legend. Big? Giant! A man for the ages to come. An ancestor shrouded with the smokes and fogs of relentless retribution, of mystery and age-old secrets, of the smells, the scents of the Orient, the wind and salt of steamy ports. The shroud was on him and his coat was stained with blood. Blood mixed long ago in a place strange and foreign. His bones and his body had come to us across the stars, out of the mountains, away from a different life built on violence and mystery and propelled by secret societies.

That December evil came to our house and with the silver needles and the birth of a family myth, I forgot the summer past. If you think back to Gramps in the summer sitting in the yard in his shirt sleeves and his old black shoes, his suspenders and a Panama hat, his big hands freckled and holding his Police Gazette, his cane resting against his chair, then you might lose the mood of the legend, so that's what I forgot until just now. What I remembered was winter, and breathing that was labored, a big black Chinese man who had hidden away in our house all those years—hidden away from the heathen Olivrine.

Quinn Lee came across the sea from Shanghai with all his clothes and probably the tiny jade Buddha in a red and black lacquered chest. Quinn Lee had left the palace of his father on the morning the Olivrine got his father. Disguised as a peasant river man in a straw hat with a straw boat and old mats thrown over the lacquered chest and a long pole to keep the boat from drifting with the current, Quinn Lee came through secret tunnels across mountains by passages through uncharted valleys, down mud yellow rivers and then another boat and the transcontinental railroad backwards and barges from Duluth and another train from Chicago to Buffalo and then he had walked, I guess, 25, 50, 75 miles east all the way
along the Barge Canal and then up Mount Hope Avenue and across the bridge to South Plymouth and then over to Main and a trolley all the way to Kelly Street to get Annie Brown.

I knew. I knew he was a mysterious Chinese soldier of fortune who came to America to escape the revenge of the Black Hand. The Black Hand reached out and sent the Olivrine and their silver needles after him. And years later, almost 40 years later they found him. As the yellow snow fog closed around the house, the Olivrine came, keeping to the shadows. Quickly! Quickly! Up on the porch, the door, the hall, into the room where the breathing was, the needles, the silver needles and red-lacquered chest under the bed. Oh yes! They took the chest and the papers hidden under the second drawer in the dresser and the ring that I'm sure he always wore. They took that too. Not a trace was left, of silver needles, of the Olivrine or of Quinn Lee's heritage as a great hero in his village and later in Shanghai or Peking or one of those great Palace Cities.

Oh they were clever all right! They waited 40 years and then they came. Quickly! Quickly! Then they were gone. The evidence was all gone with them. But I knew. I still know. Quinn Lee's own children don't know. George was off playing cards and Flora was at the Sagamore with the Big Train, Walt was playing basketball and the others were all married and living elsewhere with their own families. Annie Quinn knew. She had to know, but she never said, never spoke it, never admitted it. I know about Quinn Lee and the Olivrine and my kids know. That's a legend that cannot die. It is our heritage. I know and my kids know. My kids don't believe it. They want to see the red lacquered chest, but the Olivrine got that. Took it away and everything in it. I know. I just hope they don't come for me with their damn silver needles.

In late October, about a month after I read his own words to him, he and my mother flew to Florida to spend the winter. A week before Thanksgiving I got a call from my brother Randy. He told me that he
had spoken to the hospice nurse, who had suggested that we should all come to say goodbye to my father. My brothers, sisters and I went immediately to be with him.

We went to my parents peach bungalow in Lake Worth with its walkway painted in the style of Matisse. The place my father called the House on Frog Pond because horny toads had inhabited the small plastic pond he put in outside the living room window. The living room had been transformed into a nursing home with a hospital bed, an oxygen tank and a table full of medications. The kooky pictures of zebras and giraffes that my parents had picked up at yard sales decorated the walls, a stained glass clown and flowers that my mother had made, colored the light that shined into the room. The light sparkled and danced after reflecting off the pool, which had replaced the back yard. The carved wooden Buddha sat on the windowsill looking over my father’s bed. The sweet smells of ripe oranges from the trees outside floated in the room.

The first night that we were all there, my father was with us. He sat with us at the dinner table and later sat in his bed while we all watched the new show West Wing. And, although he was pretty quiet that night it was hard to believe that the hospice nurse was right and that we were there to say goodbye. After everyone else went to bed, I sat by my father’s side. It was dark with only light from outside providing any light in the room. I could hear the gurgling of the pump in his pond. He was restless and kept on waking up. He did not speak with me when he woke up, but he stared at me with a haunting almost pleading gaze. I will not pretend that I know what he was pleading for me to do. I tried to calm him with quiet reassurances that I did not believe.

Over the next five days and nights, it became clear to us that the hospice nurse had been right. I sat with him until late in the evening or went to bed early so that I could get up well before dawn to sit with him. Sometimes one of my brothers or sisters would sit with me. During those days, I came to know some of them for the first time in my life - such good people. When I went to bed, one or two of them sat by his side. During the day, he seemed more at peace and while there was always someone nearby, we did not feel compelled to sit by his side. Each time my father’s condition worsened, we all gathered
around him. He was restless and his breathing developed a gasp. We attempted anything we could think of to console him. We sang, read philosophy, wiped his brow with a warm cloth, simply sat by his side, hugged and kissed him.

We each became more and more exhausted. We stopped cooking for ourselves and ordered take out food. My father stopped eating. The only thing that he ate during those last few days was a Swiss chocolate truffle that I had brought for my mother. I did not see him eat it, but according to Randy after he ate it, his mouth widened into a big smile.

On the afternoon of the fifth day, I ordered lunch and then decided I was too exhausted to eat. I fell asleep. When I woke a few hours later, I dragged myself into the living room and barely glanced at my father on my way to the kitchen. While I was in the kitchen warming up my lunch, Randy stepped away from my Dad’s bed and went swimming in my parent’s pool. I could see that it was bright and warm out there.

When my food was warm, I sat in the dining room looking in on my Father without really seeing him. The light was dancing on his white cotton blanket. His head propped on a fancy Tempur-pedic pillow. Two minutes later, Randy came back in to give my father medicine. When he got to my father’s side, he dropped the spoon and began to weep. The man with the Black Glove had come while I was warming up cold french-fries or perhaps he had sent the Ohrvire. My father’s assassination was complete, but there was no sign of the damn silver needles.

I know the truth now. When I look through the telescope of time, I see my father - brilliant, passionate and tireless! He is a leader and a loyal family man. What does Noah see?