

Lanfen

Lanfen is a Chinese musician who is at a Hospice Day Centre where she has unexpectedly made friends with Jim.

I know what Jim is going to say when I see him. 'Have you been playing Lanfen? You know that if we don't keep playing, we may as well give up the ghost'.

We have promised each other that we will do a duet at the hospice. But we still haven't done it and Jim is not looking too good. I was telling him that he needed to get better so we could start practising but I've stopped doing that.

I thought I was too young to go there. That I didn't want to be sitting with the kinds of people that found themselves trapped in a place like that. That there wouldn't be anybody there like me to talk to. That just because you're alone it doesn't mean you're lonely.

But if you don't have any children at a time like this, or anyone at home to keep an eye on things, then they worry. So I did. Just so I could say 'yes Doctor I tried it, but I'm not sure I'll go back'. And within half an hour I met Jim and we found out we were both musicians and we hit it off. And I did go back.

There was a week or two when he didn't show up. I was more worried about him than I've ever been about myself. I played the erhu a lot then. And although I didn't really enjoy it when he wasn't there, I had to keep going to make sure he would come back. And he did. He looked terrible. We all do.

I've told my doctor I don't want to know what they think is going to happen to me. I don't trust them anyway. My sister died two weeks after an operation she was told would add years to her life. And everybody knows the health system is a mess. But I know I'm not an easy patient. It took me months to agree to having help at the flat. Who needs strangers coming in and telling you what you should or shouldn't be doing? It doesn't matter if a habit is good or bad, it's staying and that's that.

They come now though. After so many visits to the hospital, some of which might have been avoided if I hadn't been so stubborn, I finally agreed. But they know not to judge, and they never tell me what to do. They tried once and learnt.

My mother was a Buddhist who spent her last days breathing and meditating through her illness but that's not for me. I have decided to just carry on living as best as I can, for as long as possible. Anyway I'm not dying yet, I'm just very ill. I can still get a tune out of myself some days.

I need to be able to keep taking risks, that's what Jim understands and nobody else does. It's not some stupid Chinese thing – 'oh you know how they love their gambling! – it's a musician thing. All good musicians know you have to take risks to discover anything; it's in those discoveries, however small they are, where life is lived.

But I'm not sure what risks I can take any more. It's all so confusing. All I do know is that Jim is right, you have to keep playing. I know we're not going to do a concert together; I'm not stupid. I know it won't be long before he doesn't show up and never returns however much I hope he will. But I don't know when he's gone who is going to keep me going rather than smothering me with all these things that are here to help me. I don't know where I'll find the space to breathe.

You look at all the pills and you wonder. Are they keeping you alive or are they stopping you living?

Maybe I should take my erhu in today and play something for him, however awful it might sound. But it wouldn't. I would rise to the challenge. I always do.