

The Lost Cymbal
(A Richard Longdong story)

THE LOST CYMBAL
by Don Brown

Bong bongy bong. Bong bongy bong. The distant sound of chimes aroused Dr. Richard Longdong from a deep sleep. “Carol of the Bells,” he thought, in the semi-trance of slumber. Then he realized that the sound was the ringtone on his cell phone.

Yes, he thought, “Carol of the Bells,” composed by Mykola Leontovych, but actually based on “Shchedryk,” a Ukrainian folk chant. However, knowing this didn’t make him feel any less groggy.

He glanced at the phone: 4:00 AM! Now who could be calling?

“Hello?”

“Dr. Longdong, this is Dr. Carolyn Abbate, of the Music Department. I must see you right away.”

Longdong quickly formed a vision of the very attractive Dr. Abbate. She had shoulder-length brown hair with hints of gray, framing a lovely face, with a perky nose and blue eyes. And she had a nice body, too. Just the same, she was an efficient department chair because of her strong personality and administrative skills. Good looks don’t matter so much in the Harvard University Music Department. The irony that her call was announced by “Carol of the Bells” wasn’t lost on him.

“Do you know it’s four o’clock in the morning?”

“No, but hum a few bars and I’ll try to play it. Of course, I know what time it is.”

“Touché. Where can we meet?”

“In your living room. I’m outside your front door right now.”

She doesn’t beat around the bush, he thought. This must be important. “All right. I’ll be there.”

Longdong put on his Harris Tweed robe over his Harris Tweed pajamas. He descended the stairs to the first floor of his Cambridge townhome and opened the door.

“Please dress and come with me instantly.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see when we get there. I assure you, this trip is vital.”

It took less than five minutes for Longdong to slip into his “regular music professor” clothing, slacks and a Harris Tweed jacket, and pass a comb through his hair. Immediately after that, they were in a moving vehicle.

“Now, where are we going?”

“795 Massachusetts Avenue. City Hall. It’s less than a mile from here.”

In the predawn, Longdong could see building looming ahead. Three stories of stone, completed in 1889, as he recalled. They drove to the back of the building and parked in a space marked “Office of the Medical Examiner.”

“Dr. Abbate, you are entirely too vague. What is this place and why are we here?”

“Richard, read the sign. This is the morgue. And, as you might expect, we’re going to look at a body.”

He swallowed hard, and stole a glance at her. She was, of course, deadly serious.

She rang a bell to gain admission. A coroner’s office employee conducted them to a room. There, on a stainless steel table, lay a body.

“Do you know who this is?”

The technician lifted the shroud. Longdong was shocked at what he saw. After a moment, he said, “Yes, of course. It’s Dr. Ian Friedman, one of the world’s foremost experts on exotic instruments. He teaches—taught—at Julliard. I lectured his class once on crotales—tuned cymbals—in Bronze Age Ireland.”

“Very well. Now, let’s go sit down and I’ll fill you in.”

They left the corpse and went to a room nearby.

Abbate spoke: “Dr. Longdong, we have a mystery.”

“How are you involved?”

“I’m the head of the music department. The man, a famous musicologist, a person you readily recognize, died on the Harvard campus, no later than 10:00 PM last night. The campus police called the Cambridge police, who called the president, who called the dean. The dean called me. The next step was to call on you.”

“I don’t see how I can help. What’s the mystery?”

“Well, for a start, you might begin by explaining these to me.”

Dr. Abbate opened a bag with two items, a note and a small pair of symbols.

“These are finger cymbals, approximately 5 cm in diameter, with small leather loops and a hammered design. Common in belly dancing. They are no doubt Turkish, but may be from anywhere in Anatolia.”

“What about the back?”

“Nothing of interest, it would appear. They say ‘zils,’ Turkish for cymbals. Also I see. (صاجات) (sājāt) in Arabic, which again simply means cymbals. Wait, here’s something. 1396 Rajab 9.”

“What does that mean?”

“Rajab is a month of the Islamic calendar. Wait, let me think.”

Longdong took a moment to draw on the immense store of knowledge in his eidetic memory.

“I know, now that I think about it. 1396 Rajab 9 Islamic is the same as 1623 July 6 Gregorian.”

“And that means?”

“I don’t know. It’s a date, of course. Maybe that’s when they were made.”

“Well, all that tells us is that the little things are nearly 400 years old.

“They also say Պատմիք այն փարդուն, but I don’t know what that means.”

“What about the note?”

Longdong picked up the note and studied both sides. It was a small piece of xerographic bond paper, the kind commonly used in copiers and computer printers. Longdong could see that its dimensions were 2.0” by 4.0”, and its brightness was approximately 92. The text was printed in capital letters, written in blue ink by a common rolling writer or felt tip pen. It had been folded several times.

“I’ll read it aloud.

Friedman,

Time is running out. Help me before I am killed and it’s stolen. If they take it, the city is lost. You must find it.

Search for veritas on the Gold Coast. Look for #2 and #6, who you will know by “Serit arbores quæ alteri seculo prosint. #6 will take you to those who know.

Wong

That’s it.”

“It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It apparently does—did—to Dr. Friedman. And to someone whose name, presumably, is Wong. This person fears for his life. Wong sent Friedman the note so he could search for something important.”

“It’s not very straightforward.”

“Maybe that’s as straightforward as someone who’s scared could be. And he must have known Friedman was bright enough to get on the track.”

“True enough. What is ‘it,’ and how is the city in danger? What city?”

“I have no clue, doctor. Okay, let’s go.”

“Where?”

“Harvard.”

“Why?”

“First, our note starts with ‘veritas.’ Truth—Harvard’s motto. Second, it gives me time to think.”

Dr. Abate started her car. “Any place in particular?”

“Go to where Dr. Friedman was found.”

“Up Mass Ave we go. To Lamont Library.”

In a few minutes, Abate pulled into the parking structure at the Holyoke Center, the main administration building, and parked. They walked one block north to Mass Ave and then three blocks east to the library. The sun was now fully up, and Longdong felt as tired and ungroomed as he looked. He studied the library grounds.

“Grounds,” indeed, he thought. This library is a just a pile of steel and glass with a concrete sidewalk.

“So this is where the body was found?”

“Yes. Right on the sidewalk. There were no witnesses.”

“Any idea what he died of?”

“No. Nothing violent, if that’s what you mean. You saw the body. The police have no clue. It’s going to be called heart failure.”

“Well, we may be able to find what Dr. Friedman was searching for if we follow the clues. Now think, Dr. Abate.”

“About what?”

“What’s the Gold Coast?”

Abate didn’t hesitate. “Oh, that’s easy. Don’t you know?”

“Er, no. I’m an ethnomusicologist, not a Harvardologist.”

“Well, across Massachusetts Avenue, on Bow Street, we have a string of residence halls. They are the ones closest to Harvard Yard. The buildings were constructed around 1900 to provide luxurious accommodation for rich undergraduates. The biggest is Adams House at Bow and Plympton.”

“Let’s go.”

As they walked, Longdong was silent. Some idea was attempting to assert itself.

They stopped in front of a massive red brick building, a sort of Neo-Gothic Germanic fortress.

“Here’s Adams House, Dr. Longdong.”

“What can you tell me about it?”

“It was officially inaugurated in 1931. It’s been the home of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., Charles Schumer, Henry Kissinger, and William Randolph Hearst, Jr. Also, Arthur

Schlesinger, Jr. and Buckminster Fuller. Those in the arts include William Burroughs, Robert Frost, Andy Borowitz, Fred Gwynne, and John Lithgow.”

“Who was ‘Adams’?”

“Oh, it’s named for John Adams and John Quincy Adams.”

The insight hit Longdong like a ton of intricate New York Times crossword puzzles.

“Of course! The note says to look for #2 and #6. John Adams was the second president of the United States, and his son, John Quincy Adams, was the sixth president.”

“So what do we do now?”

“The note says, ‘#6 will take you to those who know.’ Let me think. Can we get a cup of coffee?”

“Sure. No place open is good. No place good is open. Let’s go inside and join the students.”

They entered the residence hall, and found the snack bar off the dining hall. Longdong sat while Abate ordered and brought drinks.

This gave Longdong a chance to look around. His eyes rested on the house’s coat of arms.

Abate returned. “Here. I got you a tall half-skinny half-1 percent extra hot split quad shot (two shots decaf, two shots regular) latte with whip. With shots of Amaretto, mocha, and hazelnut.”

“What are you having?”

“Tea.”

Longdong slowly sipped his coffee. He surmised that if they made the coffee any thicker or sweeter he could pour it on pancakes.

“Abbate, what does that coat of arms tell you?”

“Nothing. It’s a shield with five oak leaves.”

“Exactly. Well not exactly. To be exact, it’s five sprigs of oak acorned Or in saltire Gules. It’s the seal of John Quincy Adams. It appears on his monument and on his grave.”

“So what?”

“The note says ‘#6 will take you to those who know.’ Both the monument and grave are in Quincy, Massachusetts, so we had better go to Quincy and see the real version.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Wait! I can’t go. I have classes today.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get notices posted for you.”

Abbate moved away and made a cell call. Longdong noticed the motto under the shield. “Serit arbores quæ alteri seculo prosint.” That’s from Cicero’s Tusculan Disputations, he thought. “He plants trees for the benefit of another age.”

As the department chairman finished her call, Robert snapped out of his reverie. He could have sworn he heard her end the call with “zài jiàn.” Hmm, he thought, Mandarin for “goodbye.” How strange.

“Okay, Robert. We’re all set. Let’s drive.”

They drove south to Western Avenue, crossed the Charles River, boarded I-90, and headed east.

“How far is it?”

“Just 13.8 miles. We’ll be there in a few minutes.

At I-93, she sailed past the interchange, and continued into the seaport district.

“Dr Abbate, you’re going the wrong way, unless you want to visit the Boston Fish Pier. You’re supposed to go south on I-93.”

“I know. I will, once I shake the car that’s following us.”

She stepped on the gas. She exited at N380, made her way onto Summer Street, then onto Albany, passing Chinatown Park. That was the general route, but she took side streets and alleys whenever possible. Finally, she entered an onramp for I-93.

“There. Things look clear now.”

“Who was following us?”

“I’m not sure. I need to think.”

They drove the next few miles in silence. Finally, Dr Abbate spoke.

“Where exactly are we going?”

“Adams Memorial. Freedom Park.”

She exited at Hancock Street and consulted her cell phone. In a minute, she had directions. The park wasn’t more than fifteen blocks away.

In a few minutes more, they stood in front of the monument.

“See? There’s the seal and the motto.”

“But I don’t see what that gets us.”

“Doctor, in what specialty did you earn your Ph.D.?”

“Opera.”

“Then you should know that with persistence, you will get results. We will investigate more and learn more. Remember, the opera isn’t over until the fat lady sings.” He apparently didn’t hear Carolyn’s groan. “Now let me look around.”

Longdong studied the note. “Let’s see. He plants trees for the benefit of another age. Think, Robert.”

He glanced around the park, and then stopped to stare at a group of trees. “YES!”

Carolyn started. “What?”

“Quick. Come with me to the quincunx.” He began walking briskly to the grove.

“The what?”

“A quincunx is an arrangement of five objects, such as trees, in a square or rectangle, one at each corner and one in the middle. That’s where we’re walking. To a group of oak trees. The same pattern as the leaves on the Adams seal, and reinforced by the Adams motto. That’s all too much to be coincidence.”

They went to the center tree. There was a small brass plaque.

“Look, Carolyn. This plaque may look like typical park labeling for trees, but it’s rather new and has nothing to do with trees. It was obviously placed here recently.”

Abbate read. “Zildjian. Gong.” She paused. “Even I know what that means. Zildjian makes cymbals and gongs.”

“And the company was founded in America in 1929 by Avedis Zildjian III here in Quincy.”

“Okay, let’s go. I’ll look it up.”

”Don’t bother. If you find 22 Longwood Drive in Quincy, it doesn’t matter. We’re in the wrong town. In 1973, Zildjian moved the factory to 39 Fayette Street in Norwell, Massachusetts.”

“Wait a second. Here it is. 16.8 miles from here.”

In less than 30 minutes, they pulled into the Zildjian parking lot. They entered. In the lobby, and Longdong asked for Craigie, the CEO, or Debbie, both of them 14th generation Zildjians

In a few moments, an attractive woman came to the reception area. Longdong wasted no time.

“Բարի լույս: Դո՛ւ Կրայգի Զիլճյան!”

“Yes! Good morning to you, Dr. Longdong. How is Harvard?”

“Ah, you remember me, Ms. Zildjian! I’m here on a vital mission and I believe you are the only source of help. Can we go somewhere private to talk?”

“Of course.” She conducted them to a small conference room off the lobby.

Once seated, Longdong showed her the finger cymbals. “What do you make of these?”

Craigie Zildjian studied them carefully.

“Ah! 1396 Rajab 9. That’s when Avedis Zildjian started his factory. Sultan Osman II permitted it and allowed him to move out of the palace. He gave Avedis the name ‘Zildjian,’ too. It means ‘cymbal maker.’ These are the oldest samples of our work I’ve ever seen.”

“What about the line Պատմիր այն մարդուն?”

“Easy, if you’re Armenian. It means ‘tell the man.’ For me, it’s a family code. Our tradition is that when these cymbals are put in my hand, I am to tell the bearer a special story.”

“Then please, Պատմիր պատմությունը. Tell the story.”

“Not here. Follow me, please.”

She rose and the two professors followed her. Next to the reception area, they entered the security office. Here, Carolyn and Robert had their palms scanned and retinas photographed. Craigie Zildjian obtained a key card, and they walked down the hall.

“Where are we going?”

“To the vault. That’s where the formula for our alloy is kept.”

At the end of the hall, they found the vault. It had a giant door, as rivaling those found in the biggest banks. A machine scanned Craigie’s palm, a camera scanned her retina, and a reader scanned her card key. There was a noticeable “click,” and she gave the wheel on the vault door a turn.

They entered and she closed the door behind them.

“Now, please sit, while I get a letter.” She opened a safety deposit box, donned white cotton gloves, and returned with an envelope. “Now, I’ll read.”

To My Descendants:

Today, on my first day of business, I received an emissary from Tianqui, Ming Emperor of Cathay, now called China. An excellent omen!

He desired me to repair a strange and wonderful cymbal, which he called a gong. It was quite old, and I learned that no alchemist in China could effect the repair.

He told me of its history. The gong was made by Ji Yihu, the sixth king of the Zhou Dynasty. He ruled from 922 BC until 900 BC. He was better known as King Gong of Zhou, and named the cymbal after himself.

Fixing the instrument required only that I solder and hammer one crack. In truth, it was my alloy that made this repair possible. Then the gong was fit. I wished to test it, but the emissary forbade it. “This is a magic gong,” he said. “It teaches morality and virtue. I will demonstrate it, if you have an item made of steel.”

I took him to a room where we were about to repair the interlocking rings and steel plates on an armor breastplate. He struck the gong. Immediately, the armor shattered into hundreds of tiny pieces, each one no bigger than the nail on my smallest finger.

“Imagine, Mr. Cymbal Maker, the effect this gong would have on an army. No armor, sword, matchlock, or cannon can defend against it.

I told him he held the most powerful weapon in the world. He agreed. He said, “This is the Falun Gong, and it assures morality and virtue.”

With that, he paid me 1,000 Venetian gold ducats and left to return to China. My hope is that he does not fall victim to bandits on the Silk Road.

Nothing important may come of this. China is far away. However, I leave this message for my sons and their sons. I have made a pair of finger cymbals to remind them of this event. Watch for the gong. And someday a man may come to you with them in hand. Tell him the whole story.

Avedis Zildjian, 1623 Gregorian, 1396 Islamic.

The three were silent for a time.

Dr. Abbate: “I had no idea gongs were so powerful.”

Craigie Zildjian: “It’s the rarest gong on earth. Dr. Longdong, have you ever heard of it?”

Robert Longdong: “Only as legend or myth, really. It’s a bit like El Dorado or the Fountain of Youth. This is what cymbalists call the Lost Cymbal, and we know nothing about it. No one knows where it is. No one knows what it looks like. And we certainly don’t know how it works—if it works.”

“Well, Doctors, you know the story. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, Craigie. Thank you very much! We’re going to try to find the gong, now that we know a bit more about what we’re looking for. By the way, I’d like you to have these finger cymbals, once we find the gong.”

“Why, thank you, doctor. At last the cymbals and the letter will be together.”

She put the letter back in the safe deposit box and locked it. They left the vault and checked out at the security office. A minute later, they were in Abbate’s car.

As they pulled out from the parking lot, a set of eyes was upon them. He spoke into a cell phone.

“الله شاء إن أتابع سوف مغادرتهم.” They leave. I will follow, God willing.”

“Doctor?”

“Yes, Doctor?”

“You’re the doctor. Where shall we go?”

“New York City.”

“Why?”

“I want to see Dr. Friedman’s office at Julliard. There may be something there that points us directly to the gong.”

“If that’s so, why didn’t Friedman just stay there and avoid a trip to Harvard?”

“Simple. He didn’t know what he was looking for, or where the gong really was. Besides, the note told him to do so. When we see his office, I doubt that there will be any evidence that he knew anything more. He started, essentially, at the same place we have started.”

“Okay, Longdong, I know what to do.”

“And what’s that?”

“Take the train to New York City. If we’re lucky, we’ll catch one of the last ones. We should be in NYC by 6:40 PM.”

“Want to have lunch, Carolyn?”

“On the train. We’re in a hurry. I won’t even try to shake the car that’s following us.”

Longdong’s heart now ascended to his throat, figuratively speaking. Being followed wasn’t so bad when you were just investigating a gong. The idea had a far bigger impact when you realized that you were in search of the world’s deadliest weapon.

Within twenty minutes, they were at the Boston Back Bay Station. Ten minutes later they had tickets, and were sitting in business class seats on the AMTRAK Acela Express.

“Do you think we’re still being followed?”

“Yes and no. Maybe both. Even if someone got on this train with us, he or she will probably be calling an accomplice in New York City.”

“Well then, let’s go to the snack car. I could use some pizza and a beer.”

“Why Robert, that’s very plebian eating.”

“It comes from teaching at Harvard. After lecturing all morning about finding cymbals dated to 2600 BCE in the royal cemetery in the Sumerian city of Ur, a teacher likes to get some common food.”

“Well, before we go, I’ll make a call.”

As Abbate made the call, Robert grew lost in thought. He snapped back only when he heard her end the call with “zài jiàn.”

“Doctor, you apparently speak Chinese. Are you a spy?”

Carolyn laughed. “No, my administrative assistant is Nancy Chang. We end our calls that way. Now, here’s a bonus.” She handed him a piece of paper and the phone. “Nancy looked up the number for Julliard. You had better call ahead to get us in to Dr. Friedman’s office.”

Robert dialed.

“Hello. Could I have Dr. Friedman’s office? Yes, I know what happened. I’m sorry. I want to talk to his administrative assistant.

“Hello. This is Dr. Robert Longdong, from Harvard. You remember me? Oh! The lecture on crotales? Yes, of course. I’m the same one. I’m very sorry about Dr. Friedman, er, what’s your name? Cindy. Anyway, we’re on a train from Boston right now. We need to see you right away. We’d like to look at Dr. Friedman’s office, too.”

Pause. Words from the other end.

“SAY WHAT? Okay, okay Cindy. Try not to cry. See if anything is broken or missing. If the police have left, I don’t think they’d mind our looking around. By the way, I’m with the Chairman of Harvard’s Music Department. We’ll see you about 7:00 PM.”

He hung up and shook his head slowly.

“What is it?”

“Somebody ransacked Dr. Friedman’s office last night. They made a mess of things.”

“That means that there’s one bad guy in Boston, probably on this train right now, and at least one other in New York City. We could call the police, but we have nothing to tell them. A guy dies of a heart attack the same night somebody breaks into his office. That won’t mean anything to them.”

“But...”

“But nothing, Robert. You haven’t seen enough operas. This plot makes no sense.”

Robert settled back in the seat and tried to doze. His mind was racing. The cymbals, the note, the trip to Quincy, the conversation with Craigie Zildjian, the letter, and the lost cymbal. He danced through all he knew about cymbals: countries of origin, sizes, shapes, names, and metallic composition.

“Robert?” Someone was shaking him. “We’re about to arrive in New York.”

Longdong stirred. “Big nipples!”

“Dr. Longdong, we don’t know each other *that* well.”

“Oh, no, Dr. Abbate. Not yours. The gong. There’s a type called a big nipple gong. It has a raised boss in the center, is often composed of different metals, and may generate two different sounds. That is, I think, the gong we’re looking for.”

“Well, Robert, that narrows things considerably. We’re guessing at the size and shape of the gong. We’re in New York City, which has the largest ethnic Chinese population in the world outside of Asia. There are bound to be tens of thousands of gongs. And we don’t know how it works, anyway. We’re in great shape, huh?”

“I’ll add to that, Carolyn. I was thinking about Wong, the man or woman who wrote the note. He’s afraid of the gong being stolen. He’s afraid of being killed. He’s afraid ‘the city is lost,’ and doesn’t say why. But we have a clue about that.

“So what?”

“Dr. Friedman didn’t know exactly where the gong was. That’s why he came to Harvard. Wong has the gong, but I’ll bet you he doesn’t know exactly how it works, and he may not even know which one it is, if he has several. He’s afraid to strike it, with good reason. That’s why he wrote to Friedman. We are closest of anyone to a solution.”

The train was slowing. Abbate asked a child in the seat across the aisle, “Pardon me, boy. Is that the Pennsylvania station?” She learned that it was. They had arrived.

The platform was very crowded. There were Arabs wearing keffiyehs, Indians wearing turbans. Hassidim Jews wearing kolpiks, Haredim Jews wearing wide black hats, Orthodox Jews wearing fedoras, and Jewish boys wearing yarmulkes. There were cowboy hats, Tea Party hats, gangstas in baseball caps, punkers with colored spiked mohawks, and skinheads with head tattoos but no hats. The Chinese people didn’t wear hats, either.

“Well, Robert, if you want a hotbed of domestic and international intrigue, this is it. We don’t even have to leave the station.”

“Just the same, let’s get a cab to...”

“Shhhh! Ixnay on the estinationday.”

At the street, they grabbed a cab and told the driver where to drive.

“Julliard.”

“Хорошо. Вы хотите подняться Парк-авеню? (Do you want to go up Park Avenue?)”

Carolyn: “Не вор, мой друг. Восьмой авеню прекрасно. (Don’t be a thief, my friend. Eighth Avenue is fine.)”

“Okay, boss.”

Longdong: “You speak Russian?”

“Of course. My dissertation was on Vasily Pashkevich and his famous comic opera, *The Miser*.”

Rush hour traffic was diminishing. It took only ten minutes to drive two miles. Robert gave the driver a good tip and said “Spaseeba.”

“No problemo, comrade buddy! Gracias. Toda. Erev Tov, and Shalom!”

They entered the main building of The Julliard School. Dr. Abbate approached the security guard.

“We want to see Dr. Friedman’s admin. She’s waiting for us.

“Are you police officers?”

“No.”

“Are you with the media?”

“No, we’re music professors.”

“Well, you’re harmless. I’ll call her.”

In a moment, a young lady came into the lobby.

“Hello. I’m Cindy Peng, Dr. Friedman’s assistant. And I remember you, Dr. Longdong.”

“Excellent. Cindy, this is Dr. Carolyn Abbate.”

With the formalities finished, they took the elevator to the fourth floor.

Cindy Ping opened a locked door.

“This is my office. Dr. Friedman’s office is through that door.”

They entered.

“Jeez! What a mess!”

All drawers were open. All pictures and diplomas had been removed from the walls. All the drawers had been emptied.

“Cindy, did you find anything missing or broken?”

“No, Doctor Longdong. Everything seems to be here.”

Robert sat at Friedman’s desk. He thought, “Now if I were a gong, where would I be?” He looked for anything Oriental that might provide a clue. He scanned the desk, the walls, the floor, the waste basket, and the bulletin board.

Ah! There, on the board a sticky note presented a possibility. “Li: 212-555-3333.” That sounded Oriental. He shared the news with Carolyn.

“Robert is that the best we’ve got?”

“It’s *all* we’ve got. I’ll call.” He dialed.

A voice answered. “Wǎn shàng hǎo. Good Evening. This is Li Hongzhi.”

“Good evening, Mr. Li. This is Professor Robert Longdong. I teach music at Harvard.”

“I am honored, Dr. Longdong. How may I serve you?”

“I’m looking for a gong.”

“Well, you’ll find about 200,000 of them in New York City.”

Carolyn was prodding him, and asked for the phone.

“Excuse me, Mr. Li. This is Dr. Carolyn Abbate, head of the Music Department at Harvard. Tell me, are you the founder and spiritual master of Falun Gong?”

“Yes, of course.”

“The gong we are looking for is the legendary Falun Gong.”

Pause. “Ah. The legend says that it assures morality and virtue. Dr. Abbate, its existence is a myth.”

“Myth or not, Mr. Li, it is the most destructive gong in the world. We know what it does and we know someone will stop at nothing to get it.”

Robert unfolded the note. He took the phone.

“Mr. Li, do you know anyone named Wong?”

“Only about a thousand people.”

“Yes, of course. Sorry. Can you think of anything that might help?”

Pause. “Wait. I remember seeing an advertisement. It was on a kiosk right in front of Carnegie Hall. I can’t recall what it was for, but it had something to do with gongs. Take a look there.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Good luck to you.” He hung up.

“Okay. One thing is settled.”

“What’s that?”

“Li thinks we’re nut cases. He was laughing when he hung up.”

As they left the building, one set of eyes was upon them. The person spoke into a cell phone.

“الله شاء إن أتابع سوف مغادرتهم.” They leave. I will follow, God willing.”

Longdong and Abbate hailed a cab, which, amazingly, pulled over. They got in.

Abbate: “Driver, how do we get to Carnegie Hall?”

“Lady, I been waitin’ 25 years for somebody to ask me dat question.”

The driver, Carolyn, and Robert exchanged knowing looks. All together: “Practice, practice, practice!”

“Now, seriously, it’s just a few blocks from here. GET OUT OF THE WAY, ASSHOLE! Excuse me, folks. Just professional cab driver dialogue.

“Carolyn, don’t you know where Carnegie Hall is?”

“Nope. Operas are at the Met, and that’s just a block from here.”

On the way, the driver regaled them with an aria from *Sigfried*.

“Driver, what’s that aria?”

“Oh, nothing.” He laughed.

“Dr. Longdong, don’t be fooled by that answer. He’s singing *Nothung! Nothung! Neidliches Schwert!* That’s what Sigfried sings when he’s forging the sword known as Nothung.”

The cab pulled over at the entrance to Carnegie Hall. Robert dashed to the closest kiosk and studied the flyers.

“Think hard and think fast, Robert,” he told himself. “Draw on all your experience.”

He focused on nothing, and let his eyes dance randomly over the announcements.

“AHA!” He saw one notice that struck him intensely.

Gong
Modern Thai Dining
173 E 99th St, New York 10029
(Btwn Lexington & 3rd Ave)

He dashed back to the cab and gave the driver the address. Since it was a longer drive, the driver sang a medley from *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

Robert pulled out the note from Wong. White bond paper, blue felt tip pen. Folded many times.
FOLDED MANY TIMES?

“Longdong, you’re crazy for taking us to a restaurant.”

“I’m not. First, look at the restaurant’s name. Second, look at the folds on the note. The note must have been sent to Dr. Friedman in a fortune cookie.”

“Here we are, folks. That’s fifteen bucks.”

Robert gave him a bill. “Okay. Here’s twenty dollars for your trouble.”

Carolyn gave him another bill. “And another twenty for the recital.”

“Excellent! My mother thanks you, my father thanks you, my sister thanks you, and I thank you.”

As their cab pulled away, another cab entered 99th Street.

They went into the restaurant and took a seat at a corner table.

An older man, very likely Chinese, brought menus.

“Here menus. How you tonight?”

“Excuse me, but are you the owner?”

“Yes, Missy, I owner.”

“And is your name Wong?”

Pause. “Yes, that my name. Wong Ki.”

Longdong: “Mr. Wong, Please take a look at these. Do you recognize them?”

Longdong showed him the finger cymbals.

Silence. Then, “Oh, velly nice! You come with me, prease.”

Wong took them to a room at the back of the restaurant. From there, another door took them to the head of a flight of stairs leading to the basement.

“Now that we are alone, I will say more. I am Dr. Wong Ki, of Beijing University (more correctly called Peking University), Professor of Chemistry and Molecular Engineering. I very much recognize the finger cymbals. I sent them to Dr. Ian Friedman at Julliard, along with a cryptic note. Why do you have them?”

“This is Dr. Abbate. I’m Dr. Longdong. We are music professors at Harvard, and at the moment, the only people who know what the lost cymbal is. You may not have yet heard, but Dr. Friedman died very suddenly last night. Now, why are you in New York City instead of Beijing?”

“My government sent me here to find a gong. Actually, I rather like it and would like to keep operating this restaurant. Now, doctors, I have a clue as to what power the gong may have, as I expressed in my note. Further, the gong is likely here, but I have collected many of them, and don’t know which one it is, indeed, the Falun Gong. Or even if it is among them.”

“Why did you feel that your life was in danger?”

“I still feel it. You probably don’t read the Chinese newspapers. Any merchant with a gong collection has received death threats. A few have died. Someone is looking for the gong.”

“Why didn’t you just have Dr. Friedman visit this restaurant?”

“That would have put my life in danger. And his. And neither he nor I knew exactly what the gong looks like or exactly how it works.”

“Have you tried striking the gongs?”

“No. First, there are 20,000 gongs in this underground warehouse. Second, I don’t dare. If it’s one of the big ones, a single blow could bring this building down. That much I do know.”

“Well, sir, let’s look at what you have.”

“Okay. Now for the gong show.” He switched on the light and they descended the stairs.

The basement was far more than a basement. They beheld vast room, containing thousands of gongs.

“Here they are, doctors. You can have the Falun Gong, if you can find it.”

A new voice. “Not so fast, Dr. Longdong. You will find the gong and give it to me.”

All three turned to see a man holding a gun. He was Chinese, as nearly as Longdong could make out, and dressed in a first-class suit (Armani, although probably a knockoff). However, he had a cruel, nasty face, which certainly diminished his appeal.

“I don’t know what it looks like.”

“You lie. Let me refresh your memory.” With those words, he shot Wong Ki. Wong crumpled to the floor.

“A touch! A palpable touch! I fear that I do breathe my last!”

“Well, Dr. Longdong, perhaps that will clarify your thinking.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Zhou Zhang. I do not doubt that you know the name. I am a direct descendant of King Gong of Zhou. I have come to claim what is rightfully mine.”

Carolyn: “Is that so, Mr. Zhou. What right have you?”

“I am the leader of Al Gongga, more widely known as the Gong Tong. We are Muslim, Arabic-speaking, FARC-inspired separatists from the western Zhou kingdom. With this gong, I will rule the world, as is my right.”

Carolyn: “I don’t want to bust your bubble, sir, but the actual political and military control of China by the Ji Yihu lasted only until 771 BC, a period known as the Western Zhou.

“Quiet, woman of no importance, or you will die, like your friend Wong. Actually, since I’m going to kill you both anyway, I will explain.”

Robert thought, “Good. He’s ‘monologuing.’ The longer he talks, the greater our chances of survival.”

“I know the power of the gong. During the Zhou Dynasty, the use of iron was introduced to China, but also this period of was the zenith of Chinese bronzeware making.”

“That sounds like you made it up.”

“Nonsense. That’s what Wikipedia says.”

“Dr. Friedman. Why did you kill him?”

“I didn’t. I followed him to Harvard. Damn him for dying of a heart attack. He upset my plans, but I was able to shift quickly from following him to following you.”

“Wong’s note said you would destroy ‘the city.’ How will you accomplish that?”

“I will destroy New York City. We will use this gong at the dedication of the new One World Trade Center. ‘Get it on, bang the gong, get it on.’ T. Rex, 1971. After that, we will broadcast the gong’s waveform. Every building in China (or any city I choose) will come tumbling down. Armies will collapse in front of us. Warplanes will not be able to fly. My family will rule again!”

Abbate: “You are totally mad. You know that, don’t you?”

“You try me, woman. Now give me the gong.”

Longdong: “Okay, madman. I’ll give you the gong.” Robert pulled down a rectangular piece of metal from the wall and held it out toward Zhou.

“LIAR!!!” Zhou fired his pistol at Longdong.

When the bullet hit the gong, the impact was enormous. Robert was lifted off the floor and landed on his back.

“Oh chit and chimichanga, man. I’m dead,” he thought. But to his surprise, he was still thinking and breathing.

Carolyn rushed to him. “Oh Robert, you’re not dead! That’s excellent! However, I think Zhou is dead.”

Robert struggled to his feet and went to Zhou, who was bleeding profusely but hadn’t died. It took him only seconds to assess the situation. Zhou might live.

“Who shot me?”

“You did, Zhou. You shot yourself. The bullet was deflected by the rim of the gong. It was a rim shot. Carolyn, please call 9-1-1.”

“That wasn’t a gong. That’s why I shot you.”

“Zhou, since you’re probably going to die anyway, I’ll tell you a couple of things.

“The chau gong (also called a tam-tam or a bullseye gong) is the most familiar to Westerners. They are in orchestras and struck at temples. But you should know better. You should know that in fact it’s only one of many types of suspended gongs associated with China.

“What you didn’t count on (and reacted to so badly) was a sculptural gong, probably made by Steve Hubback, Welsh percussionist and metal crafter. It looks like a shield but it’s also a musical instrument.

“Lastly, and most important: The Falun Gong probably only works directly in front of a mass of steel, either an advancing army or a high-rise office building. Just the same way a good soprano can shatter a crystal goblet. So maybe, just maybe, you could record the waveform and broadcast it, but we don’t know, and you’ll never know. So I doubt that you can conquer the world with it.”

“Why, thank you, you wretched barbarian. Learning is a lifelong experience, you round-eyed, fascist, heathen pig.”

Robert heard sirens. “Zhou, I guess the paramedics will save your worthless life. I can only say it’s too bad that Wong is dead.”

A voice: “Don’t be too quick to count me out. I’m not yet dead! No need to go to bed. No need to call the doctor, cause I’m not yet dead.”

“Chinese wisdom?”

“No. Monty Python’s *Spamalot*.”

Carol rushed to him. “Oh, Dr. Wong! I’m so glad.”

The emergency medical technicians arrived and took both Wong and Zhou away. Of course, the police came, took the gun, and promised a full report to the professors.

“Thank you, Robert! You saved my life.”

“Thank Gene Krupa, the drummer. He invented the rimshot.”

“Just the same, this is how I feel.” She wrapped her arms around him in a deep passionate embrace, with a kiss to match.

As he held her and stroked her, he felt her nipples harden. In his most erudite professorial mode, he thought “nice tits.”

He broke the embrace. “AHA! AHA!” He broke into a dance. I remember which gong is the real gong! Look for a nipple gong!”

Even though there were thousands of gongs in the underground warehouse, they quickly found a group of about twenty nipple gongs, ranging in size from 6 inches to 96 inches.

“Robert, what can we do? How will we find the gong?”

“With a test. Stand right there.”

Longdong brought each gong to Abbate and gently struck it. There was no effect, until he brought gong #16. As he struck it, Dr. Abbate’s bosom lost a great deal of its uplift.”

“Arrrggghhh! What have you done? That’s my new Victoria’s Secret Perfect Coverage bra. It set me back \$55.50, and you’ve turned the underwires into little steel pebbles.”

“I think that’s a small price for saving the world. Now let’s catch a train to Boston. I could you some pizza and a beer.”

Abbate and Longdong met the next day in her office.

“Robert, where should the gong go? It’s dangerous.”

“I think we should put it in the vault at Zildjian. They are the only people qualified to keep the secret. Besides, I must give the finger cymbals to Craigie.”

“Then all’s well that ends well.”

“No hard feelings about the bra?”

Blushing: “No. It’s easy to replace.”

Carolyn extended her hand. It held a book.

“Robert, I’d like you to have an autographed copy of my book, *In Search of Opera*. That’s because I’ve become very fond of you.”

“Carolyn, I feel the same way about you. Here’s an autographed copy of my book, *The Origins of the Turkish Bağlama and Oud*.”

They kissed and then separated. After all, there were classes to teach and a department to run.