

Sleepwalking to China

1930

A The Reverend loomed over the barren plain. In the distance, sunset burned into the horizon, stamping his silhouette against a vast and gaudy sky. In his long coat and standing tall on the front porch above his wife and son, he appeared a giant, grand and other-worldly. Perhaps this was how the Chinese saw him, Grace thought. Her husband spread his arms towards the blazing clouds and shadowed flatlands as if to say that all of this now rested in the Lord's embrace. The breeze shifted and billows of smoke circled their way. Grace watched his outline waft and shimmer. She wouldn't have been surprised if his body went up in flames right there before her eyes, igniting in a holy conflagration and leaving behind only a pile of ash to mark his time on this earth. Grace shook the strange notion from her mind, though she wondered how so good a man could appear so sinister.

As he started down the porch steps, Grace roused their sleeping child from beside her on the seat of the buckboard. "We're here," she whispered. "Our sweet summer home, Yao dao ho."

Little Wesley opened his pale blue eyes and blinked. How would it appear to such young eyes, Grace wondered—desolate or full of potential, she could not know. The Reverend lifted the boy from her arms and placed him high on his shoulders, Wesley's favorite perch. He rubbed his eyes and surveyed the shimmering plain.

"If you look close enough, you can see all the way to the Great Wall," the Reverend said.

Wesley squinted into the slanting sun.

Grace took her husband's hand as she stepped down from the wagon and they proceeded up the rutted road.

"You'll find the countryside here too barren to be called pretty," the Reverend said. "I think it will grow on you, though. In the fall and spring the light turns a most remarkable bruised shade at the end of day when the mourning doves return to roost in the willow trees."

"You're waxing poetic again, my dear. No need to convince me. I've already agreed."

"You must forgive my enthusiasm for boulders and scrub brush."

She smiled up at him as they arrived at a rocky stream with a tree hanging over it. “This willow alone is reason for a visit,” she said, taking a seat on a rock.

The Reverend felt his heart swell as he looked down at her. “Your forbearance is remarkable in someone so young. In all ways you suit your name.”

Grace blushed, which she knew was quite ridiculous, given that he was her husband and father of her child. Still, it was hard not to think of him as her master in matters of the soul, which were the only matters of consequence. And so, even after marriage, she had continued to call him the Reverend as she always had and of which he never dissuaded her.

He set their son down near the stream and took his hand as Grace let the last of the sun warm her back. The wind made light havoc with hair fallen from her bun and Grace admired the tendrils of willow swaying into the trickling water.

“Don’t you find this spot spectacularly Chinese?” the Reverend asked. “It’s as if we stepped into an idyll depicted in brushwork. It warrants such artistry precisely because it is so lacking. The way they attribute beauty to bare rocks and ravines and rain clouds is quite remarkable.”

“And suppose I hadn’t liked it here?”

The Reverend glanced across at the cottage he had built with the help of his Chinese manservant, Ahcho, over the previous half year. “We would have ridden back to town and let the desert do what it will with the little home.”

“That’s too sad to consider.”

“The desert winds would turn it to rubble in short order. You know how a corncrib, or out building, back on our plains will tilt and then tumble if left uncared for. Winds off the plains are quite insidious.”

She pushed the dusty soil with the toe of her laced boot. “Surely our cottage is better made than that?”

“You have too much faith in me, my dear.”

She knew he was smiling, although his face didn’t show it. Grace felt the breeze and breathed in the faintly mossy air by the stream. She wondered if she could have been happier than on this day in June as she watched her husband bend and accept a rock handed to him by their son. A routine transaction and yet it made her marvel at her remarkable good fortune in this most unfortunate land.

Wesley stood straight, a miniature version of his upright father, and pointed to a cow in the field across the dirt path.

“Odd, I didn’t notice that creature before,” the Reverend said. “I don’t see how I could have missed it all those times I worked out here. It must have been left recently.”

“Perhaps someone will return for it shortly.” Grace stood and slapped the infernal dust from her skirt. Fine yellow silt wafted out from the folds of linen. She would have to buy a better

broom in Fenchow-fu and bring it the next time they visited. She followed the Reverend and little Wesley across to where the cow grazed.

“Quite surprising to see such a healthy animal in these lean times,” the Reverend repeated. “Its ribs aren’t even showing. Any farmer would want to keep a close eye on this one. I can’t imagine who left it unfettered.”

She heard the hitch in his voice and tried to judge if the Reverend was merely registering a general complaint about human profligacy or a more specific concern. When he noticed her watching him, he smoothed his brow and tried to smile, although it appeared more a grimace.

“Nothing to worry about,” he said. “I’ve brought you to the countryside so you might let go of all concerns.”

She continued to study him and the familiar buzzing began in her head: the slight bothersome noise that wasn’t altogether a noise, but could grow to become one if she wasn’t careful. She really was a cheerful person and always had been.

The Reverend addressed their son with insistent joy. “You may pet the cow if you wish.” He lifted Wesley and the boy’s small hand shot out towards the animal’s twitching tail. “Don’t grab hold of it, although there is nothing more tempting. Just pat the hide.” The Reverend smiled down at Grace and her heart ached to think of the effort it caused him to be frivolous for her sake.

She stepped closer to his side and touched his jacket sleeve. “Reverend, I know you have brought me here so the unborn child stays with us this time. I am most grateful.”

The Reverend was instantly speechless precisely at the moment when words seemed to be required. He had no idea what to say or do. Finally, he handed her their son, unable to bring himself to look at her as he did. He stepped away and tried to survey the plains, but not even the spectacular sun as it sunk lower could rescue him from thoughts of his own weaknesses.

“It’s perfectly all right,” Grace said, still softly, for she knew that her words bruised him as if they were stones. “Mai Lin is in the cottage arranging our things and the door is shut. She couldn’t possibly hear us out here. And Wesley’s too young to understand.” In her arms, as if to prove the point their son kicked his legs in delight as he patted the cow’s back.

“There’s nothing shameful in it,” Grace tried again. “Husband and wife nowadays discuss such matters.”

The Reverend took out his handkerchief and wiped his nose. He folded it carefully and placed it in his breast pocket again. Instead of dwelling on her disappointment, Grace chose to help free her husband from his own harsh judgments: she began to pat the animal with pretend delight, which was silly given that she had spent enough time on her grandparent’s farm to know a work animal for what it was.

The Reverend noticed the heat of the sun on his cheeks, although he knew it wasn’t just that. He was a grown man blushing before his wife when the Lord meant for them to have

no secrets. Had they not sworn to be true to one another and was this not the truth? He felt his shoulders sag. He was not an old-school minister of his father's generation, but wished to be a modern man with an openness to all people; a scientist, really, of religion, combining as he did the need to zealously spread the gospel with equal parts exposure to proper medical care, education and innovative concepts of industry. How could it be that he sat up half the night with a Chinese peasant, hearing of his trials and tribulations, convincing him of a new path to both purity of soul and greater purpose as a citizen in his community, and yet he could not look into the eyes of his suffering wife? He was weak where his own heart was concerned and he knew it. That was his great failing. He loved too much and yet showed that love too little. It made him no better than the ignorant sinners whom he visited in those wretched hills. As ever, he was the one in need of salvation.

The smell of smoke wafted near again. The Reverend felt some relief at being puzzled by the simple concerns of this world: he searched for the source of the distant fire.

"They must be clearing the fields," he said, bringing himself up onto his toes and rocking back again. It pleased him to remember he knew about this sort of thing. Although a poor husband, he could at least recall knowledge of crop rotation. "Extraordinary how spring brings out the optimist in man, even the poor farmer with no rain in the forecast. I believe the Chinese are even more resilient than my father was in a bad year."

"They have to be," she said, more flatly than she intended. "It is their pitiful circumstance."

The truth was, Grace had seen no such signs of industriousness on their long ride from Fenchow-fu. The fields stood fallow as the drought entered its eighth month. To her, the black cloud that appeared on the horizon seemed to be rising not from fields as a sign of some farmer's forward-thinking efforts, but instead as a sign of trouble in the last hamlet they had passed through. Then again, she was more apt to look for indications of ill luck or sorrow.

He had been right to bring her into the country, away from the small city of Fenchow-fu where outside the missionary compound instances of human suffering abounded. The children to whom she taught kindergarten routinely ate dirt. Their parents, good Christians, had not seen soap for years. Grace presided over the bathing gatherings where soap and a small strip of cloth were handed out as long lines formed before the men and women's tubs. But how these people survived on such little sustenance remained a mystery to her. They ate nothing more than pale broth and dried meats swarming with flies; stone soup and mush made from the ragged grasses nearby. And those were the ones who still had homes. The beggars in the streets sat on their haunches not more than a few feet away from human refuse. They stared at her with eyes scabbed over and unseeing, though the smells, dear Lord, even the memory of the smells should have been enough to make them gag as she did suddenly now. Grace bent forward and tugged at her high lace collar. She tried to cover her choking sound with a cough, but the Reverend was alert to her troubles and stepped to her side in an instant.

He took the child from her and wrapped his long arm around her waist and let her lean into him. Grace held on to keep from swaying. She looked into that wild sun dissected by the black horizon and saw red blood in a Chinese chamber pot, red blood on her linen gown. Her knees buckled, but the Reverend kept her upright. Mai Lin had come to her in the

middle of the night two times over the previous years and rubbed ointments and herbs into her skin, swaying incense over her to calm her. Grace had survived although the babies had not, but the Reverend was correct. It had all been too much for even a sturdy Midwestern girl. Grace squeezed herself to her husband's side and his unwavering stance helped to stop the buzzing in her head. She came to her own rescue with a Biblical truth: the thought of being made of her husband's rib seemed right.

Then, far off, from the direction of the smoke, they heard the rumble of fast-approaching horses. Two specks came into view and within a few moments those smudges of motion became riders charging their way across the open plain.

"Nothing to concern ourselves about," the Reverend said as Grace wrapped her arms around his waist. "Most likely men of business on their way to market. Perhaps the cow belongs to them."

When the horses came within fifty yards, the Reverend saw that the riders were not dressed as was customary for the region, but more like Mongols of the borderlands. He had seen their type only in the most distant reaches of his travels. They wore sheepskin coats draped heavily over their thick shoulders. Tattered rags stuck out beneath the matted fur, as if they had been on the road for some time and had sampled a piece of attire from every district they passed through. Smoke smudges darkened their faces, and oily strips of cloth and leather held back their long, black hair. Around their waists and across their chests hung amulets and metal canisters to store snuff and other sinful potions. Long sabers slapped against their legs, and daggers poked from their belts.

The Reverend handed Wesley to Grace and she slipped around behind her husband as the horses pulled up abruptly in front of them. The two men began shouting. The older one gestured for the younger one to hop down. He did and circled close, a knife unsheathed in one hand.

The Reverend squared his shoulders, straightening to his full six foot four inches. He stared hard into the man's bearded face and did not move or betray anything but calm. The young man used the knife to point from the Reverend to the cow as the older one on horseback began to shout again.

The Reverend let out an uncustomary chuckle and said in English, "Why, it's only the cow they're after." Then he spoke in a local dialect and asked the men, "Is that your beast then?"

The men froze, apparently astonished that the white man seemed to know their tongue. The younger man came close again and poked at the Reverend's top coat with a filthy finger.

Grace suddenly leaned away from the Reverend and spoke up also in an approximation of their dialect. "Or perhaps you know to whom it belongs?"

The two men turned to her and let out startled sounds: a high, hollow "Ai!" followed by a long, equally mysterious, "Eeee!"

She noticed the Reverend's jaw tightening and he glanced at her sharply. Clearly he thought that now was not the time for her to speak up and thereby challenge China's backwards assumptions about women, although she had only meant to be helpful.

Wesley started to whimper as the man's dagger shadowed Grace's chin. The tip of the blade flipped up her lace collar and she let out a small involuntary gasp. The young man laughed and the Reverend had no choice but to step forward and speak more forcefully.

"Gentlemen, we have no claim on that cow. If you have a dispute, it is with the owner. We wish to pass in peace. We are here in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and intend to follow the exhortation of live and let live. We assume that you will do the same."

The older man's face went dark. "Lord Jesus?" he asked.

The Reverend's eyes grew bright and he nodded. "Yes, you have heard of him?"

"Lord Jesus, King of Ghost Men?" the older man asked again.

The Reverend turned to Grace. "How remarkable. They know of Him and the Holy Ghost already." He looked to the men and the edges of his lips rose in a genuine smile. The miracle of salvation could cleanse the filthiest of louts.

Grace tried to feign delight as well, but a suspicion was growing in her and it came shrouded by the familiar buzzing in her ears. She looked off at the smoke smoldering on the horizon and wondered what these rouges had torched on their way here.

The older man began to shout again. He let out a hideous cackle followed by a long, low growl. Staring down into the Reverend's crisp, blue eyes, he spat at his chest. A wad of grey mucus dripped from the lapel of his dark suit.

The man thrust his saber at the sky. "No Lord Jesus! Death to Lord Jesus!"

He released a stream of sounds the likes of which neither the Reverend nor Grace had heard before. They both felt certain he was the devil incarnate, screaming with every intention of waking the Gods—both his and theirs. The Reverend had met with fury and treachery before. He knew that to stand in the face of it, to neither turn one's cheek nor one's back, but to straighten the shoulders to face one's fate was the only and proper way to illustrate the true strength of the Lord. He stared straight into the man's wild face, ignoring the spit and the curses and the swords.

But, Grace could ignore none of it. She began to whimper and held tighter to the Reverend's waist, gripping Wesley until the child clung to his father's back as well. She would cleave to her husband, not the action of an independent woman at all, but the pose of a mother in a dire situation. She did what any mother would have done: she began to beg.

"Please," she said, in native dialect. "Let us alone. Take the blasted cow, we don't care. Let us be!" Her words seemed to only enrage the older man further, yet she could not stop herself. "We have done nothing to harm you."

These words seemed to infuriate the older man beyond all else and he threw his thick leg down over the horse and landed with a thud on the ground, his fur boots sending up a cloud of dust. He raised his sword over her head and began chanting in words neither the Reverend nor Grace understood. Not words so much as sounds, rocking and keening, as if he was the one experiencing a great loss. He bowed his head in soulful prayer. Grace recognized the tone of it as nothing less than grief. After a long, low moan, the older man looked up and clapped his hands.

The younger man appeared before the Reverend and thrust his fingers into his breast pocket, snatching the white handkerchief neatly folded there. His grimy fingers held it aloft, whipping it in the breeze. The thing unfurled as he waved it in circles, and the older man laughed, although not as hysterically as before. He seemed somehow calmed by the sight of the small white flag on the breeze.

The Reverend and Grace didn't dare to look at one another, and yet they both understood they had somehow succeeded at letting these dangerous men release their fury. The barbarians appeared almost light-hearted now. As the younger one waved the handkerchief, the two joined arms in a little dance. They each held a corner of the handkerchief aloft and spun around it like peasants at some festival, rejoicing over the harvest. The Reverend managed to pat Grace's arm in feeble encouragement, because while they didn't understand what was taking place before them, they could sense something had been resolved. The older man hummed to himself. Then he clapped once more and the younger man let go of his corner of the flimsy fabric and the dance was over.

The older one wiped the Reverend's handkerchief across his own perspiring forehead and then held it out before his face and looked at it carefully. The black initials—WJC for Wesley John Carson—hung in the air. The man nodded in confident affirmation, though of what the Reverend and Grace could not know. The man let out a yip of triumph.

These people were baffling, Grace thought, as she watched the man stuff the handkerchief into one of his many pouches. As he did so, she noticed something that equally surprised her: hanging from that same dirty, embroidered sack was another strip of cloth that appeared to be made of the same material as her husband's handkerchief. Thin and grey with use, the edge of this other piece of fabric looked identical to the one the man's thick hands stuffed inside now.

Grace noticed that the Reverend appeared mesmerized by the same sight, although he showed no sign of any significance in such a coincidence. His face remained steely and firm until Grace noticed the slight twitching of his eyebrow, a tick from his boyhood whenever self-doubt captured him. When she looked back at the older man, he was pulling the red string on the sack and closing it shut. He let out a long, satisfied sound and then looked directly across and pointed at the Reverend with a bent finger, his eyes fiery and sure.

The Reverend suddenly whipped around and shouted at Grace. "Go, run! Get inside with Wesley and lock the doors."

Grace heard her husband's words and wanted to obey, but her arms wouldn't let go of his sleeve. He pried her fingers off and pushed her forward. With effort, Grace finally began to run.

"Now, Grace, hurry!" the Reverend yelled again.

Clutching Wesley to her chest, she ran up the rocky path in the direction of the house. It was a harebrained plan. She could not possibly escape two men on horseback. But, Grace tried anyway, her fingers digging into her son's small body to keep him close. As she approached, she called out to Mai Lin to open the door.

The Reverend meanwhile reached for his gold pocket watch, his most valued possession, and dangled it in the air. "Gentleman," he pleaded. "Take this. Very fine. Sell it for many cows." He even started to remove his gold spectacles, knowing how much the Chinese coveted them.

But, the men knew what they wanted. The older one shouted out orders. He pulled out his sword again and pointed it in the direction of Grace and the boy. The younger man threw himself onto his horse and rode hard after them. Grace stumbled repeatedly over the rocky ground, but she did not fall. She shouted again for Mai Lin and could hear the Reverend behind her, calling out for her to press on.

There was no contest. The young man slowed his horse and swooped down over Grace. He grabbed Wesley's arm and pulled. The boy held to her neck for as long as he could and cried out as the robber and Grace fought over him. Then the barbarian seemed to stop toying with Grace and simply yanked her son away. She would never forget how easily Wesley was lost to her in the end, as if to prove that these men could have done it at any moment all along. They could take whatever they pleased. And what they wanted was the child.

"Wesley!" she screamed.

The robber turned and flew away across the flat land with her baby in his arms. The older man let out a loud cry, too, as he whipped his horse and took off fast. Grace chased after them for several yards, but quickly slowed and then stopped. She put her hand on her belly and bent over. A quick prayer passed through her mind for the unborn child, but the buzzing in her ears was almost unbearable and she could not continue. She shut her eyes and saw blackness, then opened them again to see the sun blazing on the horizon, a too-red ball of fire and blood.

The Reverend ran past her and frantically worked to unhitch their horse from the wagon.

"Mai Lin," he shouted.

Grace fell to the ground and clawed at the dust that quickly turned her palms yellow. After a few moments, she lay unmoving except by her sobs.

The door finally flew open and when the Chinese woman saw her mistress strewn on the ground, she hobbled quickly down the steps to her.

“She’s in shock. Take care of her,” the Reverend shouted as he mounted his horse and rode off after the robbers who were becoming smaller and smaller in the distance.

Grace wailed softly, “My baby. My love.”

It didn’t take Mai Lin long to understand. She stood over Grace and shook her fists in the air. “Lord Jesus and the great ancestors rain curses down upon them!” she called out.

She had heard of such kidnappings, but never imagined evil would dare to attack the important Reverend and his family. She lifted Grace to standing and helped her up the steps and into the cottage.

It was the first time Grace had stepped over the threshold of this home built for her by her husband. And yet, she did not look around or notice the touches he had added to please her: the coat hooks beside the door, the handmade cabinet to hold pans and plates, the fine celadon pot on the mantle or calico curtains sent all the way from home to separate the bedroom from the living area. Later, much later, she would be struck by his thoughtfulness, but by then it would be too late for her to say so. The loss between them became too great.

As the last flamboyant strands of pink and purple slid down the sky and a grey stillness spread over the land, Grace lay in her newly made bed and Mai Lin burned lumps of incense and whispered soft and mysterious words over her as she had two times already in the young woman’s time in China. Grace did not know the meaning of Mai Lin’s chants. She did not hear the word Jesus, nor did Grace want to hear it just then. She was content with the sharp rise and fall of her servant’s voice: it was fury Mai Lin expressed, as if by outrage alone she could banish both evil and ill luck, her mistress’s two bedfellows. Grace did not believe it would do any good, but she was grateful nonetheless that someone was willing to confront treachery and wrong-doing on her behalf. Grace was far too weak to fight for herself. She slept fitfully and had a dream of children coming to her across the desert, a dream that would repeat and refine itself for the rest of her life. In it, Mai Lin was beside her and beckoning the children home.

Long after a thick dark had descended, the Reverend returned to the cottage. He found Grace curled under several quilts. Mai Lin hung incense over her and tipped potions into her mouth, ostensibly to keep her spirits alive. In normal circumstances, he would banish the woman from the room. He did not believe in such hocus pocus and he could not abide by Grace partaking of it. But, he had no strength left in him to speak. No interest in insisting on anything, even to a servant. He bent down and touched his wife’s disheveled hair with trembling, faint fingers and then, after a moment, he stepped away.

He looked around at the cottage. He had saved the best piece of lumber for the table, one that would seat their growing family alongside their dear, fellow-missionary friends. The windows had required a special effort. It was so difficult sometimes to make things plumb. He reached for his handkerchief to blow his nose, but finding it gone, used his sleeve to wipe a tear away. The fabric curtains sent as a present for Grace from his mother shifted as he strode past the window. He did not look into the corner at the crib he had made.

He brought down from the mantle a handsome Chinese pot he had been given by a new convert in one of the villages. It might have been valuable, the Reverend did not know. But now it would have a special purpose. He unbuttoned his jacket and pulled from inside his shirt a small, human skull. He blew dust from the surface of the white object, placed it inside the Chinese pot then set it back onto the shelf. Grace might come upon it eventually, but until she asked, he would not mention how he had stumbled upon this skull when he returned to the patch of ground where Wesley had been taken from them. The appearance of such an unexpected thing struck even the unsuperstitious Reverend as an omen, though of what he could not imagine.

He stepped to the cottage door and opened it. Over the desert, the moon rose. Before his eyes, everything turned to pewter, then coal.

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In the days and weeks that followed, the Reverend sought help from the Chinese authorities and local warlords. The American consulate in Shanghai became involved for a time. But as months turned into years, it was the Reverend alone who led the search to every village of the mountains and plains. He would hear rumors. Someone had seen a startlingly pale child in a market, on a boat going up river or on the back of a Mongol tradesman's horse. The Reverend set out again from the compound. Although his official purpose was to support and grow the outlying churches, everyone understood why he remained on mule-back so much of each year.

Charles Hale Carson was born under the shadow of their loss. Grace held him close, too close, and insisted Mai Lin swaddle him long past when a baby needs to move his arms. The young mother hovered over her infant son, pressing her face into his bony chest, inhaling the baby smell as if hoping it might transport her. Yet at other moments, she would demand he be removed from her sight, sometimes for days at a time.

In the late afternoons, Grace called for tea and sat with the cup in her hand by the window, looking out and never bothering to take a sip. What did she see out there, Mai Lin and Ahcho wondered? In spring, dust swirled up from the arid plain and clouds skidded across the sky. They suspected their mistress saw figures in the unsettled air.

"She imagines the boy returning," Ahcho once ventured.

Mai Lin coughed, a wet and ragged sound, "All her babies come back to her this way."

He bit down on his pipe. They sat in an alley behind the mission where the kitchen help and house servants congregated at the end of day.

"Two babies and then the boy," Mai Lin said as she pinched a wad of snuff from a bag and packed it into her cheek. "Mistress talks in her sleep about the other ones, too, from long time ago who were killed. White babies never had any business being here. Lord knows that and takes them away."

Ahcho shook his head. Like the Reverend, he didn't have much use for superstition and preferred the new ways. Improvements were coming. He had traveled with his master into

impoverished hamlets and, although Fenchow-fu was only a small-sized city, it could boast a new road thanks to the mission and a hospital that the Reverend had had built. Chinese children attended school now with a roof over their heads and Reverend Watson had proposed a library be built, although the district had only one book, an encyclopedia which the town elders forbid anyone from opening in order to preserve it. Perhaps Mai Lin was good at the birth and care of babies, but she was destined to be left behind as progress took hold. Although no older than him, she was already a hag, a witch, a sorry throw-back to another time. She was the one who had less and less business being here.

“The Lord only takes babies when he has a better use for them, not as a punishment. The Lord is not a foolish old woman like you.”

Mai Lin spit into the street, a thick reddish puddle forming in the dirt. “Ha! The spirits punish all the time, especially those who love too much and sacrifice too little.”

Grace had had precisely this argument in her mind many times since the kidnapping: had she and the Reverend done something to deserve this? If not one particular sin, could it have been their overall blindness to seeing themselves as the true sinners that they were? Of course suffering was necessary to devotion, but did it have to be this—the taking of their first born son?

When she looked out the window at the dust clouds that curled over the desert, Mai Lin and Ahcho were right: she was searching for her stolen children, but also for her wandering husband as well. Although Grace remained vigilant, he did not come to her with any regularity. And perhaps that was the greatest punishment of all—to lose her loved ones and then, again and again, to have them remain lost to her. Perhaps her greatest sin was of complacency by assuming that love would stay.

For the sake of propriety, she and the Reverend still attended chapel together on Sunday. He took her elbow and walked with her up the narrow aisle. She cherished his firm grip on her arm and it took all of Grace’s self-control to not turn to him before the congregation and beg him to hold her a little longer. She hated the moment he placed her in her seat in the front pew and turned away. She watched him rise behind the simple podium and offer his sermon, which with each passing week became more inspired. As he first began to speak, his face appeared pale and calm, but then his voice gained stride and his cheeks flushed and the timber of his words echoed against the plaster walls that he himself had erected. He was a master builder, a man in the full stride of life, and there, surrounded by witnesses, it was to God he spoke with force and purpose and anger. He called out and begged the Lord for mercy. He called out and unveiled his true, sinful self.

The new Chinese Christians wondered how it was possible for a white man who had once stood tall and upright and clean to hang his head and grovel before perfect strangers. If this great man who had built roads and hospitals and schools professed such weaknesses what did it mean for those who struggled simply to plow their dry fields and place food on their tables?

The more the Reverend raised his fists at the timbers, shook his head of now shaggy white hair, allowed his shirttails to become untucked and wore his coat wrinkled and worn, the

greater his impact on the Chinese. Each Sunday, as he described the torture he endured at the hands of the world, they came in greater numbers. He sang out in both misery and praise and they flocked to witness the fine white man who had fallen from such a height.

The mission leadership didn't know what to make of the surge of interest among the uninitiated. Within months, they hardly had room enough in their schools for the Chinese children and adults who begged to attend. There was no mistaking that Reverend Carson had struck a chord, but even Grace, usually lost in her own thoughts, recognized the general uneasiness about her husband's success. Did Reverend Watson and the others genuinely fear he was becoming a charlatan? After one of his most rousing sermons, she heard the word Baptist muttered more than once by the ladies pouring tea.

Still, Grace continued to admire and pine for her husband. His zealotry only inspired her more because she felt the pain at its source. He came and went from their home at all hours and she took to staying up late so she could finally see him upon his return. One mild and moonless evening, when she sat by the open window, he appeared, coming across the plain like an apparition. The air was calm and no dust swirled and first he was not there and then he was. He wore his long traveling coat like a cowboy from the American West, his hat hung low and shadowing his face. Even from a distance, she noticed he walked with downcast eyes.

Another trip, another return and no sign of the boy. Her admirable husband had become a haunted ghost, and had she not heard the high tinkle of bells, the rustle of his leather coat, the clatter of the pouches and bags attached to his belt, she might have believed he was made of no substances but sorrow and air.

"Master returns with a heavy heart," Mai Lin said in English.

Grace startled, not having noticed that her maid servant had risen from the cot by the fireplace. "It's him, though, isn't it? You see him, too?"

Mai Lin put her hand on Grace's thin shoulder and said, "Yes, he is home. Mistress can sleep now."

Grace turned to Mai Lin and tipped her face towards the oil lamp. "Do I look all right? Pleasant enough, I mean."

Mai Lin did not comment on the dark shadows under her mistress's eyes, or the way her red hair had lost its sheen, or how Grace's neck had become as thin as a chicken's and the corners of her mouth shot downward much of the time, even now when she wished most to appear hopeful. "Mistress, most beautiful."

"But beauty is within. I know him. He won't be taken in by surface appearance. His mind is so much on the soul." Grace stood and held Mai Lin's arm to steady herself.

"You need rest."

"I'm perfectly all right. You run along now. Sometimes, a wife must see her husband alone."

Mai Lin couldn't help looking skeptically at her mistress.

“It was not that long ago we were newlyweds.”

Mai Lin let out a long sigh and shook her head. Too many times she had kept the woman alive and she feared she would have to do so again.

Grace’s pleading eyes born into Mai Lin and, despite her better judgment she reached into one of the many pouches she wore and brought out a handful of fine powder which she sprinkled over the bed. Grace watched closely and offered a softly spoken, “Thank you.”

The Reverend stepped in and didn’t seem to see Mai Lin until they practically collided.

“What in the devil?” he said. “The whole house awake at this hour!”

The Reverend shook off his coat and bags, the pouches and belts, and even the dagger he know carried when he travelled. Mai Lin took the heap from him in her outstretched arms. He sat on the wicker rocker and she helped him off with his boots. Grace would have liked to do that, but it wouldn’t have been proper in front of a servant.

Mai Lin finally departed and Grace went to her husband, knelt before him and put his hand upon her cheek. He flinched at her touch, but after a few moments, he settled into it, a horse newly broken. She tossed back her hair like a girl and still he did not look into her face. She felt silly as she stroked his hand, but it was her right. He was her husband.

“You must be terribly tired,” she said. “Shall we lie down together?”

He grunted in agreement, but did not move.

“It’s been so long since we’ve been with one another. I want to know where you’ve been, what you’ve seen. Tell me.” Her own bright voice surprised her.

His distracted expression shifted and he looked upon her fiercely. She wasn’t sure she knew this man with blazing eyes. Where was his tenderness now, his good humor, his ease?

“I have seen far too much, my dear, for your innocent ears. You would never survive it. I shouldn’t have brought you here. You are too delicate a creature.”

Grace let out a hard laugh, forced frivolity taking a great effort at that late hour. “You don’t recall that I came here of my own volition. I obtained my degree in religious education and it was my decision to come all this way. And you forget that I’m the granddaughter of farmers. I’m used to rough winters and hot summers and I know how to work. Don’t worry about me.”

She liked the firmness of her words and could almost believe her surety. But, she didn’t want to be arguing with her husband just when she wanted most to simply have him hold her.

He ran a fingertip along her cheek. “I do remember you are most sturdy, although our circumstances have been trying even for the strong.” He looked away and she feared she had lost him again.

“Let’s not dwell on it, Reverend.”

Her voice reached him again and the Reverend returned to her. He traced her lips and it took great concentration for her not to swoon at the touch. He then leaned forward and placed his dry lips upon her brow and kissed it. She felt tears blazing up from the back of her mind.

“I see I have forgotten you in my suffering,” he said. “I have sinned most grievously by this omission. Can you forgive me, my dear?”

She nodded, but had no words, only the tears that pooled in her eyes. She knew her tears would pain him so she willed herself not to cry.

He sat up and squeezed her hand. “You shall go with me. It’s high time you saw the outlying hamlets, the villages and rocky roads. We’ll do this work together.”

She sat up, too, and looked to see if he was joking. With a one-year-old and in her continued weakened condition, she was in no position to travel. Mai Lin would have forbidden it in an instant, if she had had the power to do so. But, her husband wanted her at his side. That was what mattered. When Maggie was younger, her grandmother tried to make her understand that the grandfather lives in the father, and the father in the son, and somehow all of them, the three generations of brave and broken Carson men, carry on in Maggie, a woman of a certain age with her own history of mistakes and losses to bear. Grace believed that the generations telescope in this way, trading lessons and wisdom both forward and back.

In this small house given over to ghosts, set down at the edge of a desert that stretches all the way to the Great Wall and the Mongolian border beyond, Maggie waits for the apparition of her father, though she knows he will not come. Still, waiting and keeping an eye out is what she knows best to do: it has always been her role to look for messages carried on the air and listen for voices from the past.

As a girl, she lay beside her grandmother in the middle of the night as she told stories of China. Maggie sat at the kitchen table and listened to her father, too. And as she listened, no matter how tired she was, or what other thoughts vied for her attention, she felt a thrill, an eagerness to understand and be a part of that other world. Her grandmother’s words, even when she was old and confused, entered Maggie like electricity. Her father’s words, even when they were slurred, somehow made her alert to her own life.

Such vigilance is her legacy. Not the cracked vase on the table, the elegant robe she wears from her grandmother’s closet, or the other antiques in her parents’ home back in Cambridge. Watchfulness is Maggie’s true inheritance. She is the grandchild of seekers, visitors forever searching for the hidden spirit of a foreign land. And although she wishes she had brought her sketch pad or digital camera along to capture the sight, Maggie understands now that memory alone can do justice to something as shifting and mysterious as the past. Memory, and the stories we glean from it, keep a family alive.

As Maggie looks back, she wants to remember not only what she was told, but how she became a part of each tale. She always loved her family’s stories, but now, finally, she has come to love the life they have given her.