

# SCANDALON

*Running From Shame and Finding God's Scandalous Love*



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Running From Shame and Finding God's Scandalous Love

A Memoir

*by Susan Elaine Jenkins*



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Publishing

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*To Dad -*

*for your amazing generosity of spirit as I share this story. I love you so much. You are proof that it's never too late to allow love to have its way in our lives. Thank you for your consistent acceptance and grace. Your presence lights up a room; even four year olds knock at your door, asking you to come out to play with them! I adore you.*



*To Mom ~*

*so recently passed on to heaven, for reading the manuscript and giving your sweet blessing "that others would be helped." As you told me one week before you went to be with Jesus, "We will have an eternity to laugh together and talk heart-to-heart." See you later, Mom.*



## Foreword

This is a book about a survivor, a very real and courageous survivor . . . a story of betrayal and devastation . . . a journey from humiliation to hope and healing.

The Greeks had a word for this type of journey—*scandalon*. It means “to cause to fall, to offend, to bring disgrace.”

The author’s perilous journey is one of sizzling honesty. You might be amazed that she has been able to put her pain into words, to share her brokenness with us.

She reveals her personal calamity in hopes that she might help other hurting people. These reflections of transparent pain are both admirable and cathartic. This book is a gift to anyone who has been victimized, manipulated or abused. It is a recorded journey of shattered dreams, authentic intimacy and thankfully, healing. And, perhaps, as you journey through these often-tortured recollections—you might discover a bit of yourself in her story.

It is a profound symbol of restoration that a pastor has been requested to write the foreword. Without giving the story away, I can tell you that your heart will be warmed, afflicted and enticed as you journey across the great Pacific between Asia and America in a catharsis of tragedy and torment. Some of the recollection of the journey sizzles and shakes. However, the intention is not for voyeurism, but for healing—perhaps yours.

Join in the journey.

Pastor David Spait  
Visalia, California  
January, 2009



**scan-dal** (skan' dl) n. 1. Any act or set of circumstances that brings about disgrace or offends the morality of the social community; a public disgrace. 2. The reaction caused by such an act or set of circumstances, outrage: shame. 3. Any talk damaging to the character; malicious gossip 4. Damage to behavior; a disgrace. 5. One whose conduct brings about disgrace or defamation. (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1980)

Not just one, but a series of scandals hit my life, either of my own, or of someone else's making. Wherever you've been or whatever you've experienced, you might find a bit of yourself in my story.

I began writing—in a magnificent house in Pebble Beach, California—shortly after the worst scandal came to a crisis. Daniel, a warrior in my life, whom I knew from church, gave me his keys and said, “The house is yours. I don't need it—I'll be traveling all summer. Use it whenever you need to.”

So I found myself at his massive kitchen table, watching the surf change from sky blue to aqua to navy and white. Daniel would call occasionally and ask, “What color is the ocean today?” Then he'd describe the eagles flying overhead from his mountain climb, the big catch of his deep-sea fishing off the coast of Canada, or the cuisine at a Beijing business banquet.

I typed. When the issues became too difficult to deal with, I turned off the rented computer, zipped on a sweatshirt, and walked in the salty air. It was seven miles to the town of Pacific Grove, where a small bookstore served coffee and homemade

cakes. Another mile or so brought me to the Asilomar conference grounds. There I would settle into an oversized, knotty pine chair beside the stone fireplace, cozy on chilly summer evenings. After more writing or a game of ping pong, I was ready for a sound sleep, occasionally disturbed by the barking seals on Seal Rock.

When summer ended and it was time to go back to school, I packed up the computer, put the pages in a file folder and went about the painful task of getting on with life. I began practicing the art of “covering up,” a skill I developed for emotional safety and survival.

As the years unfolded, the task of writing my story took much longer than I had anticipated. The condition of my heart delayed the journey. You see, I wanted to be loved by—and accepted by—everyone. I craved attention. Besides, anger and fear were getting in my way. Both emotions gnawed at the remnants of my wounded soul. The process of trying to describe my ordeal seemed too complex a task; so, in my attempt to hide the pain, the pages of my story kept going back into a cardboard box to rot and gather dust.

I expected the haunting memories to float away and to make sure they did, I employed the use of several destructive crutches. I tried sleeping, taking pills, disengaging, eating, shopping, and finally moving halfway across the world in a frantic effort to get away from the pain. No matter how far I ran, the memories followed. They were like a festering, seeping wound. Hiding and covering up could not begin to heal me.

Even after an exciting and audacious move to China, the painful shame lodged like a stone cold monument in my heart.

*You I have called out from beyond the stars, from below the earth,  
from My own imagination, to find your life within My heart.  
From end to end, your life will I hold together. Nothing can  
happen to you outside My knowledge.*

I was raised as a pastor's daughter in a vibrant denomination that taught the necessity of being saved and living a holy life. Our family life was built around the weekly line-up of church activities—Sunday services, prayer meetings, choir rehearsals, and Wednesday night potlucks with tuna noodle casseroles, jello with whipped topping, and macaroni salads. There were missionary society meetings, revival services, visitation programs and fund-raising campaigns. Our family sat around the TV on Saturday nights, folding Sunday bulletins. Many times my mother entertained newcomers on Sunday evening and a good portion of Saturday was consumed with cleaning the house for company. There were never-ending tasks of washing windows, dusting baseboards, arranging flowers and baking cakes. I learned to do things without complaining. I learned to talk with people—interesting people, dull people, those I admired and those I tolerated. Connecting with others was something we did.

In spite of the life skills and excellent biblical understanding that I absorbed from my family and church, some unhealthy messages were picked up along the way. Somehow, I was convinced that if I “fell” or “backslid,” if I ever really messed up, I wouldn't be good enough for God. If scandal landed in my life, that would be it for me spiritually; my journey with God would be over. However unfounded, this fear would open the door to a fierce spiritual battle in my adult life.

Whatever misconceptions I took in, it was within the arms of that church fellowship that I first discovered the love of an intimate God. During those wonderful years, He wrote His words onto the walls of my heart. It was the most natural thing in the world that as my young heart focused on believing Him, I learned to discern God's voice in earnest and sincere prayer.

Much later, the murkiness that had moved between my soul and the peace of God began to slowly ease from the corners of my heart while I was living in the northern Chinese provincial

city of Tianjin. The shadowy images that lurked in my dreams were exposed and the veil hiding the lies and pain began to lift. I learned that, incredibly, no matter what scandals haunt our lives, God desires to completely “out-scandal” every possible scenario in our pasts. He is by far the most scandalous Lover of all.

*Your small, trusting heart already recognizes the perfect breath of all that is most Holy. I see you and walk with you.*

Tianjin is an enormous city covered with a pinkish haze. On most Friday afternoons I'd come to a café for a cup of coffee, to unwind and write in my journal. It's an Italian restaurant, owned by a Canadian-Chinese businesswoman who knows nothing about food but everything about making money. The Chinese cooks meticulously follow Italian recipes and the expatriates flock from all over the city, bringing their families and friends, languages, newspapers and gossip. The Chinese waitresses enjoy their jobs. They sit at the tables to join in the conversations and practice their English.

One September night the air was intermittently hot and rainy, the sizzling brick-lined street sending up clouds of steam. Every balcony jutting awkwardly from its accompanying apartment was swollen with strings of leeks and corn, heaps of cabbage and odd bits of clothing dangling from sagging ropes. I could see grandmothers squatting over plastic bowls of swirling gray water, rinsing vegetables for dinner; mothers arriving home from work, carrying small plastic bags of vegetables or meat bought at the neighborhood market; fathers rolling their shirts halfway up their torsos, lighting cigarettes and bouncing their child on their knees; sleepy schoolchildren arriving home to sip sugary snack drinks through straws before practicing their piano lessons or beginning their extensive homework assignments. Grandfathers in loose,

cotton pajamas shuffled along the street in flat, plastic shoes, under the shadow of weeping willows, nodding greetings or stopping to chat with friends. Some were already pulling up tiny wooden stools to play their nightly game of chess or mahjong on the wet street under yellow lights.

As I sipped my cup of rich black coffee, I began to write in my journal, finding words to describe the slow end of a typical work day in China and reminded of the first time I was in Guangzhou, then known as Canton.

*Swish, swish. Bicycles, black and small and packed close. Swish. Dusk filters through the leaves, falling slowly into the old. The ancient. Do you like it? This is China.*

My first glimpse of the Cantonese people was from a bus, with forty-nine other young American men and women on a world study tour. I was astonished to see hundreds of people bicycling home from their factory jobs—all dressed in white cotton shirts, baggy “Chairman Mao” trousers, and flat shoes.

That was 1980—there were no skyscrapers, towering hotels, sprawling office complexes, traffic lights, freeway overpasses, or myriads of tiny taxi cabs pushing through rush hour commutes. Instead, bicycles creaked through quiet streets unblemished by the blazing neon lights of today.

Back then, a hush blanketed the city in the evening. Giggling and curious teenagers pressed their noses against our skin, touched our hair as we walked by and asked us to take their pictures. We found everything strange and quaint—from the wisps of doled-out toilet paper to the strict schedule (“The bus will leave at 7:37 tomorrow”), to the “watcher” that was assigned to sit at a tiny desk on our hotel floor and . . . watch us. There were polite smiles and efforts made to impress the American students.

We had come to China via railway from Hong Kong. There we had crawled into a cave-like opening that led us to the Walled City. We saw dark corridors underground, with urine-stained walls, where refugees shared the windowless space with rats big as cats, and criminals watched for their chance. It was only eight years after Richard Nixon's historic trip to Peking, when he met with Chairman Mao, the Great Helmsman, chatting amiably over tea and posing for a photograph that shook the world.

In those days the train journey took us through green farmland. Water buffalo grazed near streams. Bent-backed farmers stood knee-deep in rice fields. Cooking fires dotted the countryside and groups of peasants gathered near glowing lanterns while children played with sticks.

I could practically hear the whisper of China beckoning, "Come in, come in. We've been closed for a long, long time, but the gates are creaking open, the dust is falling away, and we want you to come in, come in."

As I rode in the brand-new train, seated beside my brilliant friend, Linda, on blue upholstered chairs with primly crocheted antimacassars, I penned in an Italian red-leather journal: "China is breathtakingly beautiful. People stream from small mountains carrying baskets of produce, as others rhythmically work the Asian earth, their conical hats shielding their eyes from the sun. Everything looks as if it's been here forever. I'm falling in love with this place."

We spent the next seven days visiting Canton, Peking, and Shanghai. We toured factories, climbed the Great Wall, bought delicate tea sets and exchanged addresses with people who had never before seen a Caucasian person. We studied history and attended opera and ballet. We held babies, snapped photos of panda bears, and ate some of the best food we had ever tasted.

I met a twenty-year-old man. He asked quietly and shyly, "What is your work? What is your unit?"

"My unit? We don't have units in America. I am a teacher. Next year will be my third year of teaching."

“You are very fortunate to select your work.” His clear-black eyes, bright behind cheap plastic lenses, glistened.

“You didn’t get to choose your area of study?”

“No, no.” It was hard to hear him, as he lowered his chin and his words floated into the July dampness. “Impossible. I had to give up my studies and now I am a box packer.”

I leaned forward. “A what? Did you say a box packer?”

“Yes, now I must pack boxes in a factory. All my life I will be a box packer.” He spat his words with bitterness.

“What were you hoping to do, may I ask?”

“I wanted to teach English. You are very lucky.”

It was the Fourth of July. Our tour guide stood on top of a chair and waved a tiny United States flag. Gradually we stopped talking and put down our morning tea to sing *The Star Spangled Banner*. We were young and homesick.

On Sunday, our last day in China, the tour guide took us to church, one of the three recognized churches in Shanghai. The service was held in an old church building. The tour guide, who seemed tense on this outing, eventually showed us to our seats in the balcony with a view of the enormous sanctuary below. Goose bumps rose on my skin as I looked down at the people crammed into the church pews. Perhaps a thousand people were packed into that cavernous space. There were only a few hymnals, and I didn’t see any Bibles. Instead of a cross, an enormous portrait of Chairman Mao was displayed behind the pulpit.

Still, I felt the presence of the Lord. Tears flowed from my eyes as I watched these people, all dressed in drab colors, raising their hands in praise to God. We sang “Wonderful Words of Life,” the Chinese louder than our English of course, but all lifted in praise together. People who had suffered atrocities that were unspeakable were weeping in relief, grief and hope.

After a lengthy service, the grim tour guide checked off our numbers as we formed a queue, lining up to board the bus. The rain was falling and people were squeezing close to us, pressed in by others behind them, reaching out to shake our hands.

And, unlike other places we had visited in China, these Christian believers were speaking to us. Weeping and smiling, they grasped our arms, their faces transformed with a joy that I knew came from a living and speaking God.

*How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him! ... He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds (Ps. 147:1, 3).*

We brought into China small Bibles given to us by a Hong Kong church. We hid bundles of them in our luggage, between T-shirts and flip flops. We prayed open-eyed as we went through customs, chatting casually about the weather and the food.

There was a touch on my arm, a woman's eyes pleading, asking, "Do you have Bible?"

"I can't give you a Bible, but please write your address on this paper. Someone will bring you one later." Her hand shook as she drew the precise, vertical characters.

When our plane lifted off the runway in Shanghai and headed toward Vernasi and Calcutta, I heard that Voice I had learned early to know: "You'll be back, Susan."

*One Divine Heart within one human heart—speaking, moving, living.*

Seventeen years later I returned to the exotic land of China. Only this time I came with boxes of school supplies, three suitcases, and a laptop computer—coming to live and to teach. I had signed a two-year contract, thinking, "I can surely get out of

this if I have to. I will stay for one year; I can handle that.”

I arrived in a state of personal brokenness and depression. I had “messed up” so badly, I thought God had forgotten about me, that whatever purposes He had desired for my life had been crushed to nothing. I expected simply to try to sweep up the broken pieces and salvage what I could of my life. China was as good as any other place, I reasoned. Why not? I had lost everything already; what else was there to lose?

I never imagined I would be here for more than a decade. I never imagined that here, in this country broken by its tumultuous history, God would gently gather my broken parts and lovingly heal me—that He would choose this unlikely place to remind me of His first whispers of love.

And I never imagined He would use the people in China—those I met and worked with, those I came to help—to teach me about His love and faithfulness.

*All that comes about in your life is and will always be within My  
imagination. Trust Me.*

In 1997, long before the shining new Beijing airport had been built, it seemed as if the international flights were about to land in the fields alongside the farmers. But to my relief, the 777 rolled to a stop on the runway. I scrambled for my carry-on bags along with the other two hundred and fifty passengers.

I stood in line at the luggage cart window and the clerk stared at me, holding out her hand and mumbling, “One yuan.” I tried to explain that I didn’t yet have any Chinese money. She gazed at me sullenly, opened her hand and repeated the request. “One yuan.” The gentleman behind me stepped up, reached into his pocket for the yuan fee and, with his son, helped me load all my boxes and suitcases in a chaotic tumble on the cart. Sweaty and

exhausted, I pushed the hair out of my eyes and tried to smooth wrinkles from my linen pantsuit, feeling not at all ready to meet my new school principal and his family waiting outside.

After introductions, Mr. Chung, the beaming driver employed by the school, sped along the freeway to the city of Tianjin near the Yellow Sea. In spite of the darkness and heat, the narrow streets teemed with life—women sitting on small benches, nursing babies, their pant legs rolled up to just under their knees; men slinging back beer and gathered together in small huddles; young lovers strolling hand-in-hand, oblivious to curious gazes of passengers so close they could reach out and touch them. Several students stood resting against lampposts, faces frowning in concentration over flimsy paperbacks.

Mr. Chung slammed on the brakes and joined the slow crawl of drivers trying to get a closer look at an accident. People descended from darkened steps to see what had happened. A man lay on his back in the road, his bicycle smashed by a motorcycle. He was motionless and his genitals were exposed through the opening in his thin trousers. I turned away. It was too close, too intimate. I was horrified and embarrassed.

People were everywhere on the streets. Many were sleeping on beds made of plywood, newspapers, and straw—or curled up in dusty wheelbarrows filled with rubbish. Others were stretched out in long, endless rows, skinny legs knotting together, arms wrapped around each other. Some slept propped up against bicycles; others curled inside doorways or cardboard boxes.

I muttered, “These people sleep everywhere, don’t they?”

Craig, my new principal, nodded. “Yes, they sleep wherever they can get comfortable. It’s too hot in their houses tonight. And personal space and privacy are not yet big concepts in China.” His wife laughed in agreement. His two children rustled and shifted in their sleep beside me.

We drove past the school building and another mile or two into the dirt drive of the Peace Apartments, where I would live for the next three years. We fumbled with luggage and boxes as

we negotiated steps in the darkness. I could feel the silent gazes of knots of people on the other side of the drive. It wouldn't be until the next day that I would see the row of temporary housing covered with sheets of tin for the migrant construction workers. The air was thicker than I had remembered from 1980—heavier, wetter, and even hotter. The smells were the same, with an added layer—that of new construction and development.

We stepped into the lobby, glass doors opened by smiling security officers in blue. Our shoes left footprints on the dusty floor. All about lay heaps of discarded rubbish—beams, metal poles, pipes, broken tiles, nails.

As we ascended to the twelfth floor, Craig explained that three other teachers and I would be sharing one floor in four separate flats. He apologized for the temporary mess. He unlocked the door of my apartment. Mr. Chung and others in blue delivered my boxes and luggage, and I was home, turning on lights and taking a tour of the two bedroom flat. The tiny kitchen had a sink that looked almost scary to use—stuck in a dark corner and filled with bits of construction debris. The bathroom had exposed piping and a covered balcony that, as Craig suggested, could be used for hanging laundry. The bedrooms were carpeted and the sitting room floor was a shiny hardwood. Before he left, Mr. Chung turned on the air conditioner. I gratefully said good-bye and shut the door.

I wanted to call my parents to let them know I had arrived. But how? I picked up the cranberry-red telephone sitting on a side table. How does one call America? I tried a few times, then went downstairs to ask the smiling men in blue uniforms. They were surprised to see me again so soon. After a long and painful attempt at conversation in Mandarin, I realized that one of them spoke English. He falteringly explained how to place a long-distance telephone call to America.

At the time my parents were divorced and living on opposite ends of California. I called Mom first, and at the sound of her voice I felt instantly comforted. Then I phoned Dad, and he was

amazed that I could be calling from halfway around the world. He confided, “I cried when that big bird in the sky took off, Susan. I was afraid I’d never see you again.”

“No, Dad, I’m okay! It’s okay here . . . I think.”

Finally I called my younger brother, Paul, and my eight-year-old niece answered. In her breathy, somewhat dramatic voice she asked, “Aunt Susan? You’re in China? Right now, right this minute?”

“Yes, Lauren.”

“Okay, Aunt Susan. Look out the window and tell me exactly what you see.”

“I see . . . um, buildings. Only tall buildings in all directions, Lauren.”

Her voice fell. “Oh.”

I added, “But maybe later I’ll be able to see more. It’s about four o’clock in the morning right now.”

“Okay, call back later and tell me what you see then. Bye, Aunt Susan.” *Click.*

Every trip to China has left me feeling somewhat dizzy and disoriented upon arrival, but that first time was the most difficult. I felt like I was suspended in air, or maybe just turned upside down. The exhaustion was bone deep. I wriggled out of the damp linen suit, showered, then collapsed on the floral polyester sheet of the queen-sized bed.

*I'm always with you. Your heart will leap at the sound of My whisper and this will be joy to you. Even in strange lands you will know Me.*

The next morning we new teachers had our first orientation session. One teacher asked, “Craig, what are some of the basic points to remember about behavior here?”

Craig laughed. "Well, you can spit anywhere you want."

We laughed and I thought, *What a fun group of people. I can barely believe I'm going to be paid to do something I love doing in such an adventurous location.*

We had lunch at a surprisingly Western restaurant that catered to expatriates. Halfway through the meal of burgers, soggy coleslaw and limp fries, I felt sick. Excusing myself, I found the bathroom, where I stood in shock for a moment, taking in the filth and stench. The toilet was a hole in the floor. It was not the first I'd seen, but at that moment, with the jet lag and upset stomach, it was too much. I stumbled back to the table. Caroline, Craig's Chinese-American wife, took one look at my green face, thrust taxi fare into my hands, and scribbled the name of my apartment building on a piece of paper for me.

The driver sped out among the clatter of bicyclists and fruit and vegetable stands. The taxi zoomed along, making a path through the people walking in the middle of the narrow streets. I was getting a closer look at this city. It seemed to be dotted with one partially finished skyscraper after another. Zealous investors had begun to build monstrous projects, only to abandon them as funds were depleted. Peasant workers were bussed back to the countryside. The discarded slabs of cement, twisted chunks of metal and other remnants of construction work had become part of the landscape in these peaceful neighborhoods. A part of me resonated with the incongruent scene. The people apparently ignored the half-finished, hulking monuments that loomed over their lives; fortunes lost and dreams gone awry seemed an accepted fact of life here.

*Someday I will get married and have a beautiful wedding. Ivory lace, pink taffeta and flowers from a garden. I will have a baby and live in a white house in the country. We will be happy. Someday. Love and children in a small white house.*

I gave my heart to the Lord at the age of four in an old-fashioned revival meeting. My dad was the guest preacher at a church in the mountains of Southern California; and while I can't remember many details, I recall the moment when the peace of Jesus Christ filled my heart and made me cry with joy. I remember being tucked into bed later that evening between the pastor's daughters and feeling that, without a doubt, Jesus loved me. God loved me. Something happened within me that night.

I was taught about God in church by loving, dedicated people who gave up sitting in the "big" church, where it was air-conditioned and comfortable, to trudge over to the "children's church," where the Bible was patiently and lovingly unfolded to us. In those small, stuffy rooms, I began to absorb the glory of God.

The most memorable of my children's church teachers was my own mother. Her animated storytelling captured the attention of everyone in the room. I'd gaze at her proudly, beautiful in lemon, pink or black suits and high heels, her dark hair in a bouffant style. She wore very little make-up, as she had naturally rosy cheeks, full lips and straight white teeth. Her chiseled jaw line and high cheekbones reflected her part-Indian heritage; her soft brown eyes were expressive.

I sat in chiffon dresses with puffed sleeves and ribbon bows over white petticoats that were scratchy and stiff. My legs dangled from the small chairs, ending in white lace-edged anklets and patent leather Mary Jane shoes. My hair was done in pin curls and ribbons and I carried a dime for the offering in my tiny purse. My two brothers' hair was slicked back with Bryll Cream as once a week they exchanged their baseball uniforms for proper suits with clip-on ties.

Mother's voice changed to fit the characters and we were transported in time to the Nile River, hiding on the muddy banks alongside Moses's mother, watching the baby boy floating away in a basket of bulrushes. We were part of the taunting crowd hurling

insults and making a fool of Noah as he faithfully built the ark. Or Mother became Hannah, desperately praying for a baby in the temple while Eli watched in secret. And she was the shepherd counting the ninety-nine sheep and not resting until the one lost lamb had been found.

The Bible stories were larger than life—almost unbelievable—yet we believed in the God of miracles who had turned a walking-stick into a snake and a desert bush into a flame of fire. I knew that the Red Sea parted and that Jonah spent three days inside the belly of a great fish. My curiosity, imagination and passion for God was ignited in those basement Sunday school rooms. During the week, when I went to school or played in the neighborhood with friends, a consciousness of God's presence remained with me. He wasn't just a story or a picture to color after the Sunday school lesson. He was a person. He liked me to talk with him and tell Him things that were on my six-year-old mind, then my ten-year-old heart, and, later, within my thirteen-year-old soul. He listened. He responded. He laughed and He cried. Not in words I heard with my ears, but in words I sensed in my heart. He was a peaceful presence who brought joy beyond explanation. He was a gentle inner warmth that accompanied me on the playground, to camp, and at home. I never felt alone.

*Find your desires in Me.*

On our second day in Tianjin, the newly-arrived teachers took a trip to the medical center for physical exams. After we passed through the door marked ALIENS, we had blood tests, blood pressure tests, ultrasounds, and X-rays, and our eyes, ears, noses and throats were checked. The tests were performed in small cubicles with flimsy partitions; we could see each other's heads and shoulders as we bobbed up and down, in and out of

the examination spaces. The nurses kept us moving briskly. They shouted back and forth to each other, laughing as they recorded our weights.

My favorite part was the eye exam. I've had poor vision since third grade. Because I usually wear contacts, most people don't realize just how poor my vision is. But on this one day and each year thereafter in China, I look forward to this test, the day I magically get to have perfect vision. I take out my contacts, keeping my glasses close at hand, and the examiner begins the test. If I turn my hand in the wrong direction, indicating which way the E is facing, she firmly shakes her head until I finally "get it right." Then she smiles happily and with a flourish marks the box that says PERFECT VISION. And I get to enjoy a fleeting, satisfying moment of being an alien with perfect vision.

Two weeks after this first physical, I noticed a ping pong table in the room next to the lobby. I love to play ping pong, so I approached the blue-clad security guard and asked, "May I please play?" I pointed to the little room across from his desk.

His face turned bright red as he dialed the telephone. Another security officer trotted out from a back room with two paddles and a ball. I was pleased, but noticed the first security guard writing detailed notes in a large, black notebook. (Later I learned that everything about us was recorded in that book, from what we bought at the store to the names and addresses of our dinner guests.) After some hesitation, they finally relinquished the paddles and ball to me. Then I realized I had no partner.

I invited both guards to play with me, first one then the other, but they shook their heads, saying, "No, no, no."

I looked around again. There was no one else in the lobby. However, about thirty peasants crowded outside the windows staring at me, their weathered faces pressed up to the grimy windows. I walked outside into the heat and, with hand gestures, invited the nearest young man to play ping pong with me. Somewhat bewildered, but visibly delighted, he accepted the paddle and followed me into the gloomy entryway. His friends

outside were clapping and cheering, slapping one another on the back and shouting, "Look, look! He's going to play ping pong with a Big Nose Ghostie!"

The tall, handsome security guards stood frozen behind the desk, their smiles gone. They watched silently as the peasant worker and I began to play; then one of them picked up the telephone again.

In less than two minutes, a third security officer appeared, the one who spoke English, sweat pouring from his worried face. "Excuse me, Madam, what are you doing?"

I smiled blissfully as I slammed the ball across the table. "Playing ping pong!"

"Uh, excuse me, pardon me, Madam, but you cannot play ping pong with this man."

I wiped the dripping sweat from my face, preparing to serve the ball. "Why not?"

The peasant man let the ball go by; the joy of the game had disappeared from his face. He noiselessly and carefully set the paddle down on top of the ball as the security guard explained. "This man is a peasant from the countryside. He is a worker."

I laughed nervously. "Well, I'm a worker, too. I go to work every day, as you've noticed, I'm sure."

He said, "Yes, Madam, we know you are a teacher. But this man cannot come into this building.

"He comes into this building to paint the apartments. Why can't he play ping pong if I invite him?"

The brown peasant man, bones visible through his thin clothes, quietly melted away. So did the crowd of curious onlookers peering in through the smudged windows.

The officer continued, "I'm very sorry, Madam." He fiddled nervously and apologetically at his tie. "Uh, why don't you go upstairs now and have a rest?"

"Oh, I don't want a rest. Not yet. I just began playing!"

Another man marched into the dimly-lit, airless room, wearing a tailored suit. He walked up to the security officer and

whispered in his red ears. Then, both motioned to the first guard and they began a loud conversation in Mandarin which lasted at least ten minutes.

At last, the English-speaking guard turned to me triumphantly. “Good news! We have found someone to play ping pong with you.” The two men looked enormously pleased.

A woman appeared next, sophisticated and lovely in a white linen pantsuit; she held a small white dog. She introduced herself and said smoothly, “Good afternoon, Miss Susan. Welcome you to Peace Apartments.”

I was uneasy with the fact that she knew my name. Who was she? Still sweating profusely and feeling rather embarrassed, I said lamely, “Er, um, hello. I am sorry to have caused such a disturbance.” I motioned vaguely to the ping pong table. “I thought I could just play a little ping pong.”

She was scrutinizing me from head to toe, patting her dog who was snarling at me. My eagerness to play ping pong was beginning to wane.

“Yes, I see. Well, we have located someone to play ping pong with you, Miss Susan. Please wait here one moment.”

She turned to the security guards and spoke sharply in Mandarin over the growls of the fluffy white dog. Soon another man, someone I had not seen before, shuffled into the room. He had clearly just been awakened from a nap. He looked at me quizzically—the sweating Big Nose Ghostie—and didn’t seem very impressed. He mumbled something that didn’t sound nice at all to the three security guards now flanking one side of the room, watching. One of them—the one who spoke such good English—narrowed his eyes and waved impatiently. “Play, play.”

The sleepy man was an outstanding player and I couldn’t manage to return anything he smashed over the net. I began to seriously reconsider the security guard’s earlier suggestion of going upstairs for a rest.

From then on, during the three years I lived in the Peace Apartments, a security guard was allowed to play with me.

*My child, never forget that you are Mine and I am yours. My voice will speak amongst many others. You must be still and listen.*

When I was a child, my mother and I often played pretend games together. My favorite was “The Back Door.” I would knock loudly on the kitchen door, pretending to be a nosy neighbor or a colorful character from church. My mother would dutifully act her “part” while she prepared dinner—baked chicken and green beans or roast beef and mashed potatoes. Our “conversations” would have us laughing until tears rolled down our faces. And as a minister’s daughter, I had heaps of material from which to draw, as there was a continual procession of interesting, even wacky, people who made their way into the life of our family.

Our home was a center for people as long as I can remember. Before I turned six years old, I would listen for the phone to ring every Monday morning at six o’clock on the dot. Like clockwork, one of the older saints in the congregation called to “check up” on her feisty young pastor. My father would run down the hallway from the back bedroom, clearing his throat to avoid sounding as if he had just been awakened from a sound sleep. The day before had been a marathon for him with morning worship, Sunday school, choir practice and evening evangelistic services.

Still in bed, I listened to his side of the conversation. “Oh, of course not, Sister Coons. You didn’t wake me. I’ve been up for hours, in prayer and study. . . . Yes, Sister Coons, the services did go well yesterday. . . . Next Sunday? Well now, I haven’t quite decided on the text, but will be happy to call you as soon as I do. . . . Yes, of course, I’d be delighted to send you a sermon outline . . . You have a wonderful day. Good-bye and God bless you.”

*Click.* Then my father would stumble back down the hall and collapse into bed.

A lot of wonderful folks passed through our back door. Our mother was teaching school and our father was very busy with his church; many people helped raise us three children, who were close in age (and mischievousness). They picked us up from school, babysat us, and brought us platters of freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies. I remember Mrs. Movius, who made play dough and let us mix the colors.

In later years, the younger couples and teenagers were the ones who drifted in and out of our home—joining our family for meals at a moment's notice and becoming part of our family life.

In those days, the stereo rocked and the house was full of friends spending the night, joining in late night swim parties in the summer and going up to the mountains with us for ski trips in the winter. Life was packed with a chaotic, busy schedule of basketball games, horseback riding, church activities, and music.

This “open door policy” was a pattern that continued far into my adulthood; it was difficult for me to establish any sense of boundaries for myself. Even in adulthood the back door of my life was open and, sometimes, I should have locked it.

For a period of several months I allowed a very ill person to slip into my life. I was working at my church's Christian school. Roy simply showed up one evening, claiming that one of the church secretaries told him that I always worked late.

The distaste I felt whenever Roy shuffled into my room brought a pang of guilt. After all, he attended my church.

Roy would slink into a student chair and hunch over the desk, staring at me through thick lenses. He said he wanted to help grade papers and that by allowing him to do so, I'd be giving him a reason to live, so he wouldn't “cut himself.”

He discovered one of my passions—books. He knew where to find good used children's books for my classroom library and would scurry around the Bay Area on buses looking for new additions to my collection. He paid attention to my curriculum and found books on specific teaching subjects.

But I remained uncomfortable. There was a stale, yeasty-sour

odor about him. He came into my classroom more and more often, and stayed late into the night. He left daily messages on my home phone. He came in and out of my life without invitation, but I hadn't the skills to say, "No, thank you."

His interest in me slowly turned from pleasant discussions about books, school and theology to the point where he was literally stalking me. His "godliness" would all too quickly become a fit, a tirade of sorts, if I was too busy to spend time with him. Since he was considered legally blind and didn't have a driver's license, he frequently called for rides, demanding to be picked up at all hours of the night. He'd be waiting, shivering at a bus stop, and I'd drive him to his parents' house where he still lived.

Then came the day when he announced that God had recently informed him of our upcoming marriage. I was first shocked, then amused, and finally scared. As the months passed and the realization of my lack of interest and cooperation began to sink in, his behavior became violent. One night he threw rocks at my car after I dropped him off at his parents' house.

I finally began to wrestle free of Roy and his toxic clutch on my time and my life. I began ignoring the long, emotional phone messages. I changed my phone number and locked my classroom door at night. Slowly, my life became more spacious, peaceful and calm. I felt less cluttered, more clear. I actually enjoyed doing all those small tasks he had begged to do.

And later in China I could look back and see that it was as if I were still playing the Back Door game. From time to time people had stood there as the screen door flapped in the breeze, taking their chance to slip inside, to try to inhabit the place where I held my thoughts and dreams. And they'd ride along, enjoying the view out my window. How much easier it was for them to hitch a ride—someone else was doing all the work, all the planning. I had provided emotional transport to those I was not called or equipped to carry. On those journeys that took me away from my own path, I had let too much slip through the cracks. I had left the back door to my soul wide open, and it had invited

intruders to come inside. I had neglected to erect boundaries, to guard my heart with care and wisdom; and like a poorly-adjusted underslip, it showed.

*Let things of this world fall away, My child. You have an eternity with Me and your happiness can only come from Me, the Giver of all good things.*

One sweltering August evening I was lost in Tianjin. The street signs all looked the same to me on streets that all looked the same. I found myself outside an appliance repair shop squeezed between crumbling brick hutongs.

The shop owner—a disabled man who pulled himself along without the assistance of a wheelchair—beckoned me to sit on one of the low stools scattered about the sidewalk. He then graciously offered me a Coke from a dusty roadside stand. I plopped down among the rusting washing machines, fans, tape players and rice cookers. I soon discovered that this was a hub of social interaction. People of every social status and position dropped by this little shop to pull up impossibly tiny wooden benches and sit with cups of tea. The men smoked one cigarette after another, sitting with their shirts rolled up high on their smooth, beige chests in an effort to cope with the late summer heat. A woman in her thirties came running to perform an impromptu and charming sidewalk concert of The Carpenters' hits: "Rainy Days and Mondays" and "I Won't Last a Day Without You." She had memorized the words to all the verses. I began harmonizing with her and she beamed with pleasure.

Around us, people were gathering to watch and listen—grandmothers, teenagers, middle-aged couples and babies. Then a voice rang out from the crowd on the street.

"Where are you from?"

The English words were poetry to my ears, instantly discernible through the cacophony of Chinese.

"I'm from America," I called out in reply, searching everywhere through the throng of curious people to find the speaker of the strident English words.

As they realized the Big Nosed Foreigner was talking with someone on the street beside them, the crowd craned their necks and all conversation gradually ceased.

A man stepped out from the twist of people and smiled. "Hello, my name is Ouyang and I have been to America."

The people stared at him open-mouthed, then turned back toward me to see if I could understand his words. I was astonished to meet an English-speaking person who'd been to America, right here on this little corner.

"Really? Where did you visit while you were there?"

The crowd let out a collective murmur. The Big Nosed Foreigner and one of their own were chatting! This was something that didn't happen every day in their crumbling little neighborhood.

"I went to Las Vegas and San Jose," he explained proudly.

"Las Vegas and San Jose? Where else did you go?"

His voice fell a bit. "That's all."

I sat up straighter. "That's it? You only went to those two cities?"

Ouyang cocked his head in a gesture I would learn to know well. "Yes. That's all. I was with my cousin and he had the car."

"Oh. Well, at least you were able to see two very interesting and yet . . . um, er . . . different places. Did your cousin take you to see the Winchester Mystery House?"

He looked annoyed. "No, he didn't. *Hiyaa!* It doesn't matter."

"I'm sorry you weren't able to visit Yosemite or see the redwoods. You should have gone to San Francisco for a day."

He winced and shrugged his shoulders. "It was a so-so trip. Only so-so."

I smiled. "I can imagine. What did you do in San Jose?"

“I had to sit in my cousin’s apartment all day long. It was very hot and boring. There was nothing to do but watch the television. Such idiots in America on television!”

I laughed. “Yes, there are some very silly TV shows, aren’t there? It’s really a pity you didn’t get to see more places. When you drove from Las Vegas to San Jose did you see anything?”

He shook his head. “Nothing but desert. And we lost all our money in Las Vegas. There was nothing left. So we drove to San Jose and stayed at home.”

“Did you take the coastal route up through California so you could see the ocean?”

“No, we drove up through the middle of the state. It was very hot.”

“And you were so close to San Francisco, the most beautiful city in the world.”

The appliance repair shopkeeper offered Ouyang some tea and a bench. He joined us and we talked. The night grew longer and the air cooled slightly. As the now-enormous group of people listened to our every word and commented loudly at each turn in the conversation, Ouyang and I happily figured out that we were neighbors.

He offered me a ride home on the back of his bicycle. I gladly accepted. He flew through the narrow streets where young couples were stealing private moments together and others were out taking late-night strolls in their pajamas. Old men were gambling and smoking by lantern light. The breezes whipped my long hair around and dried the day’s sweat from my body. I felt far from all my problems. I had nothing of the comparatively-extravagant life I once lived. Yet it was peaceful to be riding along on the back of a bicycle, gliding through these ancient streets.

When we pulled into the drive of the Peace Apartments, as Ouyang skillfully avoided the potholes, we were aware of the curious gaze of hundreds of peasant construction workers. To see me being delivered home on the back of a bicycle must have been unexpected.

*Someday you will pass through the troubled waters, looking to your right and to your left for help. I will be there, eternally loving you.*

*You may not hear My voice then.*

*"I will always hear Your voice, Father."*

*Not then, you will not, for you may not be listening. Listen for Me. I am speaking in your heart, on the wind, in every simple thing.*

My dad's personality defies description. He is the ultimate extrovert—outgoing, loud, filled with laughter. He makes friends wherever he goes. He was born the youngest of four sons in a family of men who were tall, strong and handsome in that "All-American" way. When my best friend's husband met my dad, he commented, "Your father is a total jock." He was. He still is.

My dad was fourteen years of age when his father dropped dead of a sudden heart attack. As his world collapsed in a matter of moments, he watched his mother crying over the body, "What will we do? What will we do?"

It was a loss from which my father never recovered; one that was never adequately addressed. My grandmother sold the farm and red-brick farmhouse, and bought a large, gracious home in downtown Fresno, where the air is rich with the aroma of orange blossoms and peaches, mixed with the scent of cattle and burning field fires in the summer. Dad was blessed to be surrounded by older males who were strong role models. His brother Harold picked him up from school each day and took him to his piano lessons. Another brother was a dynamic preacher in a nearby town. At seventeen my father was saved in a campmeeting service at Beulah Park—a church campground in the Santa Cruz mountains that later became the setting for some of my own happy childhood memories.

My dad headed off to Pasadena College, a small private

Christian college, on fire for the Lord and determined to become a minister of the Gospel. He was talented and soon in demand as a preacher and musician. My mother arrived in Pasadena from Colorado (where her father was pastoring) and joined him on evangelistic tours around California. They were soon married. After graduating from seminary in Kansas City, my parents returned to California to pastor congregations in Los Angeles and San Jose before moving to the east Bay Area.

Dad spent a lot of time playing sports with my brothers and me outside our home in the afternoons. He played as hard as we played. We kids spent most of our time, though, either sitting in church or preparing for church. All three of us loved it. Our parents made church fun for everyone. They played music that rocked. The services were spiced with dramatic enactments of biblical principles. Peoples' lives were being changed. During the summers, my parents directed a high school church camp at Beulah Park, and those were the best days of our lives. We children had the run of the campground. As small children, we'd play from breakfast until late at night when the last embers of the campfire died. Every day we played baseball and basketball, and hiked to the creek; and often someone drove us to the beach, where there was an old-fashioned boardwalk and a wooden roller coaster.

One of my earliest recollections is of going with my dad to minister to a frail woman in her nineties, Mother Martin. For five years he drove to her home on his way to church and literally picked her up, carrying her to the car and taking her to church with us. I was somewhat intimidated by her demeanor—she wore a severe black skirt and blouse, hat and lace-up boots, like a character out of the Victorian Age. But she loved the Lord, and my dad cheerfully accommodated her desire to be in church.

*On Christ the Solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.*

Ouyang became one of my Chinese language teachers. Our friendship, begun out of the happy discovery that we were neighbors in this huge metropolis, deepened with time. I thought of him as a brother; and he considered me to be his elder sister. It was a comfortable friendship based on truth and honesty.

One day there was a knock at the door and Ouyang marched in, all business, depositing a plastic bag onto the sofa. “The cold weather comes soon and my mother is worried you do not have proper clothes. She buys you some.”

“Thank you! But she shouldn’t have done that. It’s far too expensive, Ouyang.”

“Susan, I give her money. It’s my money, don’t forget. I am a businessman in China and I am rich.”

“Okay, well, thank you. Both of you have become like family to me. But I should buy my own clothes, you know.”

He looked perplexed. “Before you moved to the other side of the world, didn’t you think that you should perhaps study the climate of your new environment? This is not San Francisco, you know. The weather changes dramatically in Tianjin. You cannot wear beach shoes now.”

I looked down at my flip-flops and polished pink toenails. “I should have checked it out more thoroughly, yes.”

He motioned toward the closet off the kitchen. “You come unprepared for the snow and yet you bring ridiculous things— toilet paper! Didn’t you think that in a country of over a billion bottoms there might be toilet paper?”

I bit my lip. “Well, I brought it because in 1980 there wasn’t much toilet paper here. I didn’t want to be caught unprepared.”

“China has changed, Susan. We’ve had private telephones for three years now,” he added proudly.

I was boiling water for tea. I had learned that drinking tea in China was not just a matter of meeting one’s physical need for liquid; it was a way of calming and centering oneself.

“The first water you boil must be thrown out. It is not good

enough. The second boil is okay,” Ouyang instructed.

“Why?”

“Because this is China! China is an ancient land and there are many customs carried on for thousands of years.” He paused momentarily, casting down his black eyes. “And I must tell you there are many customs which have been carelessly discarded, as well. This is to our shame.”

“I understand.” I poured the tea. “Will you tell me about the winter? I’m nervous about the cold. I’m not used to it.”

He thought a moment. “The cold is fine. You will be warm enough here in your nice home. It’s the hot weather the Chinese fear. They die in the summer heat. In winter, just add more layers, add more clothes and you can stay warm.”

I brought my Chinese language books to the table. Ouyang’s eyes brightened. “Okay, time to study. Let’s begin.”

Throughout the next two hours as we practiced Mandarin tones and phrases, the leaves on the trees outside continued to fall. Autumn was turning into winter and I was in Asia. I was usually too busy during the school week to think about it much, but on the weekends while sitting at home or in Ouyang’s mother’s home the realization would hit me and I would suddenly see myself as a tiny speck on a big, turning globe. The world was spinning slowly on its course, and I was on a different point than before, far away from everything I once knew. And, at the same time, nothing was far away.

*Listen for My voice.*

Our family moved to Livermore when I was twelve years old. I loved the Livermore Valley—the rolling hills that were velvety green during winter and spring, and, as John Steinbeck phrased it, like the tawny backs of golden mountain lions in summer.

The church was thriving and filled with teenagers that my two brothers and I knew from school. The school system was good and the district of churches to which we belonged provided an endless stream of activities—basketball tournaments for my brothers, Bible quiz competitions, choir tours and mission trips. Our house was a hub of life and activity and we were a happy family—with so much health and vigor on every level.

Dad was always such a loving man. He had a fierce love for his family and church people. That never changed. But gradually he did come to love something else too much.

He discovered how to make money—a lot of it. He began investing in real estate. He began to buy homes, fix them up and sell them at a time when the market was starting to boom. Our lifestyle did not show it, nothing changed in our daily lives; but our dad was rapidly becoming a very wealthy man.

His neighborhood friends and real estate buddies began calling him “the Captain.” He was falling in love with money. I can still see the gleam in his hazel eyes when speaking about the stuff—the sideways shift of his gaze, the euphoric smile, even the way he rolled the word “money” in his mouth. It was a way he had of savoring the word, letting it linger much the way wine connoisseurs allow a fine wine to fill the mouth and senses.

Somehow, the passion of my dad’s life shifted. My dad, the pastor, was all about people—leading, loving, and helping people. But my dad, “the Captain,” was quickly becoming all about money. It was a divided existence and it was leading to disaster.

He had a church phone line installed in our house so that he wouldn’t have to actually go to his office. Not that he was lazy—quite the opposite. He was busy searching for new property to acquire and, with his outgoing nature, was able to find all sorts of deals. He befriended and convinced an old man who owned an apartment building in town to sell the building at a fraction of its worth. From that apartment building, he went on to buy more homes and commercial buildings.

I went away to college in San Diego and was happy in

the routine of dorm life. But on visits back to Livermore, it was hard to ignore the changes taking place in my dad. During these years he began taking us to the Sierras. Money, we were surprised to learn, was of no concern. My parents took us to Tahoe for ski vacations as often as possible. After an exhilarating day on the slopes, we'd dress up and hit the casinos, often taking in a dinner show featuring stars like Diana Ross and Johnny Cash. Dad would approach the reservations desk and study the list of names, choosing one that was similar to ours. When the hostess turned to ask his name, he'd smoothly tell her that we were the Jensen or Johnson party—some name he had spotted on her list. We'd be escorted into the theater and my dad would give a tip to make sure we were sitting in the very front.

There were also shows with partial nudity. My college-age brothers were taken to topless shows. The first time this happened I was so upset about it, I spoke up, saying, "Dad, all our life you've told us we shouldn't do any of these things. The drinking, the partying, seeing things like this. Why have you changed so much?" But confronting my parents only seemed to make things worse. Then I wondered if there was something wrong with me. Perhaps I lacked the sophistication to handle the world's pleasures; maybe I was too immature. Whatever it was, I felt that I must be the one with the problem. Those evenings left me irritable, angry and confused.

As we trailed after Dad in the smoky air of the casinos, I wondered if he realized what kind of effect this was having upon my brothers. Little by little they were being introduced to a world they had been taught from childhood was wrong.

I remembered driving through Nevada on a family trip years before and Dad stopping to show us the casinos. We stood outside the window and stared at the people playing the slot machines, and Dad told us, "Kids, this is the devil's playground. These people are addicted to gambling. They spend their entire pensions and social security checks to take a bus and come

up here, where they lose everything they have. Do you see the hopelessness on their faces?”

We nodded, sobered by the sadness being pointed out by our minister-father. He taught us that drinking alcohol was evil and would give Satan a foothold on our lives if we were to ever indulge in it. I remember feeling very secure in the structured framework in which I was raised. There were rules, yes, but I accepted that they were put in place for our spiritual good.

Only a decade later, everything in our lives had made a 180-degree turn. The reversal caused turmoil and heartache. After the Sunday evening service, Dad stood at the sanctuary door, shaking hands with the parishioners before catching the last flight to Reno where he studied statistics and made weekly bets. He had a group of friends—a realtor, a teacher and an insurance broker—that he met with each Monday. They became good friends of our family. But the messages that Dad was sending were conflicting with everything we had been taught. Suddenly it was perfectly fine to walk over the boundaries that had always been in place. It was a paradox: some of these new friends of my father's were kind and caring folks, pillars in the community, who set up fundraising events for needy people. But these best friends of my preacher-dad were also rowdy and wild. Something was wrong with our picture-perfect family.

Things were happening that made me worry and sometimes made me mad! We took a family vacation to Hawaii. During a dinner show featuring Don Ho, someone on Mr. Ho's staff came to our table with a message: “Don Ho wants to meet your daughter.” I was terrified, but my parents were thrilled. I followed the messenger backstage and was shown to his dressing room. He greeted me, stood up and took my hand and pulled me close. He said, “Come here, Angel.” And then, audaciously and inconceivably, Mr. Ho began to kiss me, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. I pulled away, disgusted, and left immediately. One of his assistants ushered me back to my table. I was furious at the situation and at my parents, thinking, “Someday I will have a

daughter. And she will never have to do anything like that.”

Other strange things happened. After college graduation, I took a teaching job back in my hometown. I was living in an apartment at one of my dad’s apartment buildings. One day when I returned home from school, I was surprised to find my apartment empty. Everything had been moved out. I called my dad and he explained, “I needed that apartment, Susan, for a family in the church. You can move back to our house.”

Secretly worried, I finished out the year living with my parents. Dad began gambling with the next-door neighbors and other friends. He started going to the horse races at the state and county fairs. He continued to play craps in the casinos of Lake Tahoe and Reno, only now it was more than just occasional ski vacations—he was going up at least once a week.

Out of love and loyalty, Mom accompanied Dad on his gambling jaunts to Reno and Tahoe, but after a few years, her interest waned. She began staying home. Dad continued his weekly trips to Reno, sometimes catching the red-eye flight after preaching on Sunday evening, to meet his gambling buddies, place his football bets, then return home by Wednesday evening.

My heart saddened each time I had to answer the church phone and say, “I’m sorry, my father is out of town right now. May I take a message?”

I tried confronting him. “Dad, I am worried about how your behavior is going to affect Steve and Paul (my brothers). Have you thought about that at all?”

He scoffed, “They’re grown now. What I do is none of their business and won’t have any negative effect upon their lives.”

“Dad, they’re still in college! Paul says he has sensed a call to the pastoral ministry. Give him a chance to thrive in school without crushing his spirit by this crazy behavior.”

My dad was convinced that my brothers didn’t need him to be a role model any longer. And there was nothing I could say or do to change his thinking.

I didn’t realize it but I was slowly becoming depressed. I was

taking on the burden of worrying for my dad. I had to pretend that everything was perfect and normal while at church, but I also had to accommodate the changes in our family's lifestyle. I was moving back and forth between two different worlds and it caused my soul to feel divided.

I found a therapist in the phone book and made an appointment. In the therapy session I tried to convey the panic I was feeling at the night-and-day differences to which my parents had expected me to adapt. His advice after listening for fifty minutes was: "You're twenty-three years old. That's old enough to find your own lifestyle. Your parents' choices shouldn't be affecting you so much." I paid the bill and drove home, more lonely and confused than ever.

I was swimming laps in the backyard pool one night, and I looked up to see Dad standing beside the pool, visibly shaking. He had just returned home from a church board meeting where he resigned from our church. I had mixed feelings, of course, but was too young and too loyal to look at the situation objectively. My mother seemed teary and exhausted for several days.

Without the church to think about, Dad's gambling endeavors took on noticeable intensity. He spent every day, all day at the horse races with our next-door neighbor, a foul-mouthed racing addict with a beer belly that jiggled with each step.

As he pulled up to the house each evening, Dad headed not to our home, but to the neighbor's, where he drank beer and told an endless string of mediocre jokes, apparently quite funny to his new, distorted congregation, his appreciative crowd of listeners.

I couldn't help but notice that even the way my dad pronounced his words was changing: his words were slurred, slowly beginning to sound like the speech of his new friends, of a different "class" altogether. There were times I couldn't help but point it out to him. But he just scoffed at my concern.

I was worried. I saw my mom become immersed in a solitary world that none of us understood and from which she would not fully emerge for almost twenty-five years.

One night the neighbor's oldest son, an unemployed high school drop-out, shot himself in the head, the brain matter splattering all over the master bedroom. My dad owned the house and thoughtlessly sent my two brothers over to clean up the mess.

One of my cousins called one day, inviting me to attend a singles' conference on the Queen Mary in Long Beach. The church in which I had grown up was hosting the event, and he wanted me to sing at it. I wanted to go, but I was afraid that, since people in that denomination knew about my family situation, I would be unwelcome. I had managed to save enough money for a trip around the world that summer—the trip that would take me to China for the first time. I told my cousin I'd be unable to make the conference. My world had been shaken by the battle of good versus evil that was destroying my family. I would seek solace alone with God and try to make sense of it.

My life—those things that meant the most to my heart, those things that measured my days—had become very different from the life my parents were choosing. When I walked into their home after my trip and took in the discarded bottle or two and the dazed look in their eyes as they halfheartedly watched TV sitcoms, I felt I was sinking into something I had to avoid. I could sense the tentacles of addiction grabbing at my parents. And I felt that, if it destroyed them, I would be the one responsible, as if the burden was resting on my shoulders.

The pressure was building for me. I moved to an apartment in Danville—desperately needing some distance from the situation—and as I did, I was surprised by the joy I experienced in setting up house, cooking and preparing meals for my friends. I nestled into each place I lived. I was working at a private elementary school that offered a solid, conservative education, and I was playing the piano in a dinner house at night.

*I am Your Heavenly Father. I know all about you, from the*

*number of hairs on your head to the little-girl dreams living inside your heart, My child. You are always being loved and protected.*

Eventually I caught on: Nobody but large hotel kitchen staff uses hot water to wash dishes in Tianjin.

After serving dinner to several of my Chinese friends, I retired to the kitchen to start washing dishes. As I began pulling on pink rubber gloves, Ouyang cried out, “No, let me wash them! I can wash with no gloves!”

I looked at him. “Why wouldn’t you wear gloves?”

“The cold water doesn’t bother my hands,” he explained.

As I boiled water to fill the bowl in the sink, I gently explained that I needed the gloves not because the water was too cold, but because I intended to use very hot water.

His eyes widened with interest. “My father, a doctor, always tried to get my mother to wash dishes in hot water, too. He said it was healthier that way, but she refused. She thought it was another strange Canadian habit he picked up while lecturing in Toronto.”

“But your mother’s a doctor! Surely she knows that hot water is better than cold.”

Ouyang looked down sadly at the floor. “Susan, water has been a problem here in China. We are not like Americans. We do not have a hot shower any time we wish, or at least we didn’t. My family never had water in the house at all until just before my father died. Believe me, water is a problem.”

“I see. I’m so sorry, I should have thought.”

Then there is the curious habit of putting dishes away while still soaking wet after a quick rinse in cold or tepid water. When one reaches for a dish, there is most always a gray puddle at the bottom of each bowl or glass. The kitchen cupboards are lined with newspaper (a good idea, I discovered) and water literally dribbles from the dishes, dripping over everything—all the time one hears, *drip, drip, drip*. When I eat in a restaurant, I’ve noticed

it is customary to shake the water at the bottom of the glass, swishing and sloshing it about until it's flung—at last—onto the floor. Food is even served on dishes with water at the bottom with no thought to the bacteria and germs.

Once I asked one of my Chinese friends why people don't dry dishes in China. She thought a moment, then cheerfully answered, "Because there are no dish towels."

*Everything that happens can be used for My glory, for My purpose.*

Dr. John Travis was the pastor of my uncle and aunt's Presbyterian church in the heart of California's fertile San Joaquin Valley. He, his stunning wife and their two beautiful children had been on the fringes of my family life for the five years that they lived there, just two blocks from my uncle and aunt's home.

I first met Dr. Travis at a backyard barbecue. I barely remember the introduction, for I had brought Kyle, my fiancé. I was in love and barely aware of anything or anyone else. Mrs. Travis had graciously opened her home to my entire family and a host of assorted friends and distant relatives. I remember the men sat in the family room discussing theology, sports, and politics while the women prepared dinner.

The next time I met Dr. Travis was a year later, after the morning worship service at my uncle and aunt's church. My entire family on my father's side had once again gathered for a weekend together and as each of us was introduced again to Dr. Travis, he shook our hands with warmth and had a personal, winsome word for each of us. Dressed in his black ministerial robe in the sweltering August heat, he demonstrated remarkable focus and social skills, I thought. He kissed my cheek and said, "I hope we can get to know one another someday, Susan."

I remember thinking how suntanned his smooth face was, and feeling embarrassed and flattered by the intensity of his eyes.

His affectionate manner was unusual and indiscriminate. However, everyone around me seemed quite comfortable with it. My Uncle Jack proudly told us, “Now that boy is a preacher!”

One of my mischievous brothers hooted with laughter. “Did you see how he came on to Mom? Mom, you’re such a hot babe.”

We all laughed. Uncle Jack said, “He kisses everyone—even dogs and cats. Don’t worry about that boy.” He loved John.

There was something about Dr. Travis, some mixture of charisma and tenderness that drew people in. Impressive, emotional, barely thirty years old, he had a slight shyness and vulnerability about him that won people’s loyalty. He exuded boyish charm. He had a practice of “telling on himself” that disarmed even the most skeptical of listeners. Stories about running out of gas time and time again, the health problems that plagued him, the heartbreak of losing his beloved brother to cancer, his nervousness in the pulpit—these all cemented the impression of his being the absent-minded professor, quite above the mundane concerns of ordinary people. There were many, including my uncle and aunt, who wanted to take care of him, reassure and comfort him. His loyal congregation made excuses for his bouts of forgetfulness and disorganization. They ignored the extremes in his behavior, especially the occasional aloofness and distant sadness that some couldn’t help but notice. Most people assumed he was just over-scheduled. After all, he was the shepherd of a large congregation. He was also writing the first of many books and was in demand as an engaging speaker at conferences and churches across the country. And five years later he became our pastor in Danville.

*Someday I’ll have a husband, a house and a baby. Someday.*

I once had the life of which young people in China dream. The peaceful town of Danville had slowly grown up in a narrow valley near San Francisco, under the watchful presence of Mount Diablo, a sentinel that compels with a silent beauty, whether draped with pewter clouds on wet days or painted ice blue against lavender skies. It stands over the steady stream of commuter traffic and boasts many namesakes, including a magazine, a school district and even appetizers or desserts served at buffets.

Danville was and is the best of two worlds. A thirty-minute drive from the sophistication of San Francisco, it spreads its rural charm where children can breathe fresh, country air, climb trees and play in their own backyards.

The lawns are small parks. The streets are quiet and immaculate. The Iron Horse Trail weaves in and out of mottled sunlight, bathed in the aroma of eucalyptus. There are trendy boutiques, sidewalk cafés and tiny gift shops tucked between fine restaurants and quaint shopping malls. If one can afford it, it's a perfect community to call home.

For the second half of our six-year marriage, I lived here with my architect husband Kyle, in an old Colonial-style white house just two minutes from the heart of the downtown area—so close we could stroll to our favorite restaurant on special occasions. Friends parked on our street for the annual tree-lighting ceremony held the day after Thanksgiving, when the entire town was given over to the spirit of Christmas. A few rounds of traditional carols sung by the local high school chorus serenaded the arrival of Father Christmas; and as he waved merrily from a horse-drawn carriage, the magical moment would come when the live-oak tree in the center of town was lit up with thousands of miniature white lights. Children were lifted to their parents' shoulders to see the spectacular display. With a collective crescendo of gasps, the glorious holiday season would officially begin.

Not that every day was a holiday. Those are just the times I find easiest to remember, the times that don't slam hard into my heart as I remember those years with Kyle. We felt more like a

couple at those times and I felt more married, somehow, when occupied with the time-consuming task of celebrating Christmas. Kyle even called me “Mrs. Christmas” and we laughed as we cut down our own tree in the country, added ornaments to our collection and entertained large groups of family and friends. The highlight of the holiday was the succession of Christmas Eve services at our church, and I wondered when we would have our own children to delight with the gifts of a Christ-filled Christmas. I would gaze at the adorable little girls of my friends, their white-stockinged feet tucked into tiny black patent leather shoes, their eyes filled with anticipation, and I would pray for a daughter of our own. I daydreamed about the baby we might have someday, writing long lists and musing on the combinations we might produce. Soft brown eyes like my mother’s or the light blue of his Germanic father’s. I wondered if our daughter would be an artist like Kyle’s mother. Would our son be an athlete like my brothers? I bought tiny, soft things like baby T-shirts and smocked dresses and bath toys, sweet sweaters and tiny tights. I started a holiday scrapbook with labels for the coming years—Christmas 1998, Christmas 1999—planning to raise a household of happy children. Slamming doors, tricycles strewn about the driveway, pancakes on Saturday mornings, bubble baths—I wanted it all—the noise, the clutter, the laughter and the heartbreak.

One year, after all the Christmas decorating had been done with as much flair as we could muster (we were pretty good at that sort of thing), I was sitting in the firelight near the Christmas tree, writing Christmas cards and listening to soft music.

Kyle came over, put an arm around me and smiled. “Honey, what do you want for Christmas this year?”

The answer came easily, but was not what he expected. I always loved Kyle’s taste in gifts—the clothes he chose were lovely, the perfumes exquisite. He was particularly wonderful at finding just the right books—especially rare and first-edition volumes which he sometimes hand-covered in marbled paper.

Even more special were the romantic cards that accompanied

each gift, always inscribed with words of love in his poetic style and penned in artistic calligraphy. But now I looked at him, wanting something far different, something I had asked for many times but which now seemed crucial to the life and health of our marriage.

Burying my face in his sweater, I cried, “Kyle, I want to feel wanted by you. I want to know that what you want most in the world is me.” I was more than slightly embarrassed by this request and feeling shy as I traced the fullness of his mouth with my finger. “I want to make love on Christmas Eve and do it again if we want to in the morning.”

I almost had everything I wanted. We lived in my dream house, with a beautiful yard that furnished me with plenty of fresh flowers. I loved taking care of it and making it pretty.

And Kyle loved the way I made an effort to carry on traditions my southern-bred grandmother had taught me—starched and ironed sheets, warm cakes waiting in the glass-domed pedestal, gourmet meals served by the fireplace on wintry evenings.

My friends thought he was the perfect husband when he surprised me at work with mugs of fresh coffee on cold mornings, delivered with beautifully-written love notes. One colleague sighed and confided, “Susan, I want a clone of your husband.”

He was a bright conversationalist. I thought (and still do think) he was the best-looking man I had ever seen—gentle, expressive eyes that twinkled with energy, well-proportioned compact body, curly brown hair. No one guessed that once we bid friends good-bye for the evening and the doors were closed, the curtains drawn, we went our separate ways in a strange dance of inexplicable irony.

*I want, I want, I want. Flipping through the pages, the shining silver and the pristine garden. The home and the husband, the baby I want. Someday.*

Ying, our school secretary, told me one day, “Susan, you need an ayi.”

“What? What do I need?”

“An ayi. Someone to do the washing and cleaning. And even cooking!” Her eyes shone with enthusiasm.

“Do I have to have an ayi?” I did these things for myself and wasn’t keen on the idea of someone else taking over.

“Oh, yes. You don’t know the language and you have to order water and gas and pay the bills. She will help you.”

“Okay, then. That sounds great. Thank you, Ying.”

Ying’s best friend, Mrs. Zhang, became my ayi. Now middle-aged, Mrs. Zhang had been a Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution. She was part of that generation who missed their education and did their best to follow Chairman Mao’s orders to “be violent.” In the societal mayhem, schools had been closed and teachers banished. Absurdly, many were sent to the remote countryside to be “re-educated” by farmers, leaving the teenagers to reign over the streets of the big cities, roaming and raiding homes and businesses in search of anything that smacked of bourgeois. Their mission was to rid the land of the “Four Olds”—old customs, old ideas, old habits, and old cultures. And they went about their task with the sadism of zealots—beating up teachers, wealthy businessmen, and landowners. They smashed antiques, burned books and music, and destroyed the dreams of an entire nation. When Chairman Mao complained, “Peking is not violent enough,” the Red Guards boarded trains and stormed the capital city, killing over 2,000 people in one month’s time.

Eventually, the rage of the Red Guards dissipated in an invisible cloud of disappointment, lost dreams, and unfulfilled promises. Mrs. Zhang had married another Red Guard and had a son. She worked in one factory after another, joining the masses of former Red Guards who were left with only tormented and haunting memories of their days spent in unrestricted violence

and cruelty. They had been instructed to think of Chairman Mao as their father, and his fourth wife—Madame Mao—as their mother. They were compelled to turn in even their own mothers and fathers for “re-education and relocation” for comments made within the privacy of their own homes, “crimes” such as daring to question Chairman Mao’s outrageous cultural destruction, forgetting to carry the Little Red Book, or reading a book of poetry.

Now in her forties, Mrs. Zhang sought ways to forget those days. I asked her about what happened when she was a Red Guard, and she grew quiet. “I cannot think of that time. I never want to remember the things I did.” Scandal begs the memory to be forgotten.

“But, Mrs. Zhang, you were young and impressionable. You simply trusted the instructions that were given you.”

“Yes, I did. But many things happened—unspeakable things. I will not think about them.”

She had permed hair, red lipstick, and jeans tucked into boots. She rode a small motorcycle. She began working for me immediately, first arranging for the delivery of huge plastic bottles of drinking water. Next she managed to get rid of the construction residue piled in the kitchen sink. She washed floors, scoured the shower, and sang as she worked. She prepared meals of rice, vegetables and beef or chicken, and she sewed for me. Noticing one day that I had forgotten to bring a summer nightgown, she came the next day with a cool, cotton gown she had sewn, along with a hair scrunchy to match. Later she sewed costumes for my school productions, copying magazine photos.

She started an Amway business and informed me that she would be buying only Amway cleaning products. I smiled and said, “Okay.” She blissfully sprayed dusting solution around the rooms, humming Chinese melodies, leaving bits of phlegm on the leaves of my green plants.

During one of the many expatriate gatherings in Tianjin, I met Douglas, a businessman from Chicago. Soon we happily discovered that we shared the same *ayi*. We also unhappily

discovered that we shared the same less than wonderful experiences with Mrs. Zhang. We had both found our CD collections missing several pieces or misplaced in different containers. I found there were several of his CDs sitting in my CD case and vice-versa. We also realized that our homes were being used as “love nests” on holidays when we were gone. We couldn’t help but wonder exactly how many people had keys to our flats. But we liked Mrs. Zhang and knew she needed her jobs. We were committed to keeping her on, no matter what.

One day, Mrs. Zhang graciously invited both Douglas and me to her home—an event we looked forward to with anticipation. We took a taxi to the edge of town. After much searching through neighborhoods that all looked alike, we managed to spot Mrs. Zhang’s long-suffering, toupee-wearing husband standing on a corner, waiting for us. We were hard to miss—Douglas was about 6’5”, black and enormous among the Chinese men milling around staring at us.

After a long, dark climb up a dank stairwell, we reached Mrs. Zhang’s home. We entered and found a one-room flat. The living room was also the dining room and bedroom and was filled with a large queen-sized bed, covered in an oversized floral print of yellow and purple. Matching drapes graced the windows that looked out onto identical, gray apartment buildings.

A foldout cardboard table had been meticulously set for lunch and the smell of food was delicious. On the wall a huge photograph of Mrs. Zhang herself smiled down upon us. In the picture, she wore only a red feather boa, draped seductively around her sloping shoulders. Heavy eye makeup and thick powder had been applied for the photo shoot, and I couldn’t help but cringe at the thought of what it must have cost her.

Mrs. Zhang served the meal. As soon as the last tasty morsel was devoured, she dashed across the room to hook up a microphone and began singing in a startlingly high, shrill voice. I thought about the neighbors, all living in such close proximity. I shuddered, feeling embarrassed for her and for her shrinking

husband whose toupee now appeared lopsided. He quietly did the dishes in the aisle kitchen. She stood directly under the eerily magnificent photograph of herself and sang song after song in an ear-splitting register as we gave her our undivided attention.

When she had completed her repertoire, Mrs. Zhang thrust the microphone into my hand. I looked at Douglas and he smiled, knowing I would refuse to sing into a microphone in this tiny apartment at the top of an eight-story apartment building. I declined and passed the microphone to poor Mr. Zhang, who had finished washing the dishes and might as well have simply removed the shiny toupee entirely at this point. It had slipped and was now hanging on the back of his head. Douglas and I eyed him in suspense, waiting for the precariously perched fur ball to fall off. His quick jerk of refusal sent the hanging hair piece somersaulting onto Mrs. Zhang's lap. She screamed in embarrassment. Then she reached out and hit him, suddenly incensed and chiding him in rapid and irate phrases. He soon disappeared, clutching both his toupee and a pack of cigarettes. Douglas and I took the opportunity to make our exits, as well.

As we hugged Mrs. Zhang good-bye, my heart ached for her. I thought about the incongruence of her singing performance underneath the glamorous photograph in this shabby building. This was one middle-aged woman who had probably stayed up all night sewing the floral drapes and bedspread to impress us, in an effort to make her tiny home beautiful. An expert seamstress and cook extraordinaire, she had shared her world with us; undereducated, marginally talented, yet attempting to impress her new friends with what little she had. She was racing to experience something new, and to get away from the past. I recognized what she was trying to do.

As the taxi driver, a cigarette hanging from his mouth, sped back from the fringes of the city, the realization hit me: Mrs. Zhang and I probably had more in common than I would ever dare to admit to anyone. Both of us were running away from memories as fast as we could.