Claire

People sometimes ask me what the worst thing is that I've seen in my twelve years as a doctor. I choose my answer carefully depending on the company. To those who seem squeamish, I talk in general terms of broken bones and untimely passings. To the more ghoulish, I tell of amputations for gangrene, messy stillbirths, necks twisted in overturned rickshaws. My work is my least favourite topic at social gatherings, so I tend to move the conversation swiftly on. And the worst thing, in fact, is none of those things. It's something I have never told: the sight of my Jean in the stairwell, twisting slowly from the noose in the way a leaf twists trapped in a spider's web, the creak of the rope in the dead silence of the house, the thudding inevitability of it, and the knowledge that I wouldn't have been able – whatever I did – to coax the life back into her.

It is almost five years since she died.

In the same way as those years stretch back in a dense forest of days and nights, they flatten fast like dominoes until I am back there, peering through the letterbox and knowing what had happened because the kitchen chair was lying on its side in the hallway and the cat was gazing up into the stairwell.

I left Canton for Shanghai soon after. I reckoned on the change being some sort of tonic. I was wrong. Even in a different city in a different house, I still woke every day thinking of Jean. The starkness of her absence never waned. The questions still hung without answers.

Now, five years later, I am leaving Shanghai. I have no expectations this time, nor do I have a certain destination.

Claire, sleeping beside me, does not know of this yet. As I look at her, the passage of time grabs me in the same way: all the days and the nights I have loved her seem as much like a lifetime as a single moment.

I met her in the winter of my third year in Shanghai. She was a post-graduate student at Aurora University in the engineering faculty. In those days my clinic was on the campus grounds, and we passed each other from time to time on the path between the red brick buildings. One day she stopped me and asked – a little timidly, but only out of politeness; I could tell she wasn't meek – if I was a physician.

"Yes," I said. "Dr. Alice Bern."

"Then I'm sorry to trouble you," she said. I saw her face properly for the first time, beneath the red felt hat she wore. She was quite lovely – green eyes shaped like paisleys, and a shade of brown hair that implied mixed parentage. "But I suffer awfully from chilblains when it's cold, and I wondered if…"

"By all means," I said. "Come along."

Across my oak desk (by then I had grown modestly wealthy from my practice and could afford finer things than I'd had at my simple office in Canton) I took her cold hands in mine and pressed the knuckles one by one, turning them under the skin like marbles.

We arranged to meet that evening when I broke between shifts and she finished classes. We went to a café on the Avenue Dubail for hot ginger tea. Through the steam from our cups she told me that her green eyes and dusty brown hair came from her Malayan Chinese father and French mother. I told her my heritage in return: half

Soochownese, half British. We both were Shanghailanders – born, as it happened, two streets away from each other, but with a decade in between.

The following Saturday and the one after it, we ate lunch and dinner at the bistro on the Route Frélupt beside my apartment, and spoke about science. She loved art more, she said, but science meant she wouldn't have to marry. I told her – tentatively at first, to gauge her reaction – about my clinic, my former practice in Canton, my years at medical college, and the career that had made my name. Even though I meted the details out carefully, I saw the trust and admiration grow in her as she listened. It troubled me.

Two weeks later we joined the Ch'un-Ch'ieh revellers skating on the frozen lake in Jessfield Park. I was clumsy on the ice. She held me, close as an embrace, face to face, so I wouldn't fall. I laughed with the relief of entrusting myself to someone else – a relief more intense than it ought to have been. Her cheeks were painted with the cold. I felt the prickly wool of her scarf against my face as she held me closer. I breathed the soft bed-linen smell of her skin. I shut my eyes and threw all of my trust at her. As she spun us around in a zigzag waltz on the ice, I said her name:

Claire. Claire.

and

I love you.

She laughed. I felt it jolt her body. It was a calm, happy laugh of relief.

When I opened my eyes the sky had turned halogen blue with the twilight. It was dense and wide above the low roofs of the villas behind the lake. The air was thin with frost.

Back at my apartment we lit a fire.

She lay with her head in my lap and we listened to a swirling Schumann symphony on the gramophone. A notion crept over me that confused me at first; it had been so long since I'd felt it. I studied the curve of her forehead in the firelight. I watched the steady rise of her breath. I took her hand and wove her fingers with mine as she dozed. *Perhaps*, I thought, *the rest of my life might be bearable*.

And it was, for a time.

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"Do you love me?" Jean said.

I opened my eyes and blinked several times in confusion. I was coming up from a dream and I wasn't sure if the words were real – if she was real.

She was sitting up against the pillow beside me, her elbows on her knees, looking out through the latticed window to the river through the sun-shadowed treetops.

"Do you have to ask?" I said.

The silhouettes of leaves were dashing on the wood-tiled floor. The morning air smelled of camphor.

At the sight of her spine running down under her pale skin, I remembered what had brought us here: two bottles of wine in the back room of the Canton Expatriate Club the night before, seeing her father leave with his friends – my colleagues from the clinic.

"I need to know what will become of us," Jean said.

Finally, she turned her head and looked at me. The hollowness in her eyes startled me.

“We'll carry on,” I said. “Won’t we?”

She turned away again.

Seized by a fresh swell of love, I put my arms around her from behind and laid my lips to her shoulder.

“Jeanie.”

“I’m afraid you’ll lose your position,” she said. She was tense.

“If I do, then so be it,” I said. “There are pressures I could do without, in any case.”

“What pressures?”

I sighed. “I won’t bore you with it.”

The truth was that being attached to the Mission was causing me problems with my practice. The three other physicians who worked alongside me were staunch Englishmen who, despite making a good show of respecting me as a doctor, scorned me privately for my race and my being a woman. They leapt upon any excuse to unseat me; their latest gripe was my refusal to encourage patients to attend Sunday service.

We’ve forced them to trade with us and give us land, I’d said, more times than I could recall. *Can’t we leave them alone as far as faith is concerned?*

One on occasion – the one I remember most keenly – Dr. Mellor replied: *They appreciate our Western ways when it comes to medicine. They’re surely capable of appreciating our Lord as well, if shown the right path*.

I kissed Jean again but she still wouldn't look at me.

"I don't know why I love you," she said.

"You don't have to know," I said.

"Perhaps we shouldn't have done this."

I moved away. She turned quickly to face me. Seeing my disappointment she took my wrists and held them.

"I don't mean –"

"It's alright," I said.

It was the first time I had seen her naked in the daylight. What we had done had not doused or even dented the feelings I'd had for her since the day we'd met nearly a year before. But I also knew, looking at her, that if we never did it again, that one time would be enough – just to have had it.

"I'm afraid," she said.

She pushed her head under my chin and I put my arms around her.

"You shouldn't be," I said.

In a shard of dust-hung sunlight I noticed a line of raised white flecks along her upper arm between her elbow and the swell of her bicep. Some were raised, and whiter, like larvae. Some were long, and only as wide as the blade that had made them.

"There isn't anything to be afraid of," I said.

I trusted my words even though I didn't believe them. For her, they could be true. As far as I was concerned there were many things to be afraid of. But as long as I knew about them and she didn't, she was safe.

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One day, a whole winter on from the one that had brought us together, Claire and I were walking on the Avenue Ghisi when we saw a flock of pigeons twisting and doubling back on itself above the entrance to a laneway. We followed the swell of it all the way to the bottom of the lane, past rows of blue stucco terraces, to where a man in oil-stained overalls was tending a wall of wire coops. The air was acrid with the smell of birds. The coops were blossomed with white and grey feathers that flickered in the wind.

We watched the man for several moments before he noticed us. He grinned.

"How beautiful," he said in Shanghainese. *Loh ling, ah*.

It's true that we made a fine pair – Claire in her pebble-blue woolen coat and I in my tweed, and the matching black berets my neighbour had made for us.

"Sisters?" the man asked.

"No."

"Foreign or Chinese? I can't tell," he said, studying us through his squint.

Claire didn't speak Shanghai dialect as well as I did, so while I explained our provenances she stepped closer to the coops to look at the pigeons. They were jostling and murmuring behind the wire.

“You look more Chinese than she does,” the man said to me. It was true. My eyes and hair were black. “Because your mother is Chinese, not your father.”

“I’m not sure that’s why,” I said.

He nodded resolutely.

I saw Claire put her finger through the wire of one of the coops.

“Dear, be careful –”

She took her hand away and stepped back, eyeing me in surprise.

On the way back out of the lane, she asked why I had said it.

I shook my head. “I was out of line. I’m sorry.”

“Is it because you’re afraid I’ll fall sick?”

It was the first time she had asked me to explain myself. Whenever I wrapped a second blanket around her as she slept, gave her cod liver oil with her breakfast, or insisted that she sit an extra five minutes by the fire to dry her hair after a bath – she’d never seemed to resent it.

I lightened my tone so the words wouldn’t scare her. “It’s only because I know how many things can go wrong.”

I wasn’t sure if I’d explained it adequately – the knowledge of how the veins press the blood around, how the kidneys brew the poisons out, how the bones fit together – how it feels like a knife-edge: everything (*everything*) hinges on that split-second when the tenuous magic of life’s forward motion stops. Ends. Finishes.

“I suppose I can see,” Claire said equably. She was always so good-natured. It pained me. “It’s rather like me with my engines. I’m always waiting for the gears to catch or the oil to run dry.”

“Just so,” I said. But that wasn’t it at all.

That night, I watched her fall asleep in the firelight before I raked the embers to a dull warmth that would see us through until morning.

She seemed to me at once so frail and so imperishable. She was present; alive. *But imagine*, I said to myself, knowing that the train of thought would keep me from sleeping if I began it. *Imagine if a tumour were lurking, growing among the lobes of her brain*. *Imagine if it found its way into her blood, her lungs, her bones.*

She would trust me to cure her, and that was the worst thing of all. She would place her faith so strongly in me that she would barely consider another outcome. She’d told me so. Her tone had been blithe but I knew she meant it. *You’d fix me*, she’d said. It was a summer afternoon and we were watching a tennis match on the lawn of the university. It was one of the players’ first games back after a broken wrist.

“If I were gravely ill, you’d heal me,” she said. Her resolute flippancy had bothered me.

“I’m not a wizard,” I said.

“But you’ve never had a patient die,” she said with a pretty frown. The weight of my fib suddenly revealed itself. At the same time I wanted to shake her for her naïveté. *Of course I have*, I raged silently. *I’ve just never told you*.

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I have to leave Shanghai. If I stay, I know something will happen and she will be taken from me somehow. There's a pattern. I've started to feel the same way I did running up to Jean's death. Invincible. Too capable. Every time I set a bone or quell a fever or pull a newborn out warm and writhing, I feel a shimmer of power and control. I will be punished for it, the way I was last time. I'm certain of it.

At a friend's party this evening at the Cercle Sportif I met an old colleague from Canton whom I hadn't seen since I left. His face had become a memory. Dr. Winston Farber. I saw him across the room and my first instinct was to leave so I wouldn't have to talk to him. Our eyes met and I knew he felt the same. But we were both taken up by other conversations, and only came face to face at the drinks table half an hour later.

"Alice," he said.

"Winston," I said. "It's been a while."

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm well. And you?"

"Likewise."

We didn't need to say more.

It was Winston I had called when I came home from work to find Jean hanging in the stairwell – the evening after I woke up in bed beside her for the first time. The last time.

It was Winston who cut her down while I stood with my face to the wall so I wouldn't have to watch. I, who had witnessed a hundred hangings and drownings and immolations, looked away as my Jean was lifted down.

From the corner of my eye I saw Winston try to revive her.

"Don't," I said.

He looked up at me, then moved aside thinking I wanted to take over.

"She's gone, can't you see?" I said, still not able to look head-on; not ready to joust with any of the impulses that were crowding in my head and behind my ribs. And I knew, if I started resuscitation, I would never forgive myself when I failed.

I didn't even touch her. I knew how her hand would feel – as if the bones were closer to the surface. I knew how cold she would be already, from the brackish cast of her skin. I knew, and I couldn't do it.

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I know it is cruel to leave like this, but it will be right in the end.

Claire is sleeping. Her eyes – green eyes the shape of paisleys – are moving behind their lids. She is breathing.

I have packed a small suitcase. It is sitting in the hallway alongside my doctor's bag.

I will leave before she wakes.

I'll go to the train station and buy a ticket for a different city. Or perhaps to the docks; a boat would take me further. I know, though, that there is no real end except one.

If we are not dead we can only go on living.