



DAVID JOANNES

MISSIONAL STARTER | ARTISTIC CREATIVE

Hi! I'm **David Joannes**, author of *The Memories I Made Up*, a memoir of my life over the last 20 years as a missionary in Southeast Asia.

Thanks so much for subscribing to my regular missions articles at davidjoannes.com, and for downloading the first chapter of my book in progress!

I hope that this first glimpse of my book inspires you to play your part in God's epic redemptive salvation story.

Enjoy reading! I look forward to staying in touch!



* Artistic rendition. Book not yet published.



THE MEMORIES I MADE UP

by David Joannes

Chapter One

INITIAL CALLING

Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.

Who I am today has been constructed from my quondam experiences, chiseled by the slap on the cheek I received from a Chinese customs official while smuggling Bibles into China. I have been fashioned by midnight interrogations in sugarcane fields, police stations, and shoddy rural hotels. A metamorphosis took place within me as one-hundred United Wa State Army child soldiers carrying AK-47s caught me sneaking into the Myanmar border while translating for *Time Magazine*. The course of my life was altered by the ethnic Wa grandmother who cradled me like an infant after my back went out in the former head-hunting village of Dadong. Her boney fingers lovingly brushed my forehead as we jerked and trembled over rugged, rural pathways in the rear wagon of a handheld tractor. I have been shaped in large part by the pig brains and cat soup and grub worms and homemade moonshine I sampled in unreachable Asian villages. I have been fabricated by superfluous tragedy and concrete joy, molded by faith, hope, and love.

Who I am today is arduous for me to define. I am a mixture of courage and fear, compassion and anger, hope and uncertainty. I am a missionary, though that title instills within me negative notions of antipathy. I rather resonate with the anti-hero missionary, fatigued by the façade of Christian pedestals. I call myself, instead, a missional starter and an artistic creative.

Sometimes I am a hero. Most often I am a failure. I am sympathetic toward the poor and marginalized, but would much rather be absorbed by a good book in the comfort of a cozy coffee shop. I am experiencing daily grace as God continues to use me, not always because of me, but in spite of me.

I am a trailblazer, a pioneer—shall I be so bold as to say—like the Apostle Paul, passionate about bringing the Christian Gospel to regions where it has not yet been heard. But I

am also full of selfish ambition, and I easily tire from bothersome people. I am a homeschooler. I am fluent in Mandarin Chinese. I boast not a single educational degree beside my GED; yet I frequently seek to prove my sophisticated intellect to strangers and acquaintances alike.

I am loved by many. I am disliked by some. I am still learning.

I am a ragamuffin.

* * *

I didn't mind getting kicked in the ribs by teenagers in black sweat pants and colorful, perspiration-stained t-shirts. It was simple choreography, rhythmic movements to a measured beat, a counting of the tempo in my mind. Two. Three. Four. I stepped back, arms flailing in despair. Six. Seven. Eight. The clashing crescendo of cymbals as I was hurled to the hot pavement, tumbling onto my chest, a crumpled, lifeless heap.

Hong Kong must have been one hundred and ten degrees that day, the stifling humidity around eighty percent. It was just an act by a troop of American teenagers, a colorful production filled with face paint and passion. Even so, the well-practiced routine inevitably generated the occasional cuts and scrapes on kneecap and palm. These were par for the course, vestiges for a more believable performance.

I was one of the main characters in *The Journeyman* drama, who, after an arduous odyssey, ends up meeting the Miracle Man, only then to encounter the meaning of life.

After one of the teenage actors drove their foot into my abdomen, and I sprawled across the cement, I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder. The Miracle Man had come to my rescue, lifted me to my feet, his right forearm tucked under my armpit, supporting my weight. I was panting heavily, relieved that someone would defend me in the face of my enemies.

My accusers turned their rage toward my defender, and began beating the Miracle Man. Two. Three. Four. I stepped back from the tumult and watched as he fell to his knees. Six. Seven. Eight. They whipped him. The rhythmic count began again. Two. Three. Four. They dragged him onto an invisible cross. Six. Seven. Eight. They drove nails into his ankles and wrists. Moments before the exhalation of his final breath, he turned to look at me with eyes of compassion. His

head fell forward, his body lifeless, as four teenage actors formed a circle around him, a tomb consuming his inanimate corpse.

One. Two. Three. Four.

Five. Six. Seven. Eight.

The music slowed to a melodramatic hum.

Hong Kongers were inundated with interminable entertainment, but spontaneous live street performances were a rare kind of amusement. The moderate audience of fifty or so locals gawked at the human tomb cocooning the Miracle Man's body. I turned toward the crowd, silently imploring them for help as the rhythmic melody from our traveling sound box ebbed.

The Cantonese narration explained the Messianic portrayal for the audience, as the Miracle Man burst skyward by sudden resurrection force. Two. Three. Four. I ran to him, clasped his shoulders in joyous embrace, and—Six. Seven. Eight.—the drama concluded with our knees bowed and hands raised in adoration, followed by a hurrah from our audience.

After the presentation, we dialogued with lingering spectators with the help of local interpreters, conversing about family matters, spiritual issues, the afterlife, God in their midst.

I fell in love with Asia in 1995. There was little magic in the crossing of geographical coordinates by plane from America to the Orient. Still, my initial days spent in the Far East proved to be an enchanting allure I have never been able to shake.

* * *

I was sixteen-years-old when I first landed on Asian soil for a Teen Mania Ministries short-term mission trip. I was mesmerized by the towering series of stately skyscrapers rising from verdant mountains in Hong Kong. The vibrant hubbub of commotion was incessant with the never-ending deluge of public transportation. The bedazzling luminescence of flashing neon, tech stores, dirty magazine stalls, brash Indian tailors, and Cantonese noodle shops. And the immense population—I had never seen such a sea of humanity, constantly bobbing and weaving,

nearly colliding on their way—this way or that—darting in every direction at a startlingly frenetic pace.

For a homeschooler kid from the quaint city of Prescott, Arizona, Hong Kong was a particularly electrifying metropolis of intoxicating pandemonium.

Our American missionary team stayed in the two-story dormitory at Ecclesia Bible College in Shatin, New Territories. Beside fried rice breakfasts and stir fry suppers, team meetings, quiet times, and worship sessions, much of our time during the two-month mission trip was spent in colorful costumes, performing street dramas in the sweltering summer heat.

But there was another ministry dimension that, in retrospect, I am surprised we were allowed to participate in at such a young age. Besides the obvious physical strain caused by hauling overloaded luggage from Hong Kong into China, there were indisputable dangers involved with Bible smuggling.

But we were young, blithe and carefree, giving little consideration to all the possible outcomes of our task at hand.

Once a week, we took to the sidewalks, crossing the footbridge over Shing Mun River, past Shatin Central Park, through New Town Plaza mall, on our way to Pai Tau Village. Twisting, woody twines coiled themselves around thick banyan trunks, lining the narrow stairway toward Bibleway Ministries. There, we stood panting, nearly breathless under the dense humidity in the courtyard enclosing the gated apartment block.

Opposite the village valley, Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery rose from the adjacent ridge, an equal number of miniature sacrosanct Buddhist shrines as carried the name of the temple. Lush, green mountains descended spellbound toward the east, enveloping the silent Chinese effigies and ash remains, which lay below the red spires at Po Fook Memorial Hall crematorium.

It was classic Orient: beauty, mysterious.

It was fantastical, a dream surreal.

But the humidity was so stifling that I often overlooked the allure of the moment.

Bibleway Ministries was the staging point for international teams smuggling Christian literature into China. The storage room smelled of fresh ink and cardboard, and neatly stacked boxes lined the walls from floor to ceiling.

There was a curious hush that came over us, as if the walls had ears, as if we were under surveillance by snooping professional operatives. We stuffed our backpacks and rolling luggage in a hurried silence, filling every square inch with Bibles, Christians booklets, and tracts.

It was an adventurous enterprise, the stealthy, secret-agent-kind-of stuff I had seen on evening sitcoms in America. But this was not just a game or a carefully-constructed narrative by screenplay writers. It was a sort of spiritual warfare, an advancement of the Christian message to regions hostile to its presence. And the divine conduits of spiritual blessing were mere American teenagers, cracked clay jars, unassuming misfits.

In the courtyard outside Bibleway Ministries, our team gathered for a quick debrief, rules and “How To” instructions, and what to expect when crossing the border with contraband. We prayed together. We asked God to go before us; to open the eyes of the blind who were waiting for His word; to blind the eyes of those who would be monitoring x-ray machines.

Down the winding, cement stairway, we lugged our bulging bags past the banyan trees in Pai Tau Village, and boarded the KCR train on its way to the border of the People’s Republic of China.

In the summer of 1995, I became a Bible smuggler, carrying banned literature into China for the millions of Chinese Christians, hungry for God’s word.

* * *

What I was doing was dangerous. That’s what I wanted to tell my financial supporters back home. It was the bang for their buck, an eerie undertaking. That’s what I want you to think now.

There were plain-clothes police and government spies trailing our every movement, the thought of which engendered the frivolous notion of heroism.

The reality, though, was that the risk involved was much less perilous than you might think. The danger I faced by carrying Christian literature across the border paled in comparison to the persecution many Chinese Christians were encountering on a daily basis.

I cringe to admit that I subliminally magnified the melodramatic danger tones in my newsletters to financial supporters—less white lies than half truths—exaggerating my valor to come across more heroic than was the actual case.

I was merely a channel chosen by Providence, a default daredevil, just some guy who said yes to God. But oddly enough, God delights in the obedient human response to divine calling. It is His good pleasure to honor the willing heart, lauding obedience, even glorifying an earthen vessel by infusing it with all-surpassing power.

* * *

It is impossible to define the exact moment when my initial calling to cross-cultural missions occurred. It seems to me that the commencement of every narrative carries a hidden backstory, subtle junctures, pivotal moments unnoticed, paramount intersections of divine nature.

We notice the miraculous events in the life of Moses, his encounter with God in the tumult of the storm, when holy hands passed to humanity those weighty stone commands. The parting of the Red Sea, when the waters were pulled back, two pulsating, liquid walls and a dry passage for God's people. But even prior to that, a bush burning and a heavenly voice, *Ehyeh asher ehyeh, I am who I am*. But Moses' initial calling preceded that moment as well.

I hesitate to say that the commencement of his divine calling was in the crying out to Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" Or in the seven plagues that tormented unsuspecting Egyptians. Was it during his hasty rage when he smashed stone against the ruthless taskmaster's skull? It must have begun much earlier than that, as a young boy, perhaps, growing up in palatial surroundings, swinging like a monkey from golden palace column.

What we consider to be the beginning of a thing seems to me a surface judgment from dull, human perspective.

Did not the calling of Moses begin much earlier, as a baby floating helpless and unsuspecting along the stream in a bobbing basket, his faint cooing sounds echoing upon gentle waters as his sister sat hidden, watching from distant reeds?

Or perhaps the purpose of his life originated at birth, a God-ordained calling, a storyline in the making. More likely, even farther back in what we understand as time, as God orchestrated unforeseen events where man's watchful eye could not yet penetrate.

"All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be," King David marveled. I am inclined to believe that my understanding of the narrative is much denser than I wish it to be.

Take Jesus, for example. We see His majestic, skyward ascendance, disappearing past the atmosphere, beyond the view of dumbfounded disciples. It was a new beginning for the early Church, but there was a myriad of aspects to the storyline we may have overlooked.

The rolling away of the stone from the musky tomb. The droplets of blood falling from brow and wrist, staining the cross and the ground where it lay. His storytelling under a fig tree, atop a mountain, overlooking rocking boats and rippling sea. The turning of water into wine.

I dare to presume that although the public ministry of Jesus commenced at age thirty, a series of pivotal Providential events led to the climactic scriptures we gravitate to today. When he fled from the company of His parents at age twelve to commune with His Heavenly Father under temple arches. As He sanded smooth the edges of table and chairs in the carpenter's workshop. When infantile murmurs were His only response to gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And when a star shown in the Eastern night sky, angels and shepherds dancing upon pastoral hills.

The tapestry of life consists of intricately woven strands, a showpiece formed by what some might consider inconsequential fibers. A spool of thread, a tenuous conglomerate of hues and colorful tones that when blended together, comprehensive artistry emerges.

* * *

My calling to China began long before my initial journey to the East in 1995.

I was three-years-old and terribly cute with plump, rosy cheeks, long eyelashes (for a boy), and lips as red as a Lifesaver. I was the firstborn child of young parents, who bragged to friends and relatives about my artistic genius, placing a crayon in my hand to prove their point.

My art was mostly scribbles, I assume, with occasional flowers and faces emerging on colorful construction paper. Occasionally, my canvas of choice was a nearby magazine or Dr. Seuss book.

One particular day, as the afternoon sun cast elongated shadows upon the dining room table in Prescott Valley, Arizona, I was in a notably creative mode, tracing the outline of a blue whale, scribbling artistic masterpieces over descriptive text in a 1982 edition of *National Geographic Magazine*.

My mother was sitting next to me, probably flipping through the pages of *Good Housekeeping*, daydreaming, perhaps gleaning ideas for the evening meal.

My magazine flopped open to its center, and I stared at an image that would change my life forever. Funny thing is, I don't remember the photo but for the memory of it: a barefoot farmer with yellowish, sun-burnt skin, walking along the terraced ridges of his rice fields. The cool mud was squishing between his toes with each step, and the sun was setting behind him. As I sat there, observing his subtle movements, he paused for a moment, the strange awareness that someone was watching him. His head darted left, then right, water buckets dangling precariously from each end of the bamboo pole across his shoulders. Startled, he looked up at me from the magazine, directly into my eyes, and paused. A smile formed upon his lips, and he wiped his brow. "Hello, David!" He whispered in Chinese. "Ni hao."

Remember, I was three-years-old, and everything was alive with childlike wonder. It should not be incredulous that images in picture books could walk and talk and smile.

I sat up, flattening the magazine open with my elbows, and with naïve articulations, said, "Mommy, I want to go to China."

I only remember the conversation through the lens of my mother's later recollection to me. Perhaps my childish words were elicited by the many times she told me to finish eating my vegetables, "because," she explained, "there are starving kids in China."

The Chinese would later describe this moment as *yuanfen*, meaning fate or destiny. As if it was the most natural thing for me to be drawn to the East, to move to the exotic landscape of Asia, to someday feel more at home in China than in the country of my birth. As if there was no other course of action, the enormous need of unreached people groups provided sufficient justification for a young boy to say, “Yes, Lord. I will go.”

Yuanfen.

Some might even be so bold to translate the Chinese thought into what we refer to in English as providence.

My mother placed *Good Housekeeping* on the dining room table, lowered her head, perhaps a gesture of realization at the divine moment. She had no idea the future implications involved with my adolescent comment.

“What did you say?”

“When I get bigger, I want to bring bread to all the starving kids in China.”

Because bread is what they wanted, right? Not a bowl of rice with collard greens, or deep fried fish, or a steamed dumpling. I was a toddler, learning to share, and American toddlers had plenty of bread. That seemed the obvious possession to give to little Chinese kids, to the sons and daughters of the nice farmer smiling at me from the glossy leaves of the magazine.

* * *

I swayed with the momentum of the moving crowd, gripping the handrails, as the KCR train swerved along curving track to the border of China. The Hong Kong landscape was shifting as we zipped northbound through New Territories, less studded with lofty skyscrapers, now a blur of rural countryside, ripe with verdant valleys.

Our team was fidgety, trying to remember all the guidelines and procedures that we were given during our debrief at Bibleway Ministries. I recited the proper responses if caught with Bibles at immigration control.

“I am a tourist.”

“I am visiting friends in China.”

“I have nothing to declare.”

The vaguer, the better. Don’t give anything away. Blend into the crowd. Stay calm. If possible, avoid the x-ray machines.

We were told not to have overtly Christian conversations during the border crossing. Cut back on the Christianese. Save your “Hallelujahs” for later. Most importantly, never use the words “Bible” or “Christian tract.” There were code words for that. We referred to Bibles as “bread,” tracts as “crumbs.” The safe house, a storage unit where we would deliver our literature for underground Chinese Christians to pick up at a later date, was referred to as “the bakery.”

Our team leaders told us to pray under our breath. “Stick with your small group,” they said. “See you on the other side.”

We came to a slow stop in Lowu, the last station of the KCR train. A final message over the intercom in Cantonese, then English: “Please mind the platform gap when alighting,” then the pandemonium began. The pressing and pushing from every side, a human stampede, elbowing and shoving to be first in line at the escalators. Walking was not an option. Pausing to ride the escalator was frowned upon. We were forced to keep a brisk pace, a vigorous scamper.

It was a rush, an excited anticipation. But my backpack was already growing unbearable as the shoulder straps dug into my flesh. I rolled my loaded luggage over the white tiles at a brisk pace, keeping up with my small group, our team edging toward the customs turnstiles in staggered formation.

The Hong Kong side of the border was the easy part. Cantonese customs officers eyed us with courtesy, stamped our passports without question, and sent us on our way along the labyrinthine corridors of immigration control.

We followed the crowd up the stairs, through the long hallway, and over the bridge, exiting Hong Kong. Ping Yuen River trickled along the stony banks below, at the edge of sloping greens lined with layers of rusty barbed wire.

My palms were sweaty. I felt the perspiration forming upon my neck, trickling along my arms, creating unflattering blotches around the armpits of my shirt.

Across the bridge, on the China side, a certain stoic impassiveness emerged within the sterile, time-worn hallway, a sobering coldness contrasting the humid summer heat. The

sensation lasted but a moment as the shuffling feet of the crowd forced us onward, up more stairs, around a curving hallway, back down another staircase and into the wide customs hallway.

Our small group queued at the back of a line, the only Americans in a population of hundreds of Chinese travelers.

“Remember to blend into the crowd,” one of my team members quipped.

I looked around the room. Businessmen in suits, briefcases and pointy-toed dress shoes, formalwear. Black hair and slanted eyes, occasional untrimmed moles.

“I’m not doing so well at this point,” I retorted nervously.

Immigration control was an expansive white room lit by dim, fluorescent lighting, twenty zigzagging rows of antsy commuters, slowly edging forward. A hushed commotion interrupted by the random thud of stamped-upon passport permeated the anxious ambiance.

Stay calm, I reminded myself, but still I struggled to keep my passport from quivering in my trembling hand. Images of me spending the next year in a Chinese prison played upon my imagination. Extreme torture. Bamboo beneath my fingernails. Water boarding, maybe. They would break me, I knew it. I would crack.

I wondered if I had packed too many Bibles in my backpack and rolling luggage. My bags suddenly seemed much too cumbersome and I felt suspicious. *Avoid the x-ray machines*, I told myself.

As the line of people in our queue slowly dwindled, I tried to remain invisible, shielding myself behind the Chinese man in front of me. Only a few steps ahead, a stiff customs official sat inside the plexiglass encasement, stamping passports, sliding the travel documents back to commuters through a small opening along the countertop.

After a long, thirty-minute wait, I stepped forward, trying to disguise my nervousness with an awkward smile as I stood in front of the customs officer. I placed my passport through the narrow opening along the countertop, and silently prayed for favor.

His jaw was clenched, statue like; his forehead lowered. Only his eyebrows moved as he looked up at me dubiously. *He knows*, I thought. I was about to be caught red-handed with contraband Bibles and Christian literature.

His eyes darted back and forth from the photo page of my passport to his computer screen. *American*, he thought. *I don't like Americans*. He scrunched his eyebrows and swiped my passport to retrieve my travel history. His fingers pecked monotonously on the clunky keyboard, entering extra information into the system.

Teen Mania missions trip.

Journeyman drama.

Bible smuggler.

Christian.

Enemy of the state.

I wondered if everyone in immigration control could hear the furious thudding of my heartbeat. I hoisted my backpack slightly upwards, shifting my feet under the colossal weight. Beads of glistening perspiration speckled my forehead.

The customs officer glanced up at me one last time before flinging his forearm onto the counter, a sudden violent blow of rubber stamp upon American passport.

I exhaled a momentary sigh of relief, scooped up my travel document, and shuffled around the plexiglass turnstiles toward the exit.

The x-ray machines were much larger than I had anticipated, enormous off-white boxes plastered with dirty fingerprints. A group of commuters gathered around the machine, fumbling with their luggage, loading their bags onto the conveyer belt. Three police officers scanned the monitors, carefully examining the contents on the screen.

I made my way slowly, blending into the small group of travelers, waiting for the perfect moment to skirt past the crowd. The three officers were pointing at an object on the screen, and so I darted past the x-ray machine, head down.

"Hello! Hello!" The officials to my left noticed that I had not placed my bags on the conveyer belt. I bolted past a group of businessmen toward the exit. *"Hello!"* I ignored his last ditch effort to get my attention, turned the corner, and rushed down an adjacent escalator, blending into the crowds outside immigration control.

I was stealth.

I was James Bond.

I was Jason Bourne.

But “secret agent” was the last thing I would admit to if caught with Bibles.

Exhausted from the hour-long transition from Hong Kong to China, I stood motionless under the gray sky in Shenzhen, panting, trying to catch my breath, captivated by the commotion around me. Copious crowds of humanity hauled their luggage in every direction, some in search of a midday bowl of noodles, others purchasing bus tickets, hailing taxis, checking into hotels, strutting nonchalantly along overloaded sidewalks.

To my left was the train station, five stories of weathered blue glass and cracking cement tiles, capped with the gold and red emblem of the People’s Republic of China. Opposite the train station to the right, the equally-elevated bus station cast a looming shadow halfway across thick, banyan tree trunks, lining the wide walkway in front of me. Shangrila Hotel towered beyond footpaths and overpasses, flat onyx black, obsidian absorbing the sunrays, a staggered skyline of high rises fading into the distance as the hazy air cloaked the horizon.

I stood stationary, spellbound by the sights and sounds and smells as the turbid clouds descended slowly under the weight of impending rain. The empyrean heights were exhausted too, pregnant with vapor; it was easy to see as a reluctant sprinkle began, gradually intensifying until a torrential downpour burst from the sighing skies.

My reveries were interrupted by the deluge, storm waters pounding the cement and soaking my shoes; I sought refuge under the ample banyan branches.

The rain fell heavy that day in June, a cascade of gray mixed with murky sewage as the culverts burst, spewing squalid sludge upon the sidewalks, divulging the dirty secrets of Shenzhen’s underworld.

I waded through the foul tide, and found my team members huddled together outside the bus station, clutching their bags, rescuing hidden Bibles from the tainted stream.

“Well, no point in hanging around here all day,” our team leader quipped. “Since we’re already soaked, we might as well make the most of it.”

Bus drivers had given up hailing passengers by excessive horn honking, and the traffic came to a halt in the rising waters.

“There’s no way we’ll get to the ‘bakery’ at this point. Let’s go pass out some tracts.”

“You mean crumbs?” someone asked.

“Oops. Yes, crumbs. And maybe some bread, too!”

We separated into our original small groups, wading knee-deep through the rising, slimy tide to the neighborhood apartment complexes tucked along the fringes of the metroplex.

My group of three teenage missionaries and one team leader plodded through narrow alleyways, placing Christian tracts within the dry nooks and crannies we found, up dingy staircases, knocking on metal doors; then down the way we came, maintaining our clandestine presence. It was tract bombing at its best as we littered the neighborhoods with Gospel booklets, praying the Holy Spirit might enlighten those who would discover the small gifts.

We dodged neighborhood watch dogs, unsuspecting security guards who gawked at us, surprised to see a group of Americans in such an obscure part of the city. We prayer walked, seeking divine encounters with unfortunate residents who found themselves stuck in the filthy flood.

As we turned a sharp alley corner in a rundown residential area, I nearly collided with a thin Chinese man in tattered suit pants and an untucked, button-down shirt. He held a rickety, black umbrella with rusted metal frame, the canopy of which was punctured by the relentless rain.

“Sorry about that,” I said, then suddenly realized he had no understanding of the English language. The remainder of our conversation took place in silence, a flurry of raindrops falling in sheets between our umbrellas. Surprised, he bowed his head slightly, apologetically shuffling around me. I reached for his forearm, gripped him with kind gesture, and held up my forefinger. “Just a second,” I motioned with my eyes, and reaching inside my pocket, I pulled out a green Gospel tract, *Help from Above*.

Through the falling rain, I passed the gift from under my umbrella and placed it in his hand where his eyes fell suddenly, examining the Chinese characters, *Shangmian Laide Bangzhu*.

He looked up at me to reveal the most articulate eyes I had ever seen. We stood there, knee deep in flood water, ebbing ripples circling around our legs, rippling away into the city, a divine sort of providence playing upon the surface.

“What is this?” He spoke not a word, his eyes alone inquiring about the flimsy Gospel tract. His gaze fell again upon the title, *Help from Above*. “I need that kind of help, a miracle perhaps, a truth that has been so terribly elusive all my life.”

I nodded in affirmation. “This is truth,” I said silently with a smile. “God wants to reveal to you the divine meaning of life.”

He nodded back at me with somber gaze, austerity lacing his brow. A sudden heavenly compassion for this stranger fell over me. He needed not say a word. I would not require thanks. A gift of grace had been shown him, inadequate as I felt it was.

He tucked the booklet into his shirt pocket, turned toward the alleyway, and disappeared around the corner.

It was a moment that would reshape my life for decades, though I did not realize it at the time.

I watched the ripples of his departure recede slowly along the water, curling around the edges of a stairway, splashing gently against the battered apartment walls, swirling eddies formed by reverse current. The splattering raindrops and flow of flood water through city streets enveloped his wake as if nothing had ever happened, and the storm continued unapologetically. As quickly as the encounter had occurred, so it had passed.

I was left alone, stunned and silent, wondering who the man was, curious about his family, pondering what he did for a living, speculating about the condition of his soul.

Amidst the percussive spatter of raindrops, I thought I heard music, a sort of ethereal dissonance, perhaps the hum of celestial song, or in the very least, the feathery whirring of angels’ wings. No. It was more of a hushed moan, a divine longing, an ambrosial gasp released from the lips of immortals at the discovery of a secret unveiled.

I stood in the rain with my eyes closed, listening to God whisper about His love for the Chinese.

My mind wandered back to my early childhood, to an image I had seen in a magazine. A barefoot Chinese farmer whose toes squished in the muddy rice terraces. Deep wrinkles were etched upon his weathered brow. A bamboo pole bowed across his shoulders, water buckets

suspended on each end. I imagined his children at home in the misty village behind him, and I was sad for them.

“Mommy,” I said, “I want to bring bread to the starving kids in China.”

A sudden awareness of the weight upon my back seized me, luggage full of Bibles and Christian literature, when the Holy Spirit spoke a quiet confirmation.

“David, you’re taking bread to the children of China.”

Holy emotion gripped my heart, and, as is often the case at the sudden realization of a spiritual encounter, I wept.

“I am calling you to this nation,” the Holy Spirit continued. “I want to use you to bring My grace and glory to those who have still never heard of Me. Give Me the pen of your life, and I will write your story better than you yourself could ever imagine it.”

I’ve heard it said that God gives beauty for ashes. So, too, He evokes holy calling from unassuming spots, pulling passion from the profane, wringing vision from vile waters. He is in the business of transformation, of altering atmospheres, taking the squalid and making it exquisite.

I stood swamped in the fetid scent of overflowed sewage on Shenzhen’s sidewalks, and gave my life for China, believing that God had greater things yet in store.