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**An American in China**

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How did a 62-year-old widow from Southern California end up in the middle of China? Well, it’s a funny story…



*Teach English in China and experience the nuances of an ancient culture…*

I was experiencing the nuances, all right. I looked down at my bed—a generous description for that narrow plank two inches off the ground. Not even a thin mattress to rest my arthritic 62-year-old American self on. My roommate, Rosemary, giggled. I was used to that by now.

I’d arrived in Bao’an, on the outskirts of the city of Shenzhen, three weeks earlier, excited to teach English as part of my master’s degree program. I’d pictured my students hanging on my every word. It turned out eight-year-olds are the same everywhere—hyper! Plus, it was sweltering, and my classroom didn’t have so much as a fan. Thank goodness I’d finally mastered my first Chinese sentence. *Wo yao bing shui*—I’d like ice water. The other teachers in the program were just out of college, up for anything. Even the chicken feet and beef-blood stew in the cafeteria. Me, I couldn’t seem to settle in and get comfortable.

Especially on that board bed. I crouched and crawled onto it, my joints creaking. Rosemary laughed again. “Rita, why’d you decide to enroll in this program, anyway?”

I’d seen the puzzled looks from the other teachers. The locals who stopped and stared—and sometimes reached out to touch my white-blonde hair. What in the world was a 60-something widow from Southern California doing in Bao’an, far off the tourist track?

I shifted to take the pressure off my bad knee. “Okay, Rosemary, if you really want to know…”

It all started with my husband, Paul. I never thought I’d find my soul mate at age 52. Then I met Paul at a church luncheon. It was the beginning of a wonderful adventure. Which was really different for me. I’d been at the same job—teaching elementary school—for 39 years. Not like Paul. He’d sailed the seven seas, even lived in Japan. I’d never set foot on foreign soil. Paul made plans for us to travel, see the world. “Rita, you gotta dream big,” he was always saying. “Get out of your comfort zone.” We were going to drive cross-country. Backpack through Europe. But five years into our marriage, Paul died of cancer. Counseling, support groups…nothing eased my grief. What was I supposed to do with my future now that the love of my life was gone?

Then, one spring morning, a voice blaring from my clock radio jolted me awake: “Teach English in China and experience the nuances of an ancient culture.…” Just as suddenly, the ad cut off, mid-message. The radio went back to music from the station I kept it tuned to. Strange.

I wanted to hear the rest of the message. I listened for that ad for a whole month. It never played again. Finally, I called the station.

“We don’t air any commercial like that,” the manager said. I persuaded her to send me a list of the station’s sponsors. I e-mailed every name on the list, asking, “Do you offer a program to teach in China?”

Only one sponsor said yes—Concordia University. It was about to launch a pilot program for teaching English in China, as a requirement for its Master of Arts in International Studies degree. I met with the dean and the program director for an interview.The dean looked at me the way the locals here did. “I was surprised to receive your application,” he said. “How did you even hear about the program? We haven’t officially launched it yet.”

“On the radio.” I explained about the ad.

The dean looked even more perplexed. He turned to the program director. “Did you place that ad?”

The director shook his head. “We don’t have the budget for it.”

Nobody could account for the voice that came from my radio. An odd message blaring in the darkness, one I couldn’t ignore.

“So I packed my bags,” I told Rosemary. “I needed to dream big. Leave my comfort zone and try someplace new.” I tapped the plank beneath me. “I just wish it came with a more comfortable bed.”

This time when Rosemary laughed, I did too.