

## The Talisman

by Tanya E. E. Schmid

While studying traditional medicine in China in the 90s, several American students and I joined a weekend excursion to Jinshan Mountain. It was a joyous relief from the metropolis of Beijing and the University Hospital whose cement walls held onto the intense summer heat and smelled of urine.

Our bus stopped in a dusty village where a small, weather-worn woman grasped at our sleeves and offered us plastic trinkets for pennies. Her black eyes met mine, and she handed me a locket that depicted Quan Yin, the goddess of Mercy. The tour guide, who hurried us along, translated that the pendant contained a prayer. As the woman placed the talisman's scarlet thread around my neck, the guide tried to wave her off. I asked, "How much?" so he picked three Chinese coins from my palm and placed them in the woman's leathery hand. I added two more *yuan*, dropped the talisman under my blouse, and rejoined the tour group.

Eight years later, I was sound asleep in a lake-side cottage in Michigan when the phone rang in the living room. My husband and I had only lived there a few weeks, so I stumbled into a side table and lamp as I searched for the phone. I stopped short when I saw that an entire village had arisen just outside our large living room window. Lit by the moon were fishing huts that villagers had dragged onto the ice as the lake in front of our rental had frozen. The new little "town" was deserted that time of night, and it gave me goosebumps as I sat in my skimpy pajamas facing the window.

"Hello?"

"It's me." My sister choked on heavy sobs.

“Laura, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

“I can’t do it anymore. I just can’t take it,” her voice quavered.

“Honey, listen. It’s going to be alright. Where are you?” I had said these words before.

Heavy sobs. “Here at Mom and Dad’s.”

My younger sister was suffering from another bout with depression, so she was living at home again. She had turned to alcohol at thirteen, coupled with bulimia a few years later, and in her late twenties she’d lost her high-end job as an art dealer when the stress—and addictions—caught up with her. It had all begun with our tyrannical father who preferred leather belts to reason, so God only knows why she returned home in her darker hours. Our parents’ house seemed like a tragedy magnet for my sister.

*An I told you so* rose from my gut, and my voice was about to get preachy when my sister said, “Jen? I’ve got Dad’s gun.”

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A veil of clouds wrapped around Jinshan mountain and drifted down to meet the smoke rising from the Buddhist temple where we joined other pilgrims in the ritual lighting of incense sticks. Then our tour group of Chinese Medicine students walked along the ochre stone out-cropping that overlooked the Great Wall. I leapt from rock to rock along the edge—my video camera in one hand and my other arm extended for balance—as I filmed the stone snake that slinked through the lush green forest to the valley below. My stomach churned from staring through the tiny lens, but the Great Wall’s rollercoaster curves mesmerized me. The rest of the group had moved on when my foot slipped.

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A gun. At my sister’s words, my throat went dry. My hand tightened on the phone while my free hand dug into the couch cushion beneath me. My parent’s house was thirty

minutes away, down an icy, unlit country road. I tried to think of someone who could get to her fast.

“Sweetie, did you call your sponsor?” I knew Laura had regularly attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. *Were her recent smiles just for show?*

“Yeah, Tracy’s coming. She told me to call you until she got here. But I’m too tired now. I just want it to be over. I can’t talk anymore.”

“Don’t hang up, Laura.” I pushed down the panic that rose in my throat and kept my voice steady. “This will pass. Let us help you.” The Quan Yin Talisman laid next to the phone. How it ended up there after unpacking, who knows? I picked it up and pressed it to my chest.

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The Chinese Wall disappeared from my viewfinder as both my hands went up in the air. My muscles clenched in panic as my feet, butt, then stomach slid down the stone face. Fear choked my scream. I craned my neck to watch the approaching thousand-foot drop, my hands helpless to slow my descent. Then the talisman on my chest snapped open, and my body came to a halt. The slippery surface of the rock had ended, and the traction had stopped me just inches from the cliff’s edge.

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“I’m here for you, Honey.” I tried again.

I heard her set the phone receiver on what was probably my father’s desk where he kept his gun.

“Laura?” My breath came in short gasps, and my eyes blurred with tears.

Instead of a gunshot, I heard an unfamiliar voice on the phone. “This is Tracy. She’s okay. I got this, thanks.” The phone clicked as Laura’s AA sponsor hung up.

Frozen to the couch with the phone receiver clenched in my hand, the stillness of the living room fell on me. I stared out the window at the empty fishing village that glowed in the blue moonlight. The next day it would be busy with retired people drinking beer and ice-fishing. They wouldn't see me here, shivering in my pajamas, my face twisted in concern.

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My muscles shook with adrenaline and my heart pounded as I scurried back up the rocks with my video camera still attached to one hand. When I reached the top and felt the buoyancy of recovered safety, I dared to look past the cliff.

“Oh, there you are,” said the tour guide who had missed my slip-up.

I was about to follow him when I nearly tripped over a long, narrow trail of paper that came from under my shirt. From the ground, I picked up one side of the talisman and the thin, accordion-folded paper attached to it: an endless prayer hand-written in Chinese *kanji*. I took the other half of the talisman from around my neck, refolded its invocation and put both pieces in my pocket with a sincere “Thank you!”

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In the early morning hours of the lakeside living room, I released my breath. As my shoulders relaxed, I looked at the plastic picture of beautiful Quan Yin with her graceful, merciful smile. “Thank you,” I said to the talisman, to the old woman who sold it to me, to Tracy the AA sponsor, to the people who produced telephones, and to anything that allowed me not to hear my sister end her life that night, just out of reach of my love.