

Honor Your Ancestors

At first, he wasn't going to go to Astoria at all. But Callie and Greg ganged up on him. Callie said, "Georgie, you have to come!" Greg whined in his nasal tone, "C'mon, Chen, it won't be any fun without you!" So George Chen, who had expected to spend this last weekend visiting his friends in Portland before they returned to college without him, agreed to go with them.

George had zero interest in going to Astoria, a city on the northwest edge of nowhere that he remembered vaguely hearing about from his Portland friends. He felt pretty miserable as they all set out for the two-hour drive but that was nothing new to him. George had been miserable for months now. He had become even more depressed since the counselors at school had strongly suggested that he take a "mental health leave". Now, after Callie and Greg returned to school he would have to face returning to New York City, his disappointed parents and the empty weeks and months ahead. He had even thought of suicide as a way to avoid the emptiness.

His mother had been especially irritating to him last night on the phone, when he had told her of his reluctance to go to Astoria.

"Oh, George," she intoned with a crispness derived from years in a classroom dealing with unruly students, "you should go. Don't you remember Grandma Chen talking about how her great-great-grandfather left China in 1875 to come to Astoria, Oregon as a young man and had never been heard from again?" No, he didn't remember – he hardly ever listened to anything Grandma Chen said anyway and he certainly wouldn't have paid any attention to her babbling about her great-great-grandfather! The phone call had ended on a sour note when George's father had chimed in with his mother to reprimand him for, once again, failing to show his grandmother the respect due to her.

George's mood blackened and it did not improve at his first sight of the Columbia River that he spied through the trees as Greg's decades-old Subaru approached Astoria. The view mesmerized him and deepened his depression. The river was enormous but George could not take in its expanse. All he could do was stare into the deep blue center that frightened him as much as it beckoned him. An icy feeling crept through his whole body. He tore his eyes from the river and convinced himself that he would be all right if he did not look at it again.

He managed to avoid looking at the river while they checked into a room at the Norblad. On the walk to dinner he kept his eyes down on the sidewalk, hoping that their destination, The Buoy Brewery, was

not near the river. Once they were seated at the bar and he lifted his head, all his fears were right in front of his eyes.

The river loomed like a mountain just beyond the bar. George was unable to move or speak. He could only stare into the center of the river, transfixed by the movement of the soft waves that made their way towards him. He felt as if he had to escape the approaching waves, but when he stood up to flee, he felt a force around his ankles and his last thought before he hit the ground was how cold and tired he was and how good it would be to lie still forever.

George awoke but was barely able to move. "Where am I?" he managed to gasp to the crowd of strangers surrounding the stretcher he now lay on. "Easy there, you're in good hands – you are in the emergency room at Columbia Memorial Hospital and we'll take care of you." George lay back and let the doctors and the nurses test and probe his body. He had no will to move or talk anyway. His body felt as though it were weighted down and being pushed below a surface that hovered above him and distorted his view of all the people around him. He welcomed the blackness that soon enveloped him.

The next time George awoke he was in a darkened room. A nurse stood by his bed, stroking his arm. She told him that his parents had been sent for. The news neither frightened him nor comforted him. Blackness came again.

Hours later there was a new sensation on his arm. An icy cold grip forced George to rise through the darkness and recognize that the grip was not only cold but wet. Drops of water penetrated his hospital gown and dripped onto the sheets below. Next, George became aware of a shrill, angry voice piercing his clouded brain.

"Xing lai, xing lai! Then a pause and the voice, angrier still, shouted, "Wake up! Wake up, you lazy boy!"

George's eyes flew open but shut again immediately to avoid looking at the horrifying sight that confronted them. Sitting by the bed, close enough to keep hold of George's arm, was a figure of a man unlike anything George had ever seen before. The figure was thin, almost emaciated, but had a grip of iron-like strength. He was dressed in a long tattered tunic over wide trousers that hung in shreds around his legs. A small hat was set on the back of his head, which was totally bald in the front. From under the hat and down his back hung a long thick braid.

It was not, however, the clothing that caused George to recoil in horror from the vision in front of him. It was the sight of the man's skin emerging from the rags that he wore. Every inch of exposed skin was a

pale, sickly green covered with horrible wrinkles that hung loosely from the bones. The wrinkled mouth opened again and, in a surprisingly youthful voice dripping with sarcasm, said, "I am surprised, boy, that you do not understand the language of your ancestors!"

"Who are you and what do you want?"

"I am your great-great- grandfather and I want you," said the man, tightening the grip on George's arm.

"Where did you come from – how did you get in here?" George struggled to speak, his throat tight with terror.

"Be quiet boy, and listen to my tale," said the creature. "You made the mistake of coming to Astoria, where my father and I were condemned to lie forever beneath the great river by the spirits I angered so long ago. Now those spirits will see that you never leave Astoria, either. They command that the curse on the Chen family bring you to lie beside us at the bottom of the river."

"What curse?" George moaned.

"I am getting to that," said the man, breathing his repulsive fish-breath onto George's face.

"When I was three years old, my father sailed away to America. The year was 1875. He came on a huge steamship called THE GREAT REPUBLIC. That vessel brought many Chinese to San Francisco. My father heard there was good work in Astoria in the canneries. So he came here and worked hard. At first he wrote to his family in China often. He was working with a lot of other Chinese at the Booth Cannery, he told them. Then, suddenly, after a year, his letters stopped. Years went by and we never heard from him. My mother said that, when I got older, I would be sent to America to find out what happened to him. "

"When did you come?" asked George, fearing the answer.

"I came when I was 18, in November of 1889, I left my young wife and infant daughter. I was supposed to come back as soon as I found my father. If he was dead, my mother charged me with bringing his bones back to be buried in China."

The fear that grew as George realized he was talking to the ghost of his ancestor was tempered by curiosity.

“Did you find him?”

“He was dead. He drowned in the river. He floated to the surface like a swollen fish and they pulled him out to bury him in the Chinese cemetery. I was taken up a hill and showed the grave and I knew then what I had to do.” The ghost paused and covered his puckered face with his wrinkled green hands.

“That night I went back to the cemetery and dug up his bones. I carried them away in a sack, convinced I was honoring my ancestor. It wasn’t until later that I learned of my fatal mistake.”

“What mistake?” George blurted out.

The ghost ignored George and continued his story.

“In the middle of the night, I was awakened from my sleep by a terrible howling in my room. A violent wind flashed across my body. I felt hot and cold at the same time. Two eyes without a face hovered over me and a voice told me I had disturbed the spirits. I had not asked them for permission to dig up the dead. I would be punished and with the punishment came the curse....the curse on all of us,” he said, staring down with eyes that George realized for the first time were crusted over with barnacles.

“The voice said that I too would drown in the river, as would any member of my family that ever dared to come to Astoria!

“Then, the eyes hovering above me disappeared. The next morning, wanting to escape the spirits, I fled from Astoria. Somehow I managed to get to Seattle. I learned that a ship was sailing soon for Philadelphia from Port Blakely. I asked if Philadelphia was far away from Astoria and was assured it was. I was able to sign on to the crew of the steamship DOUGLAS DEARBORN. I thought I had outsmarted the spirits.

“It wasn’t until we sailed that I learned the ship would pass Astoria and the mouth of the Columbia on its way to Philadelphia. When the ship neared the river mouth, I hid below deck. I heard shouting and running above me. Suddenly there was a creaking and groaning coming from the ship itself. I felt the

whole hull lifting beneath me and then the ship was turned upside down and slammed into the water with such force that I knew the spirits had found me and were trying to shake me loose from my hiding place. I fell to the bottom of the river and my shipmates fell with me. I could see the upside-down ship bobbing in the water above my head as I passed into the other world.”

The ghost seemed exhausted by his terrible recitation. His head hung low on his sunken chest and he began to dissolve in wave-like ripples before George’s eyes. The last thing he said before he disappeared completely was “They will get you too.”

George closed his eyes. When he awoke again, it was morning. He knew right away what he had to do. There was only one way to honor his ancestors and appease the spirits at the same time. He sprang from the bed with all his strength returned. He slipped out of the room and began to run down the hall. He ran down the stairs and out the hospital door. By now, hospital staff were running after him. He crossed the street and ran down the hill through the parking lots, past the buildings and finally across the busy road. He kept on running until the land disappeared and the river swallowed him.

George’s parents arrived in Astoria to hear that their son was gone. They returned to New York, grieving but unscathed. The curse of the Chens, if it had existed at all, did not touch them.

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