

2nd China letter from Dodie to Lene:

Just before Christmas, 2011

Dear Lene

It's been a very busy month. I unintentionally went to bed with a rove beetle, which sent me on a visit to a Chinese hospital, a much more interesting story which I will now tell:

One morning at breakfast my inner elbow began to turn red and swell. As the day wore on the redness spread out in patches and streaks up and down my arm. The next day similar patches appeared on my other elbow, 2 fingers, my face. Little blisters began to grow along the streaks and my colleagues began to avoid sitting next to me at the dining table. By the 3rd day, after applications of numerous kitchen remedies which only seemed to encourage this horrible growth, the school nurse proclaimed it a serious blood infection. Time to call Dr. Z.Z. Chen, the famous hematologist and old friend of Hwa Nan foreign teachers, to the rescue!

On day 4, Dr. Chen picked me up in his private car and took me to the swarming bee hive where he practices, one of about ten 2000-bed medical clinics in Fuzhou. Doctors are government employees and that is where they work, no matter how accomplished. Dr. Chen cut a swath through the waiting throngs (people in bandages, people hooked up to rolling IV's, people sneezing) to the small, spare dermatologist's office, pushed aside a clump of people noisily vying for her attention, and presented my arm. I was pretty nervous by then, having sworn I would never check into a Chinese hospital and fearing the worst. The doc looked at my arm for a few seconds, wrote something on my record book (no office space for individual hospital records and no personal physicians so everyone keeps their own medical record books), showed me a diagnostic manual page entitled "Paederus dermatitis" and turned her attention to the jostling crowd all thrusting body parts at her. The whole procedure took about 2 minutes. I got home and googled it.

Turns out there's a critter called a rove or "blister" beetle that secretes a poison "more toxic than cobra venom" according to one website, that I must have squished in the fold of my elbow and while the tiny insect struggled for liberation, it left a trail of this special substance on my arm and the sheets which contacted different parts of my body. After meeting with the school nurse (even though I know that nurses train for only a few years out of high school) I was envisioning amputations when in fact the doc gave me a small tube of antibiotic ointment that cost about \$2.50, I applied it for about 10 days and that was the end of it. You can be sure now I shake out my bed sheets before retiring!

My fellow foreign teachers this year include a descendant of the founder of Hwa Nan and his wife from Hawaii, an eager energetic young woman from University of Puget Sound with whom Hwa Nan has a historical connection, a good-natured personal trainer from Texas, a couple who make teaching English around the world their life style, a Taiwanese couple, and Laihar, a Singapore-born Australian of Chinese parentage. We will be joined by 20+ graduate students and professors from University of Puget Sound later in November who are on a Pacific Rim year of study and will be here for almost a month.

Fuzhou is full of foreign teachers these days, many of whom congregate at Starbucks in what used to be an ancient crumbling firetrap of a neighborhood, full of fascinating street life and strange odors. Now it is a slick new-old grid of streets full of restaurants and do-dad shops. Many of the young Americans I meet here have come for the opportunities they feel are in short supply in the US. They begin as teachers, pick up a

few modeling or voice-over advertising jobs, sometimes end up in joint ventures with Chinese partners or spouses. Last month I made some extra renminbi (“people’s money”) putting the final editing touches on a professional paper being presented at a geological conference in the U.S. dealing with landslides near the Three Gorges Dam.

We are paid far more than the Chinese teachers, but prices of many things have skyrocketed in the last 3 years. I brought my rattiest clothes and shoes, intending to replace them with cheap, plentiful Chinese goods. No way! High fashion rules, small neighborhood shops have been replaced by soaring malls, and many little noodle shops are now chain restaurants. Unfortunately, the minimum wage stays at 6 yuan an hour and my students are thrilled to make 8 Y an hour as part-time shop girls (\$1=6.2 yuan or RMB).

I have enjoyed getting your messages and attachments, but can’t access any blogs or social network here. Youtube is banned. The Government (read Communist Party) Department of Internet Information keeps a heavy hand on internet access in order to “safeguard the norms of social morality. The internet should not be used to jeopardize the national or public interest or the legitimate rights and interests of other citizens”. There are no computers in public school classrooms here, or if there is one, it is only for the teacher’s use. They are taught about computers in a separate classroom overseen by an eagle-eyed computer teacher. If I try to pull up a news story that is being blogged, I get a notice on my screen that says “FORBIDDEN...you don’t have permission to access this website on your server!”. It always comes as a shock.

Last week a Christian Chinese friend took me to Grace Night at her church because her boyfriend plays the drums in the Praise Band. It was a wild evening of singing charismatic Christian songs in Chinese with everyone waving their hands in the air, gospel-style. There was a rousing sermon, tears were shed and I thought we’d be raided any minute. Sherry (friend’s English name) has a car and she drives me to and from my campus for various adventures, gaily turning left from right hand lanes, slowing to a crawl on the freeway when she becomes engaged in our conversation, carefully straddling the lane dividing lines. Traffic is heavy as the acquisition of cars has out-paced the building of roads. Aggressive drivers nose their way into any space they can (it is the following driver’s responsibility not to hit them), cars swoop briefly onto the sidewalk whenever possible to gain a few car lengths, and threading the whole mess together are streams of e-bikes, motorcycles and bicycles.
Still warm here...!

Love, Dodie