

CHARLES MALLIA

THE PILGRIMS

LATE ONE NIGHT in 1838, before the lit hearth which created sombre flickering shadows, the man stood, tall and gaunt. He was clad in black, and looked like some kind of apocalyptic preacher. His young wife sat nearby reading poems in the dim red light. He began to tell her of his ideas. He told her that when he was a child he dreamt of the many great adventures he would have. He remembered dreaming of running away from home, sailing the oceans, joining a whaling ship to hunt great white whales or even going to the interior of unknown Africa. He announced that he wanted take part in the play of life and not just be a captivated audience. He told her his wish to take them out to the Wild West where fields were green and fertile and life was a noble struggle. His wife though, felt differently and tried to change his mind. She quoted from the bible and told him he must put away childish thoughts. But he would not give up his plans and after weeks of pleading and cajoling she gave in to his wishes.

He bought a small covered wagon, two horses and all the materials he needed. He joined up with a wagon train of about forty others like him. Some of them had his same dreams, while others were looking for an escape from poverty or discrimination. But each believed in the ideal of an easy conquest to rejuvenate their soul. On the fourth day of the month the man and his wife set out with the wagon train.

He liked how civilisation shrunk the further they left it; how the reflection seemed to clear away brick by brick and tree by tree. He liked how the number of people shrunk till finally there was only one. An old ragged man with a dusty mule. This old man looked like he had come out of some storybook forest. They did not get his name—they never asked for it and he never told. But they could tell he had been to the deepest part of the country. He wore

clothes of dead beasts whose names none of the pilgrims could tell. And each and every one of them gave him a drink or some food in case he was some old god who would curse them in his wrath. Then he left. And they rode on.

Four months into their travels, the man and his wife split up from the wagon train and took their own route. The wagon train would travel for two more months and then become stricken with Cholera that would decimate them all. Historians would later only describe them as part of a group of many others who had perished in similar adventures. Their names were lost completely.

Two weeks on their own, the man and his wife came to a green field. In a short distance was a lake and beyond that was an ancient forest. This was the place, thought the man. They would make their mark at this spot. Lost in wonderment he could see his future already written out for him. He simply had to follow every syllable.

They overturned the wagon which they used as shelter. Then the man started to build his cabin. He would have failed if not for the intelligence and guidance of his wife. For six months they barely survived. The food they could gather from herbs and hunting was meagre. The days were long and arduous. Most of the time it rained and the ground was always wet and cold. It was not long till his wife was coughing. Even after they had built the cabin things were hard. The herbs they bought did not grow. They were ignorant of the fact that the seeds could not grow in that soil. The wife got sicker, till she was consigned to bed completely.

One night, in the yellow glow of the fire, he sat next to her on a wooden stool and told her everything was going to be alright. That it would be worth it in the end. That in generations to come, though their names would be forgotten, their deeds could not. That they could die in old age knowing that they took part in the fabric of life and contributed in some way to the lives of others and to the building of some great far off civilisation.

The wife took in all he said. She wanted to tell him she still loved him. That she bore him no ill will and had no regrets. That it had all been written and was as it should be. She wanted to tell him to leave. That the place was not meant for them and they should go back to civilisation. But she did not. She looked into his shadowed face and could not see into him as she once had. There was a time when she knew he could see, but now he was blind. She smiled and watched him go outside for some water. She leaned back into the pillow and watched a moth flickering on the ceiling above her. She closed her eyes and thought of nothing. She died in the night and was buried in the morning.

In the weeks that followed, the man lost his sense of reason. His actions became mechanical, until one day, he crossed the fields. He walked deep into the ancient forest where he fell to his knees. He imagined that the universe was set against him, that the stars looked down with evil intent and that the rustling of the wind was the sound of nature herself laughing at his foolishness. But the universe was not set against him. The stars did not look down on him and the rustling wind was no more than that. And in time, long after the husband ceased to exist, it too fell to the comings of the days by men with greater knowledge and greater technology to do that which the husband could not. The forest would be torn down and be made so that neither a tree could grow nor a man could kneel.