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Like a Wall

My tears rivalled those of the legendary bride whose husband was taken from her and buried beneath the Great Wall of China near where your ancestors battled the hierarchy and the elements for survival. I would not jump into the sea as Meng Jiangnu eventually did. My tears would instead dry to a crust and I would continue to live my life, to learn not to cry your name aloud under a moonless sky, to remember not to whisper to you when making love with another man, to love my children even though there was no spark of you in them.

I suppose everyone thinks their own love affair is the greatest. But ours was epic, don't you think, Junjie?

Singled out in your youth for so many reasons. *Slant-eyes*, they called you, even though your almond eyes were straight. I used to tease you about your real name. It meant handsome hero; so very Chinese. You had some strange nicknames. Remember *Cabbage Kid*?

The only son of a market gardener, you rode your bike at a whisper into the orphanage, your basket loaded with pale green orbs. The sun wouldn't even have begun to crack the horizon, yet some smart-arse would already be peering out the window at you, or a father might be heading off for the early factory shift and would report that night over his lamb chops how the *chink's little kid* pedalled 'round the corner like a wild thing with a basket full of cabbages. The man's wife would laugh and the children would chime in with a *ching-chong-chinaman* chant.

You weathered it all so you could grow tall and strong and charming, and then you invited me to tea with your mother. Her English wasn't great, was it, Junjie? And we did giggle sometimes behind her back but it was with fondness, never malice. *Fall into the water carefully!* That was the first thing she ever said to me as I approached, jumping over the raised rows of vegetables. I should have tried to find the path but I was so nervous and excited and I thought no-one would see me if I

just took a short cut to your front porch. My new school shoes did get very wet. *We speak Ying-a-lish*, she told me. Her face was a landscape of light and shadow. *Look here beautiful*, she said as she grasped my shoulders and kissed my ear.

Your father was a tall son of a mixed German–Chinese marriage who rarely spoke. When we had to write an essay on our ancestry, you said your father was Chinese Australian and when you told me it was enough that your family was singled out for their Chinese heritage, without people thinking of your father as half-*Kraut*, I almost cried.

I did cry when you insisted on meeting my father. He would not shake your hand and refused to even invite you inside. You stood at the back door with your rejected hand dangling, the other clutching a basket of carrots and greens. My new stepmother mustered a pinch of pity and took the basket from you, emptying the contents onto the bench next to my father's bottles of home brew. After you left, my father sent me to my room. Said he couldn't stand to look at me. *And get rid of that trash*, I heard him say to Muriel as the back screen slammed.

In the middle of the night, I retrieved those carrots from the bin, ate one and snuck the rest into my bag so I could deliver them to the orphanage on my way home from school. My father would have given me the strap if he'd known I went anywhere near the orphanage. He had a fixed idea that children without parents must somehow be evil. When I told you that story years later, your eyes shimmered and you held me so tight into your chest, I could barely breathe.

Chalk and cheese we were, Junjie. I couldn't look at numbers without breaking into a sweat and you were a logarithmic whizz-kid. You only liked the white of an egg, me the yolk. Remember when I tried to explain the saying to your mother? Chalk and cheese? You ended up talking in Chinese and she nodded but her forehead was still a cluster of confused question marks. Only after we were married did you tell me what you said: *I'm not sure I understand it either, ma, but look how beautiful she is. Just smile and nod*. How we laughed then!

We laughed a lot, you and I. What else could we do? A chubby red-head with a club foot and a boy with Chinese blood. *The gimp and the chink*, they called us in high school. Laugh or cry situations peppered our days. We didn't cry much.

On the day the earth flared, I wanted you to come with me to your parents' house. *They are in no danger*, you told me. You chafed at my insistence. *Look at the wind direction*, you said. *It's the other side of the hill we have to worry about*. I demanded to know who, on the other side of that hill, deserved any attention from you.

Bender Grills? The awful whiskey-soaked farmer who wouldn't sell us the beef for our wedding day? Mrs Tavelitch? The fifth-grade teacher who made you sit next to your biggest tormenter? The Harrisons, maybe?

The Harrisons were too discerning to buy lettuce ³³ Like a Wall from your father but they'd buy them from the grocers, despite knowing your family was the only supplier in the area.

Oh! Perhaps the Pringles deserve your help in saving their precious heirlooms.

I turned harridan, my face a mass of heat that no doubt blended with my hair. I must have looked a fright. And to think that was your last image of me before you turned away. I imagine myself opening your brain like a photograph album to remove that shrill, blotchy woman and replace her with any number of kinder incarnations, like the happy girl in my wedding day portrait. In it, I'm sitting sure and straight in your mother's wicker chair looking upward, a slight curve to my lips. Only you and I know that I was looking at you and trying not to laugh as you pulled faces at me.

Or perhaps I'd slip in that shot of me plastered in mud after we'd pushed your sister's old Holden out of the ditch. Long after Suyin's rattly car was out of earshot, we stayed there, rolling around in the sludge like a couple of juveniles. I'd even let you have that one of me at the beach that I always tried to hide. Whenever we'd open those albums, that picture had always slipped in behind another. All I could see when I looked at it was my inwardly-turned left foot and the semi-circular line of my deformed toes. You told me, all you saw was my Colgate-poster mega smile but even if

you did look at my feet, you found them equally beautiful. Who says such a thing? My Junjie, that's who.

After you left that day, I held on to the image of your silhouette heaving purposefully away from me, surrounded by a pink and grey haze. In my imagination, you loiter, hoping I will call you back. Eventually, the snapshot became too painful for me, the reality too gut-sucking and raw. I replaced it with the picture of you running towards me the day before the sky turned a rose-coloured ash. Your lopsided smile was my favourite greeting, your ebony fringe flopping over one eye. Do you remember that day? You'd been to see my father – you never did give up – and he'd given you a glass of his home-brewed stout. *Tasted like molasses*, you told me. And that reminded us about the time your mother tried to feed you a spoonful of that black tar because Doctor Turnbull said all Aussie children had molasses to help them grow and stop them getting what he referred to as those *'ideous diseases*. The molasses was so bad, you convinced your mother that Vegemite was the same thing. *Lesser of two evils*, you said.

You were always so different from the other boys at school. You had those square geeky glasses that became fashionable years later and you saw things through a totally different lens. It was you who made me feel good about my hair. You told me the Romans put a higher price on their red-headed slaves. There may have been some truth in that and in your notion that I would not go grey easily, but now I know you made up the other things like redheads are better lovers and more loyal friends and that they live longer. I believed everything you told me. You said I didn't have a true club foot, it was just slightly turned and you would not allow me to use the word *deformed*.

Not long after you left that morning the air fumed smutty ash and I could see red and blue flames lapping around here and there. I stood waiting for you, calling for you, until I saw an image in the distance. A scarlet ball reared up like an animal and exposed its angry blue heart, then it took a great hulking breath and speared itself across the landscape, taking out two houses and a barn. The brightness of it pulled me out of my shock and I hurtled towards your family home.

I tried to herd our sheep in front of me. Just four ewes and a lamb, all I could find of our flock of ten. But Mrs Tavelitch's mangy old Lab came barrelling out of the bushes like a wild thing, jumped the front fence and frightened the life out of those sheep. They banked so steeply, one of them toppled, but she bucked to her hooves and followed her clan straight back into the surging heat. By the time I turned back, the dog had disappeared. It didn't occur to me to run back to the house to save anything. I wanted to get to your family because I knew you would be happy to find us all together.

You would have been so proud of your parents, Junjie. Your father slogged towards me with that metal tank on a trailer, hose at the ready, your tiny mother following, a full bucket hanging from each sinewy arm. *Daughter!* she called. *You are in safe place, daughter.* She dropped the buckets and held me as tight as you did the day I told you about my father's erratic and unscrupulous disciplinary methods. Your father got as far as the road before turning back and booming at us to run.

Word of your heroic deeds filtered out. Young Paul Harrison told how you stood with his father, bashing at spot fires with wet chaff bags. This was after leading Mrs Tavelitch to the safety of the scout hall manned by police and volunteers.

He should have been with me, I hissed at Paul. I am ashamed about that, Junjie. He was just twelve years old and he was trying to tell me what a hero you had been. I wouldn't have blamed him if he never spoke to me again, but a couple of months later he came to see me as I was mindlessly pulling carrots with your father. *He thought you were safe,* Paul told me then. Apparently, the fire was heading directly north and our little cottage was south-east. I had seen for myself how quickly the savage hungry beast could turn so I understood what Paul was saying. *He called your name real loud,* Paul said. *Real loud. Then we couldn't hear nothin' else because there was just explosions and a big roar.* The poor boy started to cry, right there in just about the same spot I'd 'fallen into the water carefully' the day I met your mother.

Your dad pried Paul from my clutches. He helped him to pull some carrots and parsnips and then walked him down the road to the caravan the Harrisons were living in while they rebuilt their house. They accepted the vegetables, Junjie.

Of course, our little cottage didn't survive. Blackened sheep and a laundry trough summed up what was left of our belongings. It was better that way. It kept me from years of reaching out to you through the photographs and objects that signified something about our life together. I didn't pine for the funny little embracing man and woman that sat at the top of our two-tiered wedding cake, nor for the shell vase you helped me to finish in time for the local show. I'm glad I no longer had the jewellery box you gave me for our wedding anniversary. I probably would have turned the key constantly to watch that ballerina pirouette endlessly, alone.

You know what I did, Junjie? I built my own little wall from all the bricks I salvaged from the charred rubble. The wall was almost as high as me and six feet wide. I sat in front of it and imagined it huge. I thought about the Chinese bride, Meng Jiangnu, sobbing for her husband, lost to the Great Wall. I cried long and hard, hoping my wall would crumble and expose perhaps a hint of you, a ghost-like fog that would envelope me and take me to you. Silly. Fanciful. My wall did not crumble. I had built it strong and solid, like my love for you.

It was years later that your mother manoeuvred me into *circling out wider* to meet new people, pushing me into dance classes and helping me to get the job at the greengrocers. I would have been so happy to stay living with them, working the garden, and talking about you over cups of tea in the evening. But your dear ma, she edged me ever so gently back into life.

Greg's a good guy. He never went to school with us; he's from the mainland. He didn't take one halting breath before agreeing to your ma living with us after your dad passed away. The children called her *gugu* and she would pinch their cheeks and try to understand their fast, crazy language. I told her to just 'smile and nod'. She did so with a very serious look on her face and then she would wink at me. Greg called her *gugu* too. He was so considerate and never took offence when she corrected his gardening methods or added herbs (*for fravousome!*) to his cooking.

You will be pleased to know that we are quite a multicultural area these days and your sister's children wouldn't have had to endure the taunts and rejections that peppered your childhood. Suyin was never game to try though, preferring to call Sydney home.

Just a tiny whiff of a bushfire and my nose lifts, ready to lead me to it. You would think I'd hate the smell. After all, it was that roaring animal that so cruelly took you from me. Some people – locals who knew my loss – expected me to come undone. I would see them sniff and then everyone would talk at once; there'd usually be a bit of window closing or fan adjusting. I never managed to tell them I like the smell because they might have asked why and I would have had difficulty explaining. No-one talks about the fires any more.

Your mother died when my daughter Willow was fourteen, leaving us all with beautiful stories.

Later I eavesdropped from the porch one afternoon, listening to Willow imploring her son *not to be a mantis trying to stop a chariot*. She told him to concentrate on the little things he has the ability to change and the big things will follow later, almost an echo of your ma talking to Willow when she was eleven and wanted to save the riverbank fauna. You will be pleased to know that Willow did succeed in saving a large portion of it. I know how much you loved that river. One of my favourite warnings to my children was *cheap tricks never last* which, of course, came from one of your mother's tales about the boastful little donkey kicking his hooves; no match for a cunning tiger.

Now I have three grandchildren. Hard to believe. Charlie had a project to do on fire safety at school and he asked me if I had been alive *in the olden days in the big bush fires*. I started to blubber. After he left, I kept telling Greg how much I loved the smell of gum leaves burning. *That's understandable*, he said to me and I dabbed at my eyes with the sleeve of an old cardigan. *Really? You don't think it's weird?* Greg didn't think it was strange at all. *You lost someone you loved dearly*, he said. *Maybe you sense your Junjie close to you when you get a hint of the smell*. Oh, he's a wise one, my Greg. I know you would have liked him. I feel you would have approved.

Some years back, a couple of artists made a film about walking towards each other from opposite ends of the Great Wall in order to meet in the middle and say goodbye. I'm sure the spirit of Meng Jiangnu and her husband accompanied them as they each walked over four thousand kilometres for their dramatic ending. I would have liked such a grand gesture for us, Junjie. I yearned to see you just one last time so I searched for the wall I built from the rubble of the inferno but found only the front garden of a two-storey home in its place.