

CHINA

I NEVER STOPPED LOVING CHINA. We got together in the summer we turned seventeen and spent warm nights under the pier drinking cider and smoking weed. Some nights we walked the back roads to the ocean and lay naked in the dunes looking up at the stars. One night China rolled her salty skin onto me, dropped warm tears on my shoulder and asked that we pray our love would last. I told her there was no need for prayers. As it was I didn't believe in any god, but swore we'd always be together.

I really did believe we'd make it, as long as I could stay out of trouble, which wouldn't be easy. I'd been fucking up since I started high school, and was forever deep in shit, with teachers and the local police.

When word got out that we were together, China's family and friends warned her off me. The town was small enough that we couldn't be together without

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word getting back to her father, a sheep farmer and champion trap shooter. He came after me like I was a bush dog that had crept up on and tore the throat out of one of his sheep in the night. We were forced to meet under the pier of a night and disappear into the shadows, where China would whisper that she loved me and trusted me and was ready to take a chance on me. For most of the year we were together I did stay out of trouble, not counting a fight here and there, which was no more than most local boys got up to on a drunken Saturday night.

China came to hate our hometown, the whispers and the gossip. She decided our future lay in escape. She took me by the hand down at the beach one night and told me that if I could land a job in the city she was ready to follow me. I didn't mind the town myself. I'd never been anywhere else and the idea of packing up for good didn't appeal to me.

'We could get jobs here, China.'

'Yeah, we could. A shit job for you. Maybe labouring on a farm. And the supermarket for me. I want more than that.' She let go of my hand. 'You can stay if you like, but I'm getting out of here by the end of the year.'

She walked off in her red bikini with a T-shirt slung over her shoulder. I'd never had much ambition but right then I'd have done anything to keep her. I chased

after her, grabbed her around the waist and swore that we'd leave together and never return.

'Promise?' she laughed.

'I promise. I'm ready to go whenever you want.'

She hung her arms around my neck and dragged me into the dunes.

It took about two months for our plan to fall apart. I found myself on remand after a bad fight with Bulle Hughes outside The Pioneer hotel. We were both drunk and Bulle was just as willing as I was. But seeing as he won himself a broken nose, a cracked eye socket and coughed up a couple of his own teeth, I ended up in court facing a rack of charges. My mother couldn't come up with the bail money and I spent six weeks before the trial in lock-up. China didn't visit once.

When my mother came to see me a couple of days before the trial, carrying a secondhand suit she'd picked up at the Salvos, she broke the news that China had left town and nobody'd heard a word from her. Although her parents reported her missing, and apparently looked sad and sorry enough when they sat in the front pew at church on Sundays, the word was out that her old man had given her money to get away from both me and the town.

As my mother broke the news to me, sighing here and there, I understood I'd let a jewel slip through my fingers.

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With luck I wasn't accustomed to I beat the assault charges on account of the CCTV footage from the pub showing Bulle whacking me over the head with a billiard cue and trying to gnaw my ear off. Fortunately, there was no footage of me beating him senseless once we'd taken the fight outside. I was free to walk the streets of the town again, which left Bulle a little nervous. He avoided me for weeks. By the time I caught up with him I didn't have the anger to break wind. We passed each other on the footpath out front of the post office. I nodded, he nodded, and that was it.

I asked around about China. Nobody'd sighted her or heard a peep. She'd done a serious runner. Maybe interstate. By the time I went inside again, two years later, for a handful of smash and grabs on servos, I'd been shackled up with three or four local girls, and moved about myself, chasing whatever dollar I could get my hands on. Clean or dirty, it made no difference to me, although if I were pushed I'd have to say dirty money smelt a little better. I would think of China now and then, mostly when I was near the ocean and could smell the sea and salt air.

My first night alone in the narrow prison cell I was kept awake by a sad moaning calling me from across the yard. I didn't sleep that night, and many of the nights that followed. I kept to myself in prison and wasn't troubled at all, but it didn't stop me hitting the

mattress full of a fear I couldn't recognise. Some nights I wouldn't sleep at all, and when I did I would dream about China. I'd be searching for her in the darkness, but could never find her.

I left prison a year and a half later with a travel pass, fifty dollars in my pocket and a knitted red rug tucked under my arm that I'd made in the tapestry shop. A gift for my mother. I looked out the bus window at the dots of sheep on the side of a rich green hill, knowing I had fuck all to return to. I didn't have a place to live and my mother was uneasy about me moving in with her. While I was away she'd finally shacked up with her longtime boyfriend, Bob Cummings, a weed of a fella who ran the supermarket. They weren't married, which even in this day is enough to cause scandal in a town with more churches than pubs. The talk around the town worried him and he suggested they get married. My mother wouldn't hear of it.

'I've been married. And it was a disaster from day one. If I wanted a life of misery, Bob, I'd will myself a stroke.'

She'd always been a tough woman. But she wasn't rock-hard. She talked Bob into letting me stay with them and he okayed it for me to move into the garage, which meant his precious fishing boat was shifted onto the driveway, in the weather. I did my best to stay out of his way and only went into the house for meals and

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to shower. I also made an agreement with them that as soon as I found a permanent job I'd be on my way.

The deal on my early release included me seeing a parole officer once a fortnight and finding work. The week after I got out I caught the bus out front of the post office to the nearest big town, a thirty-minute ride, to have a meeting with my parole officer, Jim Lack. He doubled as a JP, Protestant Minister, and a newsagent. Jim sat me down in a small office behind his shop and assured me that it was his job to set me on the right path. He had the features of a budgerigar and whistled like one when he spoke.

'We're going to work together, son. The last thing we want to see is a local boy falling through the cracks and going back to prison.'

He smiled and put a hand on my thigh, a little too familiar for my liking. He also gave me the number of a 'good Rotary man' he was friendly with who owned a timber mill outside town. When I went for the job interview with the Rotary man, Reg Ling, I quickly worked out that the two men shared a trait other than the Bible and good deeds when he put his hand on my thigh and gave it a good rub.

'I like what I see in you, Cal,' he smiled, like we were on our first date.

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I started work at the mill a week later, riding an hour each way on an old pushbike I'd picked up at the local tip. I'd spent the weekend taking the bike apart, repairing and cleaning and oiling it. After a week at the mill I sat at the kitchen table with my mother, explaining that if she could have a word in Bob's ear and get him to let me stay in the garage for a little longer than he'd expected, maybe three months or so, rent-free, I'd be able to save enough money to get a place of my own to rent. She agreed, but cut a tough deal with me.

'I don't think he'll mind, Cal. But if you miss just one day of work, or if you bring any trouble here, if the police get on your tail, you'll have to go. Bob won't stand for trouble.'

I felt like screaming, 'Fuck old Bob,' but knew better.

'I understand that. I want no trouble with Bob. Or you.'

From the day I got out of prison I hadn't had another dream about China, although I did think about her a lot of the time I was riding to and from the mill, seeing as it was the same road we'd walked heading for the dunes. I tried convincing myself that the footprints I sometimes spotted in the sand by the side of the road could only be hers. I had a half-crazy idea to take to the road and go searching for her but my parole conditions didn't allow for it. Not for another year, at least. I couldn't venture more than fifty kilometres from the

town without written permission, and it was illegal for me to spend a single night away from my 'primary residence,' even just camping out on Bob's front nature strip in a tent.

I'd never driven a forklift before but picked it up in less than a day at the mill. My job was moving sawn and dressed logs from the mill to the storage yard. About fifty men and half a dozen women worked at the mill, a few of them from the town, but most off surrounding farms that had become unproductive in recent years because of the drought. They were an unfriendly bunch. None of them ever introduced themselves or spoke to me any more than they needed to. I guess it was on account of me having been in prison, although they didn't seem to have much to say to each other either.

There was one fella in the mill who looked a little familiar from the first time I spotted him, marking up sawn logs with a brush and bucket of red paint. After that I'd often notice him eyeing me too closely. I'd always been good at putting a name to a face and it got to me that I couldn't remember his. He could be an old enemy who might get it in his head to jump me.

Riding home into the third week on the job, I took a puncture in the back wheel. I had no spare tube or repair kit and was still a good way from home. There wasn't any choice but to walk the bike. Pushing it along

the side of the road I heard a car horn. A battered red utility pulled up alongside me, driven by the familiar face from the mill.

‘Your bike fucked?’ he yelled.

‘Yep. A puncture.’

‘Throw it in the back and I’ll drive you to town.’

I put the bike in the back and hopped into the passenger seat. He offered me a calloused hand.

‘Never thought you’d get back here, Cal.’

‘I know you?’

‘Of course you fucken know me. Bruce Conlan. From high school.’

I remembered Bruce Conlan as a whippet of a kid who smelled of piss and hid himself down the back of the classroom. We’d never been mates, but I’d felt a little sorry for him and had given a couple of boys a belt for standing over him in the yard. He had a lunatic for an old man, who was forever knocking his kids around. While I was in prison I read in the newspaper that the father’d gone berserk in the main street and shot up some shop windows before turning the gun on himself and blowing his head off.

Bruce had filled out. And none of it was muscle.

‘I wouldn’t have known you, Bruce. You’ve changed.’

‘Well, they say married life’s good for you, but I don’t know. She can cook, my wife. And I can shovel it

away. You look fit enough though. Did you throw the weights around while you were in ... in ...'

'I never lifted a finger in prison. Didn't eat much either. What you see here is skin and bone and not much more.'

We turned onto the town road.

'Cal, when we were in school together and you cleaned up those arseholes picking on me all the time, I never thanked you for that. No one has laid a finger on me since. They must have thought we were connected. So, thanks.'

'It was nothing.'

'Why'd you do it, stick up for me?'

'Anything for a fight,' I laughed.

He dropped me at the front gate and offered to pick me up a morning, which suited me, as the bike was on its last legs.

We had little to do with each other during the days at the mill, but did plenty of talking on the drive to and from. Bruce had married one of the Marston girls, the daughters of the same Marstons who ran the milk tankers between the dairy farms and the biggest milk producer in the district, a business they also had a slice of. The family was loaded.

Bruce said his father had rubbed his hands together when he started dating Shelley Marston.

'You'll land on your feet there, son. That family bleeds milk and shits money.'

Bruce hadn't quite landed yet. The family was sweating on the old man dying.

'Still got his first quid in his pocket. Gives his kids fuck all. They hate him and can't wait to bury him.'

'I heard about your old man knocking himself off in the main street. Tough on you?'

'Wasn't tough at all. I was glad to see the mad cunt dead. And happy he never took anyone with him. My mum especially.'

He asked if I minded talking about prison. I said no, but assured him there wasn't much to tell. 'You're in your cell fifteen hours a day, staring at the wall.'

'What's the food like?'

'We eat airline food.'

'Airline food? You having me on?'

'It's true. It's a private company that runs the prison. Their other business is catering for the airlines. They run this industrial kitchen out of the prison. We're the slave labour. Our job is making and preparing the food, which we also have to eat. In the same packaging. Saves on washing the dishes. Think of that, Bruce. You've got some businessman tucking into a meal at 30,000 feet cooked by poor cunts like us who can't walk two steps without hitting a brick wall.'

Bruce cackled like an old girl. He couldn't stop himself from laughing and was looking at me kind of weird.

‘Wasn’t that funny, mate. An’ what are you looking at me like that for?’

‘I was just thinking.’

‘Thinking what?’

He smiled like a goose. ‘I was thinking about you and China.’

I shifted in my seat. ‘What about us?’

‘You two were like Romeo and Juliet for a while there.’

‘Maybe we was. Didn’t work out for them either.’

‘If you don’t mind me saying so, Cal, she was the hottest chick in town. I saw her down at the beach a few times in that red bikini she wore. She drove blokes crazy. What a body she had.’

‘Yeah,’ I shrugged. ‘What a body.’

‘Most of the girls we went to school with let themselves go. Tribe of kids. Ton of weight. Not that I can talk,’ he laughed, grabbing a handful of fat. ‘Not that China Doll.’

‘She’s most likely gone the same way,’ I said, hoping I was wrong. ‘It’s been a long time.’

‘But she hasn’t, mate. Not her. Not when I last seen her.’

‘You saw her? Bullshit.’

‘I did. About six months back. I was after a new dog, a heeler, and went through the stock classifieds in *Farmer’s Weekly*. I came across some pups for sale, a

litter of blues. I gave the number a call and drove the hundred clicks across west to pick it up, at the old Lion Park on the Western Highway.'

'The Lion Park? Those poor scabby cats still there? I thought the bloke who ran the place was done for animal cruelty.'

'He was. He went broke and sold up to this bloke with the dogs. He runs a few horses, some sheep and these heelers that he breeds. When I got there he let the pups run around in the yard so I could get a look at them and pick one. I'm on my hands and knees playing with this pup, a lovely dark blue – Jhedda, that's what I named her – I picked her out of the litter and brought her home. While I'm playing with the dog I hear a screen door slam and this woman comes out of the house holding a mobile phone. It was a call for him. I look up and see China.'

'You sure it was her?'

'Sure I'm sure. She looked a bit heavier. There was a kid running around. I suppose it was hers. But the face, and that red hair and her eyes. It was China, all right.'

'She say anything to you?'

'You didn't know who I was when you saw me, so why would she? I never existed when she lived here, so she wouldn't know me now. Anyway, she didn't really look at me. She handed him the phone and walked back inside. But it was her.'

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I didn't say much for the rest of the drive. When he stopped at the gate I sat in the car without moving.

'We're here, mate. You getting off? Or do you want to come out to my place for a good feed?'

'What's the best way over there?'

'Where? My place?'

'No. The Lion Park.'

'Oh. You cut across country. Take the fire road out behind the speedway. It gives you a straight run to the highway. It's about another forty k on from there. You thinking of catching up with her? I'm sure she'd be married to this bloke. They looked pretty homely out there. I can't see him laying out the welcome mat for an old boyfriend a month out of the nick.'

'I'm not driving over there. Just curious. As it is, I got no car. Thanks for the lift.'

Old Bob was standing by the gate waiting for me.

'How much longer you thinking of being with us, Cal? I don't like my boat out in the sun. Or the rain.'

'Oh, not much longer at all, Bob. I'm about to move on.'

I skipped my mother's cooking and lay on top of my bed thinking about what Bruce had said. Just on dark I grabbed my jacket and wallet, left the garage and headed for an old haunt, the car park at the RSL. I

walked the aisles and settled on a battered Ford sedan with an unlocked back passenger door. I'd wired the car in less than a minute and was on the road in another thirty seconds. I passed the speedway and turned onto the fire road, driving through the pitch-black night. Pairs of eyes flashed at me from the scrub and from behind trees. A fox raced onto the dirt road carrying the bloodied carcass of a rabbit in its mouth. I felt the left front wheel slam into it, crushing its ribcage. By the time I'd turned onto the highway I'd dodged a dozen more animals and hit maybe two or three, although I couldn't be sure on account of the bumps and divets in the road.

The Lion Park wasn't hard to find. A faded billboard with the face of a roaring lion welcomed visitors. I pulled off the road at the gates. A light burned on the porch of a house at the end of a drive. I left the car and walked. A dog barked and came running from its bed on the porch. It was an aged blue heeler, a little timid. The porch light went on and the door opened.

There was no mistaking China. The shapely silhouette resting against a door post could belong to no one else. Another dog sat by her side.

'Can I help you? This is private property.'

'China,' I croaked, as if someone had shoved a handful of dust in my mouth.

She stepped forward and stood under the porch

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light. She was barefoot and wore a floral cotton dress, with her hair tied in a bun. She looked beautiful.

‘Jesus, Cal. Is it you?’

I felt shy all of a sudden, like a schoolboy.

‘It’s me.’

She came down from the porch and walked across the yard.

‘Christ. It is you. Let me look. Wow. What are you doing here?’ She was a little nervous. ‘My husband, he’s away at an ag meet. He’ll be back soon.’

‘I don’t want any trouble, China. I was just driving by.’

She raised a hand, the same soft hand she used to rest in the small of my back.

‘It’s no trouble. It’s just that I wouldn’t have expected you to show up out of the blue like this. It’s been ... four years?’

‘A little more.’

‘I read about you in the papers. How long have you been ...?’

‘About a month. I’ve been staying back with Mum.’

She looked out to the highway, to where the stolen car was parked.

‘You say you were driving by? How did you know where I was?’

‘This fella I’ve been working with, Bruce Conlan, I guess you don’t remember him? He bought one of

your dogs some time back. We were talking and your name came up and he told me that he'd seen you. I had to come over this way and I thought – only then when I saw the old sign – that I'd call in and see how you are. But like I said, I don't want to cause you any trouble.'

She shifted on her feet, reached behind her head with a hand and pulled a clip from the back of her hair. Her hair dropped, bounced and rested on her bare shoulders.

'Where are you heading to?'

I heard a car engine, turned and spotted headlights at the end of the drive. China nervously smoothed the front of her dress.

'Here's my husband now.'

I had only seconds left to me.

'China, I just wanted to tell you that when I was inside I thought about you. A lot. It sounds stupid but I need to tell you that you were a good person. I never understood that before. I was too wild to know anything when we were going out.'

I scraped my boot in the dirt.

'And I want to also tell you that you were beautiful. You are beautiful.'

'You told me that plenty of times,' she laughed. 'You were pretty nice yourself.'

'No, I was trouble. I've always been trouble.'

'You were not.' She leaned forward and brushed my arm with a fingertip. 'You were sweet. Most of the time.'

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The car pulled into the yard and the dogs ran to meet it. The driver hopped out. He was tall and thin and fit looking, full of purpose, and no doubt suspicious of me.

‘Can I help you? Is that your car on the highway?’

‘I’m working for a farmer over east and he’s after one of your working dogs. I was driving this way and I thought I’d call in on the off-chance. I shouldn’t have done so. It’s late. My apologies.’

He relaxed a little.

‘We don’t have pups at the moment. It’s not the time of year for them. You should have called ahead.’

‘Your wife was just explaining to me that they’re out of season.’

He kissed China on the cheek.

‘Sorry I’m late, Marg. It went on longer than I expected.’

I hadn’t heard China called by her proper name since school rollcall. He took out his wallet and handed me a business card.

‘Give me a call around December and I’ll let you know what we’ve got. Should have some pups then.’ He offered his hand. ‘Tom.’

‘Bruce,’ I answered. I took the card. ‘Thanks.’

I stepped back and took a last look at China, arm-in-arm with her husband.

‘And thank you, Marg.’

‘You too,’ she answered, looking down at her bare feet.

I sat in the car for an hour or more. I couldn’t get my mind off her. I got out of the car and watched the house. A honeyed glow framed a narrow window on the side of the house. I walked quietly behind a row of apple trees until I reached the window and stood among the trees, listening to my own heavy breaths as I watched China through the window. She stood naked before a mirror, brushing her hair. Her husband lay back on their bed, smoking a cigarette and admiring her until she turned to him.

I walked back along the driveway to the car, gunned the engine and pulled out onto the highway. The country gradually flattened until the dark horizon fell away. Although the air was cold I wound down the window to keep myself from fading away. I could smell the sea in the wind and thought of China and the nights we’d spent in each other’s arms. I could see her hair glowing against the moon and hear her laugh.

I didn’t want the highway patrol bearing down on me. I turned onto an irrigation road, running flat and hard into the distance. I could see a radio tower, pulsing a beam of red light across the dark sky. I set my bearings for it, as if it were the Star of Bethlehem itself.