

PROLOGUE

AND THUS WE VENTURE

*Brown, parched lands.
Dreary fields stripped of life.
Horizontal scars scour the soiled sands –
Telltale signs of a ploughman's strife.*

*A land of peasant people hard at work.
Obedient in mind to a reign of moral law.
Hands and hoes, ancient plough and horse.
An era enclosed by a gigantic Wall.*

Nathan Hoturoa Gray

Pink and white blossom hangs off scrawny trees. The mud is hard-baked and cracked; the sky grey. A crackle of thunder resonates across the valley as two crows fly east towards the mountains. A drop of rain splatters my cheek. Another taps my wrist. Dust rises as heavy drops form craters in the dry earth.

One hundred and twelve days it's been without rain. Clearly I'm a newcomer to these dry, ancient parts, but it seems like a long time to go without water, even for a cactus. I think about the possible meanings of rain. You get this way after walking 2,000 kilometres. Perhaps these desert lands are finally coming to an end?

Up ahead the gigantic Wall lumbers onwards, extending towards a range of grey mountains. Twelve feet high, six feet thick, I have accompanied this petrified serpent of stone, mud and clay for four months across Northern China. Contracting its spine to make an ascent upon a fresh range of mountains, the Wall transforms to a thin line of granite rocks weaving diagonally

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up the ridge. It is not the sort of Great Wall I had imagined or seen in tourist photos. However, it is still a tremendous feat considering the size and weight of these boulders. I can hardly lift one, and this mountain slope is getting steeper.

Two hundred crimes carried the dreaded sentence of labour on the Wall, either for life or perpetually. If you got the latter sentence then upon your death your son took your place. A major deterrent to ensure strict obedience to the code of Confucian morals. Heading up the steep mountain shoulder, I imagine the grunts of men hunched under their loads, and the sounds of cracking whips as they drive their mules mercilessly up the eroding slopes. Precipices begin to appear, revealing drops of up to a hundred feet. Winding its way through two granite crags, this 2,000-year-old trail, my guide, has become the only navigable path. Tightening my waist and chest straps for surety, I take a deep breath and move purposefully along the jutting granite path. The wind screeches like a banshee, threatening to push me off the trail as a heavy fog moves in to obscure my path. I feel like I'm caught up in a game of blind man's buff. Suddenly a gust claims my cap and takes off with it into the mist. Distracted, I misjudge a step and an ancient brick dislodges, tumbling down the foggy precipice. I instinctively leap to my right just before a small landslide follows, plummeting below with a chilling crash.

Over a million people died building the Wall, the world's longest graveyard. Viewed by the West with such a sense of awe, this almighty Great Wall is an emblem of oppression to the majority of Chinese. Forced to carry rocks up the steepest of slopes, one falter and the worker was history. Most of the bodies were thrown inside the construction. Bones fill in many layers.

I lower my pack and find my brown cap hanging haplessly at the precipice edge. I am lucky. That hat has been vital in keeping my head warm during the chilly spring evenings spent without a tent. I certainly still need it and am thankful it has not been lost. Yet this is the way with the Wall; you only carry what you need – the rest is either discarded or lost.

Twilight begins to fade. My exposed ears freeze and my nose begins to trickle. This is no place to be spending the night. I quickly retrieve my cap, attaching it safely to the waist belt of my pack, and hastily remount the dragon. If I had known where it was taking me, I never would have ventured. But that's the beauty of the unwritten path. You just never know. And thus we venture.

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Here I sit. A Chinese man sits to my right. Slanted eyes and flat nose landmark his pale and expressionless face. He's wearing a green uniform with two military stripes on the shoulders. The addition of a silver star tells me he's moving up in his world.

Fake yellow and red roses line the oak table where we sit. The table is well polished and designed for reading military maps. The walls are white and decorated with army paraphernalia: the Chinese flag, a couple of old rifles, some trophies and a poster of President Jiang Zemin and Mao Zedong rousing the Chinese army. Their arms are splayed out in a victory salute from the back of an open army truck. Another poster shows a host of rockets being transported into Beijing, probably celebrating China's entry into the space programme. Either that or they're nuclear weapons.

Hand on my forehead, elbow resting on the table, I avert my gaze from my silent companion. Indeed, there is no *Star Trek* solution to release me from this four-walled embrace. Freedom may be a state of mind, but compared with walking all those wide-open spaces I feel claustrophobically enclosed by the Chinese State. Just like much of the Chinese population, locked inside its gigantic Wall.

Twenty minutes pass . . .

'*Lindao shenme shihou lai?*' I ask the recruit when the leader is coming.

'*Ban ge xiaoshi,*' he replies, pointing to his watch.

Yeah right. He's been saying 'half an hour' for the past two hours.

Two more officials enter the room, and more Chinese tea is poured. The young men smile courteously as my white teacup is refilled.

When is this friendly-faced façade going to end? It has been two hours since I was escorted back to the compound with two loaded rifles to my head.

I eye the refilled teacup suspiciously. Is this their tactic? To play it nice so that I fill up with fluid and when it comes to play hardball I'm desperate to go . . . ?

'*He pijiu ma?*' The recruit looks to me, offering a beer.

'*Bu yong, xie xie.*' I decline the green bottle with a terse smile.

Forty minutes later I hear the sound of squeaking brakes as a green army truck arrives. Soon after, an army general appears. Unlike the fresh-faced army cadets – young boys in dark green uniforms – there's no friendly smile on this man's face. Smoker's wrinkles bank below his cold steely stare. The leader talks quickly to his assistant and then looks back to me with a frown. I rise to greet him, shaking his hand firmly and returning his stare. I've done nothing wrong and am not intimidated even though he neglects to take off his general's hat.

'You're not supposed to be here,' he says shaking his head. 'Big trouble.'

Before I can respond he performs an about-turn and leaves the room.

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I am on my own, four days out from Zhangjiakou, a city of three million about 250 kilometres north-west of Beijing. The evening fog engulfs the mountain peak I am hiking. Spurred by the mini-victory of reclaiming my cap, I continue up the narrow pathway of rocks. I reach the summit, and break through the fog. A three-quarter moon watches silently from above. It illuminates a giant golf ball about ten times my height. I'd spotted it earlier in the day when walking towards the range – then but a tiny white speck 15 kilometres or so ahead.

‘Go there for food and shelter,’ a local peasant had pointed out as we crossed paths. Having no idea where the next village was, it had become my goal.

The Wall runs up a flat grassy hilltop towards a brick house, then makes a right-angled diversion down the other side of the mountain. With minimal food and water, I head hungrily towards an open window. Inside are four Chinese: two in civilian clothing, two in green uniform.

Army. Not good.

The two recruits notice me scuttle past and run out. To my surprise their young faces glow with excitement.

‘*Wo shi xinxilan ren, zou chang cheng – wo keyi he shui ma?*’ I force out my stock Chinese phrase: I’m from New Zealand, am walking your Great Wall, and wonder whether I can have some water before going on my way.

One of the soldiers leaves and returns carrying a pale-red furnace filled with boiling water. I gulp down the last drops from my one-litre green army bottle while passing over my 750-millilitre reserve. It is always such a relief to get resupplied.

‘*Huzhao!*’ The other recruit holds out his hand, requesting my passport.

I obediently show it to him, feeling uneasy. To get it black-marked or confiscated will be disastrous. It’s my sole sense of identity in this Mainland wilderness. He flicks through the pages as the other recruit fills my bottles. I wait patiently while he reads my three-month tourist visa. He looks up and returns my passport with a nod as ten other soldiers walk past. They, too, approach excitedly. I am told to wait while the leader of this new group conducts a brief talk with his troops just out of hearing. The conference of hushed whispers ends, and the platoon again surrounds me. Their smiles look ominous.

‘*Zou ba.*’ Come with us.

We march towards the garrison, which is a collection of white concrete buildings. The soldiers are happily chattering amongst themselves, so I relax and resign myself to the experience in store. We walk through the central headquarters past a window

behind which a group of civilians are enjoying a luxurious banquet in the main hall. The table is stacked up with plates of food two, even three, tiers high, and the gathering includes two women. They are laughing and drinking, sharing in a good sense of camaraderie. My stomach belches delightedly at the prospect of being invited as an honorary guest. I am absolutely starving and, after 30 kilometres of walking, this meal is reminiscent of the Last Supper. The soldiers hurry me straight past, my hopes sinking as we enter the garrison.

*It doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white,
So long as it catches the mouse.*

Deng Xiaoping

We enter a cold, grey corridor. It leads to a spartan room, which contains two beds, a desk and some books. Like most things in China, it is small. More soldiers appear at the doorway. They, too, are excited. It is unlikely they have come face to face with a Westerner before. They stare unashamedly, prodding me with expectant eyes. The status of 'main attraction', or perhaps more aptly, 'zoo animal', is the everyday norm on this journey. The curious troops are itching for a performance. I casually unzip my fleece and am tempted to launch into a *haka*. They suck in their breath in anticipation. Alas, I will probably be killed if I attempt such a passionate rendition: they will just have to content themselves with watching me wash.

The gathering of soldiers makes way for a recruit who comes in with a giant enamel cup. It is filled to the brim with hot steaming noodles. Another carries a silver basin of warm water. I take off my grubby white t-shirt, grab the dirty cake of soap offered, and begin scrubbing my upper body. Thirty eyes peer closer. I certainly am not getting my scrotum cleaned this evening.

I look into the mirror provided. My whiskered face is tanned and smeared with desert dust. Although I like my tan, most Chinese avoid the sun because browning denotes the peasant

class; white is more attractive to the Chinese than black. I use the muddying water to clean my pores, and swish my hair back in a rare moment of vanity. It is nice to see my face again after several days without it. It looks older than I had imagined.

Drying off, I escape the cool air, putting on my tight blue thermals and grey polar fleece. I immediately head to the table, pick up the chopsticks and with three swift swipes swallow the entire bowl of noodles.

'Hei oooooohhh!' The recruits applaud, absolutely delighted. What a treat to watch this foreign barbarian so skilfully wield the chopsticks. Their very own travelling circus! I plead with Oliver Twist eyes for seconds, and two more mugs of noodles appear. The crowd hushes as they gather closer to watch the next culinary onslaught.

'Hei ooh!' they again shout in absolute hysterics. I deal to both bowls within ninety seconds, slurping up the dregs, and cheekily ask for a fourth. The boys jump at my request; my body ecstatic with the nutrition it is getting. It is nearly two days since my last proper meal. Yet despite the air of entertainment, China's sketchy human rights record lies at the back of my mind. What is going to happen next?

After dinner I am transported down the same corridor to sleep in another room. It is again white, the same size as the other, with three beds. Some wooden cupboards lie in the corner filled with clothes and there is a more extensively-filled bookshelf. I unpack and stretch out to sleep on a hard mattress as two other soldiers enter to take the other two beds. As the lights are turned off, I realise my first foolish mistake: I have forgotten to ask where the toilet is. To have done so would have given me the knowledge that I could leave the room as I wished. Instead I lie there stiffly, too scared to wake the others. Half an hour later I really need to go to the toilet. This is like living hell. It gets worse.

Lying there in the dark, my ears suddenly prick on full alert. Synchronised footsteps pace down the corridor with the distinct cocking of two rifles. The heavy boots stop outside and the

door handle is jerked down. My heart seizes and a squirt of urine leaks. Yet the door does not budge. I lie there in shock while one of the soldiers gets up drowsily to unlock it. He goes outside with the guards, exchanges some hushed whispers, and comes back a minute later. Nothing comes of it.

The guards remain outside the room all evening. The waft of cheap cigarettes seeps through the door cracks, accompanied by occasional whispers. Four times through the night heavy footsteps approach the room. Each time I lie there frozen, trapped in my cell. Yet no one comes in.

No matter how much cats fight, there always seem to be plenty of kittens.

Abraham Lincoln

Morning comes. I am up immediately.

‘*Cesuo zai nali?*’ I ask the two soldiers. They point down the corridor. I head outside and down some steps to a concrete landing where the toilet is situated. The Wall trails down the mountainside 150 metres further along a gravel road. I exuberantly relieve myself, then mark out a potential escape route while returning to the room to repack. Just as I am set to leave, two soldiers enter with a breakfast of eggs and more noodles.

‘*Chi fan!*’ they insist, showing me to my seat. I eat quickly, but just before I finish they refill my plate. My water glass is also filled every time it approaches half-empty. They keep on doing this.

An hour later, packed and having overeaten, there is no further excuse for the soldiers to keep me inside. I shoulder my pack.

‘*Wo yao zou yinwei taiyang tai re le. Wo jintian yao zou shi gongli.*’ With an urgent smile, I explain that I have to head off immediately because it is going to get above 30 degrees by midday. I want to make a good 10 kilometres before the heat sets in.

‘*Bu xing!*’ the soldier replies. You can’t go.

‘*Weishenma?*’ Why not?

He is beginning to look angry. ‘*Ni yao deng women lindao lai.*’ You must wait. Our leader is coming.

I ignore his protests and turn to leave, but he grabs my wrist. I desperately shrug him off, my body quivering in shock. I take a deep breath and stare back stiffly at the recruit, slowly backing my way out. He scowls but stands his ground. I sense he can’t keep me here against my will.

I make my way into the corridor, turn around and nervously walk outside the barracks. The recruits follow at a distance. I head down the steps towards the toilets. Halfway down, more soldiers come out.

‘You can’t leave, you have to wait for our leader.’

Fear-stricken, I force another smile, one of feigned incomprehension, and keep on walking. As much as their leader must be a respectable guy and all – covered head-to-toe in honorary stars and battlefield stripes – I have absolutely no desire to meet him.

Walking past the toilet, I can sense the whole garrison’s eyes on me. I stumble down the rocky path, my limbs malfunctioning with fear. I regain my footing but dare not look back. The scene behind is clear in my mind. A pack of Chinese hounds, saliva drooling, hungrily awaiting release from their wrought-iron leashes.

Just get out of here, Nath. Get back to the relative safety of the Wall. I look out anxiously towards the serenity of the Great Wall traversing the next two ranges. The gravel path leads to a crossing over the Wall, which will enable me to slip out of view. I reach the top of the 8-foot barrier, turning around to give a cheerfully composed wave. They all stand at the top of the hill, watching. Although I want out of here, I feel strangely incomplete for leaving filled with fear, not getting the army’s blessing for my journey. It is too late for that now.

I take the path across the Wall, and once out of view sprint down the mountainside with all the speed I can muster. A

scream emanates from the garrison above, a piercing Chinese war cry that shakes my soul to a state of trembling. The pursuit is on . . .

Here I am, twenty-six years old, alone, with a 20-kilogram pack, walking through China and being chased along the Wall by the Chinese army. Fuck. Realising the futility of attempting to out-run the military, I slow to a walk lest I be seen running from the garrison.

Three soldiers appear on the mountain rise.

‘Stop where you are!’ they scream.

I walk on, again feigning incomprehension, but freeze when they shout with added intensity and run towards me with their rifles.

‘If you were in New Zealand, you could just go and walk as you please.’ I tremble. ‘Please let me walk, I just want to enjoy your Great Wall.’ Tears blur my vision.

The three recruits flank me with their rifles but look uncertain what to do next. They are young boys, probably drafted from some remote village. I stand watching their minds gradually tick over as they simultaneously decide to aim their rifles at my head. I sit down, resigned and dejected.

How on earth did I get myself into this crazy situation?

Best I take you back, right to the very beginning . . .