

For all we know, we'll never meet again...

by Mario Perez

The traffic imperceptibly nudges forward, like the minute hand of a clock, along the curve of the street surrounding the wall of Xi'an. A litany of honks litters the air. Tails of black smoke from their exhaust trickle upwards into the smog-filled sky, looking as if it might rain to the untrained eye, but in China almost every sky is screened like dust on a window. Marcus once showed his students pictures of Chicago, and they were baffled by the clean crisp blueness of the sky in the photos. A small taxi cart powered by a motorcycle hums between the cracks of the cars, bumping along into the oncoming traffic looking for a new fare. Jamie puffs at a cigarette he bummed off a Chinese man who was missing two front teeth and whose face seemed blackened by ash. Crouched low, balancing on his heels, Jamie relaxes, trying to wake himself up. They stay at a hostel across the street. Last night, after seeing the Terracotta Warriors, they stumbled into the bar in the basement and chugged enough beers to down a bear. They wanted to make the most out of their last day here, deciding to ride the wall before hopping on the train to Hong Kong. A line of stores peel away from them down the long block, with numerous people bunched up on the sidewalk sweating and smiling, their heads craning to see all the sights. Jamie and his new Chinese friend exchange a few last words before he tosses his cig into the street. A double decker bus barrels right over it making the flame pop before it dies out.

The Alright Wall of China—aptly named by Marcus—hovers 39 feet from the ground. It is made of an ochre brick, having been rebuilt numerous times, and being once the vibrant heart of China, now just a fragment afterthought of what ancient China may have looked like some thousands of years ago. Red flags whip north as the wind cuts across the wall. The wall

stretches across more of the gloomy sky as they get closer. A forest of tourists converge at the entrance, some gripping maps in one hand and with camera's dangling from their necks, while others have matching baseball caps marching with the movement of the guide lifting alternative colored flags through the mass of people. Amongst the bustling crowds Marcus notices Jillian Jones, an Australian ESL teacher he'd met the night before, waiting. She brushes the midnight dress flowing lightly with the gust, her milky skin glimmers like the moon, and those eyes, jade like the bracelet kissing her left wrist. A sharp elbow jabs Marcus's side. Jamie noticed her too, grinning, rolling his eyes her way. Jillian doesn't notice them till they're within arm's length.

The wall's wide enough for two cars to drive on. There are numerous temples placed along the stone trail, each four stories high, red and black, and with curved roofs at every floor. Marcus peeks just over the right side of the wall, noticing the water from the moat swaying soundlessly, while the cars from the road above it roar. Jamie still lumbers along, clutching his chest in agony, and wiping the sweat from his eyes. Jillian hasn't said much since they've met up, being content in silence. Each word she says seems picked tirelessly. Sometimes she'll only give a one word answer and let the pause fill the void. Marcus's father is like that too.

They reach the bike vendor and purchase three. They've got two hours to ride around and back before they'll need to pay extra. Jamie is already cursing under his breath, rubbing his legs to remind his muscles they'll need to work. Jillian crooks her arms to tie her hair back, grinning shyly, as if no one was watching her. Jillian's cheeks are flushed like red suns. Marcus steals a glance from her before her eyes flee forward along with her body. Marcus trails behind her with Jamie huffing along behind him. The wall has humps that lurch upward then spiral down. Apartment buildings flow by like distant thoughts, flickering clotheslines, bright red Chinese characters, porches with a few rocking chairs nodding with the wind, and chimes over their wooden door frames. Lines of tress

vibrantly zoom off their right, even though the sky still lowly glimmers a dull grey. They dance between other foreigners gawking at different structures along the wall or looking down at the constant movement of the people down below. They stop and take pictures of a few of the spectacles; the guard posts crumbling and teeming with discarded garbage, old large bells that could've served as sirens for incoming enemy's, and statues of soldiers and generals of times passed. They're not as much interested in the small trinkets of Chinese history as much as they are of the landscape sprawled out before them.

Jillian speeds across the stone wall, the hem of her dress flaps violently behind her. Sometimes she stands with her back fully erect letting perpetual motion guide her down a bend with her sun blonde locks brightening the dreary sky, or she lurches her back like a cat with her feet spinning cartoon-like under her. Marcus hasn't lost sight of her, huffing along her shadow, trying to stay within her orbit. He's lost track of Jamie, whose still wincing along. Jillian's figure grows as Marcus catches up with her. Jillian shots a smile his way, weaving passed a couple, and hoping over a bump. Marcus crosses just behind her rear wheel before she slides to a stop, leaving a dense black skid mark along the floor.

Marcus brakes hard, sputtering ahead of her, turning to chide her before noticing the pensive stare intensely peering away from him. Jillian's hands are still clung to the handle bars, with the bike teetering to the left. Jillian drags it with her off to the right side of the wall to get a better view.

A thick fog of black smoke slithers into the musty air. In the middle of a busy intersection a car is engulfed by a fierce fire flickering along the front engine. It bubbles along the windshield causing it to explode and teethes through the front seat. The traffic merely flows around it, seemingly ignorant of the chaos a few steps away from their vehicle. There is no sound besides the raging flame hissing and the occasional horn directed towards a car that dwindles too long trying to get a brief look at what's happening. The fire eventually devours the whole car, as the sharp oranges and reds

whip upwards like a bonfire. The sky seems to grow darker, with no familiar siren echoing in the background, rushing to help.

In China, the best way to get around is on buses. You can find a bus going anywhere for a decent price. Along the dirt roads, when Marcus was heading back to his village at night, he noticed huge bonfires burning solemnly along particular patches near the farmlands. They'd light up the area like torches through an old dusty castle. He found out that farmer's burn their garbage in giant mounds at night. Their fire would flicker off the trees and flutter into the misty blue midnight. Every time he saw them floating over the blackness of the ground, he wondered if the people knew what that did to their sky. He wonders if they've ever thought about why there are no stars visible in some of the most remote villages. They probably know, and just don't care. Sometimes people are just too stubborn to listen to their common sense.

A siren cries faintly under the ravaging fire still swirling with the moving traffic. Other wall-walkers' have noticed it and are transfixed by it. Their faces sweat intensely, from the heat of the flame, edging towards it like moths bumping into a window. Marcus feels the cold embrace of Jillian's hand as it trickles off the stone onto his. It sends a jolt to his brain igniting a memory from last night. They've just come from a restaurant and were on a packed bus heading to a bar. Jamie was nudged up against a small Chinese man with armpit hair trickling out far enough to cut with scissors. Marcus was near Jillian, stationed a few heads away from Jamie, trying to stay afloat, crunched between numerous sweaty Chinese people. A seat opened up next to Marcus, which he offered to Jillian, who seemed exhausted from their last outing. They just met a few hours ago, through other friends of Jamie's. Marcus was enthralled with her the second he saw her. Her eyes were the first thing he noticed, completely ravished by their emerald oval endlessness. Marcus tried every conversational technique he had to yank information out of her, getting to know her bit by bit, but not seeming to get too deep. This drew him more to her, since he never met a girl whom contained within her a wall of silence that can only

be poked and peeked through, but never tore down completely. Marcus felt his heart thumping along with the bumps in the road, wanting to prompt another conversation out of her, especially since they were alone at that moment. His lower lip fluttered like a ruder, he never felt so nervous in his life. Then, it all collapsed off his shoulders, all by the simple act of Jillian lightly grasping his hand. Marcus watched the flickering torches swing by outside the bus as though he was on a merry-go-round. His eyes never deviated from shoulder height. He let the moment exist among those strangers, wedged between their warmth, but only feeling the heat expelling from her heart.

Jamie snaps him back to reality, craning his head passed them to see the fire. Firefighters were spewing a hose onto the car causing the fire to curl away sibilantly. Marcus notices some moisture deep within Jillian's eyes as the fire dies out and the smoke bubbles to a milky fog. Tiny pecks of water patter onto their noses and arms. All the watchers start to wan in opposite directions. Jamie nudges Marcus playfully and hurries to his bike. Marcus waits for Jillian to wean away from the accident and lift her bike upright. Before she rides off, she offers Marcus an invisible smile. When she smiles, sometimes, she seems to smile with her whole face. A smile that tells him she wants that wall to be broken, she wants to escape the security she's developed all her life. Jamie and Jillian go off ahead of Marcus, who peeks back at the flame, but all he sees is a smooth line of cars zooming in all directions. Not a trace of the fire is left. How quickly it has been brushed over and forgotten. It only rests in their minds now; now, it only sleeps in their hearts.

