2025 NEW BEGINNINGS

HENDERSON LIBRARIES

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101 Days

by Zachary Parker

For thirteen years, I had lived in the bustling, neon-lit cities and ancient, silent villages of China. My life there was a tapestry woven with threads of both profound joy and subtle challenges. From teaching English in the sprawling metropolis of Shanghai to exploring the serene landscapes of Guilin, I had immersed myself in a culture so different from my own that it felt like living in a parallel universe. Each day was an adventure, a lesson in adaptability, patience, and the art of communication beyond words.

I had watched China evolve, its rapid modernization a living, breathing entity, shaping and reshaping the urban skyline and the minds of its people. I made friends, built a career, fallen in love, and had two kids of my own. But as much as China had become a part of me, an undercurrent of longing for my homeland, the United States, never ceased. The decision to return home was the culmination of years of contemplation and an inner yearning for the familiar.

The day I decided to leave, the Guangzhou International Airport was my gateway to a new chapter. I packed my life into suitcases, filled with mementos, and the myriad flavors of China. The airport was a hive of activity, the usual cacophony of announcements, farewells, and the clack of luggage wheels. With my passport in hand, I approached the check-in counter, the excitement of returning home mingling with a bittersweet farewell to a country that had become my second home.

But as I moved through the security gates, my journey took an unexpected detour. Without any explanation, officers in uniform approached me. Their faces were

stern. Before I could comprehend what was happening, I was escorted away from the bustling crowd. No reason was given, no charges explained; just the cold, hard reality of metal handcuffs and the echo of my steps down a stark, unyielding corridor.

The airport faded into a distant memory as I was ushered into the unknown, my return home turned into a nightmarish pause. The beginning of what would be 101 days in a Chinese jail, a period marked by confusion, fear, and the desperate hope for clarity, had just begun.

Inside the confines of my new, grim reality, the detention cell was my world, a stark contrast to the life I had known outside. It was approximately 200 square feet, a cramped space where twenty of us were expected to live, sleep, and exist. The sleeping arrangement was a row of eight wooden beds, devoid of mattresses, pushed so close together that personal space was a luxury none of us could afford. These beds were our only refuge from the hard concrete floor, but they offered little comfort.

I never saw the light of day; the cell had no windows, only a bright light that never seemed to turn off, creating a perpetual daylight. There was no leaving this cell, no taste of fresh air or sunshine, no escape from the oppressive atmosphere that seemed to press down on us from all sides. Our uniform was a light blue shirt and pants with our inmate number on it. Mine was 0101.

The toilet was nothing more than a hole in the ground, a reminder of our basic, stripped-down existence. On one wall, there were two small holes – one for showering and one for drinking water. Hot water was a rare commodity, available only for one

hour each day at shower time, making the act of cleaning oneself a hurried, almost ritualistic dance to ensure some warmth in the otherwise cold environment.

Our diet was monotonous and barely sustaining. Every day, the meals consisted of eggs and cabbage, varying only in their preparation but never in their essence. This diet, combined with the stress and inactivity, led to a significant weight loss; I shed twenty pounds, my body reflecting the harshness of my surroundings.

Survival in such conditions pushed me to desperate measures. Food was scarce, and hunger was a constant companion. I learned to steal extra portions from the food trays when the guards were less vigilant, a small act of defiance and survival in a place where every advantage mattered.

Communication with the outside world was forbidden. I managed to steal a pen and paper, precious contraband in this environment. With these, I wrote notes to my wife, including her phone number in China, imploring my cellmates to take them when they were released. I would press these notes into the hands of those about to leave, hoping against hope that my messages would reach her.

The daily routine in the cell was both monotonous and grueling. Each day, we were allowed to sit criss-cross on the top of our beds for a mere 15 minutes. This was followed by another 15 minutes where we had to sit at attention on the floor, our backs straight, eyes forward, no leaning on the walls, while a small, crackly TV in the corner played endless loops of communist Chinese propaganda. The messages were clear, the intent to indoctrinate or perhaps just to occupy our minds with something other than our own despair.

One day, curiosity or perhaps desperation led me to look under my bed, where I discovered writings in English, scribbled by an African man who had endured over

250 days in this same cell. His words spoke of hope, frustration, and the longing for freedom. As the hours bled into days, my thoughts were consumed with questions about when I would be allowed to return home, and why I was there in the first place, with no answers forthcoming.

In this jail, where contact with family was forbidden, these notes were my lifeline, my only way to bridge the gap between my incarceration and the life that awaited me outside. Each note was a testament to my will to survive, to endure, and to one day walk free again.

The interrogations were sporadic but intense. A few times, I was taken from the cell to a small, windowless room where the communist police grilled me with questions about my life in China, my job, my contacts, and my intentions. These sessions left me with the unsettling realization that I was under some sort of investigation. As days turned into weeks and weeks into months, the routine became a blur of sameness, yet each day brought the faint whisper of hope that today might be different.

Weekends were the hardest to bear; no one was ever released on those days, making them feel like an endless stretch of despair. But the weekdays held a sliver of hope - the possibility of freedom or at least some news. Without this hope, the mental toll would have been unbearable. Amidst this bleakness, there was one small solace: a painting on the wall above my bed. It depicted the scenic Guilin mountains, with a solitary birch tree where two little birds perched gracefully on the branches. I slept under the watchful gaze of these birds for over a hundred nights. They became my silent guardians offering me a comforting connection to a life outside these walls.

Around the seventy-fifth day of my confinement, the Chinese police returned, their faces impassive, to deliver the news that I was officially being charged with espionage. This was the moment fear truly set in, a cold dread that crept up my spine. The implications were severe, and my mind raced with the possible outcomes. Desperation to communicate with the outside world intensified; I tried to sneak more letters out not knowing if they would reach my wife or simply vanish into the void.

It was at this point I made the heart-wrenching decision to urge my family to leave for the United States without me. China had become too dangerous, and the well-being of my children was paramount.

I knew I was not a spy; I had nothing to hide, yet the very notion of being charged with such a crime was terrifying. The fear was not just for myself but for how this might affect my family. I hoped they weren't too worried, that they could find some semblance of peace knowing I was at least alive.

Finally, the day arrived when the police returned with what seemed like the end of my ordeal. They informed me that I could go home and instructed me to buy a plane ticket. Relief washed over me like a wave. They escorted me to a locker where all my belongings from the outside world were stored, untouched by time but laden with the promise of freedom. I was allowed to use my phone to book my flight back to the US, the act of purchasing the ticket a tangible step towards my liberation. Back in the cell, I shared the joyous news with my fellow inmates, my temporary friends who had shared in my despair and small victories. My departure was scheduled for the next week, a beacon of hope in the otherwise endless night.

But as the days drew nearer, an uneasy feeling began to settle. The guards, when questioned, seemed oblivious or indifferent to my supposed release. Doubt crept in, gnawing at my newfound hope. The day before I was due to leave, my fears were confirmed. The Chinese police returned, but not with the news I expected. Instead, they told me, with an air of finality, that I was not going anywhere; someone higher up wanted to investigate me further. The words hit me like a physical blow, the crushing weight of continued incarceration settling back onto my shoulders.

This reversal was devastating. The light at the end of the tunnel had been an illusion, and now the darkness seemed even more oppressive. Falling into depression was hard to avoid; the emotional rollercoaster from hope to despair left me drained, questioning everything, including my own sanity. The bonds I had formed with my cellmates, now even more crucial, were all that kept me from completely losing myself to the despair that threatened to engulf me.

On day 96, the Chinese police returned with what seemed like redemption. They told me I could buy another ticket to leave the country. Skepticism was my first reaction, but I followed them back to book my ticket. This time, however, they were very specific; I could only book a flight leaving on a certain day at a certain time, as part of a group deportation involving other expatriates, mostly from the Middle East and Vietnam. The only viable ticket was one with a connection through Istanbul. Despite my doubts, I bought the ticket, holding onto the fragile hope of freedom, just five days away.

When the day arrived, the police came for us at 9pm, ushering us into police cars for the journey to the airport. The atmosphere was charged with a mix of relief and

disbelief. In the car, the first thing we all did was call our loved ones, the sounds of crying and sobbing filling the space with raw emotion. At that moment, I realized the eerie coincidence: my inmate number was 0101, and I had been imprisoned for exactly 101 days. It struck me then that perhaps the two little birds in the painting had been trying to tell me something all along.

At the airport, the reality of my impending freedom began to sink in. I was escorted by the same officer who had interrogated me multiple times, through the bustling airport to the boarding gate. He left me there without ceremony, and I was free to board my flight to Turkey. The sight of a McDonald's in the airport caught my eye, and I went over, not just for the food but for what it represented - a taste of freedom, a symbol of the USA. Eating there felt like the first step back into the world I had known, a world that now seemed both familiar and incredibly distant.

They Come Knocking

by Matthew Stedman

Belinda woke up to the sound of knocking at her front door. The first thing she did was look to her right. The empty side of the bed was yet another instant reminder that her husband was dead. The fact that it had been two years ago didn't matter. It was still her first impulse to look when she woke up each morning and, every time, he wasn't there.

The knock came again. This time she looked at her clock. Three o'clock and change in the a.m. Who could be at her door at this hour? The knock came again and she got out of bed and threw on her robe. The one her dead husband had given her for Christmas five years ago. *Every little thing is a reminder*, she thought as she went downstairs following the knocking.

She was about to just swing the door open when caution rose from the fog of her sleep-addled brain. "Who is it?" she asked the door.

A man's voice from outside, "Can you let us in please? Our car broke down and my phone's not working."

She risked opening the door a crack and saw the silhouette of a large man with two smaller figures to either side of him.

"Sorry to bother you, ma'em. It's just me and my boys." From the height, the kids looked about eight and ten years old but she could only see their shapes. She had thought the porch light was supposed to come on automatically, but they also could be flipped on from the panel next to her, so she reached and switched.

When the light came on, she saw only the smaller of the kids clearly because she happened to be facing in his direction. His skin and clothes were grey, his hair, jet black as were his eyes, pure black with no whites. She saw his grey lips lift in a smile revealing upside down

picket-fence teeth. She gasped and shoved on the door with the sudden bloom of survival instinct. The door slammed shut, but in that split second the grey child lunged with a black-clawed hand, nearly reaching the frame before the gap closed.

Belinda leaned against the door and turned the dead bolt as her breath hitched and her heart pounded. Not quite believing what she'd just seen.

More pounding at the door. The doorknob jiggled in her hands.

"Let us in! Let us in!" one of the children called in a high sing-song voice.

"My car broke down! Please won't you just let us in?" The man's voice did not sound like normal speech anymore. There was a guttural undertone as if the words were spoken through a layer of mucus. "Just let us in for a moment. Pleeeease…" Giggles from the kids. "Oh, pretty please with a cherry on top, won't you just let us innnnn!" Exaggerated fake sobbing, and the tittering of his horde.

Belinda remembered the backdoor. Was it even locked? She turned and charged across the foyer and through the kitchen. There was a utility room beyond and then the door, but she'd forgotten the step leading into the room and her bare foot slammed against it. She sprawled onto her knees, barking them up as her shoulder struck the back door. She ignored the pain and focused on the lock, or rather the *unlock*, as she now saw. Her fingers, slippery from the cold sweat of her terror fumbled on the latch. She could have counted the seconds to find a firm grip, then the lock turned and not an instant before the doorknob started jiggling.

She backed away, out of the utility room and into the kitchen and the bay window where the older child hung onto the flat pane like a gecko in a terrarium, white palms and flat feet stuck firmly as he bared his fangs at her.

Belinda drew the massive curtain, but that helped little since his silhouette could still be seen as if painted there. She watched it scuttle sideways across the curtain until it was out of sight, if not out of mind.

A heavy fist pounded on the front door. “Let us in, you bitch!” the now completely inhuman voice bellowed. As she looked back in that direction she caught sight of the wall phone right next to her. She snatched it up, held it to her ear and punched nine then one-

“Let us in, Let us in!” a childish voice said into her ear, then the faraway giggle of another child in the background. “By the hair on your chinny-chin-chin!” More giggles.

With a panicked shriek she tossed the receiver away. It rebounded on the line and smacked back against the kitchen wall.

Shotgun! Was her next thought. Dan had one, she knew, *Where was it?* She remembered putting it gingerly in the closet of his study. She’d never liked the thing, though her opinion of it had sure changed now. She charged up the stairs and threw open the study door, which she had been hesitant to step into ever since his death. She bolted for the closet door, which was right next to the window-

“Let us in!” A high voice chirped from her left. She turned to see the smaller boy’s head drop out of view. Then the older child’s head popped up. The bottom of the window was at least twelve feet above the lawn below. “Let us in!” he hissed, before dropping out of sight. The younger child’s face rose up a moment later. “Let us in!” high and chipper, then out of sight once more.

She drew the curtains and turned back to the closet. *The gun! The gun!*

She found it on the floor behind the framed Pittsburgh Steelers posters. The ammo boxes were right next to it. She spent much more time than she wanted figuring out how to load the

weapon. The entire time she could hear the man pounding at the front door, so that she was at least reminded of where he was. She hoped it wasn't a distraction while the children were trying to find some silent way into the house.

She breathed a sigh of relief once the cartridges slipped inside and she was able to pump a round into the chamber. If the children had gotten in, at least she was ready now. She snuck out the door and headed downstairs. The front door was straight across the foyer, the man still pounding away at it. Her eyes darted to the various doorways to the side. She peeked into the kitchen and saw the figure of the larger child behind the curtain at the bay window again. This time he appeared to be fiddling at the corner, probably trying to jimmy it open. She pointed the gun at it. She knew the blast would open the window for all of them. *Let them come*. There would at least be one less. She had this one dead to rights.

The figure darted out of frame. *Damn it!*

High laughter behind her. The younger child. She spun around just in time to see the grinning boy dart away from outside the dining room window. Laughter came all around her now. It sounded as though they had somehow gotten inside, even though she'd seen them outside the windows just moments before. She spun about, twirling like a ballerina as she stalked through the foyer. And over the laughter the knocking. The ever. Present. Knocking. *Shut up! Just shut the hell up!*

Then everything was silent, and she took back that thought. The silence was worse because now she didn't know *where* they were. She stared down the hallway, training the gun at one doorway, then the next, then the next-

The knock came from right behind her. She hadn't realized she'd returned to the front door. "Can you let us in, please? Our car broke down and my phone's not working." The

children could be anywhere, but their leader was right there. Once he was gone she hoped it would scare off the others.

She opened the door just enough to see the figure. A man in silhouette, a child at each side. She opened the door just enough to get the barrel of the shotgun through. She pointed it right at the man's face and pulled the trigger.

The recoil pushed her back, but not far enough she couldn't reach the door and slam it shut, then she collapsed against it, sobbing. She didn't know what she expected to happen next but it wasn't the high piercing howls and the young voice that screamed "Dadeeeeeeee!"

Something else was off. The porch light. After she'd flicked it on and saw them for the first time, she hadn't flicked it back off again. Yet they were in darkness when she'd opened the door just now *Why?*

A child's wails that hurt her heart could be heard outside. She had to see. Had to see the results of what she'd just done.

She turned on the porch light and cracked open the door once more. A man lay on her porch. Below the nose there wasn't much left that could be recognized as a face, but the eyes remained. They were not pure black, but rolled-up white with glazed blue pupils.

The tear-sodden eyes of the children kneeling on either side of him were not black either.

*

Some time later and two thousand miles away Desmond stepped out of his stalled car. He raised his dead cellphone into the air as if that would bring some reception. "Damn it," he muttered.

"Looks like we'll have to walk," his girlfriend, Vanessa, said.

"Walk where? It's the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night!" He said. They'd been pushing to get to his parent's house for the holiday. It would be their first time meeting Vanessa.

"There was a house back there about half a mile away," she said as she pushed up her glasses, the ones with the pointed corners she'd put on after taking her contacts off at the rest stop. Desmond said they made her look like a "sexy librarian." She thought he was joking but he wasn't. "Surely if we just went over there and knocked they'd let us use their phone," she said. "Surely."

*

At that exact moment, about half a mile away, Carl opened his front door a crack. He saw the darkened figures of a man and a woman at his front door. He was halfway between still drunk and hung over and was already wondering if this was some kind of government trick to take his guns away. *Let them try.* "Will you let us in?" the woman said. "Our car broke down and our cellphone doesn't work."

Carl couldn't see her face, only the shape of the pointed rims of her glasses, like something one of those avocado-toast-eating Antifas would wear. Also, there was something off about her voice, like she had a throat full of mucus.

He reached for the porch light switch so he could see them better.

Broken Social Code

by Shelby Arr

(A kind of Autism awareness)

It’s like…

a step too close into
personal space.

Movements so— kinetic,
abrupt, jolting,

nimble, full of strength.

Helicopter parenting—
an animal,

lion cub,
amphibian,

my little newt.

So many nights spent fixated on the divergence.

How to nurture so unique a soul?

This beautifully brilliant brain,
wired so strange,

so specific.

A pioneer of original thought & my role—
to nurture the kindness.

To teach the empathy—

How lucky it is that I breathe a language of love.

When I am filled with fear and its

projections of misunderstanding,

eyes full of judgement, casting blame.

I will remember advocation is the skill I refine,

for my little love,

my sweet son,

One day at a time.