



our china SYNDROME

In a hospital waiting room, John Hawkins suddenly discovers a link between democracy, Humphrey B. Bear and the silence behind the Great Wall of China.

I / m sitting in the emergency room of Royal Melbourne Children's Hospital. My daughter, Amelia, is fast asleep in my arms. Normally she's boisterous with joy, attacking the hallway at home like some wild banshee on horseback. But now she lays listless and hot, the smell of her latest upchucking rising from the synthetic fur of the Humphrey B. Bear doll she clutches.

I'm trying not to look up, because when I do there's a boy Amelia's age happily riding a plastic tricycle in front of me. The whole right side of his face is one huge pizza scab. Looking at him circling, I can't help

but think of the two-faced Roman god Janus. I'm ashamed for trying to read the boy's parents, who are sitting some distance from each other, their separate faces averted and stone still.

Beyond them, the emergency room opens like an airport terminus, with parents queuing at the registrar's counter, children in tow – some squalling or kicking, others, like Amelia, scarily silent. We've been waiting over an hour, put on a segmented waiting list that prioritises emergencies the way an airline divides its seats by class. Fortunately, our wait suggests that Amelia has an economy-class illness. Baby Janus is no doubt business-class, downgraded

from what must have been a first-class emergency just days before.

On the telly there's a news report on China's response to NATO's bombing of their Belgrade embassy, and I'm straining to follow it. But Megan, the woman sitting two seats away, has a motor mouth and won't hear of it. Anxiety, I suppose. Her nine-year-old boy sits vacantly beside her, his left arm in a sling, his right hand shovelling french fries into his mouth from a McDonald's bag she holds for him.

Megan's from South Africa. She and her professor husband migrated to Oz in 1990, the year Nelson Mandela was released from prison after 27 years.



a lot of the claptrap I hear,' she answers. 'Some people seem to think we should all be striving to live together in happy Christian brotherhood.'

She says this with such pique that I'm physically startled. Her son seems deaf to it, as he munches down the fries. I'm thinking, broken arms may be the least of his worries growing up. I'm normally garrulous, but all I want to do now is quietly absorb my daughter's pain by psychical osmosis.

On the telly, images of student protesters in a regimented rage outside the American embassy in Beijing. China is calling for an immediate halt to the NATO 'aggression' in Serbia, a talking head says. China calls the embassy bombing deliberate. President Clinton says it was a 'tragic accident', and blames it on poorly updated CIA records. China is talking about catastrophic consequences. The US responds that China is overreacting for political advantage.

Amelia shifts in my arms slightly but stays asleep. A nurse is leading little Janus away, his parents shuffling behind like tattered unstitched shadows from Never Never Land. The nurse coos something comforting to the child, and he looks up and gives her his half-smile. Out of the corner of my eye I see Megan studying me, building a dossier.

I'm thinking it's ironic that almost exactly 10 years after the bloody Tiananmen Square pro-democracy demonstrations Chinese students are now shouting pro-government slogans. Lots of people like to remember 1989 for the pleasing images of the Velvet Revolution. Pink Floyd jamming at the crumbled remnants of the Berlin Wall. Democracy in action, heady stuff. But the Tiananmen Square massacre on 4 June was the other side of the coin.

Whatever became of that man with a satchel who stared down a column of tanks? Talk about profiles in courage. Wang Weilin was the name attributed to him shortly after, but he hasn't been seen since. And no one seems to have inquired of his whereabouts. This bothers me. His reality buried beneath an image of freedom.

'Do you think they bombed the embassy on purpose?' Megan asks. I think maybe she's trying to pull my chain.

I smirk, and say, 'No, the CIA just bungled it.'

'You're naive,' says Megan. 'Don't you realize it's their 50th anniversary?'

I'm getting frantic. Here I am, waiting interminably in an emergency room with my daughter, trafficking in didactics with some motor-mouthed nutter.

'What? NATO?' I say. 'What does NATO's birthday have to do

with the bombing of an embassy?'

'No, no, not NATO. China,' she says. 'China is celebrating its 50th year of communism. Fifty years. But that's nothing, because China hasn't changed in its essentials in 2500 years, and probably never will.'

'Oh, come on, of course China is changing. What about Tiananmen Square? That's a start. No one thought the Berlin Wall would ever fall either, but it's key chains now.'

Megan snorts. 'The Berlin Wall? Let me tell you about walls. The only wall in this whole world that matters is the Great Wall. 2400 kilometres long. It would stretch from Melbourne to Brisbane. The largest structure ever built by human hands. Beside it, said Voltaire, "the pyramids of Egypt are only puerile and useless masses". It was built to keep out Attila and the Huns. And when the Huns couldn't get past it, they changed direction and set their sights on Europe. Rome fell, and Western civilisation entered the Dark Age, because China built the wall.'

I'm stunned, and barely squeak out, 'But what does that have to do with the bombing of the embassy?'

'Don't you see?' she says. 'The Americans, with their store-bought freedom this and freedom that, are little more than barbarians to the Chinese. Latter-day Huns trying to crack the Wall. Bombing the embassy was a loud Yank knock on the door. But they won't get in, and

position, like Santa Claus, or some boffin Buddha. Thanks to Megan, I find myself thinking about Voltaire. Observing the human condition, he wrote, 'If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.' But looking over at the candy-coloured clown-Christ of capitalism, I'm wondering if Ronald is the best we can do.

I think again of Wang Weilin. What became of him? Was he wasting away in some Manchurian provincial prison sweat shop now – maybe handing piecework on to the tank driver who had dared to blink?

'Here you go,' says the girl.

I pay for the juice and we make our way back toward the emergency room. Sure enough, when we get there Megan is gesturing to us to go to the registrar's desk.

'They called your name,' her son hollers.

After a hurried exchange with a harried nurse we're shown into another room, full of curtained exam cubicles, and told to wait for the doctor. He comes presently, a tall Brit with coffee nerves. He examines Amelia and declares she has a severe ear infection. 'Looks like she's picked up a wog,' he says. He gives me a prescription for antibiotics, says 'good luck', and hurries toward another cubicle.

Back in the emergency room, I carry Amelia toward the telephone bank and pick up the direct line to a

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when they can't get in they'll destroy themselves, because this time the Huns and Rome are one and the same.'

I'm slack-jawed and astonished by so much paranoia and hatred. Her spontaneous combustion seems to have burned Megan out, and for the first time in more than an hour she's truly quiet. I look down at Amelia and she's mouthing 'baw-baw.'

'She's telling you she's thirsty,' says Megan. 'She wants her bottle.'

It's then that I realize in my haste to get Amelia to the hospital I've forgotten to bring a bottle.

'There's a McDonald's on the other side of the hospital,' says Megan's son. 'I can show you.'

He leads us there, to the golden arches, the B.F. Skinner lighting, the neon fixtures, the sizzle of meat and warm smell of fries. We stand in line.

To one side of the counter is a 'life-size' plastic effigy of Ronald McDonald, moulded into a seated

taxi company. As I'm doing so, Humphrey B. Bear tumbles out of Amelia's arms to the floor. I stoop and pick it up. For some reason, I look at the label. Made in China.

There's no real avoiding Chinese goods. If you're a capitalist manufacturer, China's cheap labour is a welcome margin booster. If you're a consumer, you buy what you can afford. But there's a compromise of values here. For all I know, Wang Weilin stitched together the jeans I'm wearing. Fine for me to cry 'multiculturalism!' and 'freedom!', but what about Wang?

'Daddy,' my daughter says. 'Daddy. Humphrey. Mine.'

I stuff the doll back in Amelia's arms and we wait for the cab to come. One day I will explain walls to her – and Voltaire's gardens, too, if I don't lose my shadow first in the dark valley between my growing doubts and receding desires. ▲

I remember Mandela's world-wide tour. I went to one rally. Quarter of a million people. Skateboards. Tie-dyed T-shirts. A sign which read: END APART-HATE NOW! Cumulus clouds of cannabis. 'No Woman No Cry' sinuating from the loudspeakers.

Then Mandela jaunting onstage, fists dancing to Marley, smiling as people stood and roared and the music changed to 'One Love'. And the hush as he spoke of courage, hope and freedom.

But that's not what Megan's going on about. 'You had people vastly different from one another by virtue of culture, religion, language, economic levels and race, yet the whole world expected them to live harmoniously together overnight,' she sighs bitterly. 'But the whites lost heavily. Dispossessed, really. That's the whole problem with this so-called multiculturalism.' She looks at me for a second and adds, 'I suppose you're a multiculturalist?'

I really just want to hear the China report, but I don't want to be rude. 'Well, look, to tell you the truth,' I say. 'I've never much understood the suffixal '-ist'. After all, there's really nothing to believe about it. The fact is the world's made up of many cultures. Mostly it's just the same old story of learning to tolerate people you may not particularly like or understand.'

'Well that's an improvement over