

The Wall

"Hasn't he died yet?" Jay said, looking at himself in the mirror holding the telephone.

"That's not funny."

"Yes it is," he said, grinning. That was good shit, he thought, his feet shuffling on the floor with excess energy.

"No, he's not dead yet, close to it."

"You're doing a great job, sis. Wish someone would look out for me."

"I do."

"Yeah..." this conversation was getting old, "I've gotta go."

"Yeah, wouldn't want to keep you from your occupation."

"Very funny, Penny."

"Well, I think you should come and see him soon."

"No probs, anything for you," he said, magnanimously, "thanks for letting me know." He chuckled at how normal he sounded, like a respectable middle class man.

"I thought you'd want to know, the doctors have said the tumour has returned and he could die anytime."

"Okay, I get the picture." His smile died. "I'll come over tomorrow, you know, things to do, men to see."

"Everything's a joke with you, isn't it? You really shit me sometimes."

"I know. I'll see you tomorrow, about two, okay?"

"Sure."

Jay locked his housing commission unit and made his way down the stairwell. He stepped onto Darlinghurst Road. Sweet garlic aromas from the Indian and Vietnamese restaurants permeated the cool evening air. He walked along the uneven concrete, passing the towering terrace houses with worn green paint and wrought iron twisting along balconies only big enough for one or two people.

Some of his friend's houses still had floors layered with dirt, and grime soaked walls, like in convict times it seemed to him, poky fortresses with small windows and tiny backyard enclosures. Still, he loved it. This was his home; comforting. Its filth suited him; like a pig enjoying thick rolls of mud on his skin, it made him feel less alone. He made his way up the steep hill to the The Wall where all his mates were.

He hoped Tamara would be there tonight, the shy 18 year old chick that turned up with the Jesus van. She was a great distraction from all this shit, especially now. She was so naïve, in one way, and removed from his world, the very fact she existed made him feel better about his life. Her shock at what goes on in his life made him wonder if things could be different, better one day, maybe.

Jay danced around the edges of the park as his friends watched from their usual wooden bench, some of them high on heroin or speed, some stoned or drunk. He couldn't stay still like them. He would take people's jumpers or bags and tease them; he enjoyed it, it passed the time. He didn't want to be passive and wait in squalor to be screwed; literally.

"Hey, has she come yet?" he called to Jimbo who was urinating on a tree.

"That Jesus girl?"

"Yep."

"Yeah, they came half an hour ago."

Jay kicked the garden wall, "shit!" he yelled, the other men ignored him as he paced backward and forwards in front of them.

Heroin accompanied him through the evening; its white streak rushing rapidly into his system and providing his necessary oblivion. His closest friend, heroin was his rock, a constant in his life and reliable.

Through his shaky vision and underneath a dense fur coat of euphoria and mental dullness, he could see strangers' hands and bodies and acts that, thanks to his narcotic friend, he blurred into unreality. He awoke a little to find himself passed out in front of his own blue paint-peeled door. His mind was black. Nothing new in that and anyway, he liked it this way. Letting himself inside his lifeless apartment, he didn't bother to turn on a light, his body collapsed into an unconsciousness that lasted most of the following day.

When Jay awoke his face was adhered to his brown cushion and he realised he had probably missed visiting hours at the hospital.

"Fuckin' Dad. He won't even give a shit anyway."

Jay eventually arrived at St Vincent De Paul Hospital and after explaining he wasn't a normal visitor but a son, he was directed to the 15th floor, bed 42a. As he walked in he saw his sister leaning over his father. Images of his mother flashed before him in her soft blue pastel blouse and white flowing skirt, her wavy light brown hair and sharp nose. He could hardly breathe.

His father's mouth fell open as he saw Jay for the first time in five years. His father's eyes darted all over Jay's face and body like a doctor inspecting a patient's decline. Red blotchy craters and sores infested Jay's face, his eyes were irritated and red and his long black hair knotted in rebellion around his face.

Yellow skin, sunken eyes and an enlarged pock-filled nose showed the effects of his father's liver cancer. You don't look so scary now; Jay smiled at the thought, as memories of his father's threatening features over his bed at night dissolved.

"Jay."

"Yep, tis me."

Jay embraced Penny; she raised her arms, briefly and limply, and patted his back.

"How are you old man?" He moved nearer to the bed.

"Not great." His father didn't smile.

"I came to give you back something."

"What?"

"This rock, you gave it to me when I was ten. You said, 'you'll have to learn to be tough like this rock', I think I did you proud." He put the rock onto his father's lap. His father was shocked and awkward as he looked down at its grey jaggedness. He looked up at Jay in bewildered fear; Jay thought he looked like a dog wincing before an owner's scorn.

"Uh."

"I just wanted to thank you for it. I think it was good advice," Jay sniggered.

His father didn't say anything. Jay's fingers rested over his father's gnarly hand and he leant forward. Jay felt his father resist and pull back in an almost frightened manner. He tightened his grip. His father looked down and no longer looked into his eyes. Jay couldn't tell if he was ashamed of himself or of his son? Fuckin' hypocrite, he thought.

"Well, I'm goin'," Jay said to Penny.

She nodded and said, "I'll see you out."

"Bye, Dad."

His father nodded and looked like he might say something, but didn't. Jay thought he looked relieved.

As they reached the corridor, Jay said "don't know how you do it."

"Do what?"

"Look after him, after everythin'..."

"That's because you're not me."

"You're right; bet you're glad about that."

She looked down.

"Jay, I'd like to have you over for dinner, you haven't seen the kids for ages now."

Jay looked at Penny; he thought she must be feeling guilty about the fact that it had been a year since he had seen them.

"That'd be good," he said, "what night?"

"Wednesday, about 6:00, okay? Do you want me to pick you up?"

"Yeah that'd be good, usual place?"

"Yep," she said, "that was weird in there, why do you stuff like that?"

"What can I say? I'm my father's son."

Jay could see she was unimpressed.

“Come and see him again though Jay, it does mean something to him.”

“Don't know 'bout that. See you Wednesday, yeah?”

“See you then, take care.”

Penny disappeared back into the room. 'As usual, back at his side. Stupid alcoholic, he brought all of this onto himself,' he muttered. It would've been nice having a female to look after him beyond the age of 12, when his mother died. He could still see her leaning over him, her scent engulfing him as she kissed him goodnight.

It was Penny's choice to be like this with Dad, but Jay couldn't pretend. Maybe she was good at forgetting or maybe she had forgiven him, he didn't know, she never talked about it to him. The lift opened at ground level and Jay walked out onto the street.

Jay got out of Penny's black Saab housed in her immaculate garage. Penny had gone into the house before him to help John with the children. He walked through the garage to the television room and could hear splashing, laughing and water collisions from the bathroom.

Penny's house was warm and clean, with its caramel yellow walls, vibrant abstract paintings, soft white carpet and large windowed rooms overlooking the shimmering expanse of Elizabeth Bay.

He called out into the hallway and naked limbs came streaking out into the hall.

“Uncle Jay,” Peter yelled and ran and embraced him. Jay picked him up.

Lucy came around the corner wrapped in a towel.

“Hello, Uncle Jay,” she said, obviously pleased to see him, but not showing much emotion.

Penny followed her children, “I'm just getting him dressed.” She took Peter and dressed him in his red and blue Elmo pyjamas and Lucy appeared in what Jay saw was a Saddle Club shirt and pants.

John appeared out of his office and greeted Jay. They walked into the kitchen, with its white imitation marble bench tops and stainless steel appliances. John handed Jay a juice and they sat down to dinner. Jay looked around the table smiling through the dim candlelight (Penny's daughter loved candlelight). He loved Penny's family, especially his niece and nephew.

This dinner was so different from their childhood, he marvelled at how Penny had managed to create all of this. He looked over at her as she asked Lucy how her reading was going and he smiled feeling elated for her and a little envious. He chewed slowly and looked around the table. Peter was enjoying scooping his butter chicken into his pappadum and Lucy was talking about how she had been doing times tables at school. Jay surrendered to the children's stream of consciousness talking, and occasionally glanced over at his sister, who seemed happy to ignore him. The adults said nothing, until Jay asked;

“How's work, Penny?” He smiled at her and looked like he had just entered the world of grown ups.

“Fine, busy,” Penny said, looking over at him briefly before receiving a mouthful of food.

"How bout yours, John?" He smiled feeling pleased with himself to be participating in this normal dinner conversation.

"Good, thanks."

There was nothing more to be said and the children continued on, as if he always sat at their dinner table. Lucy did ask him however if he ever washed his hair, if he did wash it, why was it so knotty? When her hair got dirty or knotted her Mum washes it, she told him. He laughed and told her that was good advice.

Fear, silence and nausea were what Penny and Jay sat down to at the family dinner table. Jay thought it seemed as if Penny was avoiding looking at him, maybe his face contained too many memories. Since their father had deteriorated their childhood had been returning to him in colours, smells and scenes he wanted to forget.

Peter and Lucy sat on Jay's lap after dinner and said goodnight to him with delicate kisses on his cheek. Penny disappeared upstairs with them and John took an important call in his study, so Jay found himself on his own.

He walked down into the sunken lounge room and allowed his body to relax into the red cushioning of the couch. Leaning his head backwards and closing his eyes, Jay experienced the familiar jarring of his past. Sounds pounded his skull like it was about to explode. He was glad he had taken that valium before he came, it would hold him over until he could score again. Right now, his body was anchored to the couch.

The red light behind his eyelids became the dull light of his home many years ago, one of those evenings he wanted to forget.

Jay, Penny and their Mum were enjoying a rare night of their father being away for dinner. They had been able to eat everything without indigestion and had started their homework in peaceful silence, when they heard him banging through the front door, knocking into walls, falling over and swearing at the top of his voice.

Adrenalin moved through his body, he felt nervous even at the sound of his Dad's deep booming voice. Jay remembered bracing himself for his father's anger. His Dad was throwing plates around in the sink, the clatter of porcelain and cutlery was shrill and ominous in the air. He was yelling at their mother about where his dinner was and Jay could hear her answering him quietly. He knew she was trying to calm him down. Then he started to yell Jay's name and Jay's pulse quickened as he heard his father walking up the stairs.

Finally, he reached Jay in the bedroom and threw his jumper at him, yelling about putting things away. Jay got up quickly from lying on his bed, his 12 year old frame dwarfed by his father's dark shadow. And then he felt it, bam; an adult fist like a plank of heavy ply wood slammed him backwards into the wall. Jay felt stinging pressure on his shoulder blades and raised his hand to his nose and could see the thick blood on his fingers. Penny stood in the hallway and he heard their mother's anxious steps approaching and then she appeared in the bedroom door. She darted in between the swaying figure of the man and the limp boy on the bed. His mother cradled him in one arm and stood up close to their father;

"Stop, Malcolm. Get out."

Her voice was strong and deep and her back, straight and hard. She pointed her finger to the door. He stood looking at her with anger and confusion. No one had seen her with this strength before. Jay had always felt afraid for his Mum, he hated that she had to stick up for him. He looked forward to when he could defend all of them. One day he'd be bigger than him.

Many times his Mum had been pushed violently into doors, walls, bookshelves, but this night, his father looked down at her and surrendered. This was the one moment where she, Anne Beaumont, won. He left and didn't return for the rest of the night. He was so drunk and physically weak he could barely get out the front door without injuring himself. Jay remembered feeling relieved, even though they were all wondering if he would come back later, they chose to ignore this and Jay remembered his mother's soft lap and embracing perfume as he lay watching television with an ice pack on his face. Penny sat on the other side of their mother and their physical closeness made him feel safe.

Jay squirmed on the couch now, burrowing into his mother's lap as he could hear his father's taunts and teasing and the chilling disdain of his father's cackle when Jay brought home school accolades. He remembered hiding report cards and certificates from his father. Severe lines formed on his father's face and black sharp circles in his eyes fixed their murderous gaze onto Jay. He never understood why he did this. Only once did he think he saw a glimpse of a hidden chasm of insecurity in his father, but, even now at 35, he still couldn't comprehend his father's cruelty.

They both knew their mother was planning to secretly leave their father because Penny told Jay she had overheard conversations to someone about opening a bank account and other things. Penny didn't understand, but Jay sort of did. He'd seen stuff like this on television. How some women left men like him and had to be on the run. He didn't like the sound of it much, but thought it would be better than this. It annoyed him how his mother never spoke badly about him to them. They all knew what he was like, why not be honest?

He wished he hadn't been so harsh with her about his father the day when the ambulance came in flashes of red and took her away on a stretcher after she fell onto the linoleum, unconscious from an aneurism. He saw himself in hospital with her for that whole week, even though his father tried to remove him and him telling her repeatedly he was sorry, until one morning he was holding her hand and she squeezed it. That was enough for him. He knew it was her way of responding. He told her he loved her and when she died, he remembered crying as if he could not stop.

Jay whispered, "Mum..."

"No, it's not Mum."

He abruptly opened his eyes and felt a sharp pain across his forehead.

Penny was looking strangely at him.

"Sorry, must have been dreaming. Hey, I've gotta go."

"Yeah, of course, got to get back to it, hey?"

"Something like that. Hey thanks for dinner and everything, it's been really nice not to eat Hare Krishna food with smelly street men."

"Sure, Jay, that's fine. It is good to see you when you're not..."

"Yep, let's not go there."

"Fine, let's go?"

A loud, shrill ringing shook Jay from his heavy sleep. He grabbed the telephone to stop its pitch driving deep into his consciousness and he put his ear onto the receiver.

He could faintly hear a female voice, "Jay, you better get over here as quick as you can."

"Who's this?"

"Penny, remember me? We haven't heard from you for a week now, which probably means you don't care, but I thought you should know."

"What?" Jay didn't like that he really wanted to know what she was talking about.

"It's Dad; the doctors have told me he's deteriorating, it won't be long now, he's fitting and he's in and out of consciousness..." he could hardly hear her now, "I don't know if you care...but I thought I should tell you."

"I'll come."

Falling off the couch he got up in his clothes from the night before. Everything appeared to be moving in slow motion. Jay felt tight in his chest as he moved quickly out the door, slamming it hard on its hinges.

After locating his last \$20 from his grimy jean pocket, Jay climbed into a taxi. As Kings Cross' pink and blue neon streaked past him he saw his father in their backyard with the cricket bat, playing on a makeshift pitch with him. Jay could see his large smile as he called out, "Give it to me, Jay." He chuckled now, thinking of how he did give it to him, he bowled him out and then wondered if he would be beaten, but nothing happened. His father laughed and handed over the bat "Good work, Jay", the rarest comment he ever received from him. These occasions were like light falling in dense, damp rainforests, rare and enjoyable. He wasn't too bad, occasionally, when he wasn't...

He reached the hospital and walked briskly to his father's room.

Penny looked up at him as he entered, her face lined with exhaustion and her cheeks splotchy and swollen.

"You're too late, he's gone." She started to cry.

"What?" He looked at his father's body, his mouth dropped open.

"He's dead?" Jay was winded.

"They worked on him after he arrested and then after 30 minutes, they declared he was gone." Jay sat down next to the bed. He touched the edge of the bed clothing, as nausea overwhelmed him.

"You shit," he said to his father.

Penny got up and walked to the window, looking out onto the grounds.

"You were a fucked father and now you're gone, there won't be much to miss will there?"

"Why do you have to be such a bastard?" Penny turned to him.

"Why are you such a suck-up?"

She looked away again.

"Well, Dad, I guess this is goodbye. You were a fucked father anyway, so what will I be missing?" he started to cry, "what will I fuckin' miss? How can someone miss something they never had?"

Jay covered his face in his hands and cried bitterly. He raised his head, his throat aching and looked over at his sister. She was perched on the hospital chair near the window, her knees drawn up in a foetal position, crumpling her navy pin striped suit into soft layers of pastry folded onto itself. Penny's eyes were closed and her mouth was biting onto her hand. In this moment she was his 11 year old sister sitting crying in her bay window the day they lost their mother and after they both realized they had been left alone with him. Jay remembered holding her on that day, and many others, and comforting her. Now, this brotherly concern overcame him and he wanted to embrace her again. But she was a stranger to him now.

Against all his instincts, Jay got up and crossed the distance between them. He awkwardly attempted to put his arm around her shoulder. She jumped forward in shock and pushed his arm away. He moved back, startled.

"What are you doing?"

"I was trying to comfort you or something..."

"Well don't. You've never given a shit before, so why would you start now?"

"I thought..."

"The thing is Jay, you don't think... Not about me, anyway."

"That's not true."

"Of course it is, right now you're probably thinking of how you can get out of here and score something."

"Very amusing, Penny, why are you being such a bitch?"

"Because you're so self centred and you've never given a shit about me, especially when you left home and me with Dad, thank God for Aunt Jenny."

"I did think about you." He could see her little features pressed against the lounge room window the day he left home, her pleading eyes watching him leave on that dark evening.

"Yeah, in between scoring, shooting up and whatever else you do."

"Where do you get off judging me?"

"I don't."

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing. I gave up on needing you a long time ago."

Jay looked over at his father's body.

"Anyway, all that stuff shits me and it's all done now. What's the point in even talking about it? You don't get it, even now, after our fucking father is dead."

"I do get it. But what can I do about it?" He shouted at her.

"Nothing. You are like Dad, a selfish prick. And what shits me now about all of this," she was getting louder, "is that I thought when he died...I'd feel different...better, relieved or something. But I fucking don't," she directed her words towards the body on the bed.

She stood up, scraping the chair loudly as she pushed it back and stood looking out the window.

"I hate him," she muttered into the glass.

Jay was marooned in the middle of the room. He had wanted Penny to open up, but he hadn't expected this.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked.

"Whatever you want." Her voice was altered, low, like she had run out of air.

Jay looked at his sister's immaculate clothes and her aggressive stance facing the window, but he saw in her face a vulnerability he had recognised in new men who arrived at The Wall.

For a moment, she was his little sister again, arranging her dress neatly on her lap, crying softly when the noise and violence got too much in their household. He knew she was right to be angry at him, he had been a selfish bastard, but he didn't know how to tell her this.

Penny's life crystallized for him now and he saw his neglect in it. She had suffered the most; she had borne the weight of it all. 'Penny was left twice; by Mum and by me, abandoned to deal with Dad on her own,' he thought.

"For what it's worth Penny, I love you, I can't change the past, but I'm sorry for what I've done." He spoke quietly, looking down.

She looked over at him and he saw her eyes soften towards him and then she looked away again.

Jay walked over to his father's body; kissing his hand he put it onto his father's cheek.

"Bye, Dad. It's been real." He looked into his father's face half expecting and even hoping for a sarcastic remark or a snide response. He touched his hand.

"Let me know when the funeral is and maybe, sometime, you could have a junkie like me over again."

"Yeah, maybe."

She didn't look at him.

He left the room, stopping only to look back at his father. Walking out of the hospital's sliding doors into the sun, he lit a cigarette and made his way back to the bus stop.