

Jennifer Compton

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS CITY

There was a war. Soldiers everywhere. Not much to eat. Mother became pinched and pale. We were staying at a *primitive tavern* out in the countryside. Little Sister and I wore the same clothes day after day. We didn't have to keep clean. Nobody told us to be respectful, to be quiet. We would go out and watch the fields being burned off, and, late at night, we sneaked down to watch the soldiers drinking. Mother spent all her time looking for food, so Little Sister and I had a happy time for many months.

Then Mother told us we were going back to the city. She had heard that there was going to be a train. We waited all night at the station with hundreds of other people, some who wanted to go back and others who were waiting for people to arrive. Nobody seemed to know what was the best thing to do.

What a *mêlée* when the train arrived! But Little Sister screamed like a *banshee* and the crowd pulled back and we managed to get on. Mother counted her beads all the way back to the city. Little Sister and I picked our fingernails and poked at the holes in our trousers to make them bigger. We glanced at Mother from time to time but not a word.

All of the Aunts and Cousins had come to meet us and what a *motley crew*. An evening skirt with an old winter coat! Frayed cuffs, smudges of dirt, lank, tousled hair. But as we were in our peasant tops and trousers I was relieved that they weren't *correct*. The Aunts talked in quick, high whispers to Mother. She nodded, and led the family procession out of the station. I had to shorten my stride so as not to tread on their heels, how slowly they were walking. The avenue of pillars had dwindled to a meagre colonnade. And the potbellied rubbish bins that had always loomed over me, surely they were smaller.

"How much you have grown!" said one of the Aunts. "Have you learned anything while you have been away? Have you been a help to your Mother?"

Little Sister had learned to read and write, finally, when Mother had given us lessons in the evening. *Big deal!* But Mother had said that I didn't know a radish from a turnip top, and she used to knot up her hair in a scarf and go darting off between the lines of soldiers moving up and down the road. So I quickly said that I had learned not to mind when a soldier *farted*. I used the coarse peasant word and I hate to think what would have happened if I had used that word before the war. But my Aunt just smiled sadly. I could see that

she felt that Little Sister and I had been ruined, that there would be no one to marry us.

"I hope you won't be where the bombing is," she muttered.

When we got home to our beautiful apartment with the *modern* curved walls on the fifth floor, I was surprised to see Father leaning on Elder Brother's arm, as if he was an old man. I was even more surprised to see that he had his face painted in the traditional way. Didn't he know that everything had changed?! He hardly seemed to see us. His eyes looked blind.

It was late and Mother and Father went to their bed, Elder Brother wrapped himself in his quilt, and Sister crawled into her bed like a tired puppy. They looked so helpless lying asleep on the floor. I decided to find out where the fire escapes were. I wanted to be able to lead my family to them quickly and easily if we had to leave for some reason. I found the stairs down to the street. There was a full, yellow moon placed exactly between two of the spires of the numerous apartment buildings in this part of the city. A man walked down the street towards me. He pointed up at the moon as he passed, and he said to me, "That means the bombers will be coming." He walked on and turned the corner out of sight.

A huge silver plane with a big, round belly like a pregnant goldfish appeared in the sky. It moved slowly, above the moon, coming across the city. As I watched it the belly of the plane opened up and silver bombs tumbled out, down onto the city. I thought I saw the pilot's face. A thin, white face, a *Westerner*, with a soft, brown beard. He was young. Hardly older than I was.

I tried to run away. I ran towards the moon as if it could help me. The moon had never been dangerous before. I'd never been frightened before. It was as if my whole life was nothing. I was quite mad with fear. I seemed to lose myself. All I knew was that I couldn't move my legs. They were heavy, or there was something heavy on them.

I started to return to myself, to become aware that something, a wall, something, had fallen onto my legs. I began to think that I was in a hospital. I tried very hard and my legs would just stir under the bedclothes. So I was in bed.

Then I was aware that the cat was on my legs. I opened my eyes. He wasn't on my legs but lying next to them, stretching the bedclothes down tightly over them.

I was lying in bed with the cat next to me. It was just dawn. A bleached, early morning sky. A few birds beginning to rustle and chatter in the bushes. The houses that surrounded my room were completely silent. Everyone asleep.

I got up to make tea and while the kettle boiled folded yesterday's newspaper to put away in the paper bin. As I lifted the lid I saw, inside, a photo of a Japanese woman — **Wall Fell On Legs**.

The kettle buzzed as I read how she had been sixteen when she was trapped during a bombing raid by a wall falling on her legs. Now, all these years later, she was visiting our country on a reconciliation tour. Her middle-aged face politely grimaced up out of the paper. I wondered what hotel she was staying at, across on the other side of this city. I wondered what dreams she woke from into this silver dawn. I put yesterday's paper on the top of the day before yesterday's paper and closed the lid. And made tea and took it back to bed.

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