



TWO

OF US

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An extraordinary coincidence brought artists Lan Na, 52, and Reg Buckland, 76, together in Beijing in 1998. At the time, neither spoke the other's language, so they began their courtship by drawing pictures.

REG: I saw Nalan for the first time in the lobby coffee shop of the China Hotel in Beijing. I was in the second year of a four-year contract working in an ad agency. I thought she was gorgeous. I stood behind her in the queue when she went to order food, but I chickened out of talking to her.

A picture-framer I was working with for a photo exhibition had invited me to a dinner she'd organised that night. We were due to meet at her shop after work and, incredibly, Nalan was there, as she also knew the picture-framer. Beijing has the same population as the whole of Australia and the framing shop was on the other side of the city from the hotel we'd both been at that morning. It was a huge coincidence. We all went to a hot pot restaurant. I said, "Nice to see you again," and shook her hand.

Nalan couldn't speak a word of English and my Chinese was terrible, but we worked out we were both artists, so we started drawing to communicate. We had lots of similar interests. She'd completed art college in Xi'an [in central China] and knew a lot of painters and sculptors in Beijing, which was of great interest to me, so we started spending more time together. Sometimes, we'd play ping-pong; sometimes, we'd go to dinner. Within the year we were together; Nalan learned English fairly quickly.

We had a wedding ceremony in Beijing on September 29, 1999. Nine is a lucky number in China; it means eternity. I think 4 million people got married the same day as us. The yum cha and teahouse Nalan now runs in Australia is called 29 nine 99.

We moved here in 2001. Before relocating to Beijing, I'd been working in Sydney but had built a house near Rylstone [in the NSW Central Tablelands region] where I went to paint. Nalan was shocked when she arrived. Beijing is a bustling metropolis; from my farm, you couldn't see another house. I'm an old hippie and hadn't got around to building a toilet yet. I should have prepared her.

I took her to Byron Bay to see the beaches, which helped save things, and she met some of my friends. Back then, Rylstone didn't even have a coffee shop, and when we were driving back from Byron, I suggested she could do something with food. She said she could make dumplings. We found out the sandstone building that used to be the Bridge View Inn was available to rent.

We have our moments. In 2010, we had a fight and she pulled off her wedding ring and threw it at me. It missed and went into the creek near our house.

After the 2020 fires, I was down there raking seared tree branches near the edge and I

saw this glint in the shallows. I couldn't believe it was her ring! I cleaned it up and surprised her with it on our anniversary.

Nalan is a beautiful woman and a talented artist and printmaker. She works seven days a week making dumplings. Her work ethic and energy are incredible. I admire that, as well as the way she's adapted to a very different life in Australia. I take my hat off to her.

NALAN: I was working for China Central Television shooting outdoor scenes in Beijing, and it was so cold – minus 10°C – and the camera was frozen. On the way back to the office, my colleague and I stopped at the China Hotel to get something to eat. I noticed Reg as he was a foreigner and he had a ponytail. I joked with my colleague that he must be an artist.

That afternoon, a lady from my home town who'd also moved to Beijing rang to invite me to dinner with some friends at a restaurant, but I said it was too cold. When I got home, I felt bad. I thought, "I shouldn't live like I am 82 when I am 28." I rang her and told her I'd be there in half an hour. The foreigner I'd seen in the morning came in and we sat at the same table. Afterwards, my friend said he was interested in swapping languages with me, so he could learn Chinese and I could learn English. I was so naive I asked how much it would cost.

The main reason I fell in love with Reg is his mind. He's very quick – as fast as a ping-pong game in China – and very creative. My art is very meticulous and conservative because of my training, like a photograph, but his has more feeling and is more abstract. I love it.

I'd never even left China when we met. At first, I didn't like Rylstone. I hadn't seen a dirt road since I was five. I grew up with millions of people around and was used to having nice restaurants everywhere. Life's hard in China, but we always had good food. Reg's place didn't even have a toilet; he gave me a shovel! But then he built one for me.

When I was a teenager, I failed an English exam and my teacher said as punishment for not working hard, I would have to speak English for the rest of my life. I was thinking her prophecy was coming true. But I rented a store in town to start my yum cha life and made friends – and now I love it. I was 29 when we got married, and the building we rented was also number 29.

Before I learnt English, if Reg wanted to ask me if I wanted an orange juice, he'd draw a picture of a hand squeezing an orange. It was hard for us to talk on the phone, so he used to send faxes to my office. His love letters to me were often translated into Chinese by my colleagues. Even when I did learn English, I had a very strong accent, so sometimes Reg misunderstood me, and it led to arguments.

Once we had a big fight and I said I wanted a divorce. It was over something little, but I'd given up my job and moved away from my friends to another country where I couldn't speak the language. When he gave me back the ring that I'd thrown at him 12 years later, I thought it was a joke until I saw the date carved in it: 29 Nine 99. It glittered in front of my eyes after being baptised by floods and bushfires. At that moment, I returned to the time we met. I couldn't express myself in words. ■

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