William Goede / LIKE MOTHER, LIKE SON

1

Yang Li told me the elevator in her new apartment highrise always breaks down the moment you take it into your head to use it, between six and eight in the morning of course when you go to work and five and seven at night when you come home again. And when it's up and running in the middle of the day, they usually shut it down again to save electricity, so the grandmas and grandpas, left at home, have to coolie everything some thirteen, fourteen, fifteen floors straight up — groceries, live chickens, fuel, the wash, not to mention their great big fat grandbabies — all the way up the cold, dark stairs on their backs.

So I was surprised when the old gateman told me to take the elevator. I said I'd walk up, but he insisted I take the elevator. The only explanation I could come up with was he wanted to make sure I went where I said I was going. Like Gollum, he followed me all the way in from the front gate of the complex and inside the apartment building to the elevator, where a small, gaunt woman sat hunched so far over swirling hands and something long and purple I figured she was knitting it with her nose.

"The foreigner wants to visit Yang Li," he said. "It's all right, take him up."

"Okay! Okay!" she said, dropping the knitting to the floor. She wasn't supposed to go *up* this time of day. This time of day you were supposed to come *down*. She stared at the old gateman and waited for him to leave and then said, "You can go back now and fill out your report."

"Careful, you fool!" said the old man, casting a quick, shocked look at me. "This one speaks Chinese."

I said, "Not at all, not at all! You honour a mere child!"

He flapped his cheeks for a moment and limped away, the woman spun the crank and, as we squirmed our way to the top of the chute, continued her obsessive knitting.

The elevator wasn't working at all back in the spring of 1985. The complex of tall concrete apartment buildings had only just been erected for the families of the officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and, since Yang Li's husband was a high cadre, he was invited to come and pick out an apartment. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to do it because he had been posted to Hong Kong, so Yang asked me to climb the fourteen floors with her to have a look at the apartment and to advise her whether to take it or keep their old rotting house deep in the ancient *hutongs* of the old city. I had once boasted to having built my own house, and so I guess she considered me an expert. I tried to decline the invitation. I had been in the country for three years — long enough not simply to accept things as they appeared to be but not long enough to figure out what they really were.

She insisted, and my other Chinese colleagues urged me to do so. They thought I knew everything simply because I was a Canadian.

It's all Dr. Norman Bethune's fault, of course. For some reason the Chinese think we're all somehow related to the man who invented M.A.S.H. somewhere in the mountains of Hebei and then died of septicemia contracted when he cut his finger operating on a Chinese soldier. It's so disheartening, this sense of exemplary and artful improvisation and integrity that Canadians symbolize to the Chinese. They like to confide in us and ask us to solve their problems as if we reminded them of The Good Old Days of Yanan and the Second United Front and the Eighth Route Army and Dr. Bethune's hospital on horseback.

But me, I was only a 'foreign expert' who taught the English language. I never quite figured out how I got to be an 'expert' just because I spoke my own language. It surely was something like being an expert at sitting because you can sit. I lived among a couple of hundred other foreigners expert at speaking their own languages in a huge complex called the Friendship Hotel, just two blocks down the street from the apartment complex Yang Li was now planning to show me. Yang and I were colleagues in the First Department at *Renmin Daxue,* the People's University. "I learn from you," she was accustomed to saying, and I always responded with, "And I learn from you." In point of fact, since she had already spent two years in Toronto studying linguistics, I'm afraid she learned very little from me and I

learned far more from her than I could ever use.

"The workmen say the apartment needs another coat of paint," she said, trying to keep the fanfare of enthusiasm out of her voice.

"Yes," I said, trying to keep the dampness out of mine.

We walked around the cold, hollow flat inhaling wet concrete.Yang was small, but she had a large, active voice that sounded the depths of the grey cave. "They must put doors up there, you see?" She pointed at a hole the size of a dragon's jaw above the door of the bedroom. "This is storage place."

Yang had earlier described the apartment as a spacious modern flat. She said it was considered a luxury townhouse because it had balconies from which you could see clear across Beijing to the magic yellow roofs of the Forbidden City and beyond them even to the Temple of Heaven, and because the apartment featured running water and a shower and just about anything you could imagine. Moreover, it was a mere walk across the road to her classrooms. But all I could see now was a crude concrete hole with knobby and uneven concrete floors infilled with unconscionably poor carpentry and impromptu plumbing. It looked more like something hammered together by a pack of boy scouts for their summer project. I couldn't imagine anyone actually ever living there.

I said, "Storage, eh?"

"Anyway, I don't need storage. I have nothing I must store."

We inspected the entire flat. Nothing matched, no. It needed more than just another coat of paint. Metal windows were sprung and leaked air, a ganglia of wiring dribbled out here and there with crude electrical outlets stapled to the wall at eye level, the doors were already warped and badly hung, ready to fall off when used more than once.

But I could tell by the look on her face she wasn't really interested in trivialities. She had brought me here to tell her she ought to take it.

"You ought to take it," I said.

"I will have my own kitchen now and must not share it with my neighbours!"

"And Xiao Ling his own room."

"Yes, I will not have to wait until he is in bed and then undress in the dark."

"And your own toilet."

"Yes, my own toilet."

"You ought to take it."

She smiled at me, and it was a smile that broke up my cynicism. "You think so?"

"Oh, yes!"

She laughed: "I know it is not so good, I have lived in Toronto."

"Take it. This isn't Toronto."

"Moving here will be good for Xiao Ling. The best Middle School in Beijing is right across the street."She treasured her son as a special person, treated him as an heir apparent, often addressed him as an equal, and the boy responded to such treatment with bright smiles and intelligent observations about the world of science and technology."I've already spoken to the teachers, and they are very excited if he comes to them." She walked to the windows and began to laugh out loud. "But, Hagstrom, the best part is yet to come. Look, the view!" She threw open the door, and we walked out onto the balcony. It shook, and I half expected it to fall off. Not Yang Li. She leaned way over the edge as if preparing to springboard up and away and then fly around the building a few times to show me how wonderful it all was. "The view, there it is, see how wonderful!"

"Be careful!" I said, reaching for her. "Didn't anyone ever tell you how gravity works?"

We stood watching the molten blue flow of bicycles below the trees.

"You know this road?" she asked. "It's *Bai shi qiao lu*. Very famous road in China history. Very bloody road. This road starts high in the mountains in Mongolia...nobody knows where. You call it a 'brook', don't you? Mongolian soldiers came down this road for many centuries to invade us and so we must block it off with the Great Wall. Still, we must fight many battles along it. Then, in 1860, armies from Germany and Britain and the U.S. came up from Tianjin and burned the city and then went right past here to the *Yuanmingyuan* and burned it to the ground...and in 1945 Chairman Mao came down from Yanan and marched along this very road to liberate Beijing from the Guomindang. There were so many dead people in the ditches they just piled them up and burned them right where they lay." I thought I saw something unpleasant come to her as she leaned again over the

railing to contemplate the long hard road stretching back and forth for four thousand years. "But that's all behind us now." She laughed suddenly and pointed to the Friendship Hotel just south of the intersection. "You know, the very best part is...you will be my new neighbour, Hagstrom. I can keep an eye on you from here!"

"I'll have to draw my curtains," I said and went back inside.

2

The woman with the purple knitting had trouble prying open the elevator door. She got a knee and an elbow into the opening and with the other hand, levered it open, and, released, I walked quickly away. The hallway was dark, deathlike. It still smelled of cold and wet. A concrete tomb. Maybe the building had never cured. I stood for a moment and listened. Hollow. The dull thud of the elevator doors opening and closing, opening and closing, finally slamming shut, the electric hum of the car going down...and then silence. I passed several dark doorways before I saw the small card.

YANG LI, it announced in bold Chinese characters, and beneath the characters, the Pinyin and English. *Yingyu Laoshi.* Teacher of English. *Renmin Daxue.* People's University.

Teacher of English. *Yingyu Laoshi.* Yes, she represented, I thought, the best of both worlds and I remembered how she used to come to school wearing a yellow University of Toronto sweatshirt under her blue Mao jacket. Unlike her colleagues, she talked loudly and joked around with her students and then even invited them up to her new flat for a party and likely took them out onto her balcony and leaned way out over the railing to show them the wonders of their own world. The summer she moved into the flat, she boarded a shy young exchange student from Winnipeg at a time when it just wasn't done anywhere in the country.

She got away with that, too.

But while she was her own person, she structured her political views 'correctly'. She was both 'Red' and 'Expert'. Her leaders trusted

her. More than once, she had to lecture me on decorum and often gave me the 'correct' interpretation of political events. Lao Yang was a survivor. She had great instincts. She had survived the Japanese War, the civil war with the Guomindang, the Five Year Plan, the Hundred Flowers Movement, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the crackdown on mourning the death of Zhou Enlai, The Democracy Wall, the Gang of Four, and the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign. When we were alone, she was open and candid about herself. She told me she believed in China and loved 'the motherland', but she was often troubled by the cruelty Chinese people perpetrated upon each other as easily as doing the morning dishes. "It's all because of the Cultural Revolution," she'd explain. "Our manners fell apart, we never recovered. It was like we learned something about ourselves and we can never forgive ourselves."

3

I knocked at Yang Li's door .

Silence.

Knocked again.

My heart bumped up against a hard bone in my chest. I waited and knocked a third time. An inner door rasped across concrete. It whispered, I wish you'd leave us alone, we have done nothing wrong. Footsteps, and then a key worked, the door cracked, and the boy stood there.

"Hello, Xiao Ling," I said in Chinese. "May I come in?" One hand to his chin as if holding a mask to his face. "I want to speak to your mother. Is she home?"

He stared at me and said nothing. A door opened somewhere behind him and Yang Li sprang forward. "Marvin Hagstrom!" she cried, rushing out of the dark. "What are you doing here, Marvin? No one should be out in the streets now." Eyes dark saucers of fear, they searched the dark behind me. "Are you alone?"

"Except for the old gatekeeper, the elevator lady, and probably every member of your neighborhood committee!"

She laughed in the old way. "Oh, Marvin!" she said, reaching around her son and, with the old strong claw, dragged me into the room while the door was sealed behind me. "What are we going to do with you...always telling jokes."

"No, I...really, I..."

We walked into the living room. She had tried to make living quarters out of a cold hard box. Pictures of Toronto and the CN Tower and the Grand Canyon and the Great Wall were tacked to the walls, and on the floor a small green Beijing wool carpet, the furniture, plain and functional, as if stored there, lime green curtains, a lamp or two with shades of red fussy, flounced fringes, and a bookshelf with real books. Faulkner and Mao rubbing shoulders. And in the corner, under a doily, a large SONY television set and a video player her husband had brought home from Hong Kong on one of his visits.

Xiao Ling slipped back into his room, and Yang Li told me to sit down. "You shouldn't be out, we haven't been out for three days." Her voice sounded hard and unpracticed. It lacked its usual resonance and roundness. "It isn't safe to go out. We won't even go out to the balcony. What is it like? Did you see anybody in the road?"

"Soldiers. There's still that tank down there at the *Sanhuan* crossroads."

"Yes, yes," she said, perched tentatively across from me, studying the carpet. "We saw it come...early Sunday morning." She trembled a little and glanced nervously out the window, listening. "All night Saturday...we saw the smoke...lots of smoke to the west there, all along Chang'an. We heard shooting too and around midnight lots of trucks went south...very fast. We couldn't sleep. Xiao Ling and I went down to the road like everyone else. Rumours started flying. The police came and said, Go back home. Then some people came up from the south on bicycles and told us the army had killed many people at Muxidi. We refused to believe them. We said to ourselves, They are just troublemakers, this could not happen. But then others came too and said the army had gone to Tian'anmen and was shooting all the students. Some people got crazy and ran down the road saying they

were going to fight the army." The sunlight fell across Yang's face and accentuated dark lines I had never seen before. I had always thought of her as pretty, in spite of her stout, Red Army build. But now she looked as if someone had reached down inside her and pulled out one or two supporting bones."Then, around six that morning, when it was light, we saw the first students...in trucks and buses, and some on foot, barely able to walk. Bleeding, crying...some still singing away. Many of them had to be carried, you know, and you could see the pedicabs, lots of them, like they had come from the butcher market. We stood and watched, stunned, crying, we could not believe our eyes. There were many, many people in the street, but no shouting now. No 'Down with Li Peng! Down with Deng Xiaoping!' No slogans. No banners. It was like a funeral. Then some students came running up to us and said, Go back inside, the army is coming! I knew one of them and tried to talk to him, but he was so scared he wouldn't talk to me. A girl said the army had come into the square with tanks and lined up on one end and then run over all the tents. We couldn't believe it! She said two hundred students from Tianjin were still inside the tents when the tanks ran over them. Arms and heads came squirting out everywhere, she said, and, oh how we cried! This is not *our* country you're talking about, we said. This is not *our* army. *Our* army said it would not kill *our* people! Then someone said army trucks were coming up *Bai shi qiao lu*, and we heard shooting and everyone screamed and ran away. I hid for a while in bushes and watched. The trucks came up the hill and soldiers jumped out and took over the intersection, and then they ran around shooting everybody! That was when the tank came and pointed its gun right at the gate of the university."

I tried to lighten her thoughts. I said, "Speaking of Xiao Ling, will he go back to school now?"

She stared at me, and I could see the first sign of blood in her face. "He is fifteen, you know," she said. "Often he followed my students when they marched down to the square. He was there two days before the army came. Thursday, it was. Children's Day. He said the students all sat around the Goddess of Democracy and a professor from Bei Da talked about poetry and freedom."

"So what's going to happen?"

She thought for a moment and, instead of responding, got to her feet and walked to the kitchen and put the kettle on the stove. "I wonder why you came, Marvin," she said. "I'm sure you were told you should not leave the Friendship Hotel...not to go near your Chinese friends."

"I was worried about you."

She walked back into the room and settled across from me, tentatively, with her eyes fixed on me. "You are very foolish to come! They will will ask questions and I will have to answer them."

"I have been here before and nobody has asked questions."

"That was then. This is now."

At that moment Xiao Ling emerged from his room as if he had thought of something to say, but he stood with his back to the wall and silently studied the floor. He had preserved the round, healthy Han visage of his mother, but something new was growing up inside him and lurked in the eyes waiting to be born. They were heavily lidded, deep, the forehead sloping, profound, Mongolian. Why hadn't I noticed this before? Yang once told me the boy's father was from Ulaanbaatar. That would explain it. I knew from my few visits that Xiao Ling was a bright young man, a computer whiz in a world without computers, a thinker in a world without thought. He seemed charmed by Western ways, and his mother had promised him that one day like her he would study at the University of Toronto.

At last he spoke to his mother, ignoring my presence. "There is still nothing at all on the radio...just lies." He walked into the kitchen and returned with a teapot, and then cups and a tray of crackers, which he set out dutifully. He then strolled to the window and said, "There will be trouble now with him here."

Yang spoke quickly: "Xiao Ling, respect our guest!"

"They will want to know."

"We'll talk about it later."

"There is no 'later' any more. You will have to explain everything."

He looked at me as if he blamed me for the blood in the streets, and then walked out of the room.

"Forgive him, he is very disturbed by all this," she said. "I don't know what to say to him, how to explain..."

"What will happen to him when he goes back to school?"

"Nobody knows."

"And you? What will happen to you?"

She hesitated, her eyes fixed at a spot just below my chin, and, when she spoke, it seemed she was reading a speech she had been preparing for just such an occasion. "They have already started," she said, quietly, "the younger teachers. They started the day after you and all the other foreign teachers were directed to go back to the hotel and stay there. Once you were all gone, the young teachers got up at the meeting and said they wanted to do something. But they were...foolish. Nothing can be done. Not now. The older ones, people my age, they got up and said they wanted to start struggle sessions because of the marches. They have already forgotten what happened in the Cultural Revolution. It was like someone erased their minds. We don't understand ourselves, Marvin. Who was it said... 'Those who do not know history are cursed to repeat it.' Something like that."

"What is expected of you now, Lao Yang?"

She began to laugh nervously and to sip her tea while she thought about her words. "Nothing," she said, without conviction. "Nothing at all." She seemed to be talking herself. "They asked me and I said I knew nothing."

I knew what she was saying, but I continued to push her: "And so they told you that if you didn't know anything, then you were just as guilty as the young teachers."

She fired her words with accuracy. "Oh, you expect too much, Marvin," she said. "You think we are like you. You have read too many books. Books that tell too many lies about China. Pearl Buck, Han Suyin, people like that." I let her subside, and she went looking for words that would lead her back to the subject. "No, no, don't worry about me." I drank some tea and snapped a cracker, waiting. I knew she wanted to tell me something more. All I had to do was wait, and so I waited, and she finally said, "Anyway, you know Liu? Liu Jiangfu? The tall man with the scar on his cheek here —"

"Isn't he some kind of director?"

"This Liu came to me one day and he asked me who marched in the square. I told him I did not march in the square and I did not

know anyone who had marched in the square. He asked me again. I knew what he wanted me to say." It was coming out now. She spoke, but this time the words were driving her. "They always look for me. Every time they look for me. It's Lao Yang's job, they say. Go ask Lao Yang. Lao Yang must know." Her words turned sour. "But this time I refused. I did it before, but this time I refused."

I waited a while, looking for something to say. "Well, you feel better about it anyway."

"But don't you see? They know!"

"Know what?"

"Xiao Ling and I..."

She seemed unable to finish, and so I said, "They know Xiao Ling and you were — !"

"Yes!" she said, sank back and the tears began to roll down her face. "Yes, we marched with them. The two of us, we marched...with all the young teachers."

"So...what will happen, what will they do?"

She shook her head and dried her tears with her arm. "Nothing will happen. Nothing ever happens to informers."

"Informers?"

"I must think about Xiao Ling now."I thought she was going to lecture me on decorum again, as she leaned forward suddenly and laid one of her hands on my arm."Marvin, we must get him out of here! We must find a way to get him out." I could hear her breathing now, her fingers dug into my arm, she snared me with her brown eyes. "I will send him down to his father in Hong Kong. I can do that. He is allowed one visit a year. I will send him...well, very soon. And you must leave soon, perhaps even tomorrow. All of our foreign friends must leave the country now. There will be more trouble. All foreigners must leave. You must go to Hong Kong, Marvin. I will tell you where to meet my husband."

"You mean you would send Xiao Ling away?"

"I *must* do it!" she said, too loud. "There is nothing more I can do now —"

A sudden knock at the door. Short and hard and final.

She stared at me and laid a finger to her lips. Another knock. She rose slowly, forgetting me, and walked to the door, smoothing her

skirt as if she expected a lover. Yang opened the door and then backed away from it. Four men stood in the dark hallway. Four true blue ones. One was the old gatekeeper. They braced themselves and peered past into the room as if they expected an explosion. I knew Mandarin, of course, but their words sputtered fast and broke apart in their teeth. Something about The Foreigner, Who is he? What is he doing here? You know the rules! Sharp, angled words, fired pointblank. And I heard Yang's voice, too. It jellied when she tried to speak about a Loyal Foreign Friend, a Colleague from My University...

One hard official voice asserted itself over the rest, created the form, filled in the blanks and signed and sealed the summons.

It was silent for a moment.

Then the door closed and Yang crept back into the room and leaned back again the wall, clutching her stomach. I jumped to my feet and went to her. "You were right," I said, "I shouldn't have tried to come, I will leave at once."

"Marvin!" she whispered. "Remember what I said. I will send a note to you as soon as I can about where to meet my husband." I looked into pale eyes that were not looking at me now but at something beyond me, way out there past the balcony and the Road of the White Stone Bridge, past the *Yuanmingyuan* and even past the Great Wall and Outer Mongolia, to a place perhaps only she could see. "Then you must take him with you to Canada —"

"I am not going anywhere!"

It was Xiao Ling. He had come out of his room and stood staring at us, a parent who had stumbled upon his two misbehaving children, his eyes small and fixed and hard.

"Shhh!"

"I will *not* leave!" he said loudly and then looked at me. "I will *not* go anywhere!"

Yang went to her son and talked quietly for some time.

When she returned, I said, "Like Mother, Like Son."

She placed her hands on my arm. "Xiao Ling is your son now...take good care of him." I stood speechless. "Now go, my friend," she said. "Go...go!" She walked to the door and opened it. The light struck the four men in the face, and they flinched.

"Goodbye, Lao Yang," I said and turned toward Xiao Ling. He

lifted his eyes to me for a brief moment. I'm not sure what we saw in each other. "Goodbye, Xiao Ling." I looked again at Yang Li, but she was looking at the men in the doorway. "Thank you very much for the tea."

"Go," she said. "Go now."

They escorted me down the corridor like a prisoner. Fear, a human gas, bled from beneath the doorways. Fear, and curdled fat. Cold tea. Lost hopes. The elevator stood waiting for us. The doors were open. They had to be wrestled shut again. The contraption scraped its way to the ground. The Neighborhood Committee stared at the walls. The woman knitted silently. She seemed relieved to be going down.