

A Visit

By Isabelle Stroud

There is a joy in destruction. To break and burn. To cleanse. We believed that we could wash away our fury and resentment with blood.

Someone whooped amongst our small crowd. I couldn't see the doorway to the Yangs' house, for one of my comrades kept bobbing their head up and down, agitated with the wait.

"What's taking them so long!" a girl from my village asked.

I glanced at her and found that I couldn't remember what she looked like before communism came to Hejian. Her hair had been cropped and her school clothes had been replaced with her lovingly pressed green uniform. I was different too. I felt that I was no longer a boy, although I had only joined the Red Guard the previous year, when I was fifteen. Chairman Mao was now my omnipresent red sun, shepherding me into a new world. And I had embraced the dream with open arms, blinded by the glory of it.

Suddenly, the door opened slowly and an elderly woman gazed across at the crowd. Her eyes were wide as she regarded us and, shakily, she started to close the door again, as if she could pretend that we didn't exist.

"Is Mr Yang here?" the girl, Yen Ping, asked, glancing into the long corridor behind the old woman's head. Mrs Yang paused, partly shocked at the disrespectful address.

The couple were once wealthy, so the house sprawling beyond was adorned with paintings and expensive furniture. Someone behind me laughed when they saw it all. It was just as we had suspected. Mr Yang, the elderly playwright, had indeed been hoarding these relics from the old world.

Mrs Yang shook her head. She was alone in the house.

"I am Aiguo Chang. We have reason to believe that your husband is a 'class enemy'," I said, asserting my power with a pang of excitement. "Your husband's work has been deemed out of keeping with the revolution. In addition, you are accused of breaking Chairman Mao's orders. You must know that the 'four olds' must be destroyed." I was pleased with my performance since I had only done this two or three times before.

Mrs Yang said nothing. She knew exactly why we were here.

I do not know why we were so kind to her. Others suspected of violating the policy of eliminating the 'four olds' - 'old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits' - didn't get the courtesy of the Red Guard waiting and asking. Perhaps it was the status of her son, a vaguely important official in the area, that made us hesitate. Or perhaps Mrs Yang, being a local woman, didn't feel as faceless as some of the other bourgeois criminals.

Her fragile form stood to the side while we filed into the house, filing down into the main body of the building. I was last to enter.

I saw her eyes brim with tears as I ripped a painting from the wall and broke the frame beneath my feet. A tall, bearded man gazed out at me from the canvas, regarding me with a steely glare. I pressed my boot through his flimsy, paper chest.

Mrs Yang said nothing.

I trod on, searching wildly for anything else incriminating. The shatter of pottery breaking sounded from my left. Yen Ping brushed past me, gesturing to me joyfully as she held a large model of Buddha in her arms. Disgusted, I turned and glanced at Mrs Yang, who had kept such a thing in her house for years while we had believed the couple were communist.

Soon the house was a wreck, stripped of its furniture and belongings. I tore some books off the shelves, not caring to look inside them, and tossed them onto the floor. As I turned, Mrs Yang was there, hanging behind me like she was my shadow. We stared at each other for a moment. She was close to seventy; her streaked, grey hair pinned up neatly, her eyes dark and accusing. I, on the other hand, was twice her height and proudly wearing my uniform, on which I had pinned my little red badge of my beloved Chairman.

Still she did not speak a word. Mrs Yang was different to some of the others we had raided, who wailed and screamed when the last remains of the old world were torn out from their homes. I watched as she steadied herself on the wooden chair. When I looked down, I noticed that her tiny feet were bound into ornate blue shoes. Underneath I knew that the flesh was rotting away, the toes bent beneath the foot, crippling her. My own grandmother had suffered just like this. And yet Mrs Yang clung to the past!

‘Why does she cry,’ I thought, ‘when this is what tradition and the past have done to her?’

I opened my mouth as if to speak, overwhelmed by pity, but no words would come. She glared steadily at me. There was a deep moan as a bookshelf in the adjacent room tipped and finally crashed into the floorboards. Her eyes flew open, as if she was suddenly recalling something, and fled the room. I followed her.

Out in the corridor, I could see that some of the other guards were peering into the house. One was a thin boy of around twelve. As I caught his eye, he swivelled around and stared at the ground. The raids were so disorganised that those who didn’t want to take part in the violent destruction could just hang about outside the house – staring at the burning mass of relics and guarding the home to make sure no-one escaped.

Strangely, I suddenly wanted to join them. Shaking the feeling off, I told myself that I would make a self-criticism at the next party meeting. I knew that I shouldn’t feel like this. Sick. Mrs Yang reminded me too much of my own grandmother.

In the next room, the bookshelf had crashed above the window, casting everything into blue shadow. It reminded me of a tomb. In the centre, my comrades had piled various objects. All of the books. Another painting. A large metal vessel which was intricately engraved around the base. Mrs Yang lurched forward, losing her balance and reaching for a little wooden box nestled amongst the tangled mass of objects.

“What are you doing?” someone barked.

Mrs Yang yanked the lid off and cast the container away. Curled in her palm was a thin, gold bracelet. The glittering loop was so small that it could have only been for a baby. Kneeling, she closed her fist tightly around the jewellery.

Yen Ping, who had appeared at my shoulder, screamed at the old woman, her eyes wild with fury. "Put that back! Put it back! You'll sell it!"

Mrs Yang tilted her weary head up towards us and spoke for the first and last time. "Please, let me keep this. I'll happily burn the rest – if you will just let me keep this."

I stared blankly at her, then glanced away. I let Yen Ping rip it from her hands. Firmly, I kept my gaze on the bracelet as it tumbled to the ground.

'Such a small thing...' I thought. 'Such a small thing to risk your life for.'

As Yen Ping grabbed Mrs Yang under her armpits and forced her to stand, I saw a boy from the year below me come behind her with a razor they had stolen from the kitchen. I bit my lip. Everyone was staring, some revelling, in the sudden violent act. Yen Ping screamed abuse at the elderly woman, who was eerily silent. I forced myself to watch as her long, silver hair was unpinned and roughly cut. One side was kept long, the other chopped to my own length. This was the humiliating 'yin and yang' haircut; which identified those of whom had fallen from grace. I remembered seeing people in the streets with this haircut, hurrying by with their heads low, and thinking that they deserved it. Now, somehow, I wasn't sure.

When it was done, they let Mrs Yang fall to the floor with a hollow thud. Her eyes were still steadily focused on the bracelet. Slowly, I picked up the thin, metal thread. Then, without looking at her again I strode, as determinedly as I could, out of the room. No-one noticed as I walked all the way out of the house to the large pile of junk lying desolate in the street.

The sun was beginning to set behind the jagged roof-tops. The passive blue sky was streaked with long, rosy clouds. The people who were out scurried away from the house and the teetering pile of belongings. They knew that soon it would burn, creating dark plumes circling into the air. They knew that we would revel in it; that we would love it. They knew that we would then leave, discarding both the ashen pile and the people we had broken behind.

Shakily, I regarded the bracelet in my hand.

Suddenly, Yen Ping appeared next to me, jerking a large, wooden chair onto the pile. Terrified, I impulsively threw the small, gold relic away from me. I was half-relieved at having put distance between the bracelet and myself, but I also had to suppress the tears that were building up. Who knows what the real significance of that bracelet truly was? Could it be a reminder of the son who I knew never visited the old woman? It was then that I realised that the raids weren't as simple as I had previously thought.

As the cruel shape of the fire leapt up in the dusk, I stood at the edge with the young boy I had seen waiting outside earlier. Mrs Yang was deep within her house. We were just outside, so when I listened carefully, I could hear her limping about restlessly in her great, empty home, as if she had become a spectre. The embers danced up into the dark, spraying the dirt with red light.

Around me, my classmates spoke loudly to themselves. Yen Ping glanced back at me, noticing how I had slunk to the back. She called to me, beckoning me to join her. But I stared straight ahead, pretending that I had not seen her.

I stayed silent. I had nothing to say.