

TO CHINA WITH LOVE

Christine wore her headphones all twelve hours of the flight to China. She didn't want to tell her story to the stranger beside her, and she didn't want to lie. She couldn't say: "I'm going to China to meet a son I barely know" without an elaborate and painful explanation, and she couldn't bring herself to say "I've always wanted to see the Great Wall." She hadn't. So she put on the headphones, shut off the sound, and pretended to sleep.

Christine is going to China to visit David, the son who flew there two years ago to escape Vancouver's drug lords. "He ripped 'em off," said his sister Terry, a tone of satisfaction in her voice. Christine had paid for David's ticket, passport, and visa. Two thousand dollars was not much compared to the money she and her ex-husband Mike had already spent on drug rehabs, defense lawyers, and apartments David always abandoned after one or two months. The landlords never returned the damage deposits.

From China, David had e-mailed Christine every two weeks. He had landed a job teaching English in Beijing. Christine, a retired teacher of college English, knew his writing skills were far from adequate. But he was teaching oral English, idiomatic English, and David was known to have the gift of the gab. He actually wrote poetry during some of his jail time. Rap-type stuff which he sent to his mother. Christine read the poems trying to ignore the faulty grammar and the obscene word choice, trying to hear his voice chanting the lines.

Christine and Mike had adopted David when he was six. For years they had tried to have a baby themselves and by the time they decided to adopt they were too old to qualify for an infant from their local Ministry of Child Welfare. Christine remembers how she tried to convince Mike to adopt a baby from China but he raised what sounded like reasonable objections: "It wouldn't be fair to the child," he'd said, "to grow up with parents of a different colour."

David came into their lives as an angry and tough little boy, seized by the Ministry after being neglected by a drug addicted mother and physically abused by her boyfriends.

His little sister Terry came too. At four she had already learned to use her charm to win favors, batting her big blue eyes in an imitation of the innocence she had already lost.

Christine's tactics with her two adopted children differed. With David, she held her distance, thinking he needed space, and, in truth, being a little fearful of him. Terry, she held closely, actually carrying her around during much of their first year together--it felt, almost, as if she did have a baby. The child psychiatrist, who came as a condition of the adoption, explained that Terry, though four, was arrested at the two-year-old, hip-hugging stage. David, on the other hand, swaggered and sneered like a sixteen-year-old. He was harder to love.

Now, dozing on and off on the plane to China, Christine sifts through those years of frustrating motherhood: blaming herself for a failure to love the boy enough, blaming her failed marriage on her lack of courage. Mike refused--at least at first-- to abandon David when he took to the streets. He would find the thirteen-year-old in a downtown eastside café, bring him home, lecture him, advise him, confusing his role as father and high school counselor. The boy would listen silently, then promise to change. Christine stayed out of these interactions--what could she add? The next morning David's bed would be empty. Mike would be raging, Christine would be crying, and that evening the two would be arguing. It wore Christine out. She wanted peace. She, too, eventually ran away from home, taking Terry, David's still compliant sister, with her.

Not many years later, Terry followed David's path to the streets. Christine could no longer hold her. So many separations, Christine thought, as the jet hours brought her slowly to a possible union. Who was this son she was coming to claim? At twenty-six, it was he this time who had invited her to join him. Could she possibly love the man the boy had become?

There had been moments in those earlier years when mother and son had seemed to connect. That afternoon she had braved the downtown street scene to wander up and down Granville hoping to spot him. When she saw him, he looked even younger than his fourteen years, hunched over as he squatted against a dirty store front, his baseball cap before him, upturned for donations. Christine did not approach him immediately. She walked by on the other side of the street, hoping he would see her and have time to decide whether to run or wait. He waited.

“Hi, David. How’re you doing?” she said, when she finally stood in front of him.

“Hi, Mom. I’m doin’ okay.” And he shook the cap to rattle the coins, grinning that lopsided way he had--trying to hide his braces.

“Do you want to go for a coke?” she asked, trying to make her voice sound neutral, casual.

“Sure. I just gotta tell my friend where I’m goin’.”

What friend? Why? Christine thought, but didn’t ask.

As they sat across from each other in a bleak and noisy café, Christine had to resist asking many questions: Where was he sleeping? Where did he get the black leather jacket? When did he start drinking coffee? She’d heard Mike cross-examining David on those imposed home visits and didn’t want to scare him off.

“So you have a new life here. How’d you like it?”

“It’s really cool. I told you, I’m doing okay.”

He was puffing on a cigarette which Christine, an ardent anti-smoker, resisted commenting on. Clearly it was a demonstration of his independence, she thought, and congratulated herself on her tolerance.

“Cool? Do you want me to bring you a sweater?”

David laughed, though Christine didn’t mean to be funny.

“No, cool, Mom, *cool*--like there’s lot’s happening. Cop cars, ambulances--it’s never boring here.”

David used to draw police cars, fire trucks and ambulances coming to their home when he was having a time-out in his room. Usually for some act of violence against his sister.

“That’s nice, David,” Christine heard herself say, and then giggled nervously at the absurdity of her words, the absurdity of this role playing.

David chuckled too. And for a moment she felt they had connected. A mom and son laughing at the distance between them. What could be healthier, thought Christine, and couldn’t wait to report this to Carl, the child psychiatrist she had now grown so fond of.

A mohawked youth of about twenty rapped on the window behind David and signaled to him when he turned.

“Gotta go, Mom. Thanks for the coffee.”

“What about next week? Should I come again? Will I find you here?” Now she could not disguise the desperation in her tone.

“Sure. See ya next week, same place, same time.” And David disappeared.

Christine left the coffee shop walking on air. They’d connected! She’d done it! Tonight she’d again try to convince Mike that this non-threatening non-judgemental approach was the best. Let the boy experience his idea of fun. When he’s had enough he’ll be back. Just keep connected.

When Terry came home from school, Christine started to share her good news before the girl had even taken off her jacket.

“I found your brother! We had coffee together. He’s doing okay.”

“Coffee? Since when’s he drinkin coffee?”

“Oh he put lots of cream and sugar in it. I think he was just showing off.”

“What’d he say to you. What’s he doin anyway?”

“I didn’t ask many questions. I’m... I’m not really sure what he’s doing. He was panhandling when I first spotted him.”

“Panning? He was panning? And you’re so pleased with him! Hmmph!” She turned her back and stomped up to her room.

Mike, too, did not share Christine’s joy.

“Who was this guy who signaled to him? He may be a pimp, or a beggar master. Didn’t you look for the police?”

“I wasn’t trying to interfere with David’s life. I just wanted to connect with him.”

“Are you out of your mind? He’s fourteen. He needs protection, not approval.”

“Well we’ve already failed to protect him. It’s clear he doesn’t want our kind of protection. We have to let him be.”

“Let him be? Let him be! He won’t be anything at all but a druggie and a street hustler if we let him be.”

“I’m meeting him next week. I’m bringing him a sweater.”

“Jesus Christ! You are out of your mind.” And Mike exited downstairs to play pool by himself.

“I’m seeing him next week,” Christine repeated, to no one, and marveled at her own excitement. She felt like a high school girl anticipating a date with the boy she’d long

had a crush on.

Christine's anticipation mounted as the week passed. She went about her routines, teaching her classes, marking assignments at night, and shopping and cooking for her reduced family. She and Mike gave up their evening habit of walking the dog together, knowing they'd only argue. Terry went to school, went to skating lessons, went to friends' homes after school, but was tight-lipped around her parents. The three ate dinner silently. No one mentioned what was on all their minds: Where was David right now, and what was he doing?

The day before her date with David, Christine dug through his sweater drawer, trying to decide which one to bring. She smiled at the choices she had purchased: an argyle knit lay beside a subtly striped blue one to match his eyes. He put them on reluctantly on Sunday mornings, and took them off immediately after church. His favourite sweat, a black one with a Harley logo was missing. He must have taken it with him, Christine thought, though she couldn't see what he was wearing under the zipped up leather jacket.

I'll buy him a new one, she decided, and bought, that afternoon, a light grey turtleneck she thought would look good with black leather.

The phone woke her just past midnight. She could hear Mike fumbling with the receiver in the dark. Then, "Hello", and a pause.

"Yes, blue eyes, about 5'6", and wearing braces."

The morgue. Christine stiffened. This was it. This time he's gone for good.

"Can't you keep him tonight? It'll teach him a lesson."

Silence.

Then, "Okay. I'll come to the station tomorrow. After work, around four."

"Tomorrow? After work? What are they keeping him for? What's he done?"

"Attempted robbery with an imitation gun. And he's dyed his hair green."

"Good God! He's just playing, Mike. This can't be real."

"It's real. Now go to sleep. At least we know where he is tonight."

When David's trial date came, Christine felt humiliated, could feel her shoulders slump as they walked into the courthouse.

“Will we have to talk?” she asked Mike.

“No. The defense attorney says that under the Young Offenders’ Act we just have to be here. All we need to do is look respectable and responsible.”

“Responsible? I don’t feel responsible. Just the opposite.”

“The opposite? What’s that? Irresponsible? You feel irresponsible?”

“I don’t know how I feel,” Christine almost whined.

“Come on, come on. Buck up,” Mike said, guiding her through the courtroom doors by the elbow.

David seems to have shrunk, Christine thought, trying to catch his eye as he sat in the defendant’s box. He was wearing his Harley sweatshirt and looking down at his folded hands. His green hair was now shaved into a Mohawk.

“Hi, David,” she wanted to whisper, but the heavy silence of the courtroom stilled her.

The judge sentenced David to two months in a youth correction facility. Neither Christine nor Mike were asked for their opinion. They left the courtroom without David making eye contact with them.

“Just as well,” Mike said as they made their way to the parking lot. “Now he can get some help and we can get some sleep.”

Christine said nothing.

I should have spoken up then, both to Mike and to the judge, Christine thinks, and hopes she hasn’t said it aloud in her jet-induced dozing. He must have thought we were glad to be rid of him. The visits to the detention facility, that particular one and the ones he landed in later, were always tense, cold, hesitant.

Christine and Mike started visiting separately, reasoning that then the boy would have more visits, but really disliking each other’s company by now.

“You were always too hard on him,” Christine would say.

“You never showed your love for him,” Mike, in turn, would blame her.

And now, a dozen years later, it is Christine who wants David’s love. Mike, in his new marriage, seemed to have forgotten his sometime son. David said his dad rarely answered his e-mails from China. While Christine, now retired, now lonely, waited for David’s bi-weekly letters. He asked her questions about teaching, told her about his Chinese girlfriend, asked her to send money so he could take some courses on instruction.

She sent the money with some hesitation. Is this all he wants me for, she wondered?

The pilot's voice, staticky over the P.A., announces that they would be landing in Beijing in fifteen minutes. Christine pulls out her lipstick, forgetting she had just reapplied it. "Will he notice that I've aged?" she wonders, and then wonders why that should concern her., Intellectually, she scorned her culture's worship of youth, but since her sixtieth birthday, her facial wrinkles, her thickening middle, her graying hair depressed her. That Mike had married a woman twenty-five years her junior didn't help. Though she tried to avoid the couple, she forced herself to smile at his new wife when they met at weddings and funerals, and, at the last occasion, to admire their baby.

Would David have changed much in two years? Though she'd urged him to mail photos of himself and his girlfriend, he never did. She remembers how shocked she was at his aged appearance the last time she visited him in jail, observing him through the thick glass of maximum security. He'd been using crystal meth, and just as she'd read in the papers, the drug had aged him. Long in the face anyway, his gauntness was accentuated by what looked like age lines. As a boy he liked to dress up as Frankenstein on Halloween. Now he would need little make-up she thought.

David was wearing the jail issue baggy orange shirt and pants. His 6'4" frame was slumped as the guard ushered him to a chair on the prisoners' side of the visiting area. Mother's and son's eyes met briefly as he sat down. "David," Christine said, and couldn't continue. David didn't raise his eyes. He started to sob, his whole body shaking. "David," Christine said again, and again stopped. She wished Mike were with her. Unable to reach out to David physically, she needed to hold someone's hand.

David's sobs finally subsided. Christine tried again: "David," she said. "I love you." She wasn't sure she meant it. She didn't really trust the power of that word. "I love you" wasn't a phrase used in her childhood home, and she never got used to hearing young people like Terry signing off their phone calls with "love ya!"

David kept staring down at his hands. Did he think she was lying? Did he feel that unlovable? They both remained silent. What was there to say?

"How's the food here?" Christine finally managed.

David raised his eyes and grinned. "A mother's main concern" she heard him think. Christine started talking about Terry, although David hadn't asked.

“Terry’s pregnant. I advised her to abort, but she, of course, became more determined to have the baby.”

“Who’s the father?”

“She says she doesn’t know.”

Silence again.

“Well at least you’ll have a grandchild,” David offered.

And this time Christine smiled. David knew she was soft on babies, and maybe even sensed her loneliness.

“Yes, and Mike’s baby will have a cousin...or niece or nephew I guess I should say.”

“Oh, Dad’s baby came?”

“Yes.”

Now they both looked down. She wondered if David even knew his dad’s new wife’s name. She wasn’t going to ask him.

The seat belt sign starts to flash and the flight attendant asks Christine to raise her seat upright. Christine always tensed up on a plane when it was about to land. This time, however, the tension of physical fear is subdued by her emotional anticipation. Will David be waiting? How will we greet each other?

The line up at the visa and passport check seems interminably long. People start chatting: “Are you here on business?” “No, I’m joining a tour,” she hears those behind her saying. When the woman in front of her asks Christine, Christine says, “I’m here to meet my son,” only realizing after she utters the words, their heavy underlying significance.

At last she has her bag and follows the exit directions to where a large crowd of Chinese blocked the gates, most of them holding up signs with names. Looking over their heads, she spots him: a head taller at least than all of them, he waves and grins--no, that isn’t a grin--a fully smiling handsome young man is waving and yelling, “Mom, Mom! This way....”

When they embrace, Christine feels like a petite teenager collapsed in the basketball captain’s arms.

“My God, David, you’ve grown! Or have I shrunk?”

“Neither, Mom--we just haven’t hugged for a long time.” And he grabs her bag in one hand, her hand in the other, and pulls her through the crowd.

Whatever he said to the taxi driver sounded like Chinese to Christine, and already she feels proud to be in a capable young man’s company.

David. David with a fashionable short haircut. David in a tan turtleneck sweater and nicely fitting jeans. David, looking like a real *mensch* at last. And for the moment, hers.

“We’re going to my apartment, Mom. You and I can catch up tonight and tomorrow you’ll meet Zhu.”

“But I thought you two lived together?”

“We do, but tonight Zhu and me’ll stay at her mom’s. You can rest. Get over your jet lag. But first I’ll take you out for a meal of Peking duck.”

“Oh David, I’m really not hungry. I’m too excited and tired to eat.”

“Okay. I’ve got some snacks at the apartment. We’ll go right there.”

Again she hears David speaking a language she can’t understand, redirecting the taxi driver.

“How’s Terry, Mom? Do you see her a lot?”

“Oh it’s complicated, David. Do you really want to hear?”

“Well, sure. She’s still my sister. And her baby--how old is she now?”

“She’s three. And very cute. But I don’t see her often. Terry leaves her with Dad’s new family. They’re better equipped to look after her. My little apartment is pretty boring for a three-year-old.”

“Oh, yeah. I guess with Dad having a baby himself....”

“Well, not quite by himself--but let’s leave that for now. How’s your work? And tell me about Zhu.”

“I’ll take you to my office tomorrow and Zhu’ll meet us there. She’s very nervous about meeting you. Hey, here’s my place....”

David pays the taxi driver before Christine has a chance to open her purse. She’s getting teary-eyed. David in charge! David responsible! Years of hang-dog victimhood shed. Okay, okay, she warns herself. Take it easy. You’re going to burst.

David’s apartment, small, but impressively clean, is in a new high rise. As far as Christine could see, all of Beijing consists of miles and miles of high rises. From his

nineteenth floor window mom and son look down at streams of traffic, bicycles in their lanes as thick as cars.

“Where’s Tiananmen Square from here?” Christine asks, wanting to show at least some knowledge of China.

“Over that way,” David points to his right. “We’ll go tomorrow--or the next day. We have lots of time. First, you’ve got to meet Zhu. We have a surprise for you.”

Surprised enough for one night, Christine says she has a headache. She needs to lie down. She needs to write in her journal. She needs to still her racing heart. She had been afraid to take this trip, and now already she wishes she had booked it for longer than a month.

At the door, David bends down and kisses her on the lips. They’re both embarrassed, break into smiles. My God, his teeth, Christine thinks. If he’d only stayed home and kept his appointments with the dentist they’d be straight right now. Maybe he can still have braces. Dental work is probably cheaper in China. I’ll offer to pay for it tomorrow, or the next day--there’ll be a right time.

“How do you say ‘good night’ in Mandarin?” Christine asks, now trying to stall his departure.

“*Wan-an.*”

“*Wan-an*, David,” Christine whispers. “See you tomorrow.”

Strange to lie down on David’s bed. David and Zhu’s bed really. Christine feels like Alice in the rabbit hole. Her whole world had changed, and now seems infused with the possibilities of transformation. A surprise tomorrow.... Christine reaches for the stuffed panda on the bedside table. Too tired to change into her nightgown, she curls up into a fetal position, and falls asleep hugging it.