

## THE RUNAWAY DAUGHTER'S RUNAWAY DAUGHTER

*by Amos Kwok*

Somebody asked if I've had a happy childhood. Sometimes I think the best answer to that is to look at Ginnie and say see for yourself. I love her and I hate her. She scares me, this daughter of mine¾she reminds me so much of myself sometimes scolding her it seems I'm scolding myself. I'd like to think I'm bringing her up better than my own mom did but when I look into her eyes, when I listen to the words she says no, yells, when I think about all the crazy things she's done, like run away, I think, my God, that's me.

I haven't seen her in five weeks. Every night I sit by the phone, TV at half volume, hoping she'll call, one eye on the main door hoping to catch the sound of her key scratching in the lock. Peter says my hope wouldn't bring her back, he says I have to live my life and not put it on hold. He's right. But how can I bear to be warm and comfortable, with my stomach filled while my baby paces the streets by herself? I watch the flickering people on TV, whispering to each other trying not to disturb my worry. Every little girl is her, every lost child is mine.

Peter comes down at midnight, dressed in his bathrobe and a cloak of sleep. C'mon up dear, it's no use sitting there. She'll be back when she's back. What a stupid thing to say. I don't move but he tugs and tugs at my sleeve so I stand up into his embrace and sob. I know, I know, he murmurs, his voice heavy with tears. He doesn't say more and I'm glad. He leads me up to bed but I lie there, eyes chasing the shadows on the ceiling, trying to decipher their soundless message. My cold clammy thoughts melt with the warmth of somnolence. Ginnie come here and stop biting your nails no really mum I tried to stop chewing my nails Ginnie come down and eat your breakfast...

\* \* \*

She thinks I'm some sort of robot, a lump of clay, moldable to her every whim and desire. Every morning she wants me to eat breakfast. I don't want to 'cause it makes my stomach sick and she always insists I make my bed before I leave. I just delay and move slowly in the mornings, taking an eternity to find matching socks until I hear her shout the time and I fly down the stairs and out the door, shoelaces still undone, running after Jack, seeing the bus coming down the street already. She's yelling behind me, telling me to tie up my hair but I like it free, so the wind can play with it. She can make me so mad sometimes and I scream at her tell her how stupid she is, how a room doesn't make a person. She makes me hang up the phone if I talk too long. And I hate and I hate and I hate listening to her nag and nag and nag about how I chew my fingernails how my room is littered with clothes how guests would think she's a terrible mother you are I say and she slaps me all she cares is what people think of her think of her through me she says all I ever do is make her life miserable and that is the only satisfaction I get out of life I tell her it's true but it's not there's so much more to my life than just her...

At night, when I go down for some water, I pass their door on tip toe so they can't hear me sneak by. Sometimes I hear nothing, sometimes I hear noises, sometimes I hear them talk. They close the door, lock it even, but they can't lock their thoughts in. The walls tell me what they say. At times I hear them voice their disappointment in *the child*. I think they mean Jack but I know it's me. Am I a thing, an animal to be talked about nameless?

\* \* \*

The dirt is soft around the rose bushes but I poke at it without enthusiasm. I keep glancing at the tree, blaming it for letting her run, letting her go. The rose bush is dying. There's not much I can do about it and even if there was I have no heart for it. I sit back on my stool and start to take off the soiled gardening gloves, tugging at each finger individually until the whole glove comes off. I look up and the tree occupies my whole vision. Among its bare winter branches is Ginnie's window and I can see one of the branches just touching its pane. Why did Ginnie run away?

It was foolish to climb down the tree. Couldn't she see that running away was dangerous? But all she has are her mother's eyes...

\* \* \*

There's a tree outside my window. I tell Jack we can use it but he's too scared. I tell him I'm going with or without you and at midnight he creeps into my room, his haversack stuffed with Arnott's biscuits. I laugh and he shushes me afraid mum and dad might hear. I tell him the walls are groaning so there's no chance. He pretends not to understand but I know he does, his eyes give him away. I step out onto the branch and it creaks but holds my weight. Jack tosses the haversack and clambers over. We go down the family tree and find ourselves at the bottom among the roots. We jog away. We've only covered ten streets when the arc beam bathes us in guilty light. We run but pick a wrong lane and end up in cul-de-sac with no way out. The cop's a big man and I tell him some men were chasing us. He doesn't believe and comes closer. Jack starts to cry so I start yelling. There really is some guy chasing us why are you hunting us you shit touch us and you'll regret it. But his arms envelope me and Jack doesn't even move.

Dad storms into the station. I can tell he's mad, his eyes are bloodshot. His shirttail hangs out and mum's chasing him, trying to tuck it in for him. Why does she care what he looks like at two in the morning. They come over and the sergeant points in our direction. Jack starts to whimper but I only take out some cookies from his pack. Mum comes over and slaps it out of my hand. What do you think you're doing. Running away can't you see are you blind everyone is looking at us a thousand eyes with a thousand opinions mum shifts away from the eyes I know she's uncomfortable now I will not have you take that tone of voice with me young lady I take any tone I damn well please it feels good saying that mum's all red and she picks me up by the ear Mrs. Harris the sergeant starts but mum pulls me out of the station without another word.

\* \* \*

After the first time, I never expected her to try it again. Surely she understood her life had to change after attempting that stunt? But she became worse, became abusive with her mouth. Peter gave up I think and I'm glad 'cause his hands hurt more than his mouth. I tried tenderness but she thought I'd become weak and took advantage. I tried to be firm, making her stay in her room so long that when I let her out, I was shocked to see this ghost float into the living room eyes dark, face pale, lips trembling with hunger. Or anger? I tried kindness and bought her the hamsters, just like the ones I had as a little girl and they were like a drug, calming her, making her speak to me, even to Peter. But she grew lazy and neglected them and no amount of nagging could make her clean their cage and I had to take action.

\* \* \*

I go around the yard slinking from tree to tree, avoiding the windows, hugging the bushes, moving in spurts. When I round the front lawn I press myself against the side wall of the house and slither like a shadow, ducking under the windows till I come to the back yard. No one is around, least of all her. I see her stool and gloves, her little shovel and a bag of peat. Probably having a drink. I gulp air and make a dash for the tool shed at the far end. Sliding the door open I jump in and slide it shut again. I'm sure the scraping of metal has alerted everyone in the neighbourhood. I press myself against the door, listening. I don't hear my name. Only then do I smell the air in the shed, a mixture of rust, peat, hay, hamster and pee. I step over the lawnmower, the rusty shovel, the rake with two prongs missing and other devices used to torture the lawn. I kneel in front of the double-storey cage, its metal bars painted white but now flaking with rust, the connecting clear plastic tunnel between both stories caked in moss and dirt. The smell of urine is very strong now. I should clean it. Tomorrow. Chester, Walnut, I call out. There's no stirring in the cage, no rattle of bars, no disturbance in the wood chips stained with hamster pee. The blue treadmill is still, the feed bottle drips, the food tray untouched since last night. Chester, Walnut. I tug the cage door, raising the stiff

metal, stretch my hand in. I avoid the dark little pellets and fluff up the wood chips. Chester, Walnut. A warning signal buzzes in my head. I struggle for plausible reasons to explain to my panic. My fingers sweep and push the wood chips to the side, heaping them up, pushing most out through the cage bars and onto the cold dirt floor. The plastic floor of the second storey is stained with my neglect.

I stand up my body is rigid stock still my mind running through the corridors searching for the thoughts to think the words to yell my throat is tight I can hear me heart in my head feel it behind my eyes my hands my chest I'm hardly breathing now my fingers are cold so cold and my skin is tight gripping me squeezing all my organs I'm going to burst I snap around and rush for the door trip over the rake tear the skin on my left palm damn it I jump up and pay attention to the floor get to the door and yank it refuses to budge I kick it I kick it I kick it and there's a dent then forcing calmness I slide it on its rusty tracks it opens only half way 'cause it wouldn't slide past the dent I made and there's a bloodstain on it too I march across the lawn trample on the camellias and open the screen door and the back door mum I yell she's not in the kitchen I go into the living room she's laughing over the phone mum what did you do with Chester and Walnut she lowers the phone calmly one hand capping the mouthpiece I let them go they were filthy and the shed was smelling of urine then as if she'd told me the time she returns to her conversation Elaine so sorry to keep you waiting my daughter's just been misbehaving I stare at her a roar starting in my guts like a maniacally shaken bottle of coke and it forces itself up my stomach up my windpipe pass my lungs fills my eyes right to the tips of my hair and I'm tingling as the words burst you shit why did you do that you evil shit mum hangs up in disbelief horror racing over her face how dare you yell at me especially when I'm on the phone I cap both ears with both hands and scream senseless sounds created by angry fizz she storms over and swings at me smacking the sound out of my lungs I'm bawling on the floor saying shit shit over and over and I back away as she advances go to your room and don't you dare come down till your father comes home I get up smearing more blood on the carpet on the back of the armchair and look to the main door don't even think of it missy and takes a step closer I run to my room I'll show her I stamp on each step willing it to break but none do and go into

my room I slam the door and lock it rush over to the window and yank the window up the branches have all been pruned I can't reach the tree damn her...

\* \* \*

I sit in the centre of my bed and sneeze. The pillow stuffing tickles my nose, maybe I shouldn't have shredded it. Or the doona. I can still see some of its down feathers in the air, stunned. The wallpaper hangs in shame, the bare wall naked, covered with blotches of dried glue. My desk is bare, its top cleared of the lamp, the dictionary and the plywood finish. I feel a bit sorry for my tiger though. I yanked out its belly which roars a tiger roar when you squeeze it. The clothes I got for Christmas I'll never miss, they're the wrong colour to begin with. I hate pink and I've told her a million times but she never listens. I'm hungry. My eyes wander about the mess piled up like a leaf heap on the floor to see if there's a scrap of food in the mess of clothes and books and furniture. Nothing there so I dig my jeans pockets and produce a very battered and very soft mint. I devour it using my tongue to scrape at the little bits stuck to my palate. The wrapper is crushed in my fist and I'm wondering whether to eat it or not. I don't want to go down to look in the fridge, it'll mean saying sorry and I'm not 'cause she had no right to throw out my hamsters just 'cause they peed. Every creature does it, she's such an idiot. My head feels hot from thinking about her I should be doing something just to let her know she can't go around killing my pets that bitch I ought to kill her can't wait to see her face when she opens the door and sees the great big pile of anger sitting on my floor but that's my stuff and I know she wouldn't get me new clothes and that Thompson cow will punish me when I don't bring my books tomorrow I won't go to school then I won't go and be humiliated by yet another bossy woman at least Dad hits me and leaves it there but mum nags and nags and drones and drones I won't live this life any more I can't stand it I know I'll go like last time only I'll go now and hide and be careful be a checkout chick and get money to live by but I have to distract them or they'll find me like the last time yes that's it I see the zippo Andy gave me pouncing on it I flick back the cap with a clink run a thumb over the lighter

wheel a spark jumps the flame appears the smell of lighter fluid is heady the flame lights a smile and I toss it at the pile the flame dances quivering then touches several pages from my English book and they curl like an invisible hand was crushing it all gone in a minute but the flame having eaten grows larger moves on to the next meal my stupid pink blouse I watch mesmerised until the bottom of the pile is gone and my hair feels singed I go to the window and hoist it making the flames jump higher damn I forgot about the branches but no way to the door now so I perch on the ledge and jump fingers grasp the nearest branch it comes off in my hand I fall catch the next branch it snaps too and the next and the next and I'm winded the branch hits me across the chest breaking my fall my brains too I fall some more and I'm flat out on the ground everything is swimming ow ow ow my leg my arm my head hurts I'm bleeding somewhere my back feels wet I can see orange light dancing from my window now get up get up and I crawl to the front yard standing I test my ankles they work but I'm in pain got to run got to run got to run...

\* \* \*

The phone rings and I jump. Peter lowers the newspaper, his eyes searching for mine. I stare at him wide-eyed, feeling the pulsing of my heart in the throat, my hand over the mouth tries to calm the quiver in my lips. He lifts up the receiver. Hello? Oh, hang on. He turns to me. It's your brother. I go over, take the receiver, press it to my ear. Hello Jack. No, no. Haven't heard from her. Thought your phone call might be her. No. I'm as fine as I can be considering the circumstances. Yes, yes. I'm trying. Of course I remember Jack. But that was different. You saw what she did to her room. I don't know what Peter and I have done wrong. What can I do but wait. Yes, all right. Thank you Jack. I love you too. Thanks for calling.

Ends

© 1994 Amos Kwok