Lions in the Street

Stanley Tran
Carnegie Mellon University

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.cmu.edu SHR

Published In
The Sloping Halls Review, 5.
When I was eight years old, my cat died. His name was Wondei, “Emperor,” in Cantonese, and he was the most beautiful cat in the world. I had him for as long as I could remember. Wondei had the prettiest golden fur, and he always protected me from the monsters that I thought lurked in the night. But one day Mr. Lau, who owned the fish market downstairs from where we lived, found Wondei run over in the alley where trucks unload crates of seafood.

“Flat cat not good mouse catcher,” said my mother.

“Paul, do not cry for animal,” my father told me as he lit two sticks of incense that he put in front of the picture of my grandparents. “Only Americans cry for animal. Americans stupid like that. They treat animal like people. But animal not like people. Animal dirty.”

But Wondei wasn’t dirty. The cuttlefish and squids that Mr. Lau sold were dirty. Mr. Lau, who smelled like fish all the time, was dirty. But Wondei wasn’t dirty. He had beautiful, clean, golden fur.

Wondei had left the apartment through an open window in the room that I shared with my older brother, Jay. Jay had opened the window too wide that night and forgotten to close it. He was much older than I was, in high school, so I had counted on him to be on top of things. I was so mad that I didn’t speak to him for a while and I stopped playing catch with him after school. I also didn’t want to believe that Wondei had died.

So, Jay took me to the zoo one day because he wanted to cheer me up and he knew that I liked the zoo. We took the subway, and when we got there, we went straight to see the lions, which I liked the most.

“Why did you leave the window open?” I asked my brother as we leaned against the railing.

“I’m sorry. It was an accident. I just forgot,” he replied as he looked down at me.

“You shouldn’t have left the window open,” I said with a frown. I looked at the lions, who were all sleeping. Their hair was brown and dirty looking, not like Wondei’s beautiful, golden fur. I could have sworn that when Jay took me to the zoo for the first time, I looked at the lions and saw beautiful gold. We had just seen the giraffes, and we had laughed at their long necks. Jay pointed at the lions and told me about their courage and strength.
But at this moment, their fur was dark and dirty. “It wasn’t that hot. You didn’t have to open the window that much.”

“It was an accident. I didn’t know it would happen,” Jay said, this time without looking at me.

Two of the lions got up and started wrestling. They snarled and pawed at each other.

“Was it so hard to close the stupid window?”

“Paul, it was an accident.”

One of the bigger lions with a mane woke up and walked over to another lion, who didn’t have a mane. It sniffed the other lion for a bit and then got on its back, like it was going for a piggyback ride. My brother took my hand and led me away.

We went to the building where the night animals were. It was very dark inside, and an eerie red light shone on the bats and foxes that were kept behind the glass. “This glass is good because it can’t be opened. So the bats can’t fly away,” I said as I held on to my brother’s hand. But I was still a little scared of the darkness. My brother wasn’t any good at scaring away the monsters that I thought certainly roamed the streets of Chinatown as we slept. He was only good at snoring, and even though he slept only a few feet away, I never felt comfortable until Wondei sat on my bed and watched over me.

We looked at a small, yellow cat with spots like a leopard. The plaque said that it was an ocelot. I told Jay that he should ask our parents to get another cat. “They won’t listen to me. I tried,” I said. He paused for a moment and we saw the ocelot hide behind a log.

“It won’t work,” he told me, “Ma says that there are no more mice, so we don’t need another cat.”

“Then I’ll find Wondei!” I told him as I let go of his hand. Going to the zoo didn’t cheer me up at all.

“Paul, you’re not going to find him. And I’m sorry that I left the window open,” said Jay as we walked out.

The next day, my mother took me with her as she did her shopping. She needed to buy tea leaves from Jong’s Herb Shop. There was a pet store next door, so I begged her to let me look inside while she talked with Jong. “No speak to gweloo,” she told me, referring to the white tourists. “And no go into road, or you be like Wondei.”

The inside of the pet shop was very musty, and there were cages and cages of birds everywhere. Tiny songbirds sang out chirpy tunes and larger parrots squawked in response to them. There were no cats, but bags of cat food could be found next to an aquarium full of lizards. I thought about how I used to feed Wondei bits of the leftover meat from our dinner. He would thank me by purring and rubbing against my leg. When he was done eating the food given to him, he would meow until I gave him more. Then he would let me pick him up and pet his soft fur for as long as I wanted.
When I turned around, there was a lady standing there, looking at me. She had long, golden hair. "Ni how ma?" she asked me. "Did I say that right? Is that how you say hello?"

I didn't understand Mandarin, I only knew Cantonese, so I just smiled and nodded as I stared at her shiny hair.

"My name is Lisa. What's your name?"

"Ming," I said, lying but feeling proud of the fact that I had kept my true identity a secret. I knew what my mother had just told me, but I couldn't help talking with the lady. She had such pretty hair, like Wondei's fur. And it would be okay to talk with her if I didn't tell her who I really was.

"How old are you, Ming?"

I held out eight fingers, and I didn't take my eyes away from her flowing hair.

"I go to the university. I take language classes and I paint pictures."

I smiled and nodded.

"Sometimes I paint pictures of animals. You like animals, don't you? Oh, you must like them because you're in here."

I was getting very good at smiling and nodding.

"Do you have a pet?" she asked.

"Yes, I have a cat," I told her, knowing that it was a lie, too, but still trying to believe that it was true.

"What's her name?"

"His name is Wondei. It means Emperor." Then I realized that I should have made up a fake name to protect Wondei's identity, too.

"Are you looking for a toy to give to Wondei?"

I told her that I was, but also that I didn't have any money. So she said she'd pay for it. All I had to do was pick one out. I looked at the cat toys and decided that I liked the ball with two big eyes painted on it. She bought it and handed it to me. "It was so nice meeting you, Ming. I have to go now, but I hope Wondei likes his new toy. Jai jian!"

I was mesmerized as I watched the sun shine on her golden hair as she went out the door. The cat toy squeaked when I stuffed it into my pocket.

I carried the ball-shaped cat toy around with me for an entire week. I would squeeze it, making it squeak, and hope that the noise would attract Wondei to me. I squeezed it at school. I squeezed it outside of the Lau Fish Market. I snuck into the alley where Wondei supposedly died and squeezed it there. I squeezed it outside of Jong's Herb Shop and outside of the pet store.

I checked every room in the apartment thoroughly except for the room where the pictures of my grandparents were kept. My parents had told me before that I had no reason to be in there. But I did squeeze the cat toy in my parents' room, in the dining room, and in the kitchen. I opened the cabinets and drawers to make sure that Wondei could hear me squeeze the ball if he was hiding in there.

Every night, before going to sleep, I would lie in bed and squeeze the
ball until my brother told me to stop. He would actually allow me to make the squeaking noises for quite a while before telling me to quit. Then I would squeeze it hard one last time in defiance. But I couldn't fall asleep afterwards without Wondei. I stayed awake to make sure that there were no monsters under my bed until I got so tired that I finally fell asleep in spite of my fears. And that was long after Jay had begun to snore.

There was a small sandlot playground on the corner of the intersection next to the Lau Fish Market. On the eve of Chinese New Year, I sat on the swings and squeezed the ball over and over again. I looked around for my cat, but couldn’t see Wondei coming from anywhere. I noticed that all the stores had decorations on the windows. Pictures of China were hung up, as were red posters with Chinese writing them on them. Some of the words were handwritten with black ink while others were printed in gold.

Before I started to hate my brother, we used to play catch in the playground after school. We would start off by throwing the ball to each other over the swing set, then we’d run around and throw the ball again, moving farther and farther apart each time. Once I accidentally broke a window in Mr. Lau’s shop, and Jay took the blame for it because he didn’t want me to get in trouble. He had to work in the fish market until he could pay for the window. Everyday for a month he came home smelling like shrimp.

I got off the swing and started running around the playground, squeezing the ball as I did so, trying to get Wondei to notice me. I started to smell something funny after a while, so I checked the bottom of my shoe and saw what I had stepped on. “Oh no! Poo!” I screamed. “Poo! Poo! Poo! Poo!” I ran around the playground again and again in an effort to get it off my shoe. I finally stopped running and screaming “Poo!” after I had exhausted myself. I realized that what I had been doing was fruitless.

When I went back inside and took off my shoes, I saw that my brother and my mother were in the kitchen preparing the New Year’s Eve dinner. I went into the room where we kept the pictures of my grandparents, knowing that it was the only room left to be checked. Many black and white pictures hung on the walls. The pictures were all of my grandfather and grandmother in China, standing in front of some important looking building, or in front of some grand river or pasture. I never knew them because they died before I was born, and I wondered if either of them had ever had a cat. One large, framed photograph rested on a shelf. Its frame had a golden border. In front of this was a red cup with two sticks of incense burning, an ivory colored teapot, and two tiny, ivory colored tea cups. On each side of the photograph hung a scroll with Chinese writing on it. I felt as if I didn’t belong in the room, as if there was nothing for me there. All it had were pictures and words that I didn’t understand.

The picture frame interested me, however, and I wondered if the tea cups were filled, so I tried to take a closer look at them. But the shelf was too high. I jumped up to look, but still couldn’t get a clear view of the tops of the
Lions in the Street

cups. After putting the cat toy back into my pocket, I grabbed onto the shelf to pull myself up. Suddenly the shelf gave in and everything came crashing down on me. The teapot broke on the floor and spilled green tea everywhere. The picture frame cracked, and the incense and cups were mixed into the mess on the floor. I didn’t know what to do but stare at the ground and wait for my mother to come running into the room. She did, a moment later.

“Aiii-Ah! Paul!” she screamed. “What you do?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I couldn’t look at her. Frantically, I tried to pick everything up. “It was an accident.”

“No! You go to room now!” she ordered me as she reached for the photograph.

“I’m sorry, it was an accident. I didn’t mean to.”

“Go now, quickly! No dinner for you! Go now! Shoo! Shoo!”

All I could say after that was that it was an accident. For a moment, I thought that how I felt must have been how Jay felt when he told me that it was an accident that he had left the window open. My eyes started to get watery, so I ran towards my room. The last thing I heard before getting there was Jay telling my mother that I didn’t mean to do it.

My face was in my pillow, but I heard the footsteps approaching. I thought my father had finished eating and decided to come scold me when Jay walked in with a bowl of soup. “You can have my soup. I don’t want it,” he said as he handed it to me and sat on the edge of my bed.

I took it without saying anything, but was glad that he came in. I wasn’t very hungry but I drank the soup because he had taken the trouble of bringing it to me.

“Pa will give you a long lecture, no doubt,” he said. “But don’t worry, he’ll get sidetracked and start talking about China.”

I nodded as I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I told him that I didn’t mean to make a mess. He comforted me by saying that accidents happen, but everything would be all right later.

“I just wanted to look into the cups,” I said.

“They’re filled with tea so Grandmother and Grandfather can have tea in Heaven.”

I wiped my mouth some more even though it was dry, and put my head back into my pillow.

“Don’t worry, everything will be all right. Tomorrow is the Chinese New Year. All the bad memories can be forgotten, and the future will bring lots of luck.”

He probably thought that I was trying to sleep, but I was listening to him carefully, and I counted his footsteps as he walked quietly to the door.

The next day, after my father had given me a lecture on proper behavior, he and my mother took me to see the Chinese New Year celebrations. They told me that we would meet up with Jay later. The streets were crowded with
people from our community, and the parade of acrobats and people dressed in bright, traditional Chinese robes passed by. They held staffs that had firecrackers attached to the ends, and the sound of firecrackers could be heard everywhere. People said, "Kung Hei Fat Choi!", wishing everyone the best of luck in the new year. I looked up at my parents and saw how proud they were of this day. I smiled at them, yet wasn't sure that I felt the same way.

We walked around so much that I didn't notice we had made our way back to the Lau Fish Market. A large crowd had already formed to watch the Lion Dance. There were two lions. One was jade in color, but the other one, which I was excited to see, was in gold. There had never been a Lion Dance in front of Mr. Lau's store in the years before, but they stood there now. Each lion's head covered the upper body of a whole person, and another person formed the rump and back legs. The heads of the lions were giant, ornate masks that didn't look like real lion heads at all. The golden lion had large, golden eyes and a bright, yellow mane. Its body, which was a golden, silk cloth, covered the person who formed the rump, and only allowed the person's legs to be seen. The other lion had a beautiful, jade skin.

I couldn't wait to see what was going to happen. I pulled my parents closer to the front of the crowd when I heard a gong being hit rhythmically. The gold lion began to move, and then the jade one. Firecrackers popped. Crack! Crack! Crack! The lions looked at each other, winked their eyes, and advanced towards the prize that hung under the store sign, a cabbage. Crack! Crack! Crack! Gong! The sound of the gong became louder and the lions began to fight. The gold lion turned its body and gave a powerful kick. The jade lion rolled on the ground and then leaped into the air. Crack! Crack! Gong! Gong! They twisted around each other, cut each other off from reaching the cabbage, and dodged each other's blows. More firecrackers could be heard. Crack! Crack! Crack! Gong! Gong! The jade lion lunged for the gold one, bearing its teeth. Suddenly, the gold lion jumped onto the back of the jade lion and grabbed the cabbage. The crowd cheered and I raised my arms in triumph.

When the dancers took off the lion costumes, I saw that my brother was the one under the gold lion's head! I ran to him as the crowd began to disperse and he let me hold up the head. There were many golden jewels surrounding the face. I pulled on the strings inside of it to make the eyes wink and the mouth move. Jay helped me lift it over my head. I looked at him through the eyeholes, pulled out the cat toy that was in my pocket, and asked him if he could put the ball on the shelf next to the photograph of my grandparents so Wondei could play with it in Heaven. He nodded and took it from me.

I held the lion head over me, shuffled my feet a bit, and then danced my own Lion Dance.