

Chinese Memories I - Where are you, Gray-Gray?

By Olivia Xiaoyu Wang

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Along Ding-Yin Street, where an intersecting street makes a T, a huge pile of garbage always accumulated. That's the official trash dump for the neighborhood. Although there are containers lined against the street wall, trash was always overflowing to the outside. Every time I had to walk by it, I always pinched my nose tightly, sneaking along the opposite side of the street, almost shrinking into the street wall so as to pass it.

On one of the dark cloudy days, I hastened my steps to pass the trash dump to get home. But this girl, and whatever she was doing, caught my attention and eventually stopped me in my track. Her back was facing me. She wore white short sleeve shirt with a green military issued skirt. Her yellowish hair slipped against her back as she ducked her head into one of the trash containers. As I watched more closely, she was actually standing on a deserted wooden crate. In her hand that was reaching into the dumpster, it appeared to be something wooden too.

"What, what are you doing there?" She looked so neat, that's why I had to intervene. "Oh, me?" She turned around and inspected me, her fair complexion flush with sweats. As if made a decision, she said, "come and give me a hand. A kitten fell into the dumpster."

"A Kitten?" I ran forward, then stopped, resuming my nose pinching position, and finally stepped towards her again.

She waved to me impatiently. I gave in and climbed onto the wooden crate too. The dumpster was mostly empty and I could see a gray little fur ball hunched all the way in the back corner, the girl's wooden stick barely long enough to reach her.

"How can you get the kitten out with a stick?" I gave her a look and started to investigate my trash surroundings. There are some dirty ropes lying around and some more wooden crates, broken. I jumped down and tied the ropes snugly around a crate, all the time thinking how to wash my hands afterwards. After lowering it into the dumpster, I helped the girl gently push the shivering kitten into the crate. And the crate was airborne and soon enough the tiny little kitten was in our hands.

Subconsciously I looked at my hands and then the kitten, wondering which was dirtier. But the little fuzzy fur ball was so cute that I forgot my hygiene standard. Her eyes were a sparkly jet black color, gray hair all over her except for her nose tip and a triangular white spot right under her chin.

"We shall call you Hui-Hui (Gray-Gray)." Then the girl said to me, "By the way, I am Yung-Hong (Forever-Red)".

"My name is Xiaoyu (Morning-Feather). We should give her some food. She looked scared."

Yung-Hong smiled, "Yes, but a bath first."

I hurriedly agreed.

"Come on, my house is right there." She pointed to the huge red doors with giant steps and two lions guarding on each side.

I stopped before proceeding, "You live here?"

"For now."

"So your family's military."

"Mmm..."

"I have never been here before. You guys don't like visitors. The doors are always closed during the day."

"That's because nobody knows anybody here. The residents here change all the time. That's why you don't see visitors or neighbors here."

"How long have you been here?"

"A couple of weeks, I think."

"How long are you staying?"

"I don't know. I never know... But I hope, forever." She gave me a brilliant smile and took my arm. We walked up the steps, opened the red doors and then steps into the grand court yard. It was rectangular with slate colored brick flooring. groomed potted plants surrounding two big trees on the north side.

I could not tell immediately how many homes are here. The center north one seemed to be huge with multiple rooms on both sides. The east and west sides could have a few homes each. We went to the first door on the west side. The rooms were much larger in size than the ones I lived in. The center was a living room, tall ceilings with carved wood beams. The furniture, were, how do you call it, "mission style". Mahogany colored sofa chairs and coffee table, strong, bare and not inviting, maybe because only one of them had any cushion on it. The grand room felt empty and cold, despite the reddish color of the furniture. I kept thinking something's missing, but could not figure out what.

"Come with me," she led me into the room to the left. Also very big, and also used as a kitchen, just like my home used to be until I turned school age, at which time that room was turned into a bedroom plus study, after my mom and dad built out another tiny kitchen from where the patio used to be.

Once we stepped into the kitchen, we were faced with many stacked crates along the opposite wall. The fragrance gave away contents of apples and if you looked closer, some apples actually peeped at you.

She walked to the left, to the big water jug, just like every house, opened it and grunted “Oh, pepper nickels.” I went to look. The jug had about two inches of water left on the bottom which would be very difficult for either of us to get to. She grabbed the bucket, “Wait for me.” “I am coming too.” I followed her into the court yard again, helping her get water from the faucet by the trees and carried it back. We poured most of it to the water jug, the remainder to a big aluminum bowl. Now I realized that Gray-Gray had been sitting on my right shoulder. Yung-Hong poured some hot water into the bowl too and got soap. She tried to lift Gray-Gray from me, but Gray-Gray got scared and her finger nails locked tightly onto my shirt.

“Can I have a towel?” I asked.

She fetched a white towel with blue-stripes, another military issue. I dipped it in the bowl and rang it half dry and gently covered the warm towel on Gray-Gray’s little body. She quieted down, enjoying the damp warmth, trustingly lay down her head into the groove of my neck. Yung-Hong watched as if mesmerized.

I put the warm-towel-wrapped Gray-Gray gently into her lap. She held her still in a trance.

Then Gray-Gray moved to get out of the towel.

“I think the towel is getting cold”. I tested the water in the bowl, poured a little more hot water in. This time Gray-Gray obliged. She had the most sparkly black eyes I had ever seen. I thought cats had green, blue or yellow eyes before. Hers were really like mine. They shone innocently against her gray hair – now I noticed some white and black hair mixed within, wondering how she was going to look when she grew up. She flipped over in the shallow water exposing a little of her tummy, sticking out her tongue to lick her paws. I took it as a cue to rub her tummy with soapy water. She meowed with satisfaction. Yung-Hong looked on with amazement. But I knew I was trying to figure out something too, at every wave of Yung-Hong’s sandy hair.

Then Gray-Gray straightened up. I guessed she was done. I dried her off with another blue-striped towel and put her on the kitchen table, which was quite small and lower than a school desk. Gray-Gray walked to the edge, one measuring look and bravely jumped to the floor and started wandering around.

“Let her be.” We said simultaneously and smiled at each other at the synchrony.

“Here, apples. I hope you like them.” Yung Hong put a big one into my hand, half red and half green, a small leaf on the stem. It glistened in the afternoon sun. “Thank you. It looks gorgeous.” I admired it. “There’s load more.” She pointed to the crates stacked high along the southern wall. Now I suddenly figured out what I was thinking every time I look at Yung-Hong’s hair. I bit deeply into the flesh of the apple and let the sweet and tart juice sink in to the roots of my teeth, a sensation so rare. “Come to my house tomorrow, I have something to share with you too. Bring Gray-Gray.”

A light-hearted whistle blew in the yard, only to bring a cloud over Yung-Hong’s face. “Dinner is here.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing.” She went to open the door. A young soldier, only a few years older than us, came in with a big wooden box. He opened it and unloaded four dishes onto the living room dining table, then left.

“I should go now.” I picked up Gray-Gray to pet her.

“I know.” Yung-Hong said gloomily.

“Gray-Gray will keep me company here.” She said. Then all of a sudden, she became unsure and looked at me anxiously.

“Of course.” I handed Gray-Gray to her. She seemed relieved.

“When do you get off school?”

“3:30 pm.”

“I live in #9. Come to my place at 3:30.”

“You bet.” She beamed.

When I got home, Mom just started cooking. I went to help her and told her about Yung-Hong, Gray-Gray, her house and the apples... I asked if Mom could make an extra black sesame cake that night. I saved mine and the extra one for Yung-Hong’s visit.

The next day after school, I ran all the way to my house. Yung-Hong waved to me as I approached, Gray-Gray in her arms. She jumped down to greet me.

I made 3 milks from evaporated powder and put out 3 plates, two has black sesame cakes, one has a slice of toasted bun. I soaked the bun in milk and pushed it in front of Gray-Gray. I can hear Gray-Gray smacking her lips as she enjoyed the bun. Yung-Hong did not care about the milk, which to me was a luxury that my parents diligently obtained from Dong Bei Province so their two daughters would have the protein and calcium they needed, as both of us had passed the age to receive the half pound milk quota for babies and toddlers. But Yung-Hong loved the black sesame cake just as I expected. She devoured it in no time.

“The black sesame will make your hair darker and shinier. So does milk.” I said.

“Really? Ok, then I will start drinking milk. They deliver it to my house every week. I didn’t like the taste. But I will try now.” She started sipping the milk, “your mom’s so good. I’ve never had cakes like this. Yum!”

“She makes a batch every week. She said she will make an extra for you from now on.”

“Really, thank you. So you told her about me.”

“course. She said you can come by anytime and join us for dinner if your parents allow.”

There’s that cloud again.

“What’s wrong? Tell me.”

“Nothing..... Well, around dinner time I will know whether my parents will be home or not. I haven’t seen my dad for weeks now. My mom comes home at night if I don’t see her before dinner time. But I often had fallen asleep. I remember she tucked me in, but in the morning she was gone again.”

“But she does come home every night. Right?”

Yung-Hong gazed vacantly: “I think so. She holds me in bed sometimes while I sleep. But I am not sure.” I saw tears creeping up her eyes.

“Well, you can certainly spend evenings with us if your parents are not going to be there. Ask your mom when you see her... No, I got an idea. Let’s write her a note together.”

This was what we came up with.

“Dear Mama, I met a new friend, Xiaoyu. She is really nice and her family asks if I could have dinner with them when you are not at home for dinner. But if you are home, I would stay with you. I love you. Yung-Hong”

This was my part: “Hello, Mrs. Liu, my name is Xiaoyu and I live in #9 Ding-Yin Street. My Mom asks if you will allow Yung-hong to have dinner with us. Of course, my mom would be delighted if you and Officer Liu come join us as well. Sincerely, Xiaoyu.”

Thursday afterschool, as I rushed to my door, I saw Yung-Hong waving the note to me excitedly. “My mom said yes! She won’t be home this evening.”

“She won’t be home and you are happy?” I teased her, but immediately realized that I shouldn’t have. I quickly changed topic and invited her to see the food my mom had started preparing – boiled eggs stewed with roast pork, sweet and sour cabbages, glass noodles.

“Wow, Superb! Did you guys get eggs on the black market?”

“Yeah, but don’t shout. We cannot use up our rice and flour quota unlike most other families. So mom used these certificates to exchange for eggs and meat.”

“How about the glass noodles? I haven’t seen them since I left Dong Bei Province.”

“Ah, I think that’s where they got them. My dad has a relative to smuggle things from Dong Bei.”

Yung-Hong fell in love with my mom even before she met her. When mom walked in the door from a busy day of work, Yung-Hong was especially keen on making mom feel how helpful and pleasant as a guest she was. While mom cooked, we washed and chopped vegetables, set up the dining area and dishes. Soon daddy came home and the room was filled with fragrance of food, warmth and laughter. It was almost bed time that Dad and I walked Yung-Hong home.

Yung-Hong became our frequent dinner guest over the next few months. After pleading letters from Mrs. Liu, my mom started to accept eggs, apples and some times whole boxes of cooked dinner from Yung Hong when she came over for dinner. Mom reworked the food Yung-Hong brought and made them scrumptious. I could see that my cheeks were starting to plump up. Gray-Gray had been shedding her gray baby fur and gradually putting on a slick black coat. But the changes were more pronounced in Yung-Hong, her hair was no longer yellow, but now dark and shone like jet stones and her fair complexion became rosy pink. Most importantly, she became, happy.

On one autumn night, the wind started to pick up. A few leaves dangled in the wind and twirled downward as we heard the hurried foot steps approaching our barely started dinner party. Mrs. Liu, in full military uniform, opened our door. Yung-Hong jumped in her seat. Despite her obvious gratitude towards my family, Mrs. Liu had no time for pleasantries.

“Yung-Hong, you have to come with me quickly.” She said in an anxious tone.

Yung-Hong’s look reminded me of Gray-Gray hiding in the trash container. She came over to hug me. Her arms locked so tightly that I lost my train of thought. An overwhelming sadness permeated my body from her. I could not comprehend it. But Yung-Hong seemed to know what was happening. She choked as she was dragged away with Gray-Gray in hands, “I will take good care of Gray-Gray. I will always remember you. Please don’t forget me...” her lingering words in the chilly wind.

That night, a long, shrieking cat meow woke me up. I rolled up and asked my parents if I could go outside to see if it was Gray-Gray. They said no, just as all of a sudden there seemed to be many cats shrieking and running outside.

I fell half asleep. In my dreams, I could see Gray-Gray’s jet black eyes hauntingly turned into Yung-Hong’s eyes.

Again, I was woken up by heart-piercing shrieks. The morning sunlight blinded me as I ran toward the sound. I saw Gray-Gray struggling in my neighbor Uncle Su’s hands at the doorway toward the street. I ran after them. Before I could stop him, Uncle Su threw Gray-Gray onto a passing-by truck carrying red bricks.

“No!” I kept running after Gray-Gray, despite Uncle Su’s shouting of something like wild cats’ infestation. The truck was fast and becoming distant. Gray-Gray’s meowing faded as her gray figure against the red bricks became a blur in my eyes. I seemed to hear her cry, “.....I will always remember you. Please don’t forget me.”

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