

Stray
by Yinan Cao

She has gone astray
Away from the warm glow
Of beckoning windows
Far away

She is just a stray
Underneath a streetlamp
The child of alleys
Far away

Fireworks bloom and wilt, lanterns sway in the breeze. Neon signs flash red and green, streets a slow glowing river. Firecrackers go off in the distance, Cantopop blares from restaurants. Car doors slam and horns screech, the sharp tinge of gasoline infiltrating the inviting smell of a good meal. The night is alive.

She watches the people more than anything. Parents shoving their child out of the taxi, then racing back to help *their* parents out. A young woman stares at the fireworks, while her boyfriend stares at her, just as much awe in his eyes. A little girl sits on her father's shoulders, holding a candied hawthorn skewer. Two boys throw firecracker pellets against the ground, laughing as they pop. A woman draws hearts in the air with a sparkler, but they always fade into the night air before she can complete them. Families gather in crowded restaurants, feasting on roasted pork and steamed fish. Grandparents shove red envelopes into the hands of grinning toddlers, and adults wrestle for the bill. As a wise someone once said, rich or poor, everyone goes home for Chinese New Year.

The plastic table creaked under the weight of her father, who leaned in to pick up a piece of red roasted pork with his chopsticks.

"How's college?"

"It's alright."

"Alright then."

She picked at the rice in her bowl, watching her mother pour another glass of cheap wine. The Spring Festival Gala played on their TV, which showed everything with a blue tint. TFBoys were performing their new single, dancing a choreography almost robotic in its synchronicity.

“What ‘fresh talent’! Brainless plastic, I’m telling you,” her mother declared, jabbing a finger at the TV screen. “They look like little girls, all of them.”

She tapped her chopsticks against the edge of her bowl to the rhythm of the poppy tune.

“Quit it,” her father snapped.

The dumplings could’ve used more salt. Actually, everything could’ve used more salt. Or maybe it’s just that she’s used to eating takeout. Her mother looked up from her plate.

“You getting good grades?”

“They’re alright.”

The TV was now showing a skit, a young couple trying to make peace between the in-laws.

“You haven’t gotten a boyfriend yet, have you? You shouldn’t fool around until you’ve landed yourself a decent job,” her father spoke, more of a statement than a question.

She stared at the rice in her bowl.

“You have?” Her mother slammed down her chopsticks. “How many times do I have to tell you, dating will distract you from your studies! Right now, you are a student, studying is your only job! If your ‘alright’ grades turn out to be anything below a -”

“Ma!”

“Shut it! You need to -”

“Ba! Ma!”

She raised her head and met their eyes.

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Her father opened his mouth to speak.

“And I’m not going to have a boyfriend. Not a boyfriend.”

The silence held her in a chokehold. Breath. Say it.

The ghost of her words lingered in the frozen air. A crash pierced the palpable silence. Shards scattered across the tiled floor and a hand struck her cheek. Words were thrown like daggers, seared into her mind. Amidst a whirlwind of shouting and tears, hands found her wrists and broken glass pierced her feet. The door slammed. Fireworks were painting the sky and she laughed. Happy New Year.

She's on her fourth can of beer and last lamb skewer, sitting on a bench adorned with chipped paint and fading graffiti. The wind runs its fingers through her matted hair and dusts pink across her cheeks. A few feet away sat a scrawny stray cat, its fur more gray than white under the glow of the streetlamp. She turns to regard it with amusement, looking into its yellow eyes filled with caution and longing.

She giggles, pulling a piece of meat off the skewer and throwing it at the cat, missing it by a couple of feet. The cat walks towards it cautiously, glancing at her every few steps. It sniffs at the meat, before damn near inhaling it. A string of giggles bubbles up again, and she throws another piece of meat at the cat. It comes a little closer with each piece, slowly losing what little reserve it had in the first place.

"Smart little thing," she says, laughing again. Suddenly everything is funny and she can't stop laughing. "Playing cute to get food. I bet there's kids lining up to feed you those cheap sausages every day. And I bet you scratched them."

The cat is now laying at her feet, writhing on the ground and exposing its belly. She reaches down and gives it an experimental pat. It purrs and really, who cares if the thing has rabies?

She ends up feeding it the whole skewer, and it rubs against her leg with enthusiasm. She downs her sixth beer, crushes the can, and stands up. A wave of dizziness washes over her, and she stumbles sideways, tripping over the leg of the bench. It's the cat's turn to stare at her with amusement, watching as she tries to stand up, falls again, and finally succeeds on the third attempt.

"What you looking at?" She giggles, brushing off her pants. Yellow eyes blink up at her. She takes a few teetering steps, giggles escaping her mouth all the while.

“I’m going back to my house!” She exclaims, stretching out the last vowel. “See you around, kitty!”

The cat has other ideas.

“Kitty! Stop following me! You’re gonna get kidnapped one of these days.”

But she lets it follow her all the way back to her apartment. When they reach the door, yellow eyes meet black ones and she lets it in.

As it turns out, she’s just sober enough to boil frozen dumplings without burning her hands off. They end up catching the last twenty minutes of the Gala on her tiny TV. She sprawls out on the spongy couch, cradling a bowl of greasy dumplings. The cat curls up on the floor, tugging at a loose thread on her scratchy quilt.

She’s laughing at a skit when her phone rings. She fishes it out from under the couch and flips it open, her eyes glued to the TV screen. She answers it without looking.

“Nan Nan!” The very air freezes.

“Nan Nan! Come home! Ma made dumplings! Shrimp ones! They’re your favourite, right?” There’s a familiar slur to the words, and she almost laughs. Mother and daughter, getting drunk on New Year’s Eve. The bonding experience of a lifetime!

“Nan Nan,” her mother whines, giggling and childlike. “Come home. We miss you. Well, I do. I made you red roasted pork! I miss you. It’s your favourite!”

It’s Ba’s favourite, actually, and she wants to correct her mother. First phone call in a year, and all she can think of are trivial matters.

“We’re sorry. I’m sorry. It’s Chinese New Year! You’re supposed to be home! Nobody’s home! It’s Chinese New Year! Family time!” Her mother is yelling now, loud laughter erupting between words. Her ear hurts, but she can’t move her arm, the phone glued to the side of her face.

“Come home. Come home! Nan Nan is a good kid, Nan Nan is always home for Chinese New Year! I forgot to put up the window flowers. Ah, well. Come home!” Nan Nan. The nickname is jarring to her ears. She hasn’t heard it in years.

“What’s the matter with you! Speak up! You hate us, you must really hate us. Say something!” The silence is suffocating.

“Just come home!” Her mother is crying now, her words lost amongst sobs and gasps. “Just come home! Bring home some lesbo freak if that’s what makes you happy! I don’t care. I don’t care!”

The sounds dimmed down to pathetic sobs and hiccups.

“The dumplings are getting cold. Come home.”

When she finally moves, it’s to meet the pair of yellow eyes staring up at her.

She hates how fast she finds the key, hates that she kept it at all; hates how she tears out the door, and taps her feet at the bus stop. She hates how slow the traffic flows, and hates her own impatience. The nightscape glows with beckoning windows, lanterns that draw the travelers home. She can’t help but think of the one lit for her, and she hates that too.

She’s home. The rusted door opens with a screech, and she’s hit immediately by the smell of cheap beer. Shattered glass litter the floor, and the echoes of her last words hang in the air.

Picking her way carefully across the room, she finds her mother passed out on the couch. Empty bottles lay at her feet, and spilt beer ooze into her slippers. She cradles a half-empty bottle, which slowly spills over her shirt, adding to a large collection of stains. The Gala is long over, and the TV plays a cheesy commercial, featuring a family gathered around a table crowded with dishes, clinking together glasses of iced tea. The soft blue light spills over her mother’s features, bringing out the wrinkles lining her eyes. It’s as if no time has passed, as if she has stepped into last year. Nothing’s changed, and so she leaves.

She goes home. Having tried her hand at sewing old tattered pieces back together, maybe it’s time to weave a new cloth. The gentle yellow of an impending sunrise dilutes bottomless ink into an airy blue. The front door awaits her, left wide open in her drunken haste to leave. Across the grey dusting of snow, a dainty path of pawprints leads away.

~The End~

Chinese Terms Used In This Story

Cantopop: Cantonese pop music, loved by middle aged people.

Candied hawthorn skewers: A traditional snack native to Beijing with hundreds of years of history. As its name implies, it's made out of hawthorn, glazed and skewered.

Firecracker pellets: Little colourful pellets that come in boxes like Smarties. When thrown against the ground with force, it makes a cracking sound, releases a spark, and bounces. Technically kind of dangerous, as there have been cases of the pellets malfunctioning and exploding in children's hands. People give them to children anyways.

Red envelopes: Money given to children in red envelopes by elders. Its original purpose was to bribe a monster that eats children so it doesn't eat you, but most kids just spend it.

Spring Festival Gala: A yearly program that airs on Chinese New Year's Eve. Its status in China is equivalent to watching the ball drop in Time Square.

TFBoys: A popular Chinese boy-band loved by teenage girls.

Ba: Dad

Ma: Mom

Window flowers: Elaborate paper ornaments stuck on windows.

LGBTQ+ people, though mostly accepted in urban areas, still face considerable discrimination in China, many from their own family. Same sex marriage is still illegal in China, and homosexuality was only removed from the Ministry of Health's list of mental illnesses in 2001.