



THE DEATH OF THE MOTHERLESS KITTEN

— A Short Story —

HUANG KAISHAN



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NEON SINGLES

This story first appeared in issue thirty-eight of *Neon Literary Magazine*. It is republished here as a single short story. To read the rest of the issue, or to discover more short story singles visit www.neonmagazine.co.uk.

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The Death Of The Motherless Kitten

I SAW IT FROM ACROSS THE ROAD, while waiting for the green man. It was mewling for its mother. Lost, I thought.

Everybody, in their suits and ties and pencil skirts, turned to look, but they never slowed their strides.

A mother and child might have stopped for a few seconds, passingly interested.

I probably should have picked it up there and then and brought it to a vet, but I was on my way to work and late. That morning's meeting was too important to miss.

What was I supposed to say to the boss? That I stopped to save a motherless kitten?

Next I saw it, it was lunch hour. A patch of bloodied fur on afternoon tar. It might have been moving.

It might have been the wind.

I walked away and I let it die.

*

I CARRIED THE KITTEN IN ONE HAND. It struggled, but it was so small, with such threadbare flesh, I could almost loop thumb to ring finger around its chest. I brought it to a vet my colleague recommended. She'd laughed when I said I was saving a kitten.

The vet's office hadn't been cleaned in ages. The vet was smoking and he used the sink as an ash tray. When I said it wasn't mine, he paused just long enough to make his point. He gave me a price I wasn't willing to pay. Then he suggested we put it down. "It'll feel better," he said.

I felt better that way too, so I said yes. But there wasn't any more morphine on the shelf. He'd forgotten to re-stock. So I had to use my hands.

Its neck was tiny. Thumb to forefinger.

*

I BROUGHT IT HOME. My wife and I named it Bobby, after the child we'd lost.

My wife loved it so much. She became one of those cat crazy people who would dress their pet up in human clothes and take pictures.

One day, I forgot to make sure Bobby was still inside before I left the house. As I backed out of the driveway, I heard a small yelp. So I knew what had happened before I even got out of the car. I had the lie already composed in my head by the time I got to the hood; Bobby had escaped and got knocked down.

But when I looked under the car, Bobby was still alive. I'd only crushed its legs. But I couldn't imagine how my wife would be able to bear the burden of a crippled animal, no matter how much love she thought she had for it. So I backed up a little more.

*

MY WIFE WAS ALWAYS THE FIRST ONE up whenever Bobby cried.

Bobby was smart. Bobby knew he could get anything he wanted, with the mere suggestion of possible discontentment from a downturned mouth. Bobby was filled with my wife's love. He didn't have any room left for mine.

One night, my wife finally got so exhausted from waiting on his every whim that for the first time, she slept through Bobby's crying.

How he cried and cried. You could hear his demands escalating in the tone of his wail. The rising urgency, from the diva's siren call to a full-blown teenage tantrum: Why aren't you here yet? Now I'm annoyed. Now I'm outraged. Now I really mean it.

I lay in bed and I listened. I let it go on for a while, and then I got out of bed and I took it out with me in a stroller to a park. In the playground, I sat down on the swing opposite the stroller and I just let the thing whine.

With each fresh wail, I could hear its panic rising.

Why aren't you comforting me? Why aren't you smothering me in your frantic love, your sobbing contrition? Why? Why? I thought you loved me! Didn't you say you loved me?

I let it cry and cry and cry until it wouldn't cry anymore.

*

BOBBY WAS HOLDING MY HAND. Small, tiny prehensile pads closing around one hairy thumb.

Wait here, I said, and I went in and I got a drink. Two drinks. Maybe three.

When I came out, he was gone.

It was less than a minute, I said to the police officer. I just turned around for a second and he was gone. My breath tasted sour as I said it.

We searched high and low for Bobby. Everybody helped. And sooner or later, one by one, they each came to me personally to offer words of comfort.

They knew. They all knew.

I could sense it from their replies. That half beat of hesitation between the moment I told them this is my fault – and the moment they told me, of course it isn't. Their mouths moved out of sync with their eyes, like goldfish.

Less than a minute, I told them. He might have been taken, I said. It's hard to tell. It could have been anybody. Anybody but me.

My wife wouldn't speak to me. She couldn't even stand to look at me.

Neither of us had slept in two days.

I felt constantly nauseated.

When they found the body, they didn't let me see it at first. I didn't understand why, until I did see it. It was a splat on the road, a Looney Tunes character rolled down to an inch and flattened against tar. There was a comic explosion of violent colour all around the frame of its body, like a sound effect on a page.

I said what is this?

"It's your son," the police officer said.

Isn't it road kill?

"No, it's your son," he said. "It's not your fault."

But he was lying, of course, because he knew as much as anyone that I'd killed him.

My wife knew it too, but she didn't say it. She let the lawyer say it.

I was an alcoholic and an irresponsible father who couldn't even love his own son. And I'd walked away and I'd let him die.

*

SOMETIMES, AT NIGHT, I have this funny dream.

I'm in a car with my wife. My wife is asleep. We've just had a long night out and it's been great. It's been very romantic and now I'm driving home and feeling full of love for the world. I'm listening to The Strokes on the radio – that's how you know it's a dream; they don't play their songs anymore.

And as I'm cruising down the road, something shoots out of the bushes behind the crash barriers and barrels into my path. There's a terrible huroomph sound as it goes under my wheel. I slam the brake, but because this is a dream, the car goes into a spin, like in a Hollywood movie, until it stops with the windshield facing whatever it is I've hit. My wife doesn't even stir.

I peer over the dashboard. And there – right in the middle of the road, in the yellow glare of my headlights, squashed flat beneath black tyre tracks – is a small kitten.

And in my dream, I feel so unspeakably relieved.

Phew, I think.

It's only a cat.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Huang Kaishan is a communications graduate from the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore, working as a freelance video copywriter while writing short stories. She's mad about books and films and pop culture. You can read her other published work, "D is for Discipline", in *The Quarterly Literary Review Of Singapore*.