Cat Rescue Exercise

與貓演習*

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The night before his final return to the mountain village, Jiang sat in the room, listening to the sounds of "his" neighborhood. All the food stands had been taken down; the streets were dark. Outside there were people waving flashlights, climbing stairs, and shouting. They hadn't bothered posting a notice or making an advance announcement. Instead, they were conducting an emergency mobilization, going door to door to ask everyone to come out and attend a "Disaster Prevention Seminar."

"Come on out, come quickly, everyone's waiting," they invited amiably.

Everyone was waiting. There was no arguing with that.

Jiang put out the lamp, closed the window and sat at his desk, pretending he wasn't home. The cat's cinerary urn was stationed on one corner of the desk. On an ordinary night he would hear the sound of couples getting into arguments and scuffles in the street. Tonight Jiang imagined all the people coming out of their houses, walking down that street he always walked down and assembling in

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that square beside the old marketplace that seemed to have been there ever since the Japanese era. Inside was a fifty-something shop owner who would sit behind the counter with the air con on, looking at the security screen while memories of the war floated through his mind—if you went in to buy a big garbage can, he would ask you, forlornly, "You need something to store rice in?"

Jiang knew, Jiang knew; Jiang knew that everyone has his own problem, like a dead cat: you try pointing it out to someone, but it's already walked through the wall without a trace, never to return.

Jiang realized that what he'd truly made a mess of was himself.

After returning to the mountain village, Jiang still kept the cat's urn on the corner of his desk. Every day he sat at the desk and stared at it. He couldn't hide it and keep it secret, because after so many years it had automatically gotten so debilitated as to seem like a secret.

The simple truth was: once upon a time, in that big city, a stray cat had died.

It happened in the innermost chamber of that veterinary hospital, in a storage room piled with pet feed and pharmaceutical products and stacked with empty cages. It was a detention room; all the animals in the hospital lived in a wall of cages there, whether they had been sent there by their owners or were there for treatment. It was also a morgue; they put dead animals in wooden coffins and placed them on an old wooden table in the center of the room, where each waited for its owner to come and sign the authorization.

One day at dusk, Jiang waited alone in that room. His hands stuck in his pockets, he was watching the cat lying silently on its side in the box. Jiang didn't know how they did it—they must have some special technique to gently close a dead cat's eyes and bend its torso into a perfect curve.

Jiang had just signed his name on the piece of paper. That meant that the following day at the same time, he would come back for the last time and collect an urn of the cat's cremains.

Jiang looked out the window at a blind alley. On this side were people's kitchens. That evening, other people would light their stoves

at their accustomed hours. On the other side of the alley, through several layers of glass, Jiang made out a number of silent rooms; people there were busy in there with their own stuff.

It was like everyone had suddenly agreed to turn around and hurry out, leaving Jiang alone in the room in the animal hospital, listening to a wall of snarling dogs and looking at a cat in a wooden box.

They must have assumed that Jiang would need some time to be by himself and have a good cry.

Jiang tried, but the tears would not come. He looked a bit apologetically at the cat and, through the windows, at everyone else.

"Hey," Jiang said to the cat. "We've been left behind."

So how does it feel to die in this world of broadening horizons we inhabit? Jiang wanted to ask it.

Jiang had found the cat in an alley under a small truck. It was turning in circles, its head inclined to the one side, its eyes wide open. When it got tired out it would fall over with a *thump*, gasping for breath. But soon it would struggle to stand up again and continue circling.

Jiang knelt down and observed it for a while, ascertaining that it was blind.

Jiang turned his head to look up and down the alley. It was a normal day in the big city: the mouth of the alley was clogged with cars. There was an entrance to an underground parking lot on one side of the alley and a construction fence on the other. People were tearing down old houses to make way for an open-air pay parking lot.

"I've taken a look around for you," Jiang told the cat. "It's all about the same. You are, suffice it to say, under a small, illegally parked truck in the middle of a giant parking lot."

Farther down, the alley turned into a narrow fire lane. People walking down the lane would reach a street with eateries.

Jiang once saw two acquaintances greet one another in the lane.

"Where are you off to?" One of them asked.

"Off to eat," the other replied.

He didn't say "I'm off to eat a plate of rice" or "I'm off to eat a bowl of noodles" or "I'm off to eat a light meal." He only said, "off to eat." It was like two fine steeds meeting in a great grassy plain, each standing his ground, letting the luxuriant wild grass brush its fat belly, playfully bowing its head and calling reverently, "to eat," "to drink," "to run," or "to reproduce," in that kind of splendid and refreshing manner.

"So, kitty kitty, you keep turning around in circles, while I, parasite that I am, am also off to eat."

Jiang crouched motionless, watching that blind cat.

A man with a briefcase swung in from the intersection. He stopped behind Jiang, following his line of sight to see what was under the truck.

"It's a calico cat, a girl," the man said. Jiang looked up at the man.

"Ninety nine percent of calicos are female," the man added.

Then the man tucked his briefcase under his arm and turned to walk down the fire lane.

"Wonderful," said Jiang, watching the man leave. "Wonderful," said Jiang to the cat. Kitty cat—oh, sorry, you're a "pussy" cat—now we've established your sex. See what kind of world we are living in! Maybe if you keep turning in circles I'll know everything about you.

Jiang got up, looked around, and ran out of the alley. He went back to his room and got a cardboard box. Jiang picked the cat up from under the truck and put it in the box. He squeezed the box onto the footboard of his scooter, which he had parked in the alley. Jiang started the scooter. The cat opened its listless eyes and rubbed against the sides of the box. It kept turning around and squirting piss.

Jiang looked up towards intersection. The noonday sun had eaten away all shadow.

"Calico, you've got three guesses—where are we going now?" Jiang said.

"Huh?" Jiang looked at the cat. Bingo! What a clever pussy cat you are: you only needed one guess. The place we're going to is called a "hospital."

From that day on, countless times, Jiang grabbed the cat and took it to see the vet on his scooter.

The tiny little room Jiang was living in at the time was originally his landlord's kitchen. There was a sink, a counter, and a hole for a gas canister, all crowded into a row. Every evening, Jiang lay down on the metal bed and stared at the black hole. He saw tiger mosquitoes, spiders, and some creepy crawlies he did not know the names of—they were fighting for territory in there, in the unknown universe they inhabited.

In the vicinity of that unknown universe, Jiang went sleepless every night.

Always before dawn, Jiang would go out and walk into a university campus, sit by an artificial lake, and look into the darkness absent-mindedly. The lake was calm, taciturn. At a certain time, a timer installed who knows where in the university would turn off the streetlights around the lake all at once. Jiang would look up to see the sparse light of dawn shining through distant branches, the intensity a little different every time—redder in summer and paler in winter. But no matter how strong the light was, when Jiang withdrew his vision from the sky and directed it straight ahead towards the lake, he would see old folks in different stages of decrepitude everywhere he looked, in the sunlight and in the shadows, in the trees, on the path, and underneath the covered walkway by the lake.

The old folks were performing various bizarre movements—one was bashing his back against a tree; another was sitting on a fence and hitting himself on the knees; another was half crouching, rubbing his face with his hands like mad, like a snake about to shed its skin; one was stretching his shoulders; another was sucking his belly in; another had his leg up on an iron bench; and one was running barefoot up and down a little path paved with sharp pebbles. Jiang looked down and left the scene, promising himself that he would fix in his memory this place where nobody called out in pain. But Jiang failed every time. Returning to his room, he would hit the sack, not wanting to remember anything.

Except that every day in the morning when the room woke up, Jiang would wake up too, without fail. He would open his eyes and see the cracks between the creamy tiles on the walls exuding thick sweat. It was as if the spirit of the cook who had spent his whole life working in the kitchen had remained in the room to cook the air, day after day. Jiang had two windows, one looking right onto a twenty story building. Every day before noon the building's air conditioning system would rumble to life, emitting a haze from top to bottom, like a sigh.

"Everyone's gone out," the building seemed to be saying.

Jiang got up, picked up a big towel, and began his rescue mission. In the litter box, in the carrying cage, in the hole in the wall for the gas canister, in every possible hiding place in his mess of a room, Jiang searched for that stray cat he had locked up at the height of five stories in the big city.

"Calico cat, it's time to go to the hospital," he called.

Jiang found the cat. It was crouching behind a stack of books, staring warily at him. The cat had regained partial sight. It had endured innumerable treatments and been injected with countless syringes of medicine and bags of IV fluid, so that it now looked like a living sac of water. Jiang held out the towel and moved in on the water sac. He wanted to use the towel to catch it and stop it from biting him. Jiang wanted to tuck the water sac, which always resisted with all of its might, into the cage and take it to the vet, until the vet declared that this was, ahem, no longer a water sac but rather a healthy cat.

Having placed the carrying cage on the footboard, Jiang would ride his scooter, rain or shine, in the afternoon or at dusk, shuttling through the various scenes in the neighborhood until he reached the veterinary hospital; then he would shuttle back through the same neighborhood on the ride home. The cat would crouch in the cage, constantly on the alert. Jiang suspected that it was also thinking—hey, I've fallen into a maze. As soon as I can see things again I go and tumble into the twists and turns of an endless maze. And this human even folded up a towel and put it in the suitcase. What does he think he's doing? Are we going to the beach? Doesn't he realize that

there are cold currents coursing through my body, that when those medicines flow around in my veins and arteries I have no choice but to warm them up with my body heat?

The examination table was next to a glass window. There was another room on the other side. The ceiling was covered in lights; beneath was an empty iron tray. That was the operating room. In the room on the other side of the operating room, through another layer of glass, Jiang saw lots of cats and dogs being held down by people as they received a fur and nail trim. That was the beauty salon. There was another, innermost room beyond the beauty salon, but at the time Jiang could not see what it was for.

It was a long tunnel of a veterinary hospital. Jiang wondered what the rationale behind the layout was—it meant that every happy little cat or dog that came in for a spa had to pass by the operating room.

"It looks like a viral infection," the vet said suddenly.

"Huh?" Jiang said.

"A viral infection has invaded its central nervous system and destroyed its sense of balance. And so it keeps turning in circles, unable to see."

"Hum. So . . ."

"We have to test to see what kind of virus it is. But it looks like we should be able to keep it alive. Though its eyes are probably incurable."

"Ah? What do you mean?"

Plunged into a sudden awareness of the order of seriousness of the situation, Jiang didn't get it. How come? How come you can save its life but not restore its sight? There's an invisible and truly lethal kink somewhere deep inside that you're still able to iron out. While here, part of the same affliction, is a pair of eyes located everyone knows where that you're nevertheless unable to treat? How strange.

What a strange floor plan. What a strange symbol of medical progress. What a strange world.

The strangest thing of all was that the vet's prognosis was the opposite of what ended up happening. After innumerable treatments

and injections, the vet cured the cat's eyes; it's just that the cat also died.

How strange.

Jiang looked on in silence at the cat curled up in the wooden box.

He watched her and started to imagine forgetting. He imagined that every time he thought of her it would be like painting a picture that gets fainter and fainter with every stroke of the brush.

The first thing Jiang wouldn't be able to remember was that when he returned to his room and fell down, unwaking, not wanting to remember anything, he would feel her rub against his feet for warmth, though she would get up, run off and hide before everything had really woken up.

What a stubborn cat.

The next thing Jiang wouldn't be able to remember was using various little props like a ping pong ball, a scout rope, or a stuffed gerbil to test her eyes. "Stop playing around. I can see," she seemed to be saying, judging from her expression.

Then Jiang wouldn't be able to remember a period of time when he really believed someday she would be truly ready. When that day came he would return her to that place where nobody cried out in pain.

Yes, there, nobody suffered. There the quality of the sunlight was clearly different in summer and winter. Whether they got there early or late, it would be like going to a long carnival, so there was no need to rush. There they would hide the umbrella in a stand of shrubs, in case of rain. They would drag over their own chairs and turn the grove into a drawing room. They would stick a palindromic riddle up on one of the posts of the covered walkway. No matter which direction they walked, they would read the riddle one way and the answer the other way. Thus they would be free of confusion. They would nourish all living creatures.

Jiang imagined what her life there would be like.

Next Jiang wouldn't be able to remember that he shouldn't be so peremptorily perfectionistic, because living in a place like that it

was only to be expected, and entirely forgivable, that there should be certain imperfections. Her poor eyesight wouldn't present any problem.

Truly, truly, that would have been so much better than overdosing on injections that caused her organs to harden until she lay in a wooden box in a room full of crazed canines, her dead body shriveling up, drying out inexorably, becoming thinner and thinner right before his very eyes.

Jiang imagined that in the end he wouldn't even be able to remember that when he returned to the mountain village for the very last time, he was totally willing to believe that there was a reason for everything. Everything, even the business of butchery, would follow the rhythm of the seasons as a matter of course, changing from summer to winter. By that time, Jiang had moved to another little room in the old marketplace area, this one on the third floor. Every day at dawn, a pork butcher would come and set up his stand and start chopping away. It sounded like he was chopping at the top of Jiang's skull, waking him up. A year later Jiang was certain that the butcher did his chopping at half past four in the summer and half past five in the winter.

Jiang would get up and walk out and sit on the balcony like an automaton. He would watch as the sky gradually lightened and the morning market opened and the crowds gathered.

For a whole year, he would automatically start searching for the cat as soon as he opened his eyes in the morning. "Calico, let's go to the hospital," he would say. For a short while he would forget that time and place had changed. That his rescue mission, which he had been drawn out until death, had ended long before.

Yet he would still find the cat. On a corner of the desk, the cat's bones and ashes were preserved in a marble urn so freezing cold that it seemed the cold currents the cat had carried around in its body were now, all together, absorbing warmth from the outside. That day, the day he returned to the mountain village for the very last time, it was just him and her sitting together on the balcony waiting for dawn to break.

"Would it be alright for us to retreat now, Calico?" he said softly to the urn, as was his custom. He said let's not go through any of those things again. Let us instead fondly recall that first, most clear-cut rescue mission, when we charged out of that fire lane as if onto a bright vast grassy plain; "off to eat," "off to drink," "off to run," "off to reproduce," "off to rescue," "off to promise," we did what had to be done, without any doubts or qualms.

They had rushed into a small veterinary hospital, pushed aside the cats, dogs, rodents, and rabbits that were waiting to see the vet, along with their owners. "It's an emergency," a veterinarian with a dignified bearing explained, to cool the seething cauldron of the waiting room of enraged owners.

Then the vet took the leaking box of piss from him and put it on the examination table, gently lifting her out.

You're safe now, Calico, he had told her in his mind; you're going to recover.

At that time, he really thought he was light as a butterfly, that he had restarted time.

Before he was confident he could forget even this, he would always take the cat's urn with him. He knew himself. He knew that he had always needed the residues of the lives of others, which he mentally combined into one sophisticated game after another.

He returned to the mountain village. He walked out of his father's old house and stood under a tree's shade. He saw that the black mouthed cur was gone, that Grandma was gone, that the light trucks were gone too, that not even the hillbilly brats were there to bear witness to him, nor he to them. Then he closed his eyes and groped his way back to his uncle's building. He tapped the thick window and knocked at the heavy door. He said, won't you lend me a hoe, my swarthy, brawny uncle, and give me a garden plot and let me have a go?

"Uncle," he closed his eyes and smiled, silently saying, "Uncle, your half mother's eyes remain in mind, gazing at me day by day as I go blind."

He shouldered the hoe and hummed a song as he went to the fallow field that Uncle had marked off for him. He went there to dig a pond.

The world has gone blind, too. He put down the hoe, sat cross-legged on the ground, clapped his hands, and watched the ridge nibble away at the sun.

So this is that idyllic feeling—really sitting down in the dirt and leaning on a heavy piece of iron or a rotten piece of wood and watching the sun set.

He wanted to get up and run around.

He wanted to get up and run, but he sat on the ground unmoving instead. An inept farmer who could not even grow sweet potatoes, he sat there with his dying produce. It was because he was insignificant and shriveled that he was finally able to renounce time. He would proudly say: he knew the exact name of every distant place, so he was quite different from the humans who first practiced agriculture.

By small differences, generation after generation: this must be the logic of history's progress, or regress.

Time must have been muddling along a few small steps at a time ever since time began.

Jiang let his days spread out smoothly into the future.

In those days he spent lodging in his "native place," Jiang dug a pond, fixed a child's tricycle, two bicycles, an electric fan, and a dehumidifier. Jiang was waiting, waiting to feel established and settled, waiting for the feeling to rise out of the ground before his very eyes. In this way, on the other side of the window, he would grow old with "his mountain village," with "his villagers"—if he could be so bold as to use such familiar appellations.

While he wasn't paying attention, the village was suffering through the longest dry spell ever. The drought advanced relentlessly into the days ahead. He had failed to notice because he was always awake. He always saw the midnight drizzle that retreated before dawn like a thief in the night. After the raindrops scattered underneath the cracked callused feet of the villagers, by the time everything was finally

too tired to even tremble, he was still sitting in front of the window, happily gazing at that child's tricycle glistening with droplets of water leaning against the tree, just where he had put it. He was waiting, waiting for a child to discover that tricycle. At a time when time was running on as usual and there wasn't any way yet for anything to be disclosed, his parents had presented him to the world, and he went on to present himself to that tricycle. Just like a child, he frittered away his time.

He rode the bicycles he had fixed, racing over hills and through fields. He was looking forward to the day when after parting the thickets he would meet him, one of the old hillbillies who used to live in the mountain village. Hiding out deep in the wilderness, his eyes vacant and dim, maybe he was still leaning on his own refrigerator. Maybe the wound on his waist was still bandaged. Maybe he would ask Jiang—as old-timers always do—Who's your grandpappy? And Jiang would say, I can't remember.

They agreed not to remember one another. They were just sitting together in the thicket, just like they were sitting at home, each sitting by himself or herself in his or her solitary domicile. They were both members of that society of people for whom the whole world beyond the front door is a frontier, people who return to that little, familiar place of exile every day of their lives. They were exiled in the only familiar circumstance they had ever known. Looking out the window, they declared: anyone who can "love" all the people outside completely and unreservedly must have a heart a million times stronger than a normal person. They could never grow organs that strong.

All of that was really just a matter of time: in their brief, slovenly lives, they could never learn how to live safely in an aged, haunted world.

So he went back. Every day he went back to see his mother in the house his father had left behind. Through his mother's unhappy declining years, he convinced her by word and deed that he should be regarded as an unwounded wreck of a man. In this way, when the light dispersed completely, he could lightly close the door of his room, sit at his desk, and get out his pile of scrap paper. Nobody was

coming back. Nobody would run back out of the story like one of his mother's elementary school classmates had done. Jiang was writing the same row of characters, pretty much the same sentence, over and over again. Aye, his skin was flaking off again. No, no, it was only glue, only a bandage, no need to be sad. He couldn't let himself get sad. At that time all he could remember was those rain-soaked shoes and socks, those rhododendrons covered in zebra bugs, the stray dog that had gotten run over. Foot prints, wheel ruts, blood stains. At that moment, innumerable invisible rays were flung out from the village straight towards that invisible world in the distance, and then tossed back. A brilliant and magnificent spectrum appeared before his eyes, like eternal day. Eternal day: his momentary misapprehension.

He looked up and saw the drizzle falling on the village like a thief. In his father's house, the rats and frogs started to squeeze out of their holes in the walls. A clamor filled the house. The house his father built had finally come to resemble a raft, a lightless raft listing upon the sea.

As if at sea, he relearned how to get along with his mother. On nights when there wasn't a snake for him to kill, Mother would walk lightly over to his desk and ask him, "What are you up to now?"

"I'm still dreaming." He would say—I am still thinking of a way to put my youth to rest.

"Alright, you keep dreaming. I'm going to sleep."

"Alright, you go to sleep," he said.

She would return to that room of hers to lie down amid piles of pill bottles and he would go and dream a dream he did not understand.

She walked towards him in the swaying light. She was getting shorter and shorter, thinner and thinner, more and more like a tiny puppet. He looked at her and asked, "Shouldn't you fix your hair up a bit?"

"Naw," she waved him off and said, "My hair stopped growing a long time ago."

Her hair had stopped growing a long time since. Before his eyes, her hair got all tangled up and her teeth came loose root by root as she finally became one of those hillbilly crones he knew so well. She

waved; the gesture reminded him of postmen in the rain—holding their hands up, they would toss letters at each doorstep, messages that were sealed, unopened, but already fixed in writing.

He realized that no matter what those messages were, he would end up having to raise his hand and catch them.

Finally, as if wearing an old wig, mother walked back again. She was lightly holding a couple of pieces of paper. Softly, she told him, "Sign your name; I need a witness."

"What's wrong?" he asked. He spread out the papers and found it was a surgery consent form.

Mother showed him two little tumors behind her left ear.

He imagined the way from his present location to that big hospital: that row of registration counters, that long hallway, those examination rooms like cells in a hive. He recalled that if it were really true—that a wounded soldier whose legs had been amputated below the knees could recall the painful itch in his toes night after night—then when he closed his eyes by his mother's side and smelled rotting vegetation and heard the low sound of the wind on the seashore his madness was probably not fatal.

He imagined his mother having to deal with all of that alone while he let himself remain completely unaware as a matter of course.

He hadn't noticed that the person before him had pretty much never left this seaside area her whole life long; she had used up all of her time on that endlessly winding stretch of road. Then, pulling at her left ear, she had concentrated all language into a single statement, terse and chill, as if folding a million words into a little letter.

"I need someone to serve as a witness." She handed over the form and offered him, her son, this brief explanation.

He thought it over.

He watched her attentively.

He told her, "I know."

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