

AH CHOY

It's been too long since someone called me by my name; I'm beginning to forget what it is. Instead, I answer to *Lapsup por*, the trash hag. Really it's not as bad as it might sound. People smile and say "*Jo san Lapsup por*," their morning greetings familiar and friendly. They don't ever get me mixed up with other old women. I'm known for a name, for picking up what everyone throws out and that makes me a useful person. I sort out the good trash from the bad: paper, cardboard, glass and cans, these are good trash; wilted vegetables, orange peels and fish bones are bad. I clean all twelve floors of this building on Hong Lee Road. The other day I even found a pair of really nice shoes, pretty green stripes on white canvas in the sixth floor bin. I washed them and they are good as new and now I wear them everyday.

People like us have bent backs; some older ones are more bent than me from all the stooping. Sometimes my back hurts but not too much, because the pain means you *can* work and that is good.

Most everybody thinks we are poor, and in my case it's true. It's always been true. I never have much money but I have food and a place to live, so there are worse, much worse. I collect three thousand four hundred and eighty dollars from the building I clean and the government also gives me fruit money every month. I know I can sell paper for more money; other old women do that but I've never gathered enough to make it worth the trip to the collector. Also I don't want to upset others, they do the paper and I pick up other trash. I'm quite happy with the odds and ends that I can sell. But on the tenth floor, every Friday they throw out a stack of paper, I think because someone who

lives there also works there. Smooth white pages with words on one side that mean nothing to me. This I take.

I was born some time in the spring when people still lived on fishing boats. My parents and their parents were Tanka and we lived most of our lives in Sam Ka Chuen, a crowded village then. I heard now it's a fancy place for tourists to eat shrimp, garoupa and lobsters, but in the old days, when we were nine in our boat, it smelled of sweat, unwashed skin and human waste in murky water. From this paper, I mold the shapes of boats, people, houses and everything. It's like I never left.

One cold night when I was six, some men brought a few puppies back to the village, and our neighbour told us they were going to eat them, so a bunch of us kids ran to that house to watch. The puppies were playing in the front, each with a rope tied around its neck.

The fat man with no front teeth patted one of the puppies. "Ahh, this black one is good. Its meat is guaranteed to boost your strength."

I looked at the puppy, his eyes as dark as his fur, and he tilted his head and stared back at me. "Ah Ba, can we take it home?" I said.

All my brothers and sisters were quiet as my father looked at me. He never spoke unless he had to and we were all a little afraid of him, but I felt that I had always been his favourite even though I was a girl. When no one was watching, he would put an extra piece of dried fish in my bowl. Even when my mother was upset with me, instead of hitting me, Ah Ba would often say, "She's young, she doesn't know."

“This one has not so much meat, why don’t you give it to me?” he said to the fat man.

One large fleshy hand now held the puppy. “Haa, no way. The black ones cost more.”

“You give me it; my woman will mend your nets tomorrow. Yours need some mending.”

“Aiya, I paid good money for the lot. My nets are not in such bad shape.” He squeezed his small eyes.

“Here’s one dollar and we mend your nets.” My father put a dirty silver coin in the man’s hand and grabbed the puppy from him. The puppy yelped but stayed still in his arms.

“I could have got more, I’m making a loss here,” the man said. “Tomorrow your woman come early in the morning, yes? I need the nets quick.”

Back at our boat, we heard our parents arguing while Ah Ma was making dinner.

“Haa, paid one dollar!” Her shrill voice floated from the cooking quarter to where we sat huddled in the far corner, not daring to move in case she rushed out and hit one of us. But we knew she wouldn’t be upset for long, not with Ah Ba, whose voice was so low we weren’t sure what he was saying. We just needed to wait it out. The puppy toddled toward us, swaying as he tried to keep his balance with each gentle roll of the waves. He looked around and then he came to me and started licking my hand, his stubby tail wagging.

“Ah Choy, Ah Choy,” my oldest brother called out and the black puppy ran to him, and we all started calling him “Ah Choy”, the puppy who was going to bring prosperity.

I was left in the village a lot when the others were out fishing, but I didn't go to school. The boys went for a few years then quit to help out on the boat, but for the girls, Ah Ma said, “no need to learn, just girls.” Ah Choy followed me everywhere during the day, walking through the narrow alleys looking for things that we could play with. One time we found a red plastic ball which I threw for Ah Choy to catch. That was our favourite game. We didn't get rats on the boat now that he was around, so even my mother was pleased.

Four years later we moved ashore to a unit in the government housing estate not far from Sam Ka Chuen, and everyone was happy for us. My brothers and sisters all got jobs in the factories so my parents didn't have to fish anymore. Ah Choy brought us good fortune but he couldn't come to live with us there, because no pets were allowed. He was a big dog then and we had to give him to our neighbour who still lived on a boat. Everyone in the family cried a little, but I cried so much that Ah Ma finally let me sleep with him on the floor at the back of the boat.

The day we left, Ah Choy walked with us to the end of the village, but he seemed to know we were going somewhere he couldn't go. Through my tears, he became nothing more than a spot of blackness floating in water as we moved further and further away from him.

Since I was the youngest, I never married because it was my job to take care of my parents in their old age. And then after my parents died, there was no reason for me to think of getting married anymore. I live alone in another unit in another housing estate. People say my nieces and nephews should come visit me more but I don't mind. They are kind to me but I don't need them around. I can take care of myself. I'm old but I'm not useless. Sometimes they give me money, it's good but I don't really need it. I can still work.

These days I think of Ah Choy a lot. Of course he must have died many, many years ago, and yet the Ah Choy I remember is the same, the way he stood on the dock that last day, his tail still and his soft ears pulled back.

"Lapsup por, why bring all this paper back? What to do with cockroaches?" Chan *si-lai* from the next unit is a nice woman but I know she doesn't like it when I bring stuff home, though I only bring back the best trash.

"I clean up good, Chan *si-lai*, you don't worry," I tell her and she smiles and shakes her head before she closes her door.

Ah Choy is black so I need to paint the paper. The other day I found some ink and I bought a small brush from the stationery store. I hold a piece of paper in my hand and I think of him, not so hard that I can't do anything but enough that I can see him very clearly in my head. Then it's like Ah Choy is moving my hands. After I'm happy with the shape, I brush it with glue that I've boiled from rice. The glue keeps the paper hard so I can paint it. I make many versions: when he was a puppy, when he was big, sometimes he runs, other times his head looks up at me. I stop making boats and houses and other things; making Ah Choy is more important.

I hear the neighbours when they walk by my door, which I always keep open: “*Lapsup por* is losing it. Covering her home with trash. Aiya!” It’s fine. Let them say what they want. I’m not bothering anyone.

I stop counting how many Ah Choys I’ve made but each one is different. My table is covered with them and even my chair and most of the floor, so I put one out in the corridor, Ah Choy guarding my home like he used to watch over us.

Tonight I remember when I was really sick with a high fever and Ah Choy curled up beside me on the planks of the boat. Ah Ma had given me an extra blanket to keep me warm. The paper in my hand softens into the smooth, shiny black fur.

“Mummy, Mummy, look, a puppy!”

I raise my head and see a little girl, her pony tail tied with a pink ribbon, standing in my doorway.

“Can we take it home?”

Ah Choy tilts his head to look at the girl and wags his tail.