

Paper Tiger

BY ROSE LU

Claire was the first up. The adults were still tired from the night before. They'd had dinner at a fancy restaurant, where the chairs had been covered in a cream fabric, backed with decorative bows. When the guests were seated, it looked as though they were wearing big, poofy wedding dresses.

The celebration wasn't a wedding – it was a birthday. Wai Po's seventieth. She'd wanted all her family to be there, and so Claire and her mum had made the long flight to China. Claire loved staying in her grandmother's apartment. Every surface was covered in photos: eldest aunty in a dance costume, smiling proudly; middle aunty hunched over her watercolours; Claire's mum receiving some kind of prize; all three sisters in front of the tiger cage at the zoo. Claire thought it must be fun to have siblings. For starters, you wouldn't have to play board games with your parents.

She stood on the couch to take a closer look at the photo of her mum, and there, down between the back of the couch and the wall, she noticed the edge of another photo frame. It must have slipped. Claire got on the floor, lay on her stomach, and fished around till her hand reached it.

It wasn't a photo but a tiger, cut from a single sheet of red paper. Claire had never seen anything like it. She couldn't imagine scissors sharp enough to cut the almonds of the tiger's eyes or the stripes on its tail. Carefully, she opened the frame to take a closer look. The tiger was even more impressive up close. The paper was so thin her breath caused the creature to ripple and dance. She wondered where it came from and why it was behind the couch.

There was a rap on the front door. A cracking yawn came from the spare bedroom, followed by slow footsteps. Eldest aunty had jet lag after her long flight from Canada. Still in her pyjamas, she opened the door. It was a cousin – Claire couldn't remember which one – and he held a bag of steamed buns.

All that day, she wanted to ask about the tiger, but the stream of visitors never stopped. It was exhausting, and everyone had a different title – Claire couldn't just say "uncle" or "cousin" like she did in English. Her mum had to whisper the right names in her ear. It felt as though the day would never end, but at least their guests brought snacks: milky white rabbit lollies, perfectly round longans, peanuts boiled in their shells.



It wasn't until dinner that Wai Po finally closed the door on the last visitor. When they sat down to eat, Claire held up the framed tiger. Middle aunty's face lit up in recognition, and she snatched the picture from Claire with a shriek. She started telling a story in Mandarin. Claire couldn't understand what she was saying, but it seemed to be funny. Middle aunty's voice and arms rose with excitement. Suddenly, she let out a squawk and slapped her hand down on the table, causing a piece of fish to go flying. Middle aunty was too busy laughing to notice the food narrowly miss her youngest sister's face.

Claire looked to her mum, wanting a translation, but she was frowning at her plate. Everyone at the table was laughing apart from them. Claire's aunts and grandmother were making as much noise as the entire family last night. When Wai Po laughed, she threw her head back so far that Claire could see up her nostrils. The best stories always ended like this.

"I'd forgotten about that tiger," eldest aunty finally said to Claire, wiping away tears.

"I found it behind the couch," Claire said. "It must have fallen off the wall."

"No. I'd say that's where Wai Po hid it!"

"Why would Wai Po hide it?" Claire asked. Again, Claire glanced at her mum, who remained silent, arms crossed. Claire had never seen her like this.

Eldest aunty had noticed, too. "It's been so many years, and you're still upset about it?" she asked. When Claire's mum didn't respond, eldest aunty turned back to Claire.

"Wai Po came home from a work trip with three paper cuttings. There was a tiger, a cow, and a chicken. They were presents – she always brought us presents – and she said we could pick one each. Of course we all wanted the tiger, and of course, your mum was given first choice.

We said it wasn't fair, but your mum cried and hollered, and Ma gave in, as usual. The baby of the family always got special treatment."

"Special treatment?" said Claire's mum. "Ma was only looking out for me because you two always ganged up on me. Saying things like I had to give you part of my lunch as an older-sister tax..."

Eldest aunty laughed. "That was only because Ma packed you treats!"

"I never got anything you didn't get too. Apart from hand-me-downs." Claire's mum stood abruptly. "And nothing's changed. You've got two voices in the story while I only have one."

To Claire's surprise, her mum left her rice half-eaten and walked out of the room.





The table was silent for a while. Wai Po took the paper cutting from eldest aunty and shook her head ruefully at her daughters.

“I guess that’s why Ma decided none of us should have the paper tiger,” middle aunty said.

The family was eating dessert when Claire’s mum returned. She sat at the table, gazing down at her folded hands. Middle aunty was peeling longan. Wordlessly, she put the translucent fruit in front of Claire’s mum. She waited while her sister put them in her mouth and spat out the shiny black seed. Middle aunty and eldest aunty exchanged words in Mandarin, and eldest aunty began to peel longan for Claire. “When we were younger,” she said, “I should’ve looked after your mum. But I was jealous of all the attention she got.”

“I thought siblings just meant having people to play with,” Claire said.

“Oh, we had plenty of fun. We liked to go to the night market and watch the circus performers.”

“I was a little spoilt as a kid,” Claire’s mum admitted. “We were only allowed one treat at the market ... to share! We always got the candied hawthorne. My favourite.”

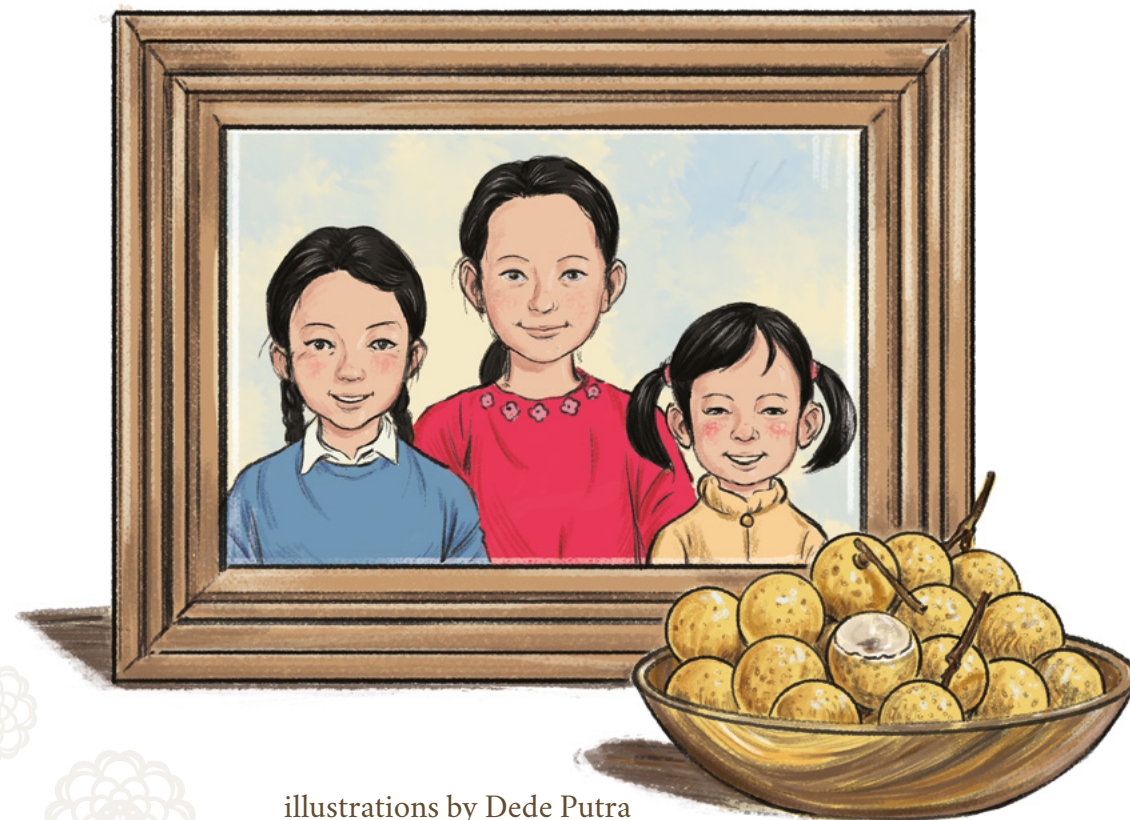
Eldest aunty laughed. “I think middle sister convinced you it was your favourite, but actually, it was hers! You always pulled a face when you got to the sour centre and gave her the rest.”

Wai Po handed the paper tiger to Claire.

“Can I have it?” Claire asked.

Wai Po nodded. Then she said something in Mandarin.

“Your grandmother said it’s a good thing you don’t have any siblings,” Claire’s mum translated with a laugh.



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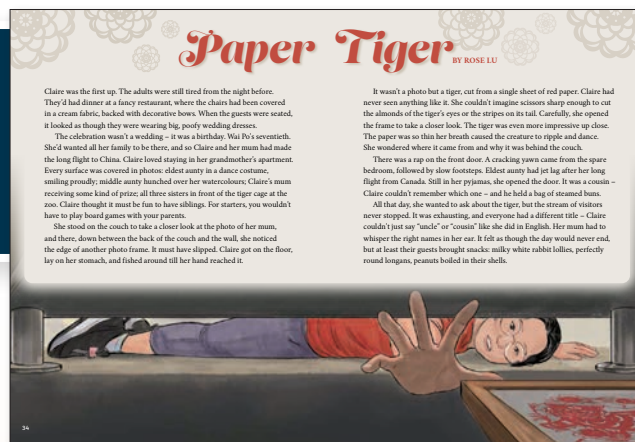
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