

TRAPPED IN THE WATER CLOSET

PRESCHOOLERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE

by George Ding

My earliest memory involves me being locked in a bathroom.

I was three and both my parents were studying in America, so I was left in the care of my grandmother. Every morning she led me through the hutongs of central Beijing to the preschool near her home.

It was one of the better schools in the area, but its shell of dull, gray brick filled me with foreboding. Two stone lions stood guard on either side of the massive main gate. To my three-year-old self, the place seemed like a prison.

The incident occurred early in the school year, during lunchtime.

We students sat in rows on long metal benches as the teachers placed chopsticks, rice, and tomato and egg soup on the table in front of us. I flooded my rice with soup but left the tomatoes in the soup bowl like fish in a drained lake. I've never been a fan of vegetables.

At the end of lunch, the teachers proceeded down each row, collecting the bowls. I didn't know at the time that students were expected to finish every last bit of food but as I looked around at everyone else's bowls, I noticed they were all polished to a shine.

The teacher paused when she got to me.

"Why didn't you finish your lunch?"

"I don't like vegetables," I said.

"Do you know how hard farmers had to work to grow these tomatoes? And you want to just throw them away?"

She placed the bowl back in front of me.

"Eat them," she growled.

"No."

The teacher's hand clamped down on my arm. She yanked me out of my chair and dragged me out of the cafeteria. My classmates regarded me like a man being led to the gallows; some scrambled to finish whatever was left of their lunch. She hauled me down the hallway to the boy's bathroom and threw me in. The door locked behind me.

My eyes, adjusting to the darkness, revealed the horrors little by little: a long trough that lined the far wall, filling the room with a smell of concentrated urea; crouch toilets caked with muddy streaks, sliding toward a dark hole gaping from the ground like the maw of Tartarus; rusted faucets that disgorged their murky contents into clogged sinks; detritus layered on a floor covered in dirt.

I spun around, looking for some kind of opening – a

vent or window perhaps – but to no avail. I tried the door but it wouldn't budge. Through it I could hear the echo of cartoons down the hall. Then it hit me: it was naptime. I was stuck in solitary while everyone else was sleeping or watching Tom chase Jerry around with a rolling pin. At the thought of this, I broke down crying.

My eyes were dry by the time the door opened again. An hour had passed.

The teacher looked at me and said, "Have you learned your lesson?"

After school let out, I ran outside, into the loving arms of my grandmother. I didn't tell her what had happened. If she'd known, she would have called the school. They would have given the teacher a slap on the wrist and she would have simply treated me worse. No, my vengeance would have to take another form.

The next day, carrot soup was on the menu. I finished everything but the carrots and sat quietly in my chair. My classmates begged me to eat them but I explained to them the righteousness of nonviolent protest. As the teacher dragged me away, I raised a fist to my brethren, telling them to stand strong, for the freedom to eschew healthy food was one worth dying for.

I protested that day and every day thereafter. As time passed and I grew accustomed to spending my naptime locked in that bathroom, it became less frightening if no less disgusting.

After a few months, I decided to see if I could get the teacher's attention. I turned on all the faucets and watched as the water pooled and spilled over the sink. Then I walked back and forth, flushing all the toilets. I flooded Tartarus.

Sure enough, the teacher burst through the door a few minutes later.

She looked incredulously at the water park I had created, then hurried to shut off all the faucets. But she knew full well that if she left, I'd just turn them all on again. She had two choices: either let me go, or spend naptime with me in the boy's bathroom from here on out. She stared at me and I stared right back.

I was paroled.

As fate would have it, I never finished that year of preschool. Shortly after my fourth birthday, my grandmother took me to America, where I was reunited with my parents and spent the rest of my childhood being a bad student in American schools. But during that year of preschool, I had indeed learned my lesson: Don't eat your vegetables, and never let anyone push you around.