WENDY RILEY

Yue's Story

It's not every day you find a bear who cries. For my father, who owned the bear farm, it was an odd and embarrassing sight. For a week he covered the bear's cage with rice sacks to stop curious neighbours peeking in and taking photos. This only made the bear cry harder, spilling pools of salty water on the bottom of its cage, already rusted from the forest rains and now cast in darkness.

"Must be an allergy," Father said, clearing his throat.

"Faulty tear ducts," said Uncle Bao, spitting on the ground.

"Just looking for sympathy," Grandma said, her voice as tight as a Chinese drum. "Never trust a moon bear as far as you can throw it. Show a bit of kindness and it'll take your head clean off your shoulders."

And Grandma should know. She watched her own father savaged to death by a moon bear—most ferocious of all the bears, with a death roar to stalk your nightmares. Min had been whipping the bear at the time, and yanking on its nose chain until blood poured out. But I was too timid to point that out then, too small to say: "Bears were never meant to dance! So what did you expect?" In my family, bears just did whatever you wanted them to. They danced on the verges of dusty roads. They were sold as exotic pets. They had holes cut in their tummies so the bile flowed on and on, as bittersweet and tumbling as the Erodobai River running in to Heaven Lake far, far above our heads. And sometimes they just cried.

Twelve bears, we had, on our farm in the chilly foothills of the Changbaishan Mountains, which stood proud and frozen along the remote border of China and North Korea. First thing in the morning I would creep through the chilly yard, peering into the cages while the bears still slept. I would catch them as they stretched a paw and yawned in the crystalline air, opening their eyes on another day. Sometimes I hoped that their eyes would stay closed. Then they wouldn't have to see what was right in front of them. And sometimes I hoped that my own eyes would stay closed so I wouldn't have to see it either. When I had to look at the bears head on, I made my eyes swim so I was blind to the red holes in their flesh, and the bulky bodies jammed against the bars of their crush cages. That's why I treasured those morning visits, before the bloody business of the milking day began and we could all pretend—for precious moments—that life was sweet and peace was possible.

"You will inherit this farm, Yue," my father said, his face proud. He didn't seem to see the terror in my own, trapped and swimming like a crazy carp. He saw only the product of the Xiang family history, laid out in lucrative rows awaiting his son's attention. He ran his hands over the endless vials and bottles in the outhouse, and blessed our good fortune.

No matter that his proud animals died a little every day.

I was first and last child in the family. Only one child was allowed in China, so they had to make do with me. Male, I was; strong, I wasn't. I failed to exhibit the steely, go-getting traits passed down through the Xiang generations. Our family name, Xiang, means 'bear'. My own name, Yue, means 'moon'. I was the moon bear born to subjugate moon bears; the special boy groomed from birth to bear his family's weight. From the start, it was too heavy for me to carry. I screamed, as a toddler, when grandad's bear danced for me. I wailed when a squealing bear cub did party tricks in the yard. I blocked my ears when the bears, mad with the pain of festering wounds, moaned as they watched their life blood trickle away. I banged my head against the wall as the crazy bears banged their heads against the bars of their crush cages, unable to move or escape their misery. I cried inconsolably as the tears made solemn tracks down the sad

bear's face, the tears of a clown who had forgotten how to smile.

But no one escaped the family fate; not my father, nor his father, nor the father before him. It was the curse of the bears, Grandma insisted. One member of each generation lost his sanity and nobody could stop it. For such a stern and upstanding family, it was a terrible affliction. My great-grandfather had run a wonderful business until my great-grandmother found him dancing, one day, just like his bears. After that, he never seemed to stop. My grandfather, then, after many years of successful bear-baiting, took to hiding under a table and rocking uncontrollably from side to side. Grandma told me all this quite calmly, as if it were obvious, really—proof positive of the wicked nature of bears.

"They cast a spell on him," she said, scraping vast quantities of rice from the wok on the stove. "Not only evil but cunning too. Wily brutes, those bears. They wait until you're happy and successful, then they strike you down. Ka-chow!"

She flicked the sounds at me as if they were bullets.

"They will come for your father, oh yes, and then they will come for you."

She dolloped the rice into our bowls as if it had personally offended her. I watched her face perspiring through the steam of the kitchen and the heat of her own fury. I imagined myself as a bear, lumbering forward, drawing back my paw and punching her clean through the grimy window behind the sink.

"*And I will come for you*," I thought. One day.

All of our bears were named after the Disney films I watched on our flickering television set. There were Dumbo, Bambi and Tinkerbell: Donald, Mickey and Pluto; Nemo, Baloo, Shere Khan and Simba. All our bears had lost something special to them. Nemo had lost his paws, chopped off by a hunter. Bambi was missing her right ear, bitten off by a tiger. Shere Khan was blind from cataracts which clouded his eyes. Baloo had lost his voice, having nothing left to say. And all our bears were missing assorted teeth and claws, father having yanked them out to avoid injuries to his workers. My particular favourites, Pooh and Piglet, lived at opposite ends of the yard, though I wanted them to marry one day and have three cubs I

would call Tigger, Eeyore and Christopher Robin.

You can imagine what Grandma thought of that idea.

"No bear weddings on this farm, thank you! You live in dreamland, Yue. American rubbish, that's what it is. Winnie the Pooh with his fat little arse? Too many Big Macs; too much honey. Keep 'em lean, I say. A hungry bear is a healthy bear."

The bears didn't get fed until they'd been milked. If they played up, grizzled or tried to eat someone, they missed out entirely. Pooh, an especially ferocious bear, often went days without food because he refused to be good. A huge, black Asiatic bear, he'd been hauled in from the wilds of Changbaishan one bitter-cold night after being shot with a tranquilliser gun. We heard his bellows of rage as he woke to find himself in a large cage in our yard. He rocked the cage so hard it crashed to the floor, and started to move, crab-like, to our back door. Mother was so shocked she ordered him into a crush cage, where he spent his days and nights lying sideways, unable to stand up or turn over. His great, black, hairy paws protruded through the slats, where he would try and swat anyone who dared to walk past. Pooh was the most fearsome bear our farm had ever seen; even Grandma was impressed, which took some doing.

"Can't break your spirit, eh? We'll see about that, my fine son. Boy, get the pliers. These claws are coming out. Now."

Deprived of their claws, the giant paws still waved alarmingly as people approached the cage. A big sign went up: *This Bear Can Kill. Watch Yourself At All Times!*

So Father went to work on Pooh's teeth, which were large, white and lethal. They put the bear to sleep, then tried to pull out his canines. When that failed—the teeth simply refused to yield—they smashed them all up instead, so they were useless. When Pooh woke up and tried to shout out, he looked as if he were smiling a crooked smile, which made Grandma laugh and me cry. But I needn't have worried. Pooh was unbroken. He would not be laid low by such ridiculous tricks. I saw it in his eyes—it would go on, and on, and on until he drew his last breath. Every day, as they stuck the rod into the angry hole in his abdomen, the black eyes watched every minute. He would never look away. He gave them no peace. Pooh sought eye contact with the workers, who squabbled among themselves to

do any other work on the farm—no matter how lowly or grim—anything to avoid the unwavering gaze of *that* bear. Many of Pooh's cellmates had long ago vacated the vital space behind their eyes, which made Pooh's watchfulness all the more remarkable. I think it was an accusation, this death stare; his refusal to let a single person off the hook. Even as I shadowed his cage in my early morning visits, he would never give me the sign I craved—some signal that he understood I brought him only love.

I cannot use love, he seemed to say, *unless love can set me free.*

Eyeing each other in first light, he asked the question of me, and I had no answers. Not then, anyway. Not yet.

And then there was Piglet, the bear who cried. She had been kept as a pet in a Sichuan garage until she lost her cuteness and killed the family cat. Thinking her children might be next, the mother instructed her husband to sell the bear and buy a Chow Chow instead. Perhaps Piglet missed the children who had loved her, or maybe she just hated living with a festering hole in her stomach. I never really knew. I just had to watch as she cried her days away. Father always steered clients away from Piglet's cage, worried that she might tug the heart strings of weaker guests. The last thing he wanted was do-gooders meddling in his affairs and conservationists wanting to lug his bears off to a sanctuary. She was such a beautiful bear. Where Pooh, the moon bear, was black, enormous and terrifying, Piglet—a sun bear—was smaller, cuddlier, and beseeching of human contact. She reached out her paw to the workers who milked her, as if to say: "It's OK, I understand; I know you have to do it."

The workers who shunned Pooh's cage flocked around Piglet, the easiest, gentlest bear in the whole of China. She was rewarded with a large cage in the warehouse allowing her to stand up, move around and scratch her back, sheltered from the biting weather of the mountains. Pooh, taking his place in the rows of open-air crush cages reserved for the 'nasty' bears, suffered the stifling heat of summer and the snows of winter with his usual, staring indifference. It was hard for me to look at him. I wondered if Piglet cried so hard because she was separated from her soul mate, sun needing moon in order to be complete. For one day only, Pooh and Piglet's cages had

stood side by side, before their temperaments wrenched them apart. But I had seen their secret tryst; the paw which reached out to touch Pooh on his aching, dusty shoulder; the eyes of the blackest night which suddenly found day.

I don't think my mother was happy on the bear farm. A gentle soul, I watched as she grew ever quieter, retreating into herself to preserve some vital sense of happiness and hope. She married not just my father but an entire family of such disturbed force that it ate her alive. Where she went in order to survive, I don't know. Somewhere behind her eyes she floated, as if in a life raft. Yet she never reached out to me so I could hop in too. I was left bobbing around in treacherous seas deprived of an anchor.

I was born not to torture bears but to save them. Yet who cared? I had tried to oblige, tried to be the boy who played the game and carried on the family name. But the name carried the madness. The madness was part of the war. I was already breaking inside, unable to cope with the keening of the bears seeping through my window at night, crushing my soul into pieces as the crush cages squeezed them within an inch of their lives. I was already as crazy as the craziest bear. It's just that no one realised it yet.

Nobody in the Xiang family put much faith in doctors. There had, however, been a few visits to traditional medicine men in the past. Great-grandfather was told to take far larger doses of the bear bile he was selling for exorbitant prices. Grandfather was told, on the contrary, to stop the bear bile altogether, because it was making him even madder than he was in the first place. Grandma, of course, thought this was bonkers. Didn't they realise it all came from the bears, who had darkness in their souls and evil in their veins? Nobody ever seemed to think about stopping all the nonsense and doing something else with their lives. I was just a boy, and not a particularly bright one at that. But even I could see.

How can you inflict madness on living things without going mad yourself?

Moon bears love water, I saw on a television show. They love to drink and splash and play. I would lie awake at night and imagine

Pooh swimming in Heaven Lake, breaking the water with strong paws and floating, weightless, on his thickly furred back under a full and brilliant moon. All the Disney bears would join him, silently, beyond sound, parting the water in black, sparkling furrows of joy. This is how it would be in my world, each bear having crept back through the birched slopes of Changbaishan, stepping lightly beneath the mighty conifers, breathing in sound and breathing out the deepest, sweetest cold imaginable. They would start to climb, then, swaying in a loose line of bears heading home, rejuvenated, life snapping back with every footfall, every leap, every scent of the birthplace pricking their noses in the bitter night. Snow would fall lightly, brushing their muzzles, sprinkling the blackness of their fur with crystal. At the very peak then the crater would open before them, the sacred lake—jewel of the Changbaishan mountains—welcoming them back to the peace of Eden; enclosing their pain; the water of the heavens washing it away forever.

This, then, is my own madness; the madness of a dream that cannot come true.

My great-grandfather's mental disturbance first showed itself when he appeared in the yard wearing a length of silk and his wife's slippers, proceeding to dance a jig. It got worse. Min started rolling naked on the family bear rug, scatching his armpits and huffing like a bear in labour.

He had no awareness of these episodes and life went on as normal. But it was the start of the family psychosis, ominously centred on the bears.

Min, Grandma's beloved father, was eventually killed by a dancing bear he christened Baby Min, even though it stood seven foot tall on its hind legs. But Baby Min was no dancer. He had two left feet. Min had paid a handsome sum for the bear, being struck by his sheer size, the thickness of his fur and the perfectly white crescent moon curving across his chest. He hadn't, however, first checked that the bear could dance. While the other bears of Baihe swayed monotonously to and fro after a yank on the nose-chain, Baby Min would get his feet tangled up and fall over backwards or lurch sideways into a trader's cart spilling fruit and vegetables across

the street. He also developed a tortured moan, quite unlike the clucks and tuts of his fellow bears. Grown-ups put their hands over their ears while local children gathered to laugh and poke sticks at this curious animal, who grew more agitated as his audience grew larger. Tourists were frightened and stayed away so depriving Min of the income he needed.

One day my great-grandfather lost his temper and started to whip the bear, pulling the nose chain so hard he nearly ripped the nostrils open. And that was it. Baby Min heard the call of the wild. Launching himself into the air, Baby Min slammed his attacker to the ground and shredded him with lethal claws and teeth. Someone shot the bear in the head but Min was already dead, his life blood leeching away on the cobbles while all the dancing bears of Baihe grew silent and still to mark his passing.

It was then left to my grandfather, Grandma's husband, to carry on the family business. He abandoned dancing bears and sank his money into bile milking, sure it was the next big thing. There was a long period of money-making with Grandfather buying cubs from hunters and hooking them up to his milking machines, their lives reduced to mangled cages and head-banging fury. So the bears all went mad too, the night air filled with sounds of screaming and rattling bars as they waited to die from starvation, infection or grief. Maybe it's just a question of who went mad first. Not that it was a competition. But Grandfather spent the last weeks of his life living under a table eating honey before the heart attack which finished him.

When I started school, I also started to believe that life could be different. I realised that most people don't hurt bears for a living. The parents of my new friends drove trucks, grew crops and looked after sick children.

Shu's father was even a ranger in Changbaishan National Park spending his days looking after plants, trees and animals. His job, strangely enough, was to keep the creatures wild and free. It took a while for me to realise that Shu's father protected the park against people like my father, who saw it as his right to remove bear cubs

from their homes. I saw that I was sliding into war against my family just as Grandma had waged her own war against the bears. I could no more take over the bear farm than cut off my own foot. I wanted to be the ranger, not the hunter. It was just a question of making it happen.

I also realised, in my new life, that other children avoided me. They left empty chairs on either side of me in the classroom. They huddled in groups during break, whispering and pointing; nobody would come to my house and play. Zang, a little boy with sticking-up hair, jabbed my chest one day and told me why.

"Your father tortures bears!" he squeaked.

I could hardly protest. Much to my shame, I hung my head and turned away, having no words to give. I knew that words changed nothing. Only deeds could set my bears free. One day, a new boy called Chen arrived in our classroom and sailed up to my desk with a grin on his face.

"Are you Yue, the bear boy?" he asked.

I nodded, feeling glum.

"I'm Chen, and mother says you can come and play whenever you want," he said.

The drought had broken! At last I had a playmate. It was only at the weekend as I entered his backyard that I understood. Bear cages stood side by side along the rutted ground, as far as my eye could see, their occupants in various stages of infected decay. I vomited, the remains of my lunch splashing over my shoes. Chen, proud of his family's bears, was disgusted and never invited me again. I was ill for a week. I wondered if I was going to die; if this was how it felt for bears with festering holes in their tummies where the metal tubes got pushed in and out, twice a day, every day of their lives. I couldn't eat. I didn't want to get out of bed. In the end my parents had to practically shovel me up the dirt road to school because I no longer wanted to go. I couldn't see the point. In anything.

That was when the English lady visited, telling us about her Sanctuary. It collected hurt and abused animals that would otherwise die. She showed us slide photos and a small film of the hidden, green space where monkeys chattered, birds called and moon bears recovered

from terrible wounds. I saw them rolling in squashy green grass, licking honey from the bark of a tree and splashing like children in a sparkling pond. This was a real place. It had a name. The lady lived there. This was the home our bears had been looking for.

But I knew I would have only one chance. I waited as the lady gathered up her things and waved goodbye, and our teacher made us chant: "Thank you Mrs Bailey!" I pushed myself to the front as the children jostled near the door, watching the lady walk up the hall. And then it came out as a strangled blurt.

"Please help my bears, Mrs Bailey. Can they come to live with you?"

But it was all Chinese to Mrs B, who spoke only English. I looked pleadingly at teacher, who I knew could help me. She chose not to. I saw the fear in her eyes. She could not cross the Xiang family, whose ferocity and generational madness were legendary in the mountains.

"He admires your work," she probably said with clipped English and false translation. "He would like to visit your sanctuary when he is older," perhaps. Or something like: "Yue just loves animals!"

Whatever it was, it was useless. Mrs B gave a warm smile and patted my head. She handed out small packs of cards and papers for each child, a memento of her visit. Trying not to cry, I watched as her car jumped on the corrugated road, whisking away her hope and her animal magic—leaving all the misery and death spasms behind her. Teacher was trying not to look at me. Her face was sad. She was probably frightened of being chased through the foothills by Grandma brandishing an axe. But I wish she could have found her courage. Just once. To bring peace to a raging world.

I knew, then, I would have to find it myself. I showed my family the card bearing the name of Mrs Bailey's sanctuary. Grandma laughed. Mother shuddered. Father went red in the face and shouted a lot. I left the card on my bedside table and took the key I had stolen from the lock box down to the yard. Feeling as calm and still as Heaven Lake on a summer's day, I turned the key in the lock of Pooh's cage and told him quietly, calmly, that his time had come. I knew he needed more than love to set him free. So here it was, my gift to Pooh. An end to war; an open door.

In the event, it happened so quickly. I remember only sprawling backwards, slammed to earth by the bulk of this bear I adored. As my head smashed the ground, a million bears exploded before my eyes in a kaleidoscope of aborted dreams. I had no time to say goodbye. Perhaps the speed was merciful. I didn't have to watch as Pooh, intoxicated with vengeance and freedom, rampaged through the yard until a single bullet to the head brought him down. Blood flowed across the cobbles from his broken brain, freed now, perfectly quiet; black eyes peaceful as a bevy of strange human beings jumped, screamed and banged their own heads against the cage of their grief.

My funeral was silent. Traditionally, elders are not allowed to pay respects to children, so my family sat and listened to the wind keening through the birches as I was cremated. What good would words do anyway? Pooh's body was slung into a shallow grave at the boundary of our farm, where the ground started to rise steeply to meet the conifer slopes of Changbaishan. His ceremony was not silent. It consisted of Father screaming abuse at bears—all bears, though this bear in particular—while whacking the cold earth with a shovel and berating my mother, who ran up and down the yard pleading with the bears.

"Why? *Why?"* she asked them.

"Why my little boy?" As if they might tell her. As if she didn't know the answer already.

Grandma stood silent through these storms, her face a mask. Perhaps she was remembering the day Baby Min took his terrible revenge on her own father. I think she knew what would happen next—how tragedy rips a hole in the heart and insanity creeps in. She watched as my father went rattling into chaos, dragging his family behind him. He lived in a permanent rage, spending most of his days banging on the bars of the bears' cages and throwing eggs at their heads. He spat at them, called them unmentionable names and told them he would rip their insides out and feed them to the eagles.

They took it very well, considering. Lacking Pooh's fiery spirit, the remaining bears gazed at my father with dull eyes and licked the split yolks from their muzzles. The exception was Piglet who had loved Pooh, but still forgave my father his indiscretions. As she

forgave everything. But now she cried without stopping and there seemed no end to her grief. This time, my family skipped the local medicine men, going straight to the new psychiatrist in the Baihe hospital. Grandma was sceptical but mother insisted.

"It's the family bear curse," Mother told the doctor.

"One in every generation," said Grandma, nodding sagely.

"Your men exhibited the bears' behaviour due to deep guilt at their plight," the doctor said. "And Jin here is driven mad by deep guilt about his son's death."

Hush descended on the small room, where one little ray of sunshine combed the back wall. There was nothing left to say. No defences left in place. No means of putting spilled blood back in the bottle or shed tears back in the duct. There was only stunned silence and a turning for home, my father supported on either side by the women who loved him.

My ashes sat in an urn on the mantelpiece, aching to drift. I whispered day and night, night and day, into my mother's ear.

"Set me free. Set me free. Set me free."

On the seventh day, she picked up the urn, carrying it to Pooh's grave where the body of the great bear lay sprawled beneath the earth.

As she sprinkled my ashes, I could hear the wind swishing through the tall trees of the forest, and—in the farthest distance—the call of wild Asiatic bears lumbering through the snow. As the last ashes touched the grave, father emerged in the yard, flailing his arms and bewildered. My mother stepped back, expecting the worst. For she had merged his precious son with the hated bear, a sin there was no coming back from.

But the fight was done. My father staggered over to Piglet's cage and gazed, open-mouthed, at the tears which fell from her eyes. He sank to his knees; water slopped from the floor of the cage, soaking his skin. Man and bear sat perfectly still, as the tears dried and Piglet's eyes rolled closed. Father started to cry, huge beads of despair splashing down his face and onto his bare arms. It was up to him now to mark the ongoing misery of those who remained—man, woman and bear—his watery vigil keeping him prostrate as suns

rose and set, and real life blurred around him. He alone held the key to an exhausted kind of peace.

On the seventh day, my father rose silently to his feet and crossed the yard, entering the house and moving slowly up the stairs. He picked up the card from my bedside table and punched digits into his phone. When a voice answered, he gave his name, address and the number of bears he held in cages.

"Come now," he said. "We are waiting."

There were no grand gestures as the rangers moved the bears into their trailers; no speeches, no sentiment, no expressions of relief. Just a blank sheet of a face as all evidence of past pain removed itself from the Xiang property. Piglet reached out her paw as she passed, not expecting it to be held or acknowledged. That's just the kind of bear she was. Pooh and I shifted the tiniest shreds of earth as she left for greener pastures but that was all, and that was enough. I knew my bears were going home. As was I.

My father stood at the gate, watching the slow procession of trucks bounce and sway down the bumpy old road until the last bear was gone.