



the
hidden
dragon

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I was ten, no, nine, when I was told the legend of the hidden dragon.

The steps were in front of the building Ah Ma and I lived in. Every day, just to reach the rest of the world, we had to pass through them. The energetic rascal I was, I usually sprinted, and soon I became addicted to the wooziness that came from bouncing down the curbs. Or that tightness in my chest after a heady, triumphant ascent. One afternoon, on my way down, I tripped and tumbled down a third of the steps. My right wrist cracked after it slammed against the middle banister. I also broke two teeth and one rib.

Because Ah Ma could not afford to send me to the hospital or even a street clinic, I was placed under the care of an elderly neighbour who claimed to have worked for a chiropractor in the mainland. In his dank flat I rested for four, no, five days. Constantly giddy from the fumes of the many pots of herbs that were always simmering, and nauseated by the murky concoctions I had to drink throughout the day. For a wild child like me, being incapacitated this way in such a depressing place was quite akin to being banished to hell. I whined continuously to be released. I also kicked up a huge fuss over anything. That was when I was told about the hidden dragon. It was an attempt to silent me. Also to coerce me into finishing the vile medication.

"I do not believe you," I remember sulking and snapping after the opening of the story. "There is no dragon here!"

"There is. But nowadays it stays hidden. Because there are too many naughty children who do not listen to their elders."

Nonsense. But this was only to be expected of Pastor Lum, the one who shared the story. He was a gaunt, balding man who headed a small church near our derelict estate. Several times each week, he ventured into our area. To share food, to spread his beliefs, or just to chat. Every kid I knew avoided him whenever possible for while he was friendly, he had a terrible tendency to nag for hours. To be stuck in bed next to him, listening to yet another of his never-ending stories, that was itself another form of torment. Almost as bad as drinking those murky concoctions.

"The government removed it a few years ago, you see. Another naughty boy who did not listen to his parents fell and broke his head against it. They replaced it with what you see nowadays. But the dragon is still there. Hidden. Two days ago, it decided to punish you for not listening to your grandmother about running down those steps."

"Lies! You are just saying that to get me to drink medicine!"

"I do want you to finish your medicine. I also want you to stop loitering at the football field. Come to my church after school each day. We will work on improving your results."

That was it. All that was ever said by Pastor Lum about the dragon. Soon, I learned the story was merely something he cooked up on the spot to coax me into behaving myself; no one else knew anything like it. As for the dragon, it was no more than the original handrail of the middle banister. Like the rest of the buildings surrounding it, it fell into disrepair after years of neglect, losing many of its mosaic tiles and even, as I was told, both of its horns. The sight of something like that, in a neighbourhood populated by the depressed and downtrodden and superstitious, invited much disgust and hatred. Someone eventually lodged a complaint with the local council. One afternoon, the dragon was replaced by a simple metal banister. The only picture I saw of the dragon, the only one I ever found, had it already chipped to pieces. It became hidden after the debris was buried under other rubbish at the junkyard.

With the story being only that, you would expect that I soon forget about everything. I didn't. Perhaps it was residue trauma from the accident. Or perhaps Pastor Lum managed to connect with something in me that afternoon. The tale of the hidden dragon never left my mind. I began using the steps respectfully, and usually as far away from the middle banister as possible. At home, I refrained from looking out of our only window, particularly at night, because that had a full view of the steps. Did I mention too that the head of the dragon used to be at the top of the steps, and so it once gazed directly into my home? And then there was that one time when I got distracted while chatting with two football buddies. I carelessly brushed my arm against the middle banister. Later that evening, a mysterious ache developed in that arm. The next morning, I rushed to Pastor Lum's church and prayed feverishly to the heavenly father he spoke of for help. After the ache disappeared, I ensured I never strayed near the middle banister again. Till today, I still keep to the sides when using those steps. I have not touched the middle banister for over ten years.

Laughable, I know.

And embarrassing. A story in which I allowed a childish phobia to survive into adulthood. But know this, over the years, something else also happened. A condition typical of such irrational paranoia. As much as I feared the hidden dragon, I also developed fascination and respect for it. I came to envision it as a far worse form of Pastor Lum. An unforgiving, unflinching eye always alert for my wrongdoings and constantly ready to inflict terrible punishment. At the age of seventeen, moments before entering the store I was told to rob, I thought I felt the dragon drifting beside me. The sensation was creepy enough to make me back out from the crime, despite knowing it would cost me my next promotion in the triad. Half a year later, as I laid recuperating from a machete attack, I suffered constant nightmares of the dragon digging into my wounds with its claws. On the day I returned home, I sat on the steps for an hour, chain smoking and drinking beer and silently mocking the dragon for its failed attempt to strike me down. At the same time, I also thanked it for a valuable lesson. The next round, I swore to it, I would not linger in a fight. I would not foolishly allow bloodlust to overwhelm me. No one would ever again add another scar to me. I would be the one scarring others.

It went that way. Over the next eight years, my rebelliousness towards the hidden dragon, if I could put it as that, made me unstoppable on the streets. I was my triad's most prized fighter when Hou came to me with his golden offer.

We called him Mousey Hou because he not only resembled a mouse, he behaved like one. Always at places where he was not wanted. Always greedy for scraps of goodies left over by the older brothers. And always with the most unusual and unbelievable information to sell. What he had for me this time was not information, though, more of a proposal. A *dai-lou* from an allied gang had been sentenced to a year in prison for vice offenses. He sought protection from his many enemies while in jail. He was willing to pay handsomely for in-house bodyguards.

"Chi sin. Tell him to use his own guys."

"It is not that you do not know about his condition. How many people has Mad Leopard left? He also thinks highly of you."

“Dew lei ah ma lah! One year! You telling me to go in for a year?”

“Listen to me. Mad Leopard has deep ties with Dai-Lou Seng. You know about that! If you do this, our own dai-lou will pay you too. And look after your grandmother while you are gone. When you come out, you will be the next in line.”

Next in line. Tempting. I was, at that point, languishing in the position of executor. A post that made way too many enemies. *“One year,”* I reiterated. *“What if I do not live to leave prison? I know what kind of enemies Mad Leopard has.”*

“Eh. Are you telling me you cannot handle this? You? Whom both Dai-Lou Seng and Mad Leopard think so highly of?”

Flattery worked. Pre-payment was a great enticer too. And so arrangements were made, paid for that was, for me to be arrested and jailed for robbery. On the evening before this happened, I went to the ceiling of an adjacent block, dangled my legs over the edge and gazed long at the steps. I had no doubt the hidden dragon strongly disapproved of my agreement and was already scheming retribution, possibly soon to enact its worst reckoning yet. As the wind messed up my hair, and as I mused over whether I would die or be paralysed should I plummet to the ground, I saw Pastor Lum hobbling towards the steps. Frail now, stricken by arthritis, he ascended awkwardly, stopping ever so often to catch his breath or to adjust his hold on the banister. At the top, he paused lengthily, and then in a strange moment of awareness, turned his head in my direction. For the next half a minute, he stared at where I was, his stick-like frame still and straight. Several times, it felt as if he was going to wave. Or at least raise his arm.

But he could not have seen me. Pastor Lum was already elderly when he told me about the dragon, now he was just a shade of a man with terrible eyesight. Yet, I was certain he knew I was staring at him. In those brief seconds of connect, I sense his emptiness, his disappointment and his frustration. I also felt all the words he had for me. All the untold stories. Before I could decide whether to yell at him, he resumed his hobbling and vanished into one of the buildings. I remained where I was for another hour. I did not see him emerge from the building.

That night, I looked out of the house window for the first time in many years. The middle banister, recently repainted white, glittered a little under the moonlight. That was all it was to me. A pale line of metallic white. For a moment, I wondered why I ever believed a sentient being rested there. After a while, I decided to sleep and not think about it.

Like me, Dai-Lou Seng and Mad Leopard came from impoverished families and were school dropouts.

Around fifteen or so, they were recruited as runners by another *dai-lou*. Over the new few years, they worked their way up the hierarchy, eventually earning their own followers and becoming affiliated with one of the strongest triads. Contented with what he had achieved, and knowing better than to be too greedy, Dai-Lou Seng then withdrew from active involvement and focused on managing the gambling dens he had with a distant hand. Mad Leopard, on the other hand, remained greedy for money and power. He soon became a nuisance to many, including some elders of our triad. The rumour I heard, one of our own elders was the one who snitched to the police. It was to punish Mad Leopard for being disrespectful during a ceremony. That elder felt Mad Leopard much needed a lesson in humility.

A lesson which Mad Leopard did not welcome. In prison, he was as brash and as insufferable as ever, chalking up more adversaries each day. This made my job of protecting him very difficult, especially after even the wardens started turning a blind eye to things. The tipping point happened on a Tuesday night before lockdown. I barely managed to shove Mad Leopard out of harm's way after the attacker lunged. The sharpened toothbrush stabbed three inches into my gut.

I survived, obviously. During the week I spent in the infirmary, Mad Leopard sent a slew of runners to visit, some of whom, by the way, were not prisoners. I was promised so many things, foremost of which being the assurance that Mad Leopard would remember what I did for him. That after leaving prison, we would work hand in hand for a better tomorrow. Truth be told, I was not at all thrilled by these promises. Why would I want to be the sidekick of such a hated figure? I was deliberating how to re-establish my distance from Mad Leopard when Pastor Lum unexpectedly came to visit. After we sat down, and after I delivered a sanitised version of the cause of my injury, we stared at each other in silence. From the look on his face, I knew he had bad news. I easily guessed what it was.

"When?" I asked when it became clear he did not know how to begin.

"Three weeks ago."

I frowned.

"She did not want you to know. She insisted before she left that you not be informed."

I frowned harder and gripped my chair. So till death, Ah Ma refused to forgive me. Which was unsurprising. Small as she was, she had always been fiery and obstinate. "Everything is taken care of?" I asked. "The flat?"

"Returned to the landlord. Some of your ... brothers came during the funeral. They paid for everything and helped with returning the flat. They wanted to inform you. But I demanded that they let me do it." He hesitated. "They were not happy."

"All of them are good brothers. They care."

"Ah Kin, listen to me. Everyone can start afresh. As we Chinese say, look back and you would see the shore ..."

"Pastor," I raised a hand. "I am not a child. I am too old for stories. Besides," I forced myself to smile. "You worship a *fan kwai lou* god. It's wrong of you to quote a Buddhist saying."

His face hardened and for a moment, I thought he was going to storm off. He did not. He merely nodded and continued calmly. "Your grandmother gave up on you. I did not and I will not. You know where to find me when you are out. My door is always open to you, Ah Kin."

"Pastor, there are many others waiting for me out there. I do not need your help."

He left. The following day, I requested my first favour from Mad Leopard. After the joss sticks were smuggled in, I lit them by myself in a corner of the courtyard. I remained there till they finished burning.

The youth was at the field on Thursday afternoon again. Playing football as always, his lithe body so agile as he weaved his way through the lesser players. Fine-boned and tall, with his hair always styled in the latest fashion, he was easily the handsomest in the group. The sort girls his age would swoon

over. From what I heard, despite still attending school, the youth already had three girls working under him. This disgusted me, prostitution of the young was the one vice I could never agree with. At the same time, it was also ironic evidence that Mad Leopard was making a change for the better, so to speak. Having a *gu ye jai* in school was the smartest thing he did in a long time.

“*Chin bui!*” The youth greeted upon approaching. This time, his excuse for venturing near me was to deliberately shoot the ball in my direction. “Joining us today?”

“Play with you kids? No thank you.”

He laughed. Such a sunny laugh. How many girls fell to that? “*Chin bui*, all of us know of what you did for Brother Leopard while in there. Brother Leopard keeps talking about you! Show us what you can do. Let us have an eye-opener!”

Flattery. What got me involved with Leopard in the first place. I decided to cut short the conversation. “Tell Leopard I am still considering. The nightclub business is not something I am familiar with. I need time to think things through.”

“All of us will be there,” he pointed at his friends. “Brother Leopard would be sending other guys to help too. And Brother Seng ...”

“I need more time.”

The cheeriness left his face. For a moment, I saw him for what he really was. A younger, more violent, deadlier version of me. I continued before he could react further. “Ah Long, is it? How long have you been following Leopard?”

“Since last year. Why?”

I gestured at his chest. On the days he played shirtless, I had an eyeful of the massive dragon tattooed there. A feral beast with blood-red, savage eyes. “You do not get into trouble at school, with such a picture on you?”

“Huh? No one knows, except some friends.” His eyes narrowed in suspicion and he retreated a step. “Brother Leopard helped me with it. He took me to ...”

“I know who he took you to. He offered the same help to me once.” I got up. “Tell Mad Leopard I will reply by the end of the week. Tell Dai-Lou Seng to please stop sending people to the church too. I am only staying there till I find my own place. It is pointless to frighten the kids.”

That terrible look on his face again. Then he faked a smile and reverted to his earlier tone. “Brother Seng joked that you have gone soft. You are teaching kids English. Reading with them. You are giving out bread at the estate too.”

“The pastor pays me to be a caretaker. And I am not teaching. I am in that class too. I keep an eye on the kids while learning with them.” Since he was doing it so radiantly, I smiled as well. “You should come, Ah Long. Always helps, with girls, when you can speak English like a *kwai lou*. Speaking of which, I must get back to work.”

He went scarlet. I turned and left. As I strolled away, I imagined him swearing and the dragon on his back glowering. Somehow, that imagery made me grin. To me, his dragon was not glowering in menace. It was cheering in approval.

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