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Flying Cat

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FLYING CAT

Here I am, spending another Saturday morning sitting in a beige plastic chair in the packed reception area at the Peace Avenue Veterinary Clinic in Mongkok, shriveling from the cold under the gale force air con, kicking myself for not remembering to wear anything warmer than a T-shirt, waiting for my number to be called. I'm J10 and the electronic light board behind the counter tells me my vet is busy with patient J8. J8 is a portly golden Labrador that can't walk. Two slight looking women lugged him into the surgery inside a large blanket they had doubled over and fashioned into a hammock. It strikes me that this might be J8's last visit. He can't walk and he peed through his blanket as soon as the automatic doors opened and he realized where he was going. I feel sad for J8 and the two women. I stare at the floor, thinking about his last moments when a door opens and the two women reappear, the dog lying down inside his hammock, eyes wide open, very much alive. They fix up the bill, pick up their corners of the sodden blanket and lug J8 out into a waiting car.

I am here with my cat. You can't see him because he is locked inside his polyester blue cat carrier, but he looks like he's just come off the set of *Jurassic Park*. Wire and concrete sprout from his face and two posts on either side of his mouth hold his jaw open. He wears an Elizabethan collar to stop him tugging out the blue plastic feeding tube that pokes through a hole in his neck and keeps him alive.

It's our sixth visit in three weeks. The girls that work here know us now. It helps that I am the only *gweipo* that seems to visit the surgery, but it's the cat too. "Ahh", they say, when I check in at the reception desk, "Flying cat." That's the name they give to cats that fall out of buildings. And my cat has earned his title. In six and a half years of life he has fallen twice.

My vet thinks Hong Kong has the biggest population of flying cats of anywhere in the world. He is probably right. After Macau, Hong Kong is the most densely populated developed urban area on earth. Almost everyone lives in apartments here, and lots of people own cats. Mongkok is one of the most congested parts of Hong Kong, heaving with 130,000 people

per square kilometer. In a good week, this surgery, which opens 24 hours and is considered one of the best in Hong Kong, sees an average of one flying cat each day. In a bad week, which tends to happen more in spring and summer when people leave their windows and balcony doors open, they see more than double that. There are seventy vet clinics in Hong Kong. If each clinic sees one flying cat a week, that's 3,640 flying cats in a year, seventy in a week. And that doesn't include the cats that walk away unharmed after their falls or the ones that don't get taken to a vet.

I am a dog person. I *liked* cats, in the way I liked komodo dragons and sharks and all animals except maybe rats, particularly the ones on Hong Kong Island that grow to be the size of terriers, but I had never loved a cat until recently. I owned a cat as a child and it was not an altogether happy experience. Lucy was a gift from my parents for my 11th birthday. She was eight weeks old and looked adorable and none of us had any reason to think she might have a few kangaroos loose in the top paddock. I stopped picking her up a couple of weeks after I got her. I grew tired of being scratched and bitten. My arms looked like they belonged to a disturbed child, the kind who kept botching the job of slicing through her veins.

When she wasn't harming me, Lucy liked to hunt. A bird would do, but her prized catch was the funnel web spider, one of the five deadliest spiders in the world and Australia's most deadly. Funnel webs happened to live on the north shore of Sydney, where we lived. Lucy's favorite trick was to catch a funnel web, hold it gently between her teeth, march up the back steps of our porch, through the cat door, saunter down the hallway to my bedroom, hop onto my bed, and deposit her catch on my pillow. This happened at least a dozen times during my childhood. I know now that cats only share their prey with those they are closest to, and that this was Lucy's way of showing me affection. But I didn't know that then. What I knew was that cats have immunity to funnel web spiders. People do not. At the time I remember thinking Lucy knew that. Scientists didn't discover the anti-venom until 1981, by which time Lucy had realized her real love was birds.

I planned to live the rest of my life cat-free until I moved to

Singapore and fell in love with someone who owned a cat. Gabriella had been given Filippo as a birthday present by her last girlfriend in Milan. After their breakup, Gabriella and Filippo moved to Singapore. They made a strange pair: Gabriella, with a symmetrical face, huge brown eyes and blonde wavy hair, and Filippo, an exotic short-haired Persian, with a thick coat of two tone ginger stripes, and a face that looked like he'd been propelled into a wall at rocket speed.

I suspected Gabriella was the love of my life, but I wasn't sure. She was younger than me and ridiculously good looking and defiant and feisty and everything else I wanted and part of me thought she was a bit too good to be true. Filippo, I decided, was not too good to be true. So I invited him to move in first. Gabriella was spending pretty much every night of the week at my place anyway, and I felt sorry for Filippo, left alone in an empty apartment all day and all night. So Filippo moved in, and aside from an allergy to cats I never knew I had, which required an intensive dose of anti-histamines for the next four years, we got on marvelously. I came to love Filippo, and he loved me back. More, it turned out, than he loved Gabriella. Six months later, on the day Gabriella moved in with us, he left a giant poo inside our bathtub, signaling his disgruntlement with the new living arrangements.

Gabriella had plans for another cat, although she didn't make this known until we had lived together for eight weeks. I wanted a dog. Filippo slept 23 hours a day and when he wasn't sleeping he was eating, preening himself, being kissed and cuddled, or using his kitty litter box. He slept between our pillows at night and didn't stir from the moment we fell asleep to the moment we woke. His sleep was frighteningly deep, so much so that I woke from time to time throughout the night and checked for the vein inside his neck, just to make sure he still had a pulse.

One night over dinner, Gabriella suggested that Filippo might enjoy the company of another cat. When, I wondered? His one hour of activity each day seemed pretty much full, and I didn't see him staying awake to squeeze in playtime with a friend. But he was an easy cat, and if we

could find another cat like him, two would be no trouble. I had only one condition: cat number two *must* come from the SPCA. I was not prepared to perpetuate the atrocious trade in live animals by buying one from a pet store. Singapore has lax regulations around the sale of animals, and it was known to those of us that cared that pets that didn't get sold by pet stores while they were still young and cute ended up being dumped or killed. I worried about those pets and the stain on my karma.

Gabriella had different ideas. She had found another exotic short-haired Persian cat for sale in a pet store in Holland Village. He was white with amber eyes and a squashed face and looked like something out of a Stephen King novel. "We cannot get this kitten", I said, the first time she picked him up and handed him over to me for a cuddle. "He's sick!" I said, handing him straight back. "Cat flu! Look at the muck around his eyes and nose. He'll make Filippo sick. Maybe even kill him!" But no amount of reason would change her mind, and in the end I got the feeling it might come down to a choice between this kitten and me. And there was no way I was going to win that contest. "Look how miserable he is! If we don't take him they'll kill him!" she said. And I, in love with her and feeling very sorry for this sickly looking cat, relented.

Filippo resented the intrusion, but we had bigger problems. Giorgio, who cost \$1000 at the pet store, clocked up a vet bill worth nearly \$25,000 in his first three months of life. The pet store gave him cat flu and he came close to dying from it twice. We had finally come to terms with the reality we might lose our kitten, when a friend of a friend recommended a vet who mingled western medicine with homeopathic remedies. Remarkably, Giorgio was cured.

His convalescence over with, Giorgio's personality blossomed. He developed some weird habits, like sitting on his rear two legs with his front legs up like a meerkat, staring at us as we ate dinner, head cocked (the "with curiosity" is all implied.) Tired, he stretched himself along the side of a wall and stuck his legs up in the air and fell asleep. He bolted from the

living room to our bedroom and back again in large loops, leaping over us sitting on the sofa or eating at the dining room table. When we got home from work he followed us into the bathroom, waited until we got into the shower, and stole our underpants. He carried them in his mouth through our apartment out to the balcony where the washing machine was and dumped them there. If the TV was on, he would sit on the table beside the screen and tap at the pictures with his paw. His favorite was the National Geographic channel. If a wildlife documentary was showing he would offer his own voice-over in his high-pitched kitten squawk. Unlike Filippo he was nocturnal, and he twigged fast that I was the light sleeper in the family. As soon as I fell asleep he would march up my sleeping body, rub my face with his whiskers, or if he really wanted my attention, lift his tail and grind his moist anus into my mouth.

I had a skateboard I liked to ride up and down the marble hallway of our apartment. Giorgio watched me, and one day after I had done my laps he hopped onto the board, used his front legs to steady himself and his two back legs to push off. He rode the skateboard the whole length of the hallway. It wasn't long before he was turning corners and zipping down the hallway faster than I could. His skill with the skateboard was astonishing and fuelled our belief that Giorgio was a very clever cat. Around this time we stopped watching TV. What could be more entertaining than our own precious cat, given a death sentence by a vet a mere three months earlier, doing tricks on a skateboard? Like any proud parents we were convinced Giorgio was special -a genius probably- and that we would soon retire and live off the proceeds of his extraordinary talents. "See?" Gabriella said as we watched him doing donuts in our living room. "And you didn't want him!"

We were in Manila visiting a friend the first time Giorgio fell. Our plane had just touched down at Ninoy International Airport and we were fighting our way through the scrum of the baggage carousel when Gabriella turned on her phone. There were seven messages from her sister who was cat sitting at our place, each more frantic than the last. Giorgio had vanished. Every cupboard, bookshelf, curtain and crevice had been searched.

He was not inside the apartment.

We rang our friend, apologized for the sudden change of plans, explained that we had no choice but to return to Singapore to find our lost kitten, grabbed our bags, ran up the escalator to the ticketing office, and bought two tickets for the next flight home.

By the time our taxi drove up Scott's Road into Orchard, Giorgio had been found. He had hopped up onto the washing machine in the small open alcove outside our kitchen and fallen four floors. Luckily, he had landed inside the balcony of an apartment on the first floor. He was fine. We took turns checking his legs, his paws, his spine, his teeth, the inside of his ears. There was not so much as a scratch on him. We had barely been home an hour when he climbed back on the skateboard and started doing a circuit of our apartment. Our cat was invincible. It was a miracle. He was one in a million. "See?" Gabriella said. "And you didn't want him!"

Six years passed between Giorgio's two falls. Lots happened in that time. Gabriella and I moved to Hong Kong, lived here four years, nursed Filippo through kidney failure, and split up. But before that, in happier times, our family grew significantly, and we were now the joint owners of three dogs and three cats. In a desperate attempt to make good for the sin of buying Giorgio from a pet store, we adopted our dogs from *Hong Kong Dog Rescue* and our cats from *Hong Kong Alley Cat Watch*. Each new addition fitted into our family seamlessly, and our three stray dogs loved their feline siblings. Our break up was sad, for me at least, but we wanted it to be amicable and agreed that our kids had to come first. We found apartments in adjoining blocks on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong and agreed to a time-share arrangement in much the same way as divorced parents do with their children. The dogs spend their nights at her place and their days at mine. I keep the three cats and the furniture we shared for six years that the cats destroyed. We split the costs of a helper who stays with the kids in the daytime and looks after them when we travel. Gabriella asked if I would mind keeping the cats, including Giorgio, at my place forever, so she could

buy an Eames Lounge chair and Ottoman for her apartment that they couldn't destroy.

So many cats fall from balconies and windows, vets have a name for the phenomenon. *High Rise Syndrome* was coined by a New York vet in 1976 whose practice saw around 150 flying cats each year. "The distance cats have fallen and survived is nothing short of amazing" he wrote. "Our record heights for survival are as follows: 18 stories onto a hard surface (concrete, asphalt, dirt, car roof), 20 stories onto shrubbery and 28 stories onto a canopy or awning".¹

Ten years later, two vets in New York City studied the injuries of 132 cats that had fallen out of buildings. Ninety percent of all cats treated survived their falls. What was really strange was that the incidence of mortality and injury peaked at the seven story mark. Only 5% of cats that fell from anywhere higher than the seventh story died, but 10% of cats that fell from between the second to the sixth story died. Incredibly, cats that fell from much higher stories sustained injuries no worse than those that fell from the seventh story. In fact, the chances they suffered any kind of fracture actually diminished. The cats that sustained the worst injuries were those that had fallen the shortest distances. Most cats that fell from the seventh or eighth story suffered a broken bone. Only one cat out of thirteen that fell from the ninth story or higher suffered a broken bone. The cat that fell from the 32nd floor of an apartment onto concrete was released from hospital two days later with a chipped tooth and a mild case of pneumothorax (collapsed lung). He turned out to be fine.²

Giorgio, like all cats that fall, owes his life to his evolutionary biology, physiology and a phenomenon called Aerial Righting Reflex, shared by all animals that live in trees. It's sad to think that Giorgio has never even *seen* a tree, much less climbed one but that is not material here. Or maybe it is. If he had more climbing experience perhaps he'd be more agile. Or at least have a healthier respect for risk.

1 Robinson, Gordon W. "The High Rise Trauma Syndrome in Cats", *Feline Practice*, Sep. 1976: 40-43, 41. Print.

2 Whitney, Wayne O. and Mehlhaff, Cheryl J. "High Rise Syndrome in Cats," *JAVMA*. Nov. 1987: 1399-1403. Print.

In free fall, cats use their eyes and inner ears to help them determine which way is up (or down) and this lets them position themselves during a fall so they reduce the force of impact. The cat's head rotates first, and then its spine follows, allowing its rear feet to align with its front feet as it soars through the air. Once righted, the cat splays its limbs outwards and arches its back, slowing the fall even further, and ensuring it lands on its feet.³ Landing on their feet provides a much safer landing than landing on their backs or another part of their body. This explains why cats that fall from lower floors tend to end up with worse injuries than those that fall from higher floors: they don't get time to right themselves.

Humans don't fare nearly as well as cats when they fall from buildings. That's because an average-sized man in free fall experiences a terminal velocity or maximum speed of 120 miles an hour. A falling cat's terminal velocity is only 60 miles an hour.⁴ Humans tend to land on their feet or their heads, compounding the risk of injury. It is rare that a human survives a fall more than six stories onto concrete, and even then his injuries are likely to be critical. It is rare for a cat to die from a fall of anything up to 30 stories.

My apartment in Hong Kong is on the fourth floor of a low-rise block. I only learned this recently but four turns out to be an unlucky number in Chinese. The word for four sounds like the word for death. Many buildings in Singapore and Hong Kong don't even have a fourth floor. I also learned recently that my balcony has railings just wide enough for a cat to slip through. A couple of days before Giorgio's fall, I spotted him squeezing through the railings and sitting on the three inch wide strip of concrete outside the balcony, looking back at me, making sure I had seen him. I got up and went straight to the kitchen and opened a tin of cat food. Within seconds he was safely back inside, and the balcony door was locked. The next day, I went looking for some green gauze, the kind they sell in garden shops, to cat proof the balcony. I looked around and asked a few people, and made a couple of phone calls, but no one seemed to know where to find that kind of thing. And then I got distracted and forgot.

3 Diamond, Jared. "Why Cats have Nine Lives," *Nature*, Vol 332, Apr. 1988: 586-7. Print.
4 Whitney and Mehlhaff.

Two nights later I got home from work to find two cats reclining on the sofa next to our helper, and three dogs asleep on the rug in front of the TV. Everyone was watching Project Runway, or Project Runaway as our helper thinks it's called. Our helper left, and I closed the balcony door, checking as I always do that no cat was hiding under one of the outdoor chairs. I had a shower, poured myself a glass of wine and started thinking about what I could defrost for dinner when it occurred to me I hadn't seen Giorgio.

I opened a tin of food and called his name. Everyone ran towards me but Giorgio. A feeling of doom began to knot inside my gut. If he wasn't inside the apartment, and he wasn't on the balcony, there was only one place he could be.

I threw on some shoes and raced downstairs. Gabriella was traveling for work and wouldn't be home for another four weeks, as tends to happen in times of crisis. I crept through the car park whispering his name. Underneath my balcony is the floor of a metal car stacker, a device popular in space-poor Hong Kong that allows two cars to be parked in a single spot. The floor of the stacker sits about six feet off the ground and is made from thick corrugated iron. If he had fallen, he must have hit the car stacker and bounced off.

Whichever way he landed he was likely to be in shock. There is a wall behind the car park and I hitched myself up on top of it, walked along it tentatively because I, unlike my cat have long passed the age where I get a thrill from walking along thin ledges, twelve feet off the ground. I called his name and I heard a noise. It sounded like a sick baby.

I jumped down from the wall, lay on my stomach on the floor of the car park, and looked under the belly of the only parked car. Stuck in its middle was Giorgio, his white body covered in blood and soot and his eyes clamped shut. I tried to coax him out but he refused to budge. I tried to slide underneath the car but the chassis was too low to the ground. The only way to get him was to stretch my arm in as far as it would go, pinch the scruff of his neck between my fingers and drag him out. I carried him

upstairs in my arms, horrified by his floppy body and the blood and bruising on his face.

I found my wallet and keys and ran out into the street and flagged a taxi. We got inside, Giorgio emitting a barely audible croak as I told the driver to take us to Mongkok, the only place in Hong Kong I knew to have a 24-hour animal clinic. I didn't know where it was, but I remembered its name: Peace Avenue Vet clinic. If the driver could find Peace Avenue, and Giorgio could keep himself alive until we got there, maybe he would survive his second fall.

Taxis in Hong Kong's New Territories present a challenge to the non-Cantonese speaking passenger. My driver knew I wanted to go to Mongkok, but "Peace Avenue" in English meant nothing to him. I kicked myself for wasting five years in Hong Kong when I should have been learning Cantonese. I slumped back into my seat and felt my heart thrash inside my chest like a freshly caught fish inside a bucket.

Apart from a couple of large arterial roads that slice through its middle, most of the streets in Mongkok are gnarled and crooked and crammed with cars and people. The last time I was here was a year earlier with a small group of MFA students, doing an exercise on immersion writing. We wandered through a food market, pens and notebooks in our hands. It was raining hard and we stopped underneath the awning of a butcher's shop. Knotted sheep's intestines hung from hooks under red lamp shades, and a fresh pig's head stared out at the street from an inside counter. The lone vegetarian, I stood back, feeling sad for the pig, rain splashing the legs of my jeans.

We were interrupted by a loud crash that sounded like part of a building collapsing. Walking towards the noise we discovered a middle-aged man sprawled out on the ground in front of a woman selling folding umbrellas. He had jumped out the window of his apartment and crashed landed on the awning above a fruit stall. An older man kneeled over him. The jumper lifted himself up slowly, waving the older man away. Cursing, he looked down at his soaked trousers and limped back inside the narrow

hallway to his building. His life had been spared by an awning, now crumpled with a tear down its middle, resting on a stack of empty fruit boxes. An ambulance pulled up and a crowd gathered, heads up, in spite of the rain, looking at the side of the building for clues. There were six stories, but it was impossible he had fallen so far. More likely to have been from the third floor, the only apartment with an open window. The crowd disappeared and all that was left was an angry fruit stall owner, shouting at the ambulance men in their plastic gloves, pointing at his broken awning. My taxi crawled up and down Peace Avenue through gridlocked traffic. Eventually, the driver stopped and pointed to a distant sign that said 24 Hour Vet, and I, worrying that Giorgio might not survive another trip around the block, and if he did that I probably would not, thanked the driver, gave him a big tip, and jumped out of his cab.

"My cat fell six stories!" I shouted, pushing to the front of the counter of what turned out to be Peace Avenue Veterinary Clinic. Hyperbole helps in an emergency, or at least that has been my experience in life to date. "Room five," the receptionist said, waving at a room behind her. "You can take him in now."

"Another flying cat" the vet said with an Australian drawl, coaxing Giorgio out of his cat carrier. He checked him over quickly before deciding Giorgio's jaw, spine and legs would need to be x-rayed and an ultrasound taken of his internal organs. "He's landed on his jaw and that's never a good thing" he said. Whatever the results, Giorgio would need to spend a couple of days in intensive care so his pain could be managed. The first 72 hours after a fall were critical and he needed to be monitored. "Is he going to be ok?" I asked, as a vet nurse started blotting the muck off Giorgio's face. "Too soon to tell," he said. I kissed Giorgio goodbye and walked out into the dirty Mongkok rain with my empty cat carrier.

I went home and spent most of the night Googling "cats that fall from buildings". The next morning I called in sick to work. I have a boring job in human resources and the last thing I felt like facing was people. At ten o'clock the vet called. Giorgio had sustained multiple fractures to his

jaw and his right front leg. His jaw required immediate surgery. He would be anesthetized and wire and concrete used to rebuild his jaw. It would take at least three weeks for the concrete to set, maybe even longer, during which time he would need to be fed through a tube. A hole would be made in his esophagus so the tube could be inserted into his stomach. Feeding would need to be done manually, by me, every three hours, around the clock.

Giorgio spent a week in intensive care. I went to visit him on his second day in hospital. That was a mistake. He looked like a monster with a thick plastic collar, pillars pressing his jaws open, his thick white coat stained brown by drool. He stared through me with glazed red eyes, not even registering as I tried to stroke the top of his nose. On my way home I rang Gabriella who had just landed in London. "He looks terrible," I said. "Maybe we should think about putting him down." "No!" she said and I agreed. In the space of six months, I had lost her and Filippo. I couldn't afford to lose anyone else. I was running out of things to love.

Giorgio was released from hospital. I arranged with my boss to work half days in the office and half days from home for the next fortnight so I could perform the duties of cat carer. My boss, who knows me as a middle-aged woman without children or a partner, shot me a look. All I could do was raise my eyebrows, exhale and say, "I know."

The vet suggested I buy a cage so the other cats and dogs would not get the chance to rip out Giorgio's feeding tube. I positioned the cage in the middle of the lounge room so he could see everything around him, and filled it with my old t-shirts. For three weeks, I fed him every three hours. When I wasn't feeding him, I was changing his bandages, or cleaning his cage, or administering drugs, or stroking his nose while we waited for the painkillers to kick in, or listening to him wail from the pain and discomfort of a mouth forced open with wire and concrete. Every three days we returned to the vet for a checkup. His progress seemed minimal. His weight had been five kilos before the accident and now it was half that. The bandage that held his tube in place wore through the skin and an infection formed. More drugs, more dressings, more stress. Sleep deprived, towards

the end of his third week at home, I had a flash one night of taking him back to the vet that very instant and having him put down. Instead I pulled the pillow over my head and tried to suffocate myself. It's harder than you think.

He's back home now, out of the cage, minus his tube and his Queen Elizabeth collar, with a gaping hole in his neck that looks like he wandered into the path of a stray bullet. He needs to relearn how to eat. Last night, despite his broken leg, which requires a further surgery when we've both recovered from this one, he hopped up onto my bed and folded himself into my arms. For the first time in four weeks he nuzzled his head into my chest and purred. I stroked the spot under his chin until we both fell asleep.

All travel and social activities have been suspended for the past four weeks. My days have been filled with me trundling off to work in a fog after a sleepless night, racing back home and attending to my sick cat. The vet bills have so far amounted to a week's salary, with more to come. But he is my cat and I would pay anything I can to make him better. That, I suppose, makes me a cat person: a cat person who will never again allow the door to her balcony to be opened until her lease runs out and she finds a new apartment somewhere on the ground floor.