

莫言：養貓專業戶

The Cat Specialist

By Mo Yan

Translated by Janice Wickeri

AUNTIE TOLD ME his dad was an idler who never did an honest day's work. In the slack winter months when other people were busy in their cellars weaving straw sandals to make money, his dad would be sauntering around, two big cats in his arms. Auntie said that when he was born the PLA artillery was holding firing practice on the stretch of alkaline soil behind the village. Columns of smoke rose from the field, some white, some black. The terrific booming rattled the papered windows.

When he was seven, he picked a fight with me, gashed my cheek with his hand and bit me on the ear. It bled a lot. But he was spotted by auntie who yelled at him: "Boomer, you little wild cat, what're you up to, biting people?"

He kept licking his lips with the tip of his tongue, like a wild cat lapping rat blood from its chops. Eyes narrowed, he suffered my auntie's scolding and didn't utter a sound or move a muscle as her words spilled over him. A black cat scurried out of our mill shed, a rat dangling from its mouth. It was a big rat and its weight dragged the cat's head down. His squinty eyes flew wide open with a flash of green light. Raising his hand to his chest, he tensed, and quick as a wink, darted straight in front of the cat and snatched the rat away. The black cat let out a few strange crying noises at him, open-mouthed; then, seeing there was nothing it could do, went off in a huff. Auntie was binding my ear with cornhusk, and her hand stopped short, but no sound came from her rigid, half-open mouth. Both auntie and I had our eyes glued to Boomer and the rat in his hand. His face wore an enigmatic smile, an expression that might have been either foolish or cruel.

Later, Boomer went off to the Northeast with his dad, and once he was gone we never heard from him. Two years before I joined the army, a slightly gaga old codger who'd gone to the Northeast to live returned to our village. I sat with him weaving mats for the production team and asked about Boomer and his family. His eyes dimmed as he said Boomer's dad died and Boomer was eaten by a leopard cat. When I asked what a leopard cat looked like, I couldn't get much sense out of him, he just said he thought it was a ferocious wild animal, a bit bigger than a cat but smaller than a dog and that even foxes and black bears were scared of it.

So Boomer had been eaten by a leopard cat. I didn't feel sad about it, only I suddenly remembered that enigmatic look he had – cruel, or maybe simply foolish.

The old codger had only been back a year when he died and was buried in the old graveyard in the eastern part of the village. The villagers all called it a case of falling leaves settling on their roots—the way they described it when somebody came home to die. It's hard to leave your native place. Poor as it may be, you can't forget it, and all your comings and goings will bring you back one day.

Another year, early winter, the army came to recruit in the village. The recruitment officers all wore leather boots and sheepskin coats and in answer to people's queries they said they came from Heilongjiang. Right away I was reminded of the mysterious tales and legends that old codger had told and of Boomer, eaten by a leopard cat, that monstrous and ferocious animal, in the act of licking Boomer's bones with its abrasive tongue; a sad shrill cry... and even the forest quaked.... Things were hard in the village then. All the young people wanted to join the army and they fought tooth and nail over it. Because my auntie had married Pockmarked Xie, a company commander in the people's militia, a few years earlier, I was in like flint and got my draft notice without a fight. Travelling north in the stuffy troop train, day fading into night, I had no idea how much time went by before we came to the edge of a big forest; the trees and snow assaulted our eyes and noses, the wind moaned, and in the night the forest was filled with the howling of wolves. When the senior officer heard I'd raised pigs at home, he put me in charge of the wolfhounds. In my dog-raising days, I regularly snuck some of the red sausages meant for the dogs. I was criticized, but I couldn't change. One glimpse of those red sausages and I got so agitated I lost my head. I had to have some or I'd be jumpy. Even now I don't dare think about the look or smell of those sausages.... While I was eating them, two visions danced before my eyes in turn: Boomer dashing in front of that cat like a bolt from the blue, snatching that rat, a smile –stupid? cruel? – on his face...and that leopard cat licking Boomer's bones with its abrasive tongue, licking at that smile, like an eraser rubbing the writing from a piece of paper.

A leopard cat's face, alert, savage, floated in my brain as real as if I had seen one.

Since my nasty habit was so hard to break, I was transferred to mess duty, where I was assigned to boil water for drinking and feed the pigs. The political commissar and the mess squad leader went into the mountains to talk one day and caught three leopard cat cubs. Leopard cat cubs! Mottled grey-black fur—shiny—especially the black; ears erect and more pointed than a domestic cat's; but for the rest it was pretty much the same. For me, the tale of Boomer's being eaten by a leopard cat

came to a close.

Not long after the leopard cat cubs arrived, some longer-serving soldiers were discharged. The name of the mess squad leader topped the list and mine brought up the rear. The squad leader had been in the army five years; the scuttlebutt had it that he was to have been promoted to quartermaster. He was a very enthusiastic worker and frequently undertook my ideological education. I'd been in the army two years and was probably being discharged on account of filching the red sausages! Well, so be it, I'd eaten my bellyful for two years and I'd been issued enough clothes from coats to hats to shoes, under- and outer-wear, to last me the rest of my life! Having spent two years in the army, my life hasn't been a total waste. That was the way I looked at it. But the mess squad leader didn't see it that way. He keeled over on the spot as his name was read out. The medic jabbed him with the needle for ages before he came to and when he did, he began to rant and rave. And then he took a carving knife and chopped off the heads of two of the leopard cat cubs.

He placed one upon the carving board (the cub still thought it was a game, mew, mew, mew, and scratched at his hand with its claws), he raised the knife, bellowing, "Company Commander! Up yours!" As he shouted, the knife glanced downwards and the cub's head rolled to the floor. The knife stuck in the carving board, black blood flowed from the cat torso. Its eyes started out, its tail beat a few times against the block, stood stiffly erect for a moment, and then slowly collapsed. The second cub was placed on the chopping board full of cat blood. Lying next to its sibling's carcass, this cub screamed in a mad frenzy. The squad leader, lip curled, red-eyed, yanked the knife from the chopping block and raised it high, cursing, "Political Commissar! Up yours!" As his voice went up, the knife fell and the cub's head rolled. Cat blood splattered his chest. A hue and cry had gone up and people came running, the company commander and the political commissar among them. The mess squad leader squatted on the ground, lip curled, a tear welling from each eye; he said: "Political Commissar...Company Commander...keep me on...I don't want to go home...."

The one leopard cub that hadn't lost its head to the mess squad leader I put into a box and took home with me. Neither his slaughtering those cats, nor his crying and pleading did the squad leader any good. He and I rode in the same vehicle to the station and he caught a steam locomotive back home. People said his village was even poorer than mine.

The company deputy-commander, afraid the cat would yowl on the train, be discovered by the attendant and cost me a fine, gave me a metal container of fish marinated in spirits and we made the cat drunk on it and put it to sleep. The deputy-commander said if it wakes up you feed it some more fish. He and I came from the same place; the rats were a plague there he said, cats were needed.

Even though I said after I'd seen a leopard cat I didn't believe that tall story about Boomer being eaten by one anymore, when I ran into him on the street, my heart thudded against my ribs. We looked each other up and down, at first just staring at the other's face, then sweeping a glance from head to toe, then each calling out the other's name.

He'd grown a lot bigger, but his face wore the same expression it had decades ago. When he wasn't talking that mysterious smile appeared, foolish and cruel at once.

"Stutterer said you'd been eaten by a leopard cat!" I said. "Stutterer" was that old codger's nickname.

He grinned: "A leopard cat?"

Even the field rats were running in the streets of the village, their mouths swollen with beans and grain, their cheeks bulging. They ambled along the streets taking their time and should a rooster get it into its head to peck at one, the rat would flee through a crack in the walls, into a haystack, or into one of the rat holes to be seen everywhere along the road.

"Have you ever seen a leopard cat?" he asked me.

I told him I'd brought a cub back from the Northeast, it was at my auntie's, still hung-over!

He was elated. He wanted me to take him right over to see it.

But I was bent on having a look at his house first.

The house he'd bought was the old workpoint record house for the production team. There were four rooms, mud walls, lattice windows. Three rows of tiles ran along the tops of the walls; two rows of blue, one of red. Two big cats slept on the *kang* while three kittens played around them. There were dozens of rat pelts nailed to the mud walls. Beside his pillow lay a book, its mud-yellow paper covers bound with black thread. Several crudely-done characters had been written on the cover in black ink: Exterminate rats; encourage cats. Curious, I flipped through it. Inside, there were no words, just weird designs. Maybe other pages had words on them, I don't know, I'd had only a glance at the designs when he snatched the book away, shouting at me stern-voiced: "You can't see!"

My face reddened slightly, at least it felt as if it had and, embarrassed, I asked: "Just a tatty old book, isn't it? Don't get so edgy."

He seemed a bit embarrassed in his turn and, stroking the book said, "It was my dad's."

"Did he write it?"

"No, dad got it from that Daoist priest, Wu."

"The one who looks after the pagoda?"

"Don't know."

I knew that pagoda. The chinks in the bricks were full of dried grasses; it'd been that way for years and years. The Daoist priest lived in a hut in front of the pagoda. He wore a black robe and could often be seen, hatless, the hem of his robe tucked up into his belt, hoeing the earth in front of the pagoda for all he was worth.

"Don't get mixed up with evil spirits!"

He grinned with that foolish, cruel look on his face, put the book into a hamper and locked it with a brass lock. A few mumbled words fell from his lips; the five cats rose to their haunches, arched their backs and gazed at his mouth with eyes round as saucers.

A light chill crept down my back, and the sound of screams in distant forests seemed to fill my ears. I was on the point of opening my mouth to say something

when a rat, albino with red eyes – completely out of it, not even trembling – tumbled down from the rafters and landed in front of the cats. It seemed as if the rat's face wore that same foolish, cruel smile. Boomer grabbed the rat, looked it up and down for a while and then said: "I'll let you go this time!" With that he mumbled a few phrases and the cats relaxed and gave a few apathetic meows. Then the grown cats went back to sleep while the kittens went back to their pleasant game of tail-biting. The albino rat suddenly revived and darted out of Boomer's hand, ran along the wall and slipped back up to the rafters. The soot of ages fluttering down made my nose itch.

Astonishment welled up inside me. The longer I looked at that enigmatic smile on Boomer's face, the more unfathomable I felt him to be. Suddenly the cats, and the ancient, tattered, dust-blanketed New Year pictures stuck to the wall, all seemed endowed with supernatural powers. They looked down, grimacing at me in the darkness, their eyes filled with other-worldly wisdom.

"What tricks are you up to?" I asked Boomer.

Boomer's smile vanished and he said quite seriously, "Listen pal, everyone is making money through private enterprise, let's us do it too! We'll raise cats."

Cat specialists! It was a weird, interesting and extraordinarily attractive proposition.

"I understand you brought a leopard cat cub back from the Northeast with you?"

That evening I gave the leopard cat cub to Boomer and he rubbed his hands together in delight.

I went round to my auntie's for a drink.

With three cups of wine under his belt, my uncle's face was flushed, and in the shadows cast by the single bulb overhead, it glistened with a thousand beads of light. He filled my cup, then his own, set the wine pot on the brazier to keep warm, cleared his throat and said, "Nephew, it seems like no time at all, but you've been back a month already. You roam around all day, don't have a regular job. Your auntie and I have been watching, but we didn't want to criticize you – you're not a child. You eat here everyday, and your auntie and I haven't said anything, but we're afraid the neighbours will make fun of you! It's different now than it was two years ago. The village took care of idlers then and a person didn't lose any workpoints by doing nothing. But the village doesn't carry those types anymore. Those who don't work don't eat. Your auntie and I don't know what's on your mind, do you want a few *mu* of land to till, or would you rather get a job?"

I shivered inside and took a gulp of wine: "Uncle, auntie, I'm grown-up, 'course I can't mooch off you! You're near relations, but you're not my own parents and even if you were, it wouldn't be right for me to just live off you and do nothing. I'll pay you back for whatever I've eaten."

Auntie said: "Your uncle's not trying to get rid of you, we don't begrudge a few meals."

"I know."

My uncle said: "That's all right then. I don't want you to get the wrong impres-

sion. Do you know what you're going to do?"

I said, "Boomer and I have it worked out. We're going into business together to raise cats."

Rats scurried across the papered ceiling overhead.

Uncle said, "What for?"

I said, "Rats have overrun the village and Boomer and I are going to set ourselves up as cat specialists, selling kittens, renting out grown cats...."

I was about to describe our grand plan to my uncle, when he began to sneer.

My auntie said, "Ohmygod! What are you doing getting mixed up with that madman? Boomer is following in the footsteps of that good-for-nothing dad of his. But you, you come from a decent family."

Uncle said sarcastically: "There are all kinds of private businesses, but I've never heard of cat specialists! You might as well team up to build robots!"

Auntie said, "Your uncle and I have been doing some thinking for you. It wouldn't be a good idea to send you right into the fields; folks who've been in the army don't take to it. For the last few days the loudspeaker has been blaring away about the county construction company wanting workers, they're paying seven *yuan* a day for unskilled labour. Allowing for food and drink, that leaves three to five *yuan*, so if you work two or three years, you can make a couple of thousand, enough to get married and settle down and I'll have done right by your mum and dad."

I saw Boomer again and told him I was going to work for the construction company and couldn't go into business raising cats with him. He said coolly: "It's up to you."

After that it became very difficult for me to see Boomer. When I had a holiday from the construction company, I went home to look him up. His shabby gates were locked up tight; there was a row of big characters written across the door in chalk: SPECIALIST IN RAISING CATS AND CATCHING RATS. Beside this in smaller characters it read: Only RMB¥1.00 per rat caught. The door was bolted shut, the fellow wasn't there. But still I yelled: "Boomer! Boomer!" An echo came back from the courtyard, as if I were shouting into a valley. I put an eye to the crack in the gate and gazed into the courtyard. It was bare as could be. Puddles of rain water stood in the low places, the albino rat was running about and a rat pelt hung from the wall.

Boomer's neighbour, old Mrs Sun, came over to me. Beneath the head of white hair, her eyes glittered like blazing will-o'-the-wisp. She held a walking stick made of prickly ash, and a streak of white skin gaped at her withered ankles. She asked: "Wanting Boomer to catch rats are you? He's not here."

"Granny Sun, I just want to see Boomer, I'm the Zhao boy, don't you know me?"

The old lady took a firm grip on her walking stick with one hand. Shading her eyes with the other, she looked me up and down and said: "Everybody's a Zhao, everybody says they're the Zhao's boy. What do they get out of it? Honey? Sesame oil?"

Immediately, I knew. The old lady was gaga too.

With an agility that belied her years, she turned, saying to me over her shoulder, "Boomer is a good boy. He's struck it rich. He buys me honey to eat, you buy

me poison. But I'm on to you, I won't eat it! A few years ago, you lot poisoned the rats to kill the cats, but it can't be done, can't be done..."

I went home and told my auntie about Boomer. Auntie said, "That madman! And if not a madman, a devil!"

Uncle put in : "Don't talk like that. Boomer ain't so easy to figure out, I heard that he's struck it rich in a slew of villages south of the Mohe River."

It was in 1985 that the rumours about Boomer were flying thick and fast. My luck had changed. I'd been taken on at the county-level Party residence mess to boil drinking water. I'd tied the knot and my wife's belly was swelling. With all my heart I was hoping for a son, but she let me down and it was a girl.

After my daughter was born, I took a month off and stayed home to take care of my wife during her confinement. Boomer came to see us once during that time. He sat in the courtyard but didn't go into the house. He was somewhat thinner than before, but his eyes shone and his speech seemed more obscure than ever, though if you thought about it, it made sense. He said, "Congratulations brother, you've been blessed; yes, you've been blessed. Stars in their heaven, all's right with the world. No time to boil her up some chicken broth; busy eating rats down south. Chasing around keeps a man fit, but life's too short and that ain't the half of it! Here's two hundred *yuan*, buy some clothes for my sister and niece!" He slapped a red envelope into my hand and was gone. Before I could make a polite refusal, I saw his dark form shade into the distant moon-shadows. A reed pipe, heart-breaking. I wasn't sure if it was Boomer or not.

A few days later, looking for some herbal medicine, I cycled to Ma village in the next county where there was an herbal medicine shop famous in three counties. When I got as far as a small hamlet not far from the village, I saw the villagers, men, women, young, old, stumbling over each other as they ran, racing toward the village. Getting off my bike to ask I found out that a "shaman" was going to stage an extermination. He was going to round up all the rats in the village and drown them in the pond. Taken aback, my immediate thought was that it must be Boomer. So, wheeling my bike, I pressed forward with the rest. As we neared the pond, we could see the colourful crowd, all gathered round in a huge circle. Under a willow tree stood a tall thin man, a black cape over his shoulders, his hair fluffed out like wisps of black smoke. I pulled my straw hat low over my forehead, took up my bike and pressed into the crowd, putting my face in shadow behind a big tall fellow, for fear that Boomer might catch sight of me.

In the beginning I thought it might not necessarily be Boomer. The man's eyes focused and unfocused from moment to moment. Unfocused they glittered like pools of starlight. Focused they were like two lumps of cold black breath; it was almost as if they could pierce the spectators' hearts. Only then did I feel this must be Boomer, because no matter whether his eyes were focused or unfocused, that enigmatic smile I knew so well – foolish, maybe cruel – was always on his face. Behind him crouched eight cats.

A man who seemed to be the village head – an old man with a grizzled beard – approached Boomer and rasped, "You'd better give it your all. For every rat you

capture you get one *yuan*. You'll get good smokes and good food at lunch, too. If you *don't* catch any rats....well, we're not far from the police station here, and two days ago an old woman, an exorcist, was arrested and taken away!"

Boomer said nothing, but that unforgettable smile grew more intense. Grizzly-beard withdrew into the crowd. Boomer produced a brass gong from behind the cats and struck it hard three times. It gave out a heart-rending sound. I don't know about anybody else but my heart contracted and I stood up straighter to have a look at Boomer. He was barefoot. Weird designs covered the black cloak and it was trimmed with hundreds of rat tails. When his sleeves moved, the rat tails swished against each other making soft rustling sounds. He raised the gong, banging it urgently, and as he did so he began to sway and turn and the cloak opened about him like immense bat wings. The cats too began dancing to his lead, now in, now out of step, but always with that leopard cat I'd brought back from the Northeast as undisputed leader. I hadn't laid eyes on it in two years. It had grown some and it was only by the distinctively pointed ears and the extraordinary brilliance of the mottled black coat that I knew it. It was larger physically than the seven other cats, a sterling example of the old codger's words: "slightly larger than a cat but smaller than a dog." I had the impression that the expressions on the cats' faces, especially the leopard cat's, commingled with Boomer's own, that they were intrinsically one, interdependent; that they belonged to the same amorphous category, not yet entirely understood by mortals and therefore a mysterious spiritual phenomenon.

When the cats danced in unison, they were like eight stars orbiting around Boomer. The sun was shining, illuminating their shiny coats. The weeping willow kissed the duckweed-choked pond, dragonflies skimmed noiselessly by. The cats' bodies were stretched out long and thin, they moved head to tail to each other, a glistening length of satin.



Boomer and the cats gyrated in their dance for about the length of time it takes to smoke two pipefuls. Just as people's heads were beginning to swim with it all, the gong fell silent, man and cats stopped short, immobile, like actors holding a pose on the stage. The heat was intense...Boomer's face shimmered with greasy sweat. All eyes were glued to him, unblinking. A few phrases shook from his mouth, vague words, not clearly heard, and two pure white spots of froth bloomed at the corners of his mouth. During his "incantation" the dormant cats had come alive, horrific cries issued from their mouths. They cantered about like eight treacherous imperial officials crossing the opera stage in their thick-soled boots.

The crowd was getting restless. The blazing sun beat down on a blue-black sea of heads. Restless, yes, but no one dared make a peep. I began to be secretly anxious for Boomer. Would all the rats in the village really be stupid enough to come up and leap into the pond?

Suddenly, the cats' cries ceased and all eight of them lined up in a row in front of Boomer, the leopard cat at the head. They faced north, backs arched, tails flag-staff erects, whiskers on end, mouths erupting huffs of breath. Their eyes flashed green light, the pupils mere slits like length after length of gold thread. My sweat went cold and clammy, jumbled visions swam before my eyes, a cacophony of drums and bells sounded in my ears, and in a trance I saw a herd of horses racing across the frozen tundra beyond the border, dry yellowed sheep running amok amid the withered grasses. I hastily gathered up my wits, there were only the eight powerful cats. Boomer drew a reed pipe from his waist and began a non-stop tootling on it; a terribly plaintive, sobbing sound. A sideways glance revealed that the encircling crowd had drawn in their chins, transparent beads of sweat stood out on faces. I don't know how much time had elapsed before a din arose at the back of the crowd. The sound of the pipe grew more resonant, like the call of the wild goose, and all the cats let out horrible yowls. Someone turned to look and shouted, "Here they come!" The crowd fell back, opening a pathway through which thousands of screeching rats, a jumble of sizes and colours, swarmed forward. No one dared so much as breathe, bodies shrunk in upon themselves and became shorter by a head.... Boomer had his eyes closed, intent only on playing his pipe. The cats' fur stood on end, they were very intimidating with their eyes unshakably fixed upon the rats. But the rats appeared quite unalarmed as they contended mindlessly with each other to jump into the pond, churning up the duckweed. Once in the water they flailed about with all their might, ploughing furrows in the duckweed cover of the blue water. And then they all sank, struggling, poking out red nostrils trying to breathe. And after that, even the nostrils disappeared.

The piping ceased. The assembled cats stretched and paced up and down. Boomer stood straight up in the burning sun, head bent, like a shrivelled tree.

The water calmed and the crowd came to life, but none dared speak. The grizzly-beard in charge hobbled up to Boomer, called him "Sir" and Boomer opened his eyes and smiled, a beautiful smile, a smile that nearly shattered my heart.

I fled on my bicycle, peddling madly, my whole body limp, enervated as never before. Coming upon a peanut field, I threw down my bike, not even bothering to lock it, and as soon as my head touched the ground, fell deeply asleep. When

I awoke the red sun was already setting in the west and both the near fields and the far-off mountains were daubed with blood. The acrid green odour of the standing grain assaulted my nostrils. As I pushed my bike toward home, the events of the morning came back to me like a dream.

When I got back to my county, I told everyone I met about Boomer's strange powers. At first no one believed me, but then seeing that I could back it up, they began to half-credit what I was saying.

In early winter, the authorities in the neighbouring county inquired about Boomer to the authorities in our county. The provincial Party secretary, Mo, was cleverly evasive.

He sought me out in the canteen to get the particulars about Boomer and I told him everything I knew.

Boomer had become famous. The municipal department concerned sent someone to investigate. Six months passed, during which Boomer became widely known.

At the wheat harvest, the County Grain Bureau's Silo No. 1 was overrun with rats. They were going to invite Boomer to come and catch them. The news spread rapidly. The municipal TV station sent a reporter with a video-camera. The provincial newspaper sent a reporter too, with a camera and a pen, and it was said that several very important leaders were also coming to watch.

When the day came, the fire-prevention reservoir at Silo No.1 had been filled to the brim and a string of tables set up along its edge. These were covered with white cloths and cigarettes and tea had been laid out on them. The county officials sat there smoking and drinking tea with several very imposing types.

Halfway through the morning, a black car pulled into the courtyard and Boomer got out. He was wearing leather shoes and a dark blue Western-style suit and looked extremely ill at ease. I sought that enigmatic smile.

It took about ten minutes to get the eight cats out of the car. They seemed extremely upset, especially the leopard cat.

Things finally got underway. The reporter trained his strong lights on Boomer's face and that smile flickered like a slip of paper in a fire. When the lights fell on the cats' faces, they yowled in terror.

The performance was a total failure. I heard an outburst of curses.

Beside the pond a man wearing glasses stood up and said coldly: "A hoax from start to finish!" Then he stalked off.

Mr Mo, the Party secretary, scurried after him. His face was dripping with sweat.

But mine was much worse.