

Readers aged 8+

# Lion Rocks

Monica Wat

There is something called the ‘Lion Rock Spirit’ where I grew up before I migrated to the UK. Named after the distinctive lion-shaped rock formation in Hong Kong, it has come to refer to a spirit of resilience and helping one another in times of hardship.

‘Lion Rock Spirit, San!’ I always found the saying a bit cliché, except when my grandmother repeated that time and time again so earnestly: when she fed me congee with leftover pork bits sold at a reduced price; when I returned home from school crying because the bullies had cornered me during recess again. She repeated that until the night she passed away.

‘Get rid of the expired ramen from the “discounted” rack, San,’ Manager Wang tells me first thing when she pushes through the door to the East Asian supermarket. ‘I will be doing the accounts. Don’t disturb me,’ she orders and heads upstairs to the office. I idle at the cashier in the early morning hours. It’s almost Lunar New Year again, and the red decorations everywhere bring back old memories...

The kitchen smelt of turnip cakes. My grandmother’s hands were wrinkled and skilful, cutting turnip slices precisely while I stirred the cornflour mixture. When the cakes were being steamed, we would kill time by snacking away. My grandmother opened the red and round New Year candy box and slipped a Lion Rocks candy into my hand. Together, we would munch on the candies while we watched TV. The golden wrapping was prettier than any red packet; and the sweet nuttiness of the chewy candies was the taste of my childhood.

I smile wistfully to myself until this little boy who buys groceries every Monday enters. I recognise him because he doesn’t look older than ten but always comes here alone, carrying the same plastic bag on his lean arm.

The boy picks out bak Choi, then tofu — both from the ‘discounted’ rack. Usually, that’s when he pays with some coins then leaves, but he lingers and disappears behind the shelves today.

After a good minute, he reappears. Something catches light from his tiny trouser pocket. Something...golden: the corner of a wrapper paper.

‘Is that all?’ I ask tentatively when he pays for the vegetable and tofu.

His eyes widen, fear and guilt clear on his face.

‘I...’ He struggles to find words. ‘Sorry...we...no money...but I want...’ He rummages through his pocket and hands me three Lion Rocks candies. Tears fill his eyes then roll down his bright red cheeks. He stares hopelessly at the golden candies I now hold in my palm.

I let out a sigh. ‘My dear, it is not right to steal. Don’t do that again.’



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He frowns, nodding vehemently.

‘But here — this is my treat.’ I take out a bag full of Lion Rocks candies from under the cashier and hand it to him.

When he leaves the store with a bright, tearful smile, I hope I did something right.

