

TROUBLE AT THE ZOO

C S WATTS



INTRODUCTION

"Toronto Zoo to receive two giant pandas from China in 2013"

"The panda pair - Er Shun (the name means "Double Smoothness") is male, Ji Li ("Successful and Pretty") is female - are slated to arrive at the Toronto Zoo next spring for a five-year stint before moving to Calgary for the second half of their stay. Zoologists are hoping to encourage them to procreate in their new digs, although the loan agreement dictates that any offspring would have to be repatriated to China.

The Zoo plans to renovate an existing exhibit, currently housing the Amur tiger, and adjacent space, to make room for the pandas during their visit. Construction is expected to begin in the coming months."

CHAPTER 1 - THE NEWS RELEASE

When I heard the news I was as excited as any of the others. Really, I was. Honestly. Pandas coming to Toronto - nothing could be cooler. We all knew it would bring tons of crowds. They might not all come to see the old crowd, but we'd get our share, get the spinoff business. Sell lots of tickets; good for the bottom line. Hey, I get it. I understand the economics of zoos as well as the next animal. Well, certainly better than most.

So when I read the initial press release about Er Shun and Ji Li, I said to my fellow zoo-mates - this is tremendous, we're all going to benefit. Money rolling in, world press coverage, it'll probably mean new digs, better working conditions, possibly even bigger food rations. The results can only be good.

I'm an opinion leader around the zoo. It's natural, being a Siberian tiger: the largest of cats, big teeth, real predator, smart, sophisticated, great orange and black coloring, neat stripes. Blah, blah, blah. I'm sure I don't need to tell you. The rest of the animals followed my lead, took up the beat

of my drum. We were all looking forward to their arrival. I was pretty proud of myself.

But was I wrong! I had overlooked something important. Really important. And that was only the beginning of what went wrong.

A week later, at our next council meeting, Saaron, the camel, piped up. "I wonder where they'll be staying?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" I said, looking up from my note-taking.

"Well, what cage will they use? Who's going to have to move?"

"Oh, come on," I said. "They'll build them a new one. Isn't that obvious?"

The remainder signaled agreement in their fashion, seeing the exquisite logic in my answer. Although we all went about our business after that, in truth, the question nagged at me. Where was the open space to build a new cage? I didn't know of any. I asked around; no one else had any ideas. Of course, not that I expected too much from the others: they were not the brightest group of zoo creatures

under the sun. In my view, the expression 'dumb animals' must have originated in a zoo.

So, as I said, we all carried on pretty much as normal until, some weeks later, I got the word. Couldn't believe my ears; they wouldn't even tell me to my face. I think my keeper even went off on vacation to avoid having to do the deed. In fact, the zoo announced it to the whole world and couldn't be bothered to communicate it directly. Yes, you guessed it - I was being moved out for the pandas! Me, the Siberian tiger, one of the zoo's star attractions.

And what's worse, they were updating the enclosure! For the pandas! Could you believe it? After all my years of lobbying for improvements and getting nowhere. I'm kicked out and the pandas get all the spoils.

Who do these pandas think they are? Sure, they're cute. Yes, they're all China has left. Yes, Canada needs them badly. The Chinese take all our lumber, wheat, canola, coal and oil, and what do we get? Cute pandas. I suppose some think it fair. I might have thought so at one point. But not anymore.

I was flabbergasted and disgusted. Even worse, I was humiliated before all my peers. I didn't know what to do. At first, I was too embarrassed to talk to the others. I shunned

them and retreated into myself. Took to pacing back and forth until my pads began to wear out and my feet hurt.

But then I realized sulking was not the answer. I had to act, take some concrete steps. But what? Knew I couldn't do it alone. I needed some friends, some allies.

CHAPTER 2 – ROUNDING UP THE POSSE

Who to turn to? It didn't take me long to figure it out. I was going to be moved out, but who was the latest star attraction to become a has-been? Of course, it was the polar bear cub. Damn, now he was cute. They were even holding a naming contest for him. In my view, he was much cuter than the pandas, but I admit I have my prejudices.

"No-name," I yelled out to him from the edge of his enclosure. "Have you heard the news? You're being replaced?"

"What!" he shouted back, swimming over. "What do you mean?"

"You know. The Chinese pandas. They're getting top billing."

"No one gets billing over me. No one's cuter."

No-name may have been young, but he was already full of himself.

"Sure, sure. Couldn't agree more," I replied. "But not everyone buys into that old hype. I'm afraid you're yesterday's news."

His brow furrowed as he tried to figure things out.

"Did they even bother to build you a new enclosure?" I added. "I don't think so."

"What? They didn't?" He stopped paddling about.

"Of course, they didn't. You got thrown in with the old folks. You think your place was brand new?"

"But-"

"I'm telling you, No-name, you're been screwed. Passed over. And you don't even have a name yet."

"How could they?" he growled.

"I'm telling ya, pal, it's those pandas. They have a marketing machine like none other."

"But haven't you seen those Coca-Cola ads?" whined No-name.

"Listen, No-name, one look at those pandas, and you're history. Say goodbye to those residuals."

"We've gotta do something," the polar bear declared.

"Now you're talking my language, No-name. But don't worry, I'm working on it. Just gimme some time - we need more allies."

It was one sentence too many - he began to lose interest in my plea and play with his toys. Knowing I had to make sure of his support before leaving, I threw in one last parting shot.

"Do you remember Knut?" I asked the bear.

"The Berlin Zoo polar bear?"

"Yah, that's the one. You remember what happened to him?"

"He died."

"And how did he die?"

"Gee, I don't know. How?"

"You didn't hear this from me, but I was told the pandas did it."

"Grrr. Those darn pandas," No-name growled again.

I had him now.

"OK, hang tight, No-name. I'll be back to you after I round up some more, er, supporters."

I left the polar bear to think about whom else might be holding a grudge against the zoo or possibly even Chinese panda bears.

There are a whole lot of animals and geographical areas in the zoo (African rainforest, Arctic tundra, Malayan woods, just to name three). Where to begin? I thought I should try my own neck of the woods first - the Eurasian section. Not far off from my space were a couple of Barbary apes, a Mouflon, an old yak, a nice snow leopard, a red panda and an Oryx.

I wondered how the red panda would feel about a rival.

Over the next few days I hunted him out.

"Red," I said, when I'd finally caught up with him, "what do you think of the panda bears coming here?"

His sour look said everything.

"So, I take it you're not amused," I pursued.

"What is it about those black and white bears? They're round and cuddly. So what? And the eye patches? We've all got distinctive marking. Gee whiz! What's wrong with me? Am I so terrible? They're slow and overweight, and I'm sleek and dapper. Am I not just as adorable?" He began to jump around his enclosure and gnaw at a stick.

"You're just the bear I'm looking for," I said.

We talked it over, establishing a good rapport. I was making good progress. It occurred to me that this campaign might be easier than I'd first thought. Perhaps pandas were not so popular after all.

Next, I went over to the snow leopard. Since she was in the next enclosure to mine, it didn't take long. Whitey had a sweet nature and I'd always been soft on her.

"Have you heard about the panda bears coming to the zoo?" I whispered through the bars.

"Hi, Amur," she purred, ignoring my question. "How's it going?"

Amur was the name the zoo folks gave me.

"Er, good, good. Well, no, to be honest, Whitey, not so good."

"Why, what's the matter, sweetie?" she asked. "Honestly, you do look troubled. Coming down with something? Avian flu? I do hear it's going round."

"What? Avian flu? Damn birds. But, no, that's not it."

"Tell me, sweetheart."

She was always so affectionate and caring; I almost lost my train of thought. Had to regroup.

"Ah, it's the pandas, Whitey. They're taking away my cage, er, that is, my wonderful enclosure."

"But I thought you hated it. You've always complained about how old it was."

Damn! I hate it when my fellow creatures remember what I say.

"No, no, Whitey, what I said was it was in need of upgrading. I love being here. Next to you."

"How sweet of you, Amur."

I'm nothing if not quick on my feet.

"Yah, and they want to move me to the other end of the zoo. Probably stick me next to some useless aardvark. We'll never be able to talk again. And you'll be forced to learn panda language."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

Me neither, but I thought it sounded good. But what I said was, "It's a really difficult language. You'll be dead before you ever get to say, 'How are you today, my little furry friends?' Well, maybe not dead, but really, really old. So there'd be no point."

"Sweetheart, we need to do something."

"Yes!" I said to myself.

"Gosh, you're so right, Whitey," I replied. "Why didn't I think of that?"

CHAPTER 3 – WHAT CAME NEXT

Okay, that was really much easier than I expected. No one turned me down. It occurred to me I might be able to round up the entire zoo population and stage a sit-down strike. I might even take over the whole place; get rid of the humans. Power was going to my head, I realized. I told myself to focus, focus on the current dilemma.

The first available evening I called a meeting of my new strike force.

“Thank you for coming, comrades. I appreciate your support and confidence. Tonight-”

“Excuse me, Mr. Chaircreature,” the polar bear interjected.

“Yes, Comrade No-name, what do you wish to say?” I replied.

“Does this group have a name?”

“Er, no, comrade.”

"Well, I think that should be our first order of business."

"Waste of time," Red said. "Let's get on with it."

"I agree-" I started to say.

"No, no, I think it's a sweet idea," said Whitey. "Anyway, Comrade No-name is so cute, why-"

I was quickly losing control - they were already at odds and I hadn't even got to the first agenda item.

"Comrades, please," I said, trying to find common ground. "We're all equal here and No-name's idea certainly has merit. I suggest we turn to the matter at our health break, when we can let the creative juices flow."

That idea seemed to mollify them.

"OK, down to business. Who's got any ideas as to how to deal with the pandas?"

"Excuse me, Comrade Chaircreature," Red said.

"Yes, Comrade," I responded, ever hopeful.

"Before we go any further, we need to get one thing straight. I am a panda; the interlopers have been labeled as 'pandas' by the mass media. They should know better. To call us all 'pandas' is an insult. I just won't have it."

What? Oh no! I thought. Somehow, I managed to keep my cool.

"What do you suggest, Comrade Red?"

"I am a true panda. They are vermin. Scum of the earth. Pestilence—"

"I think we get the point, comrade," I interrupted him.

"But they are cute," opined Whitey.

"I'll give them that," agreed No-name.

"They are not!" Red growled angrily.

"Comrades, comrades. Order, order! All views are acceptable," I hastened to say. "Everyone is entitled to an opinion."

But it was too late; they all started to quarrel. I was afraid they'd wake up the zookeepers. I began to pace again. Things were not going well. In fact, the whole meeting was a shambles. Perhaps this was not going to be so easy; perhaps I needed a different group. But I steeled myself once more.

"Comrades, let's leave the matter of appearances for another time," I said. "Are there not many creatures we consider ugly, that others would deem handsome? Is it really fair to say? Can any one of us really know and define the nature of true beauty?"

I became quite philosophical, and finally ended with the following, "in conclusion, we need to be sensitive to Comrade Red's feelings. He is closest in kind to these intruders, no matter what we think about their appearance. So, let us from now on call them simply pig bears."

I thought the suggestion brilliant on my part. Red was happy and anyone else who might think a pig was actually beautiful could not object. No one did object and I was back on track.

"Alright, back to business."

"Excuse me, Comrade Chaircreature."

I sighed. Audibly. "Yes, Comrade No-Name?"

"Is it time for our health break?"

Red was quick to interject. "No!" the panda growled. "We've just begun."

The polar bear was undaunted. "Because I'm already feeling a little peckish. And I want get back to talking about the name of our group."

"No," Red insisted.

No-Name began to pout, so I threw him a snack.

"Let's carry on, comrades - any suggestions as to how to proceed."

Dead silence. No-name's mouth was stuffed with a veggie snack. The other two, blank looks on their faces, simply looked at each other.

"I thought *you* had some ideas, sweetheart," Whitey said.

"Sweetheart!" Red repeated impishly.

"Please, Comrade Whitey, we're all '*comrades*' now," I responded, more than a little embarrassed. "No personal endearments, no matter how much they're appreciated by the recipient."

Now, the snow leopard began to pout. I was losing them. It was going from bad to worse. I decided I'd better take some bold action.

"Comrades, it so happens I do have an idea."

They perked up at this comment.

"Go on," said Red.

I had to think fast, for, in truth, I had nothing.

"Wait, everyone grab a snack. I threw the other two veggiesnacks."

"Does this mean we can talk about the name?" asked No-Name between mouthfuls.

"No!" shouted Red.

CHAPTER 4 – MY PLAN

“Clearly we have to wait until they get here,” I said, as the others chewed away. “In fact, I wouldn’t mind seeing the enclosure renovation completed. That’s when we’ll act.”

My comrades nodded; well, at least they didn’t disagree. Unfortunately, that’s as far as I had gotten. I had no idea what to do next; I’d had hoped the others would come up with something. No such luck. I decide to skirt the matter.

“Alright, comrades, we’ve agreed on that. Now let’s talk about the name.”

No-name perked up, while the other two appeared a bit shaken.

“Not to worry, comrades, we’ll figure it out when the time comes.”

I was ashamed, but I had to carry on. Enough said.

CHAPTER 5 – THE PANDAS, SORRY, THE VERMIN ARRIVE

It took a year to complete the renovation of my enclosure, though I didn't get to see much of it. I had already been removed to the far end of the zoo. It wasn't bad as enclosures go, but I missed my old friends. My pacing increased tenfold.

I was able to get word of developments through word of mouth. We animals have ways of communicating unknown to humans. These cages - I mean enclosures - are porous; in fact, the newest ones don't even have bars.

The truth is we can get out at will. It's just that who'd want to leave? Three square meals a day, no predators, the occasional mate, toys to play with, shade and sun in equal measure, indoor and outdoor facilities, perfect proportion between animals and space. The keepers even clean up after us - how great is that! Those people that object to zoos need to have their heads examined.

And what's more we're free to communicate and gather. If the keepers only knew what goes on after dark. I could write a book. That is, if I had a thumb and pen finger. And a

pen. Or maybe a MacBook Air; in that case, I wouldn't need any thumbs.

It was Red who relayed the news to me. In his words, "The vermin have landed. Time to act."

Soon the other two had chimed in. The pressure was on. I decided a little reconnaissance was required. In the dead of night I snuck out and made my way over to my old place. Knew the way like the back of my paw.

Security was tight; the zoo wasn't taking any chances. Er Shun and Ji Li were too valuable. Fortunately, the guards were only focused on human threats, not animals, and I was as stealthy as any other cat.

I found a hidden spot where I could observe them. Except for the patrols slowly walking back and forth, the zoo was as quiet as a tomb. The two bears were sitting next to each other, chewing on bamboo leaves. I've heard it's what they like. The whole time I sat there, they ate and ate and ate. No-name would have been jealous.

Some monkeys cried out in the distance. I looked up but the two pandas - sorry, Red, vermin - didn't skip a beat - they kept stuffing those leaves in like they'd be on rations tomorrow. How could anyone eat so much!

That's when it hit me. That was their weak link - those darned bamboo leaves! Without the leaves, they were toast. A plan began to take shape in my mind.

CHAPTER 6 – A LEAP INTO ACTION

Not long after my epiphany, I brought the brothers and sister together.

“Now’s the time to act,” I said. “Comrades, I have formulated the perfect plan.”

“Did we ever come with a name?” asked No-name.

Red’s eyebrows rose to their highest pitch. “Oh shut up, comrade,” the panda said.

His words were clearly out of order, even if he’d used the appropriate nomenclature. No-name began to cry. Whitey began to console him.

Not again, I thought. Time to move on.

“Comrades,” I intoned, “we must put aside our differences for the greater good of the zoo. We must get rid of these vermin before it’s too late. I can’t do this alone; we’re all needed. This is your chance for glory and greatness.”

And so on. If I do say so myself, I thought it pretty inspiring; well, at least it got us past this last hurdle.

The very next evening, after midnight, we gathered outside Whitey's enclosure, and made our way to the spot where I observed the pig bears.

"Here's what we're going to do. Two of you are going to distract the guards. First, No-Name, you run past them and head off down towards the African Savannah. Whitey, wait five minutes and then take off towards the Malay forest. Be conspicuous; they'll take off after both of you. Just don't get caught; keep running. Meanwhile, Red and I will deal with the pig bears."

I figured that Red and I were the strongest of mind and purpose. The other two softies might crumble in the moment.

"Okay; not another word."

In a few moments I gave Whitey and No-name the signal to get going. It worked; the guards panicked just as I expected and ran off in opposite directions.

Red and I waited only a second; we didn't know how much time we'd have. After putting Red on my back I leapt right into the panda enclosure.

The pig bears were so surprised they even stopped eating. Well, just for a second. 'Pigs', did I ever choose the right word!

"OK, Red, you grab that bamboo pile and I'll grab this one. Soon, we'll have it all out of here."

I grabbed a load as best I could and took off for one corner. I thought Red would be right behind me, but when I turned back, he was still standing right where I'd left him.

"What's the matter?" I called out. "What are you doing?"

Red seemed to be mesmerized by something. I went back over to him and shook him on the shoulder.

"What's going on, Comrade?" I repeated.

"You know, Amur, they are awfully cute."

"What?" I roared.

"Just look at them," Red said.

"I can't do this on my own," I hissed.

"Yes, yes, I know, but just look at them," he repeated.

"They're so darn cute."

I did as he asked. There was no getting around it - they were pretty cute, even though they were back eating again.

I sighed. It was hopeless. They were irresistible.

Sadly, I went back over to retrieve the bamboo leaves. By the time I'd returned, Red was already deep in conversation with them. It turns out the two bears were related and had friends in common. They were now exchanging e-mail addresses. Apparently, the Chinese had already given them language lessons. Darn, these Chinese; always one step ahead of us!

I couldn't even get Red to leave with me; last time I looked back, he'd taken out his Blackberry and they were getting connected. Turns out the two pig bears had visited Apple's FoxCon factory before leaving and been given the latest 'iPhone for pandas'. Darn those Chinese, two steps ahead. I didn't even know such a thing existed - iPhones for animals. Who would've guessed?

That does it. I'm going to apply for an exchange to Beijing or Shanghai, where I can get my paws on some serious technology.

CHAPTER 7 – SOLACE

In the end, I had to accept my lot. Whitey and No-Name got back to their enclosures without harm, and I managed to do the same. I took some solace in knowing that the pandas' stay would not last forever and I'd get my old place back after they'd left.

Best of all, the pandas even gave me the latest Apple iPhone from their storehouse of gifts. Ah, you've got to hand it to those Chinese: they know how to create lasting friendships.

It was time to make new friends, time to move on, and who knows: maybe my new panda buddies will put in a good word for me with the zoos in China. At least I've got someone to call on my new iPhone. In fact, I rather enjoy waking them in the middle of the night. Not that they sleep much; they're always eating.

It's just that they're so damn cute.