

Li T'ien and the Demon Nian

by Eugie Foster

Art by Roy Coker

Over two thousand years ago in China, there was a boy, Li T'ien, who lived with his grandmother in a tiny village by the seashore. They were poor, but happy. Grandmother took in washing so they would have enough money for rice, and Li T'ien caught fish. He also collected the crimson shells he found in his nets. They were delicate as snowflakes and whispered ocean poems if he held them to his ear.

Every spring, the demon Nian rose out of the sea, enraged by the melted snow that ran off the mountains and into the salt water of its home. Nian had two spiraling horns, sharp as swords, growing out of its forehead, and a thousand teeth in its mouth, keen as daggers. Its claws were tipped with burning poison, and their attack was faster than the wind.



The demon devoured both people and livestock, and caused ruin for fifteen days before returning to

the sea. When the crack-crack of melting ice heralded its arrival, people fled their homes, and hid up in the mountains. Those who were too sick or too old to make the journey cowered with their hearth fires unlit, quiet as worry, until Nian passed by. Sometimes, these unfortunates were taken by the demon. Wails of sorrow and tears of grief punctuated its passing.

One year, just as the air began to grow soft and moist, and green buds poked their heads through the snow, Grandmother called Li T'ien to her.

"Nian will be coming soon," she said. "You must pack rice in a bag for your journey to the mountain."

"Of course, Grandmother," Li T'ien said. "But you sound as though you aren't coming with me."

Grandmother reached up to embrace Li T'ien. "I am not. My bones ache. It is cold outside, and I do not want to leave my comfortable spot by the fire."

"But if you stay, especially with the fire lit, Nian will kill you!" Li T'ien cried.

"If that is the will of the gods, so be it. I have lived as well as I might, and you are old enough to marry now. I am content."

Li T'ien bowed his head, for he would not dishonor his grandmother by arguing with her. Nevertheless, he knew in his heart he could not leave her to the demon.

While everyone else in his village made ready for their journey, he dried fish, gathered firewood, and prepared for the fifteen days of Nian's rampage. He pretended he was packing rice when Grandmother came to see what he was doing. But he had cut a hole in the bottom of the sack, so it all poured out again.

"It is taking you a long time to fill that bag," Grandmother said.

"I know it," Li T'ien said. "I am pouring as fast as I can. If I do not have a full sack of rice to take to the mountain, I will go hungry."

"That is true," Grandmother said, and left him to go sit by the fire.

When the day came for the villagers to leave, Li T'ien was still pouring rice into his bag. At last, Grandmother snatched up the sack and peered into it. She saw the hole Li T'ien had made.

"Oh, my grandson," she cried, "you will starve in the mountain! Didn't you see the hole?"

Li T'ien took his grandmother's hand. "I am not going to the mountain. I will not abandon you."

"You must flee, or Nian will devour you!"

"If that is my fate, then so be it."

After the villagers departed, Grandmother insisted Li T'ien extinguish the fire. At night, when the demon came out of the sea, they hid under heavy blankets, quieter than sleeping babes. They trembled when Nian snarled in fury, breaking down doors and wrecking huts. Its voice was terrible, like the cackle of mad dogs blended with the crows of a rooster.

However, without their hearth fire, Grandmother became sick. A cough took root in her chest, and her breathing reminded Li T'ien of the rasp of sand over stones.

What good will it be for us to escape Nian, only to have Grandmother die of sickness? he thought.

So he built a fire in the hearth, and tucked Grandmother in with blankets and set steaming tea next to her. She shivered with fever, even bundled close to the red flames, so Li T'ien put more wood on until their little hut was balmy as a summer afternoon. At last Grandmother slept peacefully, just her nose and eyes peeping over the covers.

Li T'ien knew the light of their fire would draw the demon. While Grandmother slept, he took the lovely, crimson shells he had collected over the years, and used a heavy rock to grind some of them to powder. They were so fragile--more delicate than sugar candy in the rain--and when he struck them, they instantly fell to dust.

He poured water over the shell dust and used the bright red mixture to paint the door of their house.

"Maybe the red of the door will mask the fire within, and Nian will not see it."

Twilight fell. With the purple-gray veil of darkness, a mantle of silence muffled the countryside. Not a single cow lowed in her field, nor goat bleated in his pen. It was a silence of waiting and dread.

Through the hush, Li T'ien heard the clash of Nian's claws as it slithered over the rocks that bordered their village. The demon shrilled its sinister cry, hooting and bellowing into the night.

Li T'ien hunched down beside Grandmother, holding tight her hand. Her breath wheezed between her lips, quieter than the buzz of a hummingbird's wings. Even so, Nian's demon ears heard it.

With a great roar, Nian charged to their hut and smashed a powerful claw into the red door. The door sprang open, and Li T'ien leaped to his feet to stand between the demon and his grandmother.

Nian was worse than Li T'ien's nightmares had envisioned. It had six legs, all of them tipped with four claws, each longer than one of Li T'ien's feet, and when it stood on its hind legs, it towered over his head. It stank of rotten fish and despair so thick Li T'ien gagged. Nian glowered down at him out of three eyes--one venomous green, one sickly yellow, and the

last an evil black. Fresh blood dripped from its mouth.

Barely able to see through a haze of stinging tears, Li T'ien reached into the fire for a stick to brandish against it. His hand happened to grasp a length of green bamboo tossed in by accident.

Nian charged, its claws swirling the air with the force of a hurricane. Li T'ien threw the burning brand. A deafening sound, like ten thunderclaps, rattled through the hut. The fire had made the bamboo explode, shedding burning embers and pointed splinters over Nian.

The demon shrieked and ran back to the sea to put out the flames dancing on its hide. It did not return again that night.

The next day, Li T'ien gathered many sticks of bamboo and piled them beside the fire. He was gladdened to have discovered how to scare Nian away, but when he saw all the havoc the demon had caused--dead goats and cows, huts split apart by dreadful claws, and the stench of terror and poison



corrupting the air--he became furious. He fetched more crimson shells and asked Grandmother to help him pound them to dust. Then he mixed the red powder into dye. He took the white bed sheets from her washing pile and soaked them until they were a vivid red. When Grandmother understood what he was doing, she gathered up pieces of rice paper and

used her calligraphy brush to paint them red too. The sun walked the morning side of heaven, Li T'ien pasted sheets of bright red paper to each door of the village so that they fluttered like leaves of fire. He also piled bamboo at the entrance of each hut. As the sun entered the corridors of evening, he set the bamboo ablaze. Finally, Li T'ien wrapped himself in the red sheets and positioned himself at his door.

When Nian shambled up, Grandmother banged on iron pots, creating a raucous din. Remembering the reception it had received the night before, the demon skirted around Li T'ien, and turned to a neighbor's hut. Here it paused in confusion before the red, flapping paper at that door, so like the loud fire that had burned and frightened it. The bamboo at its feet exploded with thunderous booms and bangs, and Nian jumped in fear.

Li T'ien dashed forward, holding aloft a burning bamboo stick. When Nian saw the red figure rushing upon it, it turned to flee. Li T'ien flung the bamboo as hard as he could. It exploded, and Nian screamed and scuttled away.

For the remainder of the fifteen days, Li T'ien and his grandmother banged pots and exploded bamboo every night. Nian did not come near their village, so terrified was it of the red paper that blew at every door, and the crimson man who attacked it with sticks of exploding fire.

When the village folk returned, they were overjoyed to see Li T'ien and his grandmother waving at them from the doorway of their hut.

"Guo Nian," they said, which was the traditional way of congratulating anyone who had been passed over by the demon.

"But what is all this burned bamboo and red

paper doing everywhere?" they asked. "And why are you wearing that bright red sheet?"

So Li T'ien explained how he and his grandmother had driven off Nian. The next year, for the fifteen days of the demon's assault, the villagers wore red clothes, exploded bamboo, hung red paper, painted their doors red, and banged on pots. Nian was so terrified, it did not devour a single cow or goat. And it did not frighten so much as the smallest child. Nian's grip of trouble and sorrow had ended.

That is why today Chinese New Year is celebrated for fifteen days with fireworks and noisemakers. Baozhu, or "exploding bamboo," were the earliest firecrackers. People continue to wear red clothing, exchange red paper gifts, and paint their doors red during this celebration. And they greet each other saying "Guo Nian Hoa" which means "Happy New Year"-- Nian being the Chinese word for "Year," because the demon visited once a year.

The End

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