

The Tale of Wispy
by Georgie Wen

It was her first time interviewing a job candidate. Wispy's nerves traveled straight to the tip of her stripey grey tail. The resume in her paws was for a young male named Bumble, a former pilot.

Even with cheery Nintendo music playing from the ceiling it was quiet in the shop. As she waited for somebody to approach Starry Boba Cafe, Wispy kept glancing towards the empty kitchen. Work needed to be done.

Her tail whipped from side to side. A guinea pig with rounded features arrived, short of breath. Those eyes could've eclipsed the sun they were so widened.

"Got lost?" asked Wispy. Her tone was as neutral as her face. Every muscle in her body stored energy, always prepared. Perhaps her stillness made Bumble uneasy.

"Yes I did. I found a coffee shop instead of this place and was in a completely different part of town. I would've been early if..."

"Let's not waste anymore time."

Wispy managed her expectations for this interview given the way this had all begun. At the same time, she didn't want to give the impression that he would get the job. The boba drinkers won't be expecting any less than what they normally get. If the customers' faces aren't lit up after receiving their orders, no one will be more disappointed than the owner herself.

"Would you prefer to work in the kitchen or help the customers?"

"As a pilot I'm well-trained in interacting with others whether we are inside the cockpit or communicating over radio, so that proves I'm great at listening. If I work at the front, I'll make sure to get their order correct."

Wispy's eyes softened a tad when she asked if he would have a problem doing dishes all day. Bumble said no and expressed interest in seeing more of the place.

"Seeing all this shiny equipment reminds me of when I first took the front seat. It was so overwhelming and I wasn't sure if I could really fly it properly."

"Are you not going to return to flying?" She wanted more of his backstory. He looked at her with hesitation.

"No. I made a mistake and people got hurt."

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "You don't have to share."

"I'm not the best at navigating."

Wispy spotted the clock and told Bumble she would call him if he got the job. He didn't seem very happy to end on this note.

Right as the former pilot left, she pulled out her phone. It was time to line up another candidate. Eyes narrowed in on Baker's application. This was someone with kitchen experience.

Apparently they would be an energetic worker, highly skilled. Nevermind the cover letter being in all caps... Wispy wanted to meet Baker.

Young rabbits were already starting to line up. This was going to be another busy afternoon. Back when this grey tabby first opened Starry Boba Cafe, she spilled drinks everyday. A couple of negative reviews stemmed from those incidents, but she came to accept that she was a clumsy cat.

So much has changed from the furniture to the walls. A local artist offered to do a mural for Wispy, which far exceeded her expectations. Of all the places to create a masterpiece full of colours you'd find in a healthy coral reef, he chose to unleash the galaxy painting inside of a drink shop. The star fluid spilled out of a universe-sized plastic cup with mythical animals swimming through it happily. Enough detail to do a game of I Spy.

After dealing with all the reviews that set her back, there was an influx of art students wanting to hang out at Starry Boba once the mural was done. Beauty is valuable. Wispy even tried to make her drinks look better with special shaped cups and jumbo tapioca pearls. Certain customers are always happy to try whatever's new, she found.

"I can't decide which one to get."

Three brown bunnies huddled at the waiting area. They wore the same backpacks in different colours. A girl bunny wearing glasses had keychains hanging from her zippers. The one with several pins on her bag had floppy ears big enough to cover her cheeks and whiskers. Ginger, who had been talking, kept a plain backpack.

"He will like anything you give to him," said Anna with the glasses.

"You're acting like we're already dating."

The third bunny interrupted, asking why Ginger needed a gift in the first place.

"Her lover is finally getting released from the hospital," Anna explained.

The three students went into a discussion over how miraculous it is for Ginger's crush to be alive. Anna came to the conclusion that any gift would pale in comparison to a second chance at life, so it doesn't matter what Ginger decides.

Wispy handed out three jars of bubble tea with varying amounts of ice. While those rabbits returned to their own world, the tabby noticed a rather striking cat sitting at a table. This puny stranger was alert and anxious. Bright blue eyes glanced this way and that. She would pause to lick her shoulder often.

You could hear music again once Wispy finished serving the pack of thirsty animals. She approached the cat who didn't order anything.

"Are you Baker?"

"Yes," she said loudly. "I wanna work here."

"I know. Why don't you introduce yourself?"

Baker nodded aggressively (up then down) then started going on about her love of fresh ingredients and doing everything as quickly as possible. The more time she saves, the more time she has for grooming. At times it sounded like she was agreeing with herself.

Wispy took all of it in silently. Although she felt it best to conserve energy, she understood there was no shortage of that for this siamese cat who wants to be in the kitchen, therefore Wispy made a decision and wrapped up her impromptu interview. Normally, she'd be ordering food by now.

"I'm glad we've met. Tomorrow I'll show you how to run this place, so bring your learning boots."

"I don't have learning boots," said Baker.

"Get some."

There were three fast food joints Wispy would choose from after work. Wanting a fish-shaped fried fish burger, she entered Loving It Burgers, bypassing suspicious meet-ups with her claws out.

Growing up in a ramshackle neighbourhood made her less bothered by places considered not safe. Perhaps Wispy didn't come across this way, not wearing any scars or flaunting a torn ear. Cats are threatening enough to most animals they encounter anyways.

Her tail grew a mind of its own as she stood to the side near the drink machines. The food she was waiting for was all she thought about. It was taking forever. Once the tray was in her paws she rushed over to an empty table.

Out stepped this cloaked being from a hallway leading to the restrooms— unfortunate timing. Wispy's drink splattered her fur and spread across the ground.

"Oh hell, I'm sorry about your drink. Let me buy you another." His voice was gravelly and it sounded like there were two layers of it.

"My fault." Wispy shook her head without looking at the skeleton goat. Having encountered a few of these demons before, she knew well enough how they looked like in multiple forms. There was a particular manifestation that gave her nightmares. She declined sitting with him. "I don't want any company. It's been a long day."

Wispy was not good at fake smiles. She tried anyway. The bare skull was unable to smile back, but he apologized again.

"My mind has been preoccupied with last night. New death ritual and all that nonsense. It's not something I would've ever imagined myself doing, but rules are rules y'know. That chipmunk needed to be sacrificed."

He could tell Wispy was concentrating on her food in order to shut him out. That's how most animals tend to react in his presence (unless they're seeking his kind).

A bright pink kalimba greeted the very satisfied tabby cat upon coming home. It was hanging from the wall. A bit flashy for her taste, yes, but that's because she kept it from kittenhood.

Wispy could bring the whole night to a lull with her sweet, nostalgic tunes. The grasshoppers stopped singing whenever she emerged from the back patio, wood clunking beneath her toe beans going towards a red hammock. The sky shifted before her massive eyes while extended claws picked at those pretty sounding metal keys.

The meaning of each song filled her head, though she never sang. Better that way, like a foreign song you need not translate. For her closing, Wispy played the same song she always did, choosing to end with bittersweet tones. At times she would close her eyes and drift away, sleep interrupted by a harsh wind on occasion or perhaps rain during the night.

Her heart was pumping at full speed by the time she woke up. Vaguely she recalled what made her so panicked from her dreams. Bumble was there in uniform. For some reason she was in the cockpit.

Alarms were buzzing and indicating a number of problems. Fuel tank empty. Oxygen low. Terrain! Pull up. The guinea pig was swatting a dangling oxygen mask out of the way instead of flying the plane.

She stopped trying to remember and rolled off her hammock. It wouldn't be Bumble waiting for her at the shop today, thank goodness.

Baker was already digging into cardboard boxes full of cups and straws.

"How'd you get into the shop?" Wispy asked.

"I went through the vents," she replied.

"I'm giving you a key next week, so just wait for me next time."

Baker seemed disappointed, but she was eager to get going in the kitchen. Wispy let her stir the boiling pearls and explained how to make every tea step by step. Her engagement matched the level of a scientist on the verge of discovery. Maybe in a past life this cat was known for taking leaps in our understanding of physics. Either way she was certainly the main character in every existence of hers.

"Are we opening soon?" Baker asked.

"Not until you put your apron on."

It was a simple navy apron with a single pocket. Baker didn't want to touch it but her new boss insisted. "It keeps you clean. No complaints."

After giving in, Wispy offered a freshly made lychee tea with mango jellies. Baker asked if she gets a free drink everyday here.

"If all goes well. Let me show you more appliances."

It was fortunately not as crowded as yesterday. Baker picked up plenty of tips as she did her first shift, and not once did she ask if she could go home.

"Sure are a lot of rabbits that hang out at your cafe," said Baker when the place had gone empty.

"This area is probably the safest for them."

"Oh. Right."

A silhouette floated across the glass walls. The little cat acted like she had caught a whiff of smoke and her back straightened. Wispy continued wiping down the counter as this orange male cat strutted towards her.

"We just closed up, sir. Our posted shop hours are from twelve to nine."

"Your doors are open. I'd like a strawberry milk latte."

Baker appeared next to Wispy abruptly, her tail twice as fat. "We're not making anymore drinks, Rust!"

Unblinking felines faced each other, waiting for sudden movement. Wispy went towards the doors and said she's locking up now. Low grumbles came from one of the cats and Wispy didn't know who it was. All she wanted was to get her fried fish burger.

"Time to go," she announced, her patience gone.

Rust didn't acknowledge the grey cat as he walked past her. Baker tossed her apron onto a heap of boxes.

"Who is Rust?" She sounded like a parent rather than a boss. Although Baker seemed distracted, she waited for the siamese to gather her thoughts.

"He just keeps following me..." she started with a mumble.

"He's gone. We've locked him out."

"You don't understand. He'll take everything from me."

Wispy suggested that it'd be best if Baker tells her story along the way so that they can get food in a timely manner. Baker didn't order anything from Loving It Burgers, but her mood was improving. At last she had someone else involved with this annoying orange cat. Someone to finally understand the torment that came with being around Rust.

He is a greedy little thief as far as she's concerned, always following her and ruining her day. There isn't a moment where Rust isn't monitoring Baker while she's at Teddy's Prize Pit, the most addicting money sink in town. It turns out that Baker needs this cafe job if she plans to continue spending her nights on crane machines.

Anytime she desperately wanted a specific toy, the end result was always Rust getting her machine before the employees could reset it. The fact that he was so very shameless, never touching any other machines until hers was available, drove her mad. Ever since he started coming around to "steal" her prize, Baker had developed a habit of grooming aggressively as soon as she ran out of coins.

She wanted to break the machine in those situations. Once, she stood in front of it staring at an ice cream truck collectible until an employee walked by. It was the only way to make sure *he* couldn't get to it.

Wispy could understand why Rust would target her. Cats are routine. Predictable.

"I'm sorry he's been taking advantage of you at Teddy's. Does he follow you elsewhere?"

Baker sighed. "No one will believe me, but I know he does. They act like I'm talking about a ghost." Her voice rose. "He's not a ghost, he's a stalker."

Wispy groomed crumbs off her paws. The very act helps her think. She wondered how much of a problem Rust could pose for herself. However, what Baker has spoken of did not convince Wispy that they were dealing with an evil villain.

"It's been a long day, hasn't it. You deserve to rest up. I'm very pleased with your performance."

"Okay." Baker got up and left. It appears she has the same amount of energy as she did hours and hours ago. Perhaps crane games are better for someone more quiescent.

Starry Boba was closed. In the near future Wispy would see if Baker can run the place on her own once a week. Her new employee was already confident in making drinks and she didn't have to tell her to clean anything. They both preferred a nice, organized environment for working in.

As she thought about that funny little cat and her distaste for aprons, her name showed up on the phone. Probably showed up to work by mistake.

"Hello?"

"Did you see the review, boss?"

"What review?"

"For the shop. Your shop."

After checking online, Wispy saw that Baker was right. There was a new review complaining about not being served and treated rudely.

She read it five times. Of course she knew who was attacking her business, and she couldn't help but view the whole thing as premeditated. Rust, a petty grifter that outright stalks Baker to her own job just to make things worse for everyone. Wispy had to take action.

The fastest way to get 'er done in this town was to use magic. Not mermaids and fairy princess magic. Not even pointy hat wizard stuff. Only demons exist, and Wispy already knew where to find one.

He was behind the restaurant talking to a human. Those creatures also live long lives. Is that why many of them are just as corrupt? More years equals more opportunity for wrongdoing.

She overheard the man discussing family affairs. A toxic smell rolled off of his blue Hawaiian shirt. Humans have such different scents from each other; Wispy couldn't tell what would actually smell good to the average person.

"My cousin recently got this new job and I think that's why he's having a spiritual awakening. Is there a way to get him to like go back to how things were? Otherwise he won't be able to smuggle for me anymore."

The skeleton goat glanced at Wispy. It didn't take long for him to wrap things up because the white cloaked demon said his magic simply doesn't work on guinea pigs.

"Where am I gonna find another pilot..."

Wispy waited for the grumbling man to walk out of earshot.

"You again. Anything I can do for you, pretty kitty?" The demon held his skeletal palms together, which were shaped like human hands for some reason. Every time he moved, Wispy could hear the scrape of bone.

"Do you know the pale orange cat which follows a siamese around?"

"He goes by Rust," replied the skeleton goat. Her back twitched. A minuscule part of her questioned whether or not this was a good idea.

She barely knew this cat. Maybe she shouldn't have turned him away in the first place. Maybe Baker is unhinged—the type to bring this sort of drama wherever she went. What if the new hire is the real problem?

"I want to know where this individual is going to be tomorrow come sundown."

The wind hissed. "One hour before your cafe closes, he'll be there."

Wispy grabbed her phone.

It was already quite dark, but he could see a shadowy outline of someone sitting beneath the trees. The tinkling of music echoed, reaching the heavens and enticing his mind to wander. Kittenhood. Cold nights. A forgotten lullaby.

The glow of the shop touched his furry face, revealing a wary expression. By instinct he followed the song of kalimba instead of passing through the front doors. Now he was close enough to see those stripes on the back of her head.

She sat facing away from the patio table, tail swaying counterpoint to melody. While Rust fixed his yellow eyes onto that wavy movement, leaves trembled above. Baker managed to find a steady balance.

"I owe you," said Wispy. Although her paws kept plucking away, Rust stopped moving towards her beautiful tune.

"You owe me?"

"I owe you an extra drink for that night."

Strawberry milk liquid flooded down. The song was over.