Garson

Memoir by Wayson Choy

Wayson Choy (1939-) was born in Vancouver and currently lives and teaches in Toronto. He shared the 1996 Trillium Book Award (with Margaret Atwood) and won the City of Vancouver Book Award for his first novel, The Jade Peony. This selection is from Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood (1999), which was short-listed for a Governor General's Award for Nonfiction.

Whenever Garson and I played together as boyhood friends, even the most callous adults would be distracted by his bright-eyed charm. His genuinely shy smile would melt grown-up hearts. Though undersized, even for an eight-year-old, Garson mirrored his older brothers' tough-guy stance that made young women swoon. Men, like friendly giants, bent down to lift him up, up . . . up . . . tossing him giggling onto their shoulders. While he flinched, doting women knelt down to pinch his cheeks. Everyone wanted to hug or pick up Garson. Dawdling beside him, I was the ugly duckling waiting to be noticed.

I wanted to crush him.

Almost two years older than Garson, I was half-a-head taller, his unofficial big brother, and I hungered for the physical affection showered so lavishly on my smaller pal. Being a Chinatown son, I was expected to have outgrown my need for physical affection, and any feeble attempts on my part to get the same kind of attention that Garson abundantly attracted—like stupidly raising both my arms in expectation of being lifted up—were met with disdain. I was absurdly too tall for picking up, too bony for hugging. I had just turned ten and hated to look like a stranded fool, so I soon quit trying. My arms stayed stiffly by my side. Jealousy clung to me like cobwebs.

Besides, whenever we were compared as boys, Garson always won out. He was smarter, slim like his sisters, athletic like his older brothers Gar and Spike. He had bright intelligent eyes and a vocabulary equal to mine.

Grown-ups said to me, if they noticed me at all, "Sonny, you watch out for Garson. You take care of your little brother."

If they really knew Garson, the agile one, the smarter one, as Mother had pointed out a few times to Father, people would be saying instead, "Garson, you take care of Sonny."

Mother never said she would have actually preferred Garson for her own son, but I could guess what she sometimes thought.

Even my mother betrayed me.

Garson, decent even then, never really took advantage of his drawing powers; he himself hardly noticed them. He said to me, "You are my best buddy." I agreed. Whenever someone picked on him, I stood up for him. Once I tried to defend both of us from Stan Yee and his two older brothers. The three boys shoved and punched me, and, laughing, tossed me into the bushes for my puny efforts at self-defence. Garson ran away.

"You should be as smart," Mother said, removing my torn shirt and ignoring my tears.

After that episode, we smaller kids kept watch on each other, screaming "*Run! Run!*" if we spotted any one of "them." I would bang on our front door; Mother would quickly let me in; and Winky would dart out, race down the steps, barking wildly, and chase them away.

In the hierarchy of children, we picked-on kids did our share of picking on others. There was an older boy—he looked to be 12 or 13—who sometimes wandered down our street. He softly sang to himself and spoke in a funny-sounding, snorting way. One of his suspenders always slipped off his shoulder, and the other was safety-pinned to his shirt. If one of us pulled the tail of his shirt, he spun about, dancing like a clown St. Vitus, his legs wobbly, his arms waving. We were drawn to him, as we were drawn to the sideshow tents at the Pacific National Exhibition.

Giggling with our collective power, we threw sticks and kicked dirt at this gentle, dream-like figure who visited our street, but who never understood how ordinary boys thought. We distorted our faces to mock his own, and he always smiled, gap-toothed, to think we were his playmates. At first, I ran away from the sight of him. Then I stood to watch him go by. Most times, we would merely mimic his motions and let him go on his way. Sometimes Mr. Kelly or Mrs. Mah would yell at us to leave him alone.

One day, one of the older boys threw a rock at him, missed, and pushed him down onto the cobbled road. Something like bloodlust infected the pack of older boys that surrounded the fallen outlander.

"C'mon and have some fun," one of the older boys shouted at us kids standing on the sidewalk, watching. First one, then, two, then all five of us darted into the road. In the screaming melee, most of my childish kicks missed their mark; arms flailing, my blows fell upon the backs of other boys. We didn't stop until a honking car horn warned us away. Everybody scattered, shrieking like hyenas.

When I got home later that afternoon, Mother was on the telephone in our hallway.

"He's just walked in," she said in Toisanese to whoever was on the phone. She held the receiver away from herself and began to look me over.

"Did you do anything bad today, Sonny?"

"No," I said. I hadn't stolen anything or broken any windows. Winky jumped up and down on me, licking my face.

Mother continued to look me over carefully.

"That skinny white boy that's funny-looking," she said. "The *sung-khin* boy—you know the one I mean?"

I nodded my head, expecting to be knuckled on my head for taking part in beating him up.

"Don't touch him again," Mother said, her voice trembling. "Don't go near him. You don't want to be crazy, too, do you?"

"No," I said, and walked away.

The poor boy never showed up on our street again, nor did he show up anywhere else. The neighbours told Mother his family had him put away in a place with tall cement walls and a locked iron gate, far from boys like me.

In dreams he came back to visit me. Against his jerky, gentle ways, his questioning face, I have never had an answer.