Pandas in Trees (c. 1996)

Carrie was fond of hieroglyphics. Also, she didn’t mind dining out. She thought her friend Louise was terrific. But what she was insane about was pandas. When her gang, for fun, impersonated the National Zoo, Carrie was always the goofy one munching thoughtfully on bamboo. She knew just how to do it, too: she knew that pandas have a thumb (sort of) for holding bamboo shoots so they can nibble with aplomb the leaves off. It was very cute. “But isn’t it,” her friends who were lions or monkeys or buffalo, “isn’t it, ah — dull?” they’d murmur. “Well,” she explained, sighing patiently, “no. Somebody else might find it so, but I don’t. I feel most at ease looking serene and answering to some double-barreled Chinese name like Hsing-Hsing or Ling-Ling. Don’t’ ask me why. I’ve heard it said that when I was a tiny pup my parents hung above my bed a panda picture postcard up and that might, I suppose, explain why I was even as a child so meditative and urbane and extra large and extra mild.”

Her friends respected this, as well they might. Her best friend Louise considered pandas thoroughly swell though she cared more for climbing trees,
herself. But you should see her leap
to the defense of pandahood
and fire up at any creep
who found the species not so good.
For instance, Emma claimed that she’d
hid in the panda house one night
and watched to see the keepers feed
the pandas, and turn out the light,
and then (still hidden) she had heard,
from either cage, a ripping noise,
like Velcro. And without a word
three small blue-suited Chinese boys
who looked like spies, had one by one
crawled out of a Velcro opening
in each of the panda suits! and run
into the night, abandoning
the panda house and leaving in it
two crumpled black-and-white fur coats.

This stumped Louise for about a minute.
Then she started feeling her oats
as usual. “It isn’t true,
I know it isn’t,” she announced.
“I know pandas, Emma, and I know you,
and I know your story doesn’t bounce.”
“Yes,” said Carrie. “It would have been
in all the papers, if they’d found
a couple of hollow panda skins
balled up one morning on the ground.”
(Still, she was shaken, you could hear.)
“And,” said Louise, “I don’t see why
the spies should impersonate a bear.
To get into the zoo and spy?
But anyone can go to the zoo.”
Carrie bucked up and said, “You whopping
liar, Emmie. Plus, the bamboo —
boys couldn’t turn it into panda droppings,
even if they could really eat it.
Panda droppings are different from ours.
But plus” (she was unusually heated)
“don’t you think it would be bizarre
that with millions of enterprising children,
the biggest country in the world
would choose, if it wanted spies, to send
six small boys and not one girl?”

Emma had to agree with that.
In fact, she dropped her story flat.

But how did Carrie come to know
all about panda droppings? Well, in
a book that was edited by Zhu
Jing, together with Li Yangwen,
The Giant Panda, she’d found out
from Chinese scientists practically
all that there is to know about
her favourite beast, the Giant P—
how long its tail is when it’s born;
whether it hibernates (no); what
it eats (bamboo); how it keeps warm;
whether it is sublime (you bet);
and other useful facts like these
with lots of and lots of pictures.
“Wow,”
Carrie whispered to Louise,
“I wish, I wish that I knew how
I could have a round black nose
and small black cookie-cutter ears
like all the pandas this book shows.”
Louise smiled happily. “My dear,
I hope you appreciate that I do
already and by nature have
a round black little nose, and two
small round black ears. I call that suave,
don’t you?”
And when she’d thought about it some
she let on to Louise that, well,
she did have a fluffy round white tum.
“That”, said Louise, “is also swell.”

“But speaking,” said Carrie, “of mysteries
(not that we were), give this some thought:
*Do you think pandas really climb trees?*
“Sure,” said Louise. “I mean, why not?
Or maybe not. Why should they? Must
I have a firm opinion?” “Look,
you muffinhead,” said Carrie, “just
*look* at the strange thing in this book.
Now, take this picture. What do you see?”
“Only,” Louise said matter-of-factly,
“only a panda in a tree.”
“Yes. You are right. That’s its exactly.
Now look at this page for a minute.
What do you see before your eyes?
Only a tree with a panda in it.”
And this page? and the next?” Louise
said, as if it seemed ordinary,
“Couple of pandas, couple of trees.”
“Yes, that’s what I thought, too,” said Carrie.
“Now tell me this: How many shots
of pandas in trees are there between
the covers of this book?” “Oh, lots.
Wait a sec. Let me see. Fourteen?”
“I think that’s right,” said Carrie. “But
Now, read this caption, if you please.”
“This caption here? Okay, why not.
‘Pandas seldom climb trees’.
*What? ‘Pandas seldom climb trees?’*
“That’s what it says. Peculiar, no?”
(“Yes! Peculiar!” breathed Louise).
“I thought so. Look at this one, though.
‘Pandas do not usually climb trees’. What are we to make of that?”
“Well don’t ask me,” Louise said. “I’m beefaloed. Really. Tumbled flat.”
“Pandas are unable to climb, this caption says,” Carrie went on.
“Honestly, something is amiss. We should investigate. We’ll want to do some thinking about this.”

And meanwhile in the dusty yard among the sandbox and the swings chattering in the airy hard tea-colored evening of the spring the gang of friends scattered and wheeled like noisy atoms glittering to sudden halts, and spun, and squealed. Pandas, among other things, formed a subject of debate — How do they figure (asked Yvonne) out with whom they’re meant to mate, up in the wilds of Szechuan, since boys and girls look just the same? (It’s true! It’s true! You’re right! They do! “What a life!” Marsha Lou exclaimed. “Lively times in the bamboo. . . .”)


Oh. By the way. Where is Carrie? Come to think of it: Where’s Louise?
And meanwhile from the dusky yard
the children yo-yo home to bed.
The eastern sky is tarred and starred.
The heavens to the west are spread
with ochre bars of peanut butter,
which the sunset barely jellies,
and the wind drops the dust. And utter
silence drops. The two-horned snail is
snailing up a shadowed hill
where the shadow overtook her —
she stops. It is so still.
Up the pines that overlook her
shadow has climbed. Shadow is high.
Shadow is very near the top.
Only a keen and distant eye
could see to where the shadows stop —
very near the pinetrees’ heads.
Only two piney spindles push
their winking tops above the ledge
of dark.
It’s odd. The thickening hush
that’s dropped around the playground swings
is troubled.
It’s almost as if
the pines themselves were whispering.

One of them seems to give a sniff.

“Pandas,” it murmurs acidly,
“may do whatever else they please,
for anything I care. But surely
they never — almost never — climb trees?”

“Surely,” the other one agrees.
Imagine pandas climbing trees!
Virtually not whatsoever.”
It is distinctly odd. A breeze
is making both the pine-tips wiggle.
Down, down from the peaky trees
floats something like a breezy giggle.

“Nonono,” one of the trees declares.
“Other beasties climb aloft —
but surely not the panda bear,
so lovably inept and soft.
It’s true they’re wise. They’re strong and massive.
And they’re resourceful. And they’re clever.
But they are (how to put it?) — passive.
And that is why the panda never —”

“Never, never,” sang the tree
beside it, “o no never never
(or at least not frequently)”

“Well I should say not. Really bearly
(you should pardon the expression)
ever. Quite remarkably rarely.”

“And if at all, with much discretion —”

“Not to say timidity.”

“(As we know from scientific
works of great validity) —”

“Not that pandas aren’t terrific —”

“Natch. But do they. ….? No, they don’t.”

“I didn’t think they did. Did you?
It is not the panda’s wont —”

“Left to its own devices —”
“— to.”

“To what?”

“You know as well as I.”

“… up trees.”

“Ever at all.”

“Oh my.”

“(Perhaps it’s just a wayward breeze that drops the pandas into trees?)”

“O yes. I think that must be so. For otherwise they can’t, you know —)”

“(They can’t?)”

“(Well, only very seldom, unless necessity compelled ‘em).”

“Pandas are not Amazons. They do not do such things for fun —”

“Fond as they are of mild diversion they are not given to exertion —”

“So it would be distinctly queer —”

“Unheard-of!”

“— If a panda could climb up a tree, Louise, my dear.”

(I told you something was afoot,
didn’t I, now? Not just the trees
giggling and whispering, but, oy vey!
One of the trees is called Louise!
Don’t ask me. Why can I say?)

“Of course they don’t climb trees. Because
climbing is very very scary …”

“And not a treat that would amuse
a fuzzy kind of mammal, Carrie.”

“O no, not fun at all. How true.”

(Here’s a pretty how-d’ye-do.
The other tree’s named Carrie, too!
O, I don’t understand. Do you?)

“And that must be why people so
infrequently see nose or ear
or little panda furbelow
(ahem) — up trees. Isn’t that clear?”

“O yes indeed. Imagine — hiding
up in the barest treetops — waiting
to see the whole horizon sliding
off into night —”

“Exhilerating?
No ho ho ho! O no, no way.”

“And that is why I always say
the normal panda”

“— would not dream
of doing something so extreme —”

“and will not, will not climb a tree”.

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“Pass the bamboo.”

“Good night.”

“Tee hee.”