

The man and the guinea pigs: a New York City fable

Bill Vann
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Youri Cheng, a 27-year-old New York City resident, is facing charges carrying up to 86 years in prison for the crime of illegally releasing his pet guinea pigs in Central Park. A total of 43 guinea pigs were set free and the law calls for a sentence of two years for each animal.

Cheng was arraigned on Thursday in a case which attracted attention not only from the city media outlets, but from news departments as far-flung as that of the British Broadcasting Corporation. Viewers, listeners and readers were treated to the story of the rescue of the guinea pigs by park employees, and speculation as to the fate of those which were not recovered. The animals were rushed to a center where they were given medical tests. Phone numbers for people wanting to adopt the guinea pigs have been widely publicized.

“The release of the ... animals into a chilly park rife with predators, from rats to hawks, shocked the city,” the *New York Times* commented.

Little remarked on, however, was the fact that Mr. Cheng, the defendant in the case, had been condemned to the same fate as his pets by federal and city authorities. A resident of Robert Fulton Homes, a public housing project in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, Cheng and his family received an eviction notice from the city’s Housing Authority in February. His brother had been arrested in November 1996 on charges of cocaine possession. Under draconian new housing codes passed by Congress, a single drug offense by any member of a family in public housing results in the entire family’s eviction.

That Cheng and his family were being thrown into the street, quite possibly to sleep in the park or other parts of a city “rife with predators,” was hardly news. For a decade and a half, homelessness has been part of the familiar landscape in New York and many residents

of the “capital of capitals” have become benumbed to the spectacle of ragged people sleeping in doorways or wheeling shopping carts carrying all their worldly possessions.

But the rescue of endangered guinea pigs—now that’s a story!



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