Merrick was old for a dog. The 21-year-old mutt was living happily with his owner in Ontario, Canada, when tragedy struck. He was run over, and backed over, deliberately, by a police car. The officers then got out of the car and shot him, just in case.

Merrick met this horrible fate through no more fault than looking like his dangerous wild cousin the coyote, or so the policemen thought. Coyotes endanger pets and people. The officers were responding to a call of a coyote roaming the streets in Collingwood, and they thought Merrick was it. OK, Merrick did bark at the policemen, and was not wearing a collar. But that certainly did not warrant death by wheels and firing squad.

What has befallen Merrick is what we call “無妄之災” (wu2 wang4 zhi1 zai1). “無妄” (wu2 wang4) is “unexpected,” “之” (zhi1) is “that,” and “災” (zai1) is “a disaster.”

Literally, “無妄之災” is “a disaster that is unexpected.” It means an “unexpected calamity.” The idiom carries a sense that the victim had done nothing wrong. So it also means an “an uncalled-for disaster,” an “undeserved catastrophe.”

When someone walking down the street is hit on the head by a flowerpot falling from a building, it is “無妄之災” (wu2 wang4 zhi1 zai1).

It is also “無妄之災” when you are happily driving your Mercedes down the street and someone jumps off a building, falls through the car roof and lands on your backseat.

Terms containing the character “妄” (wang4) include:

妄想 (wang4 xiang3) – indulge in wild or unjustified hope
狂妄 (kuang2 wang4) – wanton
妄誕 (wang4 dan4) – false, deceitful
虚妄 (xu1 wang4) – absurd, ostentatious and fake