"Jiro," sang the woman's voice, "wake up, Jiro." The boy stirred and rolled over in bed, drawing the blankets close around his head and peeking out with one eye to the window. It was still dark, the lights of the city orange and tired with long burning, and there was a hint of gray in the sky. The boy gave a little grunt from the covers of his bed. "There's no school today, Mamma," he called.

The shadow of his mother appeared in the doorway. "I know, Jiro," she said. "Did you forget? We're going to see Grandfather today. Now hurry and get dressed. I'll have a big breakfast ready for you."

The boy stared at the ceiling for a while and then rolled over. From the corner a small lizard raced fluidly across the wall. "Good morning, gecko," he sighed. Once upon a time he would give names to all the geckos in the apartment. In his language the word for gecko meant "tiger of the walls," and in his imagination he would go hunting for insects with them all through the small corners of his home. But he did not think the little lizards were anything like tigers anymore.

On the shelf across from his bed there was a model steam train locomotive his grandfather had carved from cedar wood. The wheels would move as the driver rods swept back and circled forward in an elegant gallop, the little whistle at the top popping up and down with the motion. When he first got the train he thought he could see little wisps of steam escaping from the locomotive as he ran it along the floor, and the painted headlight seemed to glow. His mother, becoming his memory, reminded him that it had once been his favorite toy.

Jiro dressed and went sleepily to the little kitchen, and it was filled with the rich

scent of eggs frying, cut with the saltiness of dried turnips. He sat down to a small bowl of steaming rice porridge and dishes of bright yellow eggs, dried shredded pork, sweet gherkins, and a slender, baguette-shaped loaf of light dough crisped in oil.

The boy wrinkled his nose. "This is poor people's food. Why do we have to eat this? Father and Taro are making lots of money now."

His mother sat down and looked at him. "It's good, hearty food for honest people. And don't you remember? Grandmother would always fix this for us, and it would always taste so good. I bet Grandfather is having this right now, even if he can't cook quite so well."

The boy stared at the dishes. "Why do we even have to go," he said. "I don't like eating at Grandfather's. He slurps his soup. And he snores."

His mother rose from her seat. "Eat," she said. "I'll pack your things."

Jiro poked at the eggs with his chopsticks, and swirled the pork with the rice, watching it soften in the porridge. Looking over his shoulder he fished around in his pockets and brought out a cereal bar in a shiny wrapper. He unwrapped it carefully, trying not to make a sound, and then crammed it into his mouth. He chewed and gulped, pushing yellow pieces of eggs into the rice, submerging them.

"Jiro," his mother said when she returned, "you've hardly eaten a thing, and we have a long trip today."

The boy shrugged. "I'm not hungry," he said, pushing his food around a little more. "So why do we have to go, anyway?"

"Jiro," his mother sighed, "get your things."

* * *

The bus finally slipped away from the snarling traffic of the city streets and began to race through the countryside, headed towards the mountains. The stewardess, dressed neatly in a dark blue uniform with epaulettes, greeted the passengers and began to serve refreshments.

Jiro sat next to his mother quietly. He peered at a little screen he had pulled from his backpack, working the controls effortlessly, earphones transmitting the sounds of virtual explosions in time with the flashes of light. The sun flickered on the liquid surface of rice paddies as they raced by, blurring silver and gold and green against the morning sky. The bus slowed as it climbed into the mountains, the earth falling away with each looping turn. Fragments of clouds began to envelop the bus in a foggy mist as they floated past. Some would float upwards, clinging to the thick trees of the mountainsides; some would flow down, casting thin shadows over the deep valleys.

The bus lurched to a stop in a small village, and Jiro and his mother got off. It was late in the morning, but the skies were full of gray clouds and the mountain air was chilly and damp. They sat on a bench overlooking the valley. She peeled a sweet pear and shared it with him. After a while, half hidden in the mist, the bus flashed its lights and sounded its muffled horn.

"It's time to go," she said.

"But we take the train from here."

"I know," she said, handing him his backpack. "I packed a lunch for you."

Jiro looked at his mother, confused. "Where's your bag?" he said.

"Jiro, you're old enough to go by yourself now. Your grandfather wants to see you."

"But..."

She knelt in front of him and handed him three slips of paper. "You can catch this bus home; it will be back here tonight. The number two train leaves here in half an hour. The number four train will leave from grandfather's village at seven. Be sure to catch it. It's the last one."

The boy shrugged, taking the tickets. "I could just take the next one tomorrow."

His mother shook her head. "No. They're closing the line. It's the last one for good."

The bus sounded again.

"Go on, Jiro. You know the way to the station. Your father and Taro will be back tonight, and I will supper ready for all of you."

The boy followed his mother to the bus. As she got on she turned to him as he stood watching her. "Go on," she said. "You'll be fine. You're getting to be a very big boy now. And grandfather will be waiting for you."

Jiro watched as the bus turned around to retrace its route; he clutched the straps of his backpack as it rested on the ground. After the bus disappeared into the gray morning, he looked at the run-down buildings of the village. Though it was late in the morning it was very quiet, and Jiro felt like he was alone as he walked through the narrow streets. He looked at the old, faded signs on the buildings. The chipping paint transformed the characters on them into unfamiliar words. He had hoped there would be passengers at the train station, but when he arrived he found it just as empty as the streets. The old sloped roof of the station, swept up at the edges and hung with tattered paper lanterns, made the

place look like a temple or shrine, and inside it was just as quiet. There were a few wooden benches; the floor was bare, but clean. An old clock above the schedule board ticked slowly, the only thing moving in the station. Jiro studied the schedule board, reading the times and destinations over and over. Though they were up to date, the place was so quiet that he fretted they had moved the station or closed it already, and he would be left waiting. The iron bars of shuttered ticket counters frowned at him. The sun coming in and out of the clouds made the windows glow and quickly fade again.

Finally he chose a bench and sat, his backpack between his knees. He reached into his jacket pocket for the electronic game, but found the battery had gone dead. Disappointed, he shoved it back in. Shafts of sunlight came and went, and he could hear the wind in the trees and the ticking of the clock.

At last came the sound of a far away whistle. Jiro hurried through the open arches to the station platform. Along the curve of the track the wind made the trees and the tall bamboo sway, and the boy peered far along it – nothing. He looked at the narrow track and he wondered if he dared jump down the little distance to the rails, touch them, put his ear to the ground and listen for the sound of the train. Just past the track the mountainside fell away to a deep valley, and through a gap in the trees he could see the clouds floating below him.

Now another cloud appeared just past the far curve, but this cloud rushed towards him quickly, and a bright, luminous eye appeared in the center as the horn blared, and as the wind rose the black iron and bright steel of the locomotive emerged from its wreath of steam, rounding the bend, the chrome spokes of the wheels materializing from their blur as the fluid gallop of the driver rods slowed. Jets of steam burst from gaskets on either

side of the train as a shrill whistle screeched and puffed. The locomotive coasted past him, and Jiro could feel its weight and heat and the wind it carried, and the wind carried the electric scent of metal and steam. Windows and portals passed by, slowing, slowing; and then a door slid just past where he stood and stopped, the train hissing, sending out little trails of white steam. The door opened, and the conductor leaned out and cried all aboard. Jiro grabbed his pack and hurried up the two metal steps onto the train car.

The coach was old; there was no plastic in it, only wood and metal, and most of the seats were empty. Jiro found a place in the back and settled in as the train began to move again. The conductor came by, and nervously Jiro found the proper ticket in his pockets and handed it over. After the conductor punched the ticket and wordlessly handed it back and went on, Jiro let out a sigh, relieved and proud.

The two or three people sitting in his car disappeared as the train made the next few stops. Jiro stared out the window at the weathered mountains, and the clacking of the train soon put him to sleep.

He woke, sitting up anxiously and looking all around him at the empty car, worried he had missed his stop. The train had lurched, laboring hard as it pulled up a steep passage. Jiro settled back down, almost sure that this passage was just before his grandfather's village, up a very steep track and then into a tunnel. The train began to level and pick up speed, and when the car went dark and the roar and clatter of the train began to echo loudly in the tunnel, he let out his breath – now he was sure.

When the train emerged from the tunnel the sun seemed brighter than ever and

Jiro cautiously stuck his arm out the window to feel the warm air. Something cool and wet fell splashing onto his hand, and he drew it back, rubbing the rainwater between his fingers. Big, fat raindrops began to fall, pocking against the metal roof of the train, splashing the windows as Jiro looked out. The sun was wide and golden and the big raindrops danced in the air, catching the gold color against the green of the valley below. Pineapple rain, he thought – that's what grandfather calls it when it rains in the sun.

He looked out over the valley below as the train winded down to it, remembering younger days and how he had loved to visit this place. He could just see the foaming white of a stream as it issued from the far mountainside in a waterfall, sending continuous mists into the wind. The water collected in a pool at the bottom of the valley, and the pool ran into many streams, dividing the land into a multitude of long islands before drawing back together at the edge of the valley and disappearing under the earth of another mountainside.

The valley was full of little footbridges of all colors, clusters of houses with waterwheels that spun slowly as they caught the streams. On a hill stood a high, narrow pagoda of many stories, standing like a watchtower, red and white and trimmed with gold. Tall cedar trees dotted the whole valley, and clumps of them made little forests at the edge of the watery village. Jiro smiled, excited as when he was younger. But he also saw that the colors of the pagoda were faded, and some of the windmills and waterwheels were tattered and still.

The train stopped at a mountain station very much like the one it had left – clean and bare and still. Jiro stepped off the train and from the platform he watched until the

train disappeared around a bend. When he turned his grandfather was standing near the door. He was dressed in old-fashioned peasant cloths, simple and neat.

Jiro hesitated, then walked to him, a little stiffly. "Hello, grandfather," he said.

They bowed. "Hello Jiro," said the old man. "Have you eaten?"

Jiro looked at his pack. He had forgotten his mother's lunch. "No," he said.

The old man nodded. "Come along then," he said.

Together they picked their way down the steep, rocky path from the station to the valley. The brief rain had stopped, and the air was cool and clean. The two stopped at the middle of the first bridge to look along the stream. This was where the many streams of the valley converged, and so this was where the waters were widest. They looked along the length of it as the sun glittered on the surface and as the light films of rain caught by the leaves drew into large, bright drops to fall into the river with a splash. A few green leaves knocked down by the winds sailed by in the current.

This was the last bridge to cross going from the village to the station, and after each visit his grandfather would walk with the family towards the station. They would stop here and say their goodbyes, and his grandfather would go no further.

They had stopped now. After a certain quiet time, they went on.

The old man and the boy passed the houses with the waterwheels, and others with windmills, and soon they came to the main street of the village. Jiro remembered that when he was very young the street was full of shops and vendors selling food, the smell of roasted meat and candied nuts was always in the air, and the sound of hammers and saws and shouts made it difficult to talk. The village was once thick with travelers from

all over the world, who would come to buy things from the famous woodcarvers – tables and chairs, statues, model ships, children's toys of every design, all carved from the native cedar. The sharp tang of cedar wood pervaded everything. Now all that was left was a faint scent, and sawdust in the corners.

Just off the main street was his grandfather's workshop, which was also his house, as was the case with most of the woodcarvers. Past the clutter of the showroom, and the rolled-up tattami mat where he slept, the old man lit a fire in the kitchen and began to warm the cold food. He told the boy that there was only what he had left from breakfast, and after a few moments there was again the steam of rice porridge and the smell of fried eggs. Jiro sat at the table and ate.

His grandfather sat and watched him eat for a few moments. "Jiro," he said, "I think you are old enough for wine." He set out two small cups and brought out a dusty bottle of deep blue glass. He poured out equal measures of a clear liquid, the palest of gold. The boy tasted it cautiously. It was very sweet on his tongue and the liquor made his head light.

"What do you think?" said grandfather.

"It's good," the boy said. "And sweet."

His grandfather smiled. "Close your eyes when you drink."

The boy did so. This time the sweetness passed and he could taste the plums behind it.

"Tell me what you see," said grandfather.

The boy opened his eyes, confused.

"Go on," said the old man. "Try."

At first Jiro could think only of the plums. Then the thought of plum trees came to him, and then their delicate branches against the sky, and then their white flowers, and then the scent of rain and wet earth. He told his grandfather, without opening his eyes, and he could feel him smile. "Take another drink, Jiro," he said. Again Jiro tasted the wine, and now he thought of his family – his mother and father and brother and grandfather, and for the first time in a long while his grandmother as well. He told his grandfather this and opened his eyes. The old man was nodding. He rose slowly, taking up the blue glass bottle. "When you were very young," he said, returning the bottle to the dark of the cupboards, "the family spent the whole day picking plums. This is the wine from those plums." He sat down again and took up his wine, closing his eyes as he drank. "We shall visit the plum orchard today, and other places besides. And then I wish to give you your gift."

After they had put the dishes away they set out. The old man carried with him a bulging satchel of worn leather and a weathered walking stick. They walked through the remains of the town, old buildings with fading paint, a few quiet old men and women in their gardens, tending the fish of weedy ponds.

They crossed a bridge and through the grove of plum trees, dripping with rain, and beyond it the little forests of cedar trees which for so long had served the woodcutters, and the cedar scent filled the damp air. As they walked the boy asked the old man if he had lived here his whole life. The old man shook his head. "No," he said. "I went to work at a factory, after the war, and so I lived in the city, as you do. It was many years before I came back here, and many more before I learned to carve."

The trees began to thin as the ground rose to meet the mountainside, and the two came to an empty green meadow where the red and white pagoda tower appeared suddenly as they cleared the forest. In silence they climbed the spiral stairs and at the top they looked out over the whole valley. The wind was cool and wet.

The old man said, “See where the streams issue; follow their course.”

The boy set his eyes against the threads of the current and saw the far waterfall against the northern mountainside. He thought he could see a flash of red and gold through the green of the forest.

“It is far,” said the old man. “It will take most of the afternoon to walk there and back again.”

When they set out the boy offered to carry the satchel; the old man thanked him but said it was not yet time. They followed a dark stream through the forest, and by the time they heard the sound of the waterfall the sun was already slanting away in the west. At the place of the waterfall the forest came right to the mountainside, and up the rocky face there was a temple built straight into the mountain. Just above the curving red roof trimmed with gold was a natural stone shelf, and it was over this that the stream issued from the rock. The water broke against the shelf and poured over it in a sheet in front of the temple, causing the image of the temple to blur and waver behind the sheet of flowing water, as though it were underwater. The water also poured around either side, the twin falls rushing down to collect into a single large pool that began the stream they had followed through the woods. The pool was very deep, and despite the flow of the water it became very still as it spread out. In the pool, the reflection of the temple above seemed more steady than the temple under the fall itself, as though somehow the waters brought

the image back together.

The old man and the boy climbed the steep, slippery steps, rough-hewn from the mountain, slick with spray and seeping water. They passed through the waterfall to the temple by means of a narrow, swaying bridge woven of leather and rope and planks of wood, shielded from the falling water by thin bamboo slats. The temple face was open to the falling water; it had no doors, its pillars stood exposed. It was carved deep into the mountainside, and as they went further in, it became very dark, lit only with flickering oil lamps. A thin sheen of cold water covered the polished marble floor; the old man stood over it in his raised wooden sandals. The temple became very quiet. The rushing of the water seemed to enclose the space, but did not invade. The boy could hear the pulse of the water flowing outside, and also the echoes of individual drops falling in the darkness.

The altar was plain, without ornament – not even a golden Buddha statue so common in shrines, as though the place were older even than his coming. Engraved in the granite just above the flame in the center of the altar was a single glyph, a primitive character for home and family. On either side were bundles of incense in jade urns. The old man took one slender stick from each and lit them at the flame of the altar. They sputtered and lit, and he blew out the brief flame and breathed softly on the ember tips, the smoke trailing in the air, uncoiling, filling the space with the fragrance of cedar and plum and jasmine. He bowed three times, quickly, holding the sticks of incense, and spoke softly. He was quiet and set the burning sticks into the brass holder at the altar.

The boy stood beside him. He shifted his feet, the cold water seeping into his tennis shoes. The old man spoke, gazing at the flame. “I come here to speak with them. My grandfather. My father and mother. Your grandmother.”

They stood quietly.

"But," said the boy, "they're dead."

The old man nodded. "Yes. All the more important to talk with them."

The boy looked up at his grandfather, who still looked at the flame. "Do they talk back," he asked.

"Oh yes," said the old man. "They have much to say." He looked down at the boy. "Would you like to try? I know it has been some time since you last spoke to grandmother."

The boy nodded and did as his grandfather had done, lighting the incense, bowing. They stood in silence, with only the sound of the water and the wind and the flame. The boy began to shuffle his feet again.

"It's all right," said the old man. "It is hard, I know. It is as though they are very far away, and their voices are very small. But that is not quite so, though seems that way. It is that their voices have gotten very big, and yet fine – in the water, in the wind, in the quiet. It is our voices, and our ears, that are small." He turned to the boy. "They find it difficult to talk to us as well. That is why we have places like this. To make it easier." He looked back at the flame. "Even so, it takes a great deal of practice. Do not be discouraged."

The boy nodded. They stood there a while longer.

When they had left the shrine and climbed down the steps, the sun was much lower in the west. They set a brisk pace through the long shadows in the woods towards the village. At grandfather's house Jiro quickly gathered his things and they left for the

train station.

Just before they crossed the last bridge they stopped by an abandoned house near the stream, its weathered waterwheel still turning idly with the current. They sat under a great willow tree, its slender branches dipping into the water, making little golden ripples in the late sun.

"I wish to give you your gift," said the old man, and as he stood he undid the latches on his satchel. He produced from the leather bag a cedar orb, perfectly round, perhaps a little larger than a soccer ball. The surface was smooth, dark, and polished. Running along its circumference, like a brass equator, was a narrow metal band; at two equidistant points there were burnished brass latches, one the face of a tiger, the other that of a dragon. Holding the orb in one hand, the old man unclasped the latches with the other. He looked at the boy. "Now sit," he said, "as a lotus flower, facing the west." The boy did as he was told, and the old man placed the orb on his lap. He gave the upper hemisphere a slight turn, clockwise, and lifted it up.

Underneath was a crystal dome, and within the dome a replica of the entire valley. Finely carved mountains lined the circumference; detailed trees covered the valley floor. The little windmills of the model town caught the rays of the fading sun and began to turn. A few moments later, water began to seep out of the rocks, making a waterfall over the mountain shrine and filling the dry streambeds. The waterwheels began to turn. The boy looked at the miniature pagoda tower, the grove of plum trees with white flowers. The orb vibrated softly; a tiny train issued from the mouth of the tunnel, puffing steam.

The boy's eyes were lit with wonder. "Grandfather," he asked, "did you make

this?"

The old man shook his head. "No. This is far beyond even my skill." He too gazed into the depths of the orb. "When my grandfather gave it to me, he said the same. He gave me the orb when I left to work in the city, after the war. It was many years before I returned. Many nights I would stare at it, and wonder what my life would have been like, if I had stayed."

The boy looked up at his grandfather, and then back to the orb. "Do you..." he began, and stopped. He looked up again. "But it's too much. Why didn't you give this to father? Or Taro? He's the oldest."

The old man smiled. "They have their gifts. This is yours." He sighed. "It is too early to say. But maybe I can give you an idea. Am I the same to you as your father?"

"No."

"And you are not the same to me as your father. Certain things require more time than others. Certain things must be forgotten, so that they may be remembered." The old man looked at the boy. "Do you understand?"

The boy nodded.

The old man continued. "It is different also with Taro," he said. He leaned down to touch his grandson's shoulder. "You see, I was "Jiro" too – the secondborn. It is not the same. I know this is too soon for you to know. But when you have children, you will know. The firstborn brings excitement, for all things are made new. It is like the first bite of young plums. The secondborn is not like that. But it brings its own gift, a fullness that the first cannot. It is like wine. So it is also with grandchildren, to see your own child with his own child. That is why the orb is yours: you are my grandchild, and you

are the secondborn. You will understand."

The boy looked at his grandfather, a little sadly. "Do you want someone to stay," he asked.

The old man shook his head. "I want someone to remember."

The boy nodded, and again looked into the orb. He saw the miniature mountains and rivers and bridges, and the plum grove and the pagoda, and the forest and the temple. He saw the little village, each house carved in great detail. And on the outskirts of the village he saw a miniature house with a waterwheel and a willow tree.
Underneath the tree there was the figure of a boy. He was sitting as a lotus, and near him stood an old man. In the boy's lap there was a tiny cedar orb, bound with brass, one clasp the head of a dragon, the other that of a tiger.

* * *

In the dark of the morning, with just a touch of gray in the sky, an old man sat alone in the little apartment, the city lights glittering outside. The kitchen was filled with the smell of frying eggs, and the steam of tea. The old man sat at a small table. On the table, resting in his hands, was a cedar orb, a lamp shedding light on the windmills and the trees, and the little train steaming around the curve of the track.

The old man's eyes were full of tears, and yet he was also smiling. He was waiting for his grandson to visit, who lived very far away.

END