

## 2 on Winter Melon

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It was bedtime, but Grandpa only ever visited for New Year, so Linh was allowed to see if he was awake. She knocked and pushed the door straight open.

“You’re awake aren’t you Grandpa? You want to play Squash, Crab, Fish, Tiger don’t you?”

Grandpa lifted up onto one elbow and patted his bed for her to sit.

“Just one game and then your grandpa has to sleep because old men need their dreams.”

Linh put three pebbles on Crab and Grandpa put two on Deer and two on Winter Melon.

Grandpa’s board was old and scuffed at the edges, but Linh loved it because it was the one he played on with his Grandpa and it was the one precious thing he brought to Australia. Also, there were two things that made it different from other boards. Instead of a tiger or a stag, it had a deer. Linh thought that was because Grandpa had five daughters and eight grand daughters and he never once wished they were boys. Also, instead of a curvy calabash squash tied up with a bow, Grandpa’s had a long green Winter Melon. She had seen boards with tigers and stags and even a horse and a giraffe, but she had never seen a Winter Melon. It was good, because Grandpa and Linh both loved Winter Melon.

Straight up, she rolled three Crabs! Grandpa counted out nine pebbles for her.

“Crab’s my favourite, but you never choose it. Don’t you like Crab?” asked Linh

“You know I love Crab. Haven’t I told you about my old friend the Crab?”

Tom Tom the Crab was finishing final touches on his new kite when his mother appeared.

“I’m making Winter Melon Candy for New Year,” she said, “I was sure we had some in the pantry, but they’re all gone. Can you get two from the markets for me?”

“Can I fly my kite there?” asked Tom Tom

“If it’s ready now,” she said “I need to start on them tonight.”

So Tom Tom tied one last careful bow in the tail and scuttled out the back and down to the reservoir. He threw the kite upwards and ran, letting the string unwind and unwind so the kite lifted up into the blue sky above. It rose like a dragon on the breeze. Sunlight glittered on the water below and Tom Tom felt like he was flying.

Past the reservoir, people noticed and pointed up at the kite. He was pleased, but shy and suddenly anxious to bring it down smoothly. He wound the string in and tugged for it to come down. It leapt and danced and suddenly dived for the water where it landed with a terrible splash!

Tom Tom pulled it out fast. It was bad for things to fall in the reservoir because everyone’s drinking water came from there.

He distracted himself, weaving through the crowds and into the markets. But at the usual stall, there were no Winter Melons. At his mother’s second favourite stall, there were still no Winter Melons. He went to every stall in the market and there was not a single Winter Melon there. Not one. And you see, that’s how the story began.

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“Why did you call him a Crab?” asked Linh

“Oh, Tom Tom was a Crab” said Grandpa “tough shell on the outside, but soft as anything on the inside. Always went about things sideways.”

Tom Tom cut across behind the markets to the river. You may not have been to the Mekong River, so I should tell you this: it's so long and so wide that it cools the air around it as it flows. Tom Tom was happy for the cool air because it was a hot day and it was quite far to the central markets. While he walked, he replayed the crash landing in his mind. But each replay his heart also soared at that brief excellent flight. He had finally made the perfect kite. Maybe one day, he would have a kite-making business. He could imagine small faces looking into the skies of far away countries where his kites dipped and swerved in the breeze.

Bicycle wheels sliced the silence and Kim Pin the Rooster flew past on his gleaming blue bike.

"Kim Pin! It's me!" called Tom Tom. Kim Pin screeched to a halt. He flicked a wrist to his beak, flashing his father's fancy white watch. "Tom Tom, I'm in a rush. Now I have the bike it's my job to shop for New Year."

Tom Tom knew to take a sideways approach with Kim Pin.

"Have you tasted my mother's Winter Melon Candy? Tom Tom clicked his clackers to whet the appetite. Of course Kim Pin had. Their families were distantly related on the Chinese side and Tom Tom's mother was famous for her cooking.

"You know I love it. But now I'm in a rush to get to the water markets. I'm shopping for unusual ingredients today, then tomorrow I'll take grandmother to the central markets for everything else."

"I'll come! They'll have Winter Melons at the water markets."

"But you can get Winter Melons everywhere. Why didn't you just get them near your house?"

Tom Tom clambered onto the back of his friend's bike and they sped away, leaving a cloud of dust in the afternoon light

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“I want to go to water markets when I go to Vietnam,” said Linh.

“I didn’t know you were going to Vietnam!” said Grandpa.

“Everyone goes to Vietnam,” said Linh. “Even my friends who aren’t Vietnamese go to Vietnam. It has to be my turn one day.”

“Of course. It will be. But now it’s your turn to roll the dice. You’re keeping your old grandpa up all night!”

“I know there’ll be things I can’t get,” Kim Pin squawked over his shoulder. “When my father used to come home twice a week, it was easy. He always brought hot bread from the best bakery in Saigon. Then, he’d just get special ingredients near that place,” Kim Pin explained about the spice shops and the hawkers on the street - old ladies selling fresh herbs and rice cakes and young men making sugar cane juice and country girls with their piles of mangosteen “they take them to the city to get a higher price” he explained. Tom Tom leaned into the breeze and let Kim Pin rattle on. “Now I go to the shops on my bike and we just get things locally. Sometimes there’s things we can’t get that we really need. Then we ask our cousins to bring them on New Year’s morning. Grandmother doesn’t like it that way. She says you have to make it in a rush and the flavours don’t get to be perfect.”

But it turned out Kim Pin got everything he came for. The lady who made his grandmother’s favourite pickle was there, so he bought a big bag of that. Then, weaving between the boats where they specialised in Chinese ingredients, he found black mushrooms, water chestnuts, beancurd sticks, lily buds, ginko nuts, lotus seeds, even lotus root, black fungus *and* white fungus. Kim Pin flapped his wings at the sight of them.

“Grandmother will be happy. She makes Buddha’s Delight every year, but usually she just has a few of the ingredients.”

But no one had Winter Melons.

It was unheard of. Tom Tom asked every vendor, but they shrugged and shook their heads and waved him on. Even Kim Pin agreed he’d never seen it like this.

“You’re in trouble,” he said. “If there aren’t any here, there might not be any at the central markets either. What will you do?”

A low growling sound came from across the river and Tom Tom tensed.

“Was that a tiger?”

“No! Tigers don’t come to the river when people are here.” Kim Pin said it confidently, but he tensed and leapt straight onto the bike.

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“Are there tigers in Vietnam?” asked Linh

“Oh yes!” said Grandpa. “But they’re shy and they don’t let people see them.”

Tom Tom was at a loss. He gazed at the light glinting on the water and thought about New Year with no Winter Melon Candy. He would eat square cake and sticky rice and pickled vegetables. He would make kites for his cousins and teach his favourite cousin Mai how to fly one. She would be happy because he'd kept one of the clay dolls she made last year. They'd play badminton and hopscotch and chopstick and ball. He'd get lucky money and it would still be special. Coming home with nothing today would disappoint his mother. And his new kite would be ruined for nothing. And on New Year's afternoon he would long for that explosion you get when you bite into a rectangle of firm white candy... But it would be okay. He'd eat moon cake instead and maybe ginger candy. The adults always said he would start loving that when he was old enough and maybe they were right. Lots of things could go more wrong than this.

Just then, he recognised where they were. It looked different with the markets, but he knew that yellow wall across the river. It's right opposite where Loc the Prawn and Be the Fish played. Tom Tom liked their game: climbing on fishermen's boats and leaping out to splash in the water. They'd been in trouble so many times the challenge had got extreme: bigger boats and crazier risks every time.

"Let's ride down to Loc and Be and show them your new bike."

Kim Pin flicked a wrist to his beak and clucked. Tom Tom could see he was torn.

"Better show it off while it's shiny and new. They've wanted bikes ever since their favourite teacher took them cycling."

As he said it, he remembered something else about that teacher. Loc talked about her all the time: how she was so nice and all her dresses were so pretty and she let him sit right at the front of the class; how he visited her once and her house was big with every kind of fruit tree in the world; and how all the way down the back of the garden, she grew Winter Melons as big as monkeys. A twinge ran through him. Surely she would give him

one or even two. But her house was quite far from here and they needed Kim Pin's bike for the plan to work.

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Linh pointed at the board "But the prawn and the fish and the rooster and the crab, they're all in the game! And the Winter Melon. Is this a real story grandpa?"

"My darling, everything is a kind of game. Remember that, and life will turn out for you. Never quite how you plan it to, but still." Grandpa had a far away look on his face, almost a half-smile. It made her want to hug him, but she didn't.



Sure enough, those two were dangling off the biggest fanciest boat. They saw their friends and waved with all their flippers and fins and feelers and legs. Then they leapt up high and splashed as hard as they could. They swam fast, Be swishing her fins and Loc running with his tiny legs underwater.

“It’s completely new!” said Be, the first to arrive “I thought it would be second hand.”

When Loc caught up, he stretched out his feelers to stroke the paintwork. “I would do anything for a bike like this.”

Kim Pin glowed and shook his feathers with pride.

Tom Tom said: “I bet we could all fit on. Why don’t you take us to Long An? It would be the ride of our lives!”

Kim Pin flicked a wrist to his beak flashing that white watch and rustling his cape feathers. “I don’t know,” he said, “of course we can fit, but it’s quite far and I am in a rush, remember.”

“Oh please Kim Pin! Please!” Loc and Be leapt and quivered and splashed droplets of water everywhere.

“Well, it’s true,” said Kim Pin, “it would be the ride of your lives.”

So they all piled on.

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“I double friends on my bike all the time” said Linh “It’s easy, they just sit sideways.”

“Well it’s good to practice being sideways with your friends,” said Grandpa. “We stepped sideways when we came to Australia and now we will always be a little bit sideways, if we stay here or if we go back.”

The friends waved at passers-by. Climbing the hills, Kim Pin peddled in sharp staccato. Down the other side, they flew like angels. They passed little islands in the river and palm trees and fishermen casting their nets. They turned left towards Long An and the fields opened up with rice paddies on the left and cattle on the right, herons standing by for worms. They passed tiny houses where poor people lived, built up against each other. They heard the chopping sounds of a helicopter overhead. “Don’t look up!” called Be, but they couldn’t resist. Then as it passed, a roar thundered across the fields.

Tom Tom gasped: “*That was a tiger!*”

“No!” said Kim Pin, “they don’t come out in the day! Not when there’s people around.” But everyone felt him lean forward and pedal faster.

“My uncle saw a tiger,” said Loc. “He went to get water from the river and it was there, having a drink. It looked up and saw him. He said it could have eaten him if it was hungry.” They all looked intently across the fields.

That’s when they saw Van the Deer, trotting towards them. They stopped for her.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked.

“We’re showing Kim Pin’s new bike to the world!” said Loc.

“What about you?” asked Tom Tom, “Did you hear that big roar?”

“I did hear something. I thought it might be a tiger. I’m used to being careful because I live here now with my aunty. I moved after my grandparents died. Aunty says to be careful of tigers, but they almost never come out in the day.”

A flock of pelicans flew overhead casting a string of shadows.

Then she said “You should come and visit! Aunty made Winter Melon soup.”

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Linh put three pebbles on Deer. Grandpa put his last two pebbles on Winter Melon.

The soup was magnificent. Steam rose up from their bowls in coils and the friends made contented eating noises.

Van's aunty checked on cakes and kneaded dough and tidied shelves and brought washing in from the line. She watched the friends eating while she folded tea-towels.

"Aunty made me this suit for New Year," said Van, "but I got it this morning. I think she wanted to cheer me up because my ears hurt. She pierced them and they swelled up really red."

Van showed them the peanut butter paste Aunty used to bring down the swelling. They leaned in with horrified fascination.

"Well, no one will tease you for looking like a boy once you've got earrings," said Be

"That's why I did it," said Van.

"Who wants more soup?" asked Aunty, bringing over the pot.

"It's yummy," said Tom Tom. "Where did you get the Winter Melons? I've looked everywhere. Mum sent me out for some so she could make candy for New Year"

"Well isn't that strange," said Aunty "I got this one yesterday, but there were none at our local market. I had to go all the way to My Tho. I wanted two, but it was the last one. I've never seen it like this before."

"What will you do?" asked Be.

"Yes, what will you do?" asked Van.

"Won't you be in trouble?" asked Loc.

"But won't your mother understand?" Kim Pin tried to sound reassuring.

"I wish I'd saved this one for you!" said Aunty. "But maybe you should ride on out to Long An. The markets will still be open and Winter Melons grow very well out there."

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“Why weren’t there any?” asked Linh

“Everything was changing so much back then,” said Grandpa “no one really knew what to expect. Not like here where your mum can make the best Winter Melon stir fry in the world any night of the week.” Then he rolled a Prawn, a Fish and a Crab and all his pebbles were finished.

“My teacher lives in Long An,” said Loc. “She’s so nice. She has the prettiest dresses and she lets me sit at the front of the class. I went to her house once. It’s big and has every kind of fruit tree in the world. And oh! Tom Tom! All the way down the back of the garden, she has a vine that grows Winter Melons as big as monkeys! We should visit her!” and he blushed a bit. He’s already prawn pink, so you might not have noticed, but Tom Tom did.

And it was true.

Loc’s teacher was wearing a very pretty dress and her house was big with fruit trees all around. But best of all, on her vine were the biggest juiciest Winter Melons Tom Tom had ever seen.

And that year, the Winter Melon Candy was more delicious than ever.

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Linh leaned over to give Grandpa a goodnight kiss even he though he was already fast asleep.