

River Crossing

“River crossing!”

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I was six. Mama and I were doing a duet, calling for the boatman. He lived in the small mud hut on the other side of the Dragon-fighting River. We were on our way to see Grandpa and Grandma. The wide river shimmered in the morning sun. I shook my head to feel my two pigtailed dangling from the top of my head. I looked up to see Mama. She looked straight ahead, holding her big black bicycle with both hands. I was happy to visit Grandpa and Grandma, but I was more excited to see Auntie Two.

Auntie Two was Mama’s younger sister. When my parents were both busy working in separate factories and rarely home, Baba took my older brother and Mama left me with my grandparents when I was one. Auntie Two was still living at home then, so she babysat me. Every time during meals, I ran around the table, not wanting to eat. Auntie Two squatted down with a bowl in one hand and a spoon in the other. Sometimes she would say, “If you don’t eat it, toads will come to eat it.” When I finally opened my mouth, she put a spoonful of short noodles or rice into my mouth, smiling with her big yellow teeth.

I had been Auntie Two’s confidante since I was four, or maybe even before I could remember. One time she showed me the bruise on her forearm and said, “Your Uncle pushed me to the corner behind the stove and hit me with the cooking spade.” That uncle was her stuttered brother, whom I did not like.

When I turned six, Mama took me home across the Dragon-fighting River and sent my brother and me to the best elementary schools in town. In the same year, Auntie Two married a hunchbacked waste picker, who was fifteen years older than her and made a living by scavenging through waste piles in villages to find things to sell. The married couple lived in my grandparents' old house, a single mud house on high ground half a mile away from the rest of the village. Mama said it was good that Auntie Two found a husband because Auntie Two was a little different. She couldn't walk until she was twelve. I thought it was good that Auntie Two married too because my stuttered uncle could not hit her any more.

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Mama and I became a little impatient. More people were waiting for the boat now. Finally, the boatman walked out of his hut, unhooked the anchoring rope, and strode onto the boat. He picked up a long bamboo pole, and pushed against the riverbank, then the river bottom, with both hands holding the pole. One push at a time, the boat came closer and closer. Everyone waiting for the boat stopped talking.

When the concrete boat reached our side, I jumped on and called to the boatman, “Grandpa!” He had the same family name Wang as my grandpa. Mama told me if I called him Grandpa, it would make him happy. Next time he might not have us wait so long. It was not very crowded on the boat. I walked back and forth near the edge of the boat and dodged the boatman's bamboo pole when he switched sides. I was fascinated by the fast moving water underneath the boat. I felt dizzy after looking at the water too long. Two black cormorants--birds that catch fish--squatted on the bamboo stick on one side of the boat. I didn't remember seeing

them before. They were free except for a string tying to their throats. The boat slowed down. One cormorant suddenly dived into the river. It propelled in the water, dived further down, and then came back to the bamboo stick with a fish in its mouth. The boatman laid down the bamboo pole, took out the fish from the cormorant's long beak, and dropped it into a small-mouthed basket. The cormorant spread out its wings in the sun, when the other cormorant dived into the river. I wondered why the cormorants did not run away.

One push at a time, the boatman transported us to the other side of the Dragon-fighting River. "Bye, Grandpa!" I waved to the boatman when we were getting off and saw him reward the cormorants with tiny fish. I climbed onto the crossbar of Mama's bicycle. She began to pedal on the dirt road, winding and bumpy. The top of my head felt warm when Mama breathed out and cool when she breathed in. Soon my legs fell asleep.

It was a long bicycle ride. When I saw the narrow cement bridge, my heart raced. I could see smoke coming out of my grandparents' kitchen chimney. Mama and I walked across the bridge before we got back on the bicycle. On the right side of the dirt road was a massive green ocean of rice fields. On the left were similar one-story houses lining a small river. In front of grandparents' grey brick house, I got off the crossbar and ran into the kitchen.

"Grandpa! Grandma!" I called.

The smell of cooked rice filled the kitchen. Grandpa was cutting vegetables on the table in front of the tall white stove made of quicklime, which had two big woks fixed on its top and a chimney connecting to the outside. Grandma was adding straws and twigs behind the stove.

"You are here! Lunch will be ready soon," Grandpa said.

Grandma smiled.

“I am going to see Auntie Two,” I said. “I’ll be back soon.”

I dashed out of the door. Big Yellow, the neighbor’s big yellow dog, galloped towards me. He jumped up and down along my side. Before I moved away, every day when I walked home from the one-classroom school in the village, Big Yellow waited for me near the narrow cement bridge. When he saw me, he ran to me and walked me home.

Auntie Two’s single thatched mud house stood on high ground at the far eastern end of the rice fields. I walked on the narrow footpaths between green paddy fields. Spring breeze brushing over my face and sunlight warming my right side, I smelled the wet mud of the field beds in the sun-permeated air. My body felt so light that I opened my arms to run like an airplane.

“Cuckoo!” A cuckoo flew over in the sky.

“Cuckoo!” I echoed.

I ran all the way to high ground.

“Auntie Two! Auntie Two!” I called before I reached the door.

Auntie Two’s door was open, but she was not home. Her home was small. The darkened lime stove stood on the right near the door, with straws and twigs stacked behind. In front of the stove stood a clay water tank, a small wooden table and two tiny benches. Several pieces of clothing lay on the dirt floor. A twin-sized wooden bed occupied the left corner near the door. A blackened quilt and two pillows rested atop. I knew that in the belly of the bed was stored unhulled rice.

“Auntie Two!” I called out to the green ocean.

Auntie Two emerged, carrying a bamboo basket and walking up with a small digging

spade in her right hand. She wore the peach-colored shirt Mama used to wear. She looked thinner. Her short hair covered her forehead. She smiled with her big yellow teeth.

At her home, Auntie Two scooped water from the tank with a bottle gourd and drank. Her little finger was bent. She was born with two bent little fingers and I had tried to unbend them before. Auntie Two put down the bottle gourd and picked up a small basket. We walked to the back of the house where the big apricot tree was. Orange apricots cuddled under the leaves all over the tree and many had fallen on the ground. We collected the good ones from the ground.

With a tree branch, Auntie Two knocked more apricots off the tree. The moment they hit the ground, I chased them and put them in the basket.

Back in the house, Auntie Two picked the best apricots and wrapped them in a cloth.

“He beats me every day. It hurts here,” she said. Her left hand pressed her lower left belly. For a moment, my mind froze. I saw her hunchbacked husband only once. He had big wrinkles on his forehead. He seemed to have lived a hard life. I even felt sorry for him. He beat Auntie Two? Why?

Before I walked out of the door, Auntie Two put the cloth wrapped apricots in my arms. She stood in front of her thatched home, watching me walking back to my grandparents’.

I walked between the rice fields again. As I was walking, I wondered if Auntie Two was still there watching me. I looked back. There she was! I walked again and then turned again. She was still there, but looked smaller. I kept on walking and turning until she looked so tiny. I must look tiny to her too. I stopped. Auntie Two and I were standing there, tiny face to tiny face, as if we were the only two people living in that land, bathed in soft spring breeze and warm sunlight. I thought that when I grew up, I would be Auntie Two’s protector. I would invite her home,

change her into nice clothes, and make her delicious fried rice.

After lunch, I waved goodbye to Grandpa and Grandma in front of their grey house. I climbed onto the crossbar of Mama's bicycle. Big Yellow followed. Before the narrow cement bridge, Mama and I got off the bicycle. Big Yellow tagged along with us to the other side of the bridge and continued to follow. Mama and I both yelled, "Big Yellow, go home!" Big Yellow stopped. But when we got on the bicycle, he ran after us again. Mama got off her bicycle to stop him several times, but he continued to follow.

I sat on the crossbar, while Mama pedaled. Big Yellow ran by our side, and then fell behind. After a while, Mama turned to look and said Big Yellow was still following. Suddenly, I was excited that Big Yellow was following me home! I began to imagine how Big Yellow was galloping on the dirt road. He must be hanging out his tongue while running. Did he stop for a quick pee? Did he smell the grass and the wildflowers before he peed? Did he have to speed up to catch up with us? What a fun race! He ran and ran. Nothing could stop him. He had never run this far from home before. What an adventure! The wind whistled by his ears just as it whispered into mine. Big Yellow must be happy. He was far from home. He was free! He ran and ran. Then there appeared the Dragon-fighting River. I bet Big Yellow had never seen such a big river before.

I got off the crossbar. Big Yellow was panting with his tongue out. I patted him and asked Mama if Big Yellow could get on the boat. Mama said we shouldn't take Big Yellow and he knew his way home. Big Yellow walked with us to the riverbank, but someone kicked him away. I heard his painful moan and began to cry. The boatman pushed against the riverbank with his long bamboo pole. Big Yellow paced on the bank, and then sat there watching us going away.

I cried out loud. When we reached the other side, Big Yellow was still sitting there. He looked so tiny on the other side.