

L I N D A S U E P A R K

A
Single Shard



Clarion Books & New York

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lives under a bridge in a potters' village, and longs to learn how to
throw the delicate celadon ceramics himself.

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*To Dinah,
because she asked for another book*

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*A small village on the west coast of Korea,
mid- to late 12th century*

Chapter 1

"Eh, Tree-ear! Have you hungered well today?" Crane-man called out as Tree-ear drew near the bridge.

The well-fed of the village greeted each other politely by saying, "Have you eaten well today?" Tree-ear and his friend turned the greeting inside out for their own little joke.

Tree-ear squeezed the bulging pouch that he wore at his waist. He had meant to hold back the good news, but the excitement spilled out of him. "Crane-man! A good thing that you greeted me so just now, for later today we will have to use the proper words!" He held the bag high. Tree-ear was delighted when Crane-man's eyes widened in surprise. He knew that Crane-man would guess at once—only one thing could give a bag that kind of smooth fullness. Not carrot-tops or chicken bones, which protruded in odd lumps. No, the bag was filled with *rice*.

Crane-man raised his walking crutch in a salute.

"Come, my young friend! Tell me how you came by such a fortune—a tale worth hearing, no doubt!"

Tree-ear had been trotting along the road on his early-morning perusal of the village rubbish heaps. Ahead of him a man carried a heavy load on a *jiggeh*, an open-framed backpack made of branches. On the *jiggeh* was a large woven-straw container, the kind commonly used to carry rice.

Tree-ear knew that the rice must be from last year's crop; in the fields surrounding the village this season's rice had only just begun to grow. It would be many months before the rice was harvested and the poor allowed to glean the fallen grain from the bare fields. Only then would they taste the pure flavor of rice and feel its solid goodness in their bellies. Just looking at the straw box made water rush into Tree-ear's mouth.

The man had paused in the road and hoisted the wooden *jiggeh* higher on his back, shifting the cumbersome weight. As Tree-ear stared, rice began to trickle out of a hole in the straw box. The trickle thickened and became a stream. Oblivious, the man continued on his way.

For a few short moments Tree-ear's thoughts wrestled with one another. *Tell him—quickly! Before he loses too much rice!*

No! Don't say anything—you will be able to pick up the fallen rice after he rounds the bend..

Tree-ear made his decision. He waited until the man had reached the bend in the road, then ran to catch him.

"Honorable sir," Tree-ear said, panting and bowing. "As I walked behind you, I noticed that you are marking your path with rice!"

The farmer turned and saw the trail of rice. A well-built man with a broad suntanned face, he pushed his straw hat back, scratched his head, and laughed ruefully.

"Impatience," said the farmer. "I should have had this container woven with a double wall. But it would have taken more time. Now I pay for not waiting a bit longer." He struggled out of the *jiggeh*'s straps and inspected the container. He prodded the straw to close the gap but to no avail, so he threw his arms up in mock despair. Tree-ear grinned. He liked the farmer's easygoing nature.

"Fetch me a few leaves, boy," said the farmer. Tree-ear complied, and the man stuffed them into the container as a temporary patch.

The farmer squatted to don the *jiggeh*. As he started walking, he called over his shoulder. "Good deserves good, urchin. The rice on the ground is yours if you can be troubled to gather it."

"Many thanks, kind sir!" Tree-ear bowed, very pleased with himself. He had made a lucky guess

and his waist pouch would soon be filled with rice.

~~Tree-ear had learned from Crane-man's example. Foraging in the woods and rubbish heaps, gathering fallen grain-heads in the autumn—these were honorable ways to garner a meal, requiring time and work. But stealing and begging, Crane-man said, made a man no better than a dog.~~

"Work gives a man dignity, stealing takes it away," he often said.

Following Crane-man's advice was not always easy for Tree-ear. Today, for example. Was it stealing, to wait as Tree-ear had for more rice to fall before alerting the man that his rice bag was leaking? Did a good deed balance a bad one? Tree-ear often pondered these kinds of questions, alone or in discussion with Crane-man.

"Such questions serve in two ways," Crane-man had explained. "They keep a man's mind sharp—and his thoughts off his empty stomach."

Now, as always, he seemed to know Tree-ear's thoughts without hearing them spoken. "Tell me about this farmer," he said. "What kind of man was he?"

Tree-ear considered the question for several moments, stirring his memory. At last, he answered. "One who lacks patience—he said it himself. He had not wanted to wait for a sturdier container to be built. And he could not be bothered to pick up the fallen rice." Tree-ear paused. "But he laughed easily, even at himself."

"If he were here now, and heard you tell of waiting a little longer before speaking, what do you think he would say or do?"

"He would laugh," Tree-ear said, surprising himself with the speed of his response. Then, more slowly, "I think ... he would not have minded."

Crane-man nodded, satisfied. And Tree-ear thought of something his friend often said: *Scholars read the great words of the world. But you and I must learn to read the world itself.*

Tree-ear was so called after the mushroom that grew in wrinkled half-circles on dead or fallen tree trunks, emerging from the rotten wood without benefit of parent seed. A good name for an orphan, Crane-man said. If ever Tree-ear had had another name, he no longer remembered it, nor the family that might have named him so.

Tree-ear shared the space under the bridge with Crane-man—or rather, Crane-man shared it with him. After all, Crane-man had been there first, and would not be leaving anytime soon. The shriveled and twisted calf and foot he had been born with made sure of that.

Tree-ear knew the story of his friend's name. "When they saw my leg at birth, it was thought I would not survive," Crane-man had said. "Then, as I went through life on one leg, it was said that I was like a crane. But besides standing on one leg, cranes are also a symbol of long life." True enough, Crane-man added. He had outlived all his family and, unable to work, had been forced to sell his possessions one by one, including, at last, the roof over his head. Thus it was that he had come to live under the bridge.

Once, a year or so earlier, Tree-ear had asked him how long he had lived there. Crane-man shook his head; he no longer remembered. But then he brightened and hobbled over to one side of the bridge, beckoning Tree-ear to join him.

"I do not remember how long I have been here," he said, "but I know how long *you* have." And he pointed upward, to the underside of the bridge. "I wonder that I have not shown you this before."

On one of the slats was a series of deep scratches, as if made with a pointed stone. Tree-ear examined them, then shook his head at Crane-man. "So?"

"One mark for each spring since you came here," Crane-man explained. "I kept count of your years, for I thought the time would come when you would like to know how old you are."

Tree-ear looked again, this time with keen interest. There was a mark for each finger of both

hands—ten marks in all.

~~Crane-man answered before Tree-ear asked. "No, you have more than ten years," he said. "When you first came and I began making those marks, you were in perhaps your second year—already on two legs and able to talk."~~

Tree-ear nodded. He knew the rest of the story already. Crane-man had learned but little from the man who had brought Tree-ear to the bridge. The man had been paid by a kindly monk in the city of Songdo to bring Tree-ear to the little seaside village of Ch'ulp'o. Tree-ear's parents had died of fever, and the monk knew of an uncle in Ch'ulp'o.

When the travelers arrived, the man discovered that the uncle no longer lived there, the house having been abandoned long before. He took Tree-ear to the temple on the mountainside, but the monks had been unable to take the boy in because fever raged there as well. The villagers told the man to take the child to the bridge, where Crane-man would care for him until the temple was free of sickness.

"And," Crane-man always said, "when a monk came to fetch you a few months later, you would not leave. You clung to my good leg like a monkey to a tree, not crying but not letting go, either! The monk went away. You stayed."

When Tree-ear was younger, he had asked for the story often, as if hearing it over and over again might reveal something more—what his father's trade had been, what his mother had looked like, where his uncle had gone—but there was never anything more. It no longer mattered. If there was more to having a home than Crane-man and the bridge, Tree-ear had neither knowledge nor need of it.

Breakfast that morning was a feast—a bit of the rice boiled to a gruel in a castoff earthenware pot, served up in a bowl carved from a gourd. And Crane-man produced yet another surprise to add to the meal: two chicken leg-bones. No flesh remained on the arid bones, but the two friends cracked them open and worried away every scrap of marrow from inside.

Afterward, Tree-ear washed in the river and fetched a gourd of water for Crane-man, who never went into the river if he could help it; he hated getting his feet wet. Then Tree-ear set about tidying up the area under the bridge. He took care to keep the place neat, for he disliked having to clear a space to sleep at the tired end of the day.

Housekeeping complete, Tree-ear left his companion and set off back up the road. This time he did not zigzag between rubbish heaps but strode purposefully toward a small house set apart from the others at a curve in the road.

Tree-ear slowed as he neared the mud-and-wood structure. He tilted his head, listening, and grinned when the droning syllables of a song-chant reached his ears. The master potter Min was singing, which meant that it was a "throwing" day.

Min's house backed onto the beginnings of the foothills and their brushy growth, which gave way to pine-wooded mountains beyond. Tree-ear swung wide of the house. Under the deep eaves at the back, Min kept his potter's wheel. He was there now, his gray head bent over the wheel, chanting his wordless song.

Tree-ear made his way cautiously to his favorite spot, behind a paulownia tree whose low branches kept him hidden from view. He peeped through the leaves and caught his breath in delight. Min was just beginning a new pot.

Min threw a mass of clay the size of a cabbage onto the center of the wheel. He picked it up and threw it again, threw it several times. After one last throw he sat down and stared at the clay for a moment. Using his foot to spin the base of the wheel, he placed dampened hands on the sluggardly lump, and for the hundredth time Tree-ear watched the miracle.

In only a few moments the clay rose and fell, grew taller, then rounded down, until it curved into perfect symmetry. The spinning slowed. The chant, too, died out and became a mutter of words that

Tree-ear could not hear.

~~Min sat up straight. He crossed his arms and leaned back a little, as if to see the vase from a distance. Turning the wheel slowly with his knee, he inspected the graceful shape for invisible faults. Then, "Pah!" He shook his head and in a single motion of disgust scooped up the clay and slapped it back onto the wheel, whereupon it collapsed into an oafish lump again, as if ashamed.~~

Tree-ear opened his mouth to let out his breath silently, only then realizing that he had been keeping it back. To his eyes the vase had been perfect, its width half its height, its curves like those of a flower petal. Why, he wondered, had Min found it unworthy? What had he seen that so displeased him?

Min never failed to reject his first attempt. Then he would repeat the whole process. This day Tree-ear was able to watch the clay rise and fall four times before Min was satisfied. Each of the four efforts had looked identical to Tree-ear, but something about the fourth pleased Min. He took a length of twine and slipped it deftly under the vase to release it from the wheel, then placed the vase carefully on a tray to dry.

As Tree-ear crept away, he counted the days on his fingers. He knew the potter's routine well; it would be many days before another throwing day.

The village of Ch'ulp'o faced the sea, its back to the mountains and the river edging it like a near seam. Its potters produced the delicate celadon ware that had achieved fame not only in Korea but as far away as the court of the Chinese emperor.

Ch'ulp'o had become an important village for ceramics by virtue of both its location and its soil. On the shore of the Western Sea, it had access both to the easiest sea route northward and to plentiful trade with China. And the clay from the village pits contained exactly the right amount of iron to produce the exquisite gray-green color of celadon so prized by collectors.

Tree-ear knew every potter in the village, but until recently he had known them only for their rubbish heaps. It was hard for him to believe that he had never taken the time to watch them at work before. In recent years the pottery from the village kilns had gained great favor among those wealthy enough to buy pieces as gifts for both the royal court and the Buddhist temples, and the potters had achieved new levels of prosperity. The pickings from their rubbish heaps had become richer in consequence, and for the first time Tree-ear was able to forget about his stomach for a few hours each day.

During those hours it was Min he chose to watch most closely. The other potters kept their wheels in small windowless shacks. But in the warm months Min preferred to work beneath the eaves behind his house, open to the breeze and the view of the mountains.

Working without walls meant that Min possessed great skill and the confidence to match it. Potters guarded their secrets jealously. A new shape for a teapot, a new inscribed design—these were things that the potters refused to reveal until a piece was ready to show to a buyer.

Min did not seem to care about such secrecy. It was as if he were saying, *Go ahead, watch me. No matter—you will not be able to imitate my skill.*

It was true, and it was also the main reason that Tree-ear loved watching Min. His work was the finest in the region, perhaps even in the whole country.

Chapter 2

Tree-ear peered between the leaves of the paulownia tree, puzzled. Several days had passed since his last visit to Min's house, and he had calculated that it was time for another throwing day. But there was no sign of Min at his work, nor any wet clay on the wheel. The workshop area was tidy, with a few chickens in the yard the only signs of life.

Emboldened by the silence, Tree-ear emerged from his hiding place and approached the house. Against the wall was a set of shelves holding a few of Min's latest creations. They were at the stage the potters called "leather-hard"—dried by the air but not yet glazed or fired. Unglazed, the work was of little interest to thieves. The finished pieces were surely locked up somewhere in the house.

Tree-ear paused at the edge of the brush and listened hard one last time. A hen clucked proudly, and Tree-ear grinned—Min would have an egg for his supper. But there was still no sign of the potter, so Tree-ear tiptoed the last few steps to stand before the shelves.

For the first time he was seeing Min's work at close range. There was a duck that would have fit in the palm of his hand, with a tiny hole in its bill. Tree-ear had seen such a duck in use before. A painter had been sitting on the riverbank, working on a water scene. The painter had poured water from the duck's bill onto a stone a single drop at a time, mixing ink to exactly the correct consistency for his work.

Tree-ear stared at Min's duck. Though it was now a dull gray, so detailed were its features that he found himself half listening for the sound of a quack. Min had shaped and then carved the clay to form the curve of wing and tilt of head. Even the little tail curled up with an impudence that made Tree-ear smile.

He tore his gaze away from the duck to examine the next piece, a tall jug with ribbed lines that imitated the shape of a melon. The lines were perfectly symmetrical, curving so gracefully from top to bottom that Tree-ear longed to run his finger along the smooth shallow grooves. The melon's stem and leaves were cleverly shaped to form the lid of the jug.

The last piece on the shelf was the least interesting—a rectangular lidded box as large as his two hands. It was completely undecorated. Disappointed in its plainness, Tree-ear was ready to turn away when a thought struck him. Outside, the box was plain, but perhaps inside...

Holding his breath, he reached out, gently lifted the lid, and looked inside. He grinned in double delight at his own correct guess and at Min's skill. The plain box held five smaller boxes—a small round one in the center and four curved boxes that fit around it perfectly. The small boxes appeared to completely fill the larger container, but Min had left exactly the right amount of space to allow any of them to be lifted out.

Tree-ear put the lid of the large box down on the shelf and picked up one of the curved containers. On the underside of its lid was a lip of clay that held the lid in place. Tree-ear's eyes flickered back and forth between the small pieces in his hand and the larger container, his brow furrowed in thought.

How did Min fit them together so perfectly? Perhaps he made the large box, then a second one to fit inside, and cut the smaller boxes from that? Or did he make an inside box first and fit the larger box around it? Maybe he began with the small central box, then the curved ones, then—

Someone shouted. The chickens squawked noisily and Tree-ear dropped what he was holding. He stood there, paralyzed for a moment, then threw his hands up in front of his face to protect himself from the blows that were raining down on his head and shoulders.

It was the old potter. "Thief!" he screamed. "How dare you come here! How dare you touch my

work!"

~~Tree-ear did the only thing he could think of. He dropped to his knees and cowered in a deep formal bow.~~

"Please! Please, honorable sir, I was not stealing your work—I came only to admire it."

Min's cane halted in mid-blow. The potter stood over the boy with the cane still poised for another strike.

"Have you been here before, beggar-boy?"

Tree-ear's thoughts scrambled about as he tried to think what to answer. The truth seemed easier.

"Yes, honorable sir. I come often to watch you work."

"Ah!"

Tree-ear was still doubled over in his bow, but out of the corner of his eye, he could see the tip of the cane as it was lowered to the ground. He allowed himself a single sigh of relief.

"So is it you who breaks the twigs and bruises the leaves of the paulownia tree just beyond?"

Tree-ear nodded, feeling his face flush. He had thought he was covering his tracks well.

"Not to steal, you say? How do I know you do not watch just to see when I have made something of extra value?"

Now Tree-ear raised his head and looked at Min. He kept his voice respectful, but his words were proud.

"I would not steal. Stealing and begging make a man no better than a dog."

The potter stared at the boy for a long moment. At last, Min seemed to make up his mind about something, and when he spoke again, his voice had lost the sharpest edge of its anger.

"So you were not stealing. It is the same thing to me—with one part damaged, the rest is of no use." He gestured at the misshapen pottery box on the ground, badly dented from its fall. "Get on your way, then. I know better than to ask for payment for what you have ruined."

Tree-ear stood slowly, shame hot in his breast. It was true. He could never hope to pay Min for the damaged box.

Min picked it up and tossed it on the rubbish heap at the side of the yard. He continued to mutter crossly. "Ai, three days' work, and for what? For nothing. I am behind now. The order will be late..."

Tree-ear had taken a few dragging steps out of the yard. But on hearing the old potter's mutterings, he lifted his head and turned back toward him.

"Honorable potter? Sir? Could I not work for you, as payment? Perhaps my help could save you some time..."

Min shook his head impatiently. "What could you do, an untrained child? I have no time to teach you—you would be more trouble than help."

Tree-ear stepped forward eagerly. "You would not need to teach so much as you think, sir. I have been watching you for many months now. I know how you mix the clay, and turn the wheel—I have watched you make many things..."

The potter waved one hand to cut off the boy's words and spoke with derision. "Turn the wheel! Ha! He thinks he can sit and make a pot—just like that!"

Tree-ear crossed his arms stubbornly and did not look away. Min picked up the rest of the box and tossed it too on the rubbish heap. He muttered under his breath, so Tree-ear could not hear the words.

Min straightened up and glanced around, first at his shelf, then at the wheel, and finally at Tree-ear.

"Yes, all right," he said, his voice still rough with annoyance. "Come tomorrow at daybreak, the Three days it took me to make that box, so you will give me nine days' work in return. I cannot even begin to think how much greater the value of my work is than yours, but we will settle on this for a

start."

~~Tree-ear bowed in agreement. He walked around the side of the house, then flew off down the road. He could hardly wait to tell Crane-man. For the first time in his life he would have real work to do.~~

Upon arriving the next day for work, Tree-ear learned that it was Min's turn to chop wood for the kiln fires. That was why he had not been at home the day before.

Like most of the potters' villages, Ch'ulp'o had a communal kiln. Set on the hillside just outside the center of the village, it looked like a long, low tunnel made of hardened clay. The potters took turns using the kiln and keeping up the supply of fuel.

Min handed Tree-ear a small ax and led him around the side of the house to a wheeled cart.

"Fill the cart with wood," Min barked. "Dry wood, not wet. Do not come back until the cart is full."

Tree-ear felt as though the sun had suddenly dimmed. The night before, sleep had not come easily. He had imagined himself at the wheel, a beautiful pot growing from the clay before him. Perhaps, he thought now, if he chopped enough wood quickly, there would still be time at the end of the day...

Min quashed that hope with his next words. "Take care to go well into the mountains," he said. "Far too many trees have been cut too close to the village. You will walk a long way before you find a plentiful stand of trees."

Tree-ear swallowed a sigh as he placed the ax in the cart. Grasping the two handles, he wheeled the cart onto the road. He turned to wave farewell, but the potter was no longer there. The sound of the throwing song floated out from behind the house.

Chopping wood for hours without a single bite to eat had been hard enough. But the worst of that day was the long trip back down the mountainside with the cart full of wood.

The path was rutted and bumpy. The homemade cart was poorly balanced, awkward with its heavy load. At every step Tree-ear had to keep his eyes trained on the path and the cart. In spite of his efforts, whenever the wheels hit a deep rut, the cart tipped precariously and some of the logs spilled out. Then he had to stop to pick up the fallen wood. It was more than annoying, because he had been careful to lay the wood neatly as he chopped, and each bump led to further disarray of the tidy pile.

After this had happened more times than he could count, Tree-ear neared the end of the mountain path. Soon it would widen and smooth out into the more heavily traveled foothills road. Tree-ear lifted his head for a moment, in eager anticipation of the end of his journey.

Just then the right-hand wheel caught a stone. The cart handles were wrenched from his hands, and the cart tipped onto its side. The momentum pulled Tree-ear off balance, and he tripped over the cart and tumbled headfirst to the ground.

He sat up, dazed. For a moment he didn't know whether to curse or cry. He set his lips together tightly and scrambled to his feet, then pulled the cart upright and began flinging the wood back into it in a frenzy.

As he heaved a large, rough log, an arrow of pain shot through his right hand. He cried out and clenched it into a fist for a moment until the throbbing eased a little. Then he opened it cautiously and examined the injury.

The pillow of fluid that had formed on his palm during the long hours of wielding the ax had burst. Blood ran from the wound, mixing with dirt and small bits of bark. Tree-ear stared at it, and he could not stop the tears that pressed hot behind his eyes.

Angrily, he blinked away the tears and set about tearing a strip of cloth from the bottom of his

tunic. There was no water nearby, so he spat on his palm and wiped it as best he could, clenching his teeth against the pain. He used his other hand and his teeth to wrap and tie the cloth into a makeshift bandage.

From then on he worked slowly and methodically, stacking the wood in neat rows in the cart. The sun was low in the sky when he finished at last and wheeled the cart cautiously down the path to the foothills road.

Tree-ear dragged himself home to the bridge that evening. Crane-man's normally placid expression was replaced with a frown of worry when Tree-ear stumbled into the space under the struts and collapsed in a heap on the ground.

Crane-man said nothing. He merely held out a bowl in which he had placed a small mound of rice and a little pile of boiled greens. Too exhausted to eat, Tree-ear waved the food away. But Crane-man hobbled to his side and used his crutch for support as he eased himself down to sit next to Tree-ear. Crane-man picked up a little rice in his fingers, and insistently, but still without a word, began feeding Tree-ear as if he were a baby.

Tree-ear did not remember finishing the meal, but he awoke the next morning to see Crane-man swing himself down under the bridge by holding one of the struts, as he always did. Small and slight and who knew how old, Crane-man still moved his upper body with the ease of a young man; many were the times that Tree-ear forgot completely about the useless leg. Where had Crane-man been, so early?

Tree-ear sat up stiffly and began to rub his eyes. As he brought his right hand up to his face, he caught sight of the crude bandage. It was stiff with dried blood.

"Yes, that is what I have been about," said Crane-man. "Now, let us see what we can see."

Tree-ear held out his hand. Crane-man untied the bandage and began to unwrap it.

"Ssst!" Tree-ear hissed sharply in pain and snatched his hand away. The final layer of cloth clung stubbornly to the wound, and Crane-man had been trying to pull it off.

"Come now, my monkey friend," said Crane-man, kindly but firmly. "It must be removed so we can clean the wound. The demons of sickness are no doubt already scheming to enter your body through such a door."

Tree-ear rose and shuffled to the water's edge. He crouched and dipped his hand in the water. Its coolness soothed the throb, and its wetness loosened the cloth's grip on the wound. Wincing, he eased the bandage away.

While Tree-ear cleaned his wound, Crane-man took the strip of cloth and washed it thoroughly with water from the gourd bowl, scrubbing it against a flat stone at the river's edge. Then he wrung it out and handed it to Tree-ear, who scrambled up the bank and hung it on a strut to dry in the sun.

From his waist pouch Crane-man took a handful of green herbs he had gathered in the woods earlier that morning. He ground them to a paste between two stones, then scooped up some of the paste with two fingers and applied it to Tree-ear's hand.

"Close your hand," Crane-man ordered. "Squeeze, so the healing juices may enter the wound."

The two friends ate the last of the rice-treasure for breakfast, Tree-ear holding the paste as he ate with his other hand. Then Crane-man tied the now-dry strip of cloth back into a bandage.

"There," he said. "A few days' rest will see that hand good as new." He looked at Tree-ear sternly.

Tree-ear said nothing. He knew that Crane-man had already guessed there would be no rest that day. There was still eight days' work to be done for Min.

Chapter 3

Tree-ear trotted up the road toward Min's house. But he slowed a little when he heard the potter scolding him even before he arrived.

What kind of useless boy was he, coming back so late the day before and leaving the cart without a word? That wood should have been taken to the kiln and unloaded. Min had done it himself at dusk and had nearly injured himself stumbling home in the darkness. Such help was worse than no help at all! Now, did Tree-ear really intend to make himself useful? If not, it would be better for him to forgo their whole arrangement...

Finally, Min paused to draw breath. Tree-ear dared not look up. He felt like a beast with two heads, one ashamed, the other resentful. Ashamed that he had not finished the work properly, resentful that Min had not given him complete instructions. "Fill the cart"—that had been the order, and he had done it. Was he expected to read Min's mind as well?

But the shame won out in Tree-ear. He feared being sent away before he could learn to make a pot.

"I am sorry that I displeased the honorable potter," Tree-ear said. "If he would be so good as to give me another chance, he will not be disappointed."

"Hmph." Min turned and walked toward the side of the house. Tree-ear stood still for a moment, unsure of what to do.

"Well?" Min turned back impatiently. "Are you coming, beggar-boy, or are you a statue with your feet frozen to the ground?"

Tree-ear's joy at being forgiven was like a wisp of smoke; Min's orders for the day blew it into nothingness. His task was the same as the previous day's—to fill the cart with wood, and this time unload it at the kiln site.

Each day, Tree-ear appeared at Min's door eagerly. Each day, Min sent him up the mountain with the cart to chop more wood. At night, with Crane-man's careful ministrations, the wound on Tree-ear's hand would begin to heal, the tender pink layer toughening slightly. But at the start of the next day's work it would split and bleed again. Tree-ear came to expect the pain; the throbbing was like an unwelcome companion who appeared daily after the first few strokes of the ax.

On the third day, Crane-man had offered to come with him. Tree-ear's mind raced to think of a polite refusal. He knew what would happen: Crane-man would want to spare Tree-ear's blistered hand and would take up the ax himself. Tree-ear shuddered, picturing Crane-man trying to chop wood while leaning on his crutch. He might well injure his good leg.

"Your offer of help is kindness itself," Tree-ear answered. "But if it is all the same to you, it is better for me to return to a meal already prepared. I could not imagine greater assistance than this."

Crane-man was satisfied. It seemed to Tree-ear that his friend spent the entire day figuring out how to transform a handful of weeds and bones into something that resembled a meal.

Over the days Tree-ear developed a routine of work and rest. A period of diligent chopping and loading, then a break; this was better than several hours of frenzied chopping that left him with a vast untidy pile of wood, which took much time to load and left him exhausted.

In the brief periods of rest he was sometimes able to gather a little food—a few wild mushrooms here, a handful of fern sprouts there. Crane-man had taught him well on their many walks through these mountains together. Tree-ear knew which mushrooms were tasty and which deadly. He knew the birds by their songs, and how a mountain lion's spoor looked different from that of a deer. And he

never lost his way, for he knew where the streams ran, pointing sure as an arrow back down the mountain toward the road.

Besides his quiet times reading the mountain, Tree-ear's favorite part of the day was unloading the wood at the kiln site. The kiln was located at the far end of the village from Min's house. Nearby was a large, roughly built shed. Tree-ear wheeled the cart to the shed's entry, then carried armfuls of wood inside, where it would stay dry. The wood was stacked as high as a man could reach, in orderly piles on either side of a central aisle. Tree-ear liked arranging his wood neatly so the potters could take what they needed without the whole of the stack collapsing.

At the kiln site he often saw potters whose turn it was to use the kiln. They would greet him with a nod when he arrived. On the fourth day one of them spoke to him. "You are Min's new boy, are you not?"

Tree-ear knew the potter who spoke; his name was Kang. He was old enough for gray to streak his hair, but younger than Min, with a keen eye and a restless manner. Tree-ear lowered the handles of the cart to the ground and bowed his head.

"High time the old man got himself some help." Kang spoke with what seemed like an edge to his voice. "The last few times he did not bring anywhere near his proper share of wood."

Then Kang stepped forward and began to help unload the cart, so Tree-ear's work was finished earlier than usual. He was left with time enough to rifle through a rubbish dump on his way home; the cabbage core that he found would add to Crane-man's culinary efforts for dinner.

It was the morning of the tenth day. The evening before, Tree-ear had returned the cart to its usual spot next to Min's house and had lingered about for a few moments. But Min did not emerge from the house, so Tree-ear had departed at last, his debt of work paid in full.

Awake for most of the night, Tree-ear had considered over and over how best to approach Min. In the nine days of work, Tree-ear had not once touched clay. He would never be able to make a pot unless he could continue his relationship with the potter.

Tree-ear rehearsed his words one last time as he neared Min's house. He drew in a breath and held it for a moment to steady himself, then called out, "Master Potter?"

To Tree-ear's surprise, Min's wife opened the door. He knew, of course, that Min was married. On the days that he had spied on Min, Tree-ear had occasionally glimpsed the wife coming out to the yard to scatter grain for the chickens or to fetch water. But because she had nothing to do with the pottery work, Tree-ear had ignored her. And in the past several days of woodcutting he had not seen or thought of her at all.

Now he bowed his head as he stood before her. "Is the master home?" he asked.

"He is at his breakfast," she answered. "You may wait at the back of the house."

Tree-ear nodded his thanks and stepped away, but the woman spoke again, quietly. "A good thing you're chopping the wood. He is not as young as he once was..." Her voice trailed off.

Tree-ear glanced up at her, and their eyes met. Hers were bright and soft, set in a small face netted with fine wrinkles. He dropped his gaze at once, not wishing to be considered impolite. *Like Crane-man's eyes*, he thought, and wondered why.

Min was washing his hands in a basin under the eaves when Tree-ear reached the back yard.

"What are you doing here?" Min's voice was cross, and he did not look up. "It has been nine days and your debt is discharged. If you came to hear me say it, you can go now."

Tree-ear bowed. "I beg the honorable potter to pardon my insolence," he said. "I wish to express my gratitude—"

"Yes, yes," Min said impatiently. "What is it?"

"It would be a great honor for me to continue working for the potter." Tree-ear began the speech he had planned so carefully. "If he would consider—"

"I cannot pay you." Min's interruption could hardly have been more abrupt, but the curt words swept over Tree-ear like cool rain over a parched field. *I cannot pay you* was the same as "Yes." A surge of joy lifted Tree-ear's heart into his throat, so that he had to cough politely before speaking again.

"To work for such a master is payment enough," he murmured.

"Temple bell until sundown, every day," said Min.

Tree-ear found himself on the ground, collapsed in a full bow of gratitude. It was all he could do to keep himself from running all the way back to the bridge to tell Crane-man the good news.

"Clay today, not wood." Those were Min's orders for the tenth day.

Once again Tree-ear trundled the cart, this time along the river road, until he reached the diggin' area. Here the clay had been cut away in neat slabs, leaving a pattern of staggered rectangles in the riverbank.

Tree-ear paused for a moment when he reached the clay pits. He had passed by the pits many times before and had always liked looking at the scene there; the geometric pattern of the clay bank pleased him. But today he felt as though he were seeing the men and boys working there for the first time.

Using spades, they slashed at the clay with movements almost too swift to follow. When a slab of clay had been outlined with the spade, it was cut away from the bank and heaved into a nearby cart or basket.

Tree-ear watched for a while, the spade Min had given him on his shoulder. Then he slid down the muddy bank to stand in the shallow water. Raising the spade high over his shoulder, he brought it down with a dull *thunk*. It sliced into the wet clay, and Tree-ear noted with satisfaction the clean line made by the spade's edge. He tugged at the spade's handle, ready to make his next cut.

The spade did not budge. Tree-ear frowned, and pulled again. The head of the spade was well and truly buried. Tree-ear tried using both hands down low on the handle. The clay made squelching, sucking noises, as if it were trying to swallow the spade.

Finally, Tree-ear was forced to claw away the clay around the spade head in order to free it. His arms and legs were already covered with mud. He paused to brush away a mosquito and rubbed a swash of mud across one side of his face. At last, he stood up and swung the spade again.

It took him all morning to fill the cart with clay. The other diggers were long gone, having cut their clay with a swift skill that left Tree-ear alone and in despair. Heavy! The wet clay was far heavier than he had ever imagined. He could not begin to lift a slab with the spade; he had to cut each slab into several pieces and lift them one at a time into the cart. Tree-ear scowled to see the misshapen masses of clay in his cart, so different from the neat rectangles of the other workers.

Moreover, the spadework had torn open his blistered hand again. But it was not so painful as it had been on the mountainside, for here he could apply handfuls of cooling, soothing mud to the wound.

By the time the cart was loaded, Tree-ear wore mud like a second skin. Even raising his eyebrow was difficult, for his forehead was stiff with dried clay. And he was so exhausted that he could hardly bear the thought of wheeling the now-heavy cart back to Min's house.

Then a sudden thought came to him—dinner! He had forgotten in the toil of the morning. Apprentices, assistants, the lowliest workers in every trade—no matter what their status, it was the masters' duty to provide a meal for them in the middle of the workday. Now that Tree-ear was no longer working off a debt, Min was obliged to feed him. The thought broke through Tree-ear's fatigue

like a shaft of sunlight piercing a cloud.

~~He left the cart on the road and bounded into the river. He scrubbed and splashed and ducked under the water completely to get rid of as much grime as he possibly could. It would never do to appear for his first working meal dressed in mud.~~

Min glanced briefly at the clay-filled cart. "You were long enough in returning," he said with a sniff. "I will not be able to do any more work until after my midday meal."

He walked into the house, having said nothing about Tree-ear's food. But Tree-ear barely had time to wonder before Min's wife appeared in the doorway. She held out a parcel tied up in cloth.

Tree-ear trotted to the door, resisting the impulse to snatch the parcel from her. He bowed his head and held out his hands, palms up and together, as was proper when accepting something.

Min's wife placed the cloth package in his hands. "Eat well, work well," she said.

A hot lump rose in Tree-ear's throat. He raised his head and saw in her eyes that she heard his thanks even though he could not speak the words.

Tree-ear sat on a stone under the paulownia tree and untied the corners of the cloth. It held a gourd bowl filled with rice, whose whiteness was accented by a few dark shreds of savory dried fish and a little pile of *kimchee*—pickled cabbage vivid with seasonings of red pepper, green onions, and garlic. A pair of chopsticks was laid neatly across the top of the bowl.

Tree-ear picked up the chopsticks and stared for a moment. Of one thing he was certain: The feast-day banquets in the palace of the King could never better the modest meal before him, for he had earned it.

Tree-ear carted another load of clay for Min that afternoon, then returned to the bridge where Crane-man had stewed some wild mushrooms for their supper. Tree-ear spoke eagerly about his work that day. It was not until Crane-man rose to gather the supper bowls that Tree-ear noticed something was missing.

The crutch. Sure enough, after handing Tree-ear the bowls to wash, Crane-man sat down with his knife and a sturdy straight branch and began to whittle a new crutch. Tree-ear wiped out the bowls, stacked them neatly on their rock shelf, and finally asked, "What happened to the old one?"

Crane-man paused in his work, then waved his knife impatiently. "Stupidity happened," he answered. "There was a run of flounder today."

That was all he said, but Tree-ear heard much more. Although Ch'ulp'o was on the sea, it was a potters' village, not a fishing village. The men and boys seldom took time from their work to fish. Still, they all knew the useful skill of fishing, and the women and girls often gathered shellfish at low tide.

A run of flounder meant that a school of the tasty fish had come into shore far closer than usual, the waves even tossed fish right up on the beach. Such news sent many scrambling for their bamboo poles. But one had to be among the first to run from the village down to the shore. The flounder found their way back out to sea soon enough, and the fish flopping about on the sand were scooped up only by the quickest.

It had always been Tree-ear who skipped out to the beach at the first word of a flounder run, and he had never returned without a fat fish or two for a rare feast. Now he knew without asking that Crane-man had hobbled down to the beach and lurched about on the sand, so treacherous to his crutch only to come away empty-handed.

Crane-man shaved another curl of wood, then held the crutch up to his eye, squinting to check that its lines were true. "I was angry about not getting any fish," he said as he returned to his whittling "so I struck my crutch against a rock. It broke, of course."

A little pile of shavings had grown at Crane-man's feet. Tree-ear crouched and stirred the pile with his finger, too ashamed to look up. In his mind he saw Crane-man making his slow, painful way back from the beach, with only a broken crutch to help him. And no fish for his trouble. How was it that in enjoying his noontime meal Tree-ear had forgotten his friend? He should have saved some of the food for Crane-man. If it had been the other way around, Crane-man would never have forgotten.

Tree-ear swept the shavings into his palm, then threw them into the river. As he watched the current carry them away, he mumbled, "I am sorry about the flounder."

"Ah, friend," Crane-man said. "You must mean, 'I am sorry about your leg.' Because that is the reason for our fishless supper today. But I think it a waste for either of us to spend too much time in sorrow over something we cannot change." Crane-man grunted as he stood, then leaned on the new crutch to test it.

Satisfied, he nodded at Tree-ear. "Besides, when I leave this world, I will have two good legs and no need for such as this." And he tapped the crutch with his free hand.

Still cross with himself, Tree-ear grumbled half under his breath, "Some of us will have *four* good legs."

Crane-man batted at him with the new crutch. "What are you saying, impudent boy? That I will be a beast in the next life?"

Tree-ear began to protest. "No, not you—" Then he stopped and grinned. "Well, maybe," he said putting his hand on his chin in an attitude of deep thought. "A rabbit, I think. Very clever and quick—"

"You had better be quick now yourself!" Crane-man bellowed in mock anger, brandishing the crutch sword-fashion. Tree-ear began hopping about their little den like a rabbit, dodging Crane-man jabs and swipes, his shame forgotten for the moment, as the day ended in laughter.

Chapter 4

In the morning Tree-ear presented himself at Min's door before the temple bell rang. As he had hoped it was Min's wife who answered his call.

He held out a gourd bowl and bowed his head.

"I have brought my own bowl today, so as not to inconvenience the honorable potter's wife," he said. Tree-ear's plan was to eat only half his food, leave the bowl hidden somewhere, and take the other half home to Crane-man at the end of the day.

Min's wife nodded and took the bowl from him, but he could see the puzzled look in her eyes. The day before, he had returned the bowl and chopsticks to her after washing and wiping them; clearly, there had been no need for him to bring his own bowl.

Tree-ear turned away, feeling guilt like a shadow across his brow, and hoped fervently that he had not offended her. *I'm not really deceiving anyone*, he argued to himself. *And I haven't asked for more food—it should make no difference to her which bowl...*

He carted clay again for Min, and by midafternoon he had grown more accustomed to the work. He was learning the tricky balance of spadework—deep enough to make a clean cut, but not so deep as to bury the spade head in the mire. The work went more quickly now, and the muscles in his back and arms that had been strengthened by the woodcutting did not cry out so loudly anymore.

Tree-ear brought the final load of clay back to Min's. As usual, the potter was nowhere in sight at the end of the day, so Tree-ear left the cart parked under the eaves and went to retrieve the remaining half of his midday meal.

Tree-ear caught his breath. The gourd bowl was not beneath the paulownia tree where he had left it. He searched the area around the tree. The bowl had been covered with a cloth weighed down by stones. Here was the cloth, snagged on a shrub—and there, a few paces farther into the brush, the bowl.

Empty. Not just empty, but polished clean. Some wild animal...

Disappointment rose inside Tree-ear until he felt he would have to let it escape in a wolf-like howl. Instead, he picked up the bowl and hurled it as far as he could into the brush.

"Ai!" The startled cry that came from somewhere within the overgrown brush frightened Tree-ear half off his feet. Min's wife emerged from behind a tangled bush, holding the bowl in one hand and a basket in the other. The basket was filled with berries, which she had apparently been gathering on the mountainside.

She was smiling gently as she handed him the bowl. "This bowl had a great desire to become my hat," she said. "A bowl that flies! Small wonder that you preferred it to my own." Tree-ear could see that she was teasing, but he was too deep in his own embarrassment and disappointment to respond with more than a curt nod. He checked himself in time to turn the nod into a bow of respect, then fled, leaving the scene of his failure but not the knowledge of it.

Yet again he had failed to share his meal with Crane-man. And on top of that, it seemed that he had nearly hit his master's wife on the head with his bowl.

It was two full moons now that Tree-ear had been working for Min, but it seemed like a year or even longer. He sometimes felt that he could hardly remember what his life had been like before. The days had acquired a rhythm, a regularity he found comforting and dependable. He woke early, worked for Min, ate half of his dinner, worked again, then returned to the bridge at dusk.

In an attempt to discourage wild animals from eating the other half of his food while he worked

Tree-ear had taken to hiding it closer to the house. At a far corner of Min's yard he had dug a hollow just big enough to hold the bowl, and had found a large flat rock nearby to use as a cover. It looked quite unobtrusive, and he had been pleased to find the food untouched the first time he hid it there. Since then, he had been able to bring Crane-man supper every night.

This was his greatest satisfaction. The meals provided by Min's wife were simple, but they never failed to delight his friend, who opened the gourd parcel each evening as if it were a gift of royal jewels.

"Bean curd tonight," Crane-man would say, his eyes gleaming. "With cucumber *kimchee* as well. Truly a felicitous combination. Soft bean curd—crunchy cucumber. Bland bean curd—spicy cucumber. That woman is an artist."

Several days after he had begun using the new hiding place, Tree-ear made an odd discovery. As usual, he had eaten half his meal at midday. On retrieving the bowl after the day's work, he unwrapped the cloth as he always did, to check on the bowl's contents.

The bowl was full again.

Tree-ear stared in surprise. He looked toward the house, but neither Min nor his wife was in sight. And every evening thereafter he returned to find the bowl full, with enough supper for both Crane-man and himself.

Tree-ear was learning a new skill now—the draining of the clay. It was a tedious process, but one that held his interest.

At some distance from the house, near a clear running stream, a series of shallow holes had been dug and lined with several layers of rough grasscloth. The clay was shoveled into one of the pits and water mixed in to form a thick viscous mud. Tree-ear stirred and stirred the mixture with a wooden paddle until the clay and water were uniformly combined.

Then the sludge was scooped up and poured through a sieve into a neighboring pit. The sieving winnowed out tiny pebbles and other impurities. Finally, the clay was left to settle for a few days until the water at the top either had drained away or could be bailed off.

Min would squeeze handfuls of the purified clay, or rub it between his fingers. He usually did this with his eyes closed—the better to feel it, Tree-ear supposed.

He did not ask, for Min preferred to work with as few words as possible. The potter would bark terse commands, which Tree-ear struggled to satisfy by whatever means were available to him—watching Min, watching other potters, experimenting. He did not know why Min did not explain things more fully; Tree-ear's mistakes often cost valuable time or wasted valuable clay. Then Min would shout or scold while Tree-ear stared at his toes in shame and, more often than not, resentment.

But since that first day when Tree-ear had damaged the box, Min had never raised a hand against him. Throughout the first few scoldings, Tree-ear had braced himself, ready for the pummeling that would surely follow, like those he had endured when caught raiding a rubbish heap. They had not come, then or ever, even at the height of Min's scorn and rage.

The stirring, sieving, settling, and bailing were repeated any number of times, until Min was satisfied with the residue. It depended on the job at hand. If the clay was for a sturdy teapot to be used every day, a single draining might suffice. But for a finely wrought incense burner commissioned by a wealthy merchant as a gift to the temple, the clay might be drained twice or even three times. Clay that passed Min's inspection was formed into a large ball, ready to be thrown on the wheel.

The ultimate in drainage work was reserved for the creation of the celadon glaze. For this, half a dozen drainings might not be enough. Tree-ear sometimes wanted to cry out and beat his fists into the clay in frustration when Min made an abrupt gesture for yet another repetition of the work.

The clay for glaze was mixed in precise proportions with water and wood ash. This combination must have been the result of a happy accident in the distant past. Perhaps ashes had once fallen on a plain-glazed vase in the kiln and resulted in patches of the clear celadon color. Now potters used wood ash deliberately, each with his own secret formula, to produce the sought-after glaze.

How proud the potters were of its color! No one had been able to name it satisfactorily, for although it was green, shades of blue and gray and violet whispered beneath it, as in the sea on a cloudy day. Different hues blended into one another where the glaze pooled thickly in the crevices or glossed sheer on the raised surfaces of an incised design. Indeed, a famed Chinese scholar had once named twelve small wonders of the world; eleven of them were Chinese, and the twelfth was the color of Korean celadon pottery! The children of Ch'ulp'o learned this story almost before they could walk.

Tree-ear could feel the difference between the results of a first draining and that of, say, a third. After three times through the sieve, the clay was noticeably smoother, with a silky touch as light as feathers. By comparison, the residue of a first draining felt almost gravelly.

But once the process had been repeated three times, subsequent drainings did not seem to make difference—at least, not to Tree-ear. He would squeeze his eyes shut, hold his breath, and rub the clay between his fingers, trying desperately to detect whatever was different about a fifth or sixth draining. What was it that Min felt? Why couldn't Tree-ear feel it himself?

Min never indicated any satisfaction with Tree-ear's work. He would merely pick up a ball of clay and stalk off with it toward the house. Tree-ear would stay behind to attend to the draining, resigned and envious in the knowledge that Min was taking the clay to the wheel.

In the past, keeping his ears open to the talk of village life had always been a crucial skill for Tree-ear. News of a wedding, for example, meant that the bride's family would be preparing much food in the days preceding the ceremony; their rubbish heap would merit special attention during that time. The birth of a son, the death of a patriarch—these events likewise affected the state of a household's garbage.

Of course, none of the villagers thought to tell Tree-ear of such happenings. Instead, he had learned over the years to look for the clues whispered by changes in the villagers' daily routines. Extra bags of rice delivered to one house signaled a coming feast; a normally sober man stumbling home drunk one night might mean that a son had been born.

Skipping from one rubbish heap to the next, stopping at nearly every house in the village, listening to snatches of conversation along the road—in these ways Tree-ear had come to appreciate his lowly status, for people tended to ignore his presence entirely and on the rare occasions when they did notice him, usually spoke as if he weren't there. He would carry the bits and pieces of news back to Crane-man, so they could discuss how such information might lead to a better meal.

Crane-man often joked about it. "Tree-ear! Eh, again you see the aptness of your name. You are like the ears of a scrawny little tree, noticed by none but hearing all!"

True enough, and this ability of Tree-ear's was to serve him well in his new life as Min's assistant.

"Two months to make one vase."

"Min, the tortoise-potter!"

"The price of one of Min's vases—two oxen, a horse, and your first-born son!"

It was thus that the other potters, their apprentices, and some of the villagers spoke of Min—usually in jest, but sometimes with derision just below the thin layer of banter in their voices. Gradually, Tree-ear learned that his master had a reputation for slow work, slow and expensive. Because he worked so slowly, he made far fewer pieces than the other potters, and consequently had to sell each of them at a higher price. Min's work was renowned for its great beauty, but there were not

many who could afford it.

~~Tree-ear learned still more without being taught~~—that Min in his younger days had been one of the most successful potters in Ch'ulp'o, but that his insistence on perfection had lost him many a well-paid commission. Buyers grew tired of waiting for work that was finished months after the deadline, and eventually they took their custom elsewhere. True, there were those willing to wait for one of Min's creations, but they grew fewer every year.

Beyond all else, what Min needed was a royal commission. The everyday vessels for the King's household; the works of art displayed at the palace and its temples; and most of all, the gifts sent abroad as tokens of peace and respect to the greatest nation in the world—China ... these were considered the worthiest of all toil, and handsomely rewarded. A royal commission was the dream of all potters, but Tree-ear sensed somehow that it was more than a dream for Min. It was his life's desire.

So Tree-ear learned about his master from others, from watching, from breathing the very air of his work, but never by hearing a word from Min himself.

The plum trees blossomed; the petals fell like snow, leaving behind tiny green buttons that hid shyly among the leaves. While Tree-ear learned to cut and drain clay, the little buttons swelled and purpled until the ripest fell to the ground, where Crane-man hopped about gathering them, the hem of his tunic tied to make a carry-sack.

That late summer Tree-ear and Crane-man always had enough to eat, for the half-empty dinner bowl never failed to become a brimful supper bowl. Tree-ear had once been tempted to eat all of the food at midday, knowing in his heart that the bowl would be refilled. But the very thought had frightened him. How quickly one became greedy! And he knew without asking that Crane-man would disapprove. Taking advantage of the kindness of another, he might say.

Instead, Tree-ear pondered long and hard how to thank Min's wife. He felt ashamed that there was so little he could do. On the rare occasions that Min dismissed him early, he would hang around the house, looking for little chores to do—pulling weeds in her vegetable patch or sweeping the yard. And he always made sure to fill the water barrel from the stream before he left for the night. His frustration at the meagerness of his thanks was like the small but constant whine of a gnat in his thoughts.

Still, it was a weightless enough worry during as fine a time as Tree-ear could remember—golden days, warm nights, work to do, and food to eat. And Crane-man often said there was no better finish to a meal than a sweet ripe plum.

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