1. No. 147 Clearwater Village

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"They're in third and fifth grade, I imagine!" Looking across the road, I saw two little girls and guessed their ages. They were walking along a sidewalk wide enough for only a single pedestrian, who would have to brush shoulders with passing traffic. They looked so much alike, including their frowns, that they must be sisters.

The younger sister was wearing a backpack that was almost bigger than she was. It was obviously too heavy for her. With a downcast gaze, she hunched her shoulders and back against the straps that dug into her skin, twisting the neck of her T-shirt. In her hands she carried a water bottle and a lunch box.

The elder sister was wearing the same kind of bookbag, which dug into her shoulders and twisted the neck of her shirt in the same way, to the left. She was carrying even more than her younger sister, but I couldn't see what, because she had put her things in a big plastic bag. She kept looking at her sister, as if out of concern, but didn't say a thing.

Having completed my substitute military service in the Philippines, I came back to my mother's home, No. 147 Clearwater Village, for a visit. In the evenings I went jogging along the meandering industrial road to the elementary school, a stretch of road that, decades before, my mother had walked every day. I measured it: it was about three-and-a-half kilometers. I didn't see many children along the way. At a time of declining birth rates, far fewer children were attending this school. But I often saw that pair of sisters.

Where were they walking to? I gathered their home was around the next bend.

I took out the letter my mom had sent me in the Philippines. She'd written her reminiscences on the backs of used sheets of A4 paper. I turned to the part about her childhood.

When I remember myself as a child, my strongest impression is that I was always crying.

When your grandma went out to work, she didn't let me follow along. I'd stand outside the door and cry the entire afternoon. After I grew up the neighbors poked fun at me. "What a crybaby you used to be! You could cry so hard it was like exercise. That must be why you got so tall!"

By the time I started elementary school, I was old enough to walk to school on my own. I walked home, too, chatting with my classmates on the way. If I was thirsty, I'd take a drink from a well by the road. I remember there were two. I wonder what's become of them.

I wanted to see the wells she mentioned in her letter, but I guessed I'd need a bit more imagination and luck to find them. I ran around a bend. Looking back, I confirmed I could no longer see the two sisters. Looking forward again, I went off balance and stepped in a big muck heap.

I always kept a raincoat in my bookbag. It was neatly folded, like a book. For six years it went to school with me and came home with me. I put it on whenever it rained. Once I forgot to put it back in, and wouldn't you know it, it was pouring rain when school let out. Your grandma was waiting for me at the entrance. She had made the trip on foot. I felt guilty. I told myself never to forget again.

When it rained my classmates and I took off our shoes, tied the laces, and hung them around our necks. We needed to keep them clean to wear the next day. When we stepped in the yellow mud, it felt soft, kind of like wearing a pair of shoes.

My left shoe was covered in yellow mud, like I'd just changed into a new one, but in a different color. I didn't mind, I just kept running. After a few more steps, I whipped my head back to see, out of the corner of my eye, a broken line of yellow footprints on the black asphalt.

"Know why asphalt's black? Cause it stays out in the sun all day long!"

I recalled a young teacher who used to crack lame question-and-answer jokes like that. But that''s indeed the way it was: after a day in the sun, the asphalt was shimmering with heat. Soon my footprints were dry.

A bus approached at a snail's pace in the opposite lane. Seeing one of the last buses of the day told me what time it was. I'd taken it a few times. There was barely anyone on it, just a few older passengers who sat up front and had a desultory conversation in Hakka with the driver. Mostly the conversation consisted of the driver's complaints. As the bus swayed back and forth, I overheard the driver complaining that the bus company was phasing out the large "public conveyances" and replacing them with minibuses.

Everyone used to call them *basu*, the Japanese pronunciation of "bus," instead of "public conveyances," as we say today.

Whatever you call them, there were already buses to take when I was an elementary school student. It was only ten dollars for a monthly ticket, but if all of your brothers and sisters got one it added up. So we just walked, all the way through elementary. Seeing all our classmates waiting for the bus, my elder sister and I felt ashamed. We walked along, heads bowed, envying those classmates.

Without a bus to take, we could only follow along behind the other classmates who were walking home. There was a boy who liked to walk behind us and throw stones at us. All I could do is glare back at him.

There was a tangerine orchard by the road. We'd all get hungry when we walked past. That naughty classmate of mine who used to throw stones at us would sneak in, pick some unripe fruits, put them in his bookbag, and share them. In those days none of us had money to spend on snacks. Kids would only misbehave like that if they were really hungry.

"There aren't any tangerines to steal anymore!" my mom said during one of our interviews, smiling ruefully.

A blue pickup truck was tailgating the bus, with a statue of Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, in the cargo bay. Although Guanyin was sitting, She was a head taller than the cab. It was like She was staring at me, though of course I knew it was an illusion.

I asked my mother if anything unforgettable had ever happened to her on the way to or from school. She thought it over for several days. One evening she knocked softly on my door. She was holding a pink thermos in her other hand. "Crows on cows' backs," she said through pursed lips, like she was proud she'd thought of something.

Had the crows left because there were no more cows to land on? Or were the cows unable to bear solitude after the crows left? Crows on cows' backs – I imagined a silhouette. But there weren't any crows or cows to see around here anymore.

I kept running down the road. There was only one more turn until Mother's school. I walked into the campus and ran some laps around the track. When I got close to the stage where the leader of the patriotic chants we once sang used to stand, I heard a turtledove cooing. Some kids had gathered around a tree to throw rocks up at it. None of the stones followed a perfect ballistic arc to hit the intended target. One boy's shouts were more effective in getting it to move, but all it did was find another branch to coo on.

Every time our school fees, I mean tuition, came due, we paid later than our classmates. I don't know if the teacher wanted for us to feel bad, but he asked students who hadn't paid yet to stand. Young as we were, we felt ashamed, even traumatized. It was like even the turtledoves cooing outside the window were making fun of us.

When the teacher had us run as fast as we could so he could choose someone to represent our class in a sprint race, I made sure to go as slow as possible. "You're taller than the others," the teacher said, sarcastically. "Why'd you run so slow?"

Did I just not fit in? Or was I a loner? I'm not sure. All I know is that girls were more conservative back then than they are today. If you didn't have sports shorts, you had to wear boxers, cinching the cuffs with elastic bands. We wore them under our skirts, which we took off for physical education class. A few girls didn't mind, but most of us didn't like that class.

Although it wasn't dark yet when I started running home, the little temple to the god of the earth was already brightly, even a bit ostentatiously, lit. There were LED lamps on the roof and the columns that I could see flashing red, yellow, blue, green at different intervals from a mile away. Mom mentioned a lot of things have changed along the way, but the god-of-the-earth temples are still there, even the small ones. "The god of the earth can't walk too far, I guess. The only party he can throw is at home," she says when my friends come over. So far nobody's laughed.

It was the same distance in either direction, but time seemed to pass faster on the way back. I don't know if my body was playing tricks on me. What I do know is that it isn't always so easy to find your way home.

I sprinted up the hill at the end, chased by a pair of barking dogs, a white one and a chubby black one that was limping. Covered in sweat, I turned right after a green sign that read "Neighborhood 5 Clearwater Village." That's the neighborhood that No. 147 is in. A river runs through it; the terrain is hilly. It's in the town of Hsinpu in Hsinchu County. The town of Yangmei in Taoyuan County is just across the county line.[1]

[1] The "village" of Clearwater and the "town" of Hsinpu are administrative divisions, not just the places where population is concentrated. For the romanizations of place names, see the appendix.

1.2. Goldthread detoxification pills

Po-Chih:

It's your mother. This is it for now. I'll keep writing. Do you understand what I've written?

I'm sending you two pairs of shorts. You can wear them to bed or after a shower. There are also two raincoats, one of each kind (both are rip-resistant). Is "goldthread" the right spelling? No matter. Remember to take one once or twice a day. Don't eat eggplant, it's bad for your skin. Take care.

Wishing you:

Health and happiness.

Mom

I helped out around the house starting in elementary school.

Every day after school, my eldest sister's job was to cook the rice. Second Sister and I were responsible for carrying the water. In those days there were rice paddies all around. The paths through the paddies were narrow and potholed. It was hard going. We had to stop for a rest twice to make it home with the water. During winter and summer vacations I also had to help out washing clothes. My sisters washed the big garments and I washed the little ones. After every rain shower the water of the Wenshui River got muddy. Then we had to go to a little stream to do the laundry. Winter and summer vacations were busy times on the farm. I climbed the hill to tell my uncles to come down and help us harvest the rice. After we cut it we had to pray and make offerings to the god of the earth to thank him for blessing us with a bountiful harvest. While we were at it, we treated our uncles to a feast. The rice was carried load by load to the drying ground. There, I helped pick out the straw. The thing we feared the most was the "northwesterly rain" – a sudden late afternoon thundershower. Everyone – all eight or nine of us – had to put down lunch and collect the grain, doing battle with the rain. The worst was when the rain stopped as soon as we had picked up the rice. Soon it was sunny again. When the rice was dry it had to be winnowed. I remember that my pa operated the winnow. The harvest was only complete when the winnowed rice was carried into the granary.

We still had to cut the straw in thirds. One person held the straw, while another cut it with a tool like a paper cutter. Then we scattered it around the rice paddies and my pa plowed and harrowed. But the roots were not yet rotten; for that to happen, we had to mash them up with our feet. Every year my brothers and sisters and I lined up, each of us holding a bamboo pole for support so we wouldn't trip. You could step even deeper that way.

When everyone was busy with the farm work, someone often went to the river to poison fish and shrimp. All the wildlife in the river went belly up. When people heard the news they dropped what they were doing and rushed to the riverside. My sisters and I were no exception. We grabbed a basket and a bucket and hurried over. At the shore, it was like a general mobilization. Our family and the neighbors' families had turned out to

collect the catch. Everyone was standing in the stream in his or her bare feet. I was too scared to go in the water barefoot because there were bugs everywhere, big and small. There were also some strange fish that I didn't dare touch. I was useless. All I was good for was holding our family's basket at the shore and admiring the catch in everyone else's basket. Everyone was looking forward to a feast. At other times, someone went along the river electrocuting the fish with a battery. After that kind of devastation, the river needed a long time to recover.

After the paddies were harrowed, and the roots mashed, we got ready to plant the seedlings for the next crop. As usual, my big sister divided up the work with Second Sister and me. Big Sister shoveled rice seedlings, piling them in baskets, which me and my second sister each shouldered with a carrying pole down the path through the rice paddies to deliver them to the hired planters. The path was very narrow. It was also covered in cogongrass that prickled my feet.

There were two rice crops a year. Planting took two days; during those two days I was constantly jittery because I couldn't wear cloth shoes in the mud. Aye! In retrospect, I realize how useless I was. There were quite a few hired planters to feed. In addition to lunch, my ma had to make snacks and shoulder them out in a flat bamboo basket. She set them somewhere cool and holler for the planters to take a rest and have a bite. The planters were so dirty they looked like they were made of mud. But they would just wash their hands, sit down, and chow down. I wish I could have taken a photograph.

A farming family's work is never done.

In the past tea bushes were not pruned down like they are now, they grew higher. It wasn't as easy to pick the tea. My ma had to pick the top branches; I could only reach the bottom. We had another big field upstream that we planted with sweet potatoes, peanuts, and fruits. I used to help my ma out. She pulled up the peanuts, which I gleaned. She dug up the sweet potatoes for me to collect. When we filled up the basket, I helped by carrying the hoe home. When I was a bit bigger, I learned how to transport the bamboo baskets over my shoulder with a carrying pole. My ma carried a big pair, I carried a little pair. I could manage as long as we took frequent rests.

I had no free time during summer or winter vacation. There was no need for water in the paddies in winter, so the irrigation ditch ran dry. Every drop of water we used at home had to be drawn from the well. My elder sisters and I continued to divide up the work: my second sister and I carried the water and my big sister cooked the rice. Rice used to be boiled in a big pot, not in a rice cooker like nowadays. By the time it was ready to scoop out, all of the nutrition had escaped.

To keep us warm, my pa carried straw from the second rice harvest home in loose bales and wove it into a mat the size of a bed. That was our mattress. It was pretty warm. The rest of the straw was piled into a little hill and used to feed the hearth. It's just like you can see in the textbooks or in picture books, a hill of straw next to a thatched cottage. It's true.

One day when I stepped into the Chinese department office in the school where I did my substitute military service, the director handed me a pick-up notice for a PHLPOST parcel. Although I was happy to get mail, I couldn't help cursing the notorious Philippines postal system

under my breath. The parcel had come a month late! At least it had not "evaporated" on the way. And I was fortunate enough to be able to bear witness to "Filipino Time" – things get done when they get done. Like my mother wrote, it's true.

The director was a nun from China who spoke standard Mandarin, not like the more relaxed Taiwanese Mandarin I grew up speaking. "Did your Taiwanese girlfriend send it to you?" she asked out of sarcastic curiosity.

In addition to a book about fugitive foreign workers and a letter from my girlfriend, the care package also contained snacks and toiletries along with a letter from my mother about her childhood. It was in a traditional envelope of brown kraft paper, called "cowhide" paper in Chinese. I sat down at the little grocery stand around the corner from the post office. By my side sat many cement masons, their heads wrapped in strips of fabric that only showed their round eyes, though there must have been openings for the straws they were drinking cola through. I flipped through the book about fugitive foreign workers and read my girlfriend's letter, with a smile on my face as I peeked at the masons from time to time. Then I opened the envelope. It contained sheets of used A4 paper on the backs of which Mother had written her letter. One of those sheets caught my attention. One side was an itemized product inventory with sample color photos of garments, which I recognized as being from the superstore where she used to work as a "resident staff member." In this role, she did alterations. The other side was her letter. This sheet seemed like a symbol of the stages of her life: one side was her childhood remembered in middle age, the other side was the future that had already happened: the decades she'd spent in the garment processing industry, which was still haunting her after all these years. The masons left before I finished reading, leaving dust on the stools.

In my mother's letter I read about scenes of rural life that may no longer exist in Taiwan. Looking up, I saw a little girl who should have been in school lurching along with a plastic water pail that was much too big for her. Water spilled on the ground with every step she took.

I had seen a vision of my mother's past.

1.3. Second Brother's turtledove

"Dere, dere … ," said Dewi, a foreign migrant worker who worked as a caregiver next door, to my mother in broken Mandarin. She was making the most of her limited Chinese vocabulary and her richly expressive body language to refer to a bird. She was curious as to why my mother took the trouble to feed so many birds every day. At first it was just a few turtledoves, but later there were magpies, bluebirds, and some other kinds of bird I didn't know the name of. Mom had a special place in her heart for turtledoves because of a blue one that she had dreamed about.

When I was getting ready to go to the Philippines to do my substitute military service, I met with her frequently to interview her about her life. She sat on an old sofa in the corner by my desk. "Sat" isn't the right word. She sank deeply into the sofa with her hands by her sides, as if she had exhausted herself moving a heavy load. That was how she chilled out. Sometimes she looked up, sometimes down, which had an influence on her tone. No matter where she was looking, she closed her eyes from the moment she said the first word.

On my desk sat a simple voice recorder.

"The microphone's got a pretty sweater, is it feeling cold, too?" she asked, about a microphone with a black hare-hair windscreen. She thought it needed to keep warm.

Instead of looking at her, I would usually stare at the glare of my laptop screen. I often got so distracted making unrelated notes on the keyboard that I forgot to press record.

I don't recall what topic of conversation the story about the blue turtledove was a tangent from. Mother said it was about her second-oldest brother, an uncle I never got the chance to meet.

"I dreamed that my second brother turned into a blue turtledove. His favorite blue-striped shirt turned into its blue plumage. Wearing that shirt made him feel light."

The morning in the dream was just like any other morning. Brother got up, put on his favorite blue top, and teased the turtledove in the cage by the window with his finger. The bird kept cooing, hopping excitedly around in the cage. He'd raised it since it was a chick; no wonder they were so close. The bird had spirit. It seemed to sense subtle changes in his emotions.

Brother and that bird had a way of communicating that we found hard to understand.

Brother laughed happily as he took his leave, flapping his arms like wings. He was flapping them very slowly, moving every joint from his fingertips to his shoulders. He said he had to change into a turtledove and fly away with the one in the cage.

That's how Mom remembered that morning, which was the same as any other. Wearing his favorite shirt, her brother set out with simple agricultural implements in hand. Like usual, he left early that morning, but he didn't return home late that afternoon. They had no idea where he'd gone. Half a year later a sweaty old farmer scything hay discovered a white skeleton wearing a blue shirt with a bottle of pesticide issued by the township office to the side. At the time my mother was still in elementary school. She didn't know how to comfort her despairing ma, my grandma. She knew what sadness was, even though she couldn't articulate it. That evening she dreamed about a turtledove. It flew into her dream bearing a story on the wing. Mother told the story to her ma the next morning. They believed that he hadn't died, he had just changed into a blue turtledove and flown away.

Born in the year of the rabbit, Mother was like the little white bunny in that children's storybook that cries its eyes out after getting bullied by the cruel hunter. Every word in the story brought many tears. Rolling down her cheeks, her tears wetted paper tissue after paper tissue. In the end she was shaking her head to dry her tears. Smiling through her tears, she wondered how she would have turned out if her brother had stuck around. This is what she wrote about him in her letter:

When I was in third or fourth grade, my brother suddenly went missing. He was only found half a year later. I saw how sad Ma was – she was devastated. Later on I often went out to work with my sisters, not to school. My marks suffered. But when I went back for fifth and sixth grades I was close to the top in a class of seventy. The teacher encouraged me to continue with my studies. But my family was too poor to send me to junior high school. I had to stay home and do a share of the chores and farm work.

Mother's tearful story turned into a faint sound that passed through my head and left a ringing in my ears, but no rush of inspiration. A year and a half later, when I went to write this essay, my girlfriend sent me Fiona Apple's cover of the Beatles' song "Across the Universe."

Sounds of laughter, shades of life
Are ringing through my open ears
Inciting and inviting me
Limitless, undying love
Which shines around me like a million suns
It calls me on and on across the universe

Jai Guru Deva, Om
Nothing's gonna change my world

I played it over and over again, dedicating it to a certain blue turtledove that is flying across the universe.