



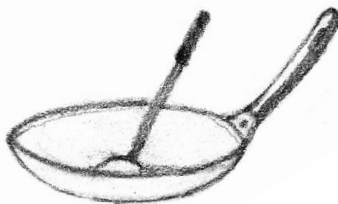
the happiness of kafi



Part One

The Home on the Water





Pan and Spatula

Mother never promised to return.

The clatter of the spatula against the pan woke Kati that morning as it had every morning she could remember. The warm scent of freshly cooked rice also played a part, not to mention the smoke from the stove and the smell of crispy fried eggs. But it was the sound of the spatula hitting the side of the pan that finally broke into Kati's slumber and roused her from her dreams.

Kati never took long to wash her face and get dressed, and Grandpa joked that she just waved at the

washbasin as she raced past. Grandma turned to look at Kati when she came into the kitchen. Grandma seldom smiled or greeted her. Grandpa said Grandma's smiles were so rare they should be preserved and canned for export overseas, like top-quality produce.

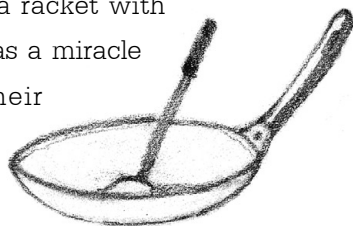
Kati ladled rice into a silver bowl. The white of the rice matched the freshness of the morning air as she cradled the rice bowl against her. The warm steam rose and seemed to fill her chest and her heart, which began to beat faster and harder as she set off at a run for the pier. Grandpa was already waiting – reading his newspaper, as always. A tray containing curry, vegetables and fried fish, each in a small, clean plastic bag, was beside him. With the addition of Kati's steaming bowl of rice, their daily merit offering to the monks was complete.

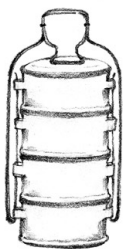
Before long came the sound of oars slapping the water, and the bow of a boat appeared round the bend. The saffron robes of the venerable abbot added a flash of colour to the morning. The abbot's pupil and nephew, Tong, flashed his teeth in a smile that could be seen from afar. Grandpa said Tong should join an acting troupe and go into comedy theatre, his smile was so contagious. Tong's smiles came straight from his cheerful heart, made for his lips and twinkling

eyes, and sent out ripples like a stone dropped in a pool so that people around him were affected too.

Under the big banyan tree, Grandpa poured water from a little brass vessel onto the ground, completing the offering to the monks. Like a river flowing from the mountains to the sea, the water symbolised the merit they had earned and passed on to departed loved ones. Kati joined her prayers to Grandpa's and prayed silently that her own wishes would be granted.

Breakfast was waiting for them at home. They had a big meal like this every morning. Grandpa took the boiled vegetables with the pungent chili sauce, leaving the stir-fried vegetables and fried fish almost entirely to Kati. Grandpa avoided fried foods of all kinds. He complained behind Grandma's back that eating her cooking was like eating everything coated in varnish, and that one day he would donate Grandma's pan and spatula to the army to melt down for a cannon for King and Country. If Grandma heard him, she'd make such a racket with her spatula and pan that it was a miracle they were still able to do their duty afterwards.





The Lunch Container

Kati waited every day for Mother.

Kati loved her tin lunch container. Grandpa called it ‘the food-mobile’ and it was compact yet held just enough food to fill you up nicely. Grandma didn’t want to see leftover food brought home to rot and she knew exactly the capacity of Kati’s stomach. Grandma’s lunch menu never missed the mark, not with ever-tasty minced basil and chili chicken with a fried egg on top, or boiled eggs, rich brown because they’d soaked up the aniseed gravy overnight, or crispy fried ‘son-in-law’ eggs with their sweet-and-sour tamarind

sauce, or smooth and creamy steamed egg custard, or quail eggs dipped in batter and fried. Grandpa called Kati an ‘eggivore’, for as long as the lunch menu included eggs there was never any need to coax Kati to eat – she would devour the lot every time.

Every school morning the bus would stop to pick up Kati. The route of the little open buses ran past the mouth of the lane leading to their house. Grandpa would give Kati a lift to the bus stop on the back of his bicycle. Kati liked hanging on tightly to Grandpa’s back. She liked the smell of his cologne that came from the bottle with the sailing ship on it. She liked the little breeze that dried away her sweat. The bus would be crowded with children because it was only a short way to the school, and Grandpa would call out for the passengers to make room for Kati and tell Uncle Loh to drive slowly and not to lurch about. ‘You’re taking them to school, not driving in the grand prix, so make sure you don’t end up spilling them out the back in a heap,’ Grandpa instructed, but Uncle Loh just laughed in reply.

The children put their lunch containers in the dining hall before putting their bags away in the schoolrooms. The lunch containers stood together, big and small, tall and short, and many different colours.

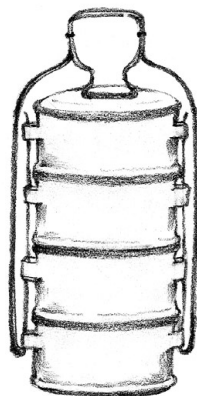
They probably conversed about the food they each contained: how tasty and spicy their food was and who had cooked it, and whether the rice had been served out lovingly or only dutifully. Did they hold just enough cold leftovers to fill the owner's stomach, or the most delicious secret recipe from a market stall so popular the stallholder could hardly dish out the food fast enough? Some containers had a sticky rim, still unwashed from the day before. Some had ants. Some were battered and dented because they'd been handed down many times. Finally, the lunch containers would probably whisper about that really flash lunch container and whether she would turn up to strut her stuff as usual.

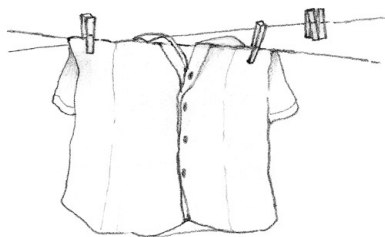
Flash was the air-conditioned car that drove up to wait in front of the school. Flash was the lunch container that came with the maid wearing a uniform like a servant of some aristocratic family. Flash were the embossed designs on that lunch container, which would open to reveal piping hot rice, steaming clear broth and exotic dishes the other lunch containers never knew about because they never had the chance to discuss these things with the flash lunch container. She only arrived at the school just before lunchbreak and was whisked away with the start of the first period

of the afternoon.

The school bell clanged for lunchbreak. Kati raced her friends downstairs and ran past Tong walking in the opposite direction. Tong was three years older than Kati and in Year 7 at school. He smiled at her before he left on his way home to the temple. Tong said that at lunchtime he had a whole buffet meal waiting for him from the varied offerings people had made to the monks.

In the afternoon when Kati got home from school she washed her lunch container and placed the sections in a basin in the kitchen to drain. Later, in the evening, she would dry them and put them by the stove, handy for Grandma in the morning. Perhaps at night the lunch container would strike up a conversation with the stove to pass the lonely hours, asking how Grandma spent her day, and if she did anything else but get angry with Grandpa.





The Washtubs and the Pegs

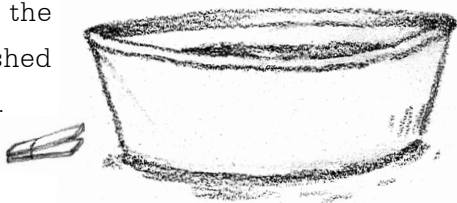
In the house there were no photos of Mother.

Kati's job was to take the clothes from the line and put them in the washtub for Grandma to sort. This had been her chore even when she was too small to reach the clothes pegs on the line. Grandpa had made her a little set of moveable steps with a basket attached to hold the tub. He would push Kati and the steps slowly between the clothes lines. The wind blew, and the clothes waved and shook with the wind, fluttering wildly, filling with air and straining against the coloured clothes pegs like birds that spread their

wings but could not fly away.

The clothes pegs had been plain wooden ones when they were bought, but Kati had coloured them with crayons, pencils and paint progressively, as she mastered each medium. It had started one day when Grandpa said that as a young man he had been a children's art teacher. The funny look that came over Grandma's face only encouraged Grandpa to go on about primary colours, warm and cool colours, complementary and opposite colours. He finished by reaching for the nearest object to hand on which to demonstrate his skill. That day the clothes pegs had been right beside him.

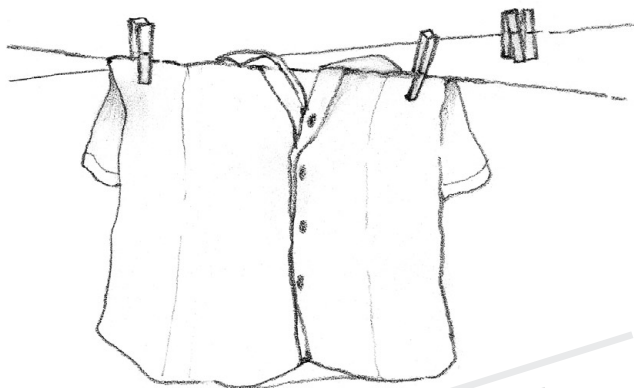
The moveable stairs reflected Kati's height. Now, at the age of nine, she needed only the first step to reach the line. But Kati liked to climb up so that she was higher than the clothes line. She would move her arms like a music conductor, like Mickey Mouse in *Fantasia*. The clothes danced to the song of the wind, and the moves were always new. Sometimes the sun was low in the sky before she finished taking in the clothes.



In the all-purpose room known as ‘Grandma’s office’, the washtubs waited in a line. Kati had to sort the clothes and place them in the correct tub: Grandma’s clothes, Grandpa’s clothes, Kati’s clothes, each in their own tub. The pillowslips and sheets, tea-towels and table napkins, the cleaning rags or ‘yucky cloths’, as Grandpa called them, were separated out, not only as a hygiene measure (an over-the-top hygiene measure, according to Grandpa) but also for the convenience of Sadap when she came to do the ironing for Grandma.

Grandma would come in and arrange the tubs in order of priority. Kati’s school uniforms took pride of place, as these had to be washed, ironed and worn again within the week.

The sound of the rain hissing and splashing on the roof was greatly improved by the plink-plonk drumming on the tubs which had been left outside. Kati lay and listened with pleasure. But she would begin to get jumpy if the rattle of the rain was drowned out by thunder rumbling from the skies. The sound of lightning strikes seemed always to be echoed by a cry of heart-stopping despair. Kati was never certain if this was just the thunder ringing in her ears or a cry coming from somewhere in the darkest recesses of her



memory. Grandma would open the bedroom door and come to lie down, holding Kati in her arms until they both fell asleep. Kati lay curled up in Grandma's embrace. She didn't want to hear the sky, the rain, the cry, the sound of that woman. Grandma's cool smooth skin was faintly scented. Grandma never sang her a lullaby or told her a story to calm her agitated spirit, but she stroked Kati's back softly, regularly, rhythmically, sending her to sleep. Once Kati half-opened her eyes to look up at Grandma and saw her eyes shining. A distant flash of lightning gave just enough light for Kati to see that, in the darkness, Grandma was crying.



The Paddle-boat

No one ever spoke of mother.

Grandpa bought a little flat-bottomed boat to paddle in the flooded fields when the rainy season came. He said it was a nice way to escape Grandma's bustle. Kati and Grandpa would go off, just the two of them. They set off in the late morning, Grandpa paddling in a leisurely fashion, passing down the waterway, looking at the fruit trees growing along the banks: mongos and rose apples mingled with casuarinas that liked to grow by the waterside. Grandpa didn't stop and rest but called greetings to all the people

he saw. Uncle Sohn was hauling up his net from the pier in front of his house, and it looked like he had a good catch of *tapean* fish. Grandpa said that on the way home he'd stop and get some for Grandma to marinate in anchovy sauce for Kati's dinner.

The little boat drew away from the deep shade of the waterway and moved towards the open field that seemed to stretch as far and wide as the eye could see. The water in their wake was ruffled by a gentle breeze, and away in the distance the paddy fields glistened bright green. Grandpa let the boat drift in the centre of the field and began to pick lily stems. You had to look carefully to make sure that you had the *pun* lilies not the *peuan* lilies with their dry bitter taste. The *pun* lilies had bright yellow flowers and round leaves with no veins. Their crisp fresh stems were delicious dipped in the pungent chili sauce which Grandma had wrapped in lily leaves along with newly harvested rice for their lunch. Kati had fun breaking the lily stems up into little pipes and fitting them back together as a necklace. Sometimes Kati would see a raft of *krajup* growing together. She liked them better than water chestnuts, and Grandpa would gather them in the bottom of the boat to take home to boil and eat. Then there were the water

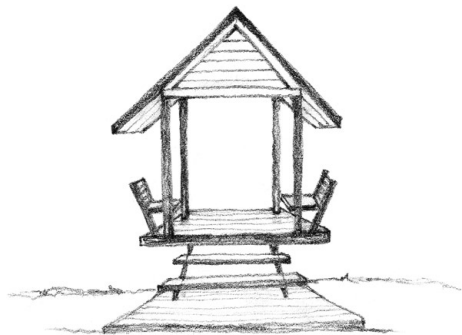
hyacinths with their fragile pale-purple blooms. If you held them in your hands, in no time at all they would wither away. The white morning glories were pretty too. Grandpa said if you were an artist like Monet you could make them just as beautiful on canvas.

Grandpa would paddle peacefully, not worrying about what time he left home, where he had to be next and when he had to be home by. Grandpa said they weren't on a tour according to the dictates of the railway timetable. They were on a tour according to the dictates of their own hearts.

The flat-bellied boat with its stubby bows made an excellent conveyance. It did not pollute the environment, but cut through the clear waters to the stroke of the paddler. If you paddled into a flock of pond-skaters, the insects would scatter wildly, making mayhem. Grandpa and Kati didn't need to speak. They let the little boat and the water greet each other instead. The sun seemed far away in the sky even though its rays were stronger now. But around them the water completely covered the field, acting as a coolant to cut out the heat. Time seemed to stop still. Water and sky, wind and sun framed a picture in the centre of which floated the little boat. Nevertheless, a boat can't keep going

forward without eventually reaching its destination,
no matter how enchanting the journey.





The Old Shelter

Kati no longer remembered Mother's face.

The destination Grandpa chose, on the basis of his rumbling stomach, was the little waterside shelter under the big East Indian walnut tree.

This was their usual rest stop on trips to the field, because it was so well placed. The lone walnut tree stood at the edge of the field, its broad canopy left to grow freely and gracefully, casting a convenient shade over the dilapidated roof of the old shelter. The thick planks of the shelter still held good, though they creaked and squeaked with every step, sounding like

an elderly person greeting a long-awaited visitor. The gentle sunshine filtered through the leaves and branches of the walnut tree. Sunlight penetrated a hole in the roof, falling on the raised wooden platform below. Grandpa gave the platform a cursory wipe, before spreading out his long cotton scarf for them to sit on like a picnic rug. Kati opened the basket Grandma had packed for them: rich sweet chili sauce, crispy fried catfish salad, sweet pork, and salted eggs which they mixed with rice and finished off, with Grandpa muttering that it was for this reason and no other that he loved Grandma.

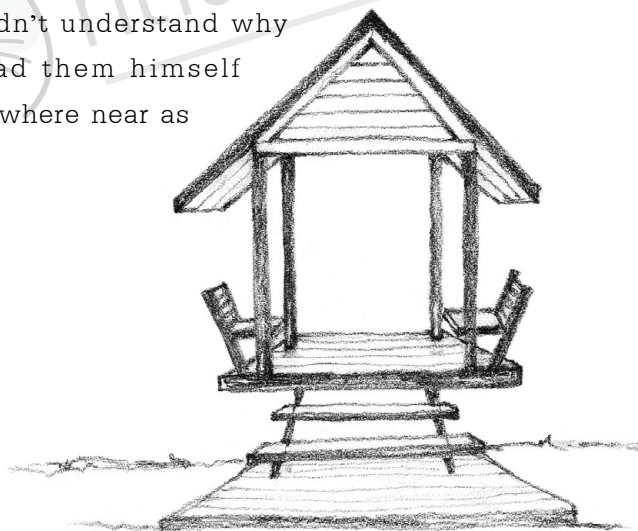
There was not even time for their eyelids to grow heavy after the big meal before they heard someone hailing them from across the water. A number of boats were heading towards them. Headman Boon was bringing the villagers to meet with Grandpa. They had not made an appointment, but Grandpa was their counsel in times of trial, and everyone in the district was courteous and considerate to him. Word spread quickly in the little community when Grandpa was out and about, and the old shelter was a convenient meeting place for those who wished to consult him.

Tong was a member of the deputation too. He gestured for Kati to come over to him while the

grownups talked. But Kati liked to hear Headman Boon's introductory remarks. He always said the same thing: that the village by the water was indeed lucky that Grandpa had chosen to return from Bangkok and retire to his ancestral home, which at the time had been left completely deserted and had fallen into disrepair; that Grandpa, who had studied abroad and was a first-class lawyer, was well-known throughout his home and, indeed, the entire kingdom; that Grandpa had made a fortune but had helped so many people; that if it had not been for Grandpa the villagers would have been exploited, taken advantage of, and the land of their ancestors... Here Grandpa raised his hand to stop the flow of words and asked smoothly if they were planning to conduct the *Kwan Narc* recital, that part of the Buddhist ordination ceremony where the ordinand recalls his debt of gratitude to his mother for conceiving him, bearing him and delivering him. Grandpa asked if they would like to include the nine months he spent inside *his* mother's womb in their recitation. This raised a shout of laughter that could be heard clear across the water.

Kati slipped away. Behind the shelter, steps led down to the water, and Kati sat swinging her legs, letting her toes dip into the water. Tong was never

able to sit idle and he had made a toy boat that floated on the water for Kati, a bit of coconut husk with leaves stuck in it as a mast and sails. They raced their boats, thrashing the water with their hands to make them go faster. If they went so far from the shelter that not even a long stick could reach them, then Tong would swim for them. He was a good swimmer who could stay underwater for long periods. But if you were comparing Tong to a fish, you'd have a hard time finding one whose white teeth were the first thing you saw as it came out of the water. When they were tired they sat and rested. Tong liked to ask Kati about stories she was reading or had just read. He said he couldn't understand why when he read them himself they were nowhere near as exciting.



It was a long time before the deputation left, and the sun was slowly setting when Kati walked back into the shelter. Grandpa was folding a letter and replacing it in an envelope. His face, when he looked up at Kati, seemed drained and weary, not unlike the old shelter which had seen sun and rain and so much of the world that every fibre of wood was steeped in the past and no longer had any hope for the future.





Big Jars, Small Jars

Kati wanted Mother to pick her up from school sometimes.

Kati never tired of reading *The House of Sixty Fathers*. It was the story of a child orphaned in a war in China, and a fat pig whose owner had named it 'Glory of the Republic'. The story ended with the pig and the boy meeting sixty American soldiers. Kati loved this story. Grandpa had read it aloud to her until his voice was hoarse while he was waiting for Kati to learn to read it herself. And it was because of this book that Kati liked to call her home on the water 'The House of

Sixteen Jars’.

There were almost too many of these big water storage jars. Still, there was a reason behind each one of the sixteen, according to Grandma’s hygiene principles. The jars were strictly segregated according to their function: drinking water, washing water, cooking water. No mixing was allowed. Grandpa scratched his head wondering what the difference was. Whether the water went down your throat or washed your feet, it was all the same to him. But Grandma stood her ground. It was not the same. Cooking water went in the big dragon jar in the kitchen. Washing water went in the huge cement jar under the house (quite a spacious area as the house was the old-fashioned kind built on stilts). As for the jar that held the drinking water, that was the most special. It went under the rain pipe and the water in it was then boiled, decanted into bottles and drunk to quench your thirst. Grandpa said that for goodness sake there was such a thing as tap water, and why did Grandma have to create more housework for herself? Fortunately Grandma didn’t hear this remark.

Kati’s favorite jar was a small ceramic one decorated with dragons. It looked precious, unlike the earthenware ones which were sold door-to-door from

a loaded boat on the waterway. This jar was glazed inside and out. Inside it was a shade of blue-green Grandpa called ‘crow’s egg green’. On the outside was the dragon pattern. Most importantly it had a lid, and Grandma used it to store rice. When it was filled with rice, it was too heavy for one person to lift.

By the stairs was a little water jar. This was for washing your feet, before you came upstairs from the yard or the area underneath the house. Along the path to the road there was a big open jar in which Grandpa grew water lilies, raised with his own hands. Yes, when you counted them all, there were at least sixteen jars. At the end of the rainy season they washed out the jars that held the drinking water before closing them up, ready to refill the following year. Kati liked to climb inside one of them and feel the cool earthenware against her skin. The biggest jar had plenty of room for Kati to make herself comfortable and it made great

hiding place known only to Kati.



Grandpa never knew that Kati overheard him say to someone on the phone, ‘...so you want to wait till the end of the school term? Do you really think we have that much time?’



The Scraping Rabbit

Kati wanted to see Mother carrying the shopping home from market.

‘Good timing! I could do with an extra pair of hands right now,’ Grandma greeted Tong as he entered the kitchen.

Earlier that morning, Grandma had made a big pot of pork curry to offer the monks for the meal they took before noon, their last meal for the day. She said it was her New Year offering, even though Grandpa reminded her that, in these parts, people made their big offering at the Songkran water festival in April. Grandma retorted that it wouldn’t hurt to make the

offering now, just in case they happened to be somewhere else at that time, and anyway whose business was it when she felt moved to make an offering.

Tong was dutifully returning one of Grandma's cooking pots from the temple. Grandma pointed to the coconut scraper, known to the villagers as a 'scraping rabbit', in the corner of the kitchen next to a pile of split coconuts. Tong grasped the scraping rabbit and the basin of coconuts and briskly made his way to the yard area under the house. The shredded coconut would be squeezed and strained for its sweet white coconut milk – called *ka-ti* in Thai – which was an important ingredient in pumpkin dessert. Grandma's voice followed him downstairs, calling to him to leave her a couple of coconuts. She would scrape them extra finely herself later to garnish her steamed rice cakes.

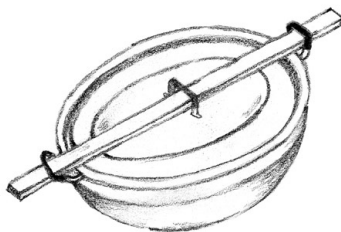
Kati had often wondered why the coconut scraper was called a 'rabbit'. Whichever way she looked at it, the scraper looked nothing like a rabbit with long ears. Finally she'd decided that the metal plate which did the actual scraping had teeth which stuck out like the buck teeth of a rabbit. Tong was an expert at this task. You could tell from the way he crouched with one knee on the body of the rabbit and the other touching the floor, smiling as he spun the coconut

shells with a fluid movement. His white teeth and the teeth of the scraping rabbit gave them something in common.

The evening meal passed quietly in contrast to the bustle of the afternoon. The breeze from the river was so cold it stung your skin as it, too, made a final salute to the passing of the old year. The huge moon beamed down on them, showing off its beauty, and Kati could see the rabbit in the moon quite clearly. The three people on the verandah gazed up at the moon as if spellbound. Grandpa said, quite casually, that wherever people were, they still looked up at the same moon.

Kati knew that Grandpa meant one person in particular was looking up at the moon right now, just as they all were. The one person that Kati's heart yearned for with every breath she took.





The Bamboo Lid-holder

Kati wondered if Mother ever thought of her.

Grandpa called Grandma's bamboo lid-holder his 'wish-spurner'. Grandma spurned Grandpa's wishes and refused to buy an electric rice cooker. 'The world has progressed, you know,' Grandpa's voice sounded loudly from the kitchen door, and he stalked out shaking his head. He muttered to Kati that Grandma was worried that the villagers would not accept her as one of them, but she should know that all the villagers hereabouts plugged in an electric appliance to cook their rice.

It was clear that Grandma hadn't always been a housewife. Grandpa said it'd only taken her a couple of years to crack the role, and now there was no trace of the personal secretary to the executive director of a five-star hotel that she had once been.

Grandpa felt constantly frustrated by Grandma's making life difficult for herself. Sometimes Kati felt Grandma was scared of not having enough to do. She always had a project on the go in the kitchen, making sweet desserts to give to the monks when they came in the morning bearing their alms bowls. Grandpa said it wasn't that Grandma was such a great cook, more that she invested in quality ingredients that did the trick.

Kati always had wonderful snacks and sweets to fill up on after school. If she had to do homework or prepare for an exam, she didn't have to lift a finger, Grandma would place the snacks right by her. Or else Grandma would store them in a row of big glass jars for her to choose from, just like in Uncle Chiang's store at the bus stop. Kati wasn't bothered by exams though she liked to get them out of the way as soon as possible. The holidays looked promising this year, with lots of fun activities. First would be stargazing. Grandpa had given her a telescope and a map of

the constellations for New Year. She hadn't even taken the telescope out of the box yet. Kati wanted to go on the special camp the school had organised, but she'd have to ask Grandpa's permission when Grandma was in a good mood. If Grandma disagreed with Grandpa, there was a big chance that Kati would miss out on going to camp.

Or then again maybe Kati would go birdwatching with Tong. Mostly they watched waterbirds or birds that lived on the edges of the fields. Tong carried his sketchbook everywhere, and when he saw a bird he'd sketch it and then compare it later with a reference book to find out what bird it was. Grandpa encouraged him in this, frequently getting him bird books from overseas. Everyone in the house counted Tong as a member of the household and Kati often suspected that, as well as helping out with the chores, Tong must have done some great favour for Grandpa and Grandpa in the past.

The rice was boiling in its pot on the stove. Kati looked for the bamboo lid-holder to drain the rice water. She needed it to fix the lid to the pot so she could tilt the pot over on one side so the remaining water would boil away, leaving the rice fluffy and dry. It couldn't be that difficult. She had seen Grandma

do it so often.

Just then Grandma hurried into the kitchen. Her gaze swept the room as she complained that she couldn't find the bamboo lid-holder. Kati could only look at her in amazement. Couldn't Grandma see that she was holding it in her own hand instead of complaining she couldn't find it? When Kati told her where it was, Grandma seemed greatly put out, and sent Kati off to set the table.

These days Grandma's thoughts were often elsewhere.

