



The Swallow and the Pumpkinseed



A Korean Folk Tale

Retold by Elisa Oh | Illustrated by Julie Kim



Long ago, when time was young, two brothers named Heung Bu and Nol Bu lived as neighbors in Korea. They planted rice and depended upon the steady change of the seasons to bring them a crop each year. Neither was wealthy, but both had enough to eat. Nol Bu, the older brother, was always making plans to grow more rice and gain more riches. Heung Bu, the younger brother, just enjoyed every day and never made plans beyond his next meal. Despite their differences, the brothers' wealth was nearly equal until the day the swallow came.

One morning early in spring, both brothers were out in their neighboring paddies planting rice seedlings. They had rolled their pant legs high above the muddy water, and their wide straw hats slanted downward, protecting their faces and necks from the sun.

HI! I'M CRICKET AND
THIS IS MY BEST
BUGGY LADYBUG.



PADDIES ARE
RICE FIELDS.



...THAT'S A WET
FIELD! MEW!

Nol Bu worked fast without looking up. From his bucket, he grabbed a new seedling in each hand and quickly plunged the roots into the mud below the shallow water. He planted sprout after sprout, making long, straight rows in his paddy. Heung Bu was working slower than his brother because he kept stopping to appreciate the squishy feeling of the mud between his toes. Every so often, he would take up his feet to look for leeches and then he'd be distracted by the elegant, white crane dipping for tadpoles or the smell of spring wafting down from the mountains.

“Are you making up poems again, Younger Brother?” called out Nol Bu from his paddy. He was ten rows ahead of Heung Bu.

“No, Older Brother,” Heung Bu shouted back with a grin. “I’m just in love with the springtime!”

Nol Bu frowned, shook his head, and went back to his work.

With a sigh, Heung Bu knelt down to plant another sprout and noticed a small, wounded swallow. The bird was crying out in pain and hopping unevenly along the edge of the paddy. Heung Bu waded over to the grassy bank to catch the fluttering creature, whose wing was broken.

“Sh. There now, little one,” Heung Bu said gently to quiet the trembling swallow. “Did the bad boys in the village hit you with a stone?”

Forgetting his work, Heung Bu took the bird home, set and bandaged the wing, and caught some flies for the swallow to eat. That night he made a large bamboo cage for the bird to live in while it healed. At night he hung the cage by his bed, and during the day he hung it outside under the thatched eaves of his house. He spent part of each day catching juicy grubs, worms, and insects for the bird to eat until it was healthy and strong.

One midsummer day before monsoon season, Heung Bu let the swallow go. As he watched his friend swoop and circle and then fly away, he felt happy and proud, but sad, too.



Later that day, Nol Bu noticed the empty cage and said, “So your precious pet is gone! Mark my words, Younger Brother—your rice crop will suffer from all the time you wasted on that bird.” But Heung Bu did not really care.

Three days later, the little swallow returned! It stayed only a short time, long enough to perch on Heung Bu’s shoulder and drop a pumpkinseed into his hand. Heung Bu could not stop smiling all day long. He planted the seed near the cabbages in his sunny garden plot.

By the next morning, the seed had sprouted a shoot that was already knee-high. And, within a week, the pumpkin vine was as thick as a man’s arm. Only one pumpkin grew from the plant, but it soon became the largest pumpkin anyone had ever seen. It was as big as a house by the late fall, when all the cabbages had been salted, stuffed with spices, and buried in huge crocks to ferment into a winter’s supply of kimchi.

After many weeks of admiring the enormous pumpkin, Heung Bu finally went to harvest it, breaking his butcher knife and saw trying to cut the vine. With a sturdy hatchet, he chopped off the pumpkin before hacking an uneven circle through the rind. He worked



his hands into the shell,
immersing his arms up to his
elbows.

Gripping tightly, Heung Bu
pulled and—*crack!*—a large
chunk of the rind broke off,
knocking him over backward.
To his surprise, out of the
pumpkin rushed a steady
stream of gold coins and
jewels. The pile of glittering
riches quickly filled up his
garden.

Heung Bu used his new
wealth to treat everyone in the
village to a week-long harvest
festival. He also built himself
a large, comfortable house.
“Come and live with me,
Older Brother,” Heung Bu said
to Nol Bu. “There is enough
money so that neither of us
ever has to work again!” Nol

Bu, who was burning with jealousy, scowled and refused.

Nol Bu went home to his successful rice crop, but he could not enjoy it. He spent the long, dark winter making plans to gain more wealth than his brother.

When spring came, Nol Bu made a clever bamboo trap and caught himself a swallow. He did not listen to the bird's cries as he broke its tiny leg, and then set it and bandaged it up. He kept the swallow in a cage in a corner of the house, feeding it until its leg healed. Then, like Heung Bu, he set the bird free just before the monsoon rains began and waited anxiously for its return.

In three days, the swallow returned with a pumpkinseed, and Nol Bu planted it with great excitement and care. Every day he watered, fertilized, and weeded the gigantic vine that grew out of the seed. By the end of the summer, he too had a tremendous pumpkin that twenty people could barely reach their arms around.

Puffed up with pride, Nol Bu boasted to his friends and neighbors that his pumpkin was bigger than Heung Bu's had been last year. He invited the whole village to watch him cut it open.



K-Chomp! K-Chomp! The hatchet bit deep into the shiny, golden-orange rind. The spectators held their breath as Nol Bu yanked out a fat slice.

Instead of riches, out swarmed a cloud of angry wasps, a tumble of rats and snakes, and a growling mountain tiger! The creatures all headed straight for Nol Bu and chased him screaming out of town.

A day and a night later, Nol Bu collapsed on Heung Bu's doorstep, utterly exhausted. Nol Bu was covered in mud, wasp stings, cuts, and bruises. He had been chased up and down the mountain until he had been sufficiently humbled.

“It’s me, Younger Brother,” he said when Heung Bu opened the door. “I always thought I would beat you in the end, but now I see that I have much to learn.”

“Come in, Older Brother,” said Heung Bu, helping Nol Bu over the threshold. “You will always be welcome in my home.” 



Author's Note

I heard about Heung Bu and Nol Bu from my father, Han Soo Oh, who was born in Daegu, Korea. He first heard the tale from his eighty-year-old grandmother.

As far back as my family can remember, the story was about magic pumpkins. However, centuries ago, the birds may have given the brothers seeds for gourds rather than pumpkins. Trade with the West didn't introduce the pumpkin to Korea until the sixteenth century. The Korean word for pumpkin, hobahk, hints at its origin: the word bahk means a gourd, but it is joined with the prefix ho-, which describes something introduced from a foreign culture.



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