



# THE FIREFLIES AFTER THE TYPHOON

Anna Kuo



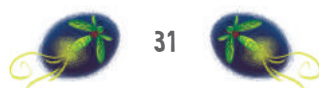
## Chapter 1

On top of a small hill, in the mountains on the island of Formosa, lay the beautiful Peach Blossom Village. Rare animals roamed the hills of the village. Macaques swung from one tree to another, Formosan sika deer showed their pretty spots, Mikado pheasants made special 'ke ke ke' calls, Taiwanese hwamei laughingthrush birds flew with startled eyebrows, and squirrels and rabbits also ran about. They were happy in their forest habitats around the village. Flowers and trees blossomed everywhere and Anodendron vines bloomed beautiful with flowers every spring.

The villagers led peaceful lives in harmony with their surroundings. The children, especially, spent a lot of time in the forest – it was their playground, their school and their foraging ground. They often gathered nuts, fruits and mushrooms to give to their families and to share with their neighbours.

They loved to watch in the evenings as the fireflies danced among the trees, their little lanterns lighting the deep, dark green of the forest shadows with cheerful signals of life and love.

A boy named Tongyan grew up in this green, lively environment. He was a respectful and quiet boy, curious and interested in everything that grew, but often solemn. He



usually got along with everyone at school because he did not argue, but he felt happiest in the forest.

Every day, after school, he would explore the woods and streams with his friends, observing the life cycles of all the special animals and plants living in balance with each other and their surroundings. All seemed well until one fateful day.

## Chapter 2

At first, it seemed just like any other day. Tongyan had finished school and was thinking about whether to catch a caterpillar for his nature studies or to play a game of ‘beggar ticks’ with his classmates, after doing his homework.

As he walked home, Tongyan suddenly noticed many workers moving quickly through the forest, clearing the large and shady trees that once stood tall and proud. The cut raw logs were being loaded onto trucks and driven away.

This was a horrifying sight for Tongyan. ‘Why are they cutting down all our special trees? Where will the animals and insects live if the trees are cut down?’ Tongyan asked himself in shock.

When he arrived home, he found his parents discussing important matters in low, serious voices at the low table on



## THE FIREFLIES AFTER THE TYPHOON

their veranda. Tongyan wanted to ask what they were talking about and approached them respectfully. Before he could even raise his question, his parents turned to him. ‘Go and do your homework quietly,’ they ordered, ‘we have to tell you something serious, after dinner.’

Tongyan did not understand why he was being sent away and why his parents were so secretive. However, he was a good boy and knew not to let curiosity get the better of him. He went to his room to work on his maths, science and Chinese studies, as he had been told.

After dinner, Tongyan sat with his family in the living room and they stared at each other without a word. His parents had a solemn, serious look on their faces. It was his father who broke the spell of silence. He said, ‘You must have noticed many men, cutting down all of our village forests as you walked home today.’ Tongyan nodded.

Then his father said, ‘We have now resolved to plant betel palms. The village elders have held a long discussion about this, over the last few weeks. We all have money problems in this village and they want better lives for ourselves and our families.

‘This may mean that you cannot play outside in nature with your friends like you used to in the woods, but so long as we take good care of those betel palms, they say, we will be able to make more money and buy many things for ourselves.’



Tongyan was a respectful boy. He did not argue or say anything. Deep inside, he was sad and confused by the decision. He could not understand why some village men had decided to harm and take away his wildlife friends, his playground, and his discoveries, just for the sake of being able to buy more things.

## Chapter 3

Three years passed and the children watched as the diverse wildlife of Peach Blossom Village was almost completely replaced by a productive, industrial monoculture of straight, stiff betel palms. The palms stuck out of the primly tended soil like rows of spiky toothbrushes.

The village adults had new jobs, working in the plantations, keeping everything growing in straight rows and harvesting the betel palms. Betel palms produce betel nuts. Some say that betel nuts can protect your body and keep your spirits up, so many folks eat them. That's why planting betel palms can make a lot of money.

Unfortunately, Tongyan and the people of the village could no longer hear the birds singing in spring, could no longer smell the fragrance of blooming flowers and could no longer see children dashing off to play and make



## THE FIREFLIES AFTER THE TYPHOON

hideouts in the forests. The children mainly stayed indoors, watching their new televisions or playing video games.

The streams were fierce yet sullen, carrying chemicals for growing palms away from the village and over the rocks. People had begun to worry about whether they should drink the water. Some neighbours living downstream complained that the water was making them ill. The children were very sad. Their hideouts were felled or forbidden.

They gathered in corners at school and spoke in quiet voices about the loss of their forests and about the unfairness of the choice that had been made without their views being heard. They missed their forest friends, especially the dancing lights of the fireflies at dusk.



The typhoons and heavy rains became worse each year. They knocked over trees, blocked mountain paths and destroyed the roads that the villagers needed. Another major typhoon was approaching. The village elders heard the early warning alerts and knew that people could not simply stay in their homes when they are right in the path of such a serious typhoon.

At first, the villagers were grateful for their new televisions and radios, which gave them warnings and updates about the storm as it got closer. They were all advised to evacuate to emergency shelters at the foot of the mountain before the typhoon arrived.

Tongyan and his parents packed as many of their belongings as they could and then travelled down to the shelter. They were careful and arrived in good time, before the storm got too bad.

The gloom of the storm clouds was heavy all afternoon. Soon, the mighty typhoon could be seen travelling towards them, speeding across the sky. The force of the typhoon struck hardest at night. Its powerful winds and downpours destroyed every road connecting the village to the rest of the island. The vegetation covering the earth was ripped away mercilessly.

The villagers hiding in the shelter looked at each other,



## THE FIREFLIES AFTER THE TYPHOON



knowing that their homes, the things they had bought with the betel money and all that they had worked to build might be broken up or blown away.

But that wasn't the worst thing to happen to the village. All the people of the island had expected to get back to their lives, once the typhoon left, having blown over on its way past them to China. No one foresaw the serious landslide that was to come right afterwards.

A torrent of roaring mud, gravel and stone swept down through the village, bringing many giant boulders with it that crushed everything in their path. There was nothing the villagers could do against the force of nature. They could only look on helplessly from their tiny shelter, as the boulders rolled



over their houses like a mass of angry, stampeding animals. The noise of destruction shook them to their very souls.

Peach Blossom Village suffered from the typhoon's destruction. A devastated landscape greeted the refugees leaving the shelter. Homes, fields, their new clinic, their old school and their traditional community centre were completely buried beneath mud and debris. No one could see any hope for their future. Tongyan and all the children were angry and very worried. They felt powerless and lost. What could they do to rebuild their homes? How could they find a new future?

## Chapter 4

The entire village, including the elders, the parents and the children, felt dusty, sad and tired. Tongyan ran out to the big stone that stood where the school had once been and found his friends waiting there. The children talked and talked.

They believed that the terrible impact of the disaster was a result of planting the betel palms. 'Our teachers explained that in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,' Tongyan said slowly, 'everyone recognises that we have a right to education about nature and that this right should be respected.'



## THE FIREFLIES AFTER THE TYPHOON

An older child added, 'This is how we know that the decision of our village council, three years ago, taken without thinking about the future, has caused terrible things.' They remembered that they had learned in school about palm trees' shallow root systems, which were poorly adapted to holding the soil together. 'There's no way those toothbrushes could hold up against the landslides,' said another child.

Tongyan then began to wonder out loud. 'In the same Convention, it says that we have a right to a clean environment and that our needs should be taken into account when adults make choices for us. I am not sure these two rights have been respected.' He added, 'Our parents, even us children, knew that the decision of the elders was not right. But we did not ask questions and we kept quiet. We must help out and find a good way to share our views.' The children resolved, together, to make a change in the way the village did things. They wanted to be a part of decision-making and they needed their voices to be heard.

Tongyan spoke seriously to his parents: 'In our eyes, planting all those betel palms for money has led to many terrible losses. It has destroyed our wonderful forests and our friends, as well as everything that we built and bought. If only we had planned for the future rather than cutting down so much, so fast, maybe we would not face this disaster today.'



Tongyan's parents listened and then spoke to their fellow villagers. The older men who had made decisions alone were worried. They reflected upon the parents' and the children's words. They agreed that their decision to grow betel palms was a very bad choice. Everyone decided to correct this mistake and work together to rebuild Peach Blossom Village so that it could develop sustainably.



## Chapter 5

Happy voices rang out and visitors wandered towards the new village centre, where the school and playground had been rebuilt. 'These colourful flower beds and climbing vines are amazing!' said one visitor. 'We can't even tell that this village has been restored after a disaster!' replied another. 'Hush! Are those Swinhoe's pheasants and Taiwan blue magpies? They're very rare,' called another, as she stepped off a forest canopy trail.



## THE FIREFLIES AFTER THE TYPHOON

This beautiful village with many visitors was the reconstructed Peach Blossom Village. The villagers had decided to replant native trees and plants that were beneficial to their local environment. They had dedicated themselves to restoring the forest, so that the animals that once lived around their village could return to their homes.

They grew colourful hanging gardens and invited eco-tourists to stay with them in order to see rare species of plants, animals and birds, and to learn Chinese. The villagers also held special races and festivals according to their old traditions. Students from many lands came to visit and to help. Everyone kept the grave lesson about harming an ecosystem in their hearts and agreed to care for their environment together, working towards the future they wanted.

Tongyan and the other children had become a part of the process in a children's council. They helped as they could, giving their ideas and a new point of view. They even made a new special hideout in the forest and nicknamed it 'Paradise of New Hope.'

They gathered just before dusk and, when their parents called from the verandas, they walked back slowly towards their homes, trailing their fingers backwards among the leaves. On arriving home, Tongyan said, 'Look, Mother! Our forest fireflies are back, dancing and blinking in the dark!'





# Welcome to South Africa

The author of this story is Diwa Boateng. He lives in South Africa.

Diwa's story is inspired by his own research into the different lives of rich and poor people in the African countries he knows best – South Africa, where he was born; Ghana, where his father is from; and Zimbabwe and Zambia, where his mother grew up and where members of his family still live.

As well as being an eco-warrior, Diwa is a computer designer and cartoon animator, and loves reading.

His story is dedicated to his grandparents who always encouraged him to study hard.





# THE FORWARD AND BACKWARD CITY

Diwa Boateng

