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My Paradise

JUN YANG

The sweet potato plants covered the entire base of the hill. Their leaves are so green; the color drips to the ground. My friends and I crossed an almost invisible path through this green ocean. The baskets dangled around our arms and followed the tempo of our whistles. We got to our destination, the guava tree. Raising our heads, we looked up to the tree. Summer had brought back all the goodies. The branches were loaded with ping-pong ball size guavas. Lots of them had already turned yellow which only makes them taste better. Sunshine ran through the space in between the leaves and made the guavas so bright that we could barely open our eyes. The aroma of them was such a temptation; we put down our baskets and started in.

I was busy gathering guavas as my friend dropped them onto the ground. I was cautious, not wanting to be hit by one of them. Bing and her sister were like monkeys moving around the branches above, trying to create a rain of guavas for me. If we could we would have gotten them all, but the three baskets filled up quickly. On the way home, our skipping made some of the guavas run away from the baskets. The three trails of guava we left behind treated some little animals on the hill. Clouds around the edge of the sky started to take on some color, just as we began our picnic. We brought out the benches and piled up all of the guavas we had gotten. “It looks like a mini pyramid,” Bing yelled out. Everyone started to laugh. I saw within faces expressions of satisfaction, like farmers after a good harvest. We all forgot about how upset we were the day before when we found out our tadpoles had run away.

A couple of days before, we had come up with the idea of hunting for tadpoles after the rain. The grass on the path was still wet, and the air was full with the fresh scents of wet grass and soil. We found a big puddle behind the reeds. All the duckweeds floating on the top made it hard to see these little lives, but their movement could not escape our eyes. We all held our breath and tried not to scare them away. Without hurting them, we slowly but quickly scooped them up with water. There were two on the first try. It was the first time I had actually seen them rather than from books or TV. I noticed that they were smaller than a pea but full of energy. We got six of them in total: a mother, a father, and four babies. At least we thought of it that way from their size. I donated my pretty plastic mug for their house. We pasted shiny papers on the mug and wrote “Home of Tadpoles” with a marker. We rushed to see them the very next morning, but they were gone. All of them, the father, the mother, even the four kids. Nothing left, except the tipped-over mug. They had all turned into frogs. That’s what Bing’s grandma said.
I tore the guava with my hands and finished the last one. We had supper at Bing’s home, and her grandma had just harvested a ton of potatoes. She always had a good harvest of peaches and cabbages, and she owned a large sweet potato farm. I never needed to worry about starving since my neighbor appeared to have enough food for three winters. I used to think that if I could not find a job when I grew up, I would just come back and plant all kinds of stuff on the hill like Bing’s grandma. Steam rushed out from the pot after we removed the lid and the rich smell of these mini potatoes made us hungry again. We all sat on the floor, grabbed the potato, peeled it quickly, and tossed it into our mouths.

They were too hot to stay any longer in our hands. Utensils would only ruin this feast of nature. Everything tastes different this way, especially sweet potato. Barbecue sweet potato! That is my favorite.

We hid our secret Barbecue spot with banana leaves. It was a one-foot deep hole we dug behind the hill. Bing would sneak into her grandma’s storage for a few little sweet potatoes, the smaller the better. We tried, but we could never cook a regular size one. Removing the three banana leaves from the hole, we placed a layer of dry straw at the bottom. We dropped in the sweet potatoes, and then covered it up with another layer of straw. Branches were our main fuel. The straw was easier to light up but it never lasted long. It was always chaos. “Hurry, we need more branches!” I threw the last one into the flame. Bing and her sister rushed to gather more. The last branch did not really help. The flame started to get smaller and smaller. “Oh, no. Please. Please wait.” I prayed. I leaned forward and blew at the tiny flame, trying to save it. When it was almost hopeless, Bing and her sister finally came back with a handful of branches.

The smoke and the fire heated up the summer afternoon. We sat steaming in the oven we created. With a long branch, we dug out the sweet potatoes underneath the ash, and they fell out to the ground, blackened with smoke. We had to let them sit a while. I broke one with my hands. The bright orange color inside formed such a contract to their skin. I bit into the bright orange; it almost burned my tongue. The smooth, rich, sweet taste made me fall back. I was in heaven. Bing and her sister buried their faces in the sweet potato. “Look at you! You look like a cat.” I pointed at them, but I didn’t notice that there was ash all over my face, too.

Spring and summer were our big event seasons. To hoe Machong was what spring meant to our league. Machong looks like scallion, but its root is round like a pearl. My mum would chop them up and mix them with potato powder and water. Then she would pour a layer of the mixture into a pan coated with a thin layer of oil. The result is a transparent, sticky pancake. All that evening, I could hear the sizzling and smell the pancakes from the neighbors. Machong season only lasts a couple of weeks in the spring. After the first spring shower is the best time to hoe them. We would each carry our small hoes over our shoulders, with a basket hooked to it. The Machong would usually grow in the cracks of the rocks or hide in the grass. With our hoes, we would carefully push aside the soil around the root since we did not want to hurt it: the root is the best part. Then we would hit the soil on the plant a few times with the dull side of the hoe to relax it, and then pull out the plant.

Mr. JinMin was with his cattle on the other side of the hill. We all stopped our work and waved at him. He waved back with a whip in his hand. He wore a straw hat with his pants rolled up to his knees. We could always see him around the hill with his cattle. He, his father, and his grandfather, all three generations in his family, raised cattle. But with Mr. JinMin, their family history had started to change. He has a fruit garden on the valley beneath the hill. In the garden, there are ten giant DragonEye trees. DragonEye fruit is famous in our country. Each pound of it is worth ten dollars. It has a natural sweet taste, and the products made from it are good for your health. So summer is Mr. JinMin’s business period, and he was very busy trading his fruits on the market. But he never seemed to stop raising cattle, even though his garden had made him wealthy enough. Maybe he wants to keep his ancestral estate or maybe to finish his mission for his generation of cattle farmers.

Our baskets were full of Machong bundles. We beat the other two groups on the hill. We washed off the earth on our sandals near the stream. The water was so clear that we could see the rocks underneath. I stepped on one of the rocks and let the coolness of the water carry away the heat. Bing and her sister all joined with me to feel the current rush under our feet. After we washed all the Machong, we laid them out to dry on a bare slope. I lay down with my arms under my head and covered my face with a hat. As a little breeze came by, I started to take my nap. I woke up and followed the direction where Bing was pointing. There was a ship sailing into our harbor. We could see it clearly up on the hill. The sunset colored the waves brightly and the surface of the river looked like fish scales. The ivory ship made a track through the water and moved southward. “Hey! Wait!” we all started to run and tried to keep the ship in sight. With bare feet, and straw hats dangling on our backs, we ran through the hills as our laughter echoed through the valley and the kingdom of our childhood.