

Under the Rice Moon

by Rhiannon Puck

Far from the evening shadows thrown by Hong Kong's tall buildings, the narrow streets of the city of Kowloon come alive under the rice moon.* Food stands sell bowls of noodles, rice, and fried fish balls on bamboo sticks to factory workers strolling homeward at the end of the day.

In a small rattan cage, a cliff swallow huddles with its tiny wings tucked in around its body. For the first time in its life, the little swallow will not fly under the rice moon tonight.

The man who caught the swallow that same morning sells dried fruits and sugarcane. A young girl walking through the marketplace buys a stick of cane to chew and sees the swallow in its small cage.

She has just enough money to buy it, and as she walks home, the rattan cage swings and bobs lightly on her arm. "I promise to take care of you, little bird," the young girl whispers.

The swallow blinks at her sadly from the corner of the cage, and in a language the young girl cannot understand, the bird cries, "Let me fly under the rice moon!"

Sour smells and sharp noises come from the side alleys and drift out to the crowds, and taxi horns blare in a dash for the next fare. Near the center of the market, a boy glances up from the pairs of colorful brocade slippers his mother has made for him to sell.

When a young girl stops to look at the slippers, the boy sees a caged bird at her side. The swallow blinks at him from the corner of the cage.

The boy trades a pair of his mother's best brocade slippers for the swallow and lifts the cage to look at the bird. "I promise to take care of you, little bird," the boy murmurs.

The cliff swallow coos, "How I would like to fly under the rice moon!" But the boy does not understand.

He puts the cage to one side as a man stops at the market stand to look at the rows of brocade slippers. After a hard day's work, he wearily searches for a cheerful gift for his young daughter, who has been at home with a fever.

* **rice moon:** a full moon, as white as rice, that appears in midwinter or early spring

He hears the cliff swallow flutter its wings softly as he looks through the stacks of shoes. Thinking that the tiny bird would make his ailing daughter happy, he offers the boy a very high price. "I know who will take care of you, little bird," the man whispers.

When he arrives home, he carries the cliff swallow in its rattan cage to the room where his daughter lies sleeping. Rather than wake her, he places the caged bird on her bedside table. As he leaves the room the little bird coos, "Oh, please let me fly under the rice moon tonight!" But the man does not understand the swallow's language.

When the girl wakes suddenly in the middle of the night, the first thing she sees through her fever is a small cliff swallow blinking at her from behind the bars of a rattan cage. She knows too well how terrible it is to be kept inside.

"I know what you need, little bird," she murmurs. But the swallow no longer believes what people say.

Slowly, the sickly girl rises from her bed and carries the cage to the open window. Unlatching the rattan door, the girl asks, "Will you fly for me, too, little bird?" And her language is one that the swallow understands.

For a moment, the bird studies the open cage door uncertainly. Then it steps to the ledge, carefully spreads its small wings, and flies away.

Although the cliff swallow now can fly anywhere it chooses, it always passes by the little girl's bedroom window each night. And each night, for a little while, both the bird and the girl are free under the rice moon.