

The Poplar Tree

He was an unusual man.

For a time he was a high-jumper. At his best he routinely cleared 2.3 meters. He was more than a match for anyone in the village.

His personal best was 2.4 meters. No matter how tall you were, he could leap over you. As he could any wall, without ruffling a shirtsleeve—he made it look effortless. He was a splendid man, the sort you rarely see.

It was only a matter of time until he set a new world record, everyone thought at one point. But he wasn't a professional athlete. He was a blacksmith, a maker of sickles, axes, and such.

People liked to watch him high-jump.

We used to ask him to jump for us. But since he wasn't a professional, we didn't make a high-jump bar for him, the kind that wobbles and falls if you brush it on

the way over, and we didn't prepare a sand pit to soften his landing. Instead we'd ask him to jump over a tall bush clover fence, or else a couple of the tallest of us kids would make like a horse and rider and dare him to jump over our heads.

He didn't often give in to a straightforward request to jump. At the same time, he didn't want people to think his talent for high-jumping had gone to his head, so if we phrased our request in the form of a dare it always worked. He'd strip to the waist, crouch down before the object to be jumped, and then, whoosh, he was a mad whirl of motion, riding on the wind, slicing clean over whoever stood on the "horse." Not once did he fall short. Quite a man, he was.

And because we thought him quite a man, we convinced ourselves that one day he would clear the flagpole at the school playground.

As for me, I believed he would one day jump a great mountain at a single bound. At a single bound he would clear the clouds floating in the sky, grab the stars that twinkled beyond, and drop them at our feet. And if only he wanted, at a single bound he would clear not only the crimson twilight painting a distant peak but the rainbow that follows a shower in the western sky, the rainbow resplendent as the striped sleeves of a girl's *saekdong* jacket.

"Uncle, can you jump over that rainbow?"

"Of course I can," he confidently replied. "As long as I have a runway that stretches out nice and wide all the way to the horizon."

But he couldn't jump higher than 2.4 meters. That was as far up as he went. It was also the height of the highest chinup bar at our school playground. There wasn't one of us who could even reach that bar from the ground.

Great as he was, though, he was not a happy man. One summer all three of his children drowned while playing in a stream, first one going under and then the older ones lost in their turn while attempting a rescue. The news drove his wife mad, and eventually she disappeared. And then the peddler of women's items who came around to the village once a month reported having seen her—once at the seashore, once beside a grave, and some time or other at the riverside. And to us she reported that the woman had sprouted scales all over—but not a word of it did we believe.

After losing his children and wife the man turned a bit strange. He still made horseshoes, sickles, and hammers, but his sickles couldn't cut grass and his hammers couldn't drive a nail. He didn't high-jump. People mocked him: he couldn't even clear a brook that us children could jump across.

It got to the point where he'd spend all day in his shop working the bellows but never producing anything, not even a horseshoe.

He was crazy, all the villagers scoffed, but we remained true to him as always—he was our hero. I continued to believe he could jump the flagpole if only he wanted, continued to believe he would one day clear the lovely colors of the rainbow unscathed. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, we asked him to jump over the highest chinup bar for us. But he would shake his head.

“Little ones, I can't jump high anymore—my legs are rusty.”

But we didn't believe him. You see, he was our hope.

“Yes you can, Uncle. You can jump over it. You're a great man.”

Finally, not wanting to disappoint us, he gave in. A mad dash down the playground, and he soared into the air. But his jump was ridiculously short. His leg hooked the bar and he fell to the ground with a scream, breaking the limb.

His leg was never the same again. He hobbled when he walked. He couldn't jump thirty centimeters high. A frog could have outjumped him. He couldn't even hop from one stepping stone to the next across the stream—you could bet he would fall in.

One day he planted a poplar sapling in his yard. I helped him. But why was he doing this? The reason escaped me. He'd planted tomatoes and Chinese cabbages, peppers and squashes there, and had lived a hand-to-mouth existence on these foods. So the idea of planting a poplar tree instead of a fruit tree whose produce he could readily consume was incomprehensible.

Finally I asked him.

“Because a poplar grows tall faster than any other tree.”

“But...a poplar doesn't produce any fruit, Uncle. Why not plant an apple tree or a peach tree?”

“No, little one,” he said with a smile. “I don't go hungry anymore. I've got all the tomatoes and potatoes I want.”

“Then what are you planting a poplar for?”

“So I can jump higher.”

And with that he hobbled to the freshly planted tree and jumped over the single shoot.

“See, I jumped over that tree—I jumped it.”

“But Uncle, I can jump over it, too.”

So saying, I proudly demonstrated.

“But every day that tree will grow a little taller. A year from now it'll be as tall as you are. In two years it'll be as tall as that chinup bar, in three years it'll be up to

the flagpole, in four years up to the electric pole, and in five years it'll grow to the sky. Every day I'm going to jump over that tree. If I can keep it up, then one day I'll be able to jump as high as the sky."

Every day he watered the tree; every day he put his heart into making it grow. True to his word, the tree did grow, but it wasn't noticeably larger every morning like, say, a morning glory, which seems to spurt up overnight when it blooms. Its growth seemed retarded—just like the hour hand of a clock, which doesn't appear to move at all.

And every day he jumped over the tree, hobble and all.

A year later, the poplar tree was as tall as I. Its verdant leaves trembled in the wind like the bracken-fern hands of schoolchildren cheering on the playground.

"Look," he said proudly. "I'm jumping over the tree."

And right before my eyes he half ran, half hobbled up to the poplar and cleared it.

Before we knew it we were growing too. Some of us were already sneaking cigarettes out in the wheat fields and no longer paid him much attention. We were gradually learning new pleasures, finding more interesting things to do. Along with our curiosity about pleasures we'd never tasted—alcohol, tobacco, girls, and such—black hair was growing by the day in our nether regions.

I alone continued to visit him, and it was for me alone that he half hobbled, half ran to the poplar tree and jumped over it.

After two years the poplar had outgrown me and was tall as the lower chinup bar. At the time, I was in love with a girl. Her beauty dazzled me, and on the low dikes among the rice paddies she would whisper to me.

"I don't love you, and I don't want you. There's nobody I like except him." She indicated a scarecrow standing amid the golden ears of rice. "I'm going to marry him. I'm going to have his baby."

Poking out of the rice paddies in autumn were countless scarecrows, each one a trunk of straw beneath a tattered farmer's hat. The flocks of sparrows weren't the least bit daunted. It was beyond me why the girl had said she loved a scarecrow.

For several days I went alone to the rice paddies and stood with my arms out like a scarecrow. And on one of those days I saw the girl and a man take off their clothes and roll around among the drooping stalks of rice. The girl then carried the child of the man, and not the scarecrow. The girl was a liar.

After I'd gotten over my sorrow, I went to see the blacksmith.

"Now just you watch, I'm going to jump over that tree," he proclaimed. "I can do it."

He hobbled up to the tree and cleared it.

"What'd I tell you? I'll jump over that tree as high as it grows. Yes I will."

But he was older now and bent-over. An old man, really, and that was the extent of it. All but two of his teeth were gone. His three children had long since perished, and his wife still hadn't returned.

"I saw his wife," the peddler of women's things reported. "She makes rice cakes out of sand at the seashore and sells them at the market. I tried one—scrumptious! 'Your husband's waiting for you,' I told her. 'Why not go back with me?' And this is what she said—'You tell him he can wait. He can wait till I've made rice cakes out of all that sand and sold every last one of them.'"

After three years the poplar was tall as the flagpole. It was a very handsome tree. Its roots were planted firmly in the ground and the vibrant young limbs stretched out wide as you please. Its leaves were as lush as the hair growing from a man's broad chest. Compared with the tree, the blacksmith was an old man approaching death. The mouth that spoke to me now held only one tooth.

"Good to see you, little one. Watch close, because I'm going to jump over that tree."

He still called me "little one." Unfortunately I was no longer a little one—I was a young man.

He started running, a slow-motion hobble. And then he was up like the wind, a bird in flight, gently brushing the air like the needles of a silver fir. Over the poplar he went.

"There, you saw it! I jumped it! I jumped that poplar tree!"

After four years the poplar had grown to the sky. You should have seen it—the top was no longer visible. Birds built nests of twigs and straw in its branches and laid their eggs. Low-lying clouds draped the midsection of the tree. In summer the whole village turned out to nap at the foot of the poplar; there was so much shade, you didn't have to fight for it.

"I saw the blacksmith's wife up above the clouds. She lives in a shelter she made on the top branches. She has three children. Honest. If you don't believe me, climb up there and see for yourself."

So said one of the more mischievous youngsters after climbing the tree all the way above the clouds.

Of course, since I wasn't a little boy anymore, I didn't have the lightness of body to climb the tree and see whether things above the clouds were as this boy had said.

When next I saw the blacksmith he had aged completely. His one remaining tooth was gone.

"Well, well, little one," he said with a smile of

delight. "From the time you were young you asked if I could jump over the clouds—remember?"

"Indeed I do, Grandfather."

"Well, here's your chance. I want you to watch me jump over that tree."

He made a long approach, hobbling as best he could. Then suddenly he was aloft, sucked into the sky. I gazed reverently toward the top of the tree he had soared over. He couldn't be seen. I waited for him to return to earth. But he never came down. At first I thought it was because the poplar was so high—high enough that its top couldn't be spotted. So I waited till the sun set, but still he didn't land. And then after the longest time something fell to the ground with a thunk. I picked it up—a wornout shoe.

Recently I visited the village. Brought the wife and our two children. The village had changed, but the poplar still stood. Strange thing was, it now looked very small to me, stunted even. Its leaves were withered, its branches broken. It was painfully contorted, like the body of a drowning victim.

When would he reappear before our eyes, landing on the ground, the form of this unusual man who had jumped higher than anyone on earth?

This morning I'm going to plant an apple tree in our yard, a tree that grows very, very slowly. Every morning

I'll jump over that tree. And one day I'll jump over the clouds and at long last meet up with him in that other world, that unusual place he disappeared to.

You see, I've finally learned. Learned that the world we live in is actually a stopping point, a place to which we leaped from the distant place we once inhabited; that we'll move on to an earth that will receive our tired souls for all time. Yes, we are hanging in the balance, all of us. We are all going around upside down.