

— by Glenn Chen

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Comfortably seated on the China Airlines 707, I quietly stared out the small oval window. Below the plane lay the city of Taipei. The bright, gleaming lights on the streets and houses shone up at me. After the long trans-ocean flight, it was a relief to see an end to the black darkness. "I'm almost there," I said aloud to myself. The fat man next to me stirred in his sleep and opened his eyes. "I didn't mean to wake you up," I said apologetically. "Never mind," he replied. "It's time to get up anyways." I was glad he was awake. During the last few hours, his leg had been covering up the headphone jack, and I was unable to listen to the plane's stereo. Too late now, I told myself.

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I leaned out of the hotel window and looked at the scene below me. It was about 8 o'clock in the morning. I had a grand view of the backs of a dozen dilapidated houses. Each was crudely fenced off by old wooden stakes and pieces of wire. Last night's rain had turned the ground into a sticky, noxious, muddy quagmire. Some chickens and a few scraggly dogs were wandering about the yards. The dogs looked wet and miserable; the brightly-hued chickens contrasted sharply with the bleak mud. Beneath me, a woman was doing her laundry. She was bent over a large, wooden tub. Clouds of steam rose up and drifted toward my window. I smelled an interesting mixture of dirty laundry and odorous muck. I still remember, nine years ago, that I was not impressed by my first glimpse of Taiwan.

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A week has already gone by, I reminded myself. The days passed so quickly; I had seen so many people and places in these past few days. I was standing at the entranceway to my grandfather's cloth shop in I-Lan. Across the street, two men were busily dumping garbage into a green truck. Music was coming out of the driver's cab. The melody was reminiscent of the tunes the ice cream man played back at home. What an unusual disagreement, I thought. The odor from the open sewer next to the street had made me wrinkle my nose on my arrival, and I wasn't exactly pleased with the sight of the squashed vegetables on the road rotting in the dirt. I didn't notice these things at all. I was watching a man with a small cart standing next to the shop. He was selling some small pastries which he made on top of his cart. They were delicate little cakes, golden brown, and, I decided, they looked delicious. From the tailor shop next door came the steady hum of sewing machines and the pleasant chatter of the workers. Crowds of morning shoppers hurried to and fro, while bicycles and pedi-cabs wove their way through the

jumble of people. Here and there, friends stopped to exchange greetings. The barber shop across the street was open and already filled with customers. I was excited by the quick bustle and ferment of activity. One of my uncles came out from within the cloth shop and put a friendly arm around me. In halting English, he asked, "Do-you-like-Taiwan?" I smiled and said, "Yes."

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The sleek express train sped steadily southward toward the port city of Kaohsiung. Our family was in the middle of a round-about island tour. The thick growths of bamboo and trees hugged the high embankment next to the track. The ground was overgrown with bushy shrubs and long grasses. The light was subdued and dim. The plants dripped from the almost constant drizzle. Dark vines twined themselves around the tree trunks and snaked among the branches. Everything seemed still beneath the leaves. There was a mystical, wild aura to the jungle. The dark, brooding place was beautiful in its own primitive way.

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The topography had changed. The train had left the mountain rain forest and was now travelling along the coast. On one side I could see the farming terraces which were hacked out of the mountainside. The lush, green carpets of rice seemed to flow down the slopes like a river of cascading water. On the opposite side lay the sea. A thick mist curled about the rocky headland and the small islands scattered along the shore. Each island resembled a rock tower capped by a pinnacle of trees and grass. They were exactly like the beautiful little islands on the Chinese scroll paintings. I continued to gaze for hours in fascination.

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The rain continued to beat down on my umbrella. I hurried along the wet street, doing my best not to get wet. We were to meet a friend at a restaurant in the center of this small coastal town, and I didn't want to get my nice clothes soiled. My eye caught sight of an old man sitting on the sidewalk under a protective awning. As I drew nearer, I noticed his ragged, filthy garments. His chin was covered with masses of stubby gray whiskers, and his hollow, sunken cheeks and vacant stare gave him a forlorn countenance. His eyes were empty and seemingly lifeless. He sat cross-legged and hunched over on a thin bamboo mat, and in his outstretched, bony hand he clutched a battered tin can. I paused and look at him with pity. Ahead, my mother turned to me and said, "He's a beggar," and told me to catch up with her. As I slowly moved away, I kept glancing back. The old man sat as immobile as a statue, staring out onto the street with his sad, blank eyes.

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I was standing at the gateway in front of our plane terminal. The straps

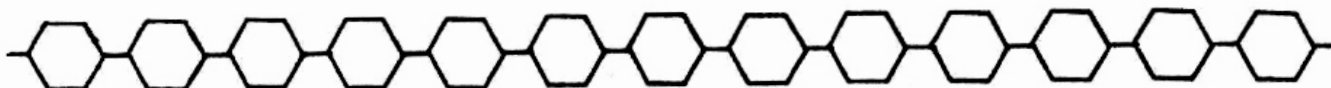
on the heavily-laden plastic handbag were cutting into my hand. My arm and shoulder were sore from having to lug the bag up and down the airport stairs. In a minute, I would be leaving Taiwan.

Relatives crowded around me, hugging and crying, saying their final good-byes. I smiled at them all -- a bit sadly perhaps. I was sorry to be leaving.

I turned toward the gangway and headed down toward the plane. As I reached a turn in the path, I looked over my shoulder and waved one more time. Aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins waved back. Slowly, I rounded the turn and disappeared aboard the plane.

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With a roar, the shiny metallic bird left the ground and climbed upwards through the gray clouds. Soon the airport was lost under the swirling overcast. Still higher we rose, up and up, until we emerged in a brilliant world of clear blue skies, white fleecy clouds, and glorious sunlight. I'm going home, I sighed to myself.



Why the Rose Plant has Thorns
Paul Yu-Yang

A long time ago the rose plant had no thorns. The rose plant was very pretty without thorns.

As a matter of fact, to make matters worse the rose plant was haughty. She loved to brag about how beautiful she was. Everyday and night she would say how beautiful she was.

This angered the God Botanic. Botanic was a flower plant god. He was one of many plant gods. Botanic was one of the fairest gods.

One day the rose plant started to talk. This was unusual because it was talking faster and louder. So loud was this that Botanic became so angry he cast a spell on the rose plant. The spell's effect were thorns. Her face and body were covered with them. All the plants laughed at her.

Botanic did not like everybody laughing at the rose plant. He was a fair god so he took the thorns off her face. The rose plant looked half good and half bad. No one laughed and she never bragged again. That is why the rose plant has thorns.