

The Story of the Mountain Pears

A Japanese Tale

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Once upon a time there lived a mother who had three sons. The mother fell ill and called her sons to her and said, "Please go and fetch some pears from the high mountains." The eldest son agreed to go and seek the pears. On the way he met an old woman sitting on a stump. She held out a red chipped wooden bowl and said, "I am thirsty, please bring me some water." The boy refused saying, "I am going to pick mountain pears." Then the old woman told him of the bamboo trees standing at the junction of three

paths ahead. "And if you listen, you'll hear the leaves telling you which path will take you to the mountain pears. The bamboo leaves are whispering, 'This way, this way, rustling, rustling, rustling.' "

The boy left the old woman and soon came to the three branching paths. The wind blew and the bamboo leaves in the middle whispered, "This way, this way, rustling, rustling, rustling. This way, this way, rustling, rustling, rustling."

Then the leaves on the right and the left spoke,

"Not this way, not this way, rustling, rustling, rustling."

But the boy forgot what the old woman had said and he walked down the path on the right. The woodpecker was making a nest and singing, "Not this way, tap, tap, tap. Not this way, tap, tap, tap." Still he went on. Some gourds on a tree were sounding, "Not this way, rattle, rattle, rattle. Not this way, rattle, rattle, rattle." And still on he went.

Then the mountains opened and the boy saw many mountain pears hanging from a tree by the lake. He ran to the tree and climbed up. When he was at the top, his shadow fell on the surface of the lake, and this awoke the guardian of the lake, Numa-No-Nushi, who rose up out of the depths of the lake and devoured the boy.

When the first son did not return home, the second son left to find the mountain pears. He went on his way and soon found the old woman sitting on the stump. She held out the red chipped wooden bowl and asked for some water, but he refused saying, "I am too busy looking for the mountain pears." Then the old woman told him of the bamboo trees standing on the three paths ahead. "And if you listen, you'll hear the leaves telling you which path will take you to the mountain pears. The bamboo leaves are whispering, 'This way, this way, rustling, rustling, rustling.'"

When the second son came to the three branch paths, he forgot what the old woman had said and went onto the path at the left where the bamboo leaves were whispering, "Not this way, not this way, rustling, rustling, rustling."

The woodpecker was making a nest and singing, "Not this way, tap, tap, tap. Not this way, tap, tap, tap." He went on, and then the gourds hanging in the tree sounded, "Not this way, rattle, rattle, rattle. Not this way, rattle, rattle, rattle." And still he went on.

Then the mountains opened up and many mountain pears hung by the lake. He shouted, "I have found the mountain pears, I have found the mountain pears." When he climbed the tree to pick the pears his shadow also fell onto the surface of the water. Numa-No-Nushi rose out of the water and devoured the second son as well.

When the second son did not return home, it was Saburo's turn, the youngest son. On his way, he met the old woman sitting on a stump. She held out the red chipped bowl saying, "I am thirsty. Will you fill this bowl at the mountain stream and bring it to me?"

"Yes I will," replied Saburo. When he returned with the water the woman asked him where he was going. Saburo replied, "I am going to pick mountain pears." Then the old woman told him about the three branching paths and the bamboo leaves whispering in the wind. "Take the path whose bamboo leaves are whispering, 'This way, this way, rustling, rustling, rustling.'"

The old woman gave Saburo a sword and the red chipped bowl. He hung the sword and bowl around his waist, bid the woman farewell, and went on his way into the mountains.

Soon he came to the three branching paths. There stood the three bamboo trees. The wind blew and the bamboo leaves in the middle whispered, "This way, this way, rustling, rustling, rustling." The bamboo leaves on the right and left whispered, "Not this way, not this way, rustling, rustling, rustling."

Saburo remembered what the old woman had said and he went on the middle path. There the woodpecker was making a nest and singing, "Not this way, tap, tap, tap. Not this way, tap, tap, tap." As he went on the gourds were hanging in the branches of a tree sounding, "Not this way, rattle, rattle, rattle. Not this way, rattle, rattle, rattle."

The mountains opened up and he found an orchard with many pears hanging in the branches. The pears were singing,

"The branches in the east and west,

The branches in the north,

All cast shadows, none are safe.

You must climb the branches in the south."

Saburo took heed and climbed the branches in the south and began picking pears. They tasted delicious. When he had gathered all he could carry, he started down the tree. But he stepped on the wrong branch and his shadow fell on the surface of the water. Numa-No-Nushi saw Saburo and began moving toward him but Saburo drew the sword. With one mighty blow he conquered Numa-No-Nushi. Saburo then heard voices saying, "Help us. We are here." Saburo cut open the belly of Numa-No-Nushi and out came his two brothers, looking pale. Saburo drew water from the mountain stream with the red chipped bowl. The two brothers drank the water and were revived. Then all three brothers began the journey home. They descended the mountain and came to the stump and the old woman was no longer there. Saburo left some mountain pears on the stump for her. They returned home and their mother ate the pears and her health was restored. From that time on they lived happily together.