

# THE KOREAN CINDERELLA

by Shirley Climo

In the land of Korea, where magical creatures were as common as cabbages, lived a child named Pear Blossom. Pear Blossom was as lovely as the pear tree planted in celebration of her birth.

One winter morning, when the branches on the pear tree were still bare sticks, Pear Blossom's mother died.

"Aigo!" wailed the old man. "Who will tend to Pear Blossom now?"

He put on his tall horsehair hat and went to the village matchmaker. She knew of a widow with a daughter the same age as Pear Blossom.

"Peony will make a good sister to Pear Blossom," the matchmaker promised. When Omoni and Peony saw how beautiful Pear Blossom was, they were jealous of her. Omoni made her worked day and night and constantly found fault with her.

One day, the village was having a festival. "Pear Blossom may go," said Omoni in a voice as sweet as barley sugar, "after she weeds the rice paddies." She handed Pear Blossom a basket of wilted turnip tops for her lunch.

"I am most grateful, Honourable Mother," said Pear Blossom.

When she reached the fields, Pear Blossom dropped the basket in dismay. Rice rippled before her like a great green lake. Weeding it would take weeks. "Who could do such a task?" she cried.

"DO-O-O-O" bellowed a black ox as it emerged from the long grass. The ox began to munch the weeds, moving through the rows of rice faster than the wind itself. Before Pear Blossom can say "Ohhh", both the ox and the weeds were gone. The whole rice field was free of weeds and yet not a single blade of rice was trampled upon!

Pear Blossom cupped her hands over her mouth and called, "A thousand thanks!" as the ox galloped away into the horizon.

Pear Blossom hastened to the village festival. The road, which followed a crooked stream, was rough with pebbles. Pear Blossom had just slipped off one straw sandal to shake out a stone when she heard a shout.

"Make way! Make way for the magistrate!"

Four bearers, a palanquin swaying on poles across their shoulders, jogged toward her. In the chair sat a young nobleman dressed in rich robes and wearing a jade jewel in his topknot. Flustered, Pear Blossom teetered on a leg like a crane, holding her straw sandal. Her cheeks grew hot as red peppers, and she hopped behind a willow tree that grew beside the stream. As she did, her sandal fell into the water and bobbed like a small boat, just out of reach.

"Stop!" commanded the magistrate from his palanquin.

He was calling to his bearers, but Pear Blossom thought he was shouting at her.

Frightened, she fled down the road.

The magistrate gazed after Pear Blossom, struck by her beauty. Then he ordered his men to fish her sandal from the stream and to carry him back to the village.

At the festival Pear Blossom forgot her missing shoe. She watched the acrobats and tightrope walkers until she was dizzy. She swayed to the flutes and drums happily. Suddenly, she heard someone shouting at her. "What are you doing here?" screamed her stepmother.

"I am here because a black ox ate all the weeds in the rice paddies," said Pear Blossom.

"Black ox indeed! You are a liar..." before she could finish her sentence, she was interrupted by the magistrate's bearers.

"Hear this," they shouted as they elbowed the palanquin through the crowd, "we seek the girl with one shoe!"

"It's Pear Blossom!" Peony pointed at her sister, "She's lost her shoe."

The bearers put the chair down beside Pear Blossom, and the nobleman held up the sandal.

"The magistrate has come to arrest you," screeched the stepmother, "you must have committed a crime and serve you right!"

"She must deserve me as her husband," the magistrate said in a kind voice, "for this lucky shoe has led me to her."

He turned to Pear Blossom and said, "I've luck enough if she who wears this one becomes my bride."

Pear Blossom smiled, too shy to speak, and slipped the sandal on her foot. The magistrate whisked Pear Blossom onto his palanquin and the bearers carried them away into the crowd. Omoni and Peony stared speechless after the couple still wondering if it was a nightmare!

Back home, a dozen pear trees bloomed. "Ewha! Ewha!" chirruped the sparrows in the branches. In Korea, "Ewha" means "Pear Blossom."