



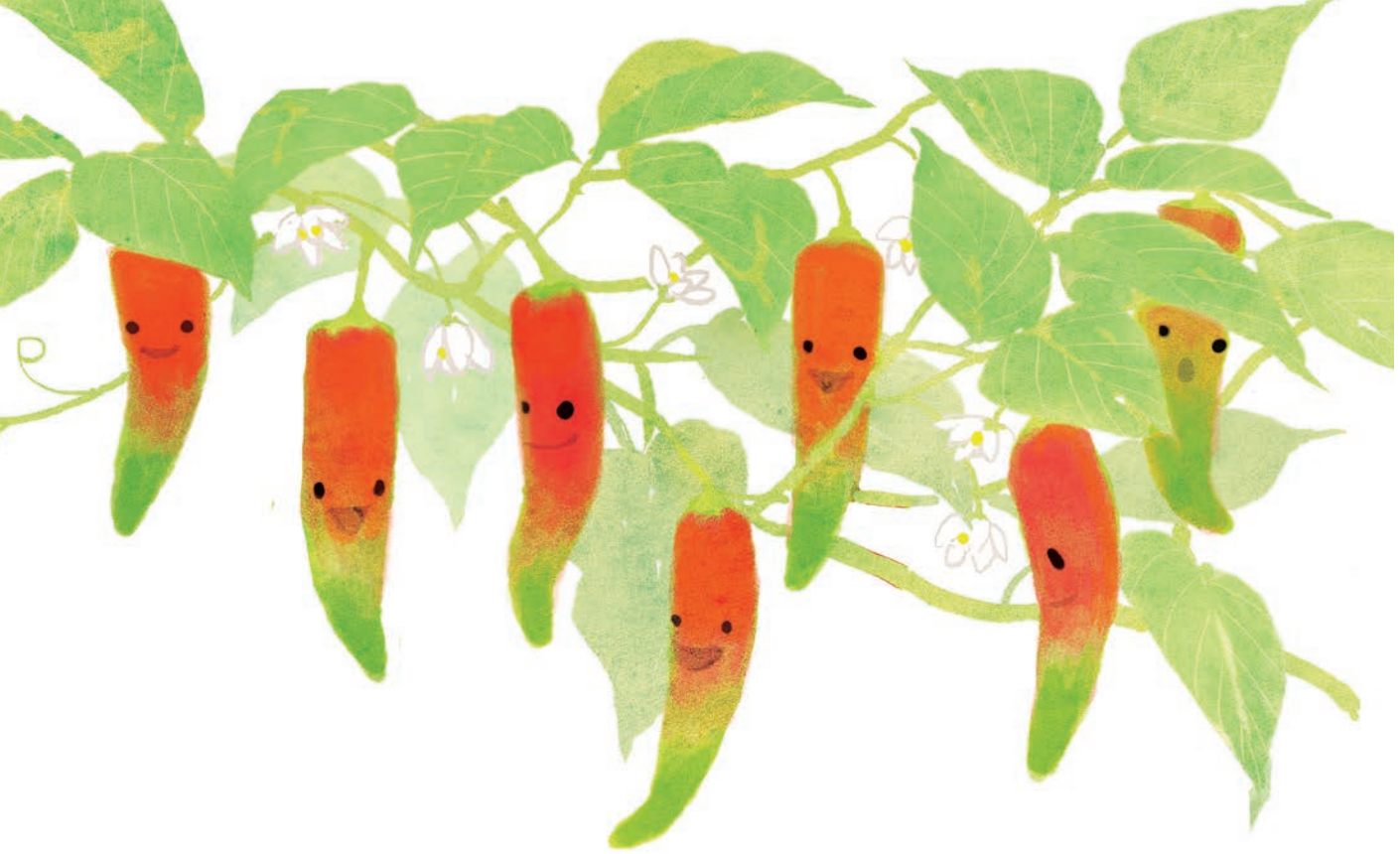
The Incident in Changu's Pepper Patch

Kwon Jeong-saeng

Illustrated by Kim Dong-sung ♦ Translated by Raymond Mommsen

IT'S MIDSUMMER and the cicadas buzzing languidly in the shade of the oak trees sound like an old man sawing wood. Just over the hill behind the oak trees is Changu's pepper patch.

Since early spring, Changu's mother and older sister have been panting up and down that hill, carrying chamber pots and baskets of manure to fertilize the field. They have sweated in streams



while pulling weeds. The pepper plants have grown huge. The plants don't seem to mind all the gravel in the soil. They hold up their leaves, spread their branches, and open their white flowers. Finally cute baby peppers come to hang in bunches. The little peppers drink the spicy wind from the mountain and try to make their faces beautiful.

"You look like an elephant's nose."

"What elephant has a nose this small?"

"I mean a toy elephant."

"So what do you think you look like then?"

Baby peppers really do look like the trunk of a tiny elephant. They change from pale green to dark green. And then they change into their red suits.

No, that's not right. The color is from inside. It's not like clothes they put on: the glow from their pure, fiery hearts blazes through until you can see it from the outside.

At midday, when the cicadas are droning under the oak trees, the red noses all flare up together like tongues of flame. If you go near the pepper patch, your nose burns and your eyes sting – and don't even think about touching them.

On a day just like this, Changu's mother is sitting by the pepper patch with her next-door neighbor.

"These days, if you look away for a second, somebody will steal the eyes out of your head."

"What are you talking about?"

"Haven't you heard about the pepper thief? They say he comes in the middle of the night, fills a sack with peppers, and runs off."

"How terrible! He must be crazy."



“Not just everyday-crazy either. Completely insane. It’s frightening.”

“Who’s lost their peppers then?”

“In the village across the river, a bunch of different fields have been robbed.”

“You better be careful too.”

“I can’t watch for thieves every night.”

The two women go down the hill together, and the red toy-elephant’s noses snort out a spicy blast of rage at the very thought.

“This is intolerable!”

“Intolerable, but it can happen.”

“Can happen, but it’s intolerable.”

“Heaven will punish the scoundrel.”

“Heaven better punish him!”

The peppers have all been talking at once, and now they snap their mouths shut. They realize that it could happen to them too, and fear almost freezes their hearts. That very night the thief might come and take them captive.

“I wish we had hands and feet.”

“So you could run away?”

“Don’t be stupid. I’d fight.”

“Fight the thief?”

“Sure.”

“But we’re stuck on the pepper plants. We can’t even move.”

“We can get mad can’t we?”

“Getting mad is childish. Let’s be courageous.”

“Courageous?”

“Right. Little peppers are spicy, aren’t they? We can use that if we’re smart.”

The more the peppers talk, the more agitated they get, as if the thief might burst into the patch at any moment. That night, they don’t sleep at all. As they stare wide-eyed into the night, their faces get redder and redder. For four nights they watch, ready for battle at any moment. Toward evening one day, Changu’s mother comes up the hill.



“Well, the peppers are finally ripe. Tomorrow I’ll bring Changu, and we’ll pick them together.” She quickly looks over the patch and goes home, and the peppers relax a bit.

“I guess we don’t need to worry now.”

“Looks like the hand that planted will get the harvest after all.”

They swing happily back and forth, shaking the branches of their plants. The oil on their skin gleams in the light of the setting sun. They are so happy that they are full grown and will be harvested by their rightful owner that their hearts are nearly bursting.

That night the stars are unusually thick and bright, scattered across heaven like shards of glass. The pepper babies are sleeping peacefully, exhausted after four nights of watching.

The night grows silently darker.

It is darkest under the oak trees.

A black shadow crawls up the slope under the cover of the black forest. A strange shadow – it has a horrible burlap sack in its hand. It creeps to the edge of the pepper patch and slowly stands up and looks all around. But nothing moves in the darkness.

The shadow sinks down between the rows of plants and its hands work quickly. The sleeping peppers feel themselves being grabbed and come awake with a shock. The shadow grabs everything, even half-ripened green peppers, and stuffs them roughly into his sack, stripping the branches clean. The terrible sack begins to stretch.

“Save the peppers!”



“The thief is taking us!”

The peppers scream, but it is no use. How could the thief be so pitiless, so utterly lacking any human feeling? He snatches everything his hands touch, even ripping off branches, and stuffs his sack to the brim. In no time, Changu’s pepper patch is empty. The thief ties the mouth of the sack tightly and throws it over his shoulder, stuffed so tight it seems ready to burst.

In the sack, the peppers are helpless as the thief hurries down the mountain path. They think about how for days they have bragged about fighting the thief, only to be dragged off without a struggle. There has to be a way to escape.

They are jammed in the sack so tightly they can’t even wiggle, but one pepper calls out:

“Hey, what are we going to do?”

The other peppers start shouting.

“We can’t just go quietly!”

“Think of Changu’s poor mother.”

“She worked so hard so we could grow big.”

“We belong to Changu’s family.”

The peppers’ fiery blood begins to boil in righteous fury.

“Fight, fight against this injustice!”

They wriggle and pant in desperation. The sack begins to swell. The thief can hardly walk. The sack stretches further, puffing up like a balloon. The thief grunts and gasps.

The peppers yell together at the top of their voices, “Heave-ho! Heave-ho!”



The thief struggles down the dark path, sweat gushing down his face.

The sack is swollen to its limit, ready to burst at the slightest touch.

As he passes under the oak tree where the night is darkest, the thief has to feel his way one step at a time. A field mouse runs through the grass by his feet and he jumps back in fright. His foot slips on a rock covered with wet moss, and he falls to the ground. The sack swings against the rock and explodes with a deafening sound. Peppers fly everywhere.

“Hurray, we’re free!”

Just then, the wind blows up the mountainside, and the flying peppers catch the wind and sail back up the hill like a flock of ravens. They flash in the starlight, lighting up the night sky like fireworks.

Then they fall quivering to earth, and each one goes quietly back to the branch it came from. A few change places and land on someone else’s branch, and some even hang upside down. But they don’t mind, and the peppers smile contentedly.

The night mist falls silently and the eastern sky turns grey. As morning comes, the peppers seem to hang even more beautifully than before.

Later in the day Changu’s mother and big sister come and lovingly pick the ripe, red peppers.





Kwon Jeong-saeng (1937–2007) spent his childhood as a Korean War refugee and later became a beloved children’s author. A passionate advocate for children victimized by war, he continued to live in a simple one-room dwelling near his village church, which he served as bell ringer (see his autobiographical essay “The Church I Dreamed Of” in our Autumn 2014 issue). At his death, he left all his lifetime savings to children in need, especially those in North Korea.