

A Big Job for May Lan

“May Lan, today’s the day for our neighborhood to get water,” Mama said. “You have to fill the buckets and the bath tub.” May Lan’s eyes grew as round as moon cakes.

“Your grandma just called. I have to take her to the doctor.”

“I have to fill the buckets and the bath tub all by myself?” Now May Lan’s eyes were as round as woks.

“From one o’clock to five o’clock,” Mama said. “Don’t forget or we won’t have water for the next four days for drinking, cooking and washing clothes. All you have to do is catch the water in all the buckets. Then fill up the bathtub.”

The summer of 1963 in Hong Kong was a difficult time. All year and the year before, very little rain fell. It was as if someone had pulled the plug to let the water out of the reservoirs. The millions of people in Hong Kong had used up most of the water.

The dreaded announcement came, “Water will be rationed. Each home will have water for four hours every four days.”

Mama gave a ten year-old a big job. The only clean water left was in a big pot. A bucket was half full of dirty dishwater for flushing the toilet. Now her family depended on her.

It was almost one o’clock. May Lan put a bucket in the bathtub and turned on the faucet.

The big clock in the living room went, Dong!

She waited and waited. The pipes gurgled and coughed. Drip, drip, drip. She waited.

Trickle, trickle, trickle.

Would the water run stronger? No, it didn’t.

Dong! Dong! Two o’clock.

She had filled only three buckets. The neighbors downstairs must have turned on the faucets, all at the same time. There wasn’t enough water to reach her fourth floor. The running water was as thin as a chopstick.

May Lan hurried downstairs to the ground floor and banged on the door.

“Mrs. Chan, I need water. Our bathtub is not filled.”

“Go away, I’m not done. I have to get another big pot,” Mrs. Chan said.

May Lan leaped to the second floor.

“Soon, not yet,” said Mrs. Lee.

May Lan climbed to the third floor.

“Don’t bother me now,” Mrs. Wong said. “I’m not getting much water on the third floor, either.”

May Lan saw the bathtub. Only two inches of water.

Dong! Dong! Dong! Three o’clock!

Out of the window, she saw a line of people behind a public faucet on the street. She grabbed a bucket, flew downstairs and waited behind a snaking line of people, all with buckets by their sides. Everyone drooped in the sweltering heat.

At last, it was May Lan’s turn. She could lift the filled bucket only with both hands. Half the water spilled on the way to the fourth floor.

Dong! Dong! Dong! Dong! Four o’clock!

May Lan knew she didn’t have the strength to carry enough buckets of water up four floors. If the neighbors downstairs would turn off the water, she still had time to fill the bathtub. She needed to give them good reasons to help her.

Back to the first floor May Lan went. Mrs. Chan was as soaked with sweat as she.

“If you’ll turn off your faucets, I’ll help your son with math homework, until he gets marks you’re happy with.”

“That sounds reasonable. I’ll turn off the faucets,” Mrs. Chan said.

On the second floor, Mrs. Lee’s face was as red as a lucky money envelope.

“I’ll write letters for you to send to your son overseas. Then you don’t have to pay the letter writer down the street, until your son comes home next year.”

“That will be a big help. I’ll turn off the faucets,” Mrs. Lee said.

On the third floor, she made an offer to limping Mrs. Wong. “I’ll go to the corner store to buy the morning newspapers for you, until your knees feel better.”

“That sounds good to me. I’ll turn off the faucet,” Mrs. Wong said.

May Lan bounded up the stairs, two at a time.

She turned on the faucet and the water roared like a river. The beautiful music of running water!

Dong! Dong! Dong! Dong! Dong! Five o’clock.

The bathtub was filled to the brim with precious water. Now May Lan’s family had water for the next four days. She had offered special gifts to her neighbors to get a big job done.

—Fanny Wong, *New York*.