



The Golden Pitcher

A story from Mongolia retold by Allison Galbraith

One morning the king went to his bathroom, looked in his mirror and began to cry. 'Oh no, look at my face, I have wrinkles and lines, my hair is turning white, I am growing old! The people of my kingdom will never respect me or be frightened of me, if all they see is an old man! This can never be, I will ban old age from my kingdom!'

And so he commanded that all of the older people must be either banished from his kingdom or put in his dungeons to die. The whole kingdom was in shock and with great sadness the young people helped their parents and grandparents to gather their belongings pack up. Tearfully the old folk left the land.

When the last old man and old woman had gone, the king quickly began to cover up his own signs of ageing. He had the royal barber dye his greying hair to jet black, and even tinted his eyebrows and moustache! Then he covered his wrinkles with expensive face cream and lots of make-up. Every day the young people came to plead with the king to be merciful and allow their parents and grandparents to come home. This gave the king a wicked idea, and so he made a royal announcement:

'Whoever finds the golden pitcher at the bottom of the lake will be allowed to bring their old folk back home; but whoever tries and fails will have to give all their land to the king.'

As soon as the youngsters heard the news they rushed to the great lake to see if they could find the golden pitcher. Sure enough there it was, a beautiful tall, elegant golden jug, with a curved handle, shimmering under the water, down at the bottom of the lake. Dozens of brave young women and men took their turn to dive into the lake to find the pitcher, but when they reached the bottom of the lake they couldn't find it anywhere! All of the youngsters came out empty-handed, and the mean king grew richer and richer with the acquisition of all their lands and even their homes.

Amongst the young people was a girl named Lilly, who at the time of the king's order to banish the old people, had hidden her old father in a cave up in the hills behind the city. Lilly loved her father more than anything in the world and each day she sneaked out of

the city to take food up to him in his cave. Lilly was so puzzled by the king's golden pitcher, and why no-one could recover it from the bottom of the lake, that she told her dad all about it. 'You can see it clearly, deep down beneath the water, but everyone who dives for it comes out with nothing!' Her dad sat listening to Lilly and then thought about it for a few moments. Then he asked, 'Is there a tree at the edge of the lake Lilly?'

'Yes father, a big old elm tree.'

'And can the pitcher be seen in the shadow of the tree?'

'Yes, it is a huge old tree, the shadow must spread out at least halfway across the lake, and the golden pitcher is within the shadow.' said Lilly.

Her father smiled and nodded, 'The king has put the golden pitcher in the branches of the tree. The pitcher that you see in the water is only its reflection.'

Lilly laughed for joy and hugged her dad.

The next day Lilly went to the king and told him that she would like to have a turn at diving into the lake for the golden pitcher. The king rubbed his hands together and told said 'Go right ahead and have a try, but you must remember that all your lands and house will become mine, if you fail to bring the pitcher up from the bottom of the lake!'

So Lilly went to the lake, and the king followed in the royal coach, and all of the townsfolk came out to watch Lilly dive in to find the mysterious golden jug. And everyone who was watching was surprised to see that Lilly, instead of diving straight into the lake, started to climb up the old elm tree.

'Perhaps she is going to dive in from its branches,' some said, but Lilly kept on climbing the tree until she reached the very top. And right there, among the top-most branches Lilly found the golden pitcher. It had been hung upside down, so that in its reflection, down below in the lake it appeared to stand upright at the bottom of the lake. Lilly untied the beautiful golden jug with the curved handle, and carried it back down, and she handed it to the king. The people cheered.

The king was furious, 'How did you figure out my trick?'

'Well, my old dad, whom I've hidden in a cave, is the one who guessed where the pitcher was hidden'

'Ahh, so it took the wisdom of one old man to solve the puzzle of the golden pitcher, where at least one hundred young people failed! Maybe the wisdom that comes with age is valuable after all!' decided the king.

And so the king allowed all the old people to come back to their families and homes and from that day on, old age was respected in the kingdom.