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Opening extract from

The Kite Rider

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1

Testing the Winds

Gou Haoyou knew that his father's spirit lived among the clouds. For he had seen him go up there with a soul, and come down again without one.

It happened down at the harbour, the day the *Chabi* put to sea. When she set sail, Haoyou's father, Gou Pei, would be among her crew and gone for months on end. So Haoyou went with him, down to the docks, to make the most of him on this, their last day together. 'When I get home this time,' said Pei, 'we must see about *you* becoming an apprenticed seaman.'

Haoyou's heart quickened with fear and pride at the thought of stepping out of childhood and into his father's saltwater world.

For the first time ever, Pei took him aboard—showed him where the anchor was lodged, where the sailors slept, how the ship was steered, where the cargo would be stowed. And the biggest excitement of all was still to come: soon, the *Chabi*'s captain would be 'testing the wind', checking the omens for a prosperous voyage.

Further along the harbour wall, a great commotion started up, as a ship, newly arrived from the South, disembarked its passengers: a travelling circus. For the first time in his life, Haoyou saw elephants, ponderously picking their way across the gangplank, while tumblers somersaulted off the ship's rail and on to the dockside.

mother, or stay and see what happened. His father injured on the eve of a voyage? It was not good, not lucky. Lucky for Haoyou (who hated his father going away for months on a voyage), but not for the family dependent on his sailor's wages.

Haoyou decided his mother should know, and turned to run. But he found his way barred by the corpulent bellies of the merchants mustering on the dockside. Word had gone out that the *Chabi* was testing the wind this morning, and it seemed as if every merchant in Dagu had hurried down to judge the omens for themselves. The prosperity of the whole voyage depended on how the 'wind-tester' behaved. Only if it flew well would they entrust their cargoes to the *Chabi*. If it flew badly, they would use some rival ship.

It was for this magnificent sight that Gou Pei had brought his son to the harbour; Haoyou had asked a hundred times to see it.

'I'm not sure,' his mother had said. 'What about the poor soul on the hurdle?'

But Pei had only shrugged and said that worse things happened at sea.

Haoyou looked back at the ship. He did not want to miss the testing of the wind. Perhaps his father had only twisted his ankle, and would be fit to sail after all. The boy stood on tiptoe to estimate the depth of the crowd; his chances of pushing his way through them. None, he decided, and stayed where he was.

A strong, gusty breeze was blowing. Members of the crowd held up wetted fingers and nodded sagely. All the signs were auspicious. A bright, cheerful sunlight brightened all the colours in their silken clothes, bleached the rust-red sails of the *Chabi*.

A foreigner stood among the crowd—neither Chinese nor Mongol, but a tan-coloured man with eyes shaped

and closed, and the tendons of his bare feet were as rigid as birds' talons.

'Do they employ criminals for this?' the foreigner enquired.

'No, no. Just one of the crew—either very drunk or very stupid.'

The horse-eyed foreigner nodded and began sketching on a piece of paper, drawing a diagram of the kite harness.

'Let him go! Untie him! You leave him alone!' shouted Haoyou, and struggled to get back on board. But a stevedore carrying a sack of salt had set it down at the top of the gangplank and sat down to watch the testing of the winds. The gangplank was blocked.

'Father! Don't let them! Let him go, you demons!' But the noise of the crowd swallowed Haoyou's voice like the sea swallowing a whisper. He could not make himself heard.

Should he run to fetch his mother? By the time he reached her, the kite would be aloft. Should he avert his eyes from the humiliation of his honoured father? Haoyou could no more have looked away than a dead man can close his own eyes. He saw the hatch-cover carried up to the bow and angled so as to catch the full force of the wind. He saw its woven fabric flex and bow, and his father's hair spread itself around his head as if glued fast to the hurdle.

With a noisy rattle, the wind-tester shed gravity and rose into the air on a gust of wind, tautening the rope. The crew paid out more, then, as the hurdle tilted, jerked on the rope so hard that Pei's jaw snapped shut. The hurdle caught the wind again and rose straight up—thirty metres, forty. Haoyou could see that his father was shouting, but the wind snatched the words away and left only the black circle of Pei's mouth.

Then the gusty breeze failed. Momentarily, the kite

What was Pei seeing up there, in the province of the birds? Could he see Haoyou's little board-built house and his mother hanging out the washing or shelling peas for the cooking pot? Could he see the white furrows ploughed by ships, and the shoulderblades of whales hummocking the ocean? As far as the Imperial City? The island of Japan? Could he see into the Past or into the Future?

The crowd began to mix and moil, merchants shouting to their secretaries, factors shouting to the warehousemen, money-lenders offering terms of credit. The first sacks of salt were being carried over the springy gangplank by agile barefooted stevedores. Haoyou was jostled and pushed out of the way. Still his face was upturned, his thumbs trapped inside his fists, his eyes on the tiny, distant kite, as the crew hauled it in.

They worked with no great urgency. The urgency was over: the captain had secured a prosperous voyage. So they wound in the kite slowly, like old women skeining wool. Little by little, the hatch-cover became visible for what it was, its passenger taking on detail: the colour of his trousers, the tilt of his head. The lower it got, the more the wind tossed it about, to left and right. At last the breezes failed to hold it and it slammed down into the sea, narrowly missing the harbour wall. It floated passenger-uppermost, and Pei was jarred and jolted as the crew scuffed it across the surface of the water. As it scraped and banged against the ship's hull and was pulled aboard, Haoyou dashed between two stevedores and crossed the bendy gangplank in nimble strides. 'Father! *Father!*'

Pei had returned to earth with the hatch-cover. His eyes were still open, his lips still drawn back from his teeth in shouting. But his spirit had remained among the birds. Somewhere during the flight, his heart, over-crammed with fear, had burst like a sack of grain and his spirit had been spilled into the path of the prevailing easterly winds.

2

Troubled Spirits

Haoyou's mother, Qing'an, was a woman of uncommon beauty. Pei's relations had nudged one another at the wedding and stared, astonished that a mere deckhand had achieved such a bride. His ageing and ugly aunts and great-aunts shook their heads, implying that no good would come of it, comforting themselves that the bride's family was destitute and of no repute. But his cousins and uncles had simply looked, mouths ajar, savouring this new adornment to the family, as they would a rare and beautiful vase on the family shrine.

Now they were gathering again, for her husband's funeral, startled by the manner of Pei's death but unstartled by death itself. It was a common enough event among the poor of Dagu's waterfront.

'A sailing man is lucky to have had such a dry death,' Great-Uncle Bo intoned in his croaking, bullfrog voice.

His thin wife, Mo, ducked her thin head in agreement. 'It is harder for a widow when her man is lost at sea and she has no body to mourn over.'

Did they think this was easy, then, for Qing'an? This jostling invasion of distant relations eating the last food out of her storage jars? Most had not visited Pei and Qing'an since the naming of their first child. They marvelled now that Haoyou had grown to such an age without acquiring any more brothers: only one small, worthless sister.

'The woman has obviously been trying to keep her

Someone set off a crackling, rip-rap firework alongside his father's shrine, but Haoyou thought the explosion was inside his head.

'What's the matter?' asked the hollow-eyed girl.

Haoyou should have said nothing. No one speaks to a stranger at a funeral: they just chatter idly. But he was caught off guard. 'Why is he still here? The *Chabi* sailed yesterday. Why isn't he gone?'

'Who?'

With a nod of his head, Haoyou pointed out the First Mate, who was in deep conversation with the head of the family, Great-Uncle Bo. There was no mistaking those buck teeth, the long necklace of mummified animal parts, the tattooed pig on his hand. 'He killed my father,' said Haoyou.

The rip-rap firework burned out. A single rocket, propped up in an oil bottle, shifted in a gust of wind. The bottle overturned and the rocket went off, like a hornet, ripping between the startled heads of the funeral guests and hitting the chicken coop with a noise like Mongol artillery. One chicken was killed outright. The rocket passed within a hand's breadth of little Wawa, who had just come back with an example of her brother's handicraft to show the hollow-eyed lady.

The kind lady had asked if her brother made toys for her; so she had brought the kite he made for her second birthday—the one with a carving of a little man hanging on beneath it. Now Wawa stood stock still, terrified by the stray rocket, the kite clutched to her chest, her little fingers inadvertently pushing through the paper.

The crowd drew back from her, with a gasp of superstitious dread. A kite with a man aboard it? At the funeral of a man who died aboard a wind-tester?

Then the hollow-eyed lady darted forward and swept Wawa up into her arms, tickling her, blowing in her ear,

seen her weep openly before, in front of him, and he had no idea what to do, other than avert his eyes and sidle awkwardly back into the house. In the doorway he collided with the hollow-eyed girl.

'I put your little sister down to sleep,' she explained, holding up a hand alongside her face, so as not to shame her hostess by seeing her cry. 'I weep for your sorrows,' she said, and was gone, skittering out into the lane on her little wooden pattens. With some part of his brain, Haoyou was aware that only she, out of all the women at the funeral, had been wearing pattens rather than straw slippers. She alone walked raised up above the dirt and litter of the dirty, dockside lanes.

When Haoyou woke, he tried to move so fast that his dream could not cling to him. He determined to shake it off by the sheer speed with which he scuttled out of bed, fetched in the water, brought it to the boil. He concentrated entirely on pouring the hot water into the two cups, without spilling a drop, sprinkling the tea leaves in exactly equal numbers on to the steaming liquid. He spaced two of the cups in the precise centre of the tray, and carried it so carefully that not a single drop spilled. Then he circled the partition to where his parents' bed lay beneath a grey-morning window.

'Good morning, honoured mother and father,' he said, as he had said a thousand times.

Then the tray fell from his hands with a crash, and he stood staring at the shards of pottery, the spreading puddle of tea. He had been trying so hard to bury his dream under everyday routine that everyday routine had undone him. This was the day after his father's funeral, and he had forgotten his father was dead. 'I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to say it! I forgot! No! I mean, I didn't forget. Of course I didn't forget, but . . . '

'Well, Haoyou, it's plain your father's spirit is angry. All that trouble at the funeral. Now this dream of yours: your father coming to you, like a black bird . . . And the broken cups. Your father's spirit is trying to tell us something. We must find out what he wants.' She had lowered her voice to a whisper, as if her husband might even now be eavesdropping outside his own bedroom: he from whom she had never kept a secret while he was living.

'No, you don't understand . . . ' Haoyou began.

'Hush,' said his mother soothingly. 'Mipeng will know. The medium will know what we have to do. You mustn't worry.'

'You don't understand!'

But his mother was preoccupied, wondering what she could sell to pay for the medium's advice.

And now that Haoyou thought back, of course his mother was right. Everything pointed towards it: a restless spirit, an unhappy spirit, a malevolent spirit demanding something from those left behind in the living world. The toppling firework, Wawa fetching in the unwelcome kite, the thieving seagull, the dead chicken . . . It hardly seemed worth correcting her about his dream.

But the face on the nightmare cormorant—fixing him with its beady eye, gaping after him with its serrated bill—had not been his father's.

It had been First Mate Di Chou, his father's killer.