

The Race to Uswag

SYNOPSIS

At the age of ten years old, every duck on the island of Pigado must cross a river to reach Uswag. Isug and Tawhay are brother ducks who turn ten years old one summer day. The two ducks agree to race to Uswag. Isug is determined to win the race by paddling as fast as he can that he ignores the pain in his legs and the growl in his stomach. Meanwhile, Tawhay floats his way across the river. He becomes absorbed in the sights and sounds around him throughout the race. When they reach Uswag, one of them wins, but each duck discovers something about himself. What happens when they reach Uswag? For Isug and Tawhay, the end is just the beginning.

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The day finally came when Isug and Tawhay turned ten and they had to leave their home.

The two ducks lived on a small island far from the eyes of searching men, the island of Pigado. Being hatched on the same day, Isug and Tawhay looked exactly alike. Both had brown bodies, blue bills, and black heads. Only their eyes differed. Isug had coal-black eyes that flitted from one spot to another, while Tawhay had brown eyes that loved to gaze at the clouds and the stars.

A river flowing over a gently sloping bed surrounded the verdant island. The light in Pigado, filtered by overhanging branches, was golden yellow. The air smelled of *ylang-ylang* in the morning and *dama de noche* at night. Tall *banaba* trees canopied the leaf-strewn ground. Cicadas sang cheerful ballads at daybreak. Crickets hummed lullabies until dawn.

Food abounded on the island of Pigado. Sweet mulberries hung from trees, ready for anyone's picking. Palms swelled with saps. Insects gnawed on twigs. Grass grew tall. Young fern fronds sprouted everywhere.

Everything was almost perfect in Pigado except for one thing: the arrival of summer. For summers on this island meant cracked soil, brown leaves, parched throats, and empty stomachs.

The inhabitants on the island had a yearly tradition. Every summer, male ducks older than ten years old would have to cross the river from Pigado to reach the nearest island, the island of Uswag. This island had a lush forest teeming with food all year long. These ten-year-old ducks would scour for food and then carry them back to Pigado to share with the rest of the ducks living on the island.

When the day Isug and Tawhay turned ten years old came, dense gray clouds hovered above. Tilha, their mother, swam towards them. Tilha's wings flapped delicately like two wooden fans on a humid day. She resembled them except for her neck that was longer than most ducks, making her look like a swan instead of a duck.

"It is now time for you to leave, my children," Tilha whispered as the two ducks lowered their heads and she kissed the top of each.

"Mother, I will miss the smell of *ylang-ylang*. The sound of crickets. The shade of trees. I will miss Pigado. But I will miss you the most, mother," Tawhay's voice turned softer until it became slightly louder than a whisper. His eyes looked up slowly to meet hers. He nestled his head briefly in Tilha's nape before turning away.

Beside Tawhay, Isug flapped his wings vigorously. His bill trembled before letting out a squawk.

“May God keep you safe in your journey,” Tilha’s voice cracked as the two ducks started to swim away. She watched their receding figures become smaller and smaller until they were no longer visible. Something dropped in the water beneath her eyes, like pebbles one after the other. She sighed and turned around to head home, a hole she burrowed near a *banyan* tree beside the river.

Isug and Tawhay swam side by side that afternoon until the course of the river became unfamiliar to them. Gone were the *banaba* trees with their sweet-smelling purple flowers by the river edge. Gone was the clear water flowing in the river where they could see rocks and pebbles that settled at the bottom. Instead, they saw rows of green mangroves lining the riverbank. The water turned brown and the air smelled like damp soil: putrid and musky.

When night came, the two ducks decided to rest near the edge of the river. Isug closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but his mind wandered elsewhere. He imagined himself having wings. His eyes remained shut and he imagined he was flying above the river and into a distant land. While Isug imagined, an idea struck him. He opened his eyes and nudged his sleeping brother beside him.

“Tawhay, Tawhay ... wake up! I thought of something,” Isug blurted out excitedly as he continued to nudge Tawhay with his bill.

“Hmmmmmm.....What is it?” Tawhay mumbled, his eyes still half-closed.

“To make our trip more fun and interesting, what if we race to Uswag? What do you think?”

“Hmmmmmm ... Do we really have to?” Tawhay murmured as he yawned. The truth was, he hated any form of competition. All he wanted was to swim beside his brother until they reach the island of Uswag.

“Think about it, our journey will be a lot more exciting if we will have this race.” He tapped Tawhay’s wing with his bill.

“Alright then, if that’s what you want, Isug. We will race tomorrow, but for now, let us try to sleep,” Tawhay conceded. He yawned and went back to sleep immediately.

Though their resting place was silent and dark, Isug could not sleep. When he thought of the race the following day, his heart beat faster and his feet turned cold. Since daybreak was approaching, he decided to spend the rest of the night stretching and paddling by the edge of the river to prepare for the race. Meanwhile, Tawhay’s sleep was deep and filled with vivid dreams.

Tawhay dreamt that after several days of swimming, he finally arrived on the island of Uswag. He searched for Isug but he was nowhere to be found. He began to explore the island alone and saw that the island was almost identical to Pigado. It had flower-filled *banaba* trees and smelled of *ylang-ylang*.

When the first hint of light crept in before the sun rose, Isug was still paddling. Near him, Tawhay opened his eyes, inhaled deeply, and looked around. He discovered that tall pine trees surrounded the spot where he slept. Several birds perched on their boughs, chirping loudly above him. Looking up and down, Tawhay noticed the mist that hung in the air, the dew on the blades of grass, the motes visible in shafts of light.

“Good morning, Isug! I hope you had a good sleep,” he greeted his brother cheerfully when he noticed him paddling near the river.

“Are you ready to race, Tawhay?” Isug replied curtly.

“Yes, I am ready. Today is a beautiful day for a race, isn’t it?” Tawhay said as he glanced at the crowd of pine trees. He dipped his feet into the water beside Isug.

“Well, then ... If you are ready, let’s begin the race. On your mark, get set, go!” Isug shouted. As soon as he said the word “go,” he paddled swiftly as he had practiced the night before.

Tawhay, on the other hand, thought it was a good day to float. The sun started to rise higher and the air was crisp. Morning was his most favorite part of the day after all. “I will still reach the other side no matter what. Why do I have to hurry?” he thought, so he lay on his back and looked at the sky. Tawhay began to hum.

Cotton clouds in the sky
Change shapes as they pass by.
Rabbit and a dragonfly
Skip and hop, flutter and fly.

By mid-day, Isug was ahead by a comfortable lead but he still swam fast. He ignored the steady rumbling in his stomach and the pain in his legs. He decided not to stop to eat or to rest. “No pain, no gain. No pain, no gain,” he chanted to himself.

The two brothers did not see each other the whole afternoon. Isug swam as fast as he could, for he had no time to waste. He was focused solely on one thing: winning.

Meanwhile, Tawhay continued to float. Once in a while, he craned his neck to observe his surroundings. Every time he did, he sighed in contentment. Wildflowers of every color surrounded him: pink hibiscus that looked like trumpets, purple asters reminding him of stars, and white lilies covered by large ferns. Blue-bodied dragonflies flapped their delicate lace-like wings around him, breaking the silence to create a steady hum.

The sun began to set. While Tawhay was afloat, he chanced upon a watercress on the river and stuffed some of them into his bill. “Wow! These are delicious! I wish Isug were here to taste them,” he thought. As he continued eating, several fireflies circled around him. He could hear the distant hooting of owls nearby, the croaking of frogs, and the sighing of crickets. He listened to the symphony of sounds around him that he completely forgot about the race.

“I wonder where Isug is,” he thought as he floated, breathing in the cool evening night air that reminded him slightly of Pigado.

That night, Isug became so hungry that he decided to look for food. It had been days since he last ate. After several hours of searching, he saw a tall shrub of honeysuckle under a tall fern tree. He drank the nectar from its flowers and ate some of the wild grass beside it. When he was full, he slept soundly beside the honeysuckle, its sweet scent lingering in the air.

At the break of dawn, Isug woke up with a start. When he realized he slept the whole night, he hurriedly got back into the river and paddled as fast as he could. From a distance, he saw the figure of Tawhay floating near Uswag.

“Oh no! Tawhay will win the race!” Isug shrieked. With all the strength that he could muster, Isug headed towards Tawhay. But when Isug caught up with Tawhay, he saw his brother’s closed eyes and pursed lips. A soft, vibrating hum escaped his lips every now and then.

Not wanting to wake his brother, Isug swam towards the edge of the river as silently as he could. When he reached the edge where the island of Uswag was, he shouted, “Hooray! Hooray! I won! I won!” Roused by his brother’s voice, Tawhay opened his eyes slowly. He saw Isug by the riverbank of Uswag.

“Congratulations, brother!” Tawhay smiled and looked around. “It’s so good to see you again.” Tawhay swam slowly towards the shore of Uswag. By this time, the sun was beginning to rise.

The two brother ducks hugged. Isug stepped out of the river. As soon as his webbed feet touched the ground, he noticed something different. His legs became bigger, and his wings were wider. “Could this be true? Could it be possible?” his voice shook in disbelief.

Isug walked in small, hesitant steps. He stepped back, ran, and propelled himself up. There was no wind but he felt his body lifted by air. He felt weightless and free. He made a startling discovery: he now had the power to fly.

Tawhay hoisted himself out of the river and into the island of Uswag. Because he chose to float his way from Pigado all the way to Uswag, he still had the same legs and wings. But by staring at the clouds and the stars, by listening to the sounds around him, he could barely contain the stories and the song he now had.

Isug flew back to where Tawhay was. Their eyes met briefly then nodded. The two brothers smiled at each other.

As Isug flew higher and higher to explore the island, Tawhay turned his head and watched his brother disappear behind the clouds. When he looked around, he saw clumps of grass near the edge of the river and he remembered the delicious watercress he ate the day before. He tucked

some beneath his wings to take home. As he turned around and looked down, he saw his face reflected on the surface of the water. He also saw his neck, now shaped like his mother's. He knew then what he had to do.

Tawhay went back to the river. As his winged body felt the warmth of water, he let himself be carried to somewhere he would rather be, neither in the clouds nor in the stars, but where he felt he belonged.

High in the sky he soared.

Wide is the river we crossed.

He is close to the clouds and the stars,

Yet I dream of my home and my songs.