Duc Tho Le’s Birthday Present

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Illustrated by Jeff Merrill
It was Duc Tho Le’s birthday.  
His American friends had parties and got gifts on their birthdays.  
But there would be no presents for him because . . . he and Grandfather had left Vietnam with only the clothes they were wearing and Grandfather’s bamboo seeds.  
Even now, after more than a year, life was hard for them.
“Today I will help Grandfather in his bamboo garden,” thought Duc.
“I will not think about my birthday. I know Grandfather cannot give me a present.”
Grandfather was in his garden, wearing the bamboo sun hat he had worn every day in the rice fields of Vietnam. Grandfather’s sun hat, like his bamboo garden, reminded him of home.
“May I help you, Grandfather?”
Duc asked. “I will step carefully. I, too, love your bamboo garden.”
“You need not work today, my grandson. This is your birthday.”
Just then Duc’s friends, Sam and Rosa, entered through the gate.
“We knocked, but no one came to the door,” Sam said.
“So we came around to see if we could find you,” said Rosa.
Grandfather made a polite bow.
“I’m pleased that my grandson’s friends have come again to our home. May I offer you tea and rice cakes?”
“I’d like a rice cake,” said Rosa.
“But no tea, thank you.”
“We can’t stay long,” Sam said. “We’re going fishing. We want Duc to go with us.”

“But I have no fishing pole,” said Duc.

“You can watch our lines,” said Sam.

“When a fish starts to pull, you can tell us, just like you did last time.”

Duc did not know what to say. He wanted to be with his friends, but it was no fun just to sit and watch. If only he had a fishing pole of his own!
“Do you not want to go fishing with your friends?” asked Grandfather.
“Oh, yes, Grandfather!” said Duc.
“But I have no pole.”
Grandfather smiled.
“I have for you a *su’ngac nhiên.*”
“A surprise? For me?”
“Yes,” said Grandfather.
“A special *su’ngac nhiên* for your birthday.” Grandfather held out the *su’ngac nhiên.*
Duc and Sam and Rosa crowded around the special surprise.
Duc jumped up and down.
“Grandfather!
You have made me a bamboo fishing pole!”
Suddenly Duc stopped jumping. He felt sad.
“But Grandfather!
You love your bamboo garden.
You cut your tallest and finest bamboo to make me this fishing pole.”
“I love you, my grandson,” said Grandfather.
“And I wished to give you a special gift.”
Duc hugged Grandfather.
“This is a most splendid birthday present!
I will catch many fish today with this fine bamboo pole.
And I will give them all to you!”
Reading

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