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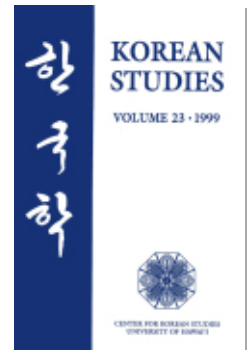
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Death of a Girl

By *Kim Wŏnju*

Translated by *Yung-Hee Kim*

[1]

The clock on the circular tower perched on the second floor of the Chongno Police Station was pointing to ten o'clock in the evening. A streetcar bound for the military drill-ground rushed in from the direction of the East Gate and stopped at the corner of the Chongno belfry. For a few frenzied minutes, people got on and off the streetcar. Then, at the second ring of the conductor's bell, the electricity-lit streetcar started moving. It was jam-packed, with no empty seats left.

In one corner, a teenage girl, who looked like a student, sat with her face turned sideways, as if trying to avoid the attention of other passengers. In no time, the streetcar arrived in front of the Hansŏng Bank.

"I am checking the tickets of passengers who got on before," announced the conductor, carrying a ticket-puncher in his hand as he wove through the spaces between the passengers. After punching the tickets of three or four people, the conductor came over to the girl and took the fare money from her outstretched hand. Then, in the middle of detaching the ticket and punching it for the girl, the conductor abruptly stopped. He noticed a drunken man on the seat behind her, hugging a dog and dozing off.

"Hey! How did you get on the train with a dog? Get off!"

The conductor rang the bell to stop the streetcar. The drunken man looked up at the conductor and said, "What's wrong with getting aboard with a dog? What fuss has my dog made anyway?" Then he hugged the dog even tighter.

The streetcar came to a halt.

"Hey! Get off right now! You can't ride a streetcar with animals."

"Then I'll pay for his fare. What has the dog done anyway?"

The man didn't even bother to stand up. The conductor suddenly lost his temper and grabbed him, trying to make him stand up.

"Hey! I said animals are not allowed on the train. Get off quickly! We've got no time."

As the conductor jerked the unwilling man from his seat, the dog fell from the man's arms onto the girl's back and rolled down with a yelp. Startled, the girl cried out "Oh, my goodness!" and sprang to her feet, turning her head around, and then sat down again.

Several passengers burst into laughter all at once. The drunken man, staring at the conductor, picked up the dog and, clutching it in his arms, stood up to argue with the conductor.

The operator, who had stopped the streetcar and stood watching the scene, stepped in. Grabbing the man by the arm, he pushed him out of the train.

"Hey! Get off quickly! Listen! We don't have time to waste."

After he forced the man to step down from the streetcar, the operator rang the bell and started the engine.

The man, now standing on the street, shot a nasty look at the innocent operator and said, "Humph! How long do you think you can last in your job?" Then he went off.

The passengers broke into another round of laughter. Ringing the bell, the conductor murmured, "My! Because of that fellow, we lost ten minutes."

Immediately the streetcar started to move forward.

Suddenly, a passenger yelled, "Hey, conductor! Something has fallen here."

Surprised, the conductor bent down and saw two envelopes that had been dropped and stepped on. Just as he was about to pick them up, the student-like girl also noticed them and quickly picked them up herself, her face turning pale. Then she accidentally dropped one of them. The envelope was addressed to "So-and-so Daily Newspaper." While holding onto the other envelope, she hastily picked up the one she had dropped. On the envelope she held, two lines of addressee were written:

"To my father and mother."

Several passengers darted suspicious glances at her at once. She appeared about seventeen or eighteen years old, with a delicate face. But a look of distress overshadowed it, as if she was deeply troubled in her heart. Traces of tears were evident in her clear and winsome eyes beneath her finely arched eyebrows.

The conductor was watching the scene with a detached look. The girl tucked the letters inside the waist of her dress. Then she leaned back in her own seat and sat stiffly with her face turned away.

Some passengers looked admiringly at her, while others thought that there was something amiss about her. Those who admired her were only caught up

with her beauty, whereas those who noticed her flustered way of handling the letters harbored suspicion.

[2]

Thus, the eyes of the passengers in the streetcar were either filled with admiration or with suspicion. But had they a chance to tear open the seals of the envelopes and read the two letters hidden in her bosom, their suspicion would have been confirmed immediately. The content of the letters was as follows:

Your undutiful daughter, Myöngsuk, is now about to leave your care forever. As much as I am aware of the sin of ingratitude, I am bidding you farewell with a few words.

Heaven gave us our precious lives to be lived as long as we want. So it is a sin to repay with disobedience the enormous debt I owe you for your having raised me for the past eighteen years. You cannot fathom the depth of grief I feel in leaving this world by cutting my innocent life short even before it reached twenty. This unfilial daughter now regretfully returns to the bright heaven above because of a helpless situation beyond her control.

During this very brief span of my life over eighteen years, I have known both joy and pain. I was happy when I carried on like a spoiled child, not knowing any better. But I got to know pain once I learned the way of the world better. If I had not attended school and got an education, my attitude toward you today would have been different. All my senses tell me that you sent me to school to lead a life worthy of a human being, not the opposite. But since last year, after my graduation from school, you have forced me to become a mindless person, pushing me to an unbearable limit.

I would welcome wealth and high position, because I am just an ordinary person. Also, as a woman, I would love to get married to a good man. But I don't want any undeserving riches and honor. When I became eleven, you arranged my betrothal with Kapsöng, son of Mr. Kim Yöngsik. Granted that you are my parents who gave me life and raised me, but I am at a loss in figuring out what your intentions are and how you could write off your promise to Mr. Kim now that he went bankrupt. If you really are concerned about your daughter's well-being, why is it that you would not arrange a proper marriage for me, so that I can live openly without shame? You insist that I become a concubine to this Mr. Min, but that is no different from making me a slave. My pain is indescribable. I know that Mr. Min is the son of a well-known family, but he is not the kind of man I want to marry.

Don't you see what a fine mess my two older sisters are in now? At first, you were very happy and satisfied that you reached your goals by marrying them off without having to wait too long. (It's hard for me to understand whether the arrangements were made because of their vanity or even whether such matters were good or bad.) But before long, my sisters were forsaken by their husbands, and your expectations for them to become your daily comfort burst like bubbles. Don't you see my sisters ended up being prostitutes, nothing but playthings of rakes? Looking at what happened to them, I cry for your sake.

Now I regret that I cannot take care of you either, because I am an unfilial daughter myself. Please do not expect me to feel the same as before. Why have you driven my sisters to this end? It is to avoid the same fate as my two sisters that I am taking this last course of action. Kapsöng is my intended, whom you chose yourself. Besides, I have also given my heart to him. But now all this has come to nothing. If I stay alive even one more day, there's no doubt I will be sacrificed for your sake.

So I am leaving you now having made up my mind to die. You have every reason to condemn this unfilial daughter. But isn't it wrong for parents to lead their children to shameful lives? I earnestly plead with you to change your mind so that you'd stop committing further transgressions. Before taking the road ahead of me, I am writing to you, but my tears blur my sight, making it impossible for me to tell all that I want to. I am leaving you now with my best wishes for you forever.

xx Day, March

Your unfilial daughter Myöngsuk.

To Honorable Reporters:

This letter is from a woman who is a grave sinner in this world. I am a pitiable person who is about to leave for heaven, having betrayed her parents for selfish reasons. But when you examine the circumstances carefully, you will find out that those who led me to this crime of disobedience and betrayal by means of taking my own life are none other than my beloved parents, who gave birth to me and raised me for the past eighteen years.

Without a full explanation of what I am talking about, my abrupt words will make you insist that no parents would lead their children to death and that I am an unfilial, wrong-headed daughter. But you need to pay attention to numerous women like me who are hidden from view in society. These women have long existed in this condition, but people take it lightly as something common. Society does not know what's happening to them, because no one has talked about it. I would like you, therefore, to look into this wretched fact hidden from society and make a fair report in your newspaper, so that it may awaken parents of women like mine.

It is difficult for me to accuse my parents of driving me to this fix. Still I offer myself as a sacrifice for those pitiful unmarried women who ruin their lives because they cannot speak for themselves, although they are in grievous situations like mine.

Please take pity on me and remember that by the time you open and read this letter, I will no longer be a person of this world. I am closing now as I hurry toward death.

xx Day, March

A female victim, Cho Myöngsuk,
addressing you with tears

[3]

Cho Myöngsuk, aboard the streetcar with the Han River as her final destination where she would end her life, is the third daughter of Cho Owijang. Some twenty years ago, Cho was the chief of the eight rakes known in the Seoul area, so to speak. Put in today's terms, he may be said to be the ringleader of villains. During those days, he served as a steward in a court official's household and lived comfortably. Thinking that the world would go on the way he would have it, he embezzled and got money by wrongfully parceling out farmlands. As times changed, however, he became useless and quickly lost the means of his livelihood, pushed to the margin of society like those of his type.

Since the rapid decline of his fortune, which had formerly allowed him to indulge in fine clothes and delicious food, Cho of no formal schooling had only the world of the demimonde to turn to—the world about which he had

plenty of knowledge. He made a living with little complaint by making the rounds of *kisaeng* houses to teach these women songs. Then, through the good offices of a friend, he took up with a *kisaeng* and made ends meet for a while as her proprietor. But as usually happens to those who fall behind the times, Cho failed in everything he laid his hands on. His years as a *kisaeng* proprietor were short-lived; new laws took effect, and the *kisaeng* freed herself by filing a charge against him with the police.

Although flat on his back, Cho ran out of schemes for making a living for a while. Then he began to study his three daughters carefully. He mulled over: "How about giving them away as concubines, because they are all good-looking!"

He floated this idea to his wife, who agreed with him at once: "I won't mind sending them away, as long as there is a good match." Cho was rather shocked by his wife's ready agreement. In the good old days when Cho indulged in debauchery, frequenting *kisaeng* houses and keeping a mistress, his wife had a lot to put up with. They often had brawls. His wife would go over to his mistress's house, smash up things, and make such a racket that the mistress ran away scared out of her wits: "Good heavens! I don't want any of your money or anything else."

After that incident, his wife was on guard, watching closely to see whether he would fall for another mistress. She used to say to others, "There is no worse hussy than those who become concubines. When they die, they will all go to hell."

Cho could not believe that his wife so readily accepted his suggestion to send their daughters away as concubines. But the truth of the matter was that during those two or three years when her husband made a living as a *kisaeng* proprietor, Cho's wife was simply jealous, with no opinion of her own. But having learned how to play the role of a *kisaeng* proprietor's wife, she began to have a liking for the trade itself and without realizing it actually came under its sway.

Moreover, there appeared no suitable candidates for their daughters. As the daughters grew older, Cho and his wife turned everywhere to find husbands for them, determined to send them away if the groom's side would feed the bride. Bargaining would break off in the middle though, because the man's side, after checking up on the bride's background, would back out, saying, "The bride would be no good with such a family upbringing."

Once, there was a proposal to take their oldest daughter just as a concubine, if it were at all acceptable to her parents. But then the proposition fell apart and the deal never took place. This made Cho all the more eager to give his daughter away as a concubine, especially when he became so hard up. So after having firmly made up his mind to give his daughter away as a concubine, he tried to spot a suitable match all over again. He happened to learn about a

rich man, Pak Yǒngt'ae of Chǒlla Province, a profligate, but Pak complained endlessly and finally abandoned Cho's oldest daughter. The daughter felt dejected for awhile, but she said to herself, "There are plenty of other men out there; Pak is not the only man in the world."

Helped by the tricks she picked up at home, she made up her mind not to be fooled by men but instead to play with them. From then on, she became something of a paramour, not a concubine. On the pretense of looking for a husband, she would rob dim-witted men of their money. But tricked by a man herself, she even gave her younger sister Tongsuk away as a concubine to a loafer, although he had to pay her parents.

While attending school, Myǒngsuk had observed what her parents and her older sister were doing and knew that they were wrong. She felt ashamed to meet people. She was fearful that others would notice what was going on at her home. One day some of her friends came over to her house to play and saw her oldest sister all dressed up and leading on men. The next day these girls spread these words at school: "Myǒngsuk's older sister is a flirt. She carries on with guys."

These words spread quickly all over school, and students whispered to each other, glancing at Myǒngsuk. Sensing what was going on, Myǒngsuk felt her face afire. She came home crying and said to her parents, "How could you let my sister carry on like this? Please stop her, even if we starve to death."

Sometime after her graduation, Myǒngsuk begged her parents for permission, and moved in with her mother's sister, who was an attendant at the memorial shrine for the royal family members.¹ There she entered another school as a junior. About that time an incident of serious consequence happened to Myǒngsuk. One evening Myǒngsuk went out to the alley near Sudong Street² to buy some notebooks and pencils. Suddenly a bell rang out noisily from behind her several times. Taken by surprise, Myǒngsuk turned around and saw right behind her a man in a Western suit riding on a bicycle. He had lost his balance and was frantically swinging the wheels in order to avoid people, while continually ringing the bell in the confusion of the moment. When Myǒngsuk stepped aside to get out of the way, she bumped into a Chinese-food delivery man and fell down. The dishes broke to pieces, scattering food all over the street. Myǒngsuk was covered with food from her face down to her waist. The man on the bicycle had to step down from it. For awhile, the Chinese man who had the dishes dumped on the street stood there dumbfounded, and then, noticing Myǒngsuk standing there, he charged, "What are you going to do with this mess?"

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

A large crowd of passersby gathered. A quarrel broke out between the Chinese man, who demanded Myǒngsuk to pay for the dishes, and Myǒngsuk, who was protesting. Observing this scene and watching Myǒngsuk carefully,

the bike owner pushed aside the people and stepped in. He apologized to Myŏngsuk and, calling for a rickshaw, asked her home address. After handing over five *wŏn*³ to the Chinese man as payment for the dishes, he told him to go away with no more argument. Then he urged Myŏngsuk—a total wreck of shame with her clothes all soiled—to get into the rickshaw. After she got in, he had the rickshaw man cover her with a raincoat, and he followed them on his bike.

There seems to be nothing as incomprehensible as human affairs in this world. Who would have guessed that this man on the bike was to become the cause of Myŏngsuk's decision to kill herself today? This man on the bike was Min Bŏmjun, the famous loafer known all over Seoul. As a spoiled son of a well-to-do family, he had sauntered around the pleasure quarters from his youth onward and squandered considerable sums of money. He got to know Myŏngsuk's father from those days, and her father borrowed a lot of money from Min, which he used up. In the past, when Myŏngsuk's father worked as a *kisaeng* proprietor, Min Bŏmjun used to hang around her house, eyeing her sisters. But since Myŏngsuk was still young and her older sisters already had their own beaus, he kept his secret designs to himself, unable to breach them. It had been about a year since Min Bŏmjun had stopped coming over to Myŏngsuk's house, and this chance meeting between them at the alley near Sudong Street may have been due to some bad *karma*. When Min Bŏmjun saw Myŏngsuk, he recognized the familiar face. Providing her with a rickshaw ride, he followed her to her aunt's house passing the Sujŏngung shrine.⁴ After coaxing Myŏngsuk about who her parents were, he found out that she was none other than the daughter of Cho Owijang.

As Min Bŏmjun recalled his old crony days with Cho, while looking at Myŏngsuk's face, he noticed that she had matured and become much prettier. He headed straight to Myŏngsuk's parents with plans forming in his mind. He told them about the incident at the alley near the Sudong street and gave them fifty *wŏn* to buy Myŏngsuk a new dress, saying that the whole thing was his fault. The hard-pressed Cho was happy over the money, and he asked Min Bŏmjun to come to visit his poor, humble home again.

Taking him up on this invitation, Min Bŏmjun came to visit Cho Owijang everyday with designs hidden in his mind, and depending on the situation at Cho's home, he gave money to Cho: for rice when they ran out of it and for firewood when it was in short supply. He even lent Cho pocket money. This continued for several months. Then one day, after bribing Cho Owijang with money, Min Bŏmjun laid bare what he had kept in his mind: he was willing to take Cho Owijang and his wife in his home if Cho would give Myŏngsuk as his third concubine after her graduation from school. The couple readily consented, as a popular saying goes, "An ardent wish which one dared not hope was fulfilled."

They brought Myöngsuk back home and broke the news to her. Instantly, Myöngsuk felt her face turning red-hot and said, "What's going to happen to Kapsöng, then?"

Her mother shouted, "You hussy! Don't you ever mention Kapsöng again! I'd smash your mouth. Don't you trust your parents?"

A few days prior to this event, Myöngsuk had a quarrel with her parents because of Kapsöng. In the past when Cho Owijang served as a steward in the house of the court official, he betrothed Myöngsuk to Kapsöng, the son of Kim Yöngsik, who frequented the official's house. The affair was motivated by Cho's ambition to make himself look good in the eyes of his master. Furthermore, at that time, Kim Yöngsik was prosperous because he was serving as the magistrate of Kwach'ön county. All these conditions appeared promising to Cho Owijang.

Thereafter Kim Yöngsik opened an inn outside the South Gate, successfully running it for a few years, but this business failed and went bankrupt, forcing him to break up his family. Out of desperation, Kim visited Cho Owijang and implored him to take care of Kapsöng and to oversee his education. Kim himself would go to the countryside to settle down first and then come back to reclaim Kapsöng. Cho Owijang thought for a while but in the end politely refused the request. Kim took leave, lamenting the fickleness of the human heart. Then, supported by his wife, Cho dissolved the engagement without delay.

Myöngsuk pointed out to her parents their wrongdoing and tearfully begged them to take their decision back, but was instead scolded, "Have you gone mad? You are a shameless wench so bold as to talk openly about men!"

Wincing at this rebuke, Myöngsuk cried all day long. Kim's son became an employee in a store, after having given up his studies. Thereafter, Myöngsuk tried to persuade her mother, saying that the situation of the Kim family was pitiful and that it would be good to take Kapsöng in at her house. This only provoked another round of scolding from her mother.

Feeling helpless, Myöngsuk's tender heart was filled with anxiety, while inwardly her sympathy went to Kapsöng, whom she had not yet met. Up until that point, she had lived with a single determination to rescue that boy. Then, out of the blue, the accident involving Min Bömjün happened. This prompted Myöngsuk to bring up the topic of Kapsöng, but with that tongue-lashing, she could not breathe another word. She returned to her aunt's house and cried.

Her parents now started living on the rice and firewood supplied by Min Bömjün, and they kept on either threatening or wheedling her. Myöngsuk resisted them with all her might, and her parents couldn't do anything about it. They told Min Bömjün that they would leave her alone until her graduation and then would dispatch her to him. At the same time they cautioned him to be tactful not to give out any hints to her.

As Myŏngsuk's graduation drew near, her parents began preparing bridal clothing, and she noticed it when she dropped by her house. Her heart sank. She returned to her aunt's house and decided to run away. She pawned some of her clothes and bought a train ticket with the money. She headed toward Inch'ŏn but was apprehended by a policeman because of her suspicious behavior and brought back to her aunt's home. Subsequently her parents took her back home and shut her in, while keeping an eye on her.

Today happened to be the Cold-Food day⁵ and her parents had gone to their ancestral grave to perform memorial services. They had not come home yet. Taking advantage of this situation, Myŏngsuk sneaked out of her house, lying to the maid, and took the streetcar. Although she wanted to see Kapsŏng for the last time, she could not even do so, because it was inappropriate for an unmarried woman to meet a man.

This was what Myŏngsuk had gone through up to today and explains why she escaped her home with the intention to put an end to her life.

[4]

In no time the streetcar stopped at the Han River station, having made stops at the South Gate station and the military drill field. Myŏngsuk got off. The night was far advanced and few people were about on the street. She was going to hide in a secluded place and end her life after all traces of people on the street were gone. With this plan in mind, Myŏngsuk crouched under the eaves of a house and waited for the night to deepen quickly.

[5]

The next morning, a ferryman discovered the body of a girl with a student's hairdo floating in the Han River under the railroad. The police inspection revealed two letters tucked in her bosom: one addressed to her parents, the other to a certain newspaper.

[*Sinyŏja*, no. 2, April 1920, pp. 41–50]

NOTES

1. The title *sujinkwan*, here given to Myŏngsuk's aunt, may refer to those attendants at the memorial shrine, Sujungung, where services were performed for members of the royal family who died young or without offspring. See Yi Hŭisŭng, comp., *Kugŏ taesajŏn* (Seoul: Minjung Sŏrim, 1982), 2096.

2. This refers to the area of Susong-dong in Chongno-ku, Seoul, today.

3. *Wŏn* was a monetary unit used during the colonial period. In the late 1920s, a sack of rice (*sŏm*) cost about ten *wŏn*.

4. This is the memorial shrine where Myŏngsuk's aunt serves.

5. Called *hansik*, this is a day in early April when Korean families visit their ancestral graves.