

A Lucky Day

Hyun Jin-geon

The sky was sullenly overcast, as if it might snow at any moment, but instead of snow, a cold drizzle fell steadily, half-frozen drops spattering onto the ground.

For **Kim Chöm-ji**, who worked as a rickshaw man within the East Gate district, this day was the luckiest he had had in quite a while. It began in the morning when he escorted the “madam” from the house across the street as far as the streetcar line, apparently to head inside the city gate (though technically, that was still within the gates). After that, hoping for more fares, he loitered around the streetcar stop, casting almost pleading glances at each passenger stepping off. Finally, a man in Western dress—likely a teacher—asked for a ride to **Tonggwang School (東光學校)**, and Kim gladly took him there.

He earned thirty jeon on the first trip and fifty jeon on the second—an auspicious sum for so early in the day. In truth, luck was with him. For nearly ten days, he had hardly laid eyes on any money. So when coins—ten-jeon nickels, or sometimes a five-jeon coin—fell clinking into his palm, his eyes nearly brimmed with tears. Even better, the eighty jeon total he now held was invaluable. With that amount, he could soothe his parched throat with a glass of cheap rice wine if he liked, but more importantly, he could buy a bowl of **seolleongtang** (ox-bone soup) for his ailing wife.

His wife had been coughing for more than a month. Since they were often forced to skip even meals of millet gruel, there was certainly no chance of affording medicine. Technically, if he had really tried, he could have managed to buy a dose or two, but he firmly believed that once you send medicine to drive out an illness, that illness just gets a taste for it and keeps coming back. Following this personal creed, he had never taken her to a doctor, so he had no idea what her disease might be. But judging from how she now lay flat on her back, unable even to turn onto her side, it was clearly serious. The illness had worsened about ten days earlier, after she ate some poorly cooked millet and became badly constipated. On that occasion, Kim had finally gotten hold of some money, bought a small sack of millet, plus a bundle of cheap firewood. According to him, “that good-for-nothing woman, all frantic, boiled it in a pot.” The fire was weak, she was in a rush, and the millet didn’t properly cook. Yet “that damned woman” skipped the spoon altogether and grabbed handfuls, stuffing them into her mouth so quickly it was as if she feared someone would snatch it away. She stuffed herself until lumps popped out on both cheeks like fists. By that same evening, she was groaning that her chest hurt and her stomach felt tight, rolling her eyes as if she were in a fit.

Outraged, Kim had shouted:

"Damn you, woman! You get sick from not eating, you get sick from eating! What am I supposed to do? Why can't you open your eyes properly?"

And he slapped the cheek of the woman who lay there groaning. Though she did open her eyes a bit wider, tears welled up in them. Kim's own eyes burned hot as well.

And yet, even in her condition, she hadn't lost her appetite. For the past three days, she had begged her husband for some seolleongtang broth.

"This damned woman! You can't even stomach millet gruel, and you want seolleongtang? Are you going to eat it and then have another fit?"

He scolded her that way, but inside, it bothered him that he couldn't afford to buy it.

Now, though, he finally could. He could also buy porridge for their three-year-old son, **Gaettong**, who was hungry and crying beside his sick mother. With eighty jeon in his hand, Kim Chöm-ji felt well off for once.

But his luck did not end there. As he wiped the sweat and drizzle from his neck with a grimy rag that could hardly be called a towel anymore, he started to leave the school gate. Suddenly, someone called out from behind, "Rickshaw!" Kim stopped and, turning, saw a student from that same school hurrying toward him. The student blurted:

"How much to get to Namdaemun Station?"

He was probably a boarding student heading back to his hometown for winter break. He must have planned to leave that day, but the rain was falling, he had luggage, and he was at a loss. Then he spotted Kim, rushed out in half-worn shoes, still in his threadbare Western suit, letting the rain soak him.

"You want to go to Namdaemun Station?"

Kim hesitated for a moment. Did he dislike trudging so far in the rain with no rain gear? Or was he already satisfied with the two fares he had collected that morning? No, not at all. It was more that he felt a faint sense of dread, faced with so much good fortune coming at him all at once. Also, his wife's plea earlier tugged at his conscience. When the lady next door had come to call for him that morning, his wife—her face reduced to skin and bone, her eyes the one remaining well of vitality, large and deeply sunken—had looked up at him with a pleading light in them.

"Don't go out today. Please, stay with me at home. I'm so terribly ill..."

She had murmured in barely a whisper, her breathing rattling in her throat. Dismissing it lightly, Kim had said:

"Damn it all, woman, talking nonsense. If I just sit around here, who's going to feed us?"

He leaped up to leave, but she waved her arms feebly, as if trying to hold him back.

"Don't go, then... come home early if you must go."

She had called after him in a choking voice as he went out.

Now, hearing the student ask to go all the way to the station, Kim suddenly saw again in his mind's eye his wife's trembling hands, her large eyes brimming with tears.

"So, how much to Namdaemun Station?"

the student asked again, sounding impatient. He glanced at the rickshaw man, muttering to himself:

"I think the train to Incheon leaves at eleven, then there's another around noon..."

"One won fifty jeon, please."

The words slipped out of Kim's mouth before he even realized it. Even he was startled at the hefty sum he had just named. It had been a very long time since he had asked for that much at once. At that, his excitement over making money flared up, burning away any concern he had for his wife. Surely she wouldn't get worse today, he told himself. No matter what happened, he couldn't give up a chance for a fare that was not just equal to his first two trips combined but even more than that.

"One won fifty... that's a bit much."

The student tilted his head doubtfully.

"Not at all. By distance, it's well over forty ri from here. And on a day like this, you've got to pay a bit extra."

Kim smiled broadly. He couldn't hide the joy radiating from his face.

"All right. I'll pay whatever you want—just get me there quickly."

The generous young customer left to gather his coat and luggage.

Leaving with the student on board, Kim Chŏm-ji felt as though his feet were as light as