

Home

By Hyun Jin-geon

Translated by Sora Kim-Russell

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About Hyun Jin-geon

Hyun Jin-geon (1900-1943), pen name Bing-heo, was born in Daegu in 1900. He debuted as a writer in 1920 with the publication of his short story “Sacrificial Flowers” (*Huisaenghwa*) in the literary journal *Genesis* (*Gaebyeok*).

In the 1920s, Hyun participated in the New Literature Movement as a member of the literary coterie journal *White Tide* (*Baekjo*), with Hong Sayong, Yi Sanghwa, Na Dohyang, Park Jonghwa, and others. He earned critical recognition for his short story “Poor Man’s Wife” (*Bincheo*), published in *Genesis* in 1921, and established his reputation as a major realist writer, ranked alongside Yom Sang-seop, with his publications of “The Corrupt” (*Tarakja*) and “A Lucky Day” (*Unsu Joeun Nal*) in *White Tide*. Some have described Hyun as one of the pioneers of modern Korean short fiction, along with Kim Dong-in.

“Home,” which came out in 1926, is a concise portrait of colonial Korea. In approximately 2000 words, this short work summarizes Korea of the 1920s, when the Japanese Empire’s colonial exploitation of the peninsula had reached its full stride, by focusing on one unique character. The narrator is seated in a train car with a man dressed in an unusual set of clothes and in short order learns that he had left his home village for Manchuria and then moved on to Japan before returning to Korea to search for work in Seoul. His impoverishment and misery serve as a dramatic allegory for the impact of Japanese colonialism on Korean life.

Home

In a train car headed from Daegu to Seoul, I met a peculiar-looking man. I could not stop staring at him in amusement. He had a kimono wrapped around him in place of a traditional overcoat, a plain cotton Korean-style jacket peeking out from under the kimono, and Chinese-style pants. The pants were made from a shiny, dark brown fabric that looked like oiled paper, the kind of pants you see Chinese people wearing all the time. His feet were wrapped with strips of cloth instead of socks, over which he wore straw shoes, and his hair was cut very short, nearly shaved. He didn't have a hat. It was the kind of odd get-up that you come across every now and then.

As luck would have it, our train compartment held people from three different countries. Reclining in the seat next to me was a Chinese man, and across from us was a Japanese man and the man in the funny clothes. Not only was he clad in garments from all three nations, but it turned out he was also fluent in Japanese, and his Chinese wasn't so bad, either.

The first words out of his mouth were “Dokomade oidedesuka? (Where are you headed?)” And from there, he proceeded to prattle on randomly about how Tokyo was like this and Osaka was like that and how people from Joseon eat a frightful lot of hot peppers and how at first Japanese food was so bland that it turned his stomach, until he saw that the Japanese gentleman, who'd been nodding his head halfheartedly and rubbing his short mustache between his thumb and forefinger while gruffly responding with a disinterested “You don't say?” would not indulge him, and so he turned to the Chinese man and began talking his ear off instead. “Nǐ qù nǎlǐ? (Where are you going?)” “Nǐ xìng shénme? (What is your name?)” He did his best to engage him,

but the Chinese man just gave him an enigmatic smile from his greasy, silently displeased-looking face and said nothing. Nevertheless, he kept on muttering and then looked at me and smiled.

It was the smile that a snake charmer gives his audience when he wants applause for his amazing feat.

I coldly avoided his eyes. I found his attempts to show off his puerile knowledge repulsive and ridiculous. He stopped talking for a little while and started scratching his head, then biting his fingernails, then staring out the window, as if bored. Finally, as if he couldn't bear to not talk, he turned to me and asked, "Where you headed?" in the Gyeongsang Province dialect.

"I'm on my way to Seoul," I said.

"That so? Nice to meet you. I'm headed to Seoul, too. I guess that makes us traveling buddies."

I didn't know how best to respond to his overly friendly tone, and frankly I didn't care to respond at all, so I said nothing.

"You lived in Seoul long?" he asked.

"I've lived there about six or seven years."

I was a little annoyed, but I couldn't not answer.

"That's a long time! This'll be my first time in Seoul. Where d'you suppose an odd-jobber like me should head? Do they have any *kijinyado*, as we say in Japanese?" he asked, and frowned, like he was contemplating his own narrow circumstances.

I discovered then that his face was far more suited to frowning than to smiling. His patchy eyebrows stuck straight up, and there were lines etched into the forehead of his droopy face. The flesh beneath his eyes kept twitching, and his cheeks were sunken. The left side of his

mouth was twisted into a sneer, as if he were chewing bitter sumac, and his crinkly eyes looked watery. He couldn't have been much older than thirty, but his face aged at least ten years when he frowned. I was so moved by the evidence of hardship in his face that my hostility towards him lessened.

“I don't know, but there must be workers' lodgings of some kind.”

He pressed me for details about the lodgings, as if grasping at straws, and asked, “Don't suppose there's any work to be found these days?”

I felt bad that my responses sounded so frosty and unkind. But as I knew nothing about available jobs, I couldn't give him any better answers. Instead, I asked him warmly, “Where are you coming from?”

“Hm? From my hometown, of course,” he said with a sigh. Then he began to unravel one thread of his hard-luck tale.

His hometown was a remote village, called H, in K County just outside of Daegu. The villagers, over a hundred families in total, once made their living by farming the land attached to the rail station; they made more money that way than if they'd farmed their own private lots. So while they were not well off, they were able to live comfortably and peacefully off of the land. But after the country was annexed, the land became the property of the Oriental Development Company. It might not have been so bad if they could have paid their farm rents directly to the company, but instead a so-called sharecropping middle management system sprang into being. These middle managers, who had never once touched soil in their lives, were sharecroppers for the ODC on paper but acted as landlords to those who did the actual work. After the share for the rent on the land went to the ODC and the middle managers took their cut, the actual farmers were left with a mere three percent of their yield. From that day on, phrases like “I'm dying” and

“I can’t go on” fell from their lips like Buddhist sutras from a monk’s. Villagers began to set out for other parts, choosing the vagabond life instead, while the village gradually fell apart.

Nine years ago, in the spring of the man’s seventeenth year (He was only twenty-five—how poverty and suffering could age a person!), his family heard a rumor that the living was good in West Gando in Manchuria and decided to move there. Of course, seeing as how they were being driven from their homes, nowhere on earth would have been a change for the better. And they had little chance of finding fertile fields open to them there. Any land that was even remotely suited to farming had already been snatched up by others, and there was more barren land than fertile. From the day they arrived, they struggled to put food in their mouths every morning and evening, so of course they had no means with which to feed and clothe themselves and plow that rough land for the eternity of a year. They borrowed a little seed money from others and tried their hand at farming, but come autumn, they were left clutching nothing. For two years, they were not living but rather willing themselves to hold on. Then his father fell ill and became a lonely ghost in a foreign land. Barely nineteen, he began looking after his widowed mother and dredged up every ounce of strength he had to keep their wretched lives going, but they didn’t make it another four years before his mother, too, died of malnourishment and hard labor.

“And then I lost my mother. She lay on her deathbed without getting to taste even a single spoonful of white rice porridge,” he said and abruptly stopped. The glistening in his eyes portended tears.

I didn’t know what I could say that would console him. I fumbled for a bit and then decided to open the bottle of rice wine that my friends had bought for me before I boarded the train. I poured some into two teacups, and we each had a drink. He drank five cups in a row, as if

the alcohol would melt the deep sorrow cast onto him by an unyielding fate, and then continued his story.

Afterward, he had no desire to remain in the place where he had lost his parents. He traveled through Sinuiju in the north all the way down to Andong in the south, finding odd jobs as a manual laborer along the way, and then set out for Japan in search of work. He worked in the coal mines of Kyushu and the ironworks of Osaka. The pay was a little better, but being young and lonely, he naturally gave himself over to debauchery. He could never seem to save any of his earnings, and his pent-up anger and sorrow would occasionally explode, making it impossible for him to settle in one place. Angry and longing for the mountains and streams of his native country, he raced back to Joseon and visited his hometown for the first time in years before deciding to move up to Seoul and look for work.

“That must have been nice to see some familiar faces.”

“What familiar faces? The village was gone.”

“Yes, I imagine a lot would have changed in nine years.”

“It didn’t just change. No one lives there anymore. No houses, no people, not so much as a stray dog.”

“Do you mean to say it’s a ghost town?”

“Hm, I guess you could say that. All that’s left are a few crumbling walls. I couldn’t even find the plot that our house used to sit on. I take it you’ve never seen an abandoned farming village?”

His voice cracked as it went higher.

“The rafters had all rotted and fallen, and the foundation stones were lying around exposed. It looked just like bones strewn around a dug-up grave. How could something like that happen? A village of over a hundred families reduced to nothing in less than a decade!”

He let out a long sigh and stared off at the distant mountains as if reliving the sight. Then he gulped down another cup of the wine that I had poured for him.

“Ah, it broke my heart, it broke it,” he said, and two fat tears spilled down.

I felt like I was looking directly at the wretched, gloomy face of Joseon between those two tears.

After a moment, I asked him, “So, you haven’t seen anyone that you used to know?”

“I saw one person. Just one.”

“Family?”

“No. Someone who used to live next door,” he said, and his face grew even gloomier.

“You must have been very excited to see each other.”

“Of course. It was like seeing a ghost. Not to mention that we had a little history...”

“History?”

“She and I were betrothed.”

“Aha!”

I was so amazed by this that my mouth wouldn’t close.

“Her life turned out no better than mine,” he said and told me her story.

She was two years older than him, but because they lived next door to each other, they grew up together, playing and fighting alike. When he turned fourteen, their parents talked about arranging their marriage, which made his young heart very happy. But in the winter of her

seventeenth year, the girl suddenly vanished without a trace. It was then discovered that her so-called father had sold her to a brothel in Daegu for twenty *won*.

As the news spread, the girl's family was driven out of the village and forced to move far away, and of course he never saw her again after that. It wasn't until his return, when he was passing through town on his way back from visiting his empty village, that he happened to run into the woman who had nearly become his wife. She was working as a nanny for a Japanese family. It had taken ten years of her life to pay off her twenty *won* "body price," and yet she was still left with sixty *won* in debt to the brothel. Aged and ailing from some virulent disease, she looked like a walking corpse, so her owner had graciously written off her remaining debt and released her the winter before.

Just as he had, she went first to the hometown that she had longed for for over a decade only to find her home gone, her parents gone, and only a lonely pile of stones to wring the tears from her eyes. She spent the day weeping and grieving the years lost and returned to the town where she wandered about until finding work with the Japanese family, thanks to the few words of Japanese that she had picked up over the last ten years.

"I know they say people change, but how can someone change *that* much? Her once-thick hair was thin and falling out. Her eyes were sunken, and even her skin, which used to be so smooth and soft, looked like it'd been burned with acid."

"You must have clung to each other and wept a great deal?"

"We didn't cry. We went straight to a noodle house and drank and then parted ways."

He let out a pained sigh, as if something were pressing hard on his chest, and looked exhausted from the old sorrows that sprang up anew in his mind.

"What's the point of talking about it?" he said sadly, and stopped.

It pained me, too, to hear about such a cruel fate.

“Let’s finish off the alcohol,” I said.

We poured each other drinks until the bottle was empty. Tipsy from the wine, he recited a song that he had once sung as a child, back before he had understood what it meant.

*They’re a paved road now,
the fields that kept us in sacks of rice.
He’s gone to prison now,
the friend who spoke up too much.
He lies in a public cemetery now,
the old man who tapped his long pipe.
She languishes in a brothel now,
the girl with the pretty face.*

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