

Two Friends

Standing on the stone step in front of the inner quarters, Deok-gi watched a manservant packing a quilt and pillow for him on the veranda. His grandfather came in from the outer quarters, his hands clasped behind his back. Seeing Deok-gi, he frowned and started grumbling.

“Deok-gi, someone’s here looking for you. Who is this guy? His hair is a mess. You know it’s important to have good friends. Why do all your friends who come around look like that?” His eyes widened as he caught sight of the quilt the manservant was wrapping. He stepped closer and touched it. “What’s this? What’s the good quilt—” Then he exploded. “How dare you! What’s this three-colored silk doing here? Silk is for your elders. You can’t take this all the way to a foreign country—you’ll just get it dirty! You’re just a student—are you crazy?” He shifted his gaze over to his granddaughter-in-law, who was standing in the kitchen without budging, and glared at her, too.

While his grandfather’s tongue-lashing focused on this new target, Deok-gi snuck away to the outer quarters, where he suspected—from the mention of disheveled hair and shabby looks—he would find that his visitor was Kim Byeong-hwa.

“Hey, I was going to stop by your place after dinner,” Deok-gi said, welcoming the friend he had seen just two days earlier.

“Oh, sure, a bourgeois like you coming to pay a visit to the likes of me! If

you're going to say good-bye to anyone, you might as well start with the head of the Bank of Korea." Byeong-hwa burst into laughter as he stood there, tall with hands buried deep in the pockets of his dusty overcoat.

"You just can't help being a wiseass every time we get together, can you? Cut it out, all right?" Deok-gi disliked being called a bourgeois. Not that he didn't feel fortunate to have enough to live on, but times being what they were, he didn't enjoy such sarcasm. "Come on in."

"What's the use of staying in?" Byeong-hwa said. "Let's go out. I'm hungry, I'm dying for a drink, and I don't want to go back to my boarding house for a miserable dinner with the family there. Anyway, they feed me only once a day — if I'm lucky — so why don't you pay, and I'll take you to a decent place? How does that sound?"

"How about I take you out and *you* pay?" Deok-gi went into the room that he was using for the time being.

"Give me a cigarette, will you? My mouth keeps telling me to put something in it." Byeong-hwa stretched out his hand and peered into the room.

"You go without cigarettes when I'm away, don't you?" Deok-gi tossed him the pack of Pigeons lying on the desk. "Seems you're only happy when you're bumming something off me, aren't you? Even if it's just a cigarette. How about we trade places in the exploiter-exploited class relationship?" Deok-gi hastily took off his Korean clothes as he spoke.

"You're getting upset about a cigarette? Like grandfather, like grandson!" Byeong-hwa inhaled slowly, savoring the flavor of the tobacco. "I'll wait outside. If the old man comes in and gives me the evil eye, it'll ruin our plans." He sauntered outside, beyond the gate of the outer quarters.

Actually, Deok-gi was also hoping to get away before his grandfather returned. Thinking about what Byeong-hwa had just said, Deok-gi snorted as he took the student uniform down from where it hung on the wall and put it on as fast as he could. He rushed out, overcoat in hand. His grand-

father would almost certainly assume from Byeong-hwa's state of disarray that he was the kind of person who'd try to get something from his grandson or worse, tempt him to drink and squander money.

"What time do you leave tomorrow?"

"Probably in the evening." Deok-gi, born into a leisure-class family, hadn't yet decided which train to take, and had left his plans vague. He figured he could just as soon leave the following day if he didn't get it together tomorrow, or even the day after that if something else delayed him.

"Well, I don't care when you leave. He must have given you quite a bit, huh?"

"Do you really think the old man would give me anything without counting down to the last coin on his abacus?"

"Stop whining. Are you afraid someone's going to ask you for a hand-out?"

"What have I got to hand out?"

"Come on! I won't let you leave until you give me enough to keep me fed for at least a month. If the landlord actually had something, he'd let me eat even if I couldn't pay, but his daughter works in a factory, and they can only afford to buy rice by the handful, even though rice prices have come down so much lately. I can't stand idly by."

Deok-gi looked sympathetic, but then he laughed and said, "They really made a mistake when they took you in!"

"That's how people like me get by, you know."

"You said it!"

"You just can't bring yourself to admit that it's a mistake being friends with someone like me. Am I right?" Byeong-hwa continued.

"You took the words right out of my mouth," Deok-gi said.

"You know that if it weren't for me, you wouldn't have anyone following you around and hitting you up for drinks."

“Yeah, right! And the great revolutionary of our generation must be so ashamed to admit to being friends with someone so green, so fresh out of secondary school. I’m truly honored by your presence, really.”

Nowadays, the two friends saw each other only once or twice a year. They traded sarcastic remarks every time they met, but they’d never actually been really angry at one another. Their friendship had begun thanks to their similar family backgrounds, when they were bright young students vying for first place in their class, and now nothing could break the deep understanding and sympathy that had developed despite their differences.

Neither was more intelligent nor more articulate than the other, but the fair-skinned Deok-gi was from a rich family and had an air of calm about him. Byeong-hwa was dark and brazen, with a stubborn streak. Deok-gi was not overly cheerful, in spite of having grown up sheltered in an affluent household. He regarded Byeong-hwa, who seemed to have become more cynical in the past couple of years, with aloofness.

“So where are we going?” Deok-gi asked. “You don’t look like you’re in the mood for Chinese or for Japanese fish-cake soup. How about we go to _____ House and hire a *gisaeng*, too?” Deok-gi had never been to a restaurant where *gisaeng* served.

“Do you think I’m some sort of lackey who wants to follow his rich friends around, squeezing as much out of them as possible? That kind of place is too good for me.”

“Didn’t you just tell me that I should be grateful for the privilege of buying you drinks? And now all you want to do is go to a cheap bar?”

“Exactly. You give me money for drinks, and you can go to the *gisaeng* house by yourself.”

The two young men made their way toward Jingogae.

“Now don’t be stubborn. Let’s just go in and eat. You should have a good meal at least once a day.” Not one for drinking, Deok-gi stopped suddenly

in front of a Western-style restaurant that he knew and tried to pull his friend inside.

“No, no. I know a better place farther down. I’m not sure who she is, but there’s this knockout who works there, two of them actually, and . . .” The truth was, Byeong-hwa was more interested in alcohol than food.

“Now I get it. You’re really a secret playboy, and I can guess what kind of a place you’re dragging me to.” Deok-gi laughed and followed his friend.

“Someone took me to this place yesterday. It’s called Bacchus. Isn’t that an excellent name? It’s a nice place. For some reason, they even seemed glad to see an unemployed guy like me. They probably liked my looks. I haven’t gotten such a welcome anywhere else in town.” Byeong-hwa suddenly sounded proud of himself.

Deok-gi was doubtful but followed his friend into Bacchus.

He could see what Byeong-hwa meant about not wanting to tag along with rich friends just to be fed and not belonging in fancy places, but his feelings were hurt all the same. He felt as if his friend were criticizing him. Byeong-hwa complained out of one side of his mouth and then ate whatever Deok-gi paid for with the other. Like most people who are well-off, he would have been happier if Byeong-hwa had just gone along with everything he said.

Naïve though he was, Deok-gi at least tried to understand how humiliating it might be for someone who didn’t have money to hobnob with those who did, tagging along like a footman, and how he would tire of acquiescing to his wealthier friend, allowing his pride to be stepped on.

The proprietor brought out a tray with a bowl of steaming fish-cake soup and two glasses filled with yellowish liquor. Deok-gi didn’t care much for alcohol, and the mere sight of the large, clumsy glasses chafed against his natural dignity; he couldn’t help but frown.

She had a dark complexion and small, sharp features, but her clear eyes

were those of an educated woman, and the way she pursed her lips into a friendly, ever-so-delicate smile gave her an air of intelligence.

Byeong-hwa gulped down his drink before the proprietor had even left. After a minute, Deok-gi asked, “Is she your knockout?”

Byeong-hwa couldn’t answer right away. “No,” he mumbled between bites of his fish cake. “But I should’ve asked where she’s gone to.” Still munching away, he clapped his hands to summon the proprietor. Even though Byeong-hwa had mentioned the beauty to his friend, he was not particularly interested in having her presence at the bar.

As she approached, Byeong-hwa finally swallowed. “What happened to that other girl?” he asked.

“She just left for the bathhouse. She should be back soon.” The proprietor stopped in the middle of the hall, her eyes on Deok-gi.

To her, he seemed fair, handsome, and intelligent. She didn’t particularly mind Koreans, but assuming he was from a wealthy family—a young man in an expensive well-cut suit, though only a student uniform—she looked down on him somewhat. Byeong-hwa, on the other hand, didn’t seem such a trifling person. She had seen him a few times at the bar, and thought that if those two were drinking buddies, then Deok-gi surely couldn’t be just a “modern boy,” the darling of some rich family. The woman had opened up her business the previous fall, and perhaps because her sensitivity hadn’t yet been dulled by the flood of business, she measured the value of each man who came in with the curiosity of an ordinary woman.

She thought of O Jeong-ja, the eldest daughter of a judge from a district court in Korea. Although O was his surname, he was Japanese, and in that language his name was pronounced Kure. The proprietor had once been the head nurse of a charity hospital in the same district, and when Jeong-ja was hospitalized for some ailment, the two had grown close.

Now why did I think of Jeong-ja? she asked herself. This young man and

Jeong-ja looked like siblings, but that was ridiculous. They weren't even the same nationality.

When discussing society and politics with the confident Jeong-ja, the proprietor would agree with her or at least listen with an understanding smile. She liked to believe she wasn't completely out of touch when it came to fashionable ways of thinking. So when the disheveled young man had come in with his friends, and they had begun talking among themselves in Japanese, she had felt a certain affinity toward them. Even so, she condescendingly considered the young men "Marxist boys" and assumed now that Deok-gi might be one of them, too — and her mind jumped to Jeong-ja, whom she sometimes called the "Marxist girl."

Hong Gyeong-ae

Noticing that her customers were beginning to look bored, the proprietor pulled up a stool between them.

“Are you going to make trouble again today?” She smiled. “I’ll have to kick you out if you do.”

“When have I ever made trouble?” The other day Byeong-hwa had skipped lunch and dinner and had had too much to drink. He vaguely remembered being drunk. Perhaps he had flirted a little, though he didn’t usually pay much attention to the opposite sex.

“Don’t pretend you were so drunk you don’t remember!” She continued to talk about his drunken behavior to keep the conversation going.

“I’m not pretending anything. But with someone like you next to me, I might have easily misbehaved.” He laughed.

“Oh? Well, if you really had, I wouldn’t have stood idly by.”

“*Tadaima,*” a woman called out in Japanese as she came in, dressed in a Japanese outfit and holding a bath bowl. She stopped short when she saw the customers.

Looking up, Deok-gi winced as if ice had been dropped down his neck, his eyes darting back to his drink. The woman seemed to cringe as well; she abruptly turned on her heels and slipped out.

Gyeong-ae! Deok-gi’s heart sank. Moisture filled his eyes, though tears did not surface. His glass, three-quarters full, seemed to dance up and down. Although he was sensitive to alcohol, he knew he wasn’t drunk, but he nevertheless felt dizzy, and the room seemed to whirl around him.