They had been playing the ssangnyuk\(^1\) game until midnight, but now the laughter from the ladies’ quarters had died out and only a solitary lamp flickered in the large hall. Icy moonlight filled the wide, frost-touched courtyard. Now and then a dog yelped pitifully in the distance.

Puyong, who had been malingering in bed since early evening, looked warily at her mother lying next to her, deeply asleep from exhaustion. Gently she lifted herself up. She took hold of the doorknob and opened the door just enough to slip out. She felt a sudden chill, but not from the needlelike wind of the winter night. Her bosom concealed a huge razor-sharp kitchen knife: Puktol Abo˘m\(^2\) had been sharpening it almost daily in anticipation for the New Year’s celebration.

Now the problem was opening the main gate. True, everyone was fast asleep, exhausted from the New Year’s games, but still there were as many as thirty in the household. Getting caught would be a disaster. Touching the crossbar of the gate, Puyong shivered weakly. She felt her fear renewed, and her steps grew small. *Maybe I should give up on the idea.*

At that moment, however, the image of manly Yŏngsoe appeared before her eyes. She had seen him earlier that day inside the South Team’s temporary headquarters. A headband fashioned out of a white handkerchief held his hair tight. He closed his big eyes slowly, as if meditating, and then suddenly raised his face. Looking right, then left, with a piercing stare, he kept issuing instructions, which gave him dignity and a commanding presence, as a team captain should.

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\(^1\) *Ssangnyuk* is a board game played with dice and checkers. Formerly enjoyed by the upper classes, it was a favorite pastime for the New Year’s festivities. It is no longer played today.

\(^2\) The term *abo˘m* is a humble/pejorative form of the word *abo˘ji* (father), used to refer to adult male servants with children. Thus Puktol Ab˘m is the name of a lowly man with a child, usually the first male child, called Puktol.
In the eyes of a girl in her seventeenth year, restless with her first love, he was hero—a hero who deserved the honor befitting a victorious general. Puyong pictured him dancing around triumphantly, a cowl on his head, captain of the winning team. She saw her own devoted effort, however small and weak, deeply woven into that victory. Puyong felt a sudden courage surge from within, and she quivered.

Yŏngsoe was a simple peasant, but he was not a slave as she was. Come a good harvest year, they had promised that he would use his savings to free her from her bondage and that they would become, for better or worse, man and wife, even if that meant surviving on barley porridge in a one-room house.

If Yŏngsoe’s South Team were to win the New Year’s tug-of-war, a good harvest for the upper village would be assured. Then . . . she bit her lip hard and grasped the crossbar. A small opening for dogs in the gate caught her attention. Fantastic! I’m saved! The best way was to slip out through the doggy hole rather than open the massive, creaky, main gate. Her waist was slimmer than most other girls’ and she had no problem slipping through the hole, crawling on all fours like a puppy.

A cutting wind; a blue moon hanging high above. A desolate night, sad and crisp. Concealing herself beneath the eaves of houses, Puyong stepped into the main road. The temporary headquarters of the lower village’s North Team was in the marketplace. From afar they didn’t look like much, but the ropes lined up in rows were so thick that a man’s arms could barely encircle them.

She sneaked around: not a guard, not a soul. Reaching the ropes, violently she slashed and stabbed at them till her strength gave out.

Morning came: the day of the Great Full Moon, the day of the tug-of-war. The whole area was eager and agitated. The marketplace was noisy from early dawn; every household hurried to finish the early breakfast so they could make it to the tug-of-war on time.

In the large kitchen of the inner quarters of the magistrate’s mansion, servants were fretting and twisting their bodies as if they were being braided into a rope. For some reason, the masters were having their breakfast later than usual—on this day of all days. And on top of that, they seemed to be eating so slowly, too! The breakfast table simply refused to come back to the kitchen for cleaning.

“No chance of watching the two teams gather. And that’s the best part,” whimpered Omuk, personal servant of the younger mistress who followed her from her maiden home on the wedding day, clunking down the huge crock of dishwater on the cooking counter.

“Be careful, you fool! Are you crazy or something? You know how terrible it is to make a mistake like breaking a crock on the day of the Great Full
Moon? Stop being so foolish!” Puyong, appearing absolutely poised, scolded her, though in truth she was even more nervous than Omuk.

What she had done the night before was like a dream. Her callow mind could not grasp the enormity of what she had done. She only prayed for Yóngsoe’s victory and longed to race out to the battleground as soon as she could get away.

She did a hasty job of washing the dishes and then slipped into her fresh New Year’s outfit. Just as she stepped outside with Omuk, able-bodied young men were marching to take up positions in the battle formations. In front marched a man carrying a huge banner bearing the words: FARMERS ARE THE BASIS OF THE COSMOS. A colorful collection of farmers’ banners came next, splendid with crimson, indigo, and yellow, carrying the names of the various prefectures. Finally the farmers’ band, composed of the talents of the countryside, entered wearing cowls on their heads, leaping and dancing, playing all kinds of instruments—gongs large and small, drums, and flutes.

A man with the best voice among them stepped forward. Wildly shaking his cowled head, he stretched out his neck as far as he could and sang from the top of his voice:

\[ K’wae-ji-na ch’ing-ch’ing na-ne. \]

So many stars are in the sky.

Not only the farm band and the young fighters with tightly fastened headbands but even the onlookers and children joined in the refrain:

\[ K’wae-ji-na ch’ing-ch’ing na-ne. \]

The thunderous chorus of thousands that had gathered shook the sky, heightening the battle atmosphere.

\[ K’wae-ji-na ch’ing-ch’ing na-ne. \]

So many pebbles are on the riverbank behind.

\[ K’wae-ji-na ch’ing-ch’ing na-ne. \]

So many lice are in the old rags.

\[ K’wae-ji-na ch’ing-ch’ing na-ne. \]

So much talk about another’s daughter-in-law.

\[ K’wae-ji-na ch’ing-ch’ing na-ne. \]

The chanting of \[ K’wae-ji-na ch’ing-ch’ing na-ne \] grew stronger and stronger with each repetition, like a shout of welcome.

Puyong put her hands under the snow-white apron she had received for the New Year and followed the parade in small, quick steps together with Omuk, disappearing among the spectators. Puyong always deplored her life...
as a slave, but on this day she felt lucky to be one because a noblewoman would not have been able to come out like this.

As the parade approached the battle formations, another group of cowled musicians playing instruments came out of the tent to greet them. In the blink of an eye, a countless number of soldiers gathered. Brimming with fighting spirit, they waited for Yŏngsoe’s order. With a dignified mien that could have commanded an entire army, Yŏngsoe ordered the generals to assign the soldiers to their appropriate posts.

Soldiers were lined up on both sides of the fearfully thick rope. Among them the stronger and better-built young men went to the front, concealing clubs and the like, just in case a fight broke out. At last the team leader gave the order to move: “Now!”

The soldiers roared, “Waa!” The immense rope, resembling a gigantic python, was carried on countless shoulders toward the battleground as if a huge earthworm were being carried by a swarm of ants. Yŏngsoe, in armor and helmet, holding the flag of leadership, stared straight ahead with his mouth tightly closed and his brow firmly set, ready to fight. He looked most imposing as he advanced, perched on the dragon head at the very front of the rope. As they reached the marketplace that had been selected as the fighting field, the North Team from the lower village emerged. They too were led by a farm band.

Finally the two teams met. The team leaders, towering over the dragon-shaped head of the rope, tried to intimidate their opponent. Eyes wild with threat, each shouted: “Put forth your rope head, sir!”

But this single moment was the key to victory, and of course neither would yield. As they were wrangling with each other, some soldiers in the front line burst out cussing, “Well, aren’t you gonna put forth, bastards?”

“How don’t you do so yourselves, idiots!”

“Yellowbellies!” The young, excited men wailed “Waa!” and began to strike each other. In the midst of the fistfight, those in the back of the North Team misinterpreted the actions in the front as the beginning of the game even before the two ropes were fixed into place. They began pulling and chanting, “Heave ho, heave ho,” and wasted precious energy that had been built up in anticipation of the game. The opponent’s false start was exactly the cunning trap set by the South Team’s leader, Yŏngsoe.

The two teams were more or less matched in strength, but the initial mistake in strategy was a costly blow to the North Team. As the situation thus unfolded, spectators who had not intended to participate in the fight could no longer idly stand by and watch. “Let’s get ‘em!” they shouted. A taffy stick peddler with a tray slung horizontally on his back was clanking his scissors to attract customers, but he dropped the tray and ran to the rope. The old soup-and-rice seller by the roadside threw away his ladle and came out.
A laborer bearing a heavy load on a wooden frame on his back, the water vendor, the spectators, entertainers, prostitutes, common housewives, and even children ran to the rope. Women put stones in their aprons and attached themselves to the rope trying to give just a little more weight to the North Team’s force. Could the South Team simply stay put and watch? They all heaved their entire being and soul into winning the contest. For just this moment they forgot all of their joys and anger, sorrows and pleasure as if this fight were the greatest endeavor under the heavens.

Back and forth they went without a clear winner. When it came time to eat, the young men refused to leave the rope and so they ate their lunch on top of it. The battle resumed after recess, but it did not look like there would ever be a winner. Puyong and Omuk, elevating themselves on a prop under the eaves of a house by the roadside, watched the fierce battle with clenched fists. Realizing that the South Team was not doing as well as it had before, Puyong found it unbearable to watch.

She whispered: “Omuk, doesn’t it look fun? Shall we charge in too?”

“What? If we did, which side?” Omuk knew very well, as a servant in an official’s mansion, she should not be anything but a detached onlooker.

“I don’t care which team,” Puyong replied, for fear of arousing suspicion, but her heart was throbbing, eager to join.

Then a middle-aged woman weaved her way through the crowd as if looking for someone. From her manner, appearance, and speech, one could tell she was a servant from some house. But when she came upon the two maids, she shouted, “Have you both lost your wits? With heads as big as horses you shamelessly run around all day long. You should taste the sting of a branding! Come down right this minute.”

Puyong, completely engrossed in the tug-of-war, was suddenly brought to her senses by the Seoul dialect, which sounded a bit flippant and stuck out in the middle of the language of the Kyongsang people around her. She looked down and there saw her mother throwing a temper tantrum.

“So, you crazy little wenches! No wonder the lady is upset. Don’t you know as soon as the winner is decided they’ll come to pay their respects to the magistrate’s family? Everybody else is frantic with preparations in the house and you horse-heads are running around outside the whole day. You must be out of your minds!” Puyong realized then that as slaves they indeed were not free to roam around and do things like leisurely watching the tug-of-war. As people stared at them, the girls felt ashamed and could not but follow the older woman who led them back home.

As the twilight disappeared with the evening glow, the eastern sky was reddened by the moon. Cho Tongjun, the magistrate of Uisong county, had just come back from the birthday party of one of his friends, Squire Choe Namsu. He threw his inebriated body onto the long hassock. He had regaled
upon a sumptuous meal and sipped fragrant spiced liquor. He was in a mood to recite a *sijo* verse or something.

“Look here, the moon is rising. The white collar we took off a bodice this morning—who has it? Quick! Bring it over and burn it—to expel the evil spirits!” The sounds from the big hall of the inner quarters were barely audible to the magistrate.

“The moon is rising?” The magistrate slowly raised his body and slid open the panel in the door. On every mountain peak a torch was lit to greet the moon. The moon, which had just risen from the eastern forest, was like a big golden mat. The enormous moon looked as if it would fall out of the dark bluish-black sky. “When the moon is round and deep yellow, it augurs a good harvest,” the magistrate murmured and smacked the threshold with the palm of his hand.

It would of course have been better to serve the king intimately and participate in the nation’s affairs, but a life in the outer regions was not bad—one could live close to nature and among the simple and plain folks.

At thirty-three years of age this year, the magistrate was in the prime of his manhood. He was the son of the late Cho Tŏkha, former minister of the interior. He had passed the first-level civil examination in his sixteenth year. At twenty-five he passed the second level with the highest marks. He had not been appointed to a central-government position, however. Ùisŏng was his second assignment in the outer region. He was born of a noble lineage and into a life of ease. On top of that, he had been known as a prodigy since childhood. A man of moral principles, he never tarnished the image of the official position. A man of faith and will, he enjoyed a reputation for undaunted courage and fortitude. His wife, with whom he shared a blissful marriage, had borne him two sons: Pyŏnggu and Yonggu. One could indeed say he was blessed. Stern and incorruptible by nature, he despised flattery, but at today’s birthday party the country squires were shamelessly praising him with a toast.

“Your high moral character is laudable, Your Excellency. The people are singing the song of peace and good harvest with full bellies under your benevolent leadership.” When he heard this, despite his modesty he could not deny that he took pride in being a beloved official.

The chilly breeze of the night entering through the open door was unexpectedly refreshing for his intoxicated face. “Brrrrrp.” He belched long and loud, and called out, “Is anybody there?” Not a heavy drinker ordinarily, he suffered from terrible thirst. “Listen, isn’t anyone there?” Still no reply. Secretaries, clerks, and pages all seemed to have gone out to watch the tug of war.

“Is there really no one here!” Tongjun burst out in anger. Though benev-
olent, incorruptible, and wise as a governor, he was still an aristocrat who was
used to giving orders and expected them to be obeyed. He turned blue with
anger. "Unforgivable peons!"

Light steps were heard and a young female voice replied, "Yes, sir." Puyong
sprang into view. As a servant in the inner quarters, she had never
gone to the men’s official reception area. Therefore, there was nothing she
feared more under heaven than her master Tongjun. With her hands folded
in front of her, she stood hesitantly under the steps leading to the hall and
waited for orders with a bowed head.

"Where did all those villains go?"

"It seems they all went to watch the tug-of-war in the marketplace."

"You mean not even one stayed behind? Tsk, tsk, tsk." Tongjun, per-
turbed, clucked his tongue. Puyong curled her body even more as if she
herself were being scolded. "Child, I am very thirsty. Bring me a glass of
cold water."

"Yes, sir."

Puyong carefully carried a bowl of cold water on a tray and went back to
the men’s area. The magistrate seemed to be asleep; the door-window was
shut and there was no sound. She hesitated, thinking what to do with the
bowl of water, when all of a sudden somebody coughed and ordered, "Did
you fetch the cold water? Bring it in." She mounted a lofty hallway and
gently opened the main door.

As she was leaving after setting the bowl of water in the room, the magis-
istrate, who was lying down on the hassock near the warmest side of the heated
floor, said: "Child, come here and rub my legs." Awed and filled with fear,
she could not say yes right away. She even forgot to close the door and did not
know how to act or what to do when the magistrate began talking again.
"Child, I do not like drafts. Close the door."

Puyong closed the door without a reply and went to his side as if her stiff
body was pulled by the hurrying stare of the magistrate. She knelt by the
hassock. Her delicate, soft, and tender cheek, blushing with reverence and
shame, resembled fine porcelain under the moonlight that seeped through
the window. She looked utterly pure and beautiful with her gently lowered
eyes and full lips. Her nose seemed as if a great craftsman had molded it onto
her face. Her gently shaking shoulders were delicately sad. Her hair, bound
with a red ribbon in a shape of a swallow, was lush and vibrant. To the
dreamy, intoxicated eyes, she was beauty itself.

Tongjun was well past thirty but had never succumbed to carnal tempta-
tion thus far, avoiding even the *kisaeng* registered in the official records of his
own local government. But as he beheld this pear-flower virgin who was
trembling with shame and fear under the luminescent moonlight, he could
not control the desire bursting within. “Your name is Omuk? How old are
you?” It was a wonderfully soft and caressing voice.

“No, sire. Your humble servant is called Puyong. I am seventeen.” Her
whisper was like a small mosquito’s buzz. Docilely she contorted her lowered
head as if she could not endure her shyness any more. The maiden’s charm
was as pure as an early morning lily laden with fresh dewdrops. Tongjun
lost control of the lust erupting from deep within. He sat up and embraced
the slender figure hard, so hard it could almost break. Puyong, paralyzed with
shock and fear, dared not resist.

It was late into the night, approaching the hour of the swine, when the ser-
vants came back from the tug-of-war. Puyong laid her exhausted body down
in a corner of her room on the bare, hard floor without bothering to spread
her coverlet. The devastating shock that broke her body and mind left her
numb. She listened to the commotion outside with total indifference.

“Hey, Puktol Abôm, which team won?” asked Puyong Ómôm3 as she ran
to the middle gate to greet the gang of returning servants.

If the North Team won, the fighters would run into the ladies’ quarters to
announce their victory. And there they would prance and frolic, playing in-
struments, singing in unison: “It’s our victory! Sweet victory!” If the South
Team won, they would come to the men’s receiving quarters, also playing
instruments, dancing and frolicking, to announce their victory. They would
then be treated to liquor and all kinds of food. So whoever won, the servants
in the official’s mansion would have no time to spare at all.

“Which team? Can’t even call it a tug-of-war. It’s just a disaster this year!”

“What . . . are you talking about?” Puyong Ómôm’s eyes widened.

“Heavens, they acted as if their lives were at stake. I don’t see how any-
body could be so driven by rage that they would attack to the point of
killing. Can you imagine? Even pregnant women with bellies like round
frogs joined the scuffle. They were stepped on, knocked backward, and had
their skulls broken. You just can’t describe it.”

“Oh my, did something really bad happen?”

“Sure did. I couldn’t begin to tell you. Damn it, if you charged at your
father’s archenemy like that, you would be called a filially pious son. They
all clung to the rope, with all their might, when suddenly it snapped. Well,
just imagine!”

“Good heavens, so what happened? I’ll bet a lot of people got hurt.”

“Of course! It was like hell on earth.”

3 Ómôm, the female counterpart of an abôm, is a humble/pejorative form of the word Ómôni (mother).
Thus Puyong Ómôm represents a lowly person with a child named Puyong.
“What a pity. What can we do? Tsk, tsk.” Puyong Īmōm scuffled back inside as if she could not take it any longer.

Puyong blankly listened to all the babbling outside. The main gate area became noisier and noisier with an ominous air.

“Are you there, Puyong?” Omuk burst open the single-paneled door as she called out.

“I looked for you all over. What’s the matter? Why are you lying down?”

When there was no reply, she was puzzled. She kicked off her shoes in a hurry and entered the room. "Puyong, what’s the matter? Get up. It’s a mess outside."

“Who cares what’s going on out there? I have such a headache, I don’t want to hear it.” She rolled over as if the world was too much with her. She was such a cheerful and lively character that her calm and proper mother used to chastise her as a “boisterous and untidy little wench.” It was indeed peculiar for her not to respond to Omuk’s prodding.

Omuk, however, was too excited to notice anything unusual about Puyong’s behavior. “Why are you so quiet? Didn’t you hear that a lot of people got hurt because the rope was cut? But I heard that it didn’t just snap accidentally—it was someone from the South Team who slashed the North Team’s ropes. So there’s a riot outside.”

Though Puyong still faced away, her heart jumped. All her senses suddenly came back, but her hands and feet curled together even tighter.

“Fists and clubs were flying everywhere. Punching and jabbing! A real mess! I bet some from the South Team got killed. I saw their captain. People trampled on his bloody face without mercy. I’m pretty sure he’s dead.”

The South Team captain—the very same Yŏngsoe. So he had been beaten to death because of her, and her own body was violated. A heavenly curse had descended upon them to crush all their hopes and happiness in an instant.

But Yŏngsoe did not die. He was only bedridden for a month or so. When he emerged, however, there was no trace of his former manly and valiant look. He had to support his pitiful, crippled body with a cane. He was missing some teeth, his right eye was crushed, and he limped on one leg. They say your appearance does not matter so long as you have character. But Yŏngsoe was only a farmer. How could he cultivate his character in such misery? He hated the sympathy and consolation from passersby who would say, “What misfortune. I hope at least you are no longer in pain.”

While he lay sick in bed, he saw Puyong many times in his dreams. Even when he was awake, he daydreamed that she would come and visit him secretly. Although he is a cripple now, couldn’t she at least show even a small sign of her pure love and sincerity? For the entire month, however, there was
not a word from her. He wanted at least to send her a letter, but with his crushed, snail-like eye, he would have appeared ridiculous asking someone else to write it on his behalf.

And so Yongsoe not only suffered from his physical affliction but also from a restless mind. A crushed-eyed gimp pursuing the smooth-skinned, lovely Puyong was too impertinent, even though she was only a slave. Under the circumstances he could not even dream of asking her to share his life and destiny. Even if she remained with me as a faithful woman for all time and wanted to devote her pure affection to me, for her sake I would not accept it. All he wanted was for them to see each other once more as tenderly as before, weep in each other's arms, and then part company. When his body was perfect, he was confident and full of courage; now he was insecure and cowardly. He dwelled upon his sad fate and resented Puyong for not making the effort to meet him.

Puyong heard the rumors but did not have the courage to go see him. She wanted to explain everything and ask for his forgiveness and soothe all her pain in his strong embrace. But she was worried over what he might do. She knew how proud, unforgiving, and hotheaded he was. Furthermore, she was trying to turn that night's incident into just a bad dream. Reveal such a secret to Yongsoe—that was something she did not want to do.

Flowers began to blossom. Puyong suffered from a lingering illness, and her pale face, betraying spring, was stained with dark yellow spots. "What's the matter with her? Why is her face like that?" everyone said.

"I know what you mean. She must be sensitive to springtime, the changing season. She just looks terrible." Puyong Omóom was not particularly concerned; but in truth Puyong did have an unspeakable worry. She was not quite sure what it was because she had never experienced anything like it before. There was something very unusual about her body. Budding new life was beating within her body and mind more and more as the days passed by, fluttering to expose the night's awful dream.

Hers was a slave's body—her master could kill or spare it. If he touched her, it would not have been cause for even idle gossip. Nonetheless, it was certainly not an honorable thing for such an honest and well-mannered magistrate to have boorishly violated a child slave and made her pregnant.

Puyong Omóom, so used to her romping, childish daughter, became suspicious of her sudden calm and graceful attitude. But at the same time, she thought even a restless child would mature with age. Puyong could not deceive the eyes of her mother for long, however, as they shared the same room.

It was the night before the Tano spring festival, which fell on the fifth day of the fifth moon. Puyong Omóom could not get away from the kitchen till very late. When she finally returned to her room, her daughter was asleep with cold sweat dripping down her face. She was startled to notice the sickly
look of her daughter's face. She scolded her all the time, calling her "you crazy wench" or "you half-wit," but in her mind she was her only daughter and as dear to her as any daughter could be. She was overcome with pity. Puyong was especially precious to her because she could not bear another child. For a servant, postnatal care was unheard of. Three days after she gave birth to Puyong, while lifting a large clay water pan above her head, trying to take it to the kitchen to fill the big water vessel there, part of her womb had become extended. Ever since, she had been barren.

"Puyong, are you not feeling well?" she asked, softly wiping the sweat off her daughter's forehead. When she looked at her carefully, the mother noticed that her daughter was emaciated: the ridge of the nose was clearly showing and her cheeks were hollow. "You must be suffering."

Puyong, who had awakened from her sleep, broke into tears at the warm words of her mother, who was usually very reserved.

"What's the matter? Why are you crying?" As she gazed upon her sobbing daughter, she felt her heart tear apart. "Has someone hurt you? . . . Even if someone did, you must live on with courage. We must have committed some sin in our previous lives to be born into the bodies of slaves. We can't use our hands and feet as we wish, but that's our fate. And what can we do about our fate? There is no use in crying and no use in resenting heaven. Let us just endure it and live contentedly," she admonished her daughter, wiping off her tears with the bow of her apron. "Puyong, would you like some rice cake? It's freshly steamed and still warm."

Puyong could not hold back her sorrow any longer and burst into a sob. Her shoulders were shaking and her gentle weeping was pathetic to the point of cutting through her mother's heart. Concealing all her feelings, however, her mother scolded her: "Why are you acting so immature? Why are you suffering alone so miserably? Why are you crying alone like a wretched orphan? Why don't you just say it? I'm your mom, after all. By the way, how can you wear such a dirty bodice? It's wet like it was dipped in brine." She took a cotton bodice out of a little chest and tried to coax her to change, but Puyong would not listen and kept crying.

Now the mother was angry. "So you still do not understand. Even an infant would have understood what I meant after having been told time and again." She tried to snatch off her daughter's clothes, but Puyong clung to them and resisted, continuing to sob.

"Now, can't you stop that whining!" she shrieked. She had become the usual scolding mama. She grabbed her daughter's bodice and Puyong's milk-white breasts protruded. At that instant, the mother's eyes opened wide and a cold chill ran down her spine.

She called her daughter quietly as if whispering in her ears, "My child!"
Puyong hurriedly covered her breasts, not daring to look up at her mother. The mother, pressing her daughter in a piercing voice, said: “You really messed up good, didn’t you!”

“Good? What do you mean?” Puyong protested weakly.

The mother sat very close to the daughter, “You crazy little wench! Oh, such misfortune! Since spring you have been acting very strange, but I never dreamed it would turn out like this. Oh my God, here comes my bad luck again! So who is the culprit?”

“Mama, what are you talking about? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You still think you can fool me? Damn you! You can’t deceive me when I can see right through you! How can a young thing have nipples like mulberries and still pretend nothing happened?” She spoke in a low but firm voice and with extreme agitation. Suddenly Puyong’s tears dried up. She could not find any more words and her lips were growing parched. “So who is the rascal that touched you?” She then jumped up and blurted out: “Tell me who that bastard is now!”

Puyong turned blue and, barely parting her lips, said, “Mama, it is really not my fault.”

“If it’s not your fault, which scoundrel did this awful thing to you?” she cried. “Spit out the name right this instant!”

No longer able to hold out, Puyong opened her mouth. “Well, on the fifteenth day of the first moon, the master wished to have some cold water and I went out to . . .”

“Why did you go there? Where was that bastard, Changkki Abo˘m?”

“That day happened to be the day of the tug-of-war and there was no one else at home. So when I went out there, the master asked me to rub his legs.”

The mother did not respond.

“I was trembling and rubbing his legs as he had ordered . . .”

“Shhhhhhh!” Suddenly the mother put her hands to her daughter’s mouth and noisily got up and spread out the bedding. Puyong did not know what to do and sat down aimlessly when her mother in an unexpectedly soft voice said, “Child, the night is deep; let us sleep.”

Puyong sat, staring blankly, shamefaced. Her mother forced her to bed. Caressing her daughter’s hair gently, she began to talk softly: “I used to have a younger sister. So she was your aunt. Before moving to this house with the mistress when she married, I used to live in her maiden home. That sister of mine was incredibly beautiful. Everybody desired her because she was far more attractive than the sixteen young mistresses of the house. So graceful was she that everyone was after her. The master of the house

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4 Changkki is a male commoner’s name meaning “Cock Pheasant.”
took her in as a concubine.” The mother swallowed back her tears and con-
tinued: “The lady of the house, that is, the mother of our current lady of the
house, found out about it and became extremely upset. One day, when the
master of the house went out, she pulled her out into the courtyard and or-
dered her whipped. That’s not all. She stripped her naked and had her body
dragged all over the courtyard. That exquisite body was covered in blood
and she lost her teeth. You simply couldn’t bear to look at her. She then fell
bedridden in the servants’ quarters for three days and died. There are no
words to describe the misery we felt.”

The mother slowly got up, blew her nose into the chamber pot, and wiped
her tears. She sat down leaning against a wall. “Several days later, the master
came back. I do not know what the lady told him, but he did not even try to
look for her.” She sighed: ‘It’s all your destiny. You are after all an insignif-
ificant brat of a lowly slave. There is no chance that you will ever be a lady. In a
way, it is fortunate that you can never spoil your family’s image, no matter
what you do, because you have none. I don’t care whose seed it is, just keep
it to yourself, and at least you won’t die before your time. To be called a
harlot is also your destiny—so just stay quiet.”

The following day, though not really feeling like it, Puyong reluctantly
gave in to her mother and Omuk who urged her to wash her hair with iris
water, change her clothes, and go play on the swings in the playground
located in the mountains behind the Confucian school. She was by nature
delicate and slender and did not yet show her bodily changes, but she was
not very excited by the swing game at which she, with her light and swift
body, had always excelled.

Trying to avoid her friends at play, Puyong climbed the wooded hill and
sat down on a rock. She was listening indifferently to the cuckoo’s songs when
she could feel a person’s presence nearby. She was startled as she nonchalantly
turned around. A stranger was standing right behind her. His right eye was
swollen and black and his eyeballs were hidden, his front teeth were missing
so the lips sank in, yet he did not look like an old man. Apparently disabled
in one leg, he was leaning on a cane. The man’s distorted face had a very se-
rious expression as he stared at Puyong. For no reason Puyong felt afraid and
stood up to face him. At that moment, she noticed the black mole under the
man’s earlobes. “It’s Yöngsoe!”

Suddenly Puyong felt goose bumps, and her heart began to pound wildly.
She screamed “Ahhhh!” half unconsciously and ran down the hill with her
red skirt fluttering behind her.