

A Young Man's Memoirs on
His Escape from
South Korea



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1. Where Has My Noble Ambition Gone Now?

I, too, had a noble ambition. But my hopes were dashed and nothing but its miserable shadow was left in my broken heart.

Who could know how the merciless chains of cruel fate would bind the wings of my soul that was flying high in the blue sky?

Soaring Dreams on the Banks of the Han River

There is a saying that teenagers live on hope, youths in their twenties on ardour and people in their thirties on discretion. Is this why the heart of a teenager swells with a happy dream?

I had in my mind a beautiful dream which rose like a bank of clouds. I lived in a wooden shack in Yongdungpo Ward, Seoul, experiencing the sorrow of a pauper, but my hope for learning was great and I entertained a beautiful dream. It seemed not for nothing that the teenage stage was called the dream stage of human life.

Times were hard, but how beautiful was my dream of realising my desire for learning and attaining my noble ambition!

My first dream was to go to high school and then university. A son of an ironworker, I had finished primary school and nursed my simple first aspiration.

My first dream came up against a hurdle at the entrance examination for high school. In a society where money is mightier than merit, would it be possible for me to gain a place at high school, admission to which entailed keen competition among large numbers of candidates? This was my worry. But I had finished middle school first in my year and so my hope flourished like a seed in spring.

I was sitting with my heart trembling in the fifth examination hall on the 20th of December when the first frost of the winter was falling. Soothing my excited nerves, I took up my pen. The questions were easy and I wrote down the answers fluently.

The invigilator saw that I was the first to finish writing and looked at my paper over my shoulder. Then he studied my face closely as if to impress it on his mind. The invigilator appeared to be a kindhearted teacher and he looked at me with smiling eyes. It seemed to mean, "Though you are shabbily dressed, you are an excellent pupil."

I was sure I had passed the examination. Nevertheless I felt very nervous because the school was keener on squeezing money out of the lean purses of people, like milking a cow, than on cultivating the intelligence of its pupils.

I came second in the examination for admission to the "S" High School in Seoul. The names of the successful candidates were displayed on the wall by the main door of the school. How happy I was on that day!

I am an only son. It was the greatest desire of my family that I, the sole heir, should go to university. This was true of my father, an ironworker, whose back was bent by hard work, and the same was the desire of my

mother who would secretly shed tears of sorrow over her unpleasant job of cooking for a rich family. And even my younger sister, who, having left primary school, was doing odd jobs to earn money entertained the same hope for me.

My mother and sister, who had rushed to the school, were so glad and moved that they were constantly wiping tears from their eyes. Much more so was my father. That was the first time I had seen them so happy; they had always been depressed and sunk in grief. And I thought to myself, "Has there ever been such a joyous event in our home?" I felt as if I were dreaming.

An acquaintance of my father's, the managing director of a bank, came and told us that I had been accepted by the school because my examination results were so extraordinary. We were told that my name had been entered reluctantly on the list of successful candidates for my real worth thanks to the consideration of the invigilator, Teacher Choe, who had marvelled at my examination paper, and other teachers.

So I was just saved from being rejected. The thought of that made me shiver. In a society where money and power reign supreme, how could a young man at the bottom of the social scale with neither money nor power hope to enter school with ease? Thus I just managed to pass the hurdle of the entrance examination, called the "examination war".

That day the school grounds were crowded with hundreds of people, parents of the candidates, who were pouring into office and lodging protests with the school authorities as if by agreement. The reason was that some boys who were poorer at school than their sons or who had handed in blank papers were among



the successful candidates on the strength of money. "Is it money or free ability that speaks in the entrance examination?" they shouted and began a sit-down strike demanding that the results of the examination be published.

It was not for nothing that the parents of the candidates were indignant. Their protest was a kind of accusation against the social absurdity of almighty money buying even human souls and certificates for going to a school. "Money opens the door to the Heavenly Kingdom," and "If only you have money, you can even buy God," were sayings frequently on the lips of people. Money shadowed students. It pursued them wherever they went.

Having so nearly failed to get into the school in the face of the unlimited tyranny of money, I heaved a sigh of relief. Was this what they called luck? Could there be a cleft in the stone wall? I thought to myself. I felt as happy as a flowering plant which could just stretch its leaves through a cleft to get the sun.

Chang Sol, a son of the president of a civil engineering company, walked past me and got into a car with his mother. As he did so, he glanced at me and called out:

"Hey, Yongdungpo fellow! It looks like you've made a go of it. Maybe your luck's changed, pauper."

After uttering these stinging words, he sped off, raising the dust. What an unbearable insult! Staring fiercely at the disappearing car, I spat in disgust.

"The social institution by which you despicable fellows lord it will collapse like a rotten tree some day. Time will show!" I thought to myself.

Barely hiding my indignation, I left the school. The sardonic remark of the son of the moneybags had

spoiled my humour. I clenched my fists with a determination to pursue my studies with such superhuman energy that this society of iniquity where money could buy everything—personality, intelligence and power—would envy me. At any rate my ambitious dream of studying soared high. I felt as though I could fly up endlessly into the blue sky of learning on the wings of a strong will.

That day I went out to the sandy beach of the River Han with Jong Ho, my classmate at middle school who had passed the entrance examination to high school at the same time as I had. We strolled together along the sands. A raw river wind was blowing, tousling our hair. We walked hand in hand endlessly along the riverside; we were great friends.

"Jong Ho, let's be good pupils to please our poor fathers and mothers," I said looking sideways at his tousled hair.

"Sure, although it was difficult to get into high school let's finish top and second in our year. Let's excel in our studies so that fellows like Chang Sol become green with envy," he replied, tightening his grip on my hand. He had also come very close to being struck off the list of successful candidates by the freak of money.

"Right, let's show them that boys from poor families can be brilliant students."

After walking aimlessly we sat down on the sand and watched the desolate evening scenery as the sun set on the banks of the Han River. While taking in the evening view of the river, we started talking about our ambitions.

Jong Ho's aspiration was to become an officer on a trading ship after finishing high school and college. He wanted to make money on voyages to foreign countries

and to buy fine things so as to please and make life easier for his widowed mother who had sacrificed much on account of him. It was a praiseworthy idea.

I, too, spoke of my aspiration.

"I would like to become a journalist after graduating from university," I said.

"A journalist? That's grand. You want to make yourself famous by your pen, do you?"

"No. When I say I will become a journalist I mean digging up all the evil things around us and publishing them in newspapers."

"Splendid! Is that your own idea?"

"No. When I was leaving middle school, my teacher suggested it to me."

"Do you mean Teacher Kang?"

"Yes. He was a very good teacher."

We remembered the Korean language instructor who enjoyed the confidence of the pupils. My heart yearned after the teacher. If he knew of my passing the entrance examination to high school, how delighted he would be!

The day before the leaving ceremony, the teacher in charge of our class had spared his time to take a walk with me by the pond in the Changgyong Palace Grounds. In that crowded place he had told me to take a close look into the pond. I could see nothing but pretty flowers on the pond. The flowers had unusually large leaves, which were floating in an attractive way on the water, reminding me of the mystical flowers in a fairy tale.

As I was unable to see anything extraordinary or instructive in the pond, my teacher patted me fondly on the head and told me in his familiar, gentle voice:

"Yong Son, don't see only those flowers. They, too, have their own special physiology."

"Do you mean the physiology of flowers?"

"Yes. The slime in which those flowers are rooted is filthy beyond compare. It reeks. But how beautiful the flowers growing out of the filthy slime are! Though they all rooted in the mire, the flowers are attractive and adorn the pond. That is what I mean."

The teacher was right. The flowers' physiology had a deep significance. But I could not get the teacher's point—Why did he want to make me understand the "physiology of flowers"? When his eyes met mine staring intently at him, Teacher Kang resumed, walking slowly along the edge of the pond:

"You, too, must bloom into a beautiful flower like those. This world is dirtier and more unfair than the slime of the pond. If you live honestly in this filthy society, you will be able to bloom and become a beautiful flower like these here. If you live honestly like those flowers in this dark world, you can avoid being polluted with the filth of the dirty society.

"If you hope to grow into a fine man, into the passionate man who is wanted by our times, you should live stoutly even in this stinking social climate. You should live honestly, conscientiously, for justice and with high aspirations. He who lives a false, vain and fast life is no better than a dead man. This is what I want to tell you before you leave school. Do you understand?"

This was the kind wish of the thoughtful teacher.

"I understand, Teacher!" I replied.

"In the absurd society of south Korea where money rules supreme, you should not dream of attaining personal wealth and glory but should rise from its dirty

silt as the flower does. And then you should clear away the dirty silt."

His words held a profound meaning. Truly he was a kindhearted and upright teacher.

I strolled around the pond for a long time deep in thought. I resolved to be a true man by learning purely and honestly with the "physiology of flowers" in my mind as the teacher had told me. I thought I would have to study harder than others because I was poor.

Hearing my still vague aspirations, the teacher suggested to me that it would be a good idea to become a journalist who could expose all social injustices.

The words of Teacher Kang returned to me with renewed force on the day I was admitted to high school. Turning over the profound meaning of his words in my mind, I walked along the sands by the River Han with my friend until it was dark.

Evening darkness was falling before our eyes as our great hope of learning flew high with its wings spread wide.

A Shattered Dream at School

Someone once said that if one wants to understand a country, one should visit its schools and see its children first of all. So, education can be regarded as a mirror reflecting the true state of affairs and as the epitome of the country.

My first lesson left a deep impression on me. The classroom was so much like the one at middle school, and this was contrary to my great expectation. The class comprised 90 pupils. It was an "outsized class", an

"overcrowded class". Being a high school located in the heart of Seoul, I had expected it would have cosy classrooms with modern equipment. But my expectation proved too naive.

The classroom was stuffy and had an offensive smell. The disappointing scene made me recall the ceremony for leaving middle school. There was no classroom or hall big enough to hold a leaving ceremony at middle school, and so the ceremony was held over a loudspeaker. A "leaving ceremony over a loudspeaker" sounds like something befitting the electronic age. But below the surface it turned out that the leaving ceremony was a desolate scene about which it was impossible to have any romantic idea, attachment or reminiscence. The headmaster sitting in the instruction section office delivered his congratulatory speech through a microphone while the school leavers listened to his "voice" absentmindedly sitting at their desks in the classrooms, hardly realizing it was a leaving ceremony. There were no pupils seeing off their "elder brothers and sisters" who were leaving the "dear classrooms". There was no atmosphere of a leaving ceremony in which those leaving call to the other pupils in tearful voices, "Farewell my younger brothers and sisters, and dear classrooms...."

While the "leaving ceremony over a loudspeaker" was held, the parents of those leaving were unable to attend because the classrooms were too small and they could only watch the scene in the classrooms by standing on tiptoe in the corridors; some of them were even crowded out of the corridors and had to wait for the end of the ceremony in different corners of the schoolyard.

The classroom in which I was now sitting presented a scene similar to that of the leaving ceremony at middle school. Although the classroom was crowded, my dream of learning was flying high. So, I was impatient to discover the ability of my new classmates. Coming from different areas, they differed in their ability. The teacher in charge of our class, who taught history, made us read a few sentences and tested our ability at mathematics in order to find out how capable we were. I was amazed at the intellectual levels of the pupils who answered. Some of them could not so much as read a textbook properly and some others did not even have an elementary knowledge of multiplication and division. I recalled some lines from an article I had read in the newspaper *Dong-A Ilbo*, which said, "In this country there are middle school pupils who are incapable even of reading Korean letters properly, high school leavers who are incapable of division, and university graduates who are unable to read daily newspapers. An education crisis is menacing this land and is a danger that is on the eve of becoming a catastrophe."

Seen in this light, the schools were no more than "diploma factories" as they were labelled critically in the town.

During the first lesson I was somewhat disappointed at the surprisingly low quality of my classmates. When we were leaving the classroom at the end of the first day's lessons at the high school, the head teacher came and made his first demand that we pay our school fees and membership fees of the education association. No sooner had the new pupils appeared in the classrooms than they were assailed with demands for the payment of money in the name of school fees. After the head

teacher had spoken, the pupils showed their first reaction. One pupil rose and asked:

"So we must pay eight per cent more school fees and five per cent more education association membership fees than before?"

"That's right. How can the school fees and education association membership fees stay at the same level when prices are rising? Don't complain and be sure to pay them by tomorrow."

With this the teacher disappeared hastily from the classroom. He looked as cold as a snake. The pupils buzzed. My head was swimming. So now I had to pay between 130,000 and 200,000 *won* a year by way of fees. How could I get such a large sum? With the thought that I would have to ask my parents for money on my first day at my new school, I felt everything going black before my eyes. I seemed to see the worried look of my father and the panic-stricken eyes of my mother and to hear the sigh of my younger sister.

I trudged home. Entering the house, I threw my bag on the desk and sat in silence. I looked worried. Mother and sister watched me. They seemed to be asking if anything was the matter at school. Having paid my school registration fee, my family had not a penny left. So, I could hardly tell them that I should have to take money to school the next day to pay more fees for fear that I might cause my mother greater anxiety.

My mother gazed at me with tears in her eyes; probably she could read my mind, torn as it was by worry about the fees. Dead silence reigned in the house. After a while my mother asked me in a tearful voice:

"My boy, is there anything the matter at school?"

Her voice trembled slightly with anxiety.

"No, nothing, Mother."

"Yes, there is, I know. Tell me about it."

"Oh, Mother. Don't worry, please!"

"My dear son, you once said you would tell your mother everything, didn't you? That you wouldn't conceal anything from me no matter how embarrassing it might be to tell me."

My mother's sincerity silenced me. It seemed that in a poor family the ties of affection between the parents and children were all the stronger.

"My dear Yong Son, let's wait and see if Father comes home with a little money. There's a way out of every situation, however bad, isn't there?" my mother said. But her voice sounded helpless. My mother was really compassionate. She was always anxious about me, her only son, about my future. How nice it would be if my father, who worked at an ironworks, really came home with some money in his pocket as my mother was hoping! We always used to wait for my father to come home from work, but that day I felt an unaccountably greater longing to see him.

After sunset I went out and sat on the verandah and opened a book. The March night was chilly.

"Brother, mother's set the table for supper," Yong Ok called to me, sounding worried.

"I don't feel like eating. You eat your supper with mother."

"Mother wants you to come in quickly."

"I ate at Jong Ho's home."

"You're lying!"

"I'm telling the truth, Yong Ok."

"Brother, don't worry mother. Come in."

At that moment my mother opened the kitchen door