

A Shower

By Hwang Sun-Won (1953)

Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé

As soon as the boy saw the girl beside the stream, he realized that she must be the great-granddaughter of Scholar Yun. She had her hands in the water and was splashing it about. Probably she had never seen a stream like that in Seoul.

She had been playing with the water in the same manner for several days now, on the way home from school. Until the previous day she had played at the edge of the stream, but today she is right in the middle of the stepping-stones.

The boy sat down on the bank. He decided to wait until she got out of the way.

As it happened, someone came along and she made way.

The next day, he arrived at the stream a little later. This time he found her washing her face, sitting there in the middle of the stepping-stones. In contrast to her pink jumper with its sleeves rolled up, her arms and the nape of her neck were very white.

After washing her face for a while, she stares intently into the water. She must be looking at her reflection. She makes a sudden grab at the water. Perhaps some baby fish were swimming by.

There is no knowing if the girl is aware or not of the boy sitting on the bank as she goes on making nimble grabs at the water. But each time to no effect. She simply keeps grabbing at the water as if for the sheer fun of it. It looks as though she will only get out of the way if there's someone crossing the stream, as on the previous day.

Then she plucks something from the water. It was a white pebble. After that, she stands up and goes skipping lightly across the stepping-stones.

Once across, she turns round : " Hey, you."

The white pebble came flying over.

The boy found himself standing up.

With her bobbed hair fluttering, she goes running off. She took the path between the reed beds. Then there was nothing but pale reed heads shining bright in the clear autumn sunlight.

The girl would soon reappear on the far side of the reeds. Then he began to think she was taking a long time. Still she did not appear. He stood on tiptoe. And he began to think she was taking an extremely long time.

Far away on the other side of the patch of reeds, a bunch of reeds was moving. The girl was hugging the reeds. Now she was walking slowly. The exceptionally bright sunshine shone on the girl's reed-like hair. It was as if a reed, not the girl, was walking across the fields.

The boy remained standing there until that reed could no longer be seen. Suddenly he looked down at the pebble she had thrown at him. The moisture had dried. He picked it up and put it in his pocket.

Starting the next day, he came down to the stream a little later. There was no trace of her. A good thing, too.

It was strange, though. As the days without a sign of her went by, somewhere in the boy's breast a feeling was growing as if something was missing. He got into the habit of fingering the pebble in his pocket.

One day, the boy sat down in the middle of the stepping stones, just where the girl had sat playing with the water. He dipped his hand in the water. He wiped his face. He stared into the water. His darkly tanned face looked back at him. He hated it.

The boy grabbed at the face in the water with both hands. Several times he grabbed at it. Then he suddenly sprang up in surprise. Why, the girl is coming, walking in this direction!

'She was hiding, watching what I was doing.' The boy started to run. He missed his step on a stone. One foot went into the water. He ran faster.

If only there was somewhere he could hide. On this side there are no reeds. Just buckwheat fields. He had the impression the perfume from the buckwheat flowers was pricking his nostrils as never before. His head was spinning. A salty fluid seeped between his lips into his mouth. His nose was bleeding.

Blocking his bleeding nose with one hand, the boy went running on. He felt that a voice was following him, repeatedly calling out, 'Silly boy, silly boy.'

Saturday came.

When he reached the edge of the stream, the girl, whom he had not seen for several days, was sitting beside the stream playing with the water. He started to cross the stepping stones, pretending to ignore her. A few days previously, he had simply made a fool of himself in front of the girl, so today he crossed the stepping stones cautiously, whereas before he had walked across them as if they were a highway.

'Hey!'

He pretended not to hear. He climbed up the bank and stopped.

'Hey, what kind of shell is this?'

Despite himself, he turned round. He found himself facing the girl's clear, dark eyes. He quickly lowered his gaze to the girl's palm.

'It's a butterfly clam.'

'That's a pretty name.'

They reached the point where the path divided. From here the girl has to go three miles or so downhill, the boy two miles or so uphill.

The girl stopped and said, 'Have you ever been beyond that hill?'

She pointed beyond the end of the fields.

'Never.'

'Why don't we go? Down here in the country, it's so boring I can't stand it.'

'It's a long way, anyway.'

'How far do you mean by far? Up in Seoul we used walk a long way on picnics.' The girl's eyes looked as though she was about to add, 'Silly boy! Silly boy!'

They took a path between two paddy fields. They passed close to where the autumn harvest was under way.

A scarecrow was standing there. The boy shook its straw rope. A few sparrows go flying off. The thought comes to him that he was supposed to go home early today to scare the sparrows from their main paddy field.

'This is fun!'

The girl is holding the scarecrow's rope and is tugging at it. The scarecrow sways, seems to be dancing. A light dimple appeared on the girl's left cheek.

A bit further away there is another scarecrow. The girl goes running toward it. The boy is running behind her. It's as if he's trying to forget that today he was supposed to go home early and help with the work.

He just runs on past the girl. Grasshoppers strike his face and leave it stinging. The perfectly clear azure sky of autumn starts to turn before the boy's eyes. He is dizzy. It's because that eagle up there, that eagle up there, that eagle up there is turning.

Looking behind, the girl is shaking the scarecrow he has just run past. It sways better than the other one. At the place where the rice fields ended was a ditch. The girl jumped across it first.

From there as far as the foot of the hills was all fields.

They passed the top of a field where millet stalks were stacked together.

'What's that?'

'A guard-shed.'

'Look, little yellow melons. Are they good here?'

'Sure, they're good, but water melons taste better.'

'If only I could eat one . . .'

The boy went into the field where white radishes have been sown among the remains of the melon plants and came back with two radishes he'd pulled up. They were still not fully grown. After he had twisted off and thrown aside the leaves, he handed one to the girl. Then, as if to say 'this is how you eat it,' after taking a bite at the larger end he peeled away a strip of the peel with his nails and bit into the flesh beneath.

The girl followed suit. But before even three mouthfuls, she exclaimed, 'Oh, it's peppery and it stinks,' and hurled it from her.

'It tastes awful, I can't eat mine either.'

The boy threw his even further.

The hills had come nearer.

Colored autumn leaves drew close, dazzling their eyes.

'Yah!'

The girl went running toward the hills. Now the boy was not running behind her any more. Instead, he was picking more flowers than the girl had gathered.

'This is wild chrysanthemum, this is bush clover, this is bellflower . . . '

'I never realized that bellflowers could be so pretty. I love purple! . . . But this flower like a sunshade, what is that?'

'That's valerian.'

The girl pretends to be holding the valerian like a parasol. At the same time, the delicate dimple appears in her slightly flushed face.

Again the boy picked a handful of flower for her. He selects only fresh flowers to give her.

But the girl says: 'Don't throw even one of them away.'

They climbed up by way of the ridge.

On the slopes of the valley opposite, a few thatched cottages were grouped companionably.

Neither said anything, but they sat down side by side straddling a rock. All around them seemed exceptionally quiet. The hot autumn sunshine was spreading the fragrance of grass drying, that was all.

'What kind of flower is that?'

On a rather steep incline, the last flowers of the season were blooming on a tangled arrowroot creeper.

'It looks just like wisteria. There was a big wisteria in our school up in Seoul. Seeing those flowers makes me think of the friends I used to play with underneath it.'

The girl stands up quietly and heads for the slope. She seizes a creeper where there are many flowers blooming and starts to tug at it. It does not snap easily. Making more of an effort, she ends up slipping. She grabbed hold of an arrowroot vine.

The boy, alarmed, came running over. The girl held out a hand. As he was pulling her up by the hand, the boy regretfully thinks that he should have picked it for her. Drops of blood were seeping from the girl's right knee. Automatically the boy applied his lips to the scratch and began to suck. Then, struck by some thought, he rose and went running a little way off.

Returning a moment later, out of breath, the boy said: 'If you spread this over it, it'll get better.'

After he had spread pine resin over the scratch, he went running to the place where the arrowroot vines were and bit off with his teeth several that had a lot of flowers; these he brought back up to her. Then he said:

'There's a calf over there. Come on.'

It was a yellowish calf. It had not yet had its nose pierced with a ring.

The boy seized the bridle tightly, pretended to scratch its back and mounted it with a bound. The calf bucks and begins to turn in circles.

The girl's pale face, pink jumper, indigo skirt, together with the flowers she is holding all turn into a blur. It all looks like a great bunch of flowers. He feels dizzy. But he's not going to get off. He was proud. Here was something the girl could never imitate, that only he could do.

'What do you think you're doing?'

A farmer was coming up through the high pampas grass.

He leaped off the calf's back. He expects to be scolded – 'Suppose you hurt the calf's back by riding it, what then?'

But the long-bearded farmer merely glanced once toward the girl, grabbed the calf by the halter, and said, 'You'd best get home fast. It looks as though a shower's coming up.'

Indeed, a dark cloud is rising over their heads. They suddenly find themselves surrounded on all sides by noises. The wind blows past with a rustling sound. In a flash everything around them turned dark purple. As they make their way downhill, raindrops can be heard striking the oak leaves. Big raindrops. The napes of their necks felt cool. Then in an instant a curtain of rain bars the way ahead. Through the rain, they could see a shack standing in a field. They would have to go and shelter there. But the pillars were all aslant and the roofing was in tatters. He helped the girl up, pointing out a spot where the roof was leaking less.

Her lips had gone blue. Her shoulders kept trembling.

He took off his cotton jacket and wrapped it round the girl's shoulders. She raised her eyes and simply looked at him; she remained silent, letting him do as he wished. Next, he drew from the bunch of flowers she had been hugging those with broken stems or crushed flowers and strewed them under her feet. Rain soon began to drip onto the spot where she was standing. They could not shelter there any longer.

After looking outside, the boy went running toward the millet field, as if struck by a thought. He pushed apart one of the stacks formed by leaning the millet stalks together upright, then carried over another stack and added it to the first. Then he parted the stalks again, before waving her to come over.

The rain did not penetrate inside the stack of millet. But he felt sorry it was such a dark and very narrow space. The boy sat beside the stack and let the rain soak him. Steam rose from his shoulders.

The girl told him, in a kind of whisper, that he should come and sit inside. I'm alright, he replied. Again, the girl told him to come and sit inside. He had no choice but to enter backwards. As he did so, he crushed the flowers the girl was still holding. But the girl thought it did not matter. The stench from the boy's wet body filled her nostrils. But she did not turn her head aside. Rather, she felt that the trembling in her body was diminishing on account of the warmth of the boy's body.

Abruptly the noise on the millet leaves stopped. It was clearing up outside.

They emerged from among the millet stalks. Not far in front of them sunlight was already shining down dazzlingly. Arriving at the ditch, they found a great flood of water filling it. In the sunlight it shone red, a

muddy torrent. They could not jump across it.

The boy turned his back to her. The girl obediently let him carry her. The water rose as far as the boy's rolled-up breeches.

The girl cried out, and clasped the boy's neck.

Before they reached the stream, the autumn sky had cleared and soon it was completely blue, cloudless, as if nothing had ever happened.

After that there was no sign of the girl. Every day he ran to the stream to look, but she was not to be seen. At break-time in school he used to search the playground. He even stole a secret glance into the 5th-grade girls' classroom. But she was not to be seen.

That day too the boy came out to the stream side, rubbing the white pebble in his pocket. Lo and behold, if the girl was not sitting there on the bank of the stream!

The boy felt his heart begin to race.

'I was sick all this while.'

Certainly, the girl's face had grown paler.

'Wasn't it because you got wet that day, in the shower?'

The girl nodded silently.

'Are you better now?'

'Not yet . . .'

'Then you ought to be lying down.'

'It was too boring so I came out. . . . You know, it was fun, that day . . . only, somewhere that day this got stained and it won't come out.'

She looked down at the front of the pink jumper. It was stained with what looked like dark red mud.

The girl silently displayed her dimple, as she asked, 'What kind of stain could it be?'

The boy was simply staring at the front of the jumper.

'You know, I've figured it out. That day, when we crossed the ditch, I rode on your back, didn't I? This stain came off your back then.'

The boy felt his face flush. At the parting of the ways, the girl added: 'Here, we picked the jujubes up at our house this morning . . . for the ancestral rites tomorrow . . .' She offers him a handful of jujubes. The boy hesitates.

'Taste one. My great-grandfather planted the tree, he says. They're very sweet.' The boy held out his hands cupped together, saying: 'Why, they're really big!'

“Then this time, after the ancestral rites, there’s something more. We’re vacating the house.’ Before the girl’s folk had moved down here, the boy had already heard his parents talking; he knew how Scholar Yun’s grandson’s business in Seoul had failed, so that he had to return home. It looked as though their family house was going to pass into other hands now.

‘For some reason, I hate the thought of moving out now. It’s the parents’ decision, of course, so there’s nothing I can do . . .’ For the first time, a sorrowful look came into the girl’s dark eyes.

On his way home after parting from the girl, the boy found himself repeating countless times to himself, ‘The girl is moving house.’ It was not something that made him feel particularly regretful or sorrowful. However, the boy was unaware of the sweetness of the jujube he was chewing.

That evening, the boy went in secret to old Deoksoi’s walnut orchard.

He climbed the tree he had singled out during the day. Then he began to beat at the branch he had singled out with a pole. The sound of falling walnuts was strangely loud. His heart froze. But the next moment he was wielding the pole with unsuspected vigor: You big nuts, lots of you, come on, fall down, lots of you, fall.

On the way back, he kept to the shadows cast by the nearly full moon. In two days’ time it would be the autumn full moon. It was the first time he felt grateful for shadows.

He stroked his swollen pocket. He did not care a bit about the saying that peeling walnuts with bare hands often brings up a rash. All he could think was that he must quickly give the girl a taste of these walnuts from old Deoksoi’s trees, the finest in the whole neighborhood.

At that moment an alarming thought struck him. He had failed to tell the girl that once she was better, before they moved away, he wanted her to come out one last time to the streamside. You fool! You fool!

The next day, on returning home from school he found his father dressed in his best clothes, holding a chicken.

He asked where he was going.

Without bothering to reply, his father weighed up the chicken he was holding: ‘Will one this size do?’

His mother handed him a mesh bag: ‘It’s already been clucking and looking for a place to lay for several days. It may not look very big, it must be fat.’ This time the boy tried asking his mother where his father was going.

‘Why, he’s off to the house of Scholar Yun over in the valley by the old school. He can use it for their offerings . . .’ ‘Then he should take a really big one. That speckled rooster . . .’ At those words his father laughed out loud and said, ‘Hey, there’s flesh enough on this one.’

The boy felt abashed for no real reason, so he threw his school books down, went across to the stable and gave the cow a good slap on the back as if he were killing a blowfly.

The water in the stream matured daily.

The boy went up to the parting of the ways and turned downhill. The village round the old school looked very near beneath the clear blue sky.

His parents had said that the girl’s family was moving to Yangpyong the next day. There, they were going to

run a tiny store.

Unthinkingly, the boy caressed the walnuts in his pocket while with the other hand he was bending and breaking off a host of reeds.

That evening the boy kept returning to the same idea, even after he was lying down to sleep: Tomorrow, suppose I went to see the girl's family leaving. If I went, perhaps I might see her.

Then he must have drifted off to sleep, but then: 'Well, really, what a world we live in . . .'

Father must have come back from the village. 'Just look at the family of Scholar Yun, now. All their fields sold off, the house they've lived in for generations handed over to other folk, and then the child dying before the parents . . .'

His mother, sitting sewing in the lamplight, replied: 'That great-granddaughter of his was the only child, wasn't she?'

'Yes. There were two boys but they lost them both when they were still small . . .'

'How can a family be so unblessed in its children?'

'That's a fact. The girl, now, she was sick for several days and they couldn't even afford any proper medicine. Now the whole family line of Scholar Yun is cut off. . . . But you know, that little girl, doesn't she sound a bit frivolous? Why, before she died, believe it or not it seems she said that if she died, she wanted them to bury her in the clothes she'd been wearing every day, just as they were. . . .'