

**Mama and the Boarder**  
**by Chu Yo-sôp**  
**translated by Kim Chong-un and Bruce Fulton**

## 1

My name is Pak Ok-hûi, and this year I'll be six years old. There's just two of us in my family--me and my mother, who's the prettiest woman in the whole wide world. Woops--I almost left out my uncle.

He's in middle school, and what with him galivanting about, he's hardly ever around except for meals. A lot of the time we won't see hide nor hair of him for days on end. So can you blame me if I forgot him for a second?

My mother is so beautiful, there's really no one else like her in the world. She'll be twenty-three this year, and she's a widow. I'm not sure what a widow is, but since the neighbors call me the "widow's girl," I figure she must be a widow. The other kids all have fathers, but not me. Maybe that has something to do with it.

## 2

According to Grandma, my father passed away a month before I came along. He and my mother had only been married for a year. My father was from somewhere far off, and he came here to teach school. So when they were married my mother stayed here and they bought this house (it's the one next to Grandma's). They weren't here even a year when my father suddenly died. Because he passed away before I came along, I never saw him in person. And I can't picture him no matter how hard I try. A couple of times I've seen what's supposed to be his picture, and he sure was good-looking. If he was still alive, he'd definitely be the most handsome father in the whole world. It's just not fair that I never got a chance to see him. It's been quite a while since I've seen his picture. My mother used to keep it on her desk, but every time Grandma came she'd tell her to put it away. So now it's gone and I don't know where. Once I came home and saw my mother sneaking a look at something from the chest. When she heard me she hid it in the chest real quick like. I guess maybe that was his picture.

My father left us something to live on before he passed away. One day last summer--actually I guess it was almost fall--Mother took me to a little mountain a few miles away to see it. At the bottom of the mountain was a house with a straw roof. We scooped up some chestnuts, then went inside and had some chicken soup. She said this was our land. We get enough rice and such from it, so that we don't have to go hungry. But there's no money for meat and vegetables or goodies. So Mother takes in sewing. That's where she gets the money to buy herring and eggs, and candy for me.

So there was really only my mother and me. But since Father's den was now empty, my mother decided to get some use out of it and at the same time have someone to run

errands for her. And that's how Little Uncle got to live with us.

## 3

One day Mother said she was going to send me to kindergarten in the spring. You should have seen how proud I was with my playmates. But as soon as I came home from playing, I saw Big Uncle (I mean the big brother of Uncle who lived in my father's room) sitting there talking with someone I'd never seen before.

"Ok-hûi," Big Uncle called me. "Ok-hûi, come here and say hello to this man."

I felt bashful and just stayed where I was.

This man I'd never seen before said to Big Uncle, "What a lovely girl--is she your niece?"

"Yes, she's my sister's daughter.... She wasn't born yet when Kyông-sôn died. She's his only child."

"Ok-hûi, come here, hmm?" said the stranger. "Those eyes are just like your father's."

"Ok-hûi, you're a big girl now--why so shy? Come here and say hi. This man's an old friend of your father. He's moving into your father's room here, so you'd better say hi and get to know each other."

The stranger was moving into my father's room? That made me very happy. So I went up to the man, gave him my best bow, then ran out to the inner courtyard. I could hear Big Uncle and the man laughing.

I went into Mother's room, and right off, I tugged on her sleeve.

"Mother!" I said. I was still all excited. "Big Uncle brought a man here! He's moving into the guest room!"

"That's right."

I guess she already knew about it.

"When's he moving in?"

"Today."

"Yippee!"

I started clapping my hands, but Mother grabbed them.

"Now what's all this fuss?"

"But what about Little Uncle?"

"He'll stay there too."

"You mean the two of them together?"

"Umm-hmm."

"In the same room?"

"Why not? They can close the sliding partition, and then they'll each have a space."

I didn't know who this new uncle was. But he treated me nice, and right away I took a shine to him. Later I heard the grown-ups say he was a friend of my father ever since they were little. He went off somewhere to study, and just came back, and he got assigned to teach at a school here. He's also a friend of Big Uncle, and since the boardinghouse rooms in our neighborhood aren't too clean, they arranged for him to stay in our guest room. Best of

all, the board money he paid us would give us some of the extras we wanted so much.

This new uncle had a whole bunch of picture books. Whenever I went in his room, he sat me in his lap and showed them to me. Every once in a while he gave me a piece of candy. Once I sneaked into his room after my lunch. He was just starting his meal. I sat down without a peep to watch him eat.

"Now what kind of side dish does Ok-hûi like best?" he asked me.

Boiled eggs, I told him. Well, wouldn't you know it, he had some on his meal tray. He gave me one and told me to help myself. I peeled it and started eating.

"Uncle, which side dish do you like most?"

He smiled for a moment.

"Boiled eggs."

I was so happy I clapped my hands.

"Gee, just like me. I'm going to tell Mother."

I got up to go, but the uncle grabbed me.

"Oh, don't do that."

But once I make up my mind there's no stopping me. So I ran out to the inner courtyard.

"Mother! Mother!" I yelled. "The new uncle's favorite side dish is boiled eggs, just like me!"

"Now don't make such a fuss," Mother said. And she gave me her please-don't-do-that look.

But the fact that the new uncle liked eggs turned out quite nice for me. Because Mother started buying eggs in bunches from then on. When the old woman with the eggs came around, Mother bought ten or twenty at a time. She boiled them up and put two of them in the uncle's place at mealtime, and then she almost always gave me one. And that wasn't all. Sometimes when I visited the uncle, he'd get an egg or two from his drawer for me to eat. After that I ate eggs to my heart's content. I really liked the uncle. But Little Uncle grumbled sometimes. I guess he didn't take to the new uncle too well. And he didn't like the way he had to run errands for him--that was probably the real reason. Once I saw Little Uncle arguing with Mother.

"Now look," said Mother, "don't you be running off again. Why can't you wait in his room? You'll have to take him his dinner tray when he comes back."

Little Uncle made a face.

"Aw shit, whenever yours truly has something to do, it seems like he's always late for his meal."

"Well, what can I do? I need *somebody* to take him his meal."

"Can't you do it yourself, Sister? Times have changed. Why do you have to be so old-fashioned when it comes to men?"

Suddenly Mother's face was all red. She didn't say anything, but you should have seen the look she gave Little Uncle.

Little Uncle gave a laugh to lighten the mood, and went out to the guest room.

## 4

I started kindergarten, and our teacher taught us songs. She also taught us dancing. She was real good at the pedal organ. The organ was a little thing compared with the one at the Protestant church we went to, but it still made a nice sound. Then I remembered seeing something that looked just like our kindergarten organ sitting at the far end of our room. So as soon as I got home that day I pulled Mother over to it and asked:

"Mama, this is an organ, isn't it?"

Mother smiled.

"That's right. How did you know?"

"It's just like the one at kindergarten. Can you play it, too, Mother?"

I had to ask, because I'd never seen her playing it. But she didn't say a word.

"Try it, Mother--please?"

Her face got kind of cloudy.

"Your father bought this organ for me. I haven't even raised the lid since he passed on...."

She looked like she was about to burst into tears at any second, so I changed the subject.

"Can I have a candy, Mommy?"

And then I led her back to the near end of our room.

Before I knew it, a month had passed since the uncle moved in. I stopped by his room almost every day. Once in a while Mother would tell me it was no good pestering him like that. But if you want to know the truth, I didn't pester him one little bit. It was the uncle who pestered me.

"Ok-hûi, those eyes of yours look just like your father's. But maybe that cute little nose came from your mother. And that little mouth, too. Am I right? Is your mother pretty like you?"

"Uncle, you're silly! Haven't you seen her face?"

But when I answered him that way, he didn't say a word.

"Shall we go in and see Mother?" I asked, taking the uncle by the sleeve.

You should have seen how strongly he reacted.

"No, we'd better not--I'm busy now," he said, pulling me back the other way. But he really didn't seem all that busy, because he didn't ask me to leave. Instead he patted my head and gave me a kiss on the cheek--he wouldn't let me go. And he kept asking me such funny questions: "Who made you this pretty jacket?... Do you sleep with your Mama at night?" He made me feel like I was something special to him. But when Little Uncle came back, the new uncle's attitude changed all of a sudden. He stopped asking me about these various things, and he wouldn't hug me tight. Instead he got all proper and showed me a picture book. Maybe he was afraid of Little Uncle.

Whatever the reason, Mother scolded me for pestering the uncle. And every once in a while she kept me in our room after dinner. But pretty soon she'd get caught up in her sewing, and I'd try to sneak out. When she heard the door slide open she'd wake up and catch me. But she never got mad at me. "Come here so I can fix your hair," she'd say. And then she'd pull me inside and make my braids nice and pretty again. "We want your hair to look nice. What's the uncle going to think if you go around just the way you are?" Or she'd braid my hair and say, "Now what did you do to your jacket?" and make me change into a new one.

## 5

One Saturday the new uncle asked me if I wanted to go for a short hike. I was so happy I said yes right away.

"Go inside and ask your mother first," he said.

Gee, he's right, I thought.

Mother said it was okay. But before she let me go she scrubbed my face and did my braids over. Then she hugged me real tight.

"Now don't be too late," she said in a loud voice. I'll bet the uncle heard it too.

We climbed to the top of a hill and looked down for a while at the train station, but no trains were running. I had fun pulling the long blades of grass and pinching the uncle while he was lying on the ground. Later when we were on our way down the hill, the uncle was holding my hand and we ran into some of the kids from my kindergarten.

"Look, Ok-hûi went somewhere with her dad," one of them said. This girl didn't know my father had passed away. My face got hot, maybe because I was thinking just then how nice it would be if the uncle really was my father. I wanted so much to be able to call him "Papa," even if it was just once. You don't know how much I enjoyed walking home through the alleys with the uncle holding my hand.

We arrived at the front gate.

"Uncle, I wish you were my papa," I blurted out.

The uncle turned red as a tomato and gently prodded me.

"You shouldn't say things like that," he said almost in a whisper. His voice was shaking an awful lot. The only thing I could think of was that he must have gotten angry. So I went inside without saying anything more.

Mother gave me a hug and said, "Where did you go?"

But instead of answering I started to sniffle.

"Ok-hûi, what happened? What's wrong, honey?"

All I could do was cry.

## 6

The next day was Sunday, and Mother and I got ready to go to church. While she was changing I poked my head inside the guest room to see if the uncle was still in a bad mood. He was sitting at his desk writing something. I tiptoed in, and when he looked up he had a big grin on his face. That

smile made me feel easy again. Now I knew he wasn't mad anymore. The uncle looked me over from head to toe.

"Ok-hûi, where are you going all prettied up like that?"

"I'm going to church with Mama."

"Is that so?" said the uncle. For a moment he looked like he was thinking about something. "Which church?"

"The one right over there."

"Oh? Over where?"

Just then I heard Mother's soft voice calling me. I hurried back to our room, but on the way I turned around to look at the uncle. His face was red and angry again. I couldn't figure out why he was getting mad so easy these days.

We took our seats in the church and sang a hymn, and then there was a prayer. During the prayer I got to wondering if maybe the uncle was there too. So I sat up and looked over at the men's side of the aisle. And what do you know--there he was. But he wasn't praying with his eyes closed, like the other grown-ups. His eyes were open, just like us kids, and he was looking around every which way. I recognized the uncle right away, but I guess he didn't recognize me. Because even when I gave him a big smile he didn't smile back; instead he had a faraway look in his eyes. So I waved at him. But the uncle ducked his head real quick. Mother finally saw me waving, and pulled me back with both hands. I put my mouth to her ear.

"The uncle's here," I whispered.

When Mother heard this she gave a little jump and put her hand over my mouth. Then she sat me in front of her and pushed my head down. This time, I noticed it was Mother who was red as a tomato.

Well, church that day was a big flop. Mother was mad till the end of the service. All she did was look straight ahead at the pulpit. She didn't look down and give me a smile once in a while like she usually did. When I looked over at the men's side to see the uncle, he didn't once look back at me but just sat there mad. Mother didn't look at me either but just kept grabbing me and pulling me down--it was too much. Why was everyone cross with me? It got to the point where I felt like bawling out loud. But then I noticed our kindergarten teacher not too far away, and I managed to keep from crying, though it wasn't easy.

## 7

When I started going to kindergarten, Little Uncle walked me there and back. But after a few days I could do it all by myself. When I got back home Mother was always waiting for me at the side gate. (Our house has two gates--the side gate and the gate to the uncle's room, and Mother only used the side gate.) When Mother saw me, she'd run over and hug me and we'd go inside.

But one day, Mother wasn't there, and I didn't know why. I thought she'd probably gone to see Grandmother, but

still, here I was back home with no one waiting for me. I thought it was awful of her to leave the house like that. Well, I decided I'd give Mother a hard time. Just then I heard her voice outside the gate.

"Goodness, I wonder if she's home already."

I ran inside, taking my shoes with me so she wouldn't know I was there. Then I hid in the storage loft. I could hear Mother's voice right outside in the yard.

"Ok-hûi--Ok-hûi, aren't you home yet?... Hmmm, I guess not."

And then it sounded like she went out again. I thought this was fun, and started giggling.

But then a little later the whole house suddenly became noisy. First I heard Mother, then Grandmother, then Little Uncle.

"Well, I was home all day, Mother, until I realized I didn't have any cookies for Ok-hûi, and that's when I visited you. And now something's happened." That was Mother speaking.

"And at the kindergarten they said she'd left a good twenty minutes ago. Gracious, do you suppose on the way home...?" That was Grandmother.

"I'll go out and look for her. Little troublemaker must have gone somewhere." That was Little Uncle.

Then Mother started crying, and Grandmother said something I couldn't make out. I told myself it was time to stop the game, but then I thought, "I've got to get even with her for getting mad at me last Sunday at church," and I lay down. The loft was stuffy and hot, and before I knew it I had drifted off to sleep.

I have no idea how long I slept. But when I woke up I'd completely forgotten about going into the loft. What was I doing lying in such a strange place? It was kind of dark, it was cramped, it was hot.... Suddenly I was scared, and I started bawling. And just as suddenly I heard Mother scream close by, and the door to the loft was yanked open. Mother rushed inside, took me in her arms, and lifted me down.

"You little devil!"

She spanked me several times, and that made me cry even louder. Mother pulled me close, and then she started crying too.

"Ok-hûi, Ok-hûi, it's all right now, Mama's here. Don't cry, Ok-hûi. You're all there is, the only thing Mama lives for. I don't need anything else. You're my only hope. Don't cry, Ok-hûi, don't cry, hmm?"

While she kept telling me this, she couldn't stop crying herself.

"Little brat--the devil must have gotten into her," said Grandmother. "What made her hide in the loft?"

"What a lousy day," said Little Uncle. He got up and went out.

On my way home from kindergarten the next day I got to thinking about how I had made Mother cry so much when I hid in the loft. I felt so ashamed. "I want to make her happy today," I thought. "Now what could I bring her?" Then I remembered the vase on our teacher's desk. It had some beautiful red flowers, though I didn't know their name. They weren't forsythias and they weren't azaleas. I could recognize those flowers, and I knew they'd already bloomed and gone by. The ones in the vase must have come from across the ocean. I knew my mother adored flowers. How happy she would be if I brought her some of those red ones.

And so I went back to my classroom. Goodie! No one was there. Teacher must have gone somewhere, because she wasn't around either. I snatched a couple of the flowers and ran out.

Mother was waiting near the gate, and she took me in her arms.

"Where did you get those lovely flowers?" she asked, taking the flowers and smelling them.

I didn't know what to say. I was too ashamed to tell her I'd brought them from kindergarten. What could I tell her? Somehow I thought of a little fib.

"The uncle in the guest room told me to give them to you," I blurted.

Mother was real flustered. It was like my words had startled her. And then all at once her face turned redder than the flowers. Her fingers holding the flowers began to tremble. She looked around like she was thinking of something scary.

"Ok-hûi, you shouldn't have taken them." Her voice was shaking so much. Mother loved flowers, and so for her to get so mad over these flowers was the last thing I expected. I told myself it was a good thing I'd fibbed about the uncle and not told her I'd brought the flowers myself. I didn't know why she was mad, but as long as she was going to be mad at someone, I was glad it was the uncle and not me. A little while later Mother led me inside.

"Ok-hûi, I don't want you to tell a soul about these flowers, hmm?"

"All right."

I thought Mother would throw the flowers away, but instead she put them in a vase and kept them on top of the organ. There they slept night after night, and finally they withered. Mother then cut off the stems and saved the flowers between the pages of her hymnbook.

That night I was back in the uncle's lap reading a picture book. Suddenly I could feel the uncle tense up. He was trying to hear something. I tried too.

It was an organ!

For sure the sound was floating out from our room. It must be Mama, I thought. I jumped up and ran to our room. It was dark there, but it was around the time of the full moon, and silvery light filled half the room, making it

light as day. There was Mother, all dressed in white and very calm, playing the organ.

I was six years old, but this was the first time I had seen Mother play the organ. She played better than our kindergarten teacher. I went up beside her, but she didn't budge and kept on playing. I guess she didn't know I was there. A little later Mother began singing to the music. I didn't know she had such a beautiful voice. Her voice was much lovelier than our teacher's, and she sang better too. I stood there quietly listening to Mother sing. It was a beautiful song. I felt it was coming down to me on a silver thread from Starland.

But then Mother's voice got a tiny bit shaky. The sound of the organ got shaky too. The song grew softer and softer, and finally it was gone. And then the organ stopped too. Mother stood up, still real calm, and gave me a pat on the head. The next instant, she took me in her arms and we went out on the veranda. Mother gave me a big hug, not saying anything. In the full moonlight her face was pure white. She's a real angel, I told myself.

Two streams of tears were running down Mother's white cheeks. The sight of those tears made me want to cry myself.

"Mother, why are you crying?" Now I was sniffing too.

"Ok-hûi."

"Hmm?"

She didn't say anything for a minute. And then, "Ok-hûi, having you is enough."

"Yes, Mama."

But that's all she said.

## 9

The next evening I was playing in the uncle's room when I began to feel sleepy. As I was about to leave, the uncle took a white envelope from his drawer and gave it to me.

"Ok-hûi, would you take this to your Mama? It's last month's room and board."

I took the envelope to Mother. But when I handed it to her, she turned pale. She looked even whiter than the night before, when we were sitting on the veranda in the moonlight. She looked anxious, like she didn't know what to do with the envelope.

"He said it's for last month's room and board."

"Oh." When Mother heard this she looked startled, as if she had just woke up. The next instant, her face wasn't white as a sheet of paper any longer; now it was red. Her trembling fingers reached inside the envelope and pulled out several paper bills. A tiny little smile formed on her lips, and she breathed a sigh. But then something else must have surprised her, because she tensed up, and the next minute her face was white again and her lips were trembling. I looked at what Mother was holding, and beside the paper money there was a piece of white paper folded into a square.

Mother looked like she didn't know what to do. But then she seemed to make up her mind. She bit her lip, unfolded the paper real carefully, and read it. Of course, I didn't know what was written there, but I could see Mother's face turn red right away and then back to pale again. Her hands weren't just trembling, they were positively shaking, enough to make the paper rustle.

A good while later Mother folded the paper back into a square and put it in the envelope along with the money. She dropped the envelope into her sewing basket. And then she sat down and just stared at the light bulb like someone who had lost her senses. I could see her chest heaving. I thought maybe she was sick or something, so I ran over and snuggled into her lap.

"Mama, can we go to sleep?"

Mama kissed me on the cheek. But her lips were so hot. They felt just like a stone that's been warmed up in a fire.

We went to sleep, and after a while I half woke up and reached out for Mother. I was in the habit of doing this from time to time. I'd reach out half asleep and feel her soft skin. Then I'd go back to sleep. But this time she wasn't there.

Mama wasn't there! Suddenly I was afraid. I opened my eyes wide and looked all around. The light was off, but the moon shone full in the yard, and enough of its light came into the room so I could see things just a little. At the far end of the room was the small chest with Father's clothes. Sometimes Mother took them out and felt them. Now the chest was open, and the white clothing was piled on the floor. Next to it was Mother in her night clothes, half sitting and half leaning against the chest. Her head was up but her eyes were closed. I could see her lips move. She looked like she was praying. I sat up and crawled over and wormed myself into her lap.

"Mama, what are you doing?"

She stopped whispering, opened her eyes, and looked at me for the longest time.

"Ok-hûi."

"Hmm?"

"Let's go back to bed."

"All right. But you too, Mama."

"Yes. Mama too."

Somehow her voice gave me a chill.

One at a time Mother picked up Father's clothes, gently smoothed them with the palm of her hand, and returned them to the chest. When the last one was in, she shut the chest and locked it. Then she gathered me up and back we went to bed.

"Mama, aren't we going to pray first?"

Mother didn't let a night go by without praying when she put me to bed. The only prayer I knew was the Lord's Prayer. I had no idea what the words meant, but from following along with Mother, I knew it by heart. But then I remembered that for some reason Mother had forgotten to pray

the night before. I felt like reminding her then, but she looked so sad that I kept quiet and ended up falling asleep without saying anything.

"All right, let's say our prayer," Mother said in her calm voice.

All of a sudden I wanted to hear the gentle voice Mother used when she prayed.

"Mother, you pray."

"Our Father who art in heaven," she began, "hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation...and lead us not into temptation...lead us not into temptation...lead us not...lead us not....'"

I couldn't believe it--Mother had lost her place! It was so funny. Even I can say the prayer without losing my place.

"...lead us not...lead us not....'"

Mother kept saying those words over and over, and when I couldn't wait any longer I said, "Mama, I'll do the rest: 'But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever.'"

After a long while Mother finally whispered, "Amen."

## 10

It was all I could do to figure out Mother. Sometimes she was quite cheerful. In the evening she might play the organ or sing a hymn. I liked that so much that I just sat quietly next to her and listened. But once in a while, what started out as her singing would end up as tears. When that happened, I would be in tears too. Then Mother would give me more kisses than I could count, and say, "Ok-hûi, you're the only one I need, yes you are." And she kept crying, on and on.

One Sunday Mother got a headache and decided not to go to church. (It was the day after kindergarten closed down for the summer.) The uncle in the guest room was out somewhere, and Little Uncle was out somewhere, so it was just Mother and me at home. Mother was lying down because of her headache. Out of the blue I heard her call my name.

"Ok-hûi, do you miss having a papa?"

"Yes, Mama, I want to have a papa too." I put on my baby act and whined a bit.

Mother didn't say anything for a while. She just stared at the ceiling.

"Ok-hûi. You know your father passed away before you were born. So it's not that you don't have a papa; it's just that he passed on early. If you had a new father now, everyone would call you names. You don't know any better, but the whole world would call you names, everyone in the world. 'Ok-hûi's mother is a loose woman'--that's what they would say. 'Ok-hûi's father died, but now she has another father; what will they do next!'--that's what everyone would

say. Everyone would point their finger at you. And when you grew up, we wouldn't be able to find you a good husband. Even if you studied hard and became successful, other people would say you're just the daughter of a loose woman."

She said this in fits and starts, like she was talking to herself. After a few minutes she talked to me some more.

"Ok-hûi?"

"Hmm?"

"Ok-hûi, I don't want you to ever leave my side. Forever and always I want you to live with Mama. I want you to live with Mama even when she's old and shriveled up. After kindergarten, after grade school, after preparatory school, after college, even if you're the finest woman in all the land, I want you to live with Mama. Hmm? Ok-hûi, tell me how much you love Mama."

"This much." I opened my arms wide.

"How much? That much! Ok-hûi, I want you to love me always and forever. I want you to study hard and be a fine woman...."

I got scared when I heard Mother's voice trembling, because I thought she was going to cry again. So I opened my arms as wide as I could and said, "This much, Mama, this much."

Mother didn't cry.

"Ok-hûi, you're everything to Mama. I don't need anything else. I'm happy just with Ok-hûi. Yes I am."

She pulled me close and held me tight. She kept hugging me until she had squeezed all my breath out.

After dinner that day, Mother called me, sat me down, and combed my hair. She made a new braid for me and then dressed me in new bloomers, jacket, and skirt.

I asked where we were going.

Mother smiled. "We aren't going anywhere." Then she took down a freshly ironed white handkerchief from beside the organ and put it in my hand.

"This handkerchief belongs to the uncle in the guest room. Could you take it to him? Now don't stay long--just give it to him and come right back, hmm?"

I thought I could feel something tucked in between the folds of the handkerchief, but I didn't open it to see.

I stopped at the uncle's door. He was lying down, but he sat right up when he saw the handkerchief. For some reason he didn't give me a smile, like before. Instead his face turned awful white. He started chewing on his lip as he took the handkerchief. He didn't say a word.

Somehow something wasn't right. So instead of going in the uncle's room I turned around and went back. Mother was at the organ. She must have been doing some hard thinking, because she was just sitting there. I sat down beside the organ and didn't say anything. And then Mother started playing, soft as could be. I didn't know the tune, but it was kind of sad and lonely.

Mother played the organ till late that night. Over and over again she played that sad and lonely tune.

## 11

Several days went by, and then one afternoon I finally paid another visit to the uncle. He was busy packing his things. Ever since the day I gave him the handkerchief, the uncle always looked sad, like someone with worries on his mind, even when he saw me. He wouldn't say anything, but just stared at me. And so I didn't go to his room to play very often.

I was surprised to see him packing all of a sudden.

"Uncle, are you going somewhere?"

"Uh-huh--far, far away."

"When?"

"Today."

"On the train?"

"Uh-huh."

"When are you coming back?"

Instead of answering, the uncle took a cute doll from his drawer and handed it to me.

"You keep this, hmm? Ok-hûi, you're going to forget Uncle soon after he leaves, aren't you?"

"Uh-uh." Suddenly I felt very sad.

I went back to our room with the doll.

"Mama, look! The uncle gave it to me. He says he's going far away on the train today."

Mother didn't say anything.

"Mama, why is the uncle going away?"

"Because his school is on vacation."

"Where is he going?"

"He's going to his home--where else?"

"Is the uncle going to come back?"

Mother didn't answer.

"I don't want the uncle to leave," I pouted.

But Mother changed the subject: "Ok-hûi, go to the closet and see how many eggs there are."

I trotted inside the closet. There were six eggs left.

"Six," I called out.

"Bring all of them here."

Mother proceeded to boil the eggs. Next she wrapped them in a handkerchief. Then she put a pinch of salt in a piece of writing paper and tucked it inside the handkerchief.

"Ok-hûi, take these to the uncle and tell him to have them on the train, hmm?"

## 12

That afternoon, after the uncle left, I played with the doll he gave me. I carried it around on my back singing it a lullaby. Mother came in from the kitchen.

"Ok-hûi, how would you like to go up the hill and get some fresh air?"

"Goodie, let's go!" I practically jumped for joy.

Mother told Little Uncle to mind the house while we went out for a while. Then she took my hand.

"Mama, can I take the uncle's doll?"

"Why not?"

I held the doll close, took Mother's hand, and we hiked up the hill behind our house. From the top we could see the train station clear as could be.

"Mama, look, there's the train station. The train isn't here yet."

Mother didn't say anything. The hem of her ramie skirt fluttered in the soft breeze. Standing quietly on top of the hill, Mother looked even prettier than she did other times.

And then I saw the train coming around a faraway hill.

"Mama, here comes the train!" I shouted in delight.

The train stopped at the station, and practically the next minute it gave a whistle and started moving again.

"There it goes!" I clapped my hands.

Mother watched till the train had disappeared around a hill in the other direction. And then she watched till all the smoke from the smokestack had scattered into the sky above.

We went down the hill, and when we were in our room again Mother put the lid back on the organ. It had been left open all these days. Then she locked it and put the sewing basket on top, the way it was before. She picked up the hymnbook like it was something heavy and flipped through the pages until she found the dried-up flowers.

"Ok-hûi, take these and throw them away." She handed me the flowers, and I remembered they were the ones I had brought her from kindergarten.

Just then the side gate creaked open.

"Get your eggs!"

It was the old woman who came every day carrying her basket of eggs on her head.

"We won't be buying from now on," said Mother.

"There's nobody here who eats them." Her voice didn't have an ounce of life to it.

This took me by surprise. I wanted to pester Mother to buy some eggs, but when I saw her face lit up by the setting sun I lost heart. Instead I put my mouth to the ear of the uncle's doll and whispered to her.

"Did you hear that! Mommy's a pretty good fibber too. She knows I like eggs, but she said there's nobody here who eats them. I'd sure like to pester her. But look at Mama's face. Look how white it is! I don't think Mama feels very good."

Author **Chu Yo-sôp** was one of modern Korea's most versatile men of letters, a writer of poetry, fiction, and essays, editor of the journal *Shindonga*, and later in life head of the Korean Literary Translators Association. Born in Pyongyang in 1902, he studied briefly in Japan, then returned to Korea after the Japanese suppression of the

March 1, 1919, Independence Movement. After making his literary debut in 1921, he spent several years in China, obtaining a university degree in Shanghai in 1927.

Most of Chu's stories from the 1920s depict the lower classes in Shanghai. "Illyôkkôgun" (Rickshaw Man, 1925) is representative. After a hiatus of almost ten years in which he published only a single story, Chu returned to literary life in 1935 with the story that follows (Sarang sonnim kwa ômôni), published originally in the journal *Chogwang*. His signature story, it marks a profound departure from the gritty stories of the previous decade. Chu published sporadically after Liberation and the Korean War, his last story appearing shortly before his death in 1972.

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