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2021-07

## Một ngày may mắn

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### Citation:

Huyn, J.(2021), "Một ngày may mắn", Book, UEH University, July

**Available at** <https://digital.lib.ueh.edu.vn/handle/11461/2010>

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# A Lucky Day

by Hyeon, Jin-gun

translated by T.I.Time

The cloudy weather looked as if it would snow, but it didn't and only the half-frozen rain sagged to the ground. Today was a lucky day for Kim *Cheomji*\*, making a living as a rickshaw man in *Dongsomun*, which wasn't common for him. In addition to taking the lady from next door to the railway, after throwing pleading glances at each person getting off, expecting at least one customer, he finally managed to pick up a man in a suit who looked like a teacher to *Dong-gwang* School.

The first was 30 *jeon*\*\* , second was 50 – this wasn't a common occurrence in mornings. Kim *Cheomji*, who had been so unlucky to not earn anything for the last ten days, was delighted to tears to see three or five ten-*jeons* drop into his palm with a clank. What's more, the 80 *jeon* worth of money was especially useful to him this day. He could wet his dry throat with a glass of liquor but more importantly, he could buy a bowl of *seollongtang*\*\*\* for his sick wife.

It's been over a month since his wife started coughing. They couldn't even afford to eat regularly, so it was no wonder he hadn't tried any sort of medicine. It wasn't that he couldn't, but he was faithful to his own belief that an illness would reoccur repeatedly if it took a liking to medicine. So he hadn't even brought her to a doctor, and didn't know exactly what her sickness was. But it certainly seemed quite serious, as she could only lie in one particular direction and couldn't get up by herself. The reason her illness turned worse was because of an incident ten days ago, when she got an upset stomach by eating millet rice.

At the time, Kim *Cheomji* had earned money for the first time in many days, and bought a toe of millet and a bundle of branches. According to him, the foolish woman recklessly put it in a pot and boiled it. In a hurry, she grasped the uncooked thing with her bare hands and pushed it into her mouth as much as her two swollen cheeks could handle, devouring it as if she were being chased. Since that evening, she started rolling her eyes back and making a fuss about how her chest felt compressed and how strained her stomach was. At this, Kim *Cheomji* exploded with anger.

"Eh, wretched girl! You have the worst luck in the world! You get sick from starving, you get sick from eating, what am I supposed to do? Why, you can't even open your eyes right!" Out of frustration, he slapped her cheek. Her eyes straightened, but tears started to form in them. His eyelids also felt hot.

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\* A title for calling elders in a degrading way Similar to 'Mr. Kim'

\*\* A monetary unit

\*\*\* Hot soup made of cow bones, tripe, and rice

Despite this, she didn't shy away from eating. Since four days ago, she pleaded her husband that she really wanted to eat *seollongtang*.

"You wench! You can't even eat boiled rice, how are you going to eat *seollongtang*? You're going to make a mess again after eating it!"

He had shouted, but it was unsatisfying to not be able to buy it for her.

Now, he could. He could also buy porridge for Gaeddong(his three year old child) who was starving next to its ailing mother. Holding 80 *jeon* in his hand, he felt at ease.

However, it wasn't the end of his luck. It came from behind him, when he was wiping his neck, clammy with sweat and rain, with his greasy towel while coming out of the school gates.

"Rickshaw man!"

Kim *Cheomji* guessed, after a quick glance, that the person that stopped him was a student. The student asked abruptly,

"How much to *Namdaemun* station?"

He was probably a student living in the school dormitory, going home for winter vacation. He might have decided to go today, but it was rainy and he had a lot of luggage, leaving him at a loss at what to do. He might've seen Kim *Cheomji* at that moment and ran out. If not so, why would he have dragged his shoes out instead of wearing them properly and let his suit get drenched to chase him down?

"To *Namdaemun* station?"

Kim *Cheomji* hesitated. Did he not want to go such a long way without an umbrella? Could he have been satisfied with the first and second customer? No, certainly not. Period. He felt uneasy about his wife's request before he left. When he was called by the lady, the patient mumbled, with an imploring expression in her oddly big and sunken eyes, the only life-like things left in her bony face,

"Please don't go out today. Please, stay home. I'm in so much pain……."

At the time, he didn't think much of it and tried to dodge out of the room saying,

"Stupid woman, you're talking nonsense. If you hold me down, who's going to earn money to keep you alive?"

The patient shook her arms as if to grab him and choked,

"I'm telling you, don't go out. Then, please come home early."

The moment he heard the request to the station, his wife's twitching hands, her unusually wide eyes, and her tearful face all appeared before his eyes.

"So, how much is it?" The student looked at his face anxiously, and muttered to himself,

"There's a train to *Incheon* at 11, and after that two more."

"That'll be 1 *won* and 50 *jeon*."

The words came out unexpectedly from his mouth. He even surprised himself at the amount of money. How long has it been since calling for this much at once! His will to earn money burned away his worries about the patient. Surely nothing bad would

happen on this day. No matter what, he could not miss this fortune which was far more valuable than the first and second luck of the day.

"Isn't that too expensive?"

The student tilted his head.

"No. It's over 15 *ri*\* from here to there. And it's more costly on rainy days like today." The rickshaw puller couldn't hide the telltale happiness flowing from his face.

"Fine, I'll pay for it. Just hurry."

The generous young customer went to get dressed and pick up his luggage.

After Kim *Cheomji* took the student on board, his legs were strangely light. It seemed he was flying rather than running. The wheels turned so smoothly it was like skating on ice. It was slippery because of the rain on the frozen ground, and soon his legs started to feel heavy. He had reached near his house. A sudden feeling of uneasiness pressed down his chest. 'Please don't go out today. I'm in so much pain!' The words vibrated in his ear, and it felt like the patient's hollow eyes were glaring at him in resentment. Then he thought he could hear Gaeddong wail loudly. He could make out hiccuping breaths, too.

"What are you doing? I'm going to be late for the train."

The impatient shout from the student on board barely reached his ears. He realized with a jolt that he had stopped awkwardly in the middle of the road holding the rickshaw.

"Yes, sir."

Kim *Cheomji* started running again. The further he got away from his house, the springier his steps became, as if he could forget his pains and worries only by relentlessly moving his legs.

Arriving at the station, he held the remarkable 1 *won* and 50 *jeon* in his hands. He didn't think about the muddy 10 *ri* he had just come through in the rain and simply felt grateful as if he had become a billionaire overnight. He respectfully bowed several times to the customer who was young enough to be his son and said, "Have a nice day."

However, it was unthinkable to go back home rattling his empty rickshaw in the rain. When the sweat from the day's work cooled off, a chill started to seep out of his starving stomach and wet clothes, and he came to realize painfully how useful the 1 *won* and 50 *jeon* could be. Leaving the station, his steps lost its pep. He felt that he would collapse on the spot and not get back up.

"Damn it! How can I go back home with this empty rickshaw! Curse the rain hitting my face!"

He was extremely irritated and cried out as if blaming someone. At that moment, a brilliant new thought flashed through his mind. 'I might be able to pick up more customers if I circle the area and wait for the next train to come.' Who could say that this kind of lucky chance was impossible on this oddly lucky day? He was

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\* Traditional way of counting distance. 1 *ri* = 0.4km

confident that his luck would trail on and on. But he couldn't stand directly in front of the station, for the station rickshaw men were stern. He had done this sort of thing many times before, and decided to put a little distance from the train stop and park his rickshaw in a gap between the railroad and the sidewalk while he explored the area. The train arrived soon after, and scores of customers poured onto the train station. Kim *Cheomji*'s eyes followed the passengers, looking for a customer. He caught a glimpse of a girl with pigtails, heels, and even a cape, looking like a retired *gisaeng*\* or a dissipated student. He inched toward her.

"Ma'am, would you like a ride?"

The girl didn't even cast a look at him and pinched her mouth shut. Kim *Cheomji* tried to initiate a conversation with her like a beggar, trying to gauge her mood.

"Ma'am," said Kim *Cheomji*, laying a hand on her Japanese jacket. "I'm much cheaper than the ones at the station. Where are you heading?"

"Don't bother me, I don't need it!" She shouted and turned around. Kim *Cheomji* huffed and backed away.

The train came. He glared at the passengers reproachfully. But his hunch was not wrong. There was one person left when the train started to leave, crowded with a number of people. It seemed that he was thrown out of the train by the conductor because his luggage was too big, guessing from his tremendously huge bag. Kim *Cheomji* approached him.

"Would you like a ride?"

After a quarrel over the price, they settled on 60 *jeon* to *Insadong*. A heavy rickshaw made his body feel lighter, while a light one made him heavy again, but this time he became anxious as well. His house kept lingering in front of eyes and he couldn't afford to wish for another stroke of luck anymore. He could only rebuke his legs which felt more like tree stumps than his own and stumble on. His steps were so hasty that a passerby might easily mistake him for a drunk and be concerned about him slipping on the wet road. The murky sky was dark, already on the brink of twilight. Only when he reached *Chang-gyeongwon* did he slow down and catch his breath.

As he drew nearer to his house, step by step, he grew strangely calm. This softening was not from relief, however, but from the fear that it was time to face the hideous misfortune which was upon him. He dawdled to delay receiving the misery. He wanted to retain the happiness of earning a miraculous amount of money for as long as possible. He looked around him, like he was asking for someone to stop his uncontrollable legs from running into his house—which meant great misfortune—and spare him. Just in time, his friend Chisam emerged from a bar. His fat face was splotched in orange, his black whiskers covering his entire chin and cheeks. He formed a queer contrast with Kim *Cheomji*, whose withered yellow face was full of wrinkles and whose beard was like an upside down pine cone stuck under his chin.

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\* A woman who dances or sings at parties

"Hey, Kim. you must be coming back from meeting someone. You must also have earned good money. How about a drink, eh?."

The fat man exclaimed upon seeing the lean one. His voice, unlike his gestures, was soft and friendly. Kim had no idea how glad he was to see his friend. He was practically his savior.

Kim *Cheomji* laughed, his face regaining color. "You already had a few drinks, didn't you? You seem to be having fun."

"Heck, it's not like I don't drink when it's not fun. But you, you look like a drenched rat! Come on in and dry yourself."

The bar was nice and warm. Steam rising up whenever the lid of the kettle was opened; roasted meat, liver, beans, fish, rice cakes cooking on the grill...Upon resting his eyes upon the untidy array of food, Kim *Cheomji* couldn't bear the sudden emptiness in his stomach. If it was up to him, he could have swallowed every plate and still wouldn't have been satisfied. But the hungry man decided to heat up two big pieces of mung bean rice cakes first and ordered one pot of loach soup. His starved bowels felt emptier with the taste of food and begged for more. In an instant he drank up the loach and tofu soup like water.

Kim *Cheomji's* eyes already started to become hazy. He cut two pieces of rice cakes from the grill and, his cheek bulging, poured two glasses.

Chisam looked at him in wonder.

"Again? We already had four glasses, that's 40 *jeon*," he warned.

"Oh, you think 40 *jeon* is so precious. I earned a lot of money today. I was so, so lucky today."

"So, how much did you earn?"

"I got 30 *won*, 30! Why don't you pour another damn drink...It's okay, really. We can eat to our heart's content. I earned a lot of money today."

"You must be drunk. Let's go now."

"Hey, I don't get drunk just on this. Eat, eat."

The drunk man cried and pulled on Chisam's ear. Then he rushed to the boy pouring the alcohol and scolded,

"Damn boy, why don't you pour me some more."

The boy giggled and glanced questioningly at Chisam. The drunkard realized this and got angry.

"Arrogant bastard, you think I don't have money?"

He ruffled through the waist of his trousers and threw out 1 *won* in front of him. With it, some silver coins fell out with a clatter.

"Hey, you're spilling your money. Why are you throwing your coins around?"

Chisam picked up the money. Even though he was drunk, Kim *Cheomji* looked down at the ground with wide eyes like he was checking where his money was. He started unexpectedly with disgust at his own actions, and flared up with more rage.

"Look, you dirty swines, see if I have no money or not. I ought to break your

goddamn legs.” He took the money Chisam had picked up for him and hurled it, yelling, “What wretched money! Worthless money!”

The coins fell into the bowl used to brew alcohol and cried out with clittering sounds. Two cups were downed before being refilled. Kim *Cheomji* sucked the alcohol off his lips and beard and stroked his pine needle beard very contentedly.

"Pour again, pour again." he shouted.

After finishing another glass, Kim *Cheomji* suddenly tapped Chisam's shoulders and burst into laughter. It was so loud that all eyes in the pub focused on him. The laughing man roared more loudly, "Hey, Chisam, you wanna hear a funny story? So, I took a customer to the station today."

"And?"

"And, I didn't want to just come back. So I decided to take a customer at the station by wandering about, you know? Just at that moment, a lady or a girl……I can't distinguish a prostitute from a young lady these days……She was standing in the rain in her cape. I edged in on her and asked her if she would like a ride and I tried to take her handbag, but she shook my hand off and whisked around, then she said, 'Don't bother me!' Her voice was like a nightingale, ha ha!"

Kim *Cheomji* then cleverly imitated the sounds of a nightingale. Everyone laughed at once.

"Damn shrew, as if I was doing something to her. 'Don't bother me!' Oh, how undignified that was, ha ha."

The laughter got louder. But Kim *Cheomji* began to cry before the laughter died down.

Chisam looked at the drunkard in dismay.

"You were just laughing and making a scene, and now you're crying?"

Kim *Cheomji* sniffled.

"My wife died."

"What? Your wife died? When?"

"When? Today."

"Oh, you're crazy. Don't lie about things like that."

"Why do you think I'm lying? She's definitely dead. For sure……I'm here drinking after leaving my wife's corpse, I'm awful," and he started bawling.

Chisam, with the expression of a man whose fun was spoiled, pulled on the crying man's arm.

"What are you saying? Are you telling lies or the truth? Let's go home then. Come on."

Kim *Cheomji* shook Chisam's hand off and grinned with tearful eyes.

"Who's dead?" He said triumphantly. "Why would she be dead? She's still alive, just eating everything away. Fooled you, didn't I?"

He clapped and laughed aloud like a child.

"You really are crazy. I did hear that your wife was ill."

Chisam seemed to feel some kind of uneasiness as well. Once again he advised Kim *Cheomji* to return home.

"She's not dead. I say she isn't dead."

Kim was enraged and shouted determinedly, as if trying to convince himself. At last he used up his 1 *won* and each had an additional double sized cup before heading out. The clammy rain was pouring down steadily.

Even in a drunk stupor, Kim *Cheomji* managed to buy *seollongtang* before arriving home. Home was, of course, a rented house. It wasn't even the whole house but just the servant's quarters, far from the inner rooms, for which they paid 1 *won* a month by pumping water. If he hadn't been under the influence of alcohol, his legs would have trembled the moment his foot crossed the threshold, at the terrifying silence that dominated the place—the stillness of the sea after a storm.

He could not hear the coughs, nor the growling breaths. Only the quiet sounds of a baby sucking on milk broke this grave silence—which was deepening the ominous silence rather than disturbing it. A sensitive person might have noticed that the child was sucking on an empty breast, for there were only sucking sounds and no swallowing.

Maybe he did guess correctly. If not, it is very suspicious that he shouted, "Useless girl, doesn't even come out to greet her husband." This yell was only false bravado to drive away the swooping fear that enveloped his body.

He jerked open the door. A nauseating stench—smell of dust from a fallen reed mat, the odor of feces from unwashed diapers, the stink from filthy clothes, the reek of sweat from the sickly—all stabbed his blunt nostrils.

Entering the room, the drunkard started hollering at the top of his voice before even putting the *seollongtang* down in a corner.

"Stupid woman, lying there day and night! Why can't you get up and greet your husband?" He kicked her legs. However, what he hit had not the feeling of human flesh but of a tree stump. At that moment, the sucking sounds turned into a baby's crying. Gaeddong let go of the breast and cried, frowning with its entire face and making a wailing expression. The whimpers seemed as if they were coming from its stomach and not its mouth. Its voice was hoarse from crying too much, and it looked like the baby had used up all its strength to properly cry.

When he realized kicking wasn't working, he rushed to her bedside and shook her head, which resembled a magpie's nest.

"Hey, talk to me! Talk! Is your mouth stuck, you moron!"

"..."

"Oh, look at this, you don't speak."

"..."

"Are you dead? Why won't you speak?"

"..."

"No answer again. You're really dead."



When he noticed her lifted eyes, the whites of her eyes covered, he choked, "Your eyes! Your eyes! Why can't you see me and see only the ceiling, why?"

Then, tears like hen's droppings fell from his eyes and wetted the stiff face of the dead. Unexpectedly, he started to madly rub her face with his, murmuring,

"Why can't you eat *seollongtang* I brought you, why...Today was a strangely lucky day, such a lucky day...."