

The Story Spirits

A Tale of Korea

There was once a boy who loved stories. His name was Dong Chin, and every night at bedtime he listened to stories from a favorite family servant, a man named Pak.

Now, Dong Chin was a fine boy, but there was one bad thing about him. He didn't like to share the stories he heard. He wanted to keep them to himself. So every night after listening, he said, "Mr. Pak, make me a promise."

"What is it, young master?" said Pak, though he knew well enough.

"Promise you won't tell those stories again to anyone but me. Promise they will stay in this room."

"All right, young master," said Pak with a sigh. "I promise."

Years went by and Dong Chin grew up. When he was 15, his father chose him a bride of the same age from a family in the next valley. Everyone in the household was excited at the coming marriage.

On the night before the wedding, Dong Chin's father undid his son's long braid—the kind worn by all sons and daughters till they married. Then he fixed the hair in a tight topknot, just like his own. On his son's head he placed a skullcap with a hole for the topknot to poke through. And over it all, he placed a feather-light, see-through hat of horsehair mesh.

Dong Chin was so proud. For years he had waited for this moment. Now he was a man!

At last the wedding day arrived. In the early morning, Dong Chin and his father made ready to go to the bride's house for the ceremony. Everyone bustled about to help and to prepare for the celebration the next day, when the bride would be brought home.

Pak was busy like everyone else. But as he rushed around, he happened to pass outside Dong Chin's room. To his surprise, he heard a murmur of many voices.

"That's strange," he said to himself. "The young master isn't in there now, and no one else should be either."

He went up to the paper window, carefully poked a small hole, and peeked through. Then he gasped.

The air was teeming with spirits—hundreds of them! Over, under, and around each other they swarmed. There were so many, they barely had room to fly, and they didn't look one bit happy!

"Silence!" called one of the spirits. "Stop talking all at once, or we'll never get anywhere."

The murmur died away. "That's right," said another spirit. "The boy's wedding is today, and we have to decide what to do."

"We must have revenge!" said another. "He has to be punished for keeping us stories all stuck here."

Pak gasped again. "It's the stories!" he said in wonder. "The ones that had to stay in the room!"

"Yes, he must be punished," said another spirit. "But how?"

"I have an idea," said another. "I'm a story that has a poisoned well in it. Why don't I put my well by the road? If he drinks the water, he'll be deathly ill."

"Wonderful!" said another. "I'm a story with poisoned strawberries in it. I'll set them farther down the road, in case he doesn't drink."

"Good thinking!" said another. "I'm a story with a red-hot poker. I'll put it in the cushion he steps onto at the bride's house—in case he neither eats nor drinks on the way. It will burn him terribly!"

"That should do it," said still another. "But in case he escapes you all, I'll be ready. I'm a story with a deadly snake. I'll hide it under the sleeping mat of the bride. When they go to bed, it will bite and kill them both!"

"No!" cried Pak. He leaped to the door and threw it open. But there was . . . nothing.

"I can't have imagined it," he said. "They must still be here, and I just can't see them. But—The young master! I must protect the young master!"

He rushed out to the road, where the wedding procession was already gathering. A gaily decorated sedan chair—for the bride's journey back—rested on two long poles held by four servants. Dong Chin and his father each sat on a small white horse, its reins held by a servant standing in front.

Pak grabbed the reins to Dong Chin's horse, knocking the other servant out of the way. "I will lead your horse today, young master!"

"Mr. Pak!" said the father. "Go inside! You're needed here to prepare for tomorrow!"

"Please, master!" begged Pak. "It is my dearest wish to lead the young master's horse on his wedding day!"

"Father, is it all right?" said Dong Chin. "I would like Mr. Pak to come with us."

"Oh, all right," his father grumbled. Then they lined up and started out, with Dong Chin in front and his father in the rear.

It was spring, and the road led over hillsides of pink, red, and white azaleas. The day was warm, and Dong Chin was relieved when he spotted a well by the road.

"Mr. Pak, I'm thirsty. Please bring me a drink from that well. There's a gourd dipper there for the water."

"A gourd dipper!" said Pak in a voice filled with horror. "Oh no, young master! You can't drink from a common gourd on your wedding day! Wait till we reach the bride's house, where you'll drink from porcelain." And he hurried the horse past the well.

Dong Chin was amazed. It was not a servant's place to disregard orders! But he said nothing.

After a while, they came to a strawberry field. "Mr. Pak, I'm both thirsty and hungry. Pick me some of these strawberries."

"These?" said Pak in a tone of disbelief. "Young master, they're so tiny! On your wedding day you must have only the largest, juiciest strawberries. You'll get much better at your bride's house." And he rushed right on.

Dong Chin was stunned. He heard his father call from the rear, "What's going on, up there?"

"Nothing, Father," Dong Chin called back. He turned to Pak and hissed, "What are you doing? If my father realizes you are disobeying, he'll have you paddled!"

"Trust me, young master," Pak pleaded softly. "Please trust me!"

At last they arrived at the bride's house, where her father met them at the gate. As was the custom, two servants brought out a cushion for Dong Chin to step down on. But he'd barely touched it when Pak grabbed a corner and jerked it away. The bride's father gasped as Dong Chin tumbled into the dirt.

"This cushion is filthy!" yelled Pak, holding it up to the servants, then tossing it away. "How dare you bring such a cushion on the young master's wedding day!"

The servants rushed to lift the young man to his feet and brush him off. Dong Chin was in shock, and he could see storm clouds on his father's face. But they could say nothing in front of others.

They went on into the garden. A platform had been set up, covered by rich weavings. On a small table in its center sat a gilded wooden goose, symbol of faithfulness.

When the moment arrived, Dong Chin took his place on the platform. The bride, whose name was Mai Hee, was led into the garden in her bridal gown of green.

It was Dong Chin's first sight of his future wife! Her powdered face was pale like ivory, and her eyebrows, shaved to a thin line, were arched like butterfly wings. Her raven-black hair, oiled and shiny, was done up in loops, bands, waves, and bangs, topped with a headdress decked with jewels and bright ribbons.

Mai Hee stepped onto the platform and faced Dong Chin. He thought she looked quite lovely, but he was too nervous even to smile. After a moment, she silently bowed to him four times. Then he bowed four times back.

The ceremony was complete. Dong Chin was married!

For the rest of the day, Dong Chin enjoyed the feasting and entertainment. But he was anxious to see more of Mai Hee, who had been led away to a separate feast in the women's quarters.

Late that night, when the guests had left, the young man was brought at last to the room of his bride. He entered and stood shyly in the candlelight.

Mai Hee, still in her bridal gown, knelt silently in a corner, as was the custom. She smiled nervously as Dong Chin approached and bowed.

"I am honored to meet you," he said. "With your help, I shall try to be a worthy husband."

Just then, the door flew open. In rushed Pak with a long kitchen knife. "Look out, young master!"

Mai Hee screamed and leaped up, and Dong Chin was beside himself. "Mr. Pak! Mr. Pak! Leave at once!"

But Pak wasn't listening. He rushed to the sleeping mat and snatched it up. There lay a snake, writhing and hissing. Pak stabbed it again and again, till at last it lay still.

Then Pak turned and sank to his knees, bowing low before the speechless Dong Chin. "Young master, please excuse the impudence of this worthless servant."

By now, others were rushing in, drawn by the noise. "Mr. Pak!" shouted Dong Chin's father. "What is the meaning of this outrage?"

"Father," said Dong Chin, pointing to the snake, "Mr. Pak saved our lives!"

Then Pak told them all about the story spirits and their plans for revenge. "No one listens to an old servant," he said, "so I knew I must protect the young master myself."

"It's all my fault," said Dong Chin. "I'm the one who wanted to keep the stories to myself. But not anymore. From this very night on, I'll tell them whenever I can, to whoever will listen. Mr. Pak, will you promise to tell them too?"

"All right, young master," said Pak with a smile. "I promise."