

The Citizen

No Gui-ok was a student in my freshman conversation class and spoke English with difficulty. She was very shy and usually avoided eye contact with me completely. Her dark eyes were radiant and her usual expression suggested a fawn that had lost its mother, forever cautious and apprehensive. I had suggested to her that another person might want to accompany us on our trip to Gap-sa, the Buddhist temple that I knew very well by now, but Miss No rejected the notion. It had taken great courage for her to overcome her normal shyness and concern over her English, and now that she had invited me on this trip, she wasn't about to share the experience with anyone. To make the situation even more awkward, we would be at a popular site on a Sunday when many people would see us together.

She was waiting in front of the bus station when I arrived. She was dressed in a jade green dress with white lace trim at the wrists and neckline. A matching ribbon was tied in her hair and she carried only a small handbag. She looked beautiful.

"Good afternoon, Miss No. You look very nice," I began.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Metzger," she blushed.

"Miss No, if it will be easier for you, we can speak Korean today." She didn't understand so I repeated the words in Korean.

She shook her head. "No. I want to practice my English," she said haltingly. I could tell this would be a difficult afternoon for conversation, but I was determined to help her the best I could.

As luck would have it, another student from the college was also on the bus that knew Miss No. She was unable to get a seat, so I offered to hold her packages on my lap. Since I hadn't agreed to speak English with everyone, I struck up a conversation with the young woman, chatting in Korean to her while periodically engaging Miss No in simple English. This seemed to help break the ice, but attracted a crowd of middle school boys who were on an outing to the national park. I

couldn't tell if they were from Gongju or not, but they were amazed that I could speak Korean and even more surprised to see a young woman speaking English to me. They were more curious than harmful, but after several disapproving looks, she told them to leave us alone, explaining that I was her teacher and that she was an English major at the college.

"I am sorry my English is not very good," she said. "I worry my future students will have a poor teacher."

"Learning a language takes practice, that's all. It's like playing a musical instrument. The more you play, the better you become. So let's practice our English," I said. This produced one of her brilliant smiles that, by itself, made the trip worthwhile.

"Where is your hometown, Miss No?"

"My hometown is Boun, near Songni San. Do you know Songni San?"

"Yes, I've heard of Songni San, a national park, right? But I haven't traveled to that part of the country yet. What's it like in Boun?"

"Boun is very beautiful, a small town in the mountains. I like it very much and hope to teach there someday."

We bounced along the highway for the rest of the way to the temple without saying anything else. We purchased a lunch to share and found a place to eat with the warmth of the sun to our backs.

"My family is so poor," she finally said. "My father and my mother works so hard every day, but we have little. They works hard for years to send me to college. I am first in my family to be college student, so it is important for me to study hard." She spoke with great effort, but was determined to practice her English. "I must not fail," she concluded, almost exhausted by her effort.

“I’m sure you won’t fail, Miss No. You have great determination. I admire you for that.”

We walked slowly around the temple grounds for a while, but as neither one of us was really dressed for hiking, we returned on an early bus and got off near the college. The campus was nearly deserted and we sat on a bench overlooking the athletic field. Miss No had not spoken for some time and seemed distracted by something.

“I am sorry you did not have a good time today, Mr. Metzger,” her head lowered as she spoke.

“On the contrary, I have had a nice time and I want to thank you very much for the invitation. I know it isn’t easy for you to speak English.”

“Yes, it is difficult. Soon the day will be finished.” The jade ribbon fell from her hair and landed near my feet. I picked it up, brushed it off lightly and handed it back to her. Her eyes were full of tears.

“Miss No, what’s wrong? Did I say or do something to upset you?”

“Mr. Metzger, I have a question to ask you. It is very important for me to know. You must be honest to me.”

“Okay,” I said, not understanding at all where the conversation was heading.

“Do you think there is real freedom in Korea?” I hadn’t expected a political question out of the blue and from Miss No in particular.

My mind scurried to erect the usual defenses. “I think it is a difficult time in Korea right now. The government is doing its best for the people. It’s not my place to criticize what’s being done.”

The look on her face indicated serious dissatisfaction with my response. “I think people are scared about the future and we can’t say what we want. Of course, our situation is different than

America. But all people need freedom. Do we have freedom, Mr. Metzger?" Although she was unaccustomed to look directly at me, her eyes were fixed on mine. A tiny tear curled from one corner and her lips trembled. I sighed deeply, sensing I needed to answer the question posed by this young Korean woman.

"No," I started slowly, "I don't believe there is any true freedom in Korea. Even though your country is at a different time in its development, freedom is like the air and water. We need freedom to fully live our lives no less than the air we breathe and the water we drink. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, I think also," she said. This confirmation opened the floodgates on her emotions and her big eyes rained tears. I touched her hand lightly not knowing what to do, but in a few minutes she had composed herself and we took the shortcut back to town through the fields. Along the way, I noticed the farmer who owned the plot plowing new ground with his ox. He had seen me many times walking on the path that cut through his rows of vegetables and never failed to greet me briefly.

"Good afternoon," I said in Korean. "How are your crops?"

"The crops are good, but there are too many weeds." He laughed softly. "And I have no time to do everything that needs to get done."

"I understand. The work of the farmer never ends," I replied.

He laughed again. "And you have spent too much time talking to farmers. Your Korean sounds like a man from the country."

Miss No snickered at this, but I was relieved to see her smile again. "He's right, *seonsaengnim*," she said in Korean. "Your speech is a little coarse sometimes."

“Excuse my poor manners, Mr. Chong. Let me introduce No Gui-ok. She is a student at Gongju Teacher’s College.” Miss No bowed briefly in his direction and he nodded in return.

“You have been on a trip with her today,” he asked?”

His voice didn’t reveal whether he thought this was a good idea or not. I quickly looked to Miss No for guidance, but she appeared ready to flee at any moment.

“Yes, we went to Gap-sa. It was a beautiful day to make a trip and Miss No is trying very hard to improve her English. There are few opportunities in Gongju for the students to speak English.”

Mr. Chong flashed a quick smile. “She is a very brave student, but you needn’t worry. The people of Gongju have decided that you are a good man and work hard for your students. We thank you for this.” He bowed deeply in my direction and I returned the gesture.

As we walked the rest of the way over the Gum River and into town, I considered the impact of what he had said. I had lived in Gongju for eighteen months, the only resident foreigner, and had wondered many times whether the people had truly accepted me. Now this simple farmer had set my mind at ease. I had become a citizen.