

# THE BOY AND HIS STORIES:

RETOLD FROM A  
TRADITIONAL  
KOREAN TALE

ART BY LISA BLECKER



**L**ong ago, in the land of Korea, a young boy named Kwan lived in a magnificent mansion. Each evening, Kwan's mother told him a story. She spoke of brave knights, mischievous fairies, terrifying ogres, and every kind of hero or villain she could imagine. The family's trusted old servant, Yong, listened as he prepared the boy's bedchamber.

In a corner of the room hung a large leather pouch. At the end of each story, the characters—good or evil, kind or frightening—flew into the pouch. They could only escape when Kwan told the story to someone else.

But Kwan was selfish with his stories. He refused to share them with anyone.

The leather pouch grew crowded over the years. The dragons, witches, and goblins found themselves packed in with sweet maidens, wise old warriors, and children who had wandered too far into the woods. There were tigers, hawks, and toads scrambling for their place, too. With all those claws, swords, and grumpy characters, the pouch became most uncomfortable.

Yet Kwan never told a story—not one.

The years passed, and Kwan grew into a young man. Still, he enjoyed his mother's stories. So every night, another character or two joined the crowded leather pouch.

One day, Kwan and a young woman planned to get married. The news spread around the village as everyone prepared for the big celebration. On the eve of the wedding, Yong was preparing Kwan's clothes when he heard a rumbling in the corner of the room. Puzzled, he stood as still as a ginkgo tree and strained his ears to listen.

"He's getting married tomorrow," growled a low voice that could only belong to a troll.

"Oh, yes, there will be beautiful *hanbok* and a grand feast," sneered a witch. "But we'll be jammed in this miserable pouch. He'll *never* tell our stories."

Yong watched in amazement as the leather pouch bulged with each angry whisper.

"If he were *dead*, we would finally be free," the troll spat out.



Yong heard the witch's cruel cackle. "My sister will poison the watering hole on the road to his bride's home," she said. "He'll be dead before he lays eyes on her."

"Should that fail," rumbled a goblin, "I have a friend who will place poisoned strawberries on his plate at the wedding feast. They're his favorite—he won't be able to resist them."

"And if both fail," hissed a serpent, "My cousin will hide under the mat in the bedchamber and kill Kwan and his bride with his deadly bite."

The troll grunted with satisfaction. "Yes. He'll have his punishment, and we'll have our freedom."

And for once, in all those years, there was peace in the leather pouch—at least among the villainous characters. The good ones did not like to argue, and they trembled for Kwan and his bride.

On his wedding day, Kwan mounted his white horse and rode to his bride's home. He brought a wooden goose to symbolize his vow of faithfulness. His parents followed in their carriage, and Yong rode alongside them.

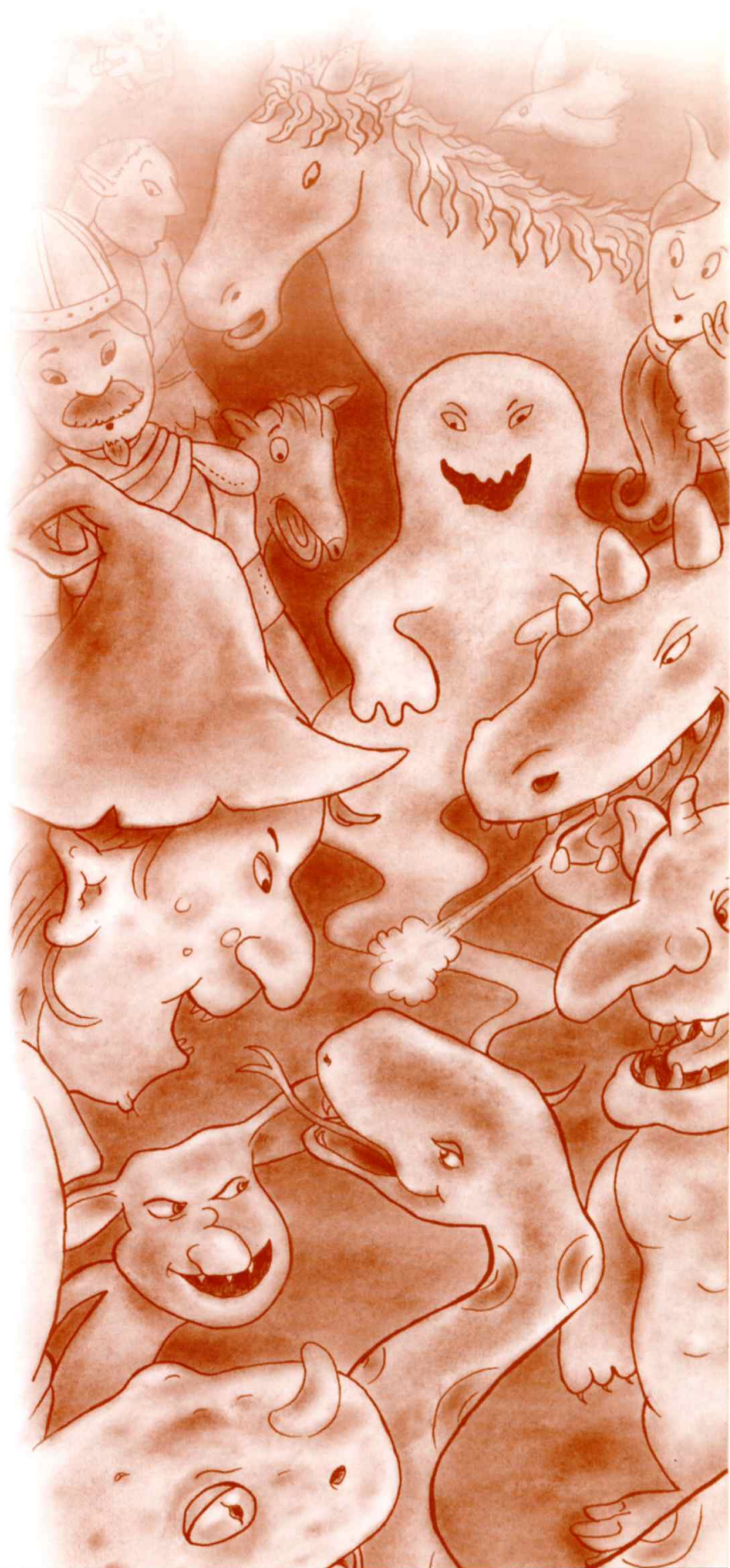
After a while, they came to the watering hole. Kwan brought his horse to a halt, but Yong rushed to his side and grabbed his arm.

"Master, *meomchuseyo*! I beg you, do not rest here," he cried. "We must hasten to meet your bride."

Kwan was taken aback, for it was not the servant's place to question his master. His parents frowned. But Kwan respected the old man, so he said, "Very well. *Kapsida!*"

Yong sighed with relief, and they continued their journey.

Kwan's bride was stunning, with skin like silk and hair like a raven's feathers. She wore a white sash adorned with cranes, for a long life. Kwan sat proudly by her side at the wedding feast. They ate *kook soo*, delicious soup with long noodles, representing wishes for a long and happy life.



They devoured *bulgogi*, *kimbop*, and sweet *ddok*. But when Kwan reached for a luscious strawberry, old Yong rushed forward and shoved the plate out of his reach. It clattered to the floor and smashed to pieces.

The bride's family gasped to see such unruly behavior from the servant. Kwan's father roared in anger, "Old man! What is wrong with you? As punishment, you will not eat for three days!"

Loyal Yong thought it a small price to pay. He bowed his head and backed into a corner of the hall.

When the wedding feast ended, family members led Kwan and his bride to their bedchamber. But as they opened the door, Yong pushed through the crowd. Kwan's father howled. Yong pulled a sword out of his robe, yanked the mat from the floor, and slashed off the head of the poisonous snake that waited beneath it!

Kwan and his bride froze. Yong panted with relief, but also with fear of what punishment faced him now, for causing a panic at his master's wedding. Kwan's father pounced on Yong and

grasped his neck. But Kwan pulled them apart.

"Father! Stop!" he cried. "Yong saved our lives!"

Yong caught his breath, then told them about the furious characters and their wicked plot. "*Kamsahamnida*," said Kwan's father. "We are indebted to you."

Kwan was sorry that his selfish ways had caused such grief, and nearly ended his life with his bride. "From now on, I will share my stories," he promised. "I'll begin tonight." He gazed tenderly at his bride.

Yong, the brave and faithful servant, was honored by the family until the end of his days.

In time, Kwan and his wife had many children. The boys and girls loved nothing more than to hear their father tell his stories each night. In the corner of the room still hung the old leather pouch. It was creased and worn, but it never again bulged with vengeful villains. Instead, the characters—good or evil, kind or frightening—flew in and out . . . as their stories were told, and retold, and told yet again.

