

# Folktale

*Bora Lee Reed*

If Kilsup had been smarter, he would not have had to go to America. He was just twelve years old, but it was already obvious that he was not the kind of boy who could do well on the all-important college entrance exam. So he was being sent across the ocean to Irvine, California, to live with his *imo*. He would go to school and learn English and attend an American college. America was not like Korea, his mother often said. In America, anyone could go to college, even a boy of average intelligence whose father was a taxi driver.

At first, Kilsup had been very excited. His friends at school and even his teacher had started treating him like he was something special. He was suddenly the expert on blue jeans and Pamela Anderson. He made up answers to his classmates' questions, but if anyone suspected, no one seemed to care. He had been a loner for most of his young life so it felt good to have the other kids like him. It was fun.

Now that his departure was a week away, however, worry hurt his stomach. A few days ago, he had learned that North Korea had rebuffed South Korea's offer to help it prepare for the year changing from 1999 to 2000. Some experts said it was unlikely that a technical glitch could launch missiles, but others warned that Pyongyang could attack and blame it on a misfiring computer. What if North Korea decided to strike and he was on the other side of the world? He had another concern, more mundane but which unsettled him nearly as much. In America, his mother had mentioned casually, they counted ages differently. So he would no longer be twelve, but eleven.

He tried to talk to her about his worries, but she brushed him off. "It's a miracle that he is accepting my family's help at all," she'd said. The "he" was Kilsup's father. He had once been a star

university student, a poet and an activist, with all the potential in the world, his mother often said. He could have been a very successful man if he had been willing to accept her family's help, but he was stubborn. His pride had been wounded by her family's refusal to accept him—though it was more than understandable, she always added—and he wouldn't deign to work for the family's import/export business, preferring instead to drive a smelly cab. She said that he never stopped being an idealistic student. Kilsup couldn't tell if this was a good or bad thing.

A late spring rain started right as school was getting out. Kilsup walked home and arrived soaking wet. His mother was at the kitchen table cutting something out of the newspaper. She looked up and saw him standing there, dripping on the floor.

"Where is your umbrella?" she asked, hurrying toward him.

"I didn't bring one," he said.

She peeled his clothes off him, right where he stood, then wrapped a scratchy towel around his shoulders. "You shouldn't have walked home like this." She knelt down and began to rub him all over, making his skin burn.

"You could have brought me an umbrella."

"I lost track of the time."

"You'll forget me when I go away," he said.

She had been drying his legs and looked up. He felt that his peevishness pleased her somehow, though he had meant to accuse.

"Impossible," she said and smiled. Kilsup knew—had known for a long time now—that his mother was beautiful. Not in some general way that all boys think their mothers pretty, but in the way that changed the feeling inside a crowded subway car or made department store clerks solicitous, though it was obvious that she did not have much money to spend.

He tried to squirm away from her embrace, but she gathered him up, towel and all, and walked down the short hallway to his room. She unfolded his sleeping mat and tucked him in with Hodori, his tiger. She covered him with a thick quilt and turned the floor heater up to high.

“It won’t do to have you getting sick now,” she whispered. She rubbed his back. “Shall I tell you a story?”

He knew she wanted to tell him one of the stories that he’d heard a hundred times before—the magic gourd, the tiger and the sweet persimmons, the goblin tree. She lay down next to him and stared up at the ceiling. “There was once a woodcutter who was very poor,” she said.

Of all the folktales his mother liked to tell, this was her favorite. When he had been smaller, the repetition had been soothing, but now it made him bristle. “I’ve heard this story a thousand times.” Kilsup turned his back to her and stared at his manhwa collection, carefully organized by series and issue number. The boxes of comics filled a shelf that spanned the entire wall. He couldn’t bring these with him—that was out of the question. His mother had comforted him by suggesting that he bring his favorite issue or two, not understanding how wrong it would be to break up the set. They were both quiet then, the only sound in the apartment the loud ticking of the wall clock and the gentle brush of rain against the window.

“Mr. Won is making another film,” she said after a while. “The newspaper mentioned that he may be collaborating with an American director.” Mr. Won was his mother’s childhood friend. Before she had moved to her prestigious all-girls high school, they had been classmates. He had gone on to be a famous movie director, perhaps Korea’s most famous. His mother clipped articles about him out of the newspaper and glued them into a bulging scrapbook. “I think it would be marvelous if he made a film showcasing some part of our country’s history, or even one of our folktales,” she said. “I’ve written him and told him so.”

She sat up abruptly. “You are still so young. You can’t imagine what it means to get a fresh start.” When Kilsup still said nothing, she patted him on the back and said, “You’re right. That’s enough melancholy talk.” She went to the kitchen and returned a moment later. “I made these just for you,” she said, holding out a bowl of steaming *mandu*. He shook his head. He did not want to be bought off with dumplings. But his mother persisted, as he knew she would.

She prodded and coaxed and held a dumpling out on a thin-handled metal spoon, until, still lying down, he set aside his toy and opened his mouth. It was his favorite kind and perfectly made. The skin was tender, the pork filling as velvety as marrow. He opened his mouth again and his mother fed him one, then another.

There was once a woodcutter who was very poor. Though he was lonely, he was too poor to marry. One day, as he walked through the woods, he heard a rustling in the bushes. In the branches, he saw a deer with its hind foot caught in the bramble.

“Help me,” the deer said. “The king’s hunters will soon be here.” The woodcutter felt pity for the poor creature. And though the king’s hunters were mighty and to be feared, he drew his knife and cut the bramble away.

That night, the deer came to the woodcutter in a dream. “What is your greatest wish?” she asked him. “I am lonely,” the woodcutter said. “I need a wife.” So the deer told him to go to a hidden mountain lake where the daughters of heaven came down to bathe. “When they undress, take one of the garments and hide it,” the deer instructed. “No matter how she begs, do not return it to her.” The woodcutter awoke, found the mountain lake and saw the daughters of heaven bathing there, just as the deer had said. He took away a sparkling robe and hid it under a rock. When it was time for the daughters to return to heaven, one remained in the water. “Give me my clothes,” she said to him. “I won’t,” he said. He wrapped her in his cloak and took her home and she became his wife.

Kilsup hadn’t thought he was tired, but he must have dozed. The room was dim when he woke and he heard voices, which meant his father was home.

“He used to be such a sloppy boy,” his mother was saying. “Who would have thought he would turn out to be so successful?” And Kilsup understood that she was still talking about Mr. Won. “It turns out the new film is going to be set in Las Vegas, which is close to where my sister lives.”

"I'll bet you were terrible to him," his father said. There were long pauses between his words, which meant he was chewing. "You were one of the pretty girls that made his life miserable."

"I wish he could put his talents to some good purpose," she said. "Kilsup asked me to tell him the story of the woodcutter and the deer and it occurred to me that it would be a wonderful premise for a film."

"I suppose he knows what he's doing," he said.

"Why spend all that money catering to Western tastes when we have so many treasures in our own culture, is all I'm saying," she said. "Of course you'd have to modernize the story somehow. I don't mean he should just tell it straight."

Not so long ago, the subject of Mr. Won would have made his parents argue. His father would say it was pathetic to pine after a married man, when she was a married woman herself. His mother would say she was simply happy for an old friend, which would make his father snort.

"I'm only cutting out pictures," she would say. "I'm proud of what he's accomplished. He didn't talk endlessly about what he would do. He just did it."

"Running around in nightclubs with girls not much older than Kilsup," his father would retort. "If only I had the talent to be as admirable as your friend."

Other times, they fought about asking her parents for money.

"What is wrong with accepting their help?" she'd ask. "They have it and they are happy to give it."

"We have all that we need and more," his father would say. "There are people in this world—"

"I'm not a monk," she would say. "I'm a human being."

"Sometimes I wonder." And then his father would walk out of the apartment and his mother would lean over and take deep breaths, as if she couldn't get enough air into her lungs, as if the atmosphere in the apartment had suddenly become uninhabitable.

Lying on his bed, Kilsup heard his father chuckle at something his mother said, but which Kilsup couldn't hear. His parents had

been getting along much better as of late. They were both trying, Kilsup could tell, probably for his sake. Well, that was good, wasn't it? A terrible image came to mind: his parents sitting in the kitchen, eating *mandu* and talking about Mr. Won's latest movies. He saw a wall clock tick the seconds to midnight on December 31 and a disembodied, white-gloved hand press a button that launched a row of missiles into the air. Kilsup turned over. The dumplings he had eaten seemed to harden in his stomach. Korea was sixteen hours ahead of California. Seoul could blow up and in America it wouldn't even be the new year.

It was the summer of 1987. The students were in the streets demanding fair elections. It was grindingly hot work, marching with the heat and humidity of those late summer days bearing down on them. A familiar sight—idealistic, impassioned students filling the streets—but this time, ordinary people were joining them. Enough was enough, everyone said. They felt themselves on the brink of real change. Kilsup's father was a university student then, a poet and a leader in the student movement, but even as businessmen, housewives, and the elderly took to the streets, he could already taste the coming disillusionment. The poems he was writing weren't good, or, not good enough.

When he saw her, he had been walking up one of the side streets leading up to the central government building. The crowd that day, the news would later report, numbered close to a hundred thousand. For years to come they would marvel that they had found each other at all. It had been fated. She stood by herself in front of an herbalist, holding a handbag and looking like a young woman from two decades earlier. It was late summer but there she was, in a yellow wool skirt and matching jacket, looking as cool as could be. She even wore matching shoes.

"Miss, have you lost your way?"

She looked up, and seemed surprised by the question. Her hair curved around her face in a way that reminded him of photos he had seen of Mrs. Kennedy, the American president's wife. She was almost a full head shorter than he, yet she carried herself erect and

confident in a manner that made him feel suddenly aware of his own sweaty body. “No,” she said, “at least I don’t think so. I agreed to meet a friend here but,” she checked the thin gold watch, as though for confirmation, “she seems to be late.”

“The democracy movement is noble in practice but difficult on the daily lives of ordinary people. In the meanwhile, a cup of coffee?” He gestured to the café with the large glass window. “You will be able to see your friend as soon as she arrives.”

“What do you suppose I am?” she asked. “An American? I don’t entertain strangers.”

“This is not entertainment,” he said soberly. “But we should toast democracy.”

He found her, then and in all their subsequent meetings, captivating. She read to him from the writers who inspired her most. He started writing again. They sensed the strangeness of their circumstance, as unlikely as their meeting. She had snuck away to the antigovernment protest, knowing her father would disapprove. And she kept sneaking away, to other cafés, to bookstores, to his tiny apartment. She seemed charmed by his austere life. She brought him proper dishes and fresh flowers. He indulged her upper class whims and moods. Having never cooked a meal in her servant-filled life, she was useless in the kitchen, so he taught her how to make a few simple dishes, rolls and sesame noodles. She often spooned these noodles into his mouth in bed after lovemaking. She was like a goddess then, her thick black hair cascading past her shoulders, her tan nipples erect on her small breasts. By this time, he knew who her father was and that his life tottered on the verge of ruin, or even death. And still he could not pull away.

His father was waiting for him when Kilsup came out of the school the next day. His mother had warned him that this might happen, saying that his father wanted to take him on a special outing. When his mother had first brought up the idea of studying in America, his father had resisted. He had said that an American education was a bitter meal if it meant sending your child away. His mother

had said that since this was about Kilsup's future, sacrifices had to be made. His father had eventually conceded. Seeing him standing there in his worn gray windbreaker and Lotte baseball cap, Kilsup wondered if there was a chance that his father might change his mind back again.

They took the subway for two stations, then came up in the middle of the Shinchon district. His father wanted to buy him something, but the stores that lined the street all catered to ladies.

"It's been a long time since I've been here," his father muttered. "It is very different."

Of all the places Kilsup could imagine going today—the manhwa shop, the arcade, the movies—he couldn't think of anything more tedious than walking around this fancy shopping district with his hapless father. They stopped in front of a shop window featuring four headless mannequins, each wearing the same gauzy dress in a different color: pink, yellow, silver, and bright blue. Their plastic feet dipped in a blue and green cellophane sea. The dresses and the sea fluttered, stirred by an unseen fan.

"That one would look good on Omma," Kilsup said, pointing to the silver dress.

"You think so?" his father asked. "Yes, it's probably the kind of thing that your mother would like." He looked up and down the street. "This is near the place where I first met her, you know," he said. "I thought it would feel good to see the old place. There used to be a café there." He squinted, then turned the other way and frowned. "Or maybe it was there? It was a long time ago."

Kilsup shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Heat prickled on the back of his neck. "Can we go home now?"

"We just got here," his father said, looking a little put out. "We need to eat at least."

They went to KFC and sat inside the brightly lit white and red restaurant, surrounded by chattering teenagers, and ate greasy chicken with their fingers. His father took out a cigarette and was about to light it when a preemptory cluck from the girl behind the counter made him look up.

“This is just a chicken house,” his father complained loudly. “Not Kyongbok Palace.” But he sighed and put his cigarettes away. “Everything is changing,” he said. “And now you are going off to study in America, leaving your poor father behind, eh?” He held up a fried chicken leg between his nicotine-stained fingers.

Kilsup looked down at the half-eaten biscuit. The doughy mass in his mouth left him spit-less.

“Everything has gotten so materialistic,” his father said. “Back then, we cared about things that mattered.” His father took a big bite of fried chicken and kept talking, gesturing with the drumstick.

Kilsup vaguely knew that his parents had met during a democracy demonstration and that his mother had left her wealthy family to marry his father. There was one photo from their wedding that sat on a bookshelf near the kitchen as proof. To Kilsup, his mother appeared unchanged, but his father looked like a different person—dashing, with a white carnation in his lapel.

“Back then, we ate ramen almost every night,” his father said. “And it didn’t matter. There was a charm to it. You may not know it now, but when I was younger, every sentimental young woman believed I had a beautiful soul. Every time one of my poems appeared in the student newspaper, I’d receive all sorts of love notes.”

The surprise must have shown on Kilsup’s face because his father smiled as he wiped his hands on a red-striped paper napkin. “I could have chosen any girl,” his father said. “But I was no fool. I got the best girl, didn’t I?” He shrugged. “If I had been less principled, we could have had a big house and your mother could have fancy dresses. But it’s not worth selling your soul for a few extra grains of rice.”

His father rarely talked this much and Kilsup felt disoriented by all the things he was saying. He wanted to ask why his father was agreeing to send him away, then, if money didn’t matter, but the words seemed to get lost on the trip from his head to his mouth.

Across the restaurant, a group of teen girls in matching school uniforms giggled and Kilsup glanced at them, worried they might be laughing at his father.

“They’re something else, aren’t they,” his father said, misreading Kilsup’s interest. “But the day your mother walked into my life, I knew I had met someone a hundred times better than anyone else.” He rolled his now-bare chicken bone inside a paper napkin and tucked it into the cardboard container. “It hasn’t always been easy on your mom,” he said. “But we are about to get ourselves back on solid footing. Things can be as they once were.”

A shift in his father’s tone made Kilsup sit up. His father’s face was as saggy as ever, but now he stared at Kilsup with an awful, hopeful expression.

Kilsup’s head roared as realization dawned. “You want me to go away.”

His father jumped. “That’s not what I meant, is it?” he said.

“What are you asking me for?” Kilsup yelled. “Don’t you know?”

Heads turned in the restaurant.

“You want to have her for yourself!” Kilsup kept yelling.

His father waved his hands frantically, as if trying to stop an oncoming car. He pleaded, then scolded, “Aren’t you ashamed to be making a scene?”

At last Kilsup understood why his father had agreed to take money from his mother’s rich relatives. He leapt up and shoved the table full of cardboard boxes and paper napkins into his father’s lap. His father grabbed him by the arm and yanked him back down into the plastic seat.

“You’re sending me away because she loves me more than you,” Kilsup insisted. Even as he raged against this newfound truth, Kilsup determined that he would find a way to stay—run away even, if he needed to. His father seemed to have regained himself and was calm again and after a bit, Kilsup quieted, too. But he could not—would not—forget the look of alarm and discovery on his father’s face.

She was dutiful and faithful, but every day she begged to see her heavenly clothes. The woodcutter remembered what the deer had told him, and resolutely refused. She cooked and cleaned. She was

the model of faithfulness. She bore him a son. Only one annoyance remained. Every day, without fail, his wife begged him to tell her where her clothes were hidden. At first he adamantly refused, but as the days and weeks became months and years, he began to regret his promise to the deer.

What would be the harm in telling his wife where her clothes were? They had lived together for years, they had a home and a child. It seemed a pity to keep her forever separated from the one thing that could remind her of her homeland. The woodcutter took his wife into the woods, and showed her the place where he had hidden her clothes. As soon as she had them, she put them on and flew into the sky, leaving him behind. “How can you leave?” cried the heartbroken woodcutter. “You poor mortal fool,” she replied. “How can I stay?”

On the day before Kilsup was to leave for America, his parents took him to an amusement park near Suwon. School was still in session and the tourist season had not yet begun, so the park was nearly deserted. His mother wore a yellow blouse and a crisp white sun hat. She held her purse in the crook of her arm and held Kilsup’s elbow lightly with her other hand. Kilsup’s father followed a step or two behind, carrying their lunch bag.

His father had taken today off work for Kilsup’s last day, but seemed neither happy nor sad. His mother, on the other hand, seemed determined to be cheerful. She exclaimed over the lights on the spinning rides and the bushes that had been pruned into the shapes of elephants, rhinos, and giraffes. She kept up a lively conversation all on her own, making no notice of their silence. Kilsup went along, but had a plan of his own. The idea had stayed with him since the disastrous KFC lunch. At first, he wasn’t sure he would have the courage to pull it off, but the more he thought about how his parents were sending him away, the braver he felt about what he had to do.

His mother made them ride the giant pirate ship that swung back and forth on a great bar. Kilsup sat between his parents as the boat hurled them high into the sky. At the top of each arc,

he felt the momentary suspension as the ship tried to break free of gravity's hold, before submitting again and hurtling toward the earth. His mother's hand tightened on his.

They had lunch in an open glade, in front of the fairy castle and a carriage decorated with flowers. Kilsup's mother had packed an enormous *doshirak*, with *kimbap* and rolled omelet and vegetables cut into little heart shapes.

"This weather is wonderful," she said. She set out a plate of food for Kilsup, and one for his father and poured hot barley tea into round cups.

"I'm not too hungry," his father said.

"Really? Surprising," his mother said. She popped a piece of *kimbap* into her mouth. "May weather does wonders for my appetite." She leaned back, stretching out her legs and wiggling her toes.

Tomorrow was the big day, the day of Kilsup's plan. Something of that must have shown on his face, because his father said, "Look at him. He's a nervous wreck."

Kilsup's mother reached out and placed two delicate fingers on his father's mouth. "There will be only one day like today," she said. Her tone was gentle, but her words fell upon them like a royal decree. The day was nearly spoiled again when they stopped for gas and his father realized that he had lost his wallet in the park. His face turned red, but Kilsup's mother soothed and pulled out five crisp 10,000-won bills from her purse. When they pulled out of the station, she moved to the front of the taxi and sat with him. Kilsup sat in the back and stared at his parents' heads. His father's was as coarse and graying as his mother's was smooth and supplely black. A pain in his chest rose as he thought of dastardly war plans being hatched in North Korea. Please don't make me go, he almost said aloud. Don't make me leave you.

Kilsup woke early the next day, but his parents were already awake. If it had not been for his father's damp hair and fresh clothes, he might have thought they had stayed up all night. Kilsup opened

the door to the balcony and stepped out. He could see tall white apartment buildings rising up on either side. Between them, he caught a glimpse of the Han River. His parents came out and stood on either side of him.

“It’s your last morning in your homeland,” his father said. “How is the feeling?” His mother took Kilsup’s hand but she smiled at his father. “It is a beautiful land,” she said.

By midmorning, everything was ready. Two large suitcases stood at the door. His mother came out wearing a pretty dress with yellow flowers. Kilsup’s father whistled and his mother blushed and twirled around.

“This is an old thing I had forgotten about,” she said. “But why shouldn’t I dress up on such an important day?”

His father drove them to the airport in his taxi. Kilsup sat in the back and his mother sat next to him, holding his hand. Kilsup looked out the window and watched Seoul’s tall buildings glide by. After the recent rains, the sky was freshly blue. He became increasingly nervous as they got closer to the airport, but he steeled himself for what he must do. He almost did it when they arrived at the terminal, but his father went to park the car and it seemed wrong to leave his mother alone. As soon as his father joined them, Kilsup felt his stomach twist. He would leave his parents here and run away into the crowd. He didn’t have a plan beyond that, but he knew that if he stayed missing for a few days—maybe a week—his parents might realize they didn’t want to live without him.

“It’s time to check him in,” his father said. Kilsup took a deep breath and got ready to run.

His mother took Kilsup’s hand in hers. “I didn’t tell you this in advance,” his mother told his father. “I didn’t want to argue. But my sister sent me a ticket, so that I could accompany Kilsup.”

His father shook his head. “What?”

“Just for a little while,” she said. “You can take care of yourself for just a little while.”

She smiled, but his mother’s eyes had an expression Kilsup had never seen before. He looked at his father, standing in front

of them, confused, wearing his ugly jacket and his tie bound too tightly around his neck. A cold, quick sadness flooded through Kilsup.

“Apa!” he cried. He wrenched his hand away from his mother and clasped his father around the neck. “I don’t want to leave you alone,” he sobbed, and he meant it with all his heart.

“What’s happening?” his father asked. “Is this about visiting that rascal’s movie set?” His father’s jacket felt coarse against Kilsup’s face. He felt his father’s heart thumping along with his.

“How dramatic you two are,” his mother said with false cheerfulness. “Kilsup, you are your father’s son.”

He felt a shudder pass through his father. Kilsup did not let go. He lifted his crying head and saw her: his beautiful mother standing there, rigid and graceful, poised for flight. ❧