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FASCINATION: SIXTEEN

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BY

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ABSTRACT

FASCINATION: SIXTEEN

BY YOUNG G. KIM

The first year in the United States would render a significant meaning to most immigrants. It is a time where strong adaptability is demanded, language barrier is palpable, and constant comparison with their homeland is inevitable. This autofictional novella describes a Korean family's first full year in America. The year is 2002, the post-911 era, where the notion of immigration and the American dream felt different from before. This was also the time when CDs were gradually replaced by MP3 devices and "Rock is dead" sounded fitting due to the diminishing rock and roll band music. Gunn, a sixteen-year-old high school sophomore, is hopeful for a new beginning but quickly meets a severe challenge of speaking English as a second language. He searches for help but instead faces the bullying inflicted on Korean-speaking newcomers who are disparagingly called "fobs." At home, he helplessly watches his mother struggling financially while working for a difficult owner couple in Koreatown, his ten-year-old sister who says she wants to go back to Korea, and his father who comes and goes between Seoul and Los Angeles while fighting cancer. Falling in love with rock CDs especially of The Cure, Gunn finds emotional comfort in America that seems to give only hardship and suffering. Through his first-person point of view, this novella aims to express the voice of poor immigrant families, struggling English learners, victims of bullying, brokenhearted youth, and the fatherless.

Songs

disc one – Close to Me

1. Intro: Plainsong
2. A Forest
3. Homesick
4. High
5. Six Different Ways
6. Lullaby
7. Doing the Unstuck
8. Where the Birds Always Sing
9. Maybe Someday
10. In Between Days
11. Close to Me

disc two – Pictures of You

1. The Caterpillar
2. Mint Car
3. Just Like Heaven
4. The Walk
5. A Thousand Hours
6. Closedown
7. Boys Don't Cry
8. The Perfect Girl
9. Disintegration
10. Fascination Street
11. Outro: Pictures of You

disc one

Close to Me

1. Intro: Plainsong

“I think you belong here. It suits you.”

I wonder what she means. I ask her to elaborate.

“How do I say it... Even when you’re speaking Korean, there’s a certain aura that you exude. It’s not about good or bad. Just by looking at you, I would’ve been able to tell that you live in America.”

Mira, my cousin from Korea, is about to enter the departure gate. She has completed her three-week trip around America. She visited New York first, followed by Austin, Texas. She came to L.A. last week and spent five days at my place. A senior in college, she is seriously looking into graduate schools in America.

She thanks me for providing a place to stay and showing her around several universities. She’s a bubbly girl, her voice loud, face cheerful, and hands making large gestures. I tell her to say hello to my wife and little son who are visiting Korea for two months this summer.

Mira pulls her carry-on, waves her hand, and then disappears into the gate. My job here is done, but I stay for a while. My heart quivers with sadness. This was the same spot where I watched my hero shouting out loud that he would soon return to Los Angeles. He never kept that promise.

Heavyhearted, I return to my car. I take local roads instead of the freeway on the way back to Koreatown. Driving feels nice in the summer evening. I raise the radio volume and leave my window open, letting the wind blow in. Not excited to head to my empty home, I drive slowly and appreciate the scenery.

I have driven past John Donahue High School countless times, but I've never visited since I left after tenth grade. Today I make a U-turn and park my car on the street across the school. I step out and look around. The gate is locked, and there's a sign that reads, *Persons must obtain approval in the main office before visiting school grounds.*

There seems to be no one on the school grounds, which look forlorn in the summer evening. I touch the wire fence, recollecting an occasion when I jumped over it after ditching class. My leg tangled with the barbed wire on top, which ripped my pants. My friends held back their laughter. We had to be quiet and run before security guards found us.

I consider myself a law-abiding man, but today I violate the rule. I climb the wire fence, this time trying to enter the school. I jump down. Not a soul is around, but I feel butterflies in my stomach, knowing I am trespassing. When I arrive at the school's softball stadium, I silently walk around its diamond from the first base to the home plate. I turn my eyes to the bleachers, which look as the same as they did twenty years ago. It's just me who has gotten older.

I walk up and sit on the top of the bleachers. This is the spot where I spent my lunch hour alone, enviously watching a group of English-speaking Korean students. It is also where I sat alone on the last day at this school. I remember standing on my feet and raising my hand to touch the air, desperately seeking a silver lining. I crack a smile as I remember listening to The Cure songs with the girl who rekindled my passion for literature and provided a hope that America might not be so bad.

I wonder what happened to my two-disc selection that contained my favorite twenty-two The Cure songs. I listened to them so much that CD scratches started to cause skipping. It was the end of an era for CD users before they shifted to MP3 devices. I can't say those days were better, but I won't deny the great sentimental value of CDs. I used to burn my favorite songs on CDs so diligently and carry my portable compact disc player everywhere. I

don't even know where they are anymore. I pull out my iPhone and put on my earbuds.

Listening to music is so easy and convenient nowadays.

As if I were attending a religious ceremony, I carefully conduct my forgotten ritual: play *Disintegration*. To my astonishment, I still feel it after all these years. "Plainsong" quickly puts me in a trancelike state. "Pictures of You" follows, tugging at my heartstrings and making me appreciate the cruelly short-lived happy time of love. "Lullaby" renders an uncanny feeling as though I were hopelessly trapped in spiderwebs. I treasure the repetition of the heavy sound of drum and bass in "Fascination Street" so much that I won't mind if it never ends. The combined feeling of melancholy and excitement erupts through the magnificent eight-minute fanfare in the title track, "Disintegration." To me this is the greatest album ever made. I fell in love with this album as much as I fell in love with the girl. *Disintegration* was a gateway to poetry, my interest in aesthetics, and a possibility of assimilating into American life.

As I inhale the summer breeze, I feel an ache in my chest. I want to jump up and down, shout and cry. Listening together to "Boys Don't Cry," the girl had said, "I really, really hate the boys that cry." I suppress my tears. Not because I still miss the girl or cherish The Cure's song, but because I am old. Married. Even have a child. It would be unsightly, perhaps creepy, if anyone noticed a middle-aged man shedding tears alone on the high school bleachers.

If Jinn in the Bottle shows up with a time travel offer, I wouldn't accept the idea of revisiting those days of constant confusion and heartbreak. Years have passed, and I'm in no position to say I've become a sage. However, I think I can finally say now, with little hesitancy and a nervous heart.

That I understand.

2. *A Forest*

Welcome to America.

The banner stuck on the wall looked contradictory, because I did not feel welcome at all. I was the only teenager among a dozen people detained for further examination. I did not understand what a bulky man said to me in English, but from his voice and gesture, I knew I wasn't getting out anytime soon. Next, a bespectacled, seemingly higher-ranking, man tried explaining to me slowly. "Paper" was a word he repeated. I tried to figure out what he meant. He couldn't be indicating newspaper. He must be talking about my documents. What about them? I couldn't provide any response. I felt ashamed. I used to get good grades in English classes throughout my middle school years, but now I was like an athlete choking in a real game.

I was left alone for forty minutes. I was worried, of course. My mom would be waiting for me in the terminal. Most passengers from the flight would have arrived and left by now.

What a helpless feeling. My future would be determined by a couple of guys who had the authority to send me back to Korea or let me walk through the gate. Part of me wanted to say, forget this. I couldn't stand their overbearing eyes that seemed to ask all foreigners to do America a favor and go home. However, I knew I would kneel and beg if that would make the bulky or the bespectacled guy let me go and see my mom.

The bespectacled guy came back, this time with a Korean interpreter. She sat close to me and asked if I was scared. I shook my head. She calmly explained that there were some discrepancies on my documents, and it was the staff's job to follow the protocol and make sure my documents were not fabricated. I told her I didn't know anything, and I wasn't lying.

I was held for another twenty minutes, and the bespectacled man returned and said I was good to go. One stamp had changed everything. I was officially granted entry to America.

It was July 2002, and I had just turned sixteen. My mom and sister had come to America in March. I had been advised to finish my spring semester before leaving Korea. My dad had arranged the flight for me to fly by myself.

When my mom saw me walking through the corridor to the terminal, she shouted my name and ran to me. She tried not to show emotion, but I saw a tear dropping from her eye. She was thirty-seven; I had been an accidental baby during her college years. Growing up, I was always proud of her appearance; she was younger and livelier than my friends' moms. Today, though, she looked older than she had in Korea. I noticed dark circles under her eyes, her no-makeup face, and her hideous baggy flower-patterned pants.

I tried to explain why it took so long, but my mom stopped me. I sensed that she did not want the man standing next to her to hear details about our family matters. Mom introduced me to the man, Mr. Bae. He was her boss.

"Annyong haseyo?" I bowed my head politely.

"I think you're the last person coming out from your flight!" His voice was hoarse and loud. "Why did they detain you? Were you hiding a bomb? Korean Al-Qaeda? Hahaha."

He obviously thought his jokes were funny.

"Don't take it personally," he patted me on my shoulders as if he knew me. "They are just doing their job to protect this great America. Airport inspection has been rigorous since 911, so small inconveniences to visitors are expected. I heard that they sometimes just randomly pick a foreigner and be hard on them. You were unlucky, but it's okay. You're here now. Reunited with your mom!"

Mr. Bae had a strange frowning face even when he was laughing. I had heard in Korea that my mom was working as a florist at a wedding shop owned by this guy. Mom didn't

have a car. Mr. Bae gave her a ride to LAX to pick me up while his wife was watching the store.

The other person waiting for me was Hyejin, my ten-year-old sister. She looked chubbier than the last time I saw her. She was quiet, showing no particular excitement about seeing me.

“Hey, how are you doing?” I asked.

“Fine.”

“Are you good at English now?”

“No.” She said flatly as if failing to improve her English was just a natural course.

“How come?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged.

I scoffed and looked away. I had brought two big, heavy suitcases, and Mom and I started carrying each. I thought it would’ve been a nice gesture if Mr. Bae had offered to take the luggage from my mom, but he just led the way, walking splay-footed.

We got out of the Tom Bradley terminal. I was officially in America. Outside, the California sun was scorching, but surprisingly, I wasn’t sweating.

“L.A. has the world’s best climate,” Mr. Bae said, as though he had been everywhere in the world. “No humidity. No mosquitos. No rain. Always sunshiny.”

After the luggage was put into his SUV, he started driving. I wanted to speak with my mom, but Mr. Bae was a motormouth. On the way to Koreatown, I learned all about his twenty-year immigration life. He had worked hard, bought a big house, and sent his children to good schools. I was supposed to feel grateful to this man who gave my mom a job and picked me up at the airport, but I was getting annoyed. It’s hard to thank anyone when they already expect gratitude.

“My wife and I have this habit of helping others,” Mr. Bae said proudly. “We just can’t

overlook people who are in need. It's a blessing and a curse. Some of them remember and express their gratitude, but there are many who end up backstabbing us, slandering us, and repaying good with evil. But we still can't stop; we continue to help. When I first met your mom, I knew I had to help her. She was so lost in America, couldn't speak English, no money, nowhere to go. I knew we needed to give her an opportunity."

Mom, sitting in the passenger seat, chimed in and said she couldn't imagine how her life in America would've been had she never met the Bae couple. From her tone of voice, I knew that she was making an effort to curry favor. Their evident boss-employee relationship was disconcerting.

Mr. Bae turned his head toward me in the back, "You look like a good kid. Who knows? One day when you are grown up and successful, you will find me and thank me with a gift of Maserati." He laughed aloud.

"I really hope it will happen. It'll be like a movie!" Mom said.

I smiled awkwardly.

Mr. Bae stopped by McDonald's located on Western Avenue. All of us entered.

"This McDonald's is dear to me," Mr. Bae's speech went on. "It was here at this very location twenty years ago when I first immigrated to America. So poor, I would fill up my stomach with a cheeseburger and Coke refills. I don't want you to experience that! Order as much as you want. My treat!"

He did not seem to know that there were now countless McDonald's in Korea, and I was already sick of Big Macs and Chicken McNuggets. One difference I found in American McDonald's was, as he mentioned, free refills. Most McDonald's in Korea gave a small cup and charged a dollar for a refill, but here, you could drink your soda endlessly. This was probably not a good thing, I realized that when Hyejin went for her third refill of Coke.

"You made it through the LAX and now you've tasted McDonald's! You're officially

in America!” Mr. Bae said with a big grin. I felt people’s stare. I really wished he would lower his voice.

Mr. Bae dropped me and my sister off at a shabby apartment in Koreatown. It was four p.m., and Mom still had three more hours of work. Our place was on the third floor. After Bae’s SUV left, Hyejin and I took the elevator and carried the suitcases through the hallway.

When Hyejin unlocked the door, I was met with a Korean woman in her tank top and short pants. The apartment had two bedrooms, and Mom had mentioned that the bedroom with a bathroom had been subleased to someone else. It looked like the woman had just gotten out of the shower. Aroused by seeing her wet hair, I turned my head away.

“Oh, you are the son of this family,” she said. “I heard so much about you.”

I said, “*Jal butak-durimnida,*” which was a greeting usually addressed to an older person to be kind and understanding to a younger person.

She laughed cheerfully, “How courteous. You must be a good student.”

“I try to be.”

“I’m a student too,” She said, and giggled. “At least on paper. Enrolled in a school to maintain my international student visa, but Hyejin knows I hardly ever go to class.”

We both shifted our gaze at Hyejin who was unzipping a suitcase to find whether there was any gift for her. The woman went to her room and came back out five minutes later, her clothes changed. She picked up a small disposable bottle in the kitchen and drank it.

“It’s herbal medicine for my weak stomach. I have to take this before I go out.” She explained although I didn’t ask.

She was short, her hair was short, and her skirts were extremely short. I figured she was twenty-five, tops. I wondered where she was headed. Meeting her boyfriend?

“So, what are your first impressions about America?”

“A bit disappointing,” I didn’t think I needed to sugarcoat things, so I spoke honestly.

“It’s only my first day. It will get better, I think.”

“It won’t get better,” she said.

“Huh?” I was taken aback by her negative remark.

“I came here three years ago, and America never got better. It’s actually getting worse. Every immigrant struggles and every foreigner suffers. Who said it would be easy to put everything behind, leave their family and friends, and start a new life? That makes every one of them have an epic story to tell.”

“You must have an epic story, too.”

“Of course,” she said. “Incredible stories. Been through paradise and hell; seen angels and demons. I don’t mean to scare you, but I advise you to brace yourself and be strong. It’s a tough world.”

“Uhm...” I hesitated. “Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“If life is too difficult here, how come you don’t go back to Korea?”

She took a moment with a smile. “That’s actually the question I constantly ask myself. Why don’t I go back? I complain all day every day, but why do I stay? Look, model student. I think about all the reasons I should go back to Korea, but at the end of the day, the reasons to stay here always outweigh the reasons to go back. The margin is so close. Like 51 to 49. But win is a win, so I decide to stay another day. Everyday has been that way for three years now.”

I nodded, but to be honest, I didn’t really understand what she was saying.

“Alright, model student. I gotta go.” She put on stunningly high heels and suddenly became a lot taller.

“See you later,” I said. “Have a great time.”

“I’m not going out to have a great time. I’m going to work.” As she picked up her

purse, opened the door and took a step outside, she turned to me and said, “Welcome to America!”

It felt weird hearing this clichéd greeting from a pessimistic lady who was contemplating leaving America on a daily basis.

I plopped down on the sofa. Having had less than two hours of sleep in the plane, I was dying for a good nap. I closed my eyes, forcing myself to stay hopeful, but I couldn’t shake off a feeling that things would not be so easy in America.

3. Homesick

Mom worked from ten to seven on normal days, and the three of us at home usually woke up at noon. The roommate—her name was Sona—slept very late after coming home around three a.m. every night. I was suffering from terrible jet lag. Hyejin? She just slept a lot.

Sona's daily schedule was unpredictable. Many days she took off soon after waking up. On a rare occasion she would show up in the living room and chat with me, but more often, she wouldn't come out of her room at all until she left at five p.m. Some nights she slept elsewhere.

Most of the time, I was home alone with Hyejin. She wasn't joking about her command of English. When a gas company guy visited for inspection, I asked Hyejin to interpret my basic messages such as "Our parents are not here" and "No, we did not smell gas," but she couldn't say or understand even simple terms. I ended up using my wildly broken English to communicate with the gasman.

I thought young kids quickly familiarized themselves with foreign languages. Four months were not a long time, but how could Hyejin have not learned anything?

But my own experience soon made me see. Other than the gasman, no one spoke a word of English to me during my first ten days in America. It was impossible to learn English when the only language I spoke was Korean and all the people I saw were Koreans. Hyejin came to America in March, she started going to school in May, and the summer vacation began in mid-June. She'd had only a few weeks of school.

I wasn't thrilled to be stuck home with her. Six years apart, there was little we could share. I wanted to ignore her although I remembered what my dad had asked of me.

The night before I left Korea, Dad and I had some alone time. Mindful about the health of his elderly mother who was living with us, my dad sneaked into my room at night, opened the window, and started smoking. It had been over ten years since he quit smoking, but after my mom and Hyejin flew to America, he occasionally smoked again. Facing the reality of sending his son as well, he looked a little down in the mouth.

“You know what, son?” He blew his cigarette smoke through the window. “I miss Hyejin so much. A lot more than I miss your mom, between you and me. Hyejin is just an incredible girl, isn’t she? Everything I do is to provide her with a better future.”

What about me? I wanted to say, but that would sound childish.

“You’ll understand one day if you have a daughter.” He stubbed out his cigarette and paused before turning his eyes toward my face. “Son, it will be challenging in America. You will have to study much harder than your peers, due to your age and English. Also, be a good son to Mom and a good brother to your sister, okay? Your love and guidance will be crucial for Hyejin in a foreign land. Promise me that you will take good care of your baby sister.”

“Sure,” I gave him my word. “Don’t worry about it.”

Here I was with my sister who looked like a not-so-cute Winnie-the-Pooh. She was about a head taller than her peers and alarmingly overweight, her cheeks so rotund that her nose was buried in between them and her eyes slanted upwards. I had trouble understanding why Dad adored her so much. I knew I promised him, but I did not like my babysitting job.

“I’m going out,” I stood up and said to Hyejin. “I wanna get some snacks.”

“You need a car.” She looked sulky. “Here, you need a car to go anywhere.”

“I can walk.”

“You’re not supposed to leave a child alone at home. That’s the law. Police will arrest you.”

I was about to laugh before I realized that she wasn’t joking.

“What about Sona?” I asked. “Weren’t you always home alone after she went out?”

“She’s not my family, but you are. She had to go to work. You’re not going to work.”

I didn’t want to argue about her flawed logic. I could have suggested that we go out together, but I craved time away from her.

“If police come,” I said. “Tell them you’re fourteen. They’ll believe you.”

I left her and walked out. With an earphone connected to my portable CD player, I played my favorite Sting songs. Hyejin was right. Here, you needed a car to go anywhere. You have to walk many blocks just to get a carton of milk. How inconvenient.

Roaming aimlessly on Western Avenue, I was overwhelmed by a great number of billboards in Korean. Tacky privately-owned stores and trendy coffee shops and beauty salons coexisted. Some ladies passed me by, speaking in my native tongue. A battered Korean signpost in front of a decrepit shop read, “Trust No One But the Hwang Plumbing! 30 Years in K-Town!”

This looked nothing like the scenes of Los Angeles I’d watched in Hollywood films. I felt like I was walking through a Twilight Zone version of Korea. Bewilderment was developing into indescribable melancholy. Was I homesick? I played “Englishman in New York,” wondering if Sting felt lonely as a foreigner in the midst of New York crowds. I checked the time and thought it should be early morning in Seoul. Would my friends have woken up? Was my dad at work already? How was my grandmother? Her health was rapidly deteriorating.

The town was boring and I had nowhere to go, but when I reached Sixth Street, I was suddenly transfixed by a two-story building. I had read an article that a building on Western Avenue had been completely destroyed by fire during L.A. riot/rebellion in 1992. I was certain this spot was it. I closely looked around the structure that had Korean restaurants and shops on the ground floor and mostly offices on the upper level. In the parking lot, there were

two middle-aged men conversing in Korean, pointing at a car and discussing auto repair issues. I decided to give it a shot and ask them.

“Yeah, indeed.” The tanned man wearing a Dodgers cap replied, “This place was completely burned down. They rebuilt the structure after the riot, so the ruins are only in people’s memories. Why do you ask? Are you a student reporter?”

“No,” I shook my head. “I was just curious. Sorry if I troubled you.”

“No trouble at all,” he said. “Young folks like you should know. So many stores were looted and burned down during the riot. So many people lost everything in a day.”

I nodded and let them return to their conversation about auto repair. I walked away and crossed the parking lot. It was not easy to imagine this building being burned down. The sun was too bright and there was not a single cloud in the sky. No fire, rampage, or violence would mix well with this weather.

On my way back home, I stopped by a Korean market on Fifth Street and spent ten dollars on milk and snacks. I walked home with a plastic bag in my hand, listening to Sting who was killing me today. Never thought his “Fragile” could sound so powerfully vulnerable.

When I got home, an unexpected guest surprised me.

“My dearest nephew! I’m so glad you’re finally here.”

My aunt, Kelly, had been living in America for eight years. She and her husband, both American citizens, were the reason my family had entertained the idea of living in America in the first place. I had been meaning to see her, but when I’d asked, Mom clucked her tongue instead of explaining and said Kelly was a michin-nyon¹.

Kelly was the youngest of four children whereas Mom was the eldest. When they grew up together, Kelly was always the wild, unpredictable one. After quitting high school and

¹ A derogatory term for “crazy woman,” but is sometimes used among close female friends.

running away from home to be an actress, she met a guy from America and left Korea with him at age nineteen. According to Mom, Kelly was an egomaniac, a compulsive liar, and a vain woman who would swipe her credit card for a designer bag even when she was in heavy debt. To me, Kelly was a cool “L.A. imo².” Whenever she visited Korea, she brought a bunch of American Disney dolls and M&M chocolates for Hyejin, and printed-in-America CDs, Billboard magazines, and graphic novels for me. As a child I thought Kelly was the smartest person on Earth when I heard her speaking comfortably in English on the phone.

Here she was now. Having left her four-year-old son with her husband, she was running some errands in K-town, she said, and stopped by to see me.

“This is for you,” Kelly pointed at the box of a new Samsung DVD player. “A welcome gift. I know how much you love movies.”

“Whoa,” I grabbed the box. “Thank you. I’ll enjoy it a lot.”

“I’ve also brought this,” Kelly picked up a thin comic book that read “1973 Wonder Woman #205.” I knew her husband was a collector. Kelly added, “This is a collectible. Worth over a hundred dollars, so don’t lose it!”

“Of course,” I said, and then handed it over to Hyejin. “It’s Wonder Woman. You should keep it. Read it and learn English.”

“What a nice oppa³,” Kelly said. “I already gave Hyejin a lot of stuff before you came home, though.”

Hyejin’s face beamed with joy anyhow, grabbing the comic book.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m just happy to see you, Imo, now in America.”

“Good to hear that,” Kelly smiled comfortably and looked around the dining table. “Are you guys hungry? Let’s order something. How about *tongdak*⁴? There’s a good one on

² Aunt (mother’s sister).

³ Older brother. Used only by females. Also used to address an older male friend.

⁴ Korean-style fried or roasted chicken.

Third Street.”

“I can run and pick it up,” I offered. “Mom said delivery order in America costs you a fee plus tip, which would be enough money to get six extra pieces of wings.”

Kelly laughed and slapped my arm. “Come on! I don’t want my nephew to be so petty. When in America, do as the Americans do. Let’s call them to bring it over.”

I was instantly embarrassed for being cheap, still stuck in the mentality of Korea where neither fee nor tip would be asked for food delivery.

Kelly ordered a whole chicken along with six pieces of crispy wings and a two-liter Pepsi. I loved her relentless way of spending. Thanks to her, Hyejin and I had a chicken feast. Kelly was done after a couple of wings. No wonder she was so slim.

When she asked where we wanted to visit the most in America, Hyejin said Disneyland and I replied Lakers and Dodgers games. As a huge basketball and baseball fan, I was excited by the thought of going to the games of these historied L.A. teams. Kelly promised that she would take us one day.

When we were done eating, she said she should leave for her child, but I asked her to stay until Mom came home.

“She wouldn’t like to see me,” Kelly said. “Your mom and I have irreconcilable differences.”

“Stay, Imo.” I insisted. “I’m sure Mom would welcome you.”

“Yeah, why not...” Kelly murmured indecisively. “I haven’t seen her for a month.”

Kelly stayed, and we chatted for a good two hours. She was such a talkative lady who would ask me a question and use my response as another topic for her to ramble on about. I liked having company here, and she was my favorite aunt. She teared up, expressing her sadness for me having to sleep on the living room couch. She said she regretted not being rich enough to have a house with an extra room for her nephew.

“At least you understand my heart,” she said. “I want to give you the best in the world. You know that, right?”

“Sure,” I said.

Mom returned home at seven thirty as usual. When she stepped inside, she looked at Kelly and said, “What are you doing here?”

There was a sense of alert in her voice. Mom didn’t want to see Kelly, that was obvious.

“Why wouldn’t I be here?” Kelly chuckled nervously. “My nephew has come to America, but you never invited me over.”

“Now that you’ve seen your dear nephew, will you please leave?”

I was startled. Mom never spoke like that to anyone.

“Unnie⁵,” Kelly glared at Mom. “You’re acting like you really want to sever our relationship.”

“I don’t want to argue with you. I’m tired, Kelly. Don’t stir me up.”

“I’m not stirring up anything. I’m here for your son. I gave gifts and bought food for your kids. That’s what family does, Unnie. What have you ever bought for *my* child? Except for that cheap Hangul⁶ sound book you brought from Korea.”

“Nobody asked you to bring gifts or buy food for my children. You always do what pleases you. Just don’t do anything for us. We don’t need it!”

“Why can’t you show some gratitude? You needed a roommate to help with the rent, so I introduced you to my friend, Sona. And didn’t I take you to the church where you met the Baes who gave you the job and Pastor Choi who helped to collect all this furniture? Sofa, TV, dining table...”

“Oh, am I supposed to thank you for these, too?” Mom said, “All this junk from church people who were looking for a place to throw them away?”

⁵ Older sister (females addressing older females).

⁶ Korean alphabet.

“All this junk saved you thousands of dollars!”

“Don’t you dare tell me about thousands of dollars!”

Mom sat down on a dining chair. Kelly stayed standing with her arms crossed. Hyejin made an annoying noise, popping the plastic bubble wrap from the DVD player box.

“America this, America that,” Mom muttered as if she were talking to herself. “You planted false hopes in my family. Nothing here is like what you said.”

“What did you expect? A mansion with a swimming pool? Limousine service? Get a grip, Unnie.”

“I just didn’t expect my sister to be an irresponsible, thoughtless woman who had not paid her rent for three months.”

“Here you go again.” Kelly frowned. “You keep bringing that up. It’s just a part of American life! People have their rent overdue all the time.”

“Who else is overdue? And who makes their sister, who just came here, pay their debt? I spent thousands of dollars on your overdue rent!”

“You spent some money for your sister. Are you gonna talk about it for the rest of your life? What kind of unnie are you?”

“Some money? That was all I had!”

“You sound like you’re proud that was all you had. What were you thinking? How could you bring only four grand to America? Are you a child? You can’t even buy a junk car with that. Were you planning for me to provide everything?”

“Let’s stop this,” Mom rubbed her forehead with her fingers. “This is why I didn’t want to see you. Would you leave now? I beg you.”

“Fine,” Kelly reached for her bag. “I’ll grant your wish and never come here again. You call me when you think you can have an adult talk without getting emotional.”

Kelly turned to me and said, “I’m sorry you had to see this. I will keep talking to you.

Don't hesitate to contact me! I love you and Hyejin so much. I will always be there for you guys!"

I said, "Thank you" in spite of myself.

After Kelly left, silence dominated our apartment. Mom looked awfully tired. I wanted to cheer her up but had nothing to say.

"Are you hungry?" she asked. "I'll make dinner."

"We're full," I said. "We had tongdak only a few hours ago."

"I'm hungry," Hyejin said.

Mom prepared a soft tofu stew. She usually cooked food in a gigantic pot for Hyejin and me to fill our stomachs when we were home alone.

After dinner, Mom still wouldn't rest. She washed the dishes and cleaned the kitchen. It was after her shower when she spoke to me about Kelly.

"Let's not be overdramatic," she said. "You're here now, and things will be alright."

"Of course, Mom."

"Hyejin and I stayed in Kelly's apartment when we first came here. We were sleeping in the living room, and in the middle of the night, I found cockroaches running over Hyejin's face. Prostitutes were shouting 'thirty dollars' and people were dealing drugs in the neighborhood. Choppers were making crazy noises. Can you believe it? This was Hollywood. When Kelly said she lived in Hollywood, I thought it was where movie stars lived."

I was speechless.

"Kelly's right," Mom said. "Four thousand dollars were all I brought to America. After spending them to pay her rent, I was penniless. At least it opened my eyes to see that my sister was not someone I should rely on. I interviewed for jobs in Koreatown, but with my English, I could only find waitressing. Then at the church I met the Baes. Normally I would never work for people like them. They are..."

She stopped. Mom never looked comfortable sharing her vulnerabilities. She said she should go to bed.

“You know what frustrates me the most in America?” she said as she stood up.

“Imo?”

“Kelly’s a psycho but she’s my sister after all. We fight, but we’ll talk again. We always have.”

“It must be your work, then.”

“Work is hard, but it pays rent. I should be grateful that I have a job.”

Then I didn’t know the answer. She laughed for the first time tonight.

“I’ve failed the driver’s license test twice in a row. Nothing saddens me more. Driving is not just necessary, but indispensable here. We can’t afford cabs all the time, and I’m sick of asking people for a ride. If I fail one more time, I’ll have to start over with the written test. I really shouldn’t fail again, but I’ve lost confidence.”

I had trouble understanding. What was so hard about passing a driving test? Just go when the light is green and stop at a red light. Mom had a license and had been driving in Korea. To my knowledge, Korea should be a lot harder to drive in, due to its tangled roads, many mannerless drivers, and narrow streets. Los Angeles was spacious, rules were clear, and streets had been designed evenly like a checkerboard. If she survived driving in Korea, how could she not even pass the test here?

Spoiler alert: Over the next twelve months, my mom would fail the driving test once more and be forced to retake the written exam. My dad, upon coming to America, would fail twice as well. As for me, I would also fail twice before finally passing it the third time.

At some point, all my family members were scared to death just to stand in line at the DMV.

4. High

“You cannot use Gun,” Pastor Choi said, pointing at my Korean passport.

I was never fond of my surname, Kim, which was too common among Koreans, but I took pride in my first name, Gun. I thought it was a dandy name. It meant “to build” in Chinese characters.

“‘Gun’ has a violent connotation here. Taboo in America.” The pastor arbitrarily wrote down “Kwon” on the form.

I did not like Kwon. I couldn’t imagine using it throughout my school years. While waiting in the administration office of JD High School, I decided to take a chance when the pastor briefly stepped out to receive a cell phone call. After haphazardly crossing out “Kwon” and inserting “Gun” instead, I submitted the form to the front desk. When Pastor Choi returned, the administrative lady went over my document and questioned my hastily scrawled name. The pastor turned his head toward me.

“You did this?” He gave me a quizzical look. “Why? You don’t like Kwon?”

I shook my head cautiously.

“Hmm... Sorry if that upset you.” He apologized rather easily.

After a short discussion, the pastor and I reached a middle ground: add an “n.” My official name became “Gunn.” I was okay with it. Billy Gunn was one of the cool professional wrestlers.

The pastor and I encountered another conflict. Having turned sixteen, I was supposed to enter the fall semester as an eleventh grader, but he insisted that I start as a sophomore.

“If you want a shot at a better university, you need at least one extra year to build up

credits. Trust me, it will benefit you. I've seen many new students from Korea who regret it after they choose otherwise."

I did not like the idea of going to school with peers a year ahead of me. I pouted, but this time I didn't win. He enrolled me in the tenth-grade. I was not in a position to defy the man who had been helping my family, but I felt he was meddlesome. I'd heard that he was also the one who made my mom move into our current place rather than her preferred apartment closer to work. He'd persuaded her to prioritize better schools for her children, because our address, located at the border of Koreatown, was districted to Hancock Park, an affluent neighborhood.

I was now officially enrolled in John Donahue High School and would start attending six classes next week. "Donahue" wasn't an easy name for me to pronounce, but thankfully, the school usually went by its initials, JD. I was granted an opportunity to walk around. The school looked awesome. Its football field was huge. Every student had a locker. The vintage red-brick building reminded me of Ivy League school pictures I saw on the Internet.

On the way to his parked car, Pastor Choi explained how to commute to school by bus from K-town. I politely thanked him.

"Glad you like the school." He smiled kindly.

He was a youth pastor in charge of middle and high school students at a small Korean immigrant church in Glendale. Mom had mentioned that Pastor Choi was the only "sane" Korean she had met thus far in America. Despite what she said to Kelly, Mom was grateful for the help provided by her new church people. In particular, Pastor Choi helped her open a bank account, take the driving test, and enroll Hyejin in an elementary school. Today, he spent all morning getting my health requirements cleared and got me registered for school. In South Korea, 25 percent of the population were reportedly Christian, but that increased to a whopping number in America, as 70 percent of Korean immigrants identified themselves as

Christians. From my own experience of receiving help from Pastor Choi, I understood why church could mean a lot to immigrants.

Before giving me a ride back home, Pastor Choi took me to In-N-Out Burger. He said In-N-Out was America's best burger chain and explained the reasons: good-quality but inexpensive, clean, friendly, and Christian-minded. He showed me the underside of a French Fries paper tray that had the printed verse of John 3:16. Suddenly inspired, he got down to do his primary job: preaching. He emphasized the great works of God and advised me to seek His will under any circumstances.

Growing up in a Christian family with devout grandparents, I was accustomed to religious talk, but I wasn't interested in Pastor Choi's sermon. He seemed like an intelligent man who could provide useful information. I waited for the right moment to change the subject.

"When did you come to America?" I asked him when there was a pause.

"Isn't it the first thing you wonder about whenever you meet someone?" He met my eyes and chuckled. "I used to do that, haha. I came here when I was a nineteen-year-old college student. That was fourteen years ago."

"I was just curious how long it would take for me to speak English fluently like you."

"I'm not fluent in English," he said flatly. "Far, far from it."

"You're being modest."

"I wish," he laughed. "The real English is beyond ordering burgers. The fact is, I still struggle with English every day."

I didn't believe him. I couldn't speak English well, but I had ears to discern who was good or bad in English.

"What about the sermon you gave in English on Sunday? You sounded professional."

"Uhm... I'll share my secret." Pastor Choi sipped his Dr Pepper before continuing.

“For that thirty-minute sermon, I prepare all week to make sure there are no errors in my grammar, pronunciation, and expression. I literally memorize my entire sermon not to embarrass myself. To be honest, I get nervous when I attend important meetings held in English or speak with American religious leaders. I’m also currently working on my Ph.D., but you don’t know how stressful it is for me to write a dissertation and lead seminars in English.”

This was a letdown. Educated, fairly young, and having lived here for fourteen years, he was still not confident in English?

“You’re in a different league,” I said. “Right now, I’d be overjoyed if I could speak English like you. I would grab any passersby and gab with them all day.”

“No, you won’t.” Pastor Choi said. “The better you speak English, the more careful you become. You’ll think twice before chatting with anyone. You’re sixteen... I’m sorry to say this, but you’re a bit late. You won’t ever be able to speak English like a native speaker. Your tongue won’t roll the way you want it to. English will be a challenge for you the rest of your life.”

I did not know what to make of his brutal assessment. I put my burger down.

“Oops,” he noticed my cheerless look. “Have I discouraged you?”

“A little,” I said. “Call me an optimist, but I don’t think it will be as hard as you say.”

“Sorry, I got carried away.” He tapped his chest apologetically. “I’ve been so frustrated with the limitation of my English, but I shouldn’t have imposed my subjective opinion. I think it depends on your circumstances. A guy I know immigrated when he was fourteen, but he speaks English comfortably. However, he grew up in an Oklahoma town where he was the only Korean. That’s not easy in L.A. When school starts, try not to hang around with Korean speakers. Make friends with English-speaking students. Having a girlfriend who speaks fluent English would definitely help, haha. When you’re home, don’t watch Korean shows. Ugh, you

know what? I'm such a hypocrite. Most of my friends are Korean speakers and watching Korean shows has been my guilty pleasure. I'm advising you to do the things that I have hard time accomplishing for myself."

"I'm a believer of hard work," I said. "I've learned from my dad. He's superb in English. Actually, he speaks four languages."

"Is that so?"

"It's certainly more effort than linguistic talent. My home was always boisterous with the sound of CNN news."

"That's very inspiring," the pastor grinned.

"He's a man of strict discipline. He treasures every second and considers wasting any of it a sin. He has amazing multitasking abilities—watching news, memorizing English vocabulary, eating, and cleaning the living room at the same time."

I knew I was bragging about my dad like a child, but I couldn't stop. I enjoyed talking about him. Most boys worship their dad until they come of age and realize how vulnerable their old man could be in real life, but I still idolized him.

"I would love to meet him. When is he coming?"

"Soon, I think."

I missed my dad and thought I would eat Animal Style Fries with him one day. Pastor Choi said it was marvelous to see me looking up to my father and advised me to emulate his work ethic. I appreciated the pastor.

Later at home, I had a video chat with my dad. I told him about Pastor Choi, reiterated how difficult it would be to master English, but expressed my readiness to study hard.

"Of course," my dad looked pleased. "Don't waste a single moment. It's a marathon, son. If you sit and relax, you'll quickly fall behind."

Listening to him, I felt ashamed for not making the best of my first month here. I ended up watching a lot of Hollywood movies. I justified myself that I learned English from them, but I should have studied more. I tried, but every time I opened a book in English, I was instantly distracted. Studying on my own without a curriculum was easier said than done.

My mom and Hyejin joined the chat. Dad was delighted to see us together on the screen, but he also mentioned how hard it was without his wife and kids. He jokingly added that he had never thought he would become a *gireogi appa*, which refers to a man left behind in Korea, keeping his job in order to pay for his family to live and study abroad in an English-speaking country. The increasing number of such dads living alone in Korea was becoming a social issue.

“You can’t be called a *gireogi appa*. You’re not sending us any money,” my mom said.

My dad’s sheepish look was pixelated due to poor Internet connection. Mom could be quite blunt when she talked to Dad. The way I understood it, my parents loved each other, but Mom was disappointed and tired.

It was getting late, and Mom and Hyejin headed to their room. I nestled in my bed. Thanks to Pastor Choi’s help, a single bed had been placed by the window and a big wooden board separated my space from the rest of the living room. Now I had some privacy.

I looked out the window. The moon between the two tall palm trees created a picturesque view. I would normally think about Korea, but tonight, I was imagining myself walking around JD, carrying a backpack full of textbooks and getting along with American friends. I had high hopes for my school days in America. I would work hard and surprise everyone. I would be a rare case, speaking English like a native speaker despite coming at sixteen. Never in my life had I waited so eagerly for school to start.

5. *Six Different Ways*

English, English... Cruelty, thy name is English.

My confidence was not completely groundless. English had been my favorite subject in Korea, and I did quite well in my middle school English courses. I had reasons to believe that I could continue my streak.

The reality hit me hard when school started.

On the placement exam, I did well in reading and writing, but scored low in speaking and listening. I was placed in Intermediate ESL—a setback. I had anticipated Advanced ESL, so that I could enter a regular English class as early as next semester. This was important, because ESL courses were not counted as academic credits toward college admission.

I couldn't blame anyone. I had serious trouble with listening comprehension. Everyone talked too fast. I wished live captions were available when people spoke to me.

“Garami?” One student said.

I forced a smile. *What kind of English is that?*

What he'd said was “Got a minute?” Countless times I failed to figure out the expressions that were supposed to be obvious, using preschool-level vocabulary.

“Well...” I muttered whenever I didn't understand. Sometimes the questioners let it slide, but I got stumped when they demanded an answer.

In all my assigned six classes, I made ridiculous errors.

When my first period teacher told the class to stay in their seats even after the bell rang, I was the only student who got up and walked out of the classroom. A student hurriedly came out and pulled me back in. Everyone laughed.

In Chemistry class, I did not understand the teacher telling students to wear goggles before experiments. Everyone but me had them on. This teacher thought I was being defiant. He got mad and yelled at me to get the hell out of his class.

I found an unusually big zit above my right eyebrow. It got infected after I scratched it. When a classmate in P.E. class noticed it and asked what happened, I told her it was “just a tumor.” A classic case of mistranslation; I had picked up a wrong term from the dictionary. A rumor spread that I was terminally ill. Some students feared this “tumor” could be contagious. The teacher had to clear the air by asking another Korean student to interpret for me.

In World History class, the teacher gave an open-note exam, but I did not know what that meant. I struggled throughout the test and finished last place.

During a class reading session, I was asked to read a passage from a book, and I reached a line that said, “Enough is enough!” I knew what the word “enough” meant but had never come across this idiom before. In a split second, I got mixed up with another word. I read aloud, “Energy is energy!” I unintentionally became a comedian. Everyone had a good laugh.

The series of embarrassments led me to lose confidence. My personality was changing. I became a quiet, inexpressive student.

“You won’t improve much if you’re shy. Who cares about mistakes? Be bold and be aggressive. Keep speaking in English!” Mr. Irwin, my ESL teacher, encouraged the class.

I agreed. Passive people never win. But the more I tried, the more regretful memories I was adding to my life. I grew skeptical. To me, the world was not divided into rich and poor, black and white, or conservative and liberal. It was people who spoke English well and those who didn’t. I couldn’t shake off what Pastor Choi said. Maybe I was already late. Yes, I would gradually improve enough to order burgers and chat with neighbors, but I would never

be able to speak fluently. Even Pastor Choi was suffering from his limitations after fourteen years. How would I be any different?

All summer I'd desperately wanted to go to school. After several weeks at school, I found myself counting days until weekends. People around me still thought I was a smart student. Mom completely believed in me. Dad would berate me for being weak and tell me to take it like a man.

Was Hyejin having a similar problem? She walked to a nearby elementary school while I took the bus to JD High. I asked her how she was doing at school, whether she was learning anything and making new friends.

"I have Korean friends."

"Do they speak English?"

"They speak Korean."

"How can you improve your English when you speak Korean even at school?"

She took a moment, and finally said, "I don't care."

I usually disdained her nonchalance and lack of passion, but this time, I envied her.

In fact, I wasn't in a position to worry about her having only Korean-speaking friends. I didn't have *any* friends.

In my observation, Korean students could be classified into three different levels. Level 1: Those who were born here or immigrated at an early age. Coming from families that had already settled in America, they were Americanized, earning good grades, seemingly having a promising future. Level 2: Those who had been in America for a good amount of time. They were bilingual, comfortable with both cultures. Level 3: Those who recently came to America and struggled with English. The ones in this bracket were disparagingly called fobs. To me, "F.O.B." was the most offensive F-word. It easily separated me from regular American students. I would prefer to say nothing than revealing my status as a newcomer.

Of course, I wished I could become friends with Level 1 students to quickly improve my English, but they were out of reach. Level 2 students seemed cool, but Level 3 students were my league. Trying to get by, striving to learn English, their parents also going through difficult times as new immigrants... I started hanging with them. I didn't think Level 1 students even knew we existed, but I expected Level 2 students to be kind to Level 3 students who needed help.

It did not take long time to wake up from that hope.

6. Lullaby

On the outdoor basketball court, Dragon was conspicuous. He had a name, but everyone called him Dragon. I heard he had an imposing dragon tattoo on his back, but in school tattoos were required to be covered up. He was exceptionally tall, the only Korean dude who could dunk.

I was led by Wonho, an Advanced ESL student, to introduce myself to Dragon. Dragon wasn't talkative, but when he spoke, he did so in a bossy manner. He looked distracted after the basketball game, not really paying attention to me.

"You're in tenth grade," Dragon said, his eyes looking elsewhere. "Call me *hyung*⁷."

"I don't think that will be necessary," I said with a smile. I was already told that he was a junior. I confirmed with him that although I was a year behind him, we were the same age.

"Whatever," Dragon turned and walked over to a girl wearing heavy makeup and a filmy blouse that showed her cleavage. That girl would be sitting next to him after school when he showed up in his blue Mustang through the parking lot. Having a car would make any highschooler look special, but this guy seemed to be on a different level.

I entertained the idea of becoming friends with Dragon. He was athletic and popular, spoke good English, and had the swagger that reminded me of stylish characters in the movies. I thought it would be nice if I could join his world.

Dragon and his three close friends called themselves "MF." I thought it indicated bad words, but it stood for "Magnificent Four." They were considered cool dudes in school—

⁷ Older brother. Used only by males. Also used to address upperclassmen in school.

fashionable, hair neatly trimmed, carrying hot girls around. They were all eleventh graders, had been in America for several years, and seemingly came from affluent families. They probably had many ways to enjoy their lifestyle at school, but unfortunately, they found their fun in picking on ESL students.

Six thousand miles away from Korea, there was a solid pecking order for Korean-speaking students. Korea is known for its strict hierarchy systems that run through all aspects of society. Honorifics are extremely developed, respecting elders is highly emphasized, and even a one-year difference in school is so huge that underclassmen are expected to behave politely to upperclassmen. When I watched Hollywood films, I was enchanted by the scenes of freshmen becoming friends with seniors and elders telling youngsters to call them by their first name. The last thing I ever anticipated at an American school was the revival of Korean-style vertical relationships.

I soon noticed that the younger Korean-speaking students, also known as “fobs,” were doing various chores for the MF members: carrying their backpacks, doing their homework, and waiting in line to get lunch for them. These fobs were nobodies at school. They were from poor families and spoke poor English.

JD High had a secluded corner where the dumping ground was located. It was usually shady, thanks to the two-story red-brick building blocking the sunlight. Nicknamed “O.K. Corral,” it had reportedly been a venue for many fights ever since the school was founded in the 1920s. Students were probably all whites back then, but now the O.K. Corral had become a haven for Korean-speaking students. We would gather here after lunch, and things were peaceful unless the MF visited when they got bored. Then the bullying took place.

One afternoon, new underclassmen were forced to go through a hazing ritual. They performed a talent show, singing, rapping, and dancing trendy K-pop songs in front of the MF members sitting on a bench like American Idol judges. Some were so awful that they

drew jeers, but some actually displayed talent. Dong, a reticent freshman, was surprisingly a skilled dancer, imitating remarkable moves of recent K-pop bands. His dance heightened the mood. Dong sounded similar to *thong*, which meant feces in Korean, so the MF created an English name for him: Poopoo. When things were bland, Dragon would say, “Hey, Poopoo. Come on up and dance.” Then Dong started dancing.

Inexplicably, it looked like I had been exempted from the underclassmen’s duty to entertain the MF and do their chores. Was it because I told Dragon that I was the same age as him? But there were several other sixteen-year-old sophomores who called Dragon *hyung*. I knew people were wondering why I was the exception. The MF must have been debating what they should do with me. What would I do if they demanded my subordination? No way I would let anyone—especially those the same age—make me carry their bags, run their errands, or sing and dance for them.

Call me a wimp, but what I chose to do was spend lunchtime by myself, staying far away from the O.K. Corral.

I didn’t understand why the school gave 45 minutes for lunch; everyone could easily finish their lunch in fifteen minutes. I found my hideout on the top of the softball stadium bleachers, largely because a group of English-speaking Korean students would show up at the bottom of the bleachers. I liked watching them. Mostly girls, but boys often joined as well. They were loud, chatting about various matters of their lives and occasionally playing Frisbee. Unrestrained and articulate, well-tanned, having no fob mark⁸, and clueless how blessed they were... None of them would ever know what was going on at the O.K. Corral. Struggles of first-generation immigrants, the language barrier, cheap K-town apartments were probably their parents’ bygone stories. I was, at first, envious and longing to be part of their community, but as time went by, I just appreciated the sight of them. I quietly watched

⁸ A scar on the upper left arm acquired after receiving a smallpox vaccination shot during childhood.

them for the long lunch break. Their vibrant appearances were a spectacle and their uproarious laughter was music to my ears.

Like it or not, I would be stuck with my ESL peers for a good while. I shouldn't just hide like this and eat lunch alone every day, but the more I thought about my reality, the more indecisive I became.

Days of solitude went on until an unsavory incident occurred. It provided an unexpected solution to my dilemma.

Algebra II was a class where I suffered less. I was doing pretty well, not because I was a math genius, but because I had already learned many of the formulas the year before in Korea.

Sitting behind me was Marcus, an African-American student. He was friendly, always wearing a smile, fist-bumping me, and even speaking some simple Korean words he had memorized. I didn't hesitate to share my notes and worksheets with him. I was glad to have a buddy I could talk to in English on a daily basis.

Our fellowship was short-lived. My trouble understanding things in English was well known in the class, and Marcus started calling me a fob. He playfully chanted "F.O.B., F.O.B." when I solved an equation on the blackboard. There was no sign of malice on his face. He seemed to think that it was an endearing term. Marcus didn't know how much I loathed that word, and I didn't know how to tell him. I made a sour face at him in frustration. I expected the teacher to do something, but he showed no particular reaction.

After a week of putting up with this, I finally fumed at Marcus. "Stop call me fob!"

"You can't even say that right." He giggled, "because you're a fob."

My mind worked furiously to analyze my English errors. I should have said "*Don't* call me fob." Or, "stop *calling* me fob." Should *a* be there? "Stop calling me *a* fob?" If I were

to write it, should I discard *a* and capitalize fob? “Stop calling me *Fob*?”

About fifteen minutes later, he was coming toward my seat after turning in his worksheet to the teacher. Sitting in my chair, I lifted my left leg and kicked his belly.

“What the fuck was that for?” Taken aback, he scowled angrily. “Stand up! I’ll kick your ass!”

The classroom was in a sudden uproar with Marcus throwing curse words at me. The teacher stood up from his seat with an I-didn’t-sign-up-for-this look. I glared at Marcus. Another student came and stood between us, and that triggered Marcus. He violently jerked his arm loose and charged at me like a running back. Pandemonium broke out. Several desks fell in the crash. Hit by one of them, a girl let out a piercing shriek. Marcus was all over me, and I struggled to push him away. We wrestled until the other boys separated us. Marcus kept shouting and swearing. I didn’t speak, but never took my eyes off him.

This was my first fight in America. It resulted in my first suspension. The school called my mom and sent her notifications regarding her child’s misdemeanor, but thanks to her English deficiency, she ignored the calls and letters. Marcus was suspended for one day whereas I got two days. According to the investigation, I started the fight by kicking him first. I stayed mum when a supervisor asked me why I kicked him. I didn’t know how to articulate myself. I wanted to say “I hated when he called me a fob,” but I was afraid of people’s reactions. Maybe it wasn’t an offensive term. Maybe I overreacted. One thing was certain: the more sensitively I reacted, the more it would prove that I was, in fact, a fob.

I had zero racial awareness when I fought Marcus, but interracial fights were taken seriously in school, especially between Blacks and Koreans. Their unfortunate tension had played a role in the L.A. riot/rebellion. This incident didn’t escalate, but it ironically cemented my new tough image among Korean students. No Korean would kick a Black dude first, but I was apparently crazy enough to do that. It made me gain some invisible

acceptance from the MF. They wouldn't treat me the way they did other weaklings. They wouldn't force me to call them *hyung*. Even though I still socialized with Level 3 students, I no longer worried about being bullied. It didn't feel right to witness other students' ordeals, but I felt a sense of relief.

About the two-day suspension, I told Mom that it was JD's special holidays. Mom believed me. Or she didn't, but was too busy to care.

One late October night, I woke up from a nightmare. Trapped in a cube, I was watching a dark, unidentifiable creature crawling toward me. I was having frightening dreams lately.

Playing D'Angelo's music on my earphones, I quietly looked around my apartment. Home was, in many ways, the opposite of school. There was no strain, no discipline, no rules. Mom granted me absolute freedom. She never told me to study hard, never stopped me when I was watching movies. Somehow, she conveniently presumed that I must be adjusting well to the new environment, making friends, getting all A's. I didn't see her doing anything other than working six days a week, cooking for her children at night, and going to church on Sunday. Her sighs were getting heavier. She was perhaps doubting what her purpose was in America. I didn't tell her about school. I would never add anything negative to her already weary life.

Hyejin probably needed help. She recklessly consumed all kinds of junk food, watched Korean shows after school, and wasn't improving her English.

Sona came home drunk almost every night—or to be precise, early in the morning. She and I recently had a heart-to-heart talk. She told me about her previous life in Korea: growing up in a dysfunctional family and working at a hostess bar. She came to America in part to launder her reputation, but after six months of a fruitless effort of studying, she realized she would never be a school person. She said she'd returned to the “similar line of

business.” She didn’t explain, but I knew what it meant. Sona was liable to mood swings. She was usually upbeat and cheerful, but sometimes she would curse in broken English and cry. Mom thought having her as a roommate was not a good influence on her children, but she didn’t dare tell Sona to move out.

This place needs some change, I thought. I opened the World History textbook, but couldn’t concentrate on ancient Greek stories that seemed so detached from my life. I turned the music off and lay upon the bed, trying to get back to sleep.

It was past midnight, and Mom’s phone rang. I knew it was Dad. She was louder than usual, her voice excited. When the call ended in ten minutes, she came out of her room to check if I was sleeping. I sat up and moved my legs for her to sit on my bed. She looked elated. It had been quite a while since I saw such radiance on her face.

“Next Thursday. One-thirty p.m. Northwest Airlines.” She accented every syllable in Korean. “Your father is coming.”

7. Doing the Unstuck

When the sixth period bell rang, I hastened my steps toward the main exit. Outside was already hustle and bustle with students and cars. I walked down the brick steps, and it didn't take long to find what I was looking for. Pastor Choi was standing by his car, and next to him was my dad waving at me.

He looked the same in his dark gray suit and white shirt without a tie. A long-time banker, he habitually wore suits. Contrary to my skinny and rather feminine figure, Dad was strong and robust, his hands and feet enormous, eyebrows thick, eyes sharp, shoulders broad. Well-built and six-foot-one-tall, he was considered a giant during his youth in Korea. My peers were already taller than their dads, but I still looked small when I stood next to him. Another noticeable physical trait was that he was fair skinned for an Asian, earning the nickname "White Man" amongst his friends. He didn't like being pale, so he tried tanning several times, but eventually gave up because nasty skin peeling repeatedly occurred before his skin returned to natural whiteness.

"You look great, son." He stroked my head. "So does your school. Wow, aren't you happy to study in this blessed environment?"

I gave him an awkward nod. Pastor Choi was looking at us with a warm smile. He grabbed his digital camera and took a photo of us.

"What a beautiful shot of a father and a son," Choi said, showing us the saved image. "I'll print it and give it to you next time."

I thanked him. Again, he did my family a big favor by picking up my dad from the airport. Although Pastor Choi and my dad had met for the first time today, it seemed that they

already became close. All of us got into Choi's Ford Explorer.

"How long are you staying here?" I asked Dad as I took the backseat.

"Just two weeks," he replied from the passenger seat. "I will resign from my bank soon, settle things in Korea, and come back here early next year, for good."

"Did you meet Mom yet?"

"We came straight to your school. Let's pick up Hyejin and Mom now, and then go to a nice restaurant together."

"It's only three p.m. Mom's boss couple never let her go before seven."

"I'll ask them nicely." Dad seemed unconcerned. "They'll give her a break if it's not a busy day."

I didn't know how much Dad knew about Mom's work situation. Mr. and Mrs. Bae weren't bad people, but I disliked them for being rude and arrogant. What upset me the most was Mom's submissive attitude. She believed we should be grateful for her job that paid our rent, but I knew the Bae couple were exploiting Mom, never paying overtime even when she worked past midnight on Fridays. Every time I visited her workplace, I wished I were old enough to get her out of there. On the way in the car, I shared these thoughts with my dad.

"Everything will be fine," Dad said. "I'm here now."

He had a way of saying that he could easily solve every problem. I wanted to trust his assurance. Mom's hard days would be over soon, thanks to Dad.

After arriving, we all went inside Cana Wedding Center. Mom and Dad were typical Korean parents who wouldn't hug, kiss, or say "I missed you" in public, but they surely seemed happy to see each other. Dad and the boss couple exchanged greetings. To my amazement, they were overly polite to my dad. When Dad asked for Mom's early leave, Mr. Bae smiled broadly and said, "Of course! It's the least I can do to help your family enjoy a wonderful reunion!"

After going on and on about must-visit restaurants in K-town, he even apologized to my dad, “I’m sorry. I want to give your wife a day off tomorrow, but Fridays are busy, because we must prepare for weddings that take place on Saturdays. How about if I give her next Monday and Tuesday off? You couple should take a vacation! Have you been to Las Vegas?”

Mr. Bae always had an employer’s condescending attitude toward Mom, but today, despite still being a bigmouth, he was respectful, almost ingratiating himself with my dad. An impartial bystander would have had a hard time distinguishing who was the owner and who was the employee’s husband.

“I’ve never seen Mr. Bae act that way,” I told Dad when we got into the car.

“People that fear the strong and bully the weak,” my dad briefly turned his head toward me and looked back forward. “I know how to deal with them.”

“*How* do you deal with them?” I asked, quite earnestly. I really wanted to know.

“There’s nothing enigmatic, son.” Dad let out a chuckle before explaining. “I heard enough about the Bae couple from Mom. I came on a plane, but why am I wearing a suit today? The suit does its job: straightening your posture and conveying a message that you’re serious about business. From the beginning, the suit gave me the upper hand; Mr. Bae was wearing a sweater and jeans. When I shook his hands, I gave only one hand⁹, making him sense that I was not an easy man. He offered a seat, but I kept standing. I made him look up to me, because I’m taller. I was smiling the whole time, but when he made a crude joke, I let him notice that I didn’t appreciate it. Over the course of short ten minutes, I maintained my manners, but I knew I had already won the psychological battle with Mr. Bae.”

“Whoa, that’s impressive.” Behind the wheel, Pastor Choi said what I was thinking.

“Sorry, I know the Bible teaches humility.” Dad said. “But sometimes *The Art of War*

⁹ It is customary in Korea for a younger man to use both hands when he shakes hands with an older man.

is useful to work around men.”

“The Bible also teaches Christians to be clever and dauntless,” Pastor Choi replied. “We all know that being nice is not always the best virtue. I should learn from you. I worry too much about whether I make others feel comfortable. That is not a good characteristic for leadership.”

I puffed up like a child when Pastor Choi spoke in admiration of my dad. However, my mom, sitting next to me in the backseat, was not ready to give her husband full credit.

“I’d like to see how helpful *The Art of War* would be if you had to work for them six days a week.”

“Haha, I know. It would be a different story if I got paid by them. I was just trying to tell my son to be smart and strategic when he confronts men with power. You gotta take every advantage you have, otherwise they will run all over you.”

“Look where taking every advantage has gotten you.”

This time Mom’s sarcasm sounded almost mean. I didn’t appreciate her disparaging Dad’s heroism in front of Pastor Choi. Somehow Dad’s magic of commanding the respect of people had little effect on his wife. While so kind to others, Mom was harsh with Dad. Strange power dynamics.

Upon picking up Hyejin from her after-school program, we went to Hanmi-gwan, a top-tier Korean restaurant. My parents insisted that Pastor Choi join us.

Looking at the price on the menu, Dad said, “Hmm, I don’t think we will come here often, so for today, order whatever you want. Hahaha.”

I sat with Pastor Choi, and my dad sat between Mom and Hyejin, and he was unable to control himself from showing affection for his daughter. He repeatedly hugged her and kissed her cheek, and Hyejin giggled loudly, complaining about tickling and stinging caused by Dad’s beard grown over the day.

“You should shave clean every time before you kiss your daughter,” Pastor Choi joked.

Korea had long been known for son preference, but that was declining in response to economic development. “Daughter equals happiness; son brings stress” was a new social buzzword, and there was a noticeable increase of parents preferring girls over boys and fathers being exceptionally fond of their daughter. My dad was one of them, but I was perplexed; Hyejin was far from cute or adorable.

Hyejin selected *galbi*, but she wanted *pajeon*¹⁰ as well. Dad said, “Sure, order more!”

Having been both annoyed and concerned with her weight, I thought it was a good time to address the issue. “Look at her, Dad. She’s obese. She’s been eating too much, mostly unhealthy food. She needs some discipline in her eating habits.”

“No worries, son.” Dad said, his voice optimistic. “You got that skinny build from Mom, but Hyejin inherited my physique. I was chubby during childhood, but when I hit the growth spurt during middle school, all my fat dramatically transformed into height. Her weight will only help her become taller.”

Regardless of whether this claim had any scientific basis, Hyejin wore a wickedly triumphant smile.

“She’s already tall for her age,” Mom intervened. “What if she grows over six-feet? That’d be intimidating for a girl.”

“Then she can be a supermodel,” Dad said.

I laughed. Even Pastor Choi let out a guffaw. No offense, but it was just hard to picture my obese sister as a supermodel.

“You will regret it when Hyejin becomes a famous model,” my dad made an exaggerated hand gesture. “Be nice to her, or she won’t let you taste any piece of her

¹⁰ A pan-fried dish made with scallions.

success.”

Before I could speak, he turned his head back to Hyejin and patted her. “Not that you’re not pretty right now. You’re fantastic just the way you are. Only the Lord knows how much I missed you in Korea. Every time I closed my eyes, you were all I dreamed of.”

He tried to kiss her on the cheek again, and Mom stopped him.

“Leave her alone. You’re bothering her.”

“What do you mean I’m bothering her?” Dad asked Mom in protest.

“She’s ten now. Not a child anymore. You’re treating her like she’s still your doll. Besides, you have to be careful in America with your display of affection. There are many crimes done by fathers against their daughters. People might look at you weird.”

“Come on, that’s absurd. It’s not like I’ve never been to America before. No one will think that way.” Dad’s assertion was followed by his mischievous gleam in his eye. He poked Mom in her arms and said, “You’re just jealous. Admit it.”

“Oh my God, you’re impossible.”

Watching them quibble, Pastor Choi and I were grinning. It had been just a few hours since Dad arrived, but things had definitely changed already. We were loud and constantly laughing.

Pastor Choi gave us a ride home after our early dinner. My parents asked him to have a cup of tea. Choi meant to stay briefly, but ended up engaging in religious and political conversations with my dad. I sat with them on the sofa, mainly listening, while Mom and Hyejin were sorting out the things unpacked from the two suitcases Dad brought.

“Appa¹¹, this is Dooly...” Hyejin said weakly, holding a stuffed animal. It was the main character from a famous Korean cartoon series *Dooly the Little Dinosaur*.

¹¹ Dad or daddy.

“Did I get the wrong one?”

“I asked you to get Ddochi.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Dad apologized quickly. “I didn’t remember that name. When I asked the toy shop guy, he said it had to be Dooly. He said Dooly was most popular and my daughter would be disappointed if I got something else.”

“No,” Hyejin pouted. “Everyone has Dooly. I wanted Ddochi.”

“I’m so sorry. I’ll get it for sure next time. Will you please forgive me?” Dad literally put his hands together and begged. It was funny to see a big man like him so helpless in front of his little daughter.

“I forgive you,” Hyejin said, trying to find satisfaction in Dooly for the time being.

Dad returned to the conversation with Pastor Choi. They were on the same page when they discussed Christianity’s contemporary problems and waning influence, but they clashed when it came to political topics, particularly Korea’s presidential election that would be held a month later. Unlike Choi rooting for the conservative candidate, Dad placed his hope on a politician named Roh Moo-hyun.

“Isn’t he too radical?” Pastor Choi questioned. “Not to denigrate his academic background, but he’s only a high school graduate. More alarmingly, he wants to make friends with North Korea and has even said, ‘So what if I’m anti-American?’ I don’t think a man with such a dangerous mind is fit to be president.”

“With all due respect, I’m afraid you have misconceptions about Roh, probably generated by the major conservative news media hellbent on criticizing him.” Dad spoke gently but persuasively. On political subjects, Dad was a preacher. To facilitate Choi’s—and my—understanding, Dad went through the brief bio of Roh Moo-hyun.

Raised in a poverty-stricken family, Roh was unable to go to college, but self-studied to pass the bar exam. He made good money as a lawyer, but his life changed in 1981 when he

defended college students who were brutally tortured under infamous Chun Doo-hwan's military dictatorship. After entering politics, Roh chose a tough path when he opposed his mentor, Kim Young-sam, who, despite being a long-time pro-democracy champion, joined hands with the inheritors of military dictatorship to seize power. As a politician Roh distanced himself from the conglomerates, major media, and prosecutors, and criticized them for working in cahoots to abuse their power and manipulate the public. Running for the National Assembly re-election, Roh had a good chance of winning in Jongno, the district known as Korea's political epicenter, but to set an example of overcoming regionalism, he went to the countryside and challenged the opponent party's turf. He was repeatedly defeated. This brought about unexpected consequences. He started gaining immense popularity, earning a nickname "Fool," which gloriously represented him as an upright man who kept losing rather than winning due to pursuing values over immediate gain. People pushed him further to a point of becoming the Democratic Party's presidential candidate.

"I used to be the worst pessimist about politics," Dad said. "The world is never fair, but the self-serving politicians keep ignoring people. Now I see hope. Roh has been fighting injustice all his life. I'm glad that there is finally a man who not only speaks for justice, but actually acts on it."

Ah, justice... I was hearing that familiar word again. Ever since my childhood, justice was like religion to my dad.

"That's not justice," he would solemnly mumble when he was watching the TV news that highlighted corporations taking advantage of poor laborers or politicians spreading lies. From John Wayne to James Bond, he loved movies that had good guys predictably beating bad guys. He said injustice usually prevails in the world, so he did not want the movies to remind him of reality. With his eyes glinting like a tragic warrior of old martial arts films, my dad would mutter, "A man should embrace it as an honor and privilege if he's given the

opportunity to defy injustice and defend justice.”

So, it was not a surprise to see him inspired by Roh Moo-hyun’s rise. Pastor Choi was not assertive with his political opinion. Attentive throughout my dad’s speech, Choi said that he was glad for this occasion to see Roh from a different angle.

It was all good. An informative and congenial chat in an amicable mood while Mom and Hyejin finished unpacking Dad’s things. That was until Dad dropped a bomb.

“So, after I met Roh...”

“You met Roh Moo-hyun in person?” Pastor Choi asked with a surprised look.

“Lots of people meet him,” Dad said in a casual tone. “My old high school friend is an aide in Roh’s team. I had the opportunity to participate in their meetings. Roh was such an inspirational man. I had been merely dreaming about this for a long time, but I came to a decision after meeting him. I can’t rot in the bank dealing with someone else’s money for the rest of my life. I will pursue a career in politics.”

Pastor Choi and I were lost for words.

My mom, who was walking between the kitchen and her room, stopped and asked in disbelief, “What did you say?”

“No, no. Honey, listen.” Dad was suddenly defensive. “My friend, you know him, Chan-gyo suggested that I join the camp and help Roh right now, but I thought it would be too sudden for all of us. After a long discussion, we reached an agreement. I will get a master’s degree in political science in America. By the time I’m done with my studies, it will be Roh’s third year as president. I will have a lot to offer. If he is not elected as president next month, that’s okay. There will still be numerous ways for me to contribute to realizing justice.”

“What are you talking about?” Mom’s tone of voice rose. “When you said you would quit your job, I thought you were going to live with us here.”

“Of course. During my studies.”

“I meant permanently! So, after you finish your degree, will we all go back to Korea to support your political career?”

“No, you guys can stay here. Or who knows? I might find a career here.”

Dad’s eloquence and coherence as a speaker mysteriously lost power when he spoke with his wife. Mom shook her head, visibly frustrated. “If you go to graduate school here, what about working? Who will pay for tuition? Rent? Children’s education? Politics... You’re kidding. You made that kind of decision without consulting me?”

“That’s why I am here. To discuss with you. I was looking for the right time.”

“You’re not discussing! You’ll do what you want no matter what we say!”

Mom’s outcry was followed by a moment of everyone’s silence. That was when Pastor Choi stood up.

“My goodness, I forgot I have to prepare for my Sunday sermon.” With an awkward smile, he put on his jacket. “Thank you so much for the fabulous dinner and tea.”

My parents escorted him out. I was worried that they would continue their unfinished quarrel, but when they returned, neither uttered a word about it. They both looked too tired to argue.

8. *Where the Birds Always Sing*

Mom and Dad chose to be happy for a few days. After Mom finished her wedding work on Saturday, we enjoyed a family time, thanks to Sona who drove us to Santa Monica Promenade. We ate delicious food and watched the sunset. On Sunday, we visited Mom's church where Dad was greeted by many people. When I came home from school on Monday, I learned that my parents did not go anywhere far. Mom slept in on her rare day off and they had lunch with their acquaintances in K-town. That evening, what had been left as the elephant in the room inevitably erupted. Loud and intense voices were heard from the bedroom.

Hyejin came out of the room and flopped down on the sofa. She looked upset.

"Don't worry," I said. "They just have different opinions. They will find a compromise. Politics is always a sensitive issue."

"They weren't talking about politics," Hyejin said. "Appa told Umma¹² he has cancer."

"Huh?" I knitted my brows. "What kind of sick joke is that?"

"I'm not kidding."

"Then why does Mom sound so angry if Dad is ill?"

"I don't know," Hyejin shrugged, her eyes sad. "You ask her."

A good thirty minutes later, Dad showed up. Looking uneasy, he made indecisive steps around the living room.

"I need some fresh air," Dad said and left the apartment.

¹² Mom or mommy.

I got up, walked to the bedroom, and slowly pushed the door open. There was Mom with a mixed expression of confusion, fragility, and anger. Above all, she seemed lonely.

“Dad has cancer?” I asked unhesitatingly. “Where? He looks so normal.”

“Colorectal cancer. He downplays it. He says he’s found it early enough. I don’t know... I can’t trust his words now.” Mom leaned herself weakly against her pillow on the bed. I sat on a desk chair and waited for her to say more. She took her deep breath and sat up straight.

“You’re old enough to know what’s going on,” she tried to speak calmly. “Seeking justice is a noble thing, but the head of household should not neglect his duty to care for his own family. Do you agree?”

I nodded.

“Your dad has been working for Jeil Bank, and that’s one of the major banks in Korea. It’s a stable job envied by many people and none of us is a big spender, but why do we always struggle financially? Your father is a competent man, well regarded with his work ethics, but why hasn’t he ever climbed higher than a managerial position? Something always happened, and so he kept moving from one branch to another, which caused you to attend seven different elementary schools. Do you wonder why? Remember that rookie assistant incident?”

Yes, I remembered. I was an elementary student back then. A recognized employee, Dad was in a good position to be promoted at the Jongno main branch located in downtown Seoul. However, things went awry when a new assistant bravely revealed that the chief banking officer made lewd sexual advances towards her. Making her case unfortunately wasn’t viable in the mid 90s in Korea. Her disclosure backfired, and she was forced to resign. Listening to her story coupled with her sick mother to look after, my dad couldn’t restrain himself, because this was *injustice*. He confronted the fifty-some-year-old chief banking

officer in broad daylight in his closed office room, but everyone could still hear from the outside. Things escalated and my dad ended up telling him, *Shame on you! Apologize to her and reinstate her! You're a disgrace to our bank and our nation!*

“When his fellow worker told me about this incident, I actually chuckled,” Mom said, grabbing her forehead with one hand. “Our nation? Did he really say, *our nation*? What kind of a staffer says such words to his superior?”

As the result of this bravado, Dad was demoted and relocated to a suburban Anyang branch away from Seoul. I also had to transfer schools abruptly in the middle of the year.

“That’s just one of many episodes... His single-minded view of justice has been hurting this family, and his unpredictability makes me nervous. And guess what? He has hit another one recently—this time a monumental feat.” There was sadness in her sarcastic voice. “Our new apartment¹³ is gone.”

I pricked up my ears. My parents were renting an old row house, but last year, they made a bold decision and invested a great sum of their savings in a new apartment complex under construction in Jamshil, a popular district close to Gangnam.

“Construction has been completed. It’s now move-in ready. But your dad sold it, and we’re not getting a penny.” Mom said faintly. Both disappointment and anger crossed her eyes.

What the heck happened?

Three years ago, Dad’s younger brother had opened a Samsung Electronics retail franchise in Songpa, also near Gangnam. Whenever I visited there, I felt proud that my uncle was the owner of such a big, grand-scale store. Sadly, the business did not do well. It actually went bust, prompting my uncle to hide from the moneylenders. Worse, he moved with his wife and daughter into my family’s home. I remembered the chaos of suddenly living with

¹³ Due to dense population, high-rise apartments are the most common form of housing in Korea.

them.

“Your uncle is officially in breach of economic laws, subject to prison time if he failed to pay back. And then here’s your dad,” Mom said. “He sold our new apartment and gave all the earnings to pay his little brother’s debts. Again, without consulting me.”

I was dumbfounded. I respected my dad and loved my uncle—he was a good man, a devout Christian—but this wasn’t right. The Jamshil apartment was supposed to be either our permanent home in Korea or an asset to be sold for us to settle in America.

“Fine, water under the bridge.” Mom sighed with resignation. “If it can stop his brother from going to jail, how can I object? What’s important is that we must move forward in a constructive direction. Let’s face our reality. We don’t have to live in luxury, but we shouldn’t be dependent on others for help, you know. We need to move, buy a car... The list goes on. With fifteen years of banking experience, your dad can get a job in one of the Korean banks in America. I’m sure he’ll get paid well. But our future is hazy, because he has decided to study. And he expects me to continuously work full time and support him!”

I sympathized with my mom’s frustration. Before putting forward his aspirations, my father was a man and a breadwinner. He must not forget his primary duty to ensure the financial stability of this family.

I said to Mom, “Did you discuss this with him? He’s a reasonable man. He wouldn’t just disregard your opinions.”

“He says there’s nothing to worry about,” she said. “He’ll get scholarships, work part time... He criticizes me for worrying too much. He says I’m a Christian so I should fully trust in God’s provision. Gosh, I hate when he does that. Using my faith as a tool to corner me.”

I agreed. That wasn’t nice of Dad. Mom let out a deep sigh and continued, “I know you admire him and think that your father is awesome and cool. Yeah, that is true. He’s an amazing guy when he’s on the outside, but inside this family, he’s irresponsible and selfish.

Isn't he contradicting himself when he says he values justice yet neglects his own family? We should be his top priority! And now he says he has cancer. I don't know what to do. I'm not supposed to argue with a sick person, so he'll just keep doing whatever he wants."

I had no idea how serious his illness was, but Mom had a point. What was he thinking? He shouldn't do this to us, especially after witnessing Mom's hard work and our struggle here. Talk about justice? This was not justice for us.

Convinced by Mom, I had a surge of adrenaline to fulfill my responsibility as the eldest son. I had to talk to my dad.

I confirmed that Dad hadn't been back home yet. I walked out, took the elevator down, and headed out of the building in search of him.

I didn't have to go far. My dad was right there, smoking at the street corner. Like a teenager caught in a misdeed, he looked at me and grinned sheepishly.

"Were you here the whole time?" I asked, walking closer.

"No, I took a walk around. A lot of beautiful houses." He pointed his cigarette toward Hancock Park before stubbing it out. "Your mom's gonna kill me if she finds that I still have cigarettes, not to mention smoking them. Have you ever tried?"

"No."

"Good. Don't even start it. It's like war." He hummed a tune in English. "Cigarette, huh yeah. What is it good for? Absolutely nothing."

Normally I would've laughed, but I had a dire subject to discuss.

"Dad," I opened my mouth. "I think you should cut Mom some slack. She's been through a lot here. Working six days a week while taking care of two children is no joke. You've met her boss couple. They're not easy people. Did Mom also tell you about the tough time she had with Auntie Kelly?"

"I know, I know." Dad nodded.

“I don’t think you know enough,” I said. I wanted to show him that I was mature enough to stand up for Mom. “Dad, how could you sell our new Jamshil apartment? We’ve never even once set foot there. No matter what happens here, we could’ve always had a place to go, but now it’s gone. How could you?”

“Because I can’t see my brother go to jail,” Dad said emphatically. “Wouldn’t you do that? If Hyejin were in big trouble, would you not help her?”

“But what about Mom? Us?”

“What about Mom? What about us?” Dad’s eyes were suddenly sharp.

“We are struggling...”

“What do you mean we are struggling?” Dad looked straight into my face. “Are we naked? Are we starving? Are we sleeping on the street?”

“No, but...” For a moment, I did not know what to say.

“Listen to me, son.” Dad’s voice was firm. “I love you and I love my family to death. But I am tired of hearing this gripe. In fact, I’m disgusted. I really am. I’ve been dealing with money all my life. Korea is sick. America is sick. The world is sick. Bigger house, better car, fancy dinners, money, money, money... That’s all everyone ever talks about. Whatever happened to following passion? The intangible values that are far more meaningful than mere possession?”

I saw where he was going, but I had to speak on behalf of my mom. “Passion is important, but so is reality. Look at all the other immigrant families. They sacrifice their passion and work hard to settle down...”

“Oh, you’re comparing.” He exhaled through his nose. “You live your own life, son. Comparing with someone who’s better off is an unwise thing to do. Heck, I can compare our situation to my childhood. I used to share a room with my five other siblings. Can you imagine that? But what’s the point of comparing? Every individual is placed in a different

situation. If you must compare, how about comparing yourself to the mighty kings who once ruled their country? They didn't have your bathtub that pours hot water anytime when you simply turn the switch. Even with a thousand servants, they couldn't get more information than you clicking on your computer. They were riding horses, and now we fly in the plane. We're living a life larger than King Alexander, Genghis Khan, or Napoleon."

He made me chuckle. He smiled as well. I found myself softening up.

"Your mom says it pains her to see you sleeping in the living room and that she can't afford to take you to the Lakers game or get a tutor for you to do well in school. But if you ask me, I'm not sorry, son. My priorities are different. I'm never sorry about not providing such things, but I would be deeply sorry if I fail to put the right values in your mind. The values that transcend money. The values that fulfill justice."

I felt something tickling my heart. My dad took a step closer.

"I won't promise to take you to the Lakers game or buy you a nice car. I'm not interested in that. But I promise I will help you develop the values that cannot be priced. A compassionate heart for the poor and the needy. The eyes that will not overlook the victim who has been wronged. The sense of justice so powerful to change the system so that the unjust men would receive punishment instead of controlling the weak."

Here my old hero was giving a speech once again, and I was inexplicably moved. Despite my intention to convey my mom's words and emphasize his role as a breadwinner, I was unable to say anything back to him.

"Many people thoughtlessly pursue money and spend a big chunk of time purchasing unnecessary things. Is that the lifestyle our family should aim for? Would you want your father to live a life for the right values or just work hard to get you a bedroom and take you to some fancy places?"

I knew which dad I would choose.

“When I share these ideas with your mom, she says I’m abnormal and I always go for a fight I won’t win. I take that as a compliment. It’s okay to fight and lose when there is a just cause. Somebody’s gotta keep trying. Yes, I do feel bad for my wife. I’m asking her to support me for two, three years. Not to sound like a jerk, but come on... I supported this family for the last sixteen years. You have my word that the next three years will be well worth it.”

“What’s your plan for politics?” I asked. “I mean, after you finish your studies, how will you work for justice? Are you gonna run for the National Assembly?”

“A million-dollar question, son.” Dad said, rubbing his chin. “I honestly have so many plans, but things shall materialize one at a time. I promise I will be frank with you and share my process with you. I do have a secret ambition. Between you and me, my goal is to be the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Korea before I turn fifty. It excites me when I entertain the idea of playing a role in diplomacy and international relations not only for my country, but also for mutual benefits all over the globe. Do you think it’s a pipe dream? Maybe. But that’s the beauty of politics. Ten years ago, who would’ve believed it if someone said Roh Moo-hyun would be running for president in 2002?”

I was sold. His beliefs felt so lofty compared to a banking job in Koreatown just to provide for family. No wonder our current inconveniences were considered trivial to him. Who cares about sleeping in the living room when you have a noble vision to pursue?

“But Dad...” I spoke with caution. “Just one thing... Is it true?”

“What’s true?”

“Your...” It took a moment to finish my question, “cancer...”

“Yes, it is.” He replied with a smile. “I didn’t even want to tell your mom, but I did because she has a right to know. I was diagnosed with stage-three colon cancer. *Early* stage three. I will receive treatment as soon as I return to Korea. Doctor says I have a sixty-percent

chance of conquering it. I would've been confident if they said *sixteen* percent, but *sixty*? Don't worry about it. When I come back here in February or March, I'll probably have it cured already."

I nodded affirmatively. Standing in front of our apartment at St. Andrews and Fourth Street, my dad looked taller and more dignified than ever. I reached a verdict. I felt bad for Mom, but if I had to take a side, I would follow Dad. He touched my heart and gave me an inspiration for my life. I did not want to be just another pawn in this system, striving for a stable job while comparing myself with people who had more material goods. That didn't seem cool. Predictable and typical. I wanted to be a man who makes a difference in this unfair world. I would join my dad's journey to fight for justice. If I couldn't, the least I could do was support someone who was determined to devote his life to doing that.

I felt certain that my dad was doing the right thing.

9. Maybe Someday

Under Mom's coercion, Dad had job interviews at a couple of Korean banks in K-town, but I knew he had no interest in working for them. When Mom was at work, Dad spent a great deal of time searching for grad school programs and working on his applications.

Near the end of November, my dad flew back to Korea. Life without him went on. After more than three months, my English had improved slightly, and I was making less ridiculous errors in school. I made friends with some English-speaking classmates although it was still impossible to join their peer groups. The friends I hung out with were, of course, ESL students.

Invisible in the classrooms, they were loud and animated at the O.K. Corral. Oftentimes they would arouse nostalgia, talking about their past life in Korea and various forms of Korean entertainment. I wasn't very talkative but felt comfortable with them. Ingenuous and unsophisticated, they radiated innocence. They were good kids.

The MF were usually busy playing basketball or flirting with girls, but they would sometimes show up and destroy our peace. It reminded me of old western movies where lawless villains on horseback intruded upon a quiet village and messed everything up in an instant. My ESL friends were helpless with no defense mechanisms. On one occasion, the MF randomly picked three and made them gulp tap water to see who could last longer. The scene of a student vomiting an immense amount of water made the MF giggle maniacally. Silently watching, I was angry, but more relieved that I wasn't the one forced to guzzle.

I wasn't picked on, perhaps thanks to the reputation I built after the incident with Marcus, but it didn't mean that I was completely off their radar. In the cafeteria Dragon once

told me to carry his backpack and follow him to the basketball court. I didn't pick it up. I left it and started walking.

"Where's my bag?" Dragon noticed me without it. "Didn't I tell you to bring it?"

"Oh, I forgot," I said with feigned nonchalance.

Dragon's MF minions scowled and looked like they would strike me. I wasn't ready for a fight, but I reactively clenched my fists hidden in the pockets of my jacket.

"Hey, Poopoo. You carry it, then." Surprisingly in an airy tone, Dragon turned and told Dong who was standing nearby. Dong picked up the bag and carried it on his shoulders.

I might have gotten away from trouble, but I felt sorry for Dong. A freshman in Beginning ESL, he was younger than me, but we had several things in common: skinny, new in America, from a humble family background. Unlike me, he had no interest in literature, was fairly optimistic, and demonstrated top-notch dancing skills. Any advanced moves, he could imitate. He was a likable kid, too talented to be humiliated by Dragon. Their master-servant relationship went beyond school as Dong was running all sorts of personal errands for Dragon.

When I had a chance to talk to Dong, I insinuated that he shouldn't let anyone walk all over him.

"I'm not living without a plan," he replied. "Everyone knows I'm not school material. I just need to graduate from high school in America. I'll go back to Korea and become a K-pop dancer. Dragon-hyung promised that he will hook me up with his dad. He's a tycoon in the entertainment industry."

"With your skills, I'm sure you can succeed without Dragon's help."

He laughed. "I'm nothing, Gunn-hyung. There are so many great dancers. I need more than just skills to stand out. One of my friends was recruited by Dragon-hyung's dad and is now a backup dancer for Lee Hyori."

I figured this must be important to him. I could do nothing else other than wish him the best of luck.

Another friend I made was Wonho, a sixteen-year-old sophomore like me, but he was in Advanced ESL, having been in America for more than a year. He provided a great deal of helpful information during my adjustment period. Wonho was a brainy student and had encyclopedic knowledge of a wide range of fields. I thought he could be a Jeopardy champion if his English were better. He especially excelled in math, and was already taking Calculus. He hadn't been severely bullied, because he occasionally did math homework and projects for Dragon.

It was Wonho who acquainted me with Dragon's background. Dragon's father was a CEO of the L.A. branch of a major Korean entertainment company and made insane money after it was listed on the stock market. Dragon's older brother was involved in a Korean gang, and that was how he got dragon tattoos. In middle school, Dragon once appeared in a local newspaper for being involved in a group brawl. Contrary to his notoriety, he had been systematically trained in classical piano since he was five...

"Classical piano and Dragon?" I laughed. The images just didn't match.

"Things have changed," Wonho said cynically. "Delinquents used to be from poor, dysfunctional families, but nowadays, these dudes have wealthy parents, are provided with ample resources and private tutors, and will go to good colleges... Yet they spend their spare time bullying others and joining gang activities for fun. You know what's the scariest thing? Guys like Dragon will eventually inherit a big company and then hire people like us. After surviving this ordeal, we may end up working for the dudes like him when we enter society."

This was some gloomy forecast.

"I don't get it," I said. "If he's so well-off, why does he torture these kids?"

"Because he *can*," Wonho said. "Power is a sweet thing, man. When you have it, you

will exercise it without even knowing. Some guys really enjoy the feeling of being dominant and having control over others. Watching people kowtowing to you becomes a natural routine, and you will feel weird if they start acting otherwise.”

I asked myself if I had that disposition. Probably not. I couldn't imagine myself feeling fine with people trying to please me out of fear.

“Dragon's already rich, so at least he doesn't extort money.” Wonho said. “When I was in Korea, I had this bully regularly taking money from students. God, it was awful. But Dragon does sometimes thoughtlessly tell kids to go buy snacks for him and never pays back. Five bucks mean a lot to poor students, but he neither cares nor understands.”

“It beats me why these kids just take it,” I said. “They're constantly harassed but never fight back. Pathetic. Are they just accepting it as their fate?”

“Don't say that,” Wonho suddenly lowered his voice. He wasn't smiling. “I think Dragon respects you in some way. There is something spiky about you. You walk with your head up high. You carry your backpack on one shoulder, never both. I get that; you're not a pushover. But don't judge others for not having your attitude. Many people naturally submit to power. They have never learned how to go out of their way to break the status quo and confront frightful challenges. Don't think of them as cowards or idiots.”

“Sorry,” I said. I had barely been able to protect myself, and it was wrong to disparage my friends when I could not do anything to help or defend them.

“Can't we ask the school authorities for help?” I asked.

“A kid tried that last year. But dealing with these non-English speakers has limitations. The school staff asked the victims' parents to speak up for themselves, but nobody showed up. Not even that kid's parents! After things waned, the kid had to face the MF's retaliation. He eventually moved.’

I sighed. “How about we take down the MF together? We're more than ten. They are

four.”

“You’re kidding, right? Even if we have forty, we won’t defeat them. To them we are like sheep.”

Wonho’s levelheaded assessments did little to alleviate my torment of witnessing the MF bullying innocent students. It was clearly an injustice my dad would not tolerate. When I strove to find a solution, I always came to the same conclusion. I had to be strong myself. I actively searched online and even joined a Korean website, “How to make yourself a fighter.”

Of course, I wasn’t expecting to become a martial arts master overnight, but I did find some valuable tips. One was to cultivate hammer-like fists. No matter how fast or skilled you are, you will not win a fight if your fist hasn’t been built to make powerful impacts. The instruction on the webpage was simple: punch hard objects as often as you can. Don’t hit them too hard at the beginning; your fingers might crack. Apply the moderate force you can handle and gradually increase the intensity. I developed a new habit of punching asphalt, concrete, and brick walls. To my amazement, my knuckles started to harden and form a shape like in images of professional fighters. And I found myself feeling less pain when I hit hard objects.

I wouldn’t wish to ever use them, but I would be ready when I’d have to. Someday.

10. *In Between Days*

While I was working up my strength, I fulfilled my new regular after-school duty. My dad was upset when he found out that Hyejin had been walking home by herself from school. I honestly thought that a big girl like her walking five blocks alone was no big deal, but I gave him my word. After I got out of school at three, I would take the bus, get off, pick her up from her Beyond the Bell after-school program, and walk her home safely every day.

I didn't like this job. I did not want anything to do with my sister. Yes, I was wrong, and I was a bad brother, but I couldn't help it. I wasn't able to pinpoint the exact reason for my apathy toward her, but I realized something when I ran into a classmate of mine, Luis, a popular dude in my Chemistry class. It turned out that he lived just a block from my place. One afternoon, we were walking home on the same route. I had been eager to have a close English-speaking friend, so I didn't want Hyejin to ruin this opportunity. When Luis asked me who the girl next to me was, I found myself reluctant to tell him that she was my sister.

I was embarrassed of her.

"When I am with any of my friends, follow me ten feet away, alright?" I told Hyejin.

The next time I ran across Luis, I chatted with him all the way home on Wilton Place. I looked back occasionally to make sure Hyejin was present. She was following me from behind, faithfully maintaining a ten-foot distance. When I stopped, she stopped. When I took a step, she took a step. She didn't complain. She scanned around the neighborhood as if she were a tourist enjoying the scenery.

A six-year gap was large. I could hardly communicate with her. Her disinterest in me seemed mutual, but she did look up to me, calling me *oppa* and seeking my advice

sometimes.

“People have trouble pronouncing my name,” Hyejin said. “I want an English name.”

“How about Rose?” I suggested.

She liked it and started using it, presuming that it was after the heroine from her favorite movie, *Titanic*. I was thinking of Barr and O’Donnell.

“Call me Rose. My name is Rose.” I heard her talking to her friend on the phone. She would walk around in our apartment, posing like Kate Winslet in love and humming the melody of that annoying Celine Dion song. Hyejin was a curious creature to me. Optimism is good, but I thought she was too carefree and laidback. Anyone late for their destination will instinctively rush their steps. Hyejin would keep walking slowly as if the world had to adjust to her, not the other way around. Sometimes I wondered if she was my real sister. I could not see any physical similarities between her and my family members, not to mention any trace of my parents’ mental toughness and work ethics.

At sixteen, I was shallow, infatuated with good looks and the notion of being “cool.” Hyejin had a pretty face but was obese. I was frustrated by my parents’ tolerance. Dad had different parenting styles with the two of us. His usual strict discipline vanished when it came to Hyejin, because he considered everything about her adorable. When I watched a Korean show, he would say, “Son, what do you get out of watching that? If you want entertainment, watch American shows. You should use every minute to improve your English.” When Hyejin was watching and mimicking some Korean comedians, he laughed and said his daughter was just too talented.

Dad’s method apparently worked. Hyejin would read and study to show him that she was learning things, which naturally drew more compliments from Dad. Although he never criticized her weight, she ate less. There was a certain virtuous circle for her when Dad was there.

But now Dad wasn't home, and Hyejin returned to her intemperate life. She would devour anything edible. She would watch TV all day, not moving an inch from the couch while leaving her school worksheets blank. When Mom and I expressed concerns, she muttered that she just wanted to go back to Korea. I did not want to condone this behavior, because it made my mom feel apologetic, hence unable to discipline her. Mom was clearly in line with me about the necessity to fix Hyejin's obesity, but she wouldn't take the initiative. She was just too busy and couldn't be tough on her own daughter. Someone had to do something. I played a villain.

"Staying in shape is like Dad wearing a suit," I told Hyejin. "It keeps your life diligent and balanced. It will make you feel competent and efficient."

Hyejin yawned. I was preaching to a wall. I turned to a different strategy.

"Dad put me in charge, okay? When he's not here, you are under my supervision. You must respect me. Listen to me like you would listen to Dad. First and foremost, I can't let you keep eating without restrictions."

"But Appa said I'm okay." Hyejin protested. "He said I will be skinny when I hit the growth spurt."

"He's trying to cheer you up, because you're only ten. He'll be strict with you when you become a teenager. You'll regret it when you're older. Just do as I say, alright?"

"You're jealous," Hyejin said. "Appa loves me so much, so you're jealous."

I laughed. This girl had no idea. Dad treated her like a doll, but I was the one with whom he shared his intimate visions and important family matters. Hyejin as a child would never understand.

I convinced myself it was imperative that she reduce her meal portions in order to lose weight. I was no expert on dieting, but I implemented my groundless plans. I showed her some clips of the movie *Seven* to frighten her with the consequences of gluttony. Based on

some internet data, I warned her that she could get sick from childhood diabetes. I tried to make her feel guilty by saying that her eating habit was pressuring Mom to work harder to provide more food.

None of these worked.

I tried sincerely imploring her to refrain from binge eating. She reluctantly nodded. Later, she would be caught, having finished a whole carton of ice cream.

“Obviously, you don’t respect me as your oppa,” I said, irked. “If you had even a modicum of respect for me, you would not ignore my words.”

Without response, she began chewing on her T-shirt that had Tom chasing after Jerry.

I devised cruel methods. I thought I had a legitimate motive to insult her. Maybe that would make her come to her senses. Instead of Hyejin or Rose, I called her *dweji*, a Korean word for “pig.” One Friday night, we were having fried rice leftovers for dinner without Mom who was working at the shop, and I improvised a song and sang a tune: “You look like dweji. You eat like dweji. You smell like dweji. Keep choosing food. Deny family. There will be no one around the stinking dweji.”

Hyejin’s tears began to fall, but she would not let go of her spoon. She continued to eat until her plate was completely empty. It wasn’t an act of rebellion. She really wanted to finish her food.

“I’m ashamed that you’re my sister,” I said. “Look at you. You’re lazy. You don’t study. You don’t listen to your oppa or umma. All you do is eat. You’re gonna turn into a real dweji.”

She gulped back her tears. I didn’t regret what I said. I doubted that she had a capacity for real emotions. If she did, my offense would trigger her to make some sort of determination to start losing weight.

All of a sudden, she stood up. And she shouted in English: “You’re a bully. You’re

bullying me!”

I was taken aback. “Bully” was a word I wouldn’t take lightly.

“Be quiet, alright? You have no idea what a bully is,” I rebuked her.

“You’re a bully!” she yelled again.

I was at a loss for words. Did her unexpected resistance make me realize my mistreatment of her? Was I sorry and moved to fix my behavior? No. On the contrary, I was indignant. How dare she call me a bully? Dragon was a bully, torturing innocent students for no reason. I was her brother. I was doing this for her, because I cared about her.

Wait... Did I really care about her?

I probably didn’t. I probably cared more about not having a fat sister.

Whatever. I give up. Fine, be that way. Eat all you want, get fat, be lazy, do nothing productive. I no longer give a damn.

I had plenty of other problems to worry about.

11. Close to Me

Many mornings I prayed for a big storm or flood so I could skip school, but the weather in Los Angeles was ever so beautiful. No natural disaster severe enough to close school would occur. But good news! The first semester was finally over, and I was intact.

Before the winter break began, I had a peculiar moment. Away from my ESL friends chatting on the opposite side of the O.K. Corral, I was sitting alone on a bench to go over my World History exam. Suddenly Dragon appeared with a girl and sat next to me. After they discussed something for five minutes, the girl left, and it was only Dragon and me on the bench. I felt awkward, but I thought it would be unnatural if I stood up and left. While pretending to keep reviewing my exam, I felt Dragon's gaze.

"Winter vacation plans?" he asked. "Going anywhere?"

I turned to him and replied, "Umm... probably nowhere."

There was a moment of silence. Dragon spat on the ground. "I like your name," he said. "Gunn. That's pretty cool."

I forced a smile. Dragon turned his eyes and stared straight ahead.

"Look over there, those fobs." Dragon said, his chin pointing at my ESL friends. "None of them will be featured on the extra pages of the school yearbook. No one will notice if any of them disappears. They will forever live as losers, relying on financial aid and welfare. Y'know what? Losers have loser genes running in their blood. Passed through their grandparents and parents, and their children will inherit them. I don't understand why they even came to America. Losers like them give Korea a bad name. Disgraceful."

Before I could speak, he spat on the ground again and continued without looking at

me. “Why do you hang around with them, Gunn? You don’t belong there. You have nothing to gain from those losers.”

I was puzzled by Dragon’s question. Why did I hang out with them? Because they were all I got. I didn’t want to eat lunch alone. I had nowhere else to go.

“Think for yourself, Gunn. If you mix with losers, you become a loser.”

Dragon got up and walked away to where his MF friends were.

What was that about? I was perplexed. What the heck was Dragon implying? He spoke to me like a dear buddy, but I didn’t know whether I should be offended by the way he demeaned my friends or feel flattered that he sounded like I was special.

Confused, but I decided not to dwell on it. I had to relish the status of being out of school, albeit only for three weeks.

A few days after the winter break started, there was big news from Korea. Roh Moo-hyun was elected president in a dramatic fashion, his margin of victory merely two percent against the opposing candidate. Largely conservative, people in Koreatown had a hard time accepting him as Korea’s new commander-in-chief. I saw some seniors bemoaning the news and saying that their dear homeland would soon perish. When I spoke to my dad on the phone, he sounded so thrilled that I didn’t have a chance to ask him about his health. He said a new world would begin. Roh would fight the deep-rooted corrupt power groups, provide better opportunities to the underprivileged, and make justice prevail.

“And I could play a role in it.” He said, reminding me of his personal connection with Roh’s triumphant election team. I had a feeling that he was already more involved in politics than he’d told his family.

Kudos to Dad and Korea, but my mom’s life here was not getting better. In fact, a recent incident had taken a toll on her. Some insolent strangers burst into her workplace one day and asked her to pay off Auntie Kelly’s debt. According to them, Kelly told them that she

and my mom had agreed already, so all they needed to do was visit the wedding shop and my mom would give them money. Shocked, Mom said she had no money, but they made a commotion and wouldn't leave. Embarrassed and feeling responsible for the business, Mom wrote them a check for two thousand dollars. The money she had planned for a car down payment was gone just like that.

"It's my fault. What was I thinking?" Mom said to me. "I talked to Kelly on the phone a week ago. She asked if her brother-in-law brought any money from Korea, and I carelessly told her three grand was all he brought. I had no idea she would have designs on it."

Perhaps it was good that Mom had little time to let this keep affecting her. She got awfully busy with several weddings scheduled for the end of the year.

Cana Wedding Center provided professional services for all of the wedding procedures including budgeting, venue selection, wedding dress rental, invitation card design, catering, and so on. While outsourcing other specialists such as photographers and video artists, the Baes hired my mom as an in-house florist. However, she soon became a full-time multitasker involved in all aspects of the wedding business. This was a considerable switch from her life in Korea where she used to occasionally freelance as a licensed florist.

The Baes were previously engaged in gardening services. They worked hard and bought a house in Alhambra. Having earned money, they craved an elegant career. An opportunity came when their church acquaintance decided to sell her wedding shop. The Baes decisively quit their business and invested in the shop, but they faced trouble: the wedding business required more than hard work. When new couples visited the wedding shop, they expected class, sophistication, and aesthetic sense, but those weren't elements the Baes could quickly cultivate. Even I had a hard time matching the Baes' image with refined wedding ceremonies. The Baes looked and behaved like typical manual laborers—heavily tanned, loud-mouthed, and tastelessly dressed.

After running the shop for a year, the Baes were losing money but still didn't grasp what was pushing their customers away. That was when my mom was hired. Her English deficiency was not a significant issue, because most of the customers were Korean. With her cultured and amiable character, she supplemented what the Baes lacked and gradually became indispensable for the business. This was a double-edged sword. The Baes valued my mom but were offended when customers wanted to speak only with her. Some customers even thought my mom was the owner and treated Mrs. Bae as an employee. The Bae couple's sense of insecurity increased. They sensitively reacted when their lack of culture was revealed and openly depreciated my mom to make sure everyone knew that *they* were the owners.

During the winter break I helped Mom on Fridays and Saturdays. To keep their viridity, flowers had to be arranged a night before the wedding. Having no knowledge of flowers, I did other chores such as cleaning, carrying heavy stuff, and decorating at the wedding venues. I was happy to provide my assistance, but I did not appreciate Mr. Bae's company.

"Congratulations on completing your first semester in America!" Mr. Bae's broad smile displayed his yellowed teeth. "Did you get all A's?"

"Ah... no."

"What's wrong with you? You're not Korean? Every Korean student gets straight A's!"

He was getting on my nerves. I didn't like him any more than Dragon.

"Cheer up! First year is hard, especially because of English. We struggled too when we first came here. But look at us now. We never get nervous when we face Americans."

From such confidence, I presumed that the Baes spoke flawless English. That was before I witnessed their real English competency when a white American woman visited the shop to try on a wedding dress. Mrs. Bae laughed theatrically and said, "Oh, dis is bery sex style po you."

I figured she meant to say, “you look very ‘sexy’ in this dress.” She gave a thumbs up and repeated to her customer, “Your body bery pretty, so dis dress perfect, because it is bery sex style.” Neither my mom nor I spoke good English, but this was not a matter of language ability. We were genuinely concerned how the Bae couple could manage this business. Personally, I found a contrast between Pastor Choi and Mr. Bae quite amazing. Choi was consistently modest saying that he had a lot to learn despite his decent English skills, but Bae was absurdly intrepid with his awful English.

It was the last night of the year, but Cana Wedding Center was busy, thanks to a wedding scheduled the next day. My sister and I stayed at the shop for Mom, but frankly we weren’t very helpful. Most of the wedding preparations were completed around nine p.m. except flower arrangement, which meant Mom’s work was far from over.

“Those dimwits think it’s cool to get married on January first,” Mr. Bae said loudly, “but they have no idea there are people working so hard for them on New Year’s Eve!”

I tried not to frown. I wanted to ask him why he didn’t just tell the client that this shop would be closed for the holidays.

While Mrs. Bae was assisting my mom, arranging flowers in the centerpieces, I didn’t know what Mr. Bae was doing. He just blathered constantly.

At nine-thirty, the Baes’ well-dressed children appeared. The elder son, home from college, and his seventeen-year-old sister giggled and talked in their comfortable English.

“Let’s go, Mom and Dad! We’re gonna be late!” The sister yelled. Vivacious and talkative, she reminded me of the English-speaking Korean students I watched from the top of the bleachers. I learned that the whole Bae family was scheduled to head to a New Year’s Eve party together.

“Damnit, I really don’t want to go, but the host literally begged me to bring our family.” This was Mr. Bae’s way of apologizing to my mom for leaving the rest of unfinished work to

her. He turned to me. "I'm relieved a good son like you is here for her! Make sure you help your mother, okay?"

I smiled crookedly.

"We gotta hurry," the sister pressed her family. "Monsta Q's gonna perform as a guest. I'll never forgive myself if I miss it!"

"Stop acting like such a groupie." The brother teased her.

"Shut up. You're the one who has a Jessica Alba poster on the wall."

I didn't know what kind of party the Baes were going to attend, but all of them seemed excited. As soon as they left, I locked the door and grumbled at my mom, "So selfish. How could the Bae couple just leave when there's still so much work?"

"I am thankful they left," Mom said. "It's much easier without them."

The original deal was that Mrs. Bae would learn from my mom how to arrange flowers by working together, but Mrs. Bae hadn't improved much. Her lack of skills and Mr. Bae's prattle had only been distracting my mom.

Contrary to my assumption, flower arrangement was not sedentary work; Mom was on her feet, cutting, removing, mixing, and arranging flowers. In addition to her leg fatigue, she suffered from pain around her knuckles and swollen hands. It was past midnight when she was done. Mainly in ivory and light pink colors, orchids, hydrangeas, and roses were organized around the twelve sets of centerpieces, white dendrobium spread on the bottom. Flowers were also arranged on arches, baskets, and candlesticks, while bouquets and corsages were prepared separately. The centerpieces stood magnificently, waiting to be displayed. People would say they are beautiful.

I detested flowers. The more splendid they looked, the more they reminded me of my mom's cracked and battered hands.

Meanwhile, my bored little sister outlined the word "ROSE" on the blank side of a

calendar sheet and had been filling it with tinier spellings of “Rose.” She must really like her English name. I started calling her Rose as well.

When we were cleaning up, Rose shouted, “We didn’t do a countdown!”

“Big deal,” I retorted pointedly, so that Mom would not have to apologize.

“Sorry.” My mom apologized anyway.

She called K-town cab services, but to our dismay, all of them said we would have to wait an hour or two, given the backlog of orders on this special night. We were stuck inside the shop. It was cold and desolate.

“Let’s walk home, Mom.” I suggested. “We can’t just wait here.”

“Walking at this hour? Too dangerous.”

“Not tonight. There are people celebrating on the streets. And you have me.”

We decided to walk about ten blocks from Hobart and Eighth Street. I led the way like a knight to assure Mom that she had nothing to fear, but walking through the city after midnight was indeed a little scary. There was actually a moment where a homeless man accosted us. Stoned, he talked gibberish and made an obscene gesture as we walked past him.

Rose hooked her arm into Mom’s. It got better after we reached Western Avenue, because there were people here and there. We chatted on the way, mostly about Dad.

“Mom, he’ll come back healthy. He will get into a good grad school, and then become a successful politician. Don’t worry too much. Everything will be fine.” I told my mother.

“You sound like your dad now,” Mom smiled. “Sorry, it’s kind of hard to be optimistic. I’ve spent half of my life so far with your father. My first half was quiet, not so much drama or winding roads, but my second half has been turbulent. All I want is just some normalcy, you know...”

Unlike my dad’s poor family background, my mom grew up in a middle-class family and went to Ewha Womans University, one of the most prestigious universities in Korea. She

didn't graduate, though. My dad knocked her up in her third year. Due to the strict policy of the women-only school, she was asked to leave. My mom once joked that her decision to have me had complicated all her original life plans. I couldn't laugh.

"As soon as I entered university, my mother put me in a flower design school, hoping for her daughter to lead an elegant life. I earned a license and even held an exhibition. I never knew I would be a full-time florist working on weddings. It's okay. I don't want to blame anything, because coming to America was my choice. But losing our new apartment in Korea is a different story. We've only been renting since I got married. I guess I was too excited by the idea of finally owning a home. That's why I was devastated when I heard that your dad sold it. I know I should get over it, but it's tough."

"Mom, you didn't want to give money to Kelly's lenders, but you did, because she's your sister. Dad did the same for his brother. As I see it, you guys are not much different. Both of you looked after your little sibling. That's noble."

Mom chuckled, "God, I hate to hear that. I've been criticizing your dad, but you're saying I'm no different."

It was one a.m. Outside of some clubs and bars, there was a crowd, mostly people in their twenties. Drunk, boisterous, and elated, they clamored to celebrate the first hours of the new year.

"I'm sorry," my mom said after we passed through the crowd. "I know how much you like the Lakers, but I haven't kept my promise to take you to the real games."

"Why do you keep saying that, Mom? I'm really okay."

"Just as your dad can't stop chasing his dream, I can't stop chasing *my* dream. It is to provide you with things you love." Mom turned to Rose. "And I will take you to Disneyland and Universal Studios."

"You'll do that," I said. "For now, please make sure that you get your hands treated. I'm

really worried when I look at them.”

“They’re fine,” Mom said, thrusting her hand in her jacket pocket.

We arrived at our apartment building at last. Except for the homeless guy, our trip home in the middle of the night was safe. Before entering our apartment, my sister took out a thick-stemmed pink rose from the inside of her jacket and lifted it up. She must have kept a piece from the shop.

“Rose is holding a rose,” she said in English. “Get it?”

It sounded corny, but Mom started laughing. I chuckled along with them. Under the streetlamp, the three of us looked happy.

Rose looked up at Mom and me, and said, “Happy New Year!”

Mom responded in her rare English, “Happy New Year!”

disc two

Pictures of You

1. The Caterpillar

Unlike my first semester, I did not get my hopes up for my second semester. The world would not get better. Forget about achieving anything. Survival was my motto.

However, a miracle happened after a couple of weeks. A dazzling light shone on my puny life.

Her name was Jeanie. She caught my attention when she stood up from her seat in the cafeteria during lunch hour and said to Dragon, “Fuck off, you piece of shit.”

Dragon at JD High was like Bugsy in Hollywood. No one messed with him. I hated him because he was a bully, but I admittedly admired him for being such a prominent, influential Korean dude.

I had no idea what exactly caused the commotion. My best guess was that Dragon pissed Jeanie off by making some indecent remarks. Anyhow, there Jeanie was, looking straight into Dragon’s eyes, cursing at him in the crowded cafeteria. Dragon could not control his face from the embarrassment he rarely felt.

He laughed awkwardly and said in Korean, “Hey, it’s a misunderstanding.”

“What the fuck are you speaking in Korean to me for? Speak English, dickhead.”

All eyes were on them. A security guard stood nearby, and he, too, seemed frozen by this girl’s charisma. Conscious of people’s gaze, Dragon retreated.

“Don’t ever come near me like you know me. I’ll fucking kill you.” Jeanie spat at him.

“Shit, don’t worry. That won’t happen.” Dragon managed to say and walked away.

Jeanie resumed lunch with her friends. Everybody returned to their lives. Not me. I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

Jeanie was an English-speaking Korean girl with big eyes and long straight hair, almost always dressed in dark clothes. I had been aware of her existence before, but this was the first time I'd seen her up close. I kept staring at her, but when she turned and our eyes met, I quickly looked away.

Although she made a strong impression on me, I did not expect anything more than a slight crush. Wonho had told me that Jeanie was a junior taking AP English. I was a sophomore (despite the same age) in the ESL program. Not to underrate myself, but a match like *Notting Hill* doesn't happen in real life.

Or maybe it does. Strange, but it was Jeanie who spoke to me first.

Surrounded by my ESL friends, I was sitting on a bench with my head down, flipping through the pages of an assigned book.

"What are you reading?" I heard a heavenly voice fall over my head. I looked up and it was Jeanie! She was speaking Korean, and more surprisingly, her Korean sounded fluent. I'd assumed she couldn't, because she'd told Dragon not to speak to her in Korean.

I soon learned that she came to the O.K. Corral to ask Wonho about an assignment from their Calculus class. Already knowing the guys here were Korean speakers, she initiated a conversation with me in Korean. I felt embarrassed about being an ESL student. I also wanted to hide the book I was reading. It was called *Sunder*.

"Oh, I read that in elementary school," Jeanie said.

I blushed. I was working on a book she'd read when she was a child. I wanted to tell her they gave easier material at the beginning of the semester. On the syllabus, the class would cover *The Old Man and the Sea* in March.

"Let me know when you finish it. Just don't cry at the end. I can't stand boys that cry." She tittered and left to speak with Wonho. When she turned away, her long hair touched my left cheek and electrified my face.

That night I couldn't sleep. I got busy with my hand until my briefs got wet. I asked God for forgiveness and cursed myself for violating the goddess in my imagination.

As I returned to my senses, I went to work. I hammered away at my dictionary and finished *Sounder*. Completing a lower-grade book was nothing to be proud of, but it was an accomplishment for me. Although a minute or so was all I had with Jeanie, I felt we had established enough of a relationship to say hi to each other if we met again. Over the next week, I noticed her everywhere. She alone stood out to me while everything else—buildings, cars, humans—seemed blurry.

I aimed for the perfect time to talk to her, preferably with no one else around, but she was never alone. Finally, an unexpected opportunity came. I was heading to the restroom between classes, and when I went around the corner of the main building, there she was, walking towards me, chatting with her gal friends. As we caught each other's eyes, she stopped walking. We stood a few feet apart. I had prepared fancy lines, but my mind went blank.

"I... I've finished the book," I said in English.

Jeanie rolled her eyes as if she were asking *Who are you?*

I felt sweat on my back, thinking that I was just interrupting her. I ended up saying, "And of course, I did not cry."

Her lips formed a slight grin, but there was still no reply. She passed me by, resumed chatting with her friends, and walked away. I silently gazed after her dark, authoritative appearance—purple shirt, black jeans, long black hair.

What an idiot. I muttered after she disappeared. What did I do? I made a complete fool of myself.

I did not fantasize about her when I masturbated that night. Giving up on her was not difficult. The thought of her made me feel small. My crush was undeniable, but I knew I

shouldn't lose my dignity.

A few days later, I was at the O.K. Corral with my friends, and I saw Jeanie coming towards us. Although I told myself that beauty had nothing to do with my life, my heart still pounded, but less madly than before. She stopped in front of me. I put down my juice box and got up.

"I think Wonho's at the library."

"No, I'm here to see you," Jeanie said, this time in English.

Huh?

She took out a book from her bag. "I wanted to give this as a reward for doing your last homework. It's one of my favorites. Read it and let me know when you're done with it."

It was a paperback. Worn and beat-up.

"Are you lending me this?" I asked in Korean.

"You can have it," she replied in English. "My gift."

It was called *The Exorcist* by William Peter Blatty. It had a ghastly apparition on the front cover.

"Oh, make sure you watch the movie too. It's a masterpiece."

After Jeanie left, I held the book firmly and looked at my friends with a swagger as if I was about to announce my wedding.

"That's some scary shit," Su-tae, my ESL classmate, said in Korean. "Why did she come all the way here to give you a book?"

I didn't know how to answer that.

As soon as I got home, I touched and smelled the book, trying to retrace her fingers going through each page. Old and battered, the book probably had a lot of bacteria. Didn't matter. Call me a sicko, but I would kiss every page she'd touched.

I started reading from the first page. Alas, it was in a different league. I quickly fell

into despair. Even with the dictionary, this was not a book for a sixteen-year-old ESL student who came to America six months ago.

I grew frustrated. I wanted to provide Jeanie with an intelligent book review, but barely reading through the first pages was a daunting task.

Wrung. Sift. Stratum. Entrail. Bead. Pendant. Glyptics. Phalli. Ground-stone. Mortar. Stained. Burnished. Assyrian. Brittle. Remnant. Upward-groping. Licorice. Tamarisk. Poppied. Reeded. Rock-strewn. Headlong. Furnace...

Just from the first fifteen lines of the book, these were words that I encountered for the first time in my life.

I decided to watch the movie at least. My mom and sister would be flabbergasted if I let a gruesome horror film run on TV, so I wore my headphone and played it on my laptop after they went to bed. The movie was intense, but I had no luxury to enjoy it or feel scared. I had to gather sufficient information, so I could talk to Jeanie. I saw the movie twice, imagining what she thought, felt, appreciated at each scene. Would she have been intrigued when the girl started acting oddly? Would she have felt sorry for the girl when she had "HELP ME" spelled out on her belly? Would Jeanie have laughed when the girl's head spun around in 360 degrees?

After about a week, Jeanie and I finally had some time alone. Technically, we weren't alone; there were many people in the cafeteria, but she and I talked to each other, face to face. I explained how much I liked the movie. And I confessed that I hadn't read the whole book yet. It was too hard, and I needed more time. I promised her I would finish it sooner than later.

Jeanie seemed impressed. She actually reached out and touched my arm for a second, which made me lose my breath. The way she smiled, I thought she wanted to give a pat on my head and say, "Good boy."

“Sorry I gave you too much homework,” she said. “Oh, how about this one?” She pulled another book out of her backpack. “This is the script of *Pulp Fiction*. Should be easier for you because they’re all dialogues. I think you’ll enjoy it.”

I received the book that had the cover of a badass-looking lady with a cigarette in her hand. I asked Jeanie, “Is this a gift, too?”

She laughed and said, “Actually, that’s for my elective film class. But what the hell. You’re an excellent student, so I’ll just give it to you. I’ll buy another one.”

Jeanie was the first person in America to say that I was an excellent student.

2. *Mint Car*

That was how it started. Jeanie and I officially became close friends. She was a busy student, so we usually met after school. It became my ritual to walk her home unless she had other business. She lived in a house in Hancock Park, a ten-minute walk from school. It created a detour from the bus station, so I had to walk thirty extra minutes afterwards to get to my apartment in Koreatown, but of course, I did not care. I abandoned my afterschool duty of picking up Rose. All day at school, I eagerly awaited my ten-minute walk with Jeanie.

On my lucky days, she didn't go straight home. We would chat at a coffee shop, her neighborhood park, or our school. I invited her to the top seat of the softball stadium bleachers. This was the spot where I used to hide my lonely self during my first month at JD. Now I wanted everyone to notice me, sitting next to Jeanie. I felt like I was on top of the world.

Born in America, but Jeanie's Korean was good, thanks to her mother who spoke only Korean at home and had her receive systematic Korean language education from a private tutor. Unlike Jeanie's dad who grew up here, her mother had come to America as an international student.

I usually spoke to Jeanie in Korean to better express myself. I wanted to let her know that I was better than what my reality as an ESL student showed. "In Korea, I had the reputation of being a bookworm, capable of finishing a full-length novel in one sitting. I read *Faust* and *Hamlet* before entering middle school. The shift to the English-speaking setting has been tough. I'm sick of looking up words in the dictionary. Even then, I sometimes still have trouble understanding the texts."

Jeanie listened silently to my venting in Korean.

“The stress with English is so big that I have nightmares.” I was opening up. “Some might say, ‘why don’t you go back to your country if learning English frustrates you that much,’ but they have no idea. In Korea, English has become a monster that eats away your soul. Little kids are pressured to learn English even before they master their native language. College students must study with textbooks written in English. White-collar workers’ promotion depends on their English proficiency. Everyone with ambition for social success lives under the stress of being born as a non-native English speaker. You know what’s funny? When Americans visit Korea, they don’t hesitate to ask locals for directions in English. Koreans don’t question why Americans don’t try to speak Korean in Korea. Instead, the locals are extremely apologetic, like they are unworthy sinners, for being unable to respond well in English. This is just a small sample of what kind of power English has as a language.”

I had never talked this much to anyone other than my family since I came to America. I went on grumbling, “Immigrants with a doctoral degree become drycleaners here while American high school graduates get paid well in Korea just for being native speakers. All because of English! I’m envious of English-speaking Koreans like you. If I could choose, I would prefer to be born here to speak only English. My native tongue is useless.”

“Hey, don’t fucking say that.” Jeanie wrinkled her forehead. I knew she cursed habitually, but I was still startled. She fired off in English, “Yes, English is important and all, but it’s one of many languages, and it just happens to be used a lot in our time. Its power? Ah, fuck that. You’re perfect in Korean, and that’s awesome. Don’t belittle what you have, man. Be proud of your mother tongue. Never, ever say it’s useless.”

“Sorry,” I said. I got carried away. I liked her so much, and I couldn’t afford to lose a friend like her. However, I still didn’t think she understood what it meant to be a desperate English learner. “I was hopeful when I first came here. My plan was to improve in English,

go to a good university, and major in literature. The first semester quickly made me face reality. How would I possibly study literature in English? It takes days for me to finish *Jack and the Beanstalk!*”

“You’re doing that again,” Jeanie said. “Don’t underestimate your potential. If literature is your passion, go for it no matter what. Okay, I get that English is your obstacle. Then study as hard as you can. Read, write, speak, listen all day, and even think in English. Give everything you have and get better.”

“Please don’t think I’m whining,” I said. “I don’t mind working hard, but you gotta understand. My family can’t afford a tutor. I’m actually looking for a part-time job to help my mom. I speak Korean at home and hang around with Korean-speaking students at school. Giving my everything won’t be enough.”

“I’ll help you.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll fucking help you,” she reiterated, her voice firm. “Dude, I’m in AP English. I’ll read your essays and help you improve your writing. I’ll share my readings and let you know what’s crucial to prepare for college. And from now on, let’s speak only in English. No Korean between us whatsoever until you become fluent in English. How’s that?”

I looked at her in awe, feeling my heart swell.

She added, “Just stop babbling that you gave up your passion, it’s realistically impossible, or some shit like that, alright?”

Mesmerized, I could hardly believe what was happening.

From that day on, we conversed strictly in English. Challenging, but it was the opportunity I’d craved all year. Talking to her on the phone was especially effective, because I couldn’t use body language. I felt myself getting better. Some nights, I even dreamed in English.

We would talk endlessly about movies and books. Everything she liked, so did I. To keep up with her knowledge of Tarantino, I watched all the Tarantino-involved movies over a week. To keep up with her liking of horror movies, I watched the must-see scary films from classic to recent. She also recommended notable crime and mystery books, so I checked them out one at a time at the public library.

Listening to music was my favorite time with her. Many Korean girls loved K-pop, but Jeanie expressed an intense distaste for sweet teen-oriented songs, calling them, “nauseous, loathsome garbage.” She was into bygone rock-and-roll music. While lamenting that rock was dead, she excitedly explained the great rock bands and burned two CDs for me—collected songs of her favorites.

Guns N’ Roses, Metallica, Nirvana, Pearl Jam, R.E.M., Nine Inch Nails, Pink Floyd, Radiohead, Dead Kennedys, RATM, Smashing Pumpkins...

I listened to them over and over. I studied their lyrics to decipher what they meant to Jeanie. I investigated their background stories to converse with Jeanie. I analyzed specific sound and instrument arrangements to impress Jeanie.

No band had a greater impact on her than The Cure. According to her, it was the greatest rock band and *Disintegration* was the greatest album of all time.

Jeanie said, “No matter how much you love the music, you will eventually get sick of it if you listen to it too much. It’s unavoidable human nature. I was eleven when I first came across *Disintegration*, and I resolved not to commit the crime of ever getting tired of it. So, I only listened to it once every season, namely four times a year. Past five years, I have listened to the whole album only about twenty times.”

I had the honor of joining her next ritual. Sitting on the top of the bleachers with our arms touching, we shared earbuds and listened to the album together. It was dark, gloomy, and enchantingly sad. A wave of melancholy surged from the start and continued to engulf

me in incredible emotions. Among the tracks, Jeanie re-played “Fascination Street” and also introduced me to its nine-minute version in The Cure’s *Mixed Up* album. It was an up-tempo song, but I didn’t know why I felt like crying. When I was relishing the scenery of the birds freely flying through the sunset, I turned my head and glanced at Jeanie’s profile. My heart trembled as I resisted the urge to extend my thumb and touch her pink lips.

“Why does he say, ‘open your mouth?’” I asked her when the song ended.

“Guess he likes oral sex,” she replied flatly.

Jeanie never shied away from sexual topics. She even shared intimate details she had with her last boyfriend. I wished I could tell her about my own experience, but she laughed and said, “You’re a sheer virgin, dude. Your face says it all.”

My body may have been pristine, but my mind was filthy. I was horny all the time, desiring her passionately, but I never made an attempt to touch her. We were close enough to confide personal matters and I felt like we were lovers, but I couldn’t dare to make a move.

The closest moment of physical contact occurred when I visited her house. It looked unreasonably huge for only three people to live in. Jeanie said her parents were visiting South America, so we were alone. We ordered and ate pizza, watched *The Silence of the Lambs*, and blasted The Cure on the stereo. After a while, she changed into her swimsuit and dived into her backyard pool. She pointed at me to join her. I took off my clothes except for my boxer, and jumped in. She was a fast swimmer, and I was busy doing the dog paddle.

She got out of the pool and stood backlit against the sunlight. Still in the water, I looked up at her ravishing silhouette. I thought my eyes would be blinded not by the sun, but by her otherworldly beauty.

On the ground next to the pool, she spread a beach towel and lay on it. I laid myself down next to her. She closed her eyes. The sun was warm. A light breeze blew. I whispered to her, but she did not respond. She seemed to be asleep, but I couldn’t tell if she was really

sleeping. I observed her body from head to toe. She was wearing a black swimming bra and panties, her skin pale and soft, and her bare navel conspicuous in the middle of her frame. It was so tranquil that I could hear her breathing. If time stopped and I were cursed to stay still and only allowed to stare at her body perpetually, I would be fine with that. She was too magnificent to touch, but I could not stop reaching for her. I gently placed my hand on her chest. I did not move the hand; it just stayed that way for a time that felt like eternity.

I wonder what would have happened if I went further that day. Would she have accepted it? Or would she have slapped me and say *fuck off* like she did to Dragon? I'd never know, because I never tried. I was scared. I hardly got scared when I watched all those appalling horror movies, but I got scared when I put my hand over her heart. I thought I would be struck by lightning if I attempted anything more.

That was as intimate as we ever were in terms of sexual activity. Nevertheless, we remained close. Frequently chatting all night, I was sleep-deprived, but no student was happier. I felt like I was walking on clouds. Jeanie was busy with her loads of friends, but she would occasionally talk to me, walk with me, and even have lunch with me at school. I felt people's envious gaze. My shoulders were raised in pride. I loved school. I loved America. I felt fortunate that my family decided to come to this country.

"Fascinating!" I often said to myself.

3. Just Like Heaven

Quiet, dark, everyone sleeping, but my ringing cell phone woke me up at three a.m.

“Hey, model student...” It was Sona, intoxicated, her Korean incoherent. “Could you come down, please? I feel sick. Can’t move.”

I put my jacket on and walked downstairs. As I stepped out of the building, I found Sona on the ground. Although she had a coat on, she looked cold in her flimsy mini dress on this February morning. Her skirt rode up, showing her panties. I squatted down and covered her bare thighs with my jacket.

“What an asshole. The cab driver left me here on the street. Can you believe it?” Sona reeked of alcohol. I straightened her torso, and she rested her head on my chest.

“Let’s go up,” I said. “Come on, take my arm.”

“No, no, I can’t!” She shrieked, suddenly turned, and crawled toward the grass to throw up. I patted her on the back, helping her disgorge.

“How can a heart hurt so much?” she started sobbing. “It feels like someone is churning it with a screwdriver. What should I do, model student? I don’t know... I never know a goddamn thing...”

Her tears would not stop. The smell mixed with booze and vomit made my head hurt. I was clueless about what broke her like this. Did she get dumped by her lover? Heard bad news from her family in Korea? Humiliated at work? Whatever it was, I wasn’t curious.

“America is full of shit, you know that?” Sona muttered. “This country gives me nothing but a heartache. But why am I still here? Why?”

I used to ask that question all the time, but not anymore. Jeanie showed me life could

be marvelous. Sona had been here much longer than I had, but she seemingly never found happiness. Would she ever?

I remembered one time when she asked me not to laugh and said she couldn't stop wishing for the movie *Pretty Woman* to happen in her real life. Her Richard Gere would show up, fall in love with her, and make her happy, not to mention helping her get a green card. I didn't laugh at all. I wished her American dream would come true, but tonight, it looked like she was far from achieving it.

"Let's go up," I said. "You should lie in your warm bed."

"Leave me here." Sona curled up in a fetal position. "I'm better off dead in the street."

"Come on, Nuna¹⁴. Don't do this."

She was now snickling. It sounded bizarre when I looked at her ruined makeup. I decided to lift her up in my arms. She was petite, so it wasn't hard. As I turned around, I was surprised to see my mom standing at the entrance door. Apparently, she woke up, realized I was gone, and came out to see what was going on. She was dumbfounded at the sight of her teenage boy carrying a drunk lady in his arms.

Sona moved out a few days later. My mom had already been thinking that having her as a roommate was not advisable for her children. Triggered by this incident, Mom politely told Sona that we would need one more room because my dad would come soon and live with us for good. Sona agreed. She left without saying goodbye to me. When I came home from school one day, her room had already been vacated.

This meant I got my own room now. There was even a bathroom attached inside. It was a dramatic upturn from sleeping behind the wooden board in the living room. I asked my mom if we could afford this apartment without finding another roommate. She told me not to

¹⁴ Used by a younger male to call an older female or sister.

worry about it.

At school, I had a different kind of status upgrade. I accepted Dragon's offer to join the MF. It was now Magnificent *Five*. I had no idea what exactly motivated Dragon to select me as a member of his posse, but my close relationship with a distinguished girl like Jeanie must have helped. I honestly didn't feel comfortable with the MF and knew we would never be true friends. They were spoiled, supercilious jerks looking for trouble. But I picked my poison. They were still better than being stuck with ESL kids at the dismal O.K. Corral. I might have ranked fifth on the MF ladder, but it made a world of difference. I played basketball with them, rode in their nice cars, went to their party, and met popular students. And I was now more of an overseer of the fobs rather than one amongst them.

The MF hazed four new students from Korea. I watched them just as I had been observing Dong making no effort of escaping his miserable status quo. I felt bad for the students, but there was nothing I could do. Perhaps Dragon was right. It might really be in their genes. Some guys were destined to live a mediocre life, following orders and conforming to the system. I swaggered for being different. In just seven months, I escaped fob status, belonged to the group of cool friends, and was spending night after night on the phone with a dream girl until we could barely have our eyes open.

"What's hip in Korea nowadays?" In response to Dragon's question, the newcomers gave their performances, which were absurdly entertaining. Boy 1 rapped Eminem's *Lose Yourself*, drawing loud laughs because of his heavily accented English and terrible rhythmic sense. Boy 2, shy and lanky, sang a plaintive ballad, which made the MF yell, "Stop!" It was Boy 3 that stole the show. He mimicked a big-time girl band, singing in falsetto, showing feminine moves, and twerking. We cheered and clapped. It was so hilarious that I, sitting alongside the MF like a judge, laughed aloud too.

There was something unusual about the fourth boy. Burly and muscular, he said he

played for a school hockey team in Korea. During my time thus far at JD, he was the first Korean student to refuse to participate in the hazing. Dragon said that was fine, and let it go.

The inherent tension exploded a week later. Dragon told him to pick up his lunch, and he disobeyed. Dragon scowled and told the hockey boy to stay at the O.K. Corral after school.

I didn't witness their duel. I had to fulfill my paramount duty of walking Jeanie home. It was later that I heard from Su-tae.

"There's a reason why Dragon is where he is," his voice was excited. "The hockey boy was strong and fast, but no match for Dragon who was simply better. Everyone was amazed by how skilled he was. Hands down, Dragon is the *jjang*¹⁵ of JD."

Hearsay didn't do it justice. I regretted that I missed the fight. Anyhow, as the hockey boy's rebellion ended in vain, Jeanie remained the only person who defied Dragon and remained intact.

"Scum," Jeanie spoke of Dragon in a contemptuous tone. "My parents know his parents. A parvenu family. They buy expensive paintings without knowing who the artists are. Dragon may get A's by using *jokbo*¹⁶ and win awards by making others work for him, but he will never attain class. That's why he still can't speak intelligent English after all these years. He knows that, so he gets pissed when I poke his inferiority complex."

"Aren't you concerned about retaliation?" I asked. "Dragon holds a grudge and won't forget humiliation."

Jeanie scoffed, "He's not afraid of anything because many hyungs protect him, but I have oppas in K-town who protect me."

I wondered if those oppas meant Koreatown gang members, but didn't ask. That didn't interest me. All I wanted was to continue having a good time. Listen to The Cure together,

¹⁵ Best fighter.

¹⁶ Literally a genealogy book, this refers to school materials and exams handed down by former students.

chat all night, and feel her arm touching me when we walked side by side.

On February 14, I wrote my first-ever Valentine's card. Here's how it started: "Thank you, Jeanie. You're the best thing that has ever happened in my life. To me, you're just like heaven."

I cited the lyrics of my favorite Cure song. I ended up not sending my cheesy card to her, but I meant every word I wrote. I would promise that I would run away with her. Wherever she wanted.

"Seattle," She said when I asked her where her favorite place was. "Best I've ever been. Fucking rains all the time. Kills me."

I had a new goal. I would acquire a driver's license, get a car, take Jeanie, and drive north all the way to Seattle. We would make unforgettable memories. Watch sunsets on the PCH. Cruise through Redwood. Get soaked in rain in Seattle. I would kiss her wet lips. Touch her bare skin. This time, I would not just gently place my hand on her heart. I would unhook her bra. Fondle her breasts and arouse her. Press my body against her. We would make love. "Just Like Heaven" would be playing through the speakers behind us.

4. The Walk

When my father came back from Korea, he surprised us with his emaciated look and darkened skin, disquieting because his sturdy build and pale skin had been his trademark.

“I’m fine,” he smiled broadly at our nervous faces. “Just a side effect from treatment. It’ll get back to normal.”

Dad quickly and successfully turned things around, allowing us little time to worry. I caught a glimpse of the “normalcy” that Mom had mentioned. Home was lively and boisterous with laughter. We had nice dinners and visited Universal Studios. We went car hunting (although none of us had a driver’s license yet) and house hunting (although we were likely to move when my dad decided which school to attend).

Dad kept himself busy preparing for school and reading a bunch of books. By early March, he received his first acceptance letters from two of the four graduate schools to which he’d applied.

Meanwhile, Mom received an offer from a different wedding shop owner who guaranteed her two days off a week and \$1,000 more than she was earning a month. Mom was waiting for the right time to ask the Baes to match the offer or let her go.

Rose was all smiles for the return of her favorite person. For the time being, my parents decided to let me keep my new room, which meant they would share their bedroom with Rose. She loved it. She wanted to stay with her dad as long as she could.

One Saturday morning, there was an uproarious sound coming from my parents’ room. I entered and saw Dad and Rose talking to each other on the foot phone.

“Hello? Is my daughter there?” Asked my dad, putting Rose’s foot to his ear. “The

prettiest girl in the world? Her name is Hyejin and her English name is Rose. Be careful, everyone. She's beautiful, but may have thorns!"

Taking turns, Rose grabbed the sole of her dad's foot. "Hello, is Appa there? His name is Pil-tae. His English name is Phil. Be careful, because..." She couldn't finish, lacking creativity. She eventually shouted, "Because he has a big foot!" Then she giggled uncontrollably.

Their childish frolics were nothing new. In Korea, when my dad returned home from work, there was a routine run-and-chase game with Dad as the cat and Hyejin as the mouse. When he finally caught her, he would bite her toes and rub his face against her belly, making fart noises with his mouth.

These were happening now in America. Things looked good. Our only concern was Dad's health. He tried to hide it, but he was obviously going through physical pain. Due to poor digestion, he was increasingly relying on liquid food and nutritional supplements. He kept assuring all of us that everything would be alright. I believed him. I wanted to. This was just a process. The reality of a happy immigrant family wasn't far-fetched. It seemed attainable.

My dad loved walking around the neighborhood. I joined him one evening. There were less apartment buildings after we passed Wilton Place, and Hancock Park with upscale houses started from Norton Avenue. If I kept walking straight down, I would arrive at Jeanie's home. I was constantly thinking about her. I decided to show my dad a picture of Jeanie. I proudly explained how close we were and asserted that she would soon be my official girlfriend.

"Kind of a girl that a boy your age would go head over heels for," he chuckled. "Look at her overpowering eyes. Wow. You're no match for her. She'll lead you by the nose."

I was offended by his words. Jeanie had been nothing but an angel to me. Old men

tend to be conservative and treat cool girls as a menace. They're obsessed with the good-wife-wise-mother type. I regretted showing him Jeanie's photo. Someday, I would introduce her to my family and prove how amazing she was.

"How's Korea?" I changed the subject. "Going well after Roh became president?"

"Quite the opposite. Korea will be chaotic for years to come."

"How come? I thought Roh was a good president."

"Chaotic, because he's a good president." Dad said. "Was America quiet when Lincoln was in office? Justice doesn't come for free, son. Roh started a war against the very powerful cartels that are immensely displeased by his reforms. I'm worried. I can't wait to finish my studies and contribute."

My simple question opened the door for Dad to give a speech about modern Korean history: how injustice prevailed because the national traitors who kowtowed to Japanese imperialism and colluded with dictators were never punished but maintained their leadership positions. Since he was telling old stories, I induced him to revisit my childhood favorite topic: the early era of Korean gangsters involving Kim Duhan, Korea's first organized mob leader; Shirasoni, a free-spirited, non-gang-affiliated fighter; and Lee Jeong-jae who would be executed for his illegal acts committed with corrupt politicians. It was like an American father telling his son the tales of Dillinger, Capone, and Luciano, but the difference was that these Korean gangsters were fist-fighters. I was infatuated with the romantic age in which the fighters fought one-on-one, and the winner took over the entire gang members of the defeated boss.

I asked my dad whether he had ever been involved in violence. He said he enjoyed a rather comfortable youth thanks to his robust physique. Nevertheless, there were unavoidable occasions where he demonstrated his fighting skill in order to live in peace. A famous fist-fighter had taught him a secret technique that ensured a high level of success while

minimizing violence. After using it in a couple of critical situations, Dad never had to fight again.

I pricked up my ears. I asked him fiercely. *What is that technique? I have to know right now!*

My dad said with a smile, “There’s nothing complicated about the skill, but it requires strength, precision, and guts. Not sure if you have the talent. I don’t see a fighter in you.”

“Teach me,” I insisted. “I’m not trying to be Bruce Lee or anything, but I should be able to protect myself when *injustice* threatens me.”

To persuade him, I explained what was going on at school. I understated the magnitude of violence and omitted shameful parts including me joining the MF, but Dad was already disturbed by my description of Dragon and his buddies’ tyranny.

“It’s sickening to hear about those young Korean students bullying newcomers instead of helping them,” Dad clicked his tongue. It was injustice. And he detested injustice.

The sun was ready to sink toward the skyline formed around the trees in Hancock Park, and there were a cancer-stricken man and his sixteen-year-old boy standing five feet apart. The father was about to pass on the know-how that protected him in his younger days.

“When you’re in a duel,” he said, “look straight into his eyes. Doesn’t matter if he’s a foot taller or thirty pounds heavier. Stare at him like you own him. Make him feel that he might actually lose. Then you keenly look out for the perfect moment. Unless he’s a professional fighter with a 50-0 record, every man is bound to be off guard for a second. Pay close attention until you find it. That’s when you go and shove his face with your hand.”

“Shove his face?” My eyes widened.

“Yes. No need to punch or slap him. A simple shove is all you need. That’s not the end. What you do with your foot at the same time is crucial. With precision, extend your foot and thrust his leg. You don’t have to kick it, but apply enough force to shove his shin or leg. He

will completely lose his balance and fall.”

To make me see it clearly, he tried it on me. Coming closer, he swiftly pushed my left cheek with his right hand and simultaneously nudged my right leg with his left foot. I dropped to the ground helplessly. It only took two seconds.

“My goodness!” I exclaimed. “Unbelievable! What do you do next?”

“As soon as he falls to the ground,” he said. “Stretch your leg quickly and place your foot on his throat. And press it hard, as though you will break his neck if he moves.”

Dad gave an emphatic tap on his knee and acted like he was trampling on the neck of the imaginary foe fallen to the ground.

“Then you look down at his face with disdain. An utter contempt to destroy his morale. You don’t have to say anything. This is how you declare your victory. He’s effectively humiliated. The fight is over. He will forever have to acknowledge you as a victor.”

It sounded incredible, but perhaps too surreal, idealistic, even romantic. In principle, I understood how the skill was supposed to work, but would it be viable for a skinny guy like me?

“Of course,” Dad said, showing his trust in me now. “Practice makes perfect. Build your strength, agility, vision, and confidence. At the end of the day, it’s the best way to win. No blood to be shed, skin to be bruised, or bone to be broken.”

I pictured a triumphant scene of me stepping on Dragon’s neck. How awesome. Okay, practice makes perfect. This would be another daily homework for me.

I appreciated the walk with my dad. On the way back home, I received a text message from Jeanie, letting me know that she just logged into the MSN Messenger. All of a sudden, I felt that my dad was walking too slowly.

“Do you like walking, son?” He asked, not knowing that I was now in a hurry.

“Sure,” I said, although I thought I had been walking too much lately thanks to Jeanie.

“I study life when I walk,” Dad let out a dry cough and continued. “We all have our own path to walk. You have yours, too. Walk on it with vigor and valor, son. Many times, it will be tough, lonely, and difficult, making you feel like you are all alone. But you’re not. It’s the path you’re taking with those who love you and pray for you with unwavering devotion. If you feel weary and lost, remind yourself whom you’re walking with. You will not fail, because you know how important it is to keep stepping forward for those people.”

“Okay,” I said with a nod, trying to quicken my pace.

When we arrived at our apartment building, Dad gestured to me to head up first and said he would stay outside a little longer. Before I left, I glanced at him standing alone on the street. For some reason, my long-time invincible hero seemed feeble. Something tingled my heart, but I turned around without hesitation. I climbed three stairs at a time and hurried home to chat with Jeanie in earnest.

5. A Thousand Hours

I had to take our relationship to the next level. It was absurd that Jeanie and I had never been anywhere together outside the two-mile perimeter of JD High. We agreed to go somewhere far after school on a Friday. I couldn't wait all week, hopeful for a new beginning. I was secretly aiming for our first kiss.

As soon as my sixth period was over, I ran like an arrow to her French III classroom. I beamed at her when she came out, but she was pulling a long face.

"Rain check? I have some family issues," she said.

I was supposed to say "Sure, don't worry about it," but I couldn't hide my disappointment.

On the way to her locker, she spoke with her mother on her cell phone. I walked beside her, two feet away. Jeanie looked grim as their conversation went on. After she hung up and put her things in the locker, she said, "Never mind. I think I have some time. Where are we going anyway?"

She spoke like what I had been planning all week was some sort of a task to get over with. Something was off, and it continued when we got on the bus. She didn't even know she had to pay without a bus pass. Granted, she lived within walking distance of school, but I couldn't understand how she, as a city girl, had never ridden a bus before. She had several boyfriends; how did they date? Only then it flashed across my mind. Ah, they all drove...

"What's going on in your family? Can I ask?" I said after we took a seat. I was never a nosy person, but just wanted to spark a conversation.

"You don't wanna know. Some shitty stuff."

She shut herself away, listening to music through her earphones. Some shitty stuff was obviously bothering her. She occasionally cursed under her breath, shaking her head. I was deflated. Maybe we should have taken a rain check.

We got off at Santa Monica Promenade. I picked here because this was the best date location I knew. To be precise, it was the only date location I knew. It had fancy shops, buskers gave cool performances, and you could walk a bit and watch the sunset.

“It’s been a while since I last came here,” Jeanie said, finally loosening up. We walked down Third Street.

When I led her to Johnny Rockets, she chuckled and said, “Okay, this is the kind of place I would have expected you to take me.”

I didn’t know what she meant. Was she insinuating that this was a cheap place? It was the most expensive hamburger shop I had ever been to. With fifty dollars in my pocket, I thought this was the best restaurant I could afford.

When our food was ready, her phone rang.

“I’m eating. Can I call you later?” She spoke in Korean, so I knew it was her mom again.

It lasted about a minute, Jeanie mostly listening. After hanging up, she was visibly upset. While I finished my portion, she ate some fries and sipped her shake, and that was pretty much it. I looked at her burger that had barely been touched. She said I could have it if I wanted. I surely would have if the mood had been better. It pained me to imagine a complete food going straight to the trashcan.

Nothing was helping me. A child at the next table kept crying, and his parents weren’t trying hard to soothe him. Jeanie grimaced noticeably as the boy’s sniveling noise wouldn’t subside. I knew how much she hated anyone crying.

“If you can’t shut him up, would you have some fucking decency to take him outside

how insignificant my presence was to her.

We wordlessly walked on the footpath where we saw the boardwalk on the left and the ocean up front. The sun was ready to say goodnight and disappear. Jeanie seemed to have recovered a bit of her sanity. She even cracked a smile.

“You thought I was just a happy-go-lucky chick, huh?” She asked in an undertone. “Like I never have any worries.”

“No...” I murmured.

“You’re always kind to me,” she took a cigarette out of her purse and lit it. “Is it because of English? If I sucked at English, would you still have been my friend?”

“Of course.” This time I said resolutely. I would’ve been her friend even if she couldn’t speak at all.

“What would you do for me?” She asked. “I’ve been helping you a lot, haven’t I? What will you do in return?”

I didn’t appreciate her tone, but I replied, “Anything. Just say it.”

“Would you kill my dad?”

Huh? I was taken aback. Kill her dad? What did she mean? I only hoped that my dad would overcome cancer and live.

“My dad is a very successful lawyer,” she blew out cigarette smoke and continued. “Respected for doing a lot of admirable things for the community and poor people. Reputed to be a sweet family man. He would do anything for me. Say I throw this phone away, he’ll get me a new one, no questions asked. Sounds like a cool dad? A very healthy dad, too. I want him to get sick and die quickly, but he’s always in perfect condition. He plays tennis at such a high level that he’s a president of some fucking social tennis club. I’ll probably die before he does. Someone must kill him. Or I’ll kill him myself. He must not enjoy natural

death.”

Such animosity toward one’s own father was never conceivable to me. There was undoubtedly something going on between them. She stopped, and I waited for her. When the sun had completely set and the duskiness made it hard for me to see her eyes clearly, she opened up. Her confession was actually brief. For three years, from age nine to twelve, her dad did the bad thing to her. Every time it was done, he wept. He was deeply remorseful for failing to control himself once again. But when the craving overpowered the guilt, he would reopen the door of her room in the dead of night.

Jeanie added that she had been muzzled to protect her family’s reputation and I was now the first person other than her mom to know this.

Opposite emotions surged upon me. Sad and furious for her pain, glad and fearful that she shared her secret with me, and stupefied by the magnitude of the truth. Many questions arose. Did it stop for good four years ago? How is it still affecting you? Why are you still living with him? Why are you telling *me* this? Are you reaching out for help? What exactly went between you and your mom on the phone today?

I asked none of this. I thought hard how to respond. How could I prove that I cared? How could I address my heart aching for her? I decided to say what I had in mind most truthfully.

“Let me know anytime. I’ll kill him for you.”

She stared me in the face for a moment and said, “You didn’t do anything when those morons were insulting me at Rockets. Now you can commit a murder for me?”

“I’m like Christian Bale in *American Psycho*,” I explained slowly to better articulate myself in English. “I walk away from trouble. But I come back to kill when nobody watching.”

She lowered her head, and I couldn’t tell whether she was frowning or smiling until I

heard her snicker.

“Let’s go home,” she said, tapping my arm. “It’s dark.”

I looked for the bus stop, but she unhesitatingly jumped into a cab.

Sitting in the backseat, we didn’t talk much on the way home. The driver left soft music on, and suddenly I realized how tired I was.

Tired of trying so hard to speak English to her. Tired of suppressing my emotions. Tired of being unable to say I’m tired. Tired of feeling small to be with her. Even at this moment after she revealed her devastating secret, I was worried about how I was going to pay for the taxi fare if it cost more than my remaining money. I recollected my mom’s response when I told her I needed big money for a special date. Taking out a fifty-dollar bill, she smiled tenderly and said, *Fighting¹⁷, my son!*

I had my eyes closed but opened them when I felt a weight on my left shoulder. It was Jeanie, leaning her head on me. As the scent of her coconut shampoo hit my nostrils, my heart started beating fast again. The fascination I felt when I listened to *Disintegration* with her at the top of the bleachers... It was something I would give anything to retain. Something too precious that made it impossible for me to ever say, *forget it, I’m done.*

I was confused and hurt. I did not know what to do with anything anymore.

¹⁷ Konglish, but this has become an endearing term, meaning “way to go” or “go for it,” used to encourage someone.

6. Closedown

Contrary to what my dad said, he was clearly not getting better. More often than not, he wouldn't even come out of his room. When he did, he tried to spend as much time with Rose as possible. She was his best consoler, a presence that made him smile just by looking at her. When he felt better, he played board games with her, helped her with homework, and they watched animated films together. The father-daughter bonding was stronger than ever.

One night, about an hour after dinner, my dad let out a scream and collapsed to the floor. It was a fearsome sight. He pulled his hair, writhed in agony, and banged his head against the wall. My old hero succumbed to excruciating pain. He just could not withstand it anymore.

“Morphine, morphine, please...” He mumbled.

I knew my mom hadn't been getting along with Aunt Kelly, but I called her for help.

“I'll be right there,” Kelly said. “Don't call an ambulance. It will cost you a fortune.”

Kelly took about 20 minutes, and it was a long, agonizing time to watch my dad suffering, his pain so severe that all he could do was groan. My mom sat next to him and cried. Rose took his hand, and my dad did not let go.

Kelly drove us all to USC Hospital. A doctor resembling Colonel Sanders explained the situation in unintelligible medical terms, but the bottom line was that the size of Dad's tumor was alarming and his cancer was metastasizing rapidly. It was imperative that he receive intensive chemo, and even then, his survival rate would be 35%. It was sixty last time. How did it drop so fast?

“Cancer movement is not easy to predict,” the doctor said matter-of-factly. “It affects

every individual differently.”

Without health insurance yet, a temporary return to Korea was the sensible decision for Dad. There, he had full insurance and was comfortable with the health system. He assured us that Korea’s medical standards were now world-class, highly dependable.

Less than two months after returning to Los Angeles, he was now flying back to Korea. We all went to LAX with him. Aunt Kelly gave us a ride. She and my mom were sisters after all; they acted as if there had been no conflict between them.

After my dad finished the check-in and luggage-shipping process, we had a light meal together. I saw a blue Korean Air plane parked outside. My heart was heavy, knowing that it would soon carry away my dad. He constantly had a smile on his face. He tried hard to make us feel like this was just a short business trip and he would be back in no time.

We came downstairs from the snack bar and stood near the gate entrance. Dad kept his posture straight in his suit and tie.

“I’m still shocked... I don’t believe my own eyes,” Kelly got emotional. “Hyungboo¹⁸, you were always so healthy and strong. I thought you would reach 100 without catching any disease.”

My dad smiled without words.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been a good sister and aunt,” Kelly continued. “I missed my nephew and niece so much, and I’ve been meaning to come and see you sooner, but the relationship with Unnie has been rough and my life has been unkind. My unemployed husband won’t find a job, and I’ve been working hard to feed my family. I’m all alone and nobody helps me. You know how it is in America, Hyungboo. You understand, don’t you?”

“Of course, I understand.” Dad’s voice was gentle. “We all love you and no one blames you, Cheojae¹⁹. Please don’t apologize. We’re in America, all thanks to you. We

¹⁸ Older sister’s husband.

¹⁹ Wife’s younger sister.

wouldn't have thought of coming to this wonderful land in the first place if it weren't for you. I am so relieved for my wife and children, because you are here. Look at us. We're all family. We shall rely on each other."

Kelly wiped her tears with a handkerchief. After hugging her, Dad took a step closer to Rose. He bent his knees to lower his stature, and then gave Rose a firm hug. Rose wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I love you the most in the whole wide world," Dad said.

Surrounding them, we all knew it too well.

"When are you coming back, Appa?" Rose looked intimidated by the cheerless mood around her.

"I must be back before fall semester starts," Dad replied. "So, I'll see you in summer. Be prepared to face your healthy appa again. Mighty and powerful appa!"

"My friend, Jane, said everyone who gets cancer will die." Rose said with a concerned look.

"Jane is wrong. Not all cancer patients die. Pray for me every night, will you? God is most attentive to the prayers of children."

"I already pray for you everyday."

"That is exactly why I'll be just fine. We know God is faithful and merciful. Your prayers will be answered."

Rose gazed up at him as though she understood now.

"This summer let's go on a family trip," Dad said cheerfully. "Where do you want to go? I'll take you wherever you'd like."

"Umm..." Rose thought for a moment. "I want to go to Yosemite."

Dad laughed out loud. "You made me nervous; I thought you might say Paris or Dubai. Yosemite is easy! Let's all go there. We can hike, camp, and count the stars at night. Who

knows? We might see a bear.”

Dad and Rose made a pinky promise.

He turned to me and grabbed my shoulder, his voice soft. “I’m always proud of you. Keep it up, son.”

I appreciated his words, but remained silent, not knowing how to respond.

“As for the girl...” He said good-naturedly. I had briefly shared with him my feelings for Jeanie one night. Although I sought his advice, I didn’t want him to revisit the topic at this moment when he was leaving, especially in front of Kelly and Mom. He went on regardless, “She should already know who you are by now, so you don’t have to try so hard anymore. Don’t plan anything. Don’t approach her first. Give her time and let her decide. Meanwhile, empty your mind. That has to happen for you first. Then before you even realize, you will be surprised to see her coming to you. That’s how it’s gotta be. If she doesn’t come to you, that’s okay too, because you have cleared your mind. So, it works out either way. You’ll either start a healthy relationship with her or have peace of mind without her. Do you see what I mean?”

I had a lot to say, but just nodded in silence.

He let go of my shoulder and then moved to embrace my mom. Unlike Kelly who was constantly sniffing, my mom was placid, almost emotionless.

“You’re tired of me apologizing,” Dad chuckled. “So, I’ll just say, thank you for everything. Especially for taking good care of the children while I’m away. I will make it up to you. I promise.”

Catching hold of her husband’s arm, Mom smiled weakly and said in a low voice, “Should we all go back to Korea?”

Fazed by her question, Dad said, “You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m not,” Mom stared at him uneasily. “What’s the point of all this? You coming back

and forth, me working here to pay rent, children not adapting well... Besides, I really think I should be with you when you receive chemo. How're you gonna handle it all by yourself?"

"I'm not alone in Korea. I have siblings, colleagues, friends..." Dad paused for a moment, pondering on how to better appease his wife. He apologized again. "Sorry, Honey. I know you're disappointed. But let's not give this up. We are here for a reason. Let's overcome this rough time. I promise I'll make things right..."

Mom managed to show a smile despite her tightened lips. Dad gave her a long hug.

Time was up. People in line were disappearing into the gate one by one.

Dad turned to Rose and hugged her one more time. With his eyes closed, he strove to cherish the moment.

"You're flawless just the way you are. You are a perfect girl."

"I'm a perfect girl," Rose repeated after him.

"Yes, you are. Never forget that, my precious daughter."

Dad straightened his knees and stepped aside to join the line. We stood behind the line, watching him gradually getting closer to the gate. After showing his passport and boarding pass to the airport staff, he turned around and looked at us. All he had to do now was enter the gate, board the plane, and fly. He waved his hand and made a smile so bright that it reminded me of the day when he was waiting for me in front of JD High on the roadside, standing next to Pastor Choi's car.

We all waved at him. He turned and went inside the gate. Before we told ourselves that he was gone, he came back out for some reason and stood at the entrance door.

Grinning, he raised his right hand up high. Then he lifted his left hand too. He used all the space around him to swing his arms up and down. He started hopping as if he were doing jumping jacks. People standing in line, their families at a distance, and airport employees were now looking at him, but he wouldn't stop. He kept shaking his arms, hopping up and

down as though he had always been healthy all along without any disease. Then he made clumsy dancing moves, and I had no idea which musician or dancer he was imitating.

Watching his goofy movement, Rose burst out laughing. On the other hand, my mother, who had been reluctant to show emotions, broke into tears.

“I’m coming back! You know I’ll be back!” My dad exclaimed with a joyous smile. His words were loud enough for us to hear them clearly and his grin was broad enough for us to see his teeth, albeit fifteen yards away.

With his right fist held high, my father made eye contact with me. We stared at each other for a few seconds. I felt like he was asking me for something, but I didn’t know what. I unconsciously clenched my fist and raised it up, too.

Then he went back inside.

I wobbled a little, but I hid my fragility by leaning my arm against a pillar. No one said it, but I knew all of us were overwhelmed with anxiety at the thought that this could possibly be the last moment of seeing him. I slowly approached my mom and gently massaged her shoulders. Shook up by noticing her aunt and mom in tears, Rose started crying too.

“Appa’s not coming back?” asked Rose.

“Silly. Didn’t you hear him?” I said, my voice calm, acting like today was just another ordinary day. “He’s coming back, and you’re going to Yosemite.”

7. *Boys Don't Cry*

Days sans Dad resumed. He continued to assure us over the phone that everything would be alright and he would be back soon, but something was different this time. He refused the video call, saying that he'd lost his hair and didn't like looking at himself without it. He sounded subdued. We couldn't sense his usual playfulness.

Mom seriously contemplated whether we should go back to Korea to be there for Dad. Rose concurred. She said America sucked and she wanted to be with Appa. I opposed firmly. I reminded them that we already started a new life here no matter how meager it looked. And needlessly to say, Dad had to start school in the fall. He had been accepted to all four graduate schools.

I had unfinished business with Jeanie. Since our Santa Monica date, she wasn't as close to me as before. We were no longer talking all night, and our texts were shorter and less frequent. Then it reached a point where I could text her only when there was a reason. I recalled my dad's advice. Don't approach her first. Don't fret. Just wait. She would come to realization of my true worth. She would reach out to me, and we would finally start a healthy relationship. Not the lopsided one we had now.

But the latter part of Dad's advice was impossible to follow. I couldn't empty my mind. From the moment I woke up in the morning to the moment of closing my eyes at night, she completely dominated my brain. I told myself that the intimacy we shared could not easily vanish, but I was, in fact, terrified of the thought that any form of our relationship might have ended already.

What replaced the presence of Dad and Jeanie in my life was the MF, the "cool" dudes

I'd chosen over my ESL friends. Being a member of the MF wasn't just about escaping the fob status. One time we ditched school and went all the way down to Garden Grove to have a group fight with other high school students. The reason? One of them, while visiting L.A., made a pass at Sylvia, Dragon's cousin. We had to teach the suburban kids a lesson never to mess with city slickers. I barely knew Sylvia but participated in the fight. We won easily. The Garden Grove boys apologized and vowed that they would behave.

"You got guts. I like that." Dragon said after the fight, playfully tapping me on the arm with his fist.

I didn't do it for Dragon's recognition. I wasn't interested in climbing up the MF ladder. I needed a getaway from the school and Jeanie. I liked the air hitting my face in Dragon's Mustang when he drove. I felt alive walking with a swagger in some place I had been for the first time. The MF was a necessary evil. What would I be doing otherwise? Tormenting myself with what-ifs concerning my dad? Having lunch and chatting with loser fobs? Hovering around Jeanie's route with a hope of running into her? Pathetic.

My excitement was short-lived. I soon felt equally pathetic hanging with the MF. On another day when we played hooky, Dragon picked my apartment as a hideout, mainly because no one was home. On my DVD player given by Aunt Kelly as a gift, they played the world's rarest and most extreme hardcore porn. I had no idea how they even got those. I was astounded to see how humans were capable of doing such incredible work with every part of the body and every filth that came out of the body in every possible position at every possible location. It was riveting, but after thirty minutes, it felt so repugnant that I wanted to vomit or close my eyes at least, but I could not do that. I remained nonchalant to show my friends how unperturbed I was.

When pornography wasn't enough, they turned to some strange low-quality snuff films. I acted like I already knew they existed, but I was stunned. There was too much blood, rape,

murder, dismemberment... Alligators feasting on humans, cutting out a heart from an alive man, smashing a skull with a hammer... Are these real? They're staged, right?

The MF ate snacks and drank soda while viewing these. I had twice-watched *The Exorcist* by myself at night, but these films tested my endurance. There were five teenagers in my living room enjoying footage that no sane human being should watch. And they assessed and rated each video, laughing at a dying girl's grotesque face or saying things like, oh that's dope, ah this is weak...

I wasn't the only one questioning what the hell I was doing with these guys. Dragon's righthand minion's dislike of me was palpable. His English name was Gregory, but we called him Jotgory, *jot* being a derogatory term for a penis in Korean. It was a fitting nickname for him—a despicable dude, quick to beating docile students while stooping low to Dragon. Jotgory would bluntly demean me when I voiced any opinion. For instance, when I tried getting into their conversation about college applications, he would stop me and contemptuously say, “What does an ESL student know about college?”

A sense of regret was greater than a desire to punch him. What did I expect when I made a choice of joining the MF? Like water and oil, we would never mix. These weren't the guys who would be there when I needed help. They wouldn't care what would happen to my dad. They were more likely to trample on me if they saw any weakness.

As the time with them grew distressing, my longing for Jeanie rekindled. I knew exactly what I wanted. The happiness of chattering all night with someone who understood me; exploration with someone well-versed in books, movies, and rock music; a thrill felt even from a small touch of someone so beautiful; an impetus to improve my English and assimilate into American culture; and a sense of belonging... all of these would be possible if I could only be with Jeanie.

One lunchtime, I was eating a slice of pizza while listening to my MF friends' chat about getting into nightclubs with a fake ID. As I was holding back a yawn, I saw Jotgory come running.

"Breaking news," he said with a crooked smile. His eyes turned to me, and then toward Dragon. "Jeanie is going to prom with Mick."

"Is that so?" Dragon pointed at me. "What's going on, man? I thought you were screwing Jeanie. Why is she going to the prom with Mick?"

I could not help but ask, "What's prom?"

Everyone looked at me like I was a monkey in the zoo. They burst into a loud laughter. Jotgory shook his head and said, "You're a hopeless FOB. Get the fuck outta here."

I had it coming. Their scoff and scorn. In my defense, I was aware of America's formal high school dance parties held before graduation. I'd seen them in Hollywood films. I just didn't know the dance was called a "prom."

So, Jeanie was going to the prom with Mick?

I knew that guy. A white dude who was a senior class vice president, a star on the school football team, and a recent admittee to Cornell. How typical. I thought Mick contradicted Jeanie's character. Choosing such a guy sounded like she went to a Backstreet Boys concert instead of The Cure's.

I texted Jeanie, asking if I could walk her home after school. She replied that she had plans with friends. I would normally say okay, but this time I insisted. I told her I had something important to discuss.

We walked together down Fifth Street in Hancock Park. She was in a black blouse and tight jeans, her long hair fluttering with every step she took.

I had to say it, because she wouldn't say it first.

“Hey, I heard you’re going to prom?” Like I knew what a prom was all along.

“Mick asked me, and I said yes.”

There was coldness in her voice. She sounded different. Aloof. I felt a throbbing pain around my heart.

“W-Why didn’t you tell me?” I managed to ask.

“I have no obligation to report to you whom I’m going to a prom with.”

“No obligation, but it would’ve been nice. We’ve been so close. You were like my girlfriend.”

“I was never your girlfriend,” she corrected me, enunciating every word so clearly that I felt like it was hammering me.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. But can I ask you that now? Can I be your boyfriend? I’m asking you out.”

I didn’t know what the hell I was saying. A disastrous attempt. Would it have worked if I asked her two months ago? Terrible timing, but I thought I should be honest with her once and for all. I had never revealed what I truly felt about her.

“I’m going out with Mick,” she said, callously.

My legs trembled and the sky was no longer blue. Worse, I felt a lump in my throat. All that was left in me now was the overwhelming consciousness that I should not cry in front of her.

“Ah, okay. Cool.” Even to the last moment, I was being an idiot. Cool for what? Making a fool of me for these months? Choosing a hotshot guy over me? Breaking my heart into pieces?

I turned around to walk away. Then unexpectedly, she called me from behind.

“Hey, Gunn. Stop.”

Jeanie came walking towards me. Then she hugged me. Tenderly and closely. Felt her breasts pressing me. Smelled the scent of her sweet shampoo that I adored. My hands rested

awkwardly on her waist.

When she released her hug, she stared into my eyes. My lips quivered, anxious to let out my thoughts.

I know your life isn't perfect, Jeanie. You're vulnerable and hurt, just like me. I think you chose Mick because he seems strong. You're subconsciously expecting someone to protect you and fight for you. You misunderstood me, Jeanie. I'm strong, too. I can protect you. There's nothing I wouldn't do in order to make a smile stay on your face.

My brain got busy organizing these words to say to her in English. I ended up saying nothing. She also seemed to have something to say, so I waited for her to speak up. But she ended up not saying anything either.

She walked backwards facing me, and then finally turned around. She trotted and headed to her house, which stood a block away. I watched her diminishing gradually until she became a dot. And then gone.

8. The Perfect Girl

Dad wasn't answering our calls. Mom called our relatives, and they said he wasn't responding well to the chemo and things weren't looking great. No one knew whether he would get better, but one thing was now certain: his chance of starting school in the fall was nil.

Mom made up her mind. We would go back to Korea. It was an enormous decision for us. Mom had been on a waitlist for her green card and was expected to receive it any day, certainly within a year. As minors Rose and I could claim it along with her. Returning to Korea meant we would have to start all over again. Our lawyer strongly advised against that, saying the U.S. immigration bureau was never forgiving to immigrants changing things during their procedures. If we went to Korea now, we had to accept the likelihood of living there permanently. No more America.

This time I agreed with Mom. The American dream was probably not for my family. Mom mapped out a plan to leave for good after our second semester. We had less than a month. That was what I thought until one Sunday morning.

We were getting ready to go to church. Pastor Choi picked us up most Sundays. There was a call coming from Korea and my mom answered it. Suddenly, she dropped down and let out a wail. My sister followed. I couldn't calm them down.

My father had just passed away.

I took the phone and spoke with my uncle, Dad's younger brother. He said it was pandemonium there. A surgical error had reportedly been involved in my dad's death. He complained of acute pain, was hospitalized, and a surgeon mistakenly scarred his pancreas

while dealing with his small intestines. This caused secretion of pancreatin, which resulted in the melting and perforation in the intestines. My relatives would consult lawyers about suing the hospital. Of course, the hospital adamantly defended themselves, stating that the error wasn't significant enough to have directly caused his death and emphasizing that his cancer had already spread to other organs and he would have died anyway in a matter of six months.

I felt woozy, my brain blank. None of us had said goodbye to him, I mumbled. No one at all said goodbye to him, my uncle said. When my dad was moved to the operating room, no one had the slightest idea that it would be the last moment.

I had no time to reel from shock. Mom's church people filled the apartment all afternoon, paying condolence visits, and I kept myself busy, finding street parking for them, receiving their words of consolation. The senior pastor led a service and prayed for my family. It was around eleven p.m. when we were finally alone. Mom didn't sleep, speaking on the phone with people in Korea. Rose looked dazed, speechless, until she fell asleep on the sofa.

Next day, I went to school. I told no one about my dad. His death wasn't news on the school bulletin board. Everything looked the same. Dragon and the MF plagued ESL students. My heart went out for them, but they saw me now as one of the MF, whether I participated in bullying or not.

Jeanie and Mick were officially together. They walked hand in hand in public. Something she had never done with me.

I lost all motivation to do well. I wouldn't care less if my report card exhibited CCCCCC. Actually, that would be Cool. I would be the first Asian student with straight C's.

After school, I walked home instead of taking bus. When I reached Jeanie's neighborhood, I imagined telling her of my despair. It would be beautiful if we could ease each other's pain. I walked past her street, knowing it would never happen.

I roamed around Fourth Street on the way home, reliving the day my dad and I went for a walk. A slim woman was running in sportswear with headphones over her ears. A young couple were talking to each other in a car parked under a big tree. Water gushed out of the lawn sprinkler in front of a mansion. An old man crossed the street cautiously with his leashed fluffy dog. Things were too tranquil and peaceful.

I knew Dad's illness was serious, but I'd had zero feeling that he would die. How could he? He was an indestructible man who had mastered the art of knocking down anyone without physically hurting them. How about the justice he swore to protect? What was God doing? Nothing made any sense. He was only thirty-eight years old.

I was in denial. I thought he would give me a call at any minute and say, "Hey son, have you figured out the skill yet? I'm flying there next week. See you soon!"

His funeral took place several days later. None of us could go. I heard a great number of people showed up. Amidst their grief, a wreath delivered in President Roh's name astonished everyone.

Usually not self-assertive, Rose spoke up, "I don't care about America. I want to go to Korea."

"It's too late," Mom said, despondently. "We should've gone sooner. At least we could have been with him at his last moment. Who knows? He might have been alive if we were there for him. But now he's gone, and that changes everything. Without him, there's no point going there. We're on our own. We have to figure out how to survive here."

"But I want to live in Korea. I want to be where Appa is!"

"Mom just said we must live here," I rebuked Rose. "And Appa is not in Korea."

"I know he's not there. But he is there."

Rose was acting strange. She appeared to have accepted the fact that our dad had died,

but she also simultaneously believed in his presence in Korea.

“Get your own plane ticket and fly yourself then,” I said.

Rose looked upset. After a minute, she said, “Take me to LAX.”

“LAX?” I asked. “What for?”

“I want to see Appa.”

“Wake up, will ya? Appa’s not in Korea. Appa’s not at the airport.”

“I know!” Rose exclaimed. “But I want to go to the airport. That’s where he waved at me. That’s where I saw him the last time.”

Staring at her silently, Mom became teary-eyed. I felt bad for Rose, but I was irritated that her nonsensical, childish behavior was hurting Mom.

“What are you gonna do there? Cry? You can cry here if you want. Absolutely meaningless to go to the airport. It will just break all of our hearts!”

Rose sealed her lips. She said nothing more.

Several days later, I checked a text message left by Mom after first period. When I called her, she said she had received a notification of absence from Rose’s school.

“What are you talking about? I left her at the school.”

“Did you see her entering the classroom?”

Of course not. She wasn’t five. Every morning I walked her to the school entrance and got on my way to catch the bus. There had never been a problem.

“Oh my God, where is she? Where is she?” Mom repeated her question.

After the main office approved of my early dismissal, I walked out and got on the bus.

My sister was MIA. I pondered where she could possibly be. Rose had never caused trouble before. She had always been meek, inarticulate. She hardly complained, so Mom and I thought she was fine. We took her presence for granted.

A dreadful thought of kidnapping came to mind, but it felt implausible. This was probably something silly. She might be taking a nap at a park or eating donuts alone at Dunkin'. If that was the case, I would give her a good scolding. She should know better than making our mom worried sick.

As soon as I got home, Mom urgently handed me a note with a phone number.

"I got a call from a stranger. I couldn't really understand her, but I'm sure she said she has my daughter. I told her my son speaks English so we would call her back."

I called, nervous.

"Hi there, my name's Ella." From her intonation, I could tell she was an African American woman. "I got your number from Rose. Tell your mom not to worry about nothing. Rose is fine. She's with me."

Her gentle chuckle soothed us, and she thankfully explained slowly. According to her, a young girl was wandering alone in the morning. Rose was conspicuous in Westmont, South Central's predominantly Black community.

"When I asked her what she was doing here, she said, 'I'm going to LAX.' I told her you ain't going nowhere without your guardian. A little kid shouldn't be roaming like that, so I brought her to my home."

Now I figured out what happened. Disappointed that nobody would take her wish seriously, Rose decided to act on her own. She studied the map to locate LAX, navigated the bus route, took a bus to go south, got off to make a transfer, and then got lost in the middle of South Central.

I thanked Ella and told her we would pick up Rose. Ella put Rose on the phone. In a muffled voice, she said she was okay and reiterated that she would go to LAX.

"Of course, of course." Mom told Rose. "Wait for us. We'll take you there."

After hanging up, she sighed and said, "Thank God she's safe. Why didn't I think of

that? It never occurred to me that she would try to go to the airport by herself.”

I didn’t predict that either. Rose had never attempted anything like this.

“What’s wrong with her? Why is she doing this?” I made a sour face.

“My fault,” Mom blamed herself. “I failed to fathom how she’s coping with her loss.”

We called a few people for a ride. Aunt Kelly couldn’t leave her work and Pastor Choi was in the middle of his school seminar. I knew who would be available at this hour.

Living in a K-town apartment with her new roommates, Sona was still sleeping when I called her.

“Hyejin never struck me as a decisive girl. She rarely expresses her feeling, you know. Wow, she took the bus by herself to go to the airport? Her love for her dad is amazing. I’m jealous. I hated my drunken, wife-beating old man.” Behind the wheel, Sona rattled on. I was sitting next to her, Mom in the backseat. I held the handle on top. Sona was an aggressive driver.

As we went deep south, I noticed that almost everyone in the streets was Black. It was my first time being in South Central. Same for Sona despite living in America for four years.

“In fact, 40th Street is the farthest south I’ve been.” Sona said as she drove down. “If I had business in Torrance, I made sure to take the freeway, never the local. Aren’t you nervous? I am. It can get really scary here. I heard they don’t even ask for money. They just shoot you in the head and take it.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I said, “I’m sorry for putting you through this.”

“That’s okay. Let’s get your sister and get out of here.”

We followed the directions given by Ella and found her modest house. Sona parked on the street, and the three of us got out and walked. Neighbors gave us curious looks.

Ella, a plump lady in her fifties, opened the door and greeted us. A muscular man in a

tank top was with her. His name was Jerome, Ella's son. I shook hands with him.

Sitting on the sofa was Rose, eating cookies, drinking milk, watching TV. She stood up when my mom went to hug her. She seemed terribly innocent for causing all this trouble.

"Rose loves my homemade cookies. She finished almost the entire jar." Ella's friendly laughter made us feel comfortable. She offered her cookies and soda. Nothing about this house raised an alarm.

"Thank you so much." I said to Ella. "We were so worried, but you were there for her."

"Jerome's father went to heaven five years ago. A car accident," Ella said. "So, I know how Rose is feeling. And I know what you guys are going through. My condolences."

"Thank you." My mom replied in English.

"Make sure you guys take Rose to the airport," Ella said. "I know it sounds absurd, but it will mean a lot to her. Let her cry, let her vent. It'll help her."

"We'll do that," I said.

When we were about to leave, my mom clumsily pulled out her wallet to give Ella some cash as a token of our gratitude. Ella refused flatly.

"Please don't. I had a pleasant time with Rose, and she made me happy. You know what she said about herself when I first met her?"

We looked at each other, unable to guess.

"I'm a perfect girl, I'm a perfect girl." Ella guffawed. "She said that over and over again. Rose is a perfect girl. You guys take a good care of her."

Sona drove to LAX. I feared that Rose would be all dramatic and turn the airport into a sea of tears. I was concerned about my mom who was already extremely vulnerable. To my surprise, Rose didn't make a fuss. We stayed at the same spot where we watched our dad jumping and shouting. Rose just stood there quietly.

I didn't know why it was so important for her to revisit here. Even if she explained, I couldn't have comprehended the psychology of a girl who had lost her favorite person in the world. I had my own speculations. She would be eleven soon. It might have been a necessary ritual for her to carry on without Dad. It was perhaps imperative that she receive some sort of spiritual energy here by recollecting her father's last moments.

We gave Rose plenty of time. Meanwhile, my mom, Sona, and I spoke to one another. Mom had her own time to weep, but tried to control her emotion.

"She's a wonderful lady," Mom said, referring to Ella. "At least I should send her flowers."

"Good idea," I said before turning my eyes to Sona. "Thank you for today, Nuna."

"Thank you for reaching out," Sona said. "Look out for your sister, okay? That's what your dad would ask of you."

"Yeah," I nodded.

"Come to think of it, I haven't eaten anything today." Mom said. "Let's go grab something. It's nice to have an unexpected day off."

"All thanks to Hyejin," Sona looked intently at my sister's face.

Rose turned, following our gaze. She jumped up and down, waving her hands, obviously imitating what Dad had done before he left. Then she walked to our mom and took her arm.

It looked like her ritual was over. Rose had a smile, and it lasted to the parking structure.

She would surely miss her dad, break down, and cry her eyes out at times in her life. But for now, her smile was all we could ask for.

9. *Disintegration*

Nine, eight, seven... I was counting the days for the semester to be over despite having no summer vacation plans. While my worries about Mom and my sense of responsibility towards Rose weighed on me since Dad passed away, I needed some healing for myself. I was a broken soul, and nothing gave me peace. I hated school, but also disliked staying home. I disliked my friends, but also hated being alone.

When Dragon asked me to join his ride to Venice Beach, I said sure. However, Jake, one of the MF members, soon ruined the plan. He guaranteed that some fresh DVDs he'd acquired would blow us away. After loafing around in Koreatown for an hour, we picked up sushi rolls and headed to my apartment. It was not only nearby, but also the only place without anyone home for sure.

Chewing an avocado roll, Dragon glanced at some documents, which included my dad's pictures, scattered across the table.

"Your old man's still in Korea?" asked Dragon.

I hesitated, but told him, "Nah, he passed away. Cancer."

Dragon's eyes were open and watching. "When?"

"Two weeks ago."

"How come you didn't tell us?"

I shrugged.

"What about the funeral?"

"It was held in Korea. We didn't go."

"Damn," Dragon put down his chopsticks. "Losing an old man is a big thing, man. You

should've told us."

I wanted to ask what difference it would make, but I kept quiet. Dead silence suddenly fell over the place.

"You didn't go to the funeral? That's messed up." Jotgory broke the hush.

"Just didn't go, alright?" I said.

"Didn't or couldn't?" Jotgory said with a vile smile. "Don't tell me you are illegal aliens."

"No, we're not!"

"Shit, what's that dirty look, man?" Jotgory unfolded his palms in the air. "You're scaring the crap out of me. I'm joking, okay? Jeez, can't you take a joke? Are we supposed to all solemn and mourning and shit? Chill, dude."

"Play it, Jake. Let's watch it," Dragon said.

Jake was adept at handling my TV and DVD player. We sat down, but just about five minutes in, Rose startled us by opening the apartment door with her key. Jake hurriedly turned off the screen. Rose was supposed to stay at Beyond the Bell, but she unexpectedly came home early.

She looked around with her wondering eyes. I told her these were my school friends.

Dragon tried coaxing her into leaving. "Hey, we are working on an important school project. We need privacy. Would you leave us for a couple of hours?"

"I want to stay home," my sister said plainly. "I'll be in the bedroom."

"Come on, don't you have any friends to play with in the neighborhood?"

"No."

"Yeah, you don't look like you have any," Jotgory butted in.

Desperate, Dragon pulled out a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket. "Hey, take this. Just go somewhere else, get some snacks, and come back an hour later. Good deal, huh?"

I frowned. They were trying to kick my sister out of her own place. For what? To watch

another victim raped and mutilated? Or people having a group sex in piss and period blood?

“You go somewhere,” I heard myself say. “Leave her alone. Get out of my house. All of you. Right now.”

I had never stood against Dragon like this before. Flustered, all my friends stared into my face.

Dragon sneered and said, “Shit, such a buzz-kill. Let’s get outta here.”

They put on their shoes and walked out one by one. I closed the door and looked at my sister.

“You don’t have to go anywhere,” I said.

Not knowing what was really going on, Rose sat on a dining chair and started eating cereal. I flopped down on the sofa.

“Let’s watch something,” I suggested. “How about Gag Concert²⁰?”

A look of surprise crossed Rose’s face. I had been deliberately avoiding all Korean shows in the name of learning English. I had sworn that I would never see anything spoken in Korean until I became fluent in English. But it was okay now. I had no one to impress.

Rose and I watched the comedians performing ludicrous acts and routines. Rose started to giggle. I laughed, too. They were hilarious. Amazing how they played with words. I realized how comfortable I was in Korean. I couldn’t laugh when I was watching *SNL*. Many nights I had no idea why the Top Ten List on *Late Show with David Letterman* was supposed to be funny. These Gag Concert guys were using all these jokes, buzzwords in slang and I understood them.

We binged the show until Mom came home at six. She was earlier than usual.

“Umma, begopayo. Bab-juseyo²¹!” Rose and I jumped up and shouted at her, mimicking the comical tone of the show’s hotshot member.

²⁰ A sketch-comedy television show that ran for 21 years. Now defunct.

²¹ “Mom, we’re hungry. Please feed us!”

Mom didn't laugh. Looking crestfallen, she went straight into her room without a word. When I turned my head, I was surprised to find Pastor Choi standing at the door.

He pointed at me and said, "Gunn, can I see you outside? I've come to speak with you."

Pastor Choi and I stood by the sidewall of my apartment. This was where Dad and I used to chat occasionally.

"You're now the man of the house," Choi looked straight into my eyes, his voice sincere. "I noticed your maturity when people visited here the day your dad passed. You took care of everything, not shedding a single tear. I have faith in you. Will you carefully listen to what I'm about say?"

"Sure."

"Last week, your mom notified the Baes she would quit working at Cana Wedding."

"That's good news," I said. "She can't rot in there forever. She's got a better offer from another wedding shop."

Choi shook his head weakly. He explained. Things didn't go according to Mom's plan. The Baes quickly responded that they would match the competitor's offer. Mom said it wasn't just about money; she wanted a fresh start. The Baes asked her inquisitively why she wanted to move. While evading direct answers, Mom made it clear that her decision was final. She would no longer work for them. The Baes began to lose their cool. Things escalated. They exploded with rage.

You think you can slight us like this? One person we'll never forgive is a traitor. How dare you betray us? Think about where you were a year ago. No one would hire you. You didn't have anything. You didn't speak a word of English. I took pity on you and gave you the job. How many times we gave you a ride home? How many times we tolerated your excuses? How about two grand we gave for consolation money when your husband died? After all that, this

is how you repay us? You knew nothing about wedding business, but we taught you everything. Now you know how to do business, and you will screw us by going to our competitor? You underestimated us. I know everyone in Koreatown. I will make sure you will never get a job anywhere here.

Mr. Bae wasn't bluffing. He took a visit to Mrs. Lim, the owner of the rival wedding center, and threatened her not to hire my mom. Not necessarily because she got scared, but the aged Mrs. Lim didn't want trouble. She called off her offer.

The Baes then sweet-talked my mom that all would be forgiven if she continued to work for them. As powerless as my mom was, she couldn't be more determined not to ever have anything to do with this couple. When Mom gave them final notice that she would work only until they found a replacement, the Baes took offense and told her to leave by this weekend. Out of spite, they wouldn't give her this month's salary.

"How come I didn't know any of this?" I said, exasperated.

"I understand you're upset," Choi said. "I felt the same. I couldn't help but think that the Baes wouldn't dare to treat your mom that way if your dad were alive and with her. It was harsh and unfair, so I decided to step in. I met with the Baes a few days ago. But it backfired. I'm afraid I made everything worse."

"What do you mean?"

"Not a wise move..." Choi kept shaking his head. "As a pastor I told the Baes what they were doing wasn't right according to the teachings of Jesus who had exceptional compassion for widows. I advised that we should put aside our interests and be supportive of your mom. It was a cordial meeting. They listened with a smile and seemed to be understanding. I don't know whether it was all pretense or they agreed with me at least for that moment before they changed their minds. I thought I did the right thing. I wanted to be of help to you guys, you know..."

Of course, I knew. No one helped my family more than Pastor Choi during our first year in America. He was especially attentive to our needs after Dad died. Unfortunately, his defense for my mom added fuel to the fire. Already sore with my mom, the Baes must've had regarded Choi's preachy mediation as presumptuous meddling. Mrs. Bae spread malicious gossip to church members. That Pastor Choi and my mom had a thing for each other. That it was why Mom didn't even go to her husband's funeral. Now, Mom would not only lose her job, but would also be stigmatized as a widow who seduced a younger man—more seriously, a pastor—immediately after her husband's death.

Feeling a tide of rage, I clenched my fists.

Pastor Choi explained himself. "I'm telling you this, because you will hear it somewhere sooner or later. Trust me, Gunn. It has been my delight to help your family, and I have great respect for both your mom and dad. Never for a single moment that the relationship between your mom and me has looked anything like what the rumor indicates. That is a dire insult to your mom who devoted her whole life to your dad. It is also an outrageous accusation against my lifelong commitment to do what pleases God. I thought being single was a way to give myself completely to God, but I had to see that people could use my bachelorhood as a tool to slander. I should've been more careful."

"How could you be more careful? Should you help us less often? Stop giving us a ride to church?"

"Perhaps yes," he gave an anguished look. "Things are going out of control. I don't think I should be around you guys... at least for a while."

I didn't like what I was hearing. Fine if he wanted to distance himself from us, but his usual self-reflection-first attitude made him look like a coward.

"So, that's it for the Baes?" I said. "They have been abusing their power on my mom from day one. Now they make her jobless and dishonor both you and my mom. Aren't you

mad? I know forgiveness is a virtue in the Bible, but what about justice? You'll just let them get away with that? They are evil."

"They are not evil, Gunn. No child of God is evil."

"I disagree, Pastor. I can't forgive the Baes."

"You can, and you will."

"They don't deserve it. I'll smack Mr. Bae in the face. I'll break their shop windows. I will burn their store down. I swear."

"Listen to yourself," Pastor Choi grabbed my arm, entreatingly. "How are you any different from them? Do you know what I loved about your father? Being a pastor, I couldn't fully express myself, but he made my heart swell like when I was a teenager. I wanted to look up to him as my big brother and continue to learn from him how to be a faithful Christian who pursues justice and acts wisely at the same time. You're not acting like your dad right now. You sound more like the Baes."

I bit my lower lips. I respected Choi, but his words no longer resonated with me.

"The Baes are scared," Choi continued. "The wedding shop is their everything. They invested all they had in there. Seeing your mom determined to leave, they had no heart to give her a blessing. They knew well that the customers were coming for your mom. They knew they couldn't run a successful business without your mom. They got scared, Gunn. Scared of losing their business. Scared of going back to gardening. Don't you understand that?"

I didn't want to understand anyone.

"Listen," Pastor put his hand on my shoulder. "Your role is too important now. You must lead your family. Physically, mentally, spiritually. Sorry to put tremendous pressure on you, but I see you have your father's eyes. You're a wise, strong, responsible leader like him. I want to remind you of that. Please don't make me regret coming here to talk to you."

I gave a deep sigh, caught my breath, and then forced a smile. "I understand, Pastor.

Thank you for coming by today. I'll do as you say.”

I lied. I just wanted him to leave. I would lead my family, but not in the way he advised. I wouldn't forgive anyone. No more standing like a punching bag. I was sick of swallowing my anger. Disgusted at myself for always accepting things as they were.

After Pastor Choi left, I punched the cement wall repeatedly. My fists had been trained hard. It didn't hurt me. Nothing could hurt me anymore.

10. Fascination Street

Five, four, three... hang in there a couple of more days and summer vacation would begin. No more school. No reason to complicate matters.

I guess I didn't want it to end that way.

With my strained eyes, I silently looked around the O.K. Corral during lunchtime. I clenched my fists so tight they began to sweat. I was waiting for something to trigger me.

Dong was the MF's target of the day. He was told to stand against the brick wall, and the MF took turns to throw racquetballs at him. A skilled dancer, Dong was nimble and agile, remarkably able to dodge the balls.

"Go Poopoo, go Poopoo!" Impressed, Dragon chanted his nickname.

When it was Jotgory's turn, he didn't just throw the balls, but took time to calculate Dong's movement and take accurate aim. When his ball hit Dong's head, Jotgory raised his hands and yelled out a cheer like the Lakers fans did when Kobe made a three-pointer. Several balls later, one of them hit Dong's face. He fell down, grimacing. Dong's sad expression contrasted sharply with the MF's collective laughter.

I wasn't laughing. Dragon looked at me, his eyes asking why I wouldn't participate. He finally said to me, "Something wrong?"

I slowly stood up from the bench.

"Yeah, you," I said. "You're a moron. That's what's wrong."

Everyone, the MF and the ESL students, froze. Who dares to talk to Dragon like this?

"You're acting weird these days," Dragon sneered. "It was about time I taught you a lesson, but I've been giving you a break, because your old man passed away. I'm that merciful."

Merciful? It made me scoff. I stared directly into his eyes.

“Let’s do it,” I said. “A duel after school. Right here, O.K. Corral. You and me. One on one.”

He laughed hard as if he’d heard the funniest joke of the year. “You’re out of your mind. Nothing to lose, huh? Because your dad died and your bitch is with another dude.”

“Shut up and just show up after school. Don’t chicken out.”

I spat on the ground and walked away.

During the next two hours, I had no idea what the teachers were talking to the class about. I had never tried drugs, but I thought taking them would feel like this. My head fuzzy, ears stuffy, cold sweat on my back.

I headed to the O.K. Corral after the sixth period. Dozens of spectators flocked to watch the fight. The news must have spread fast; I saw unfamiliar faces as well.

Dragon versus who? Really? That skinny dude? Wasn’t he one of Dragon’s buddies?

I heard some of them chattering when I passed them. They probably wouldn’t see a chance of me defeating Dragon. To be clear, I wasn’t all crazy and reckless. I learned how to fight by studying numerous texts and videos, and practiced attack-defense patterns on a daily basis. I also made my knuckles as hard as steel and honed the secret skill that my dad taught me. This fight shouldn’t be as one-sided as it looked. I had a legit chance to beat this guy.

There were Level 1 students who’d never know about the bullying against ESL students but came anyway to enjoy the show. Amongst them was Jeanie in her black tops and short skirts. Mick was standing next to her. The dude who had it all. The dude who dressed up in a tuxedo and took Jeanie to paradise. The dude who must have kissed her, removed her purple dress, and caressed her body. I’d prefer Jeanie wasn’t here. Her eyes briefly met mine. Hold on, was that a worried look? Whatever. I didn’t care. For the first time ever, she didn’t look gorgeous to me. She wasn’t pretty. Not awesome. She was only watching, not talking. If she

uttered a word, I would have fumed at her too.

I felt the gaze of ESL students. My dear fob friends. I wanted to apologize to them. I had shunned them, deliberately ignored them, tried hard not to associate with them. Why did I feel so ashamed of them? I should've felt ashamed of my efforts to belong to the MF. It was too important for me that people wouldn't see me as an insignificant FOB. How phony and childish.

Here I was. Face to face with Dragon.

"You'll die today," he took off his flannel shirt, exposing his muscular biceps. "Any last words?"

I actually had a lot to say. "Let's make a deal."

"Shoot."

"If I win," I said. "Leave these friends alone. No one will carry your bag. No one will do your chores. Nobody will dance or sing for you. Nobody gets hit by the ball. No more bullying, period."

Dragon smirked, "And if I win?"

"Then you just keep living like the asshole that you always are."

"Let's get this over with," Dragon said. "Can't stand your shit anymore. It was my mistake to tolerate your impudence all this time. Then you wouldn't have pressed your luck. You would have saved yourself from..."

Dragon was unable to finish his sentence. I ambushed him and punched his face with all my strength. Practicing with an imaginary foe for too long, this was my conclusion. No, it wasn't what my dad taught. He told me to just push his face. But I had to object. Dragon was too strong, so merely nudging him might not be enough. The heavier blow, the greater my chance of winning.

I aimed at the center of his nose, but it was slightly off the mark. He reeled under a blow

anyhow. As soon as I struck him in the face, I looked down at his legs. I shoved my foot against his shin. Dragon lost his balance and fell. He was on the ground. The next step was crucial. I had to trample his neck with my foot. Press hard. Squeeze it to instill fear. The fear that I would break his neck if he moved. Then the fight would be over. I would win.

When I tried to stamp on his neck, something unexpected happened. He was supposed to be down, defeated, immobile. However, he grabbed my leg and pulled my body. As a result, I fell down too. I quickly got back up, but he also managed to get himself up. We were standing toe to toe again. He touched his nose, which was bleeding. Did I break his nose?

“Fuck!” He shouted aloud, furious. “You’re dead! You’re fucking dead!”

The fight was supposed to be over. Dragon should be fallen on his back, and I was supposed to trample his neck and look down at him with disdain. But Dragon wasn’t down. The fight was still on.

Suddenly, my rage, my courage, my vigor waned a bit. Fear crept on me to replace my bravado. If I could, I would call it a day. Feeling dizzy, I suddenly wanted to call my dad. Ask him what to do now.

Dragon took a step towards me, but I couldn’t come up with any moves. I didn’t have counterplans. No ace in the hole. Dragon swung his fists. I covered my face. Random jabs and punches were thrown at me. I felt pain in my ears, cheeks, neck, shoulders. I fell. I felt a kick to my abdomen. I barely got back up, and tried to swing my fist, but it only opened up a gap for him to strike my face. My cheeks were swollen. One of my eyes was already closed.

“Why don’t you throw another punch, huh?” Dragon yelled scornfully. I did want to throw another punch, but I lost my sense of distance. I wondered what the audience were thinking. The MF dudes might be gloating. Those who were rooting for the underdog would be disappointed. My fob friends... Was I adding another despair to their wretched lives? Did they expect that I would win? I thought I would. Was Jeanie still watching? I didn’t know,

because I couldn't see her. Not only because one of my eyes was shut, but also because I was crying. Yes, my tears were falling. Profusely.

I heard Dragon snicker, "What the fuck? This pathetic loser is crying!"

I was sobbing now. I felt tears running down my face like a river. Jeanie had said there was no worse turn-off than a crying guy. Sorry, Jeanie. Boys do cry. While shedding tears, I screamed at Dragon. In English.

"Fuck you! Fuck you, you asshole! I'm not done! Bring it on, you piece of shit. You're the Poopoo. You're the Feces. You stink the worst of all. I'll fucking kill you! I'll fucking bury you. Come on, you good-for-nothing piece of stinking shit!"

I was surprised at myself how smooth I had become in English, albeit only in terms of swearing. Unfortunately, I couldn't continue flaunting my fabulous competency in English. I was no longer able to speak. I must've had received a final blow. I saw stars. I was down on the ground. I might have fainted temporarily.

The fight was over.

It was all over.

It would be the long-awaited summer vacation.

My back against the hard concrete, I wondered if my dad was looking at me. He wouldn't be proud of me, but I didn't think he would feel ashamed of me either. I missed him. Missed his voice so much. I would do anything if I could only hear him speak to me again...about anything. Korean modern history, gangster tales, politics, his ambitious plans, President Roh, pursuit of justice... That would be nice. If he scolded me why I wasn't studying hard anymore, that would be nice too. A long lecture on how I should help Mom and take better care of my sister... I'd like that. Hey son, that's not how I taught you to fight! You got it all wrong! I could picture him ready to teach me again. Son, you gotta stop watching TV! Improve your English skills and spend your time wisely to broaden your horizons! Just any words would

make me happy. There were so many questions I wanted to ask him. Why is it so hard for justice to prevail? What shall I do when I feel weak and lose confidence? How do I lead my family? How do I protect my mom? What can I do for my sister? Will anyone ever be able to love Hyejin as much as you loved her?

Time glided on. I didn't know how long I stayed that way. I slowly sat up. All the spectators were gone except a few ESL friends including Wonho and Sutae.

They asked if I was okay and whether I needed to go to hospital. Embarrassed, I shook my hand, grabbed my backpack, and quietly walked away from them. Not toward home. I had to figure out what to say to Mom when she saw my mess.

I found myself sitting on the top of the softball stadium bleachers. As my adrenaline had cooled down, I felt chilly. It hurt all over my bruised body including my wrecked face that would probably scare me if I looked at my reflection in the mirror.

I took out my portable CD player. It was my best friend that I would always bring to school even if I forgot my textbooks. I put on my earphones and played the double CDs on which I'd burnt my twenty-two favorite The Cure songs. Jeanie had said it was criminal to listen to songs repeatedly if you really cared about them. I saw her point, but I had a different reason. I had to listen to it so much so that I could appreciate the music without thinking of her. I would make these songs mine, not a reminder of Jeanie.

When it reached the track "Fascination Street," I repeated it three times in a row. Its long intro with thick drum and bass sounds made my heart palpitate every time I listened. "Fascination" was probably my favorite English word. It sounded fancier than "cool."

When I finished listening to the whole two CDs, I wanted to thank Robert Smith who would be chilling somewhere in England. I couldn't imagine how my life in America would have been without his music.

I was back to my reality, remembering what had happened today. Even if I wasn't hurt,

I would probably skip the two remaining school days, because I didn't think I could cope with people's reactions. It was a pathetic fight, but I had no regrets. I felt like something that had been stuck deep inside was finally unclogged. I would choose to say it had to happen. Inevitable.

Just like when I first attended this school a year ago, I was alone again at the top of the bleachers. Still lonely and confused, but I was certainly not the same dude. I rose from my seat and took a panoramic view. I was standing at the high point of JD. Despite the throbbing pain, I raised my left arm up to reach higher. I knew life wouldn't get easy; I could count all the problems that might lie ahead. I muttered to myself. Fine, let's hit opening time.

Outro: Pictures of You

There were loads of things to do on the day after moving. Mom, Rose, and I spent all day unpacking and cleaning in our new apartment. Not an upgrade from our previous K-town apartment, but this place was a bit more spacious while 150 dollars cheaper per month. It was located in Rowland Heights, a suburb about 25 miles away from Downtown L.A. We got to know this area thanks to my mom's former client couple who kept in touch after she arranged flowers for their wedding. Living in Diamond Bar, they had been saying nice things about their church, school district, and the conveniences of this heavily Asian-populated town.

More importantly, after several failed attempts, we followed their advice to take the driving test in West Covina where streets were easy and uncongested. Mom got her driver's license in mid-June, and I, a week later. Mom bought a used Kia Optima. We officially could drive and had a car now.

Our new apartment and neighborhood felt unfamiliar, but we would try to adapt. Rose and I would transfer in August, her starting middle school as a sixth grader and I as a junior in high school.

"Happy Birthday!"

It was still bright in the evening, but Rose just couldn't wait. She put a tall candle and seven short candles on the top of a fruit cake. I sat down at the dining table. Mom lit the candles.

"Make a wish, make a wish!" Rose rushed me.

I blew out the candles.

"What did you wish?"

I made a funny face. "Straight A's in my junior year."

“Nice!” Rose said, already smacking her lips, her eyes on the cake.

“You’ll achieve it,” Mom smiled at me. “I believe in you.”

I cut the cake and we started eating. I wasn’t much of a cake person, but it tasted sweet, and I was glad to see Rose enjoying it.

Mom’s excitement didn’t last long; her face returned to her usual look of anxiety.

“Stop worrying so much, Umma.”

“Sorry,” Mom adjusted her countenance. “I shouldn’t be drooping on your birthday. Looking at this mess and all the boxes to unpack, I’m just...a little baffled.”

She wasn’t just talking about the disarray. I understood her constant apprehension. At the end of the day, she had two children to raise without her husband. We moved for a fresh start, but she had little savings and was under pressure to get a job in no time. We expected to receive some of my dad’s remaining assets from Korea, but the eldest brother of his family pocketed his retirement and insurance money as well as condolence money collected at the funeral. So, our first-bought home was lost because of the good-natured younger brother, and the rest of Dad’s dough was taken by the greedy older brother. We weren’t even mad anymore. These things sounded almost comical by now.

“Everything will be alright,” I said to Mom. “We got this. You’ll find a good job. I’ll work, too.”

“You think you can work while getting straight A’s?”

“Sure, I can.”

Mom grinned, her incredulous expression mixed with concern and tenderness. Whatever her feelings, I meant what I said, and I wanted her to trust me. I would do anything to make my family safe and sound.

Mom took a sip of water and said, “Can you believe it? It will soon be exactly one year since you came to America.”

“Uh-huh,” I nodded.

We indulged ourselves, looking back on our past year, but we were also careful not to say anything sensitive to arouse our emotions.

“Umma,” I said in a casual tone. “I’ve always wondered. Why did we come to America in the first place? I know it was more of your decision than Dad’s.”

Mom took a pause and breathed deeply before giving a long explanation. “After epic business failure, your little uncle lost his home and was sleeping in motels. Of course, your dad reached out his helping hand. As you remember, we had already been looking after your grandmother, and your uncle’s family started living with us in our place. I was extremely stressed. Your uncle’s wife never helped me with the housework, and their three-year-old daughter, Mira, had a strange habit of holding her milk bottle upside down and pressing it hard wherever she went. It became my daily routine to wipe the floor and clean quilts and sofa to get rid of milk stains. Your dad and I quarreled frequently, but he wouldn’t tell me when his brother’s family would move out. He only reiterated that it wasn’t right to kick them out in their dire situation. I was going crazy. When I spoke with Kelly on the phone, I didn’t believe everything she said about the great America, but it would at least provide me with independence and freedom from your dad’s family. And no more cleaning Mira’s milk stains! That’s how I decided to come here.”

When I’d asked my question, I honestly expected a typical but meaningful response. I thought she would say it was for her children’s education or pursuit of a lofty American dream.

“So, it was Mira’s milk bottle that got all of us living in America,” I said.

We started laughing heartily. I wasn’t sure whether Rose truly understood the context, but her giggle was the loudest.

After my simple birthday party, I went into my room and closed the door. I unwrapped my boxes and organized my CDs, books, and pictures. I picked up a photo taken by Pastor

Choi in front of JD High School on the day when my dad came straight from the airport. I was expressionless, but he had a broad smile, his hand laid on my shoulder. I carefully placed it in front of the books on my desk. Looking at the picture, I reminisced about our walk around Hancock Park and recollected his advice that day. I had my path to pursue. No matter how difficult it might be, I wasn't alone. I was walking with people who loved me and whom I should care for. That was my mom and sister. Recognition of this gave me motivation and strength. I would commit myself to improving the quality of their lives. I was determined not to neglect this duty.

The other pictures I found were of Jeanie. She gave several to me when we were close, and I used to feel proud of owning them. I stared at them quietly for a moment.

I heard my phone ring. When I picked it up, I was startled, having an eerie feeling. It was Jeanie. I hadn't spoken to her since the day she hugged me in her neighborhood, and I hadn't seen her face since my miserable last day at JD.

I cleared my throat and answered the phone, "Hello?"

"Happy birthday!" Her voice was jovial. "You're seventeen now!"

"Yeah..." I didn't remember telling her when my birthday was. I wasn't a guy who would advertise his birthday to anyone. "How did you know it was my birthday?"

"You don't remember? You were reluctant to tell me when your birthday was, but then there was a 76 gas station when we were walking down the street, and you pointed at it."

"Wow," I had a dim recollection of that moment. "Thanks for remembering that."

We carried on a comfortable chat. She shared her latest news: her parents bought her a new car, she broke up with Mick naturally as he left for the East Coast, and she had just returned home from a Seattle trip.

"Did you hear what happened to Jotgory?" Jeanie said.

"No."

“He got gang-beaten,” she sounded like she was explaining a TV show episode. “The idiot had it coming. He picked a fight with a small Mexican kid, but a group of his homeboys later showed up to retaliate in front of Carl’s Jr. on Western Avenue. They messed him up pretty good. Two ribs are broken, I heard.”

I’d never liked Jotgory, but it was jarring to hear about such a misfortune.

“What about Dragon?” I asked. “He didn’t help his friend?”

“Dragon’s in Korea for summer, participating in some K-pop band’s album as a keyboardist. Isn’t it the most grotesque sight ever? That prick playing piano.”

I wouldn’t wish Dragon bad luck, but it did annoy me that his life seemed too comfortable. It would be nice if he had a Scrooge night. So that he might see the other side and develop some empathy for underprivileged, voiceless, cowering souls.

“Speaking of Dragon,” I said. “I’m sorry you had to see my fight.”

“What’re you talking about?” Jeanie’s tone went up. “That was the best fight I ever saw. You were amazing. I was worried about you, but I had to leave with Mick. I’m sorry. I spoke with Wonho later and heard that you were okay. I was relieved.”

“Thanks, Jeanie.”

“I’m sure Dragon will think twice before bullying the kids next semester.”

I doubted it.

When she asked me about my whereabouts, I told her that I got my driver’s license and moved to a new place with my family.

“Let me see your face,” she said. “Come on, it’s summer vacation! We should definitely catch up. When can I see you? I can come over to your new town if you don’t like L.A.”

Whoa... Was this what my dad meant? Empty your mind first, then she would come to you.

I did not say yes right away. When she noticed my hesitation, her cheerful voice subsided.

“Did I call you at a bad time?” asked Jeanie.

“No, no... I mean...” I didn’t know how to express myself. But then, that had always been my problem with her. I should be honest with her no matter the consequence. “Jeanie, I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to see you.”

“Oh,” she uttered. I pictured her disconcerted look.

“It’s not because of you, Jeanie. It’s me. I... I don’t know. Whenever I think of you, I don’t know why, but tears well up in my eyes. I’m afraid I might cry if we meet. Believe me, Jeanie. I hate crying as much as you do.”

There was silence on the other line until she said, “I don’t think I would mind seeing you cry.”

I let her hear my soft chuckle. “Thank you, Jeanie. It means a lot to me. Thanks for remembering my birthday. Thanks for calling. Thanks for your kind words. I... I gotta go. Sorry. I need to unpack and finish boxes.”

We hung up rather abruptly.

How astonishing. My heart was overwhelmed with emotion again, and my brain was filled with uncontrollable thoughts and regrets, telling myself how I could’ve better responded to her. No matter how firmly determined I was to live for my mom and sister, a few words of Jeanie could moisten my eyes, turn my world upside down, and plunge me into a vortex of chaos.

Shaking my head violently, I stepped out of my room. Mom was unpacking in her room. In the living room I saw Rose on the sofa, looking sulky.

“What’s up?” I asked.

Rose pouted and replied, “I went out to look around our new neighborhood, and some kids were reading comic books. I asked them what they were reading, and one of them said, ‘go back to where you belong, fatso.’ And they all laughed.”

Good grief. I bent my brows. Taunting a new girl who had just moved here... that was injustice.

After giving some thought, I told Rose to get the "1973 Wonder Woman #205" issue that Aunt Kelly gave her as a gift. We went out together. There were two boys and a girl around Rose's age sitting on the playground.

"Hey guys," I approached them. "We moved here yesterday. This is my sister. Her name is Rose. She came to you and asked a question, because she loves comic books. Take a look at this. It's hers."

A boy in his Anaheim Angels T-shirt noticed it immediately. "This is dope!" He turned his eyes to Rose. "You collect comic books?"

"Sure," I answered on her behalf. We actually didn't, but I thought we could, from now on. The kids took turns looking through Rose's book. My sister sat next to them. I liked looking at her lips forming a big smile and eyes glistening with curiosity.

The tiny playground of this humble apartment had a nameless tree. The rays of the setting sun shone upon us through its leaves. It was a warm July evening. I had turned seventeen. And it was three days before my first-year anniversary in the United States.

Welcome to America.