

## Beauty Looks Down On Me

By Eun Hee Kyung

## Spring Snow

I'll never forget the day I first saw Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. A late spring snow was coming down. As I followed my father into the carpeted Italian restaurant, I realized it was a world apart from any place I'd ever known. Each table was set with its own dainty flower vase and candlesticks, and the air in the room was quietly stirred by the subdued conversations of affluent, refined-looking people skilfully handling Western-style silverware. My father and I were shown to a reserved table beside a window. A waiter took my father's elegant overcoat and my old, lumpy parka and hung them on a coat stand.

As soon as I sat down across from him, I kept my eyes on the large painting dimly lit by a spotlight on the wall behind him. I couldn't look directly at him. The restaurant was warm, and sweat soon began to ooze along my neck. "Now that you're a middle school student," he said, "you must do more for your mother." I nodded almost imperceptibly in response to Father's words. "You can call me anytime." That sounded like a lie. When the food came out, I lowered my eyes and pretended to be absorbed in eating. Father dipped a shrimp in sauce and placed it on my plate. "You have a healthy appetite," he said. "But don't worry. The fat will melt off on its own when you grow up. When I was your age, my nickname was Dumpling." That sounded like a lie too.

Once we'd finished eating and the plates were cleared away, I had nowhere to focus my eyes, so I gazed up at the painting again. Father turned to see what I was looking at. A refined smile rose to his lips. "That's Venus," he said. "The scene where she's born out of the sea foam." Why did I feel so sad the moment I heard those words? Was it because of the smooth, beautiful face like that of a porcelain doll, milky-hued with a touch of green? Or the long, blond hair wrapped around her slender, naked body and fluttering in the breeze, or the defenseless-looking, bare, white feet poised on a great gaping shell? Or was it because of the mysterious sorrow deep in her eyes as she gazed up into the empty air? "I'm sorry," Father said mournfully, when he saw that my eyes were brimming with tears.

Looking back now, I realize that, as I followed my father around that day, I was tormented by the question of why I was born. Each time I fell behind, he had to stop and wait for me to catch up, probably thinking all the while, just as everyone else did, that I was slow because I was big. I was already used to that kind of misunderstanding. Because I was fat, everyone thought I looked angry or unhappy all the time, when in fact I was merely shy. On the days I met Father, I always went home feeling sad because I was convinced I could never please him. My fatness seemed to bother him. Had I been clever and innocent, he would have been the tragic hero, but a fat kid who looks stupid or crabby could never amount to anything more than a reminder of his own mistake, his one moment of folly.

## Venus

Once I was old enough to buy what I wanted with my own money, I hung a picture of Botticelli's Venus on my wall. My friends assumed it was some kind of pornography, since it had a naked woman in it. B said fat people were obsessed with the classics as a form of psychological compensation, a way to prove how refined and sensitive they really were. But neither the sensuous Venus welcoming her lover Mars into bed, nor the pure, innocent Venus standing with Eros holding his bow, were the focus of my attention. To my eyes, even the Venus de Milo with her elegant symmetry, as if nothing better could

ever be imagined, looked like a mere model for an art class. The only Venus in my book was Botticelli's Venus.

That day, my friends and I went to B's house to pilfer some whiskey his parents had bought on a trip to Europe. Throughout the house were bottles of ginseng wine and other kinds of liquor that we would steal swigs from and top off with water. But that day, we didn't dare drink too much, as B warned us over and over that it was expensive stuff. We decided to drink just a drop more of the whiskey that B's father kept in his study, and I went to get the bottle. I liked his father's study—the dust-covered books, the secret solitude, and the faint, fatherly scent hanging in the air. Of all that B had, it was perhaps what I liked the most. I took the bottle from the bookcase, and, on my way out, stole a glance at the book on the desk. I was always curious as to what book B's father was reading. A museum catalogue that looked like it had been bought at his latest travel destination was lying open on top of the desk.

It was a statue of an immensely obese woman. The sagging roll of flesh around her middle made her look as if she was carrying a baby on her back, wrapped tightly round with a thick cotton quilt. Her upper body, leaning forward to buttress breasts the size of stone mortars, was securely supported by a belly like a clay jar and short legs as thick as pillars. There could be no distinguishing legs and arms, or neck and waist, and her face as well had nothing that might be termed features. It was as if an elephant's legs were attached to a haphazardly rolled snowman. The woman's name was "The Venus of Willendorf." The caption said it was a stone Venus made about 20,000 years ago during the Ice Age, preserved in a museum in Vienna, Austria.

I gazed at her for a while, almost like someone possessed. At last, I set the bottle down on one side of the desk and began carefully tearing the page out of the catalogue. After I folded it a couple of times, it fit neatly into my trouser pocket. Even now, I don't understand exactly why I did it. Was it because I had sensed something for the first time, however slightly, about a twenty-thousand-year span of time? You might say, tritely, that I sensed a primitive age inside my body, but in truth, it wasn't without some traces of mockery or cynicism.

These feelings, though, were immediately forgotten when my friends shouted joyfully at seeing the bottle in my hands. Only when I was changing my trousers after returning home did I recall the woman's picture in my pocket. Feeling drowsy from the alcohol, I carelessly slipped the picture between the pages of the first book I grabbed from the bookshelf, then went straight to bed. As I threw myself onto the bed, it uttered a groan as if it were being tortured.

My weight was probably at its peak around then. Those painful PE classes still appear in my dreams sometimes. I had almost forgotten about the woman whose picture I stole, the first time I'd ever stolen anything in my life. But when I stood on the scale in the public bath on Sunday mornings when no one else was around, she would sometimes come to mind. Each time, I would get down from the scale, muttering, "Venus, please, don't bless me. Take from me your bounty and fertility." I didn't remember her so often as to feel an urge to ransack all the books in my bookcase looking for that photo, inserted between the pages of some book or other. I don't know why, but after I became a college student, I tied together almost all of the books I had read in the order in which they had been stuck on the shelves and sold them to a second-hand bookstore. The ever-more faded picture of Botticelli's Venus disappeared during the move.

When I started high school, Father took me out to another fancy restaurant, but once I was in college, I never heard from him again. Mother had a habit of telling me that the older I got, the more I resembled him. Of course, she said that when she was unhappy with me. She stopped talking about him after I started college. It was as though, now that I was grown up, she had come to terms with the fact that Father had left. Though she seemed much freer than before, it was no guarantee of her immediate happiness. It had taken too long for her to reach that point. "Now that you're in college, you have to do more for your mother." Had I met Father then, that's certainly what he would have said. It was really the only thing he could have done for her.

## Phone Call on A Sunday

My thirty-fifth birthday fell on a Sunday. Upon returning from church, Mother prepared the traditional birthday soup made with dried seaweed, which she had soaked in water the night before. Watching television with her after she finished washing the dishes, I declared that I was going on a diet to commemorate my birthday. My mother stared at me dubiously, as if she had just heard those words spoken by a bear preparing to hibernate. I had lived as a fat person since infancy, and that was no short period of time. It's true that it had been uncomfortable, but human narcissism can adapt to any condition, no matter how bad, and find ways to rationalize it. Seeing that Mother had thought for the past thirty years that I accepted my obesity quite naturally, her long searching stare wasn't at all unreasonable. But she didn't seem to have picked up on the reason why I had suddenly decided to go on some kind of a diet. She said reluctantly, "It'll be nice to have more room on the drying rack." Mother had always complained that there wasn't enough space to hang the clothes, even though there were only two of us, because my clothes were all extra-large. It never occurred to her that it might be because she didn't do laundry often enough. "Maybe the house will feel more spacious once you shrink." A tired, blank expression hardened by many years of life came over Mother's face as she turned her head to survey the interior of our house.

A talk show rerun was on cable. As the faces of the program guests appeared on the screen, Mother moved closer to the TV set. Two attractive young men dressed like twins in identical white clothing appeared, shaking their long, feathered hair and smiling brightly as if they hoped to fill the screen with sweetness. Mother had never even heard their songs. Yet they had recently become her favorite celebrities. Each time the two appeared, Mother would invariably ask me, "Which one is Hyeonjung, and which is Hyeongjun?" Mother couldn't tell whether I was right or wrong, but she could always detect an uncertain reply. It wasn't that she really expected a sincere response from me. She had long ago got into the habit of talking to herself as if we were having a conversation, having realized that despite her complaints, there would be no change in my taciturn character. "It'd be easier to tell them apart if there were three of them, but it's harder when there's only two. Like telling a left turn from a right turn." That spring Mother had given up on trying to get a driver's license after she had failed the written test for the eighth time. She must have been thinking that once she gave up on trying to tell Hyeonjung from Hyeongjun, she may as well have to start giving up on more and more things in her old age.

After attending a two-hour lecture to the effect that growing old was a matter of learning the composure needed to accept and resign oneself to senility, Mother stopped going to the Senior Citizen's Welfare Center. Although she had been forced to give up many things in the course of her life, what Mother hated most was resignation and any pressure in that direction. In actual fact, call it resignation if you like, Mother had almost never made any choices for herself. It was no different when she held me to her breast as a newborn baby.

When the program ended, Mother sat back from the TV and asked me, "How many kilos are you going to lose?" When I said I planned to lose twenty, she cocked her head and nodded again. As I went back into my room, she muttered, "Are you hoping to meet someone?" Contrary to Mother's complaints that I was impossible to figure out, I sometimes thought there was nothing she didn't know about me. This was one of those times.

Of course, it wasn't that I had had absolutely no interest in diets until now. You can't ignore what's going on in the world. Nowadays, fat people aren't simply looked at in an insensitive and apathetic way. They're also treated like lazy good-for-nothings who lack self-control and don't take care of themselves. I know that the many blind dates I'd been set up with, and undoubtedly my own mother as well, probably thought at some point that my sexual ability would leave a lot to be desired. B joked that if my weight went over a hundred kilograms, I would have to start counting it in tons. "'0.1' looks better and sounds more aspirational than '100.'" To be honest, if it weren't for your weight, you'd be far too

ordinary in every way.” I don’t know if it was because what B said about me was true, that my weight made it hard to sway me, or if it wasn’t true that I was so ordinary, but I hated being manipulated by conformist values. The only thing that could influence me was not the general majority but certain people who were important to me.

That afternoon, I took the bus and went to a large bookstore in Gwanghwamun. After carefully looking through dozens of books for about two hours, I bought three diet books that I thought offered more persuasive theories than the others. B’s company, which closed on Saturdays and opened on Sundays instead, was ten minutes away. B answered his phone immediately. I told him I’d come out to buy some books, and he assured me he would be there in the bookstore before I’d read even two pages.

However, it was two hours before he showed up. A newspaper reporter is like a husband who drinks heavily: he always offers an excessively logical excuse for being late and never forgets to add that he’s going to have to quit. While talking to me, he read the titles of the books next to me, simultaneously going over the day’s lead stories in his head.

According to B, it would be as if I was living a new life. I would never again suffer the indignity of having someone in a crowded elevator on the point of leaving hit the “close” button as I came rushing up, gasping for air, and was about to set one foot inside. And I would be freed from turning red in the face whenever I tied my shoes, worrying that I might unwittingly strain too hard and let out a fart. I would leave behind the anguish of having to conceal my wounded pride whenever a waitress delivered a meal I’d ordered to some ugly, sloppy fat guy, since all fat people look alike, and having to call her over in a loud voice. “That’s right,” B said. “All of us, including you, will finally get a look at the real you, the you that’s been wrapped up inside those rolls of flesh.” B considered it entirely my fault that his old car had lost its muffler. “Don’t you realize that the bottom of the car sinks so low when you’re in it, it can barely make it over the speed bumps? From now on you, whenever you get on an airplane, a boat, or a playground ride, or whatever, won’t have to worry whether the person next to you is wondering if it’s going to tip to your side.” Ordering one last bottle of soju, B asked, “Why did you decide to lose weight all of a sudden, anyway? Trying to sleep with some girl?”

That had come up during a get-together of high-school friends whom I hadn’t seen for a long time. One of the guys bragged about how he used his company’s corporate card to hit the hottest spots in Gangnam and enjoy unlimited one-night stands. Married friends responded nonchalantly to his bragging, but the unmarried ones gradually leaned in closer. When his entertaining tales of adventures with women at company expense ended, someone sitting in a corner sighed deeply. “I haven’t slept with a woman in 11 months, 3 weeks, and 2 days.” “What?” “No way!” An exaggerated chorus of sighs arose all around, as if they were a paid audience filling the studio seats for a television talk show. I confided to B alone, on our way home, that it had been two years more for me than for that friend. 11 months, 3 weeks, and 2 days! I had brought it up for fun, meaning to suggest that he must have been keeping a daily tab since he even remembered the number of days, but B interpreted my words differently. “Honestly, I don’t think dieting will solve that problem for you,” B said, a serious look on his face. “It’s a matter of how assertive you are. Have you ever tried approaching a woman and striking up a conversation?” Despite having known each other a long time, there were still a lot of things B didn’t know about me. I wasn’t passive about wanting things. It’s just that the conditions under which I lived meant that I always had to first consider, even before I ardently desired something, whether it was okay for me to desire it. Besides, even without B spelling it out plainly, I wasn’t so stupid as to not know that, when it came to sleeping with women, there were many simple solutions that didn’t entail going on a diet.

By the time we came out of the bar, night had already fallen and was waiting for us. “How’s your mother doing?” B walked with me to the bus stop after he’d phoned for someone to drive him home. “Hasn’t she been complaining of boredom since she quit the restaurant?” “Relieved, more like it. I think she still goes there sometimes to eat. She taught the new owner her recipes, so the food tastes okay.” Actually that was a pretext. She was surely bored to death after twenty years of the same food, always in the same place, but Mother had nowhere else to go. “Is she still going to the same church?” “No, she switched to the Full Gospel Church.” I explained why. “She said she couldn’t stand the sight of those

rich Gangnam wives singing hymns so affectedly with their mouths moving like goldfish, so she switched churches because she wanted to bawl out hymns at the top of her lungs.” “Your mother is so feisty.” B laughed loudly, as if he found it funny.

Since it was Sunday evening, the bus wasn't too crowded. As I placed my books on the empty seat next to me, B's words came to mind. It was true that every time I took a seat on a bus, I was careful not to touch the person sitting next to me. Several times I had been unable to bear the misunderstanding of some young woman and gotten off the bus halfway. I smiled wryly. B was different from me in every way; I was unnecessarily complicated and sensitive. He was simple, cheerful and devoid of malice, as befitting a son lovingly brought up in a good environment. I didn't know him as a child, but he must have been a bright, earnest-looking boy.

I turned my face toward the window. The road outside was darker than usual. Perhaps because there were not many cars, the streetlights created patterns here and there on the dark, deserted road. Mother had always led a dull life, and though she desired change, there was nothing she could do about it. The only thing she could change was the church she attended. She had never been a feisty person. If Mother had answered that phone call, she might well have replied flatly that it was the wrong number, that the person they were looking for didn't live there. But then, not only would her hands have been shaking too hard for her to prepare lunch, she would have been unable to look me in the face when I asked about the phone call; she would have ended up wrapping herself in her quilt and curling up on her side.

I'd received the phone call a week before, in the morning, while Mother was at church. It was a young man's voice. He said he got the number from the restaurant, and asked whether he was correct in assuming that I was the son. Then he mentioned Father's name and told me the name of the hospital and the room number. It was a short conversation. It was thanks to a kindly nurse on duty at the hospital that I learned the name of his disease and the date of the operation. “Are you family?” “Yes, I am,” I answered drily, like the young man who had phoned. A week went by after, and the only thing I did was to call up the restaurant to tell them that if they gave out our number to strangers, Mother would be put in a tight spot, and requested that they not even tell her someone had asked for our number. I tried to remember what Father looked like, but my mind was blank. Instead, what came to mind was a fat kid, lost in some sad thoughts and hurrying after his father for fear of losing him.

## Our Daily Bread

Dr. Robert Atkins, a cardiologist, discovered an interesting fact while performing autopsies on deceased soldiers during the Vietnam War. Thick chunks of fat were attached to their internal organs. How could such accumulated fat, a common pattern among older people who eat a lot of meat and get little exercise, be found in young soldiers on the battlefield? It was due to carbohydrates, the staple of their diet. The human body is a big chemical factory. Excess carbohydrates in the body turn to fat; but fat, no matter how much is consumed, cannot be stored without carbohydrates. That's where the theory of the Atkins Diet comes from—eat all the fat you want but no carbohydrates.

Mother, who had run a small restaurant that served rice soup for over twenty years, naturally held the opposite theory. When I told her that I would lose weight by eating fatty pork, she pretended to be puzzled, asking where all that grease would go. I tried telling her that once food enters the body, it turns into completely different substances, but it was no use. She adopted an especially firm attitude when I said that I would completely cut out carbohydrates like rice, bread, noodles, and rice cakes. She was unyielding in her argument that rice is healthy food, home-grown produce eaten by generation after generation of ancestors, and that noodles have only half the calories of rice, while buckwheat noodles are widely known as a diet food. Mother had been watching morning TV programs almost without fail. When it came to the rule that fruit or juice should be avoided, she retorted, “Even sugar-free juice?” “Fruit is high in sugar. And don't buy potatoes, either. Starch immediately breaks down into

carbohydrates.” Mother’s eyebrows rose high, full of confidence. “Can you name one food that is as nutritious as potatoes?” “Yeah, yeah, I know,” I hurriedly replied as if to cut her off, since I was not accustomed to explaining things to Mother. Everyone knows how much sugar and potatoes have contributed to human history. The problem is that this is no longer an era of nutritional deficiency when people need to generate energy at low cost. On the contrary, in the U.S. alone they pour billions of dollars a year into dieting and keeping in shape.

The scale I had ordered through the Internet arrived the following day. People imagine the difficulties fat people face to be simply a matter of having a hard time walking up stairs, or spending a lot on food, but it’s not so. What is far more uncomfortable is the way we can’t do anything without attracting people’s attention. One of the major advantages of Internet shopping is that, just as a bachelor can quietly purchase a “real doll,” a fat person can choose things like large-size clothes or a scale without feeling that everyone’s staring at them. Standing on the first scale I had ever owned in my life, I gazed down at the needle as it sped blithely over the figures.

On my way home, I bought a small spring-bound notebook with pages ruled in blue from the stationery store next to the bus stop. The notebook was held closed by a fabric-covered rubber band and contained fifty pages. Leaving forty-two pages, I tore out the rest then wrote one day’s date on each of the pages with a thick pen. The preparations were pretty much complete.

## The Second Week

As soon as I opened my eyes, I started the day by recording my weight.

For breakfast I ate vegetables with eggs or tofu. I had to change my entire cooking method to be able to eat without getting bored. For vegetables, I alternated between things like tomatoes, cucumbers, and bell peppers. Dinner was meat and fish. I ate slices of grilled pork one day and sushi the next, followed by grilled fish, fried bacon, boiled chicken, grilled sirloin, and so on. From anyone’s point of view, they were decent meals to be sure, but it took more patience than I thought to eat the same food every day. It was a particular struggle to eat all of these things without rice. Until now, I had chosen my meals based on the main items and thought of rice as something that automatically came with them. Now it was completely different. My appetite demanded only rice, and my body went crazy with excitement at just the thought of warm, glossy rice. That wasn’t just because of appetite. Fat can only be stored if it’s consumed with carbohydrates. Thus, my body’s instinct was to plead and clamor for carbohydrates.

Lunch was the most difficult. I offended the restaurant owner by only eating side dishes and not even touching the rice. On the plate of dumplings I had finished eating, only the peeled dumpling skins were left untouched with the stuffing taken out. When I ate bibimbap, I first skimmed off the hot pepper sauce, which was made with sweet rice and mixed with sugar, then carefully removed and ate the vegetables that were set on top of the rice.

When I went to restaurants with my co-workers, they would talk until the end of the meal about the fact that I had started dieting, the incomprehensible aspects of the diet I had chosen, and common knowledge regarding the terrible things that might happen if someone as fat as me did not go on a diet. A friend who joined the company the same year as me made the most scathing comments regarding the side effects of dieting and the yo-yo syndrome, using our friendship as an excuse. The only one among them who didn’t speak was the new female employee, but I could sense that she was using her chopsticks quietly so she wouldn’t miss a word of the conversation. It was all outward encouragement. However, since other people’s problems are a matter of common curiosity anyway, I didn’t enjoy being made its subject. Eventually, I started eating out alone. I pushed all my dinner appointments back six weeks.

Changes began to appear in my body after three days. I felt dizzy, as if suffering from anemia, and began to lose my concentration. Whenever I saw a chair, I sank into it even if only for a short while. I

lost enthusiasm for everything, and even my daily routine at the office became difficult for me to handle. When the new female employee overtook me as I was walking slowly up the stairs holding onto the handrail, she even carried my files for me as she couldn't just stand by and watch. "Are you okay? You look pale." Though I hated the fact that I was drawing attention to myself, I pointed at my head and smiled wryly. "My brain is angry with me." "What? What about your brain?" Since I didn't have the energy to explain further, her wide, innocent-looking eyes began to get on my nerves. The brain, the most sophisticated part of our body, doesn't bother with tedious tasks. Instead of producing energy for its own use, it gets its supply of glucose from carbohydrates; but now it had been getting none. Dr. Atkins said you shouldn't satisfy your brain's demands. Over time, the brain cannot help but adapt to the new system. However, you clearly risk a certain degree of danger by not feeding your brain, even for a short time.

Mother could not help noticing. On the fifth day, ginseng chicken soup was on the table for supper. "Chicken's okay, isn't it?" Mother sounded glib, as if to suggest that she couldn't possibly be expected to know anything about the stuffing of sweet rice hidden inside the breast. I was speechless, unable to do anything but stare blankly at the chicken that was giving off hot steam with the savory scent of rice. Meat was okay, but the instant I chased it with cold noodles or rice and stew, I would start gaining weight—this explanation was so obvious that it refused to leave my lips. Instead, my mouth quickly began to fill with saliva. While I hesitated, my selfish, greedy body had already tucked in the napkin, and was sitting there holding a knife and fork, looking at me with an expression that said: Come on, hurry up.

"Everyone has to eat grain to stay healthy." Staring fixedly at me, Mother uttered terribly tempting words. There was nothing wrong with what she said. You only had to think of a farmer's rice bowl mounded high like a grave to realize it: next to sugar, grains are most easily converted into energy. But in my state, forced to burn up all my surplus reserves, I absolutely had to avoid consuming any more food.

After a light meal of canned tuna and tofu for dinner, I had an unpleasant taste in my mouth, so Mother brought me fragrant honeyed water in a clear glass with ice cubes floating in it. "It's the only way. Listening to your body is the key to health." Her words, as sweet as the honeyed water, were also true. The body, like a baseball trainer, sends us all kinds of signals to control the game called "survival." The problem is that when it comes to fat, there is a complete difference between the satisfaction my body craves and the health I desire. As for my brain, it was increasingly not on my side. It was the brain that was ordering the viscera to stock up on glucose in order to secure energy for itself, regardless of what the other organs might suffer. Frantic to go on storing more, the brain is always three minutes late in telling the body that the stomach is full. Even as I reluctantly waved away the honeyed water, I could feel at the same time that someone inside my body was struggling desperately to rush out, without stopping to put their shoes on, and grab the glass.

Grilled mackerel and pan-fried tofu, which I had requested, were served for dinner the next day. But there was also a bowl of glossy rice and fried squid with noodles on top, which I had not asked for. Everything was in very small portions. Mother declared that everyone knows it's a bad habit to eat an unbalanced diet, and she ordered me to eat a variety of foods but to reduce my intake by half, just as the morning program on TV advised. I ignored her, so she changed her tactics again the next day. In addition to salt and pepper, she used a sweetly scented marinade on the meat, and she even added sugar, which was pure carbohydrates, to spicy chicken soup and fried squid. The less I was able to overcome temptation, the bigger my discontent with her grew. Eventually, I started losing my temper at the table.

It began with me shouting that she had to throw out her old, out-dated beliefs about food and other things. I grumbled that she should let me handle my problems my own way, especially when it came to my own body. But the grumbling grew into nervous criticism. I even told her bluntly that I would never be able to get married, as she so desired, if I failed this diet, and would therefore certainly not produce any fat children. I implied that her current, hopeless life was fate's inevitable revenge for

her one immoral act. I knew exactly how to hurt her. But Mother had enough dignity to despise those who hurt her. Whenever she couldn't get her way, she reminded me of her absolute authority and self-sacrifice on my behalf when I was just a helpless, wretchedly abandoned fetus, and she did so with enough vigor to stuff me back into her womb like a boa constrictor swallowing an elephant. "Why did you give birth to me?" "Why did I have a son like you?" Had we been a chicken and an egg, we still would have growled at each other like this.

The diet was difficult because I had to struggle against the millennia-old system of survival instincts installed in my body. The human body comes programmed with a system, dating back to the age of stone axes, that intensively stores fat. But today's standards of beauty and health call for burning off all of one's body fat. Dieting creates a dilemma between our primitive body and modern culture. I was confronted with dilemmas daily, through different trials in every aspect of my life. One day, upon returning from the archives, I found a paper plate with a slice of mousse cake topped with sweetened whipped cream and a red strawberry waiting for me. A glass of cola sat beside it. With whipped cream already stuck to the corners of his mouth, my coworker waved a fork as he told me it was the new female employee's birthday. I sensed my coworkers all watching the plate and me, as if they had placed bets.

"Have mine, too." I moved the plate of cake to my colleague's desk. Looking at me with an intrigued expression as I handed him the glass of cola as well, he quizzed me as if playing a game. "Why is cola bad for you?" "When you eat concentrated sugar along with fat, the body has a tendency to store that fat." I continued talking in a slow, cool voice. "If you wonder why bad things taste so good, it's because you have the body of a millennia-old primitive man who goes crazy at the mere mention of fat."

I called the other person living inside my body Primitive Man. I gradually began to feel a sense of hostility toward the animal instinct for survival and the systems in my body that were attached to it. Human beings don't have sex anymore just to preserve the species. My birth was proof enough of that. And yet, my body persists in asserting that I am still an animal no different from Ice Age man. Why do pleasure-seeking humans, having resisted the instinct to preserve the species, still submit to the pleasurable instinct to store fat? Is it because the dominant human gene is to seek out pleasure?

I lost weight little by little each day. There were days when I weighed the same as before, but even on those days, my body definitely felt lighter. My watch hung loose on my wrist, and I had to tighten my belt by three holes. Fastening the collar button on my shirt, I realized my weight loss had started primarily in my neck. When I looked at my reflection in the mirror while taking a shower, it seemed as though there was more space in the mirror, and when I met someone in a narrow hallway, I only had to turn slightly to get past without touching the wall. It was easier to catch a cab, too, presumably because there were fewer cabdrivers that didn't want to take me. There were more and more instances in which the new female employee, who had previously been so hesitant to respond whenever I pointed something out, smiled and replied promptly. Once I had lost eight kilograms, I became convinced that this diet was proof that modern humanity represented a new stage of existence, having abandoned the natural choices made by animals for the choices of enlightened civilization. But more importantly, I found satisfaction in the thought that I was resisting my genetic inheritance. In the meantime, three weeks had passed.

### Things You Can Choose And Things You Can't

B paid a visit to my workplace one lunch hour. "Anything goes, so long as you stay away from the carbohydrates? That shouldn't be too difficult?" But B and I had to keep passing by restaurants. Ox bone soup or hangover soup, sushi, fried rice, and curry rice are all dishes that can't be imagined without rice. Even light lunch items such as cold buckwheat noodles and udon are packed full of carbohydrates. Pasta is no different. B stopped in front of a Chinese restaurant. "Meat's okay?" "Yes, but most Chinese dishes contain starch." Standing on the pavement and looking at the signboards of

restaurants around him, his gaze settled without much hope on a sandwich shop across the street. “No good, of course?” “Bread is bad enough, but there’s also sugar in the mayonnaise.” “I don’t care if you eat or not, I need to have lunch.” Complaining that he was losing his appetite, B finally hauled me into the nearest fast food place.

B ordered fried chicken, a cola, and a biscuit, and I ordered a hamburger without sauce. “Won’t you end up malnourished if you keep not eating rice like that?” he asked. “Seems to me that diets work by forcing you to lose weight through malnutrition.” Since every person talking to me over the past few weeks had questioned me about diet methods, I was sick of the subject, but I tried explaining that dieting is more a matter of metabolism than calories. Though lions only eat meat, they don’t have problems with their nutritional balance because carbohydrates are synthesized inside their bodies. On the contrary, even though cows only eat grass, they have a lot of fat in their bodies. Though camels hold fat in their humps, they are able to cross the desert because fat converts into water when it burns. And so on. B snickered. “Wow, you’re like a robot! Don’t change that channel!”

A boy who appeared to be waiting for his mother who had gone to order was sitting by himself across from me and staring at me with a piercing gaze. I don’t like fast food places, and it’s not just because whenever a fat person appears, people immediately think of the lawsuit against McDonald’s. It’s also because they can see up close what others are eating, and because those places are usually full of children. Young children, being candid, stare openly whenever something catches their eye, and most parents only recognize their children’s right to innocence, failing to teach them about the self-respect of people who don’t want to be stared at like that. If they see me eating just a salad, the parents will whisper to their child, “He has to eat just a little like that because he’s fat. But he’s still fat even though he eats so little; don’t you feel sorry for him?” But even if a fat person is eating French fries, a double hamburger, and a coke, they don’t ignore him just because what he’s eating matches his size. They exchange looks that say, “He’s fat because he eats like that,” while suppressing their laughter, then look away quickly when they sense my gaze. It’s not because fat people are large that they are so readily noticed. People stare at fat people because they feel there’s something different about them. I saw the boy watch closely as I ate only the insides of the burger and tossed the buns onto a tray.

B pointed at the chicken. “Want some? You said you can eat fatty food.” “Plain chicken is okay,” I said, “but that looks like it wrapped itself in a loaf of bread and dove into the fryer.” B raised his eyebrows, a bitter look on his face. “This is a real struggle for you,” he said. “Yeah, I envy bears. They lose weight just by sleeping all winter.” “They lose weight in their sleep?” He laughed. “Never knew bears went in for liposuction.” “No kidding,” I said, “nice to know they can afford it.” But B didn’t look like he was enjoying joking around as usual. I could hear the ice rattling as B absentmindedly shook his cup. I changed the topic. “Do you know why human beings overeat?”

During the Ice Age, our ancestors starved on a regular basis. Many died because they couldn’t make it through the times when there were no plants to gather or animals to hunt. Therefore, if they found something to eat after a long period of waiting, they would always throw a big feast and overeat. The purpose of the feast was to store fat, and the purpose of storing fat was to be able to survive the next cold spell, drought, or other time of need. If children don’t eat properly for even a week, their limbs stop growing. According to researchers who study the bones and teeth of prehistoric humans, there is a clear difference in density between the parts that stopped developing due to starvation and the parts that developed actively after a round of heavy eating. The ability to survive didn’t depend simply on eating but on overeating. Therefore, even fat people, whose bodies have ample fat stored up for emergencies, get hungry regularly and enjoy the taste of food. Overeating is a genetic flaw built into the human body.

“So all you have to do is blame everything on your ancestors,” B interrupted me. Strangely, his expression as he scrutinized my face was just like that of the kid sitting opposite. It was the first time B had ever looked at me like he was looking at a fat person. It was like he was telling me that while I’m aware of and struggling against my inner fat guy, the fat guy becomes my true identity. B added, still wearing the expression of a stranger, “What you’re saying is, it’s not your fault because you were born

the wrong way. Am I right?”

I put the empty cup and dirty napkins on my plate without saying anything. He went on. “You seem to really hate the guy you call “Primitive Man,” but isn’t it just you, crying out for fat? You think you’re a highly rational self that commands the being called you, while he’s a primitive person living off of you like a parasite? What are you talking about? He existed before you got the current shell called your ‘body.’ He is you. Isn’t that right?” I picked up the tray and stood up without responding. Clever, innocent children don’t know the reason fat kids who look grouchy and stupid don’t play ball with the others and instead watch them from the classroom window while greedily licking the chocolate in their hands, or the pleasure and stimulating animosity of the sweetness that taints the mouth. Shit, who cares whose genes are inside my body?

### At The Dinner Table

That evening, I returned home and ate grilled pork with half a bottle of soju. I chose soju, according to Dr. Atkins’ advice, instead of the beer I usually drank. Mother had the remaining half. The TV was on behind the chair where I was sitting. Her eyes glued to Hyeon-jung and Hyeong-jun, Mother spoke. “Tell me the truth. Why are you so crazy about losing weight? What’s going on?” I looked down at the sliced pork sizzling on the electric frying pan. The piece of fat left on the pan, which Mother had separated from the lean meat, was sizzling especially loudly. Holding the last glass of soju, I stared blankly at the wall behind Mother as usual. There was nothing hanging on it.

As two weeks had passed since the date of the operation, I thought he might have been discharged from the hospital. However, the patient was still in his hospital room, waiting for a second operation. I wanted to ask how he was doing but hung up the phone instead. I didn’t want to let even the nurse know that I was wondering about his condition. Things went that way because I was determined to suppress my desire to know if the patient wanted to see me. It was the same in regard to the pain his body must be undergoing. It wasn’t that I was unconcerned, but too much relentless time had built up between us, like fatty dregs that thicken the blood, for me to naturally feel pity for him.

I had opened the notebook that was sitting on one side of the table and was checking the dates when Mother suddenly shrieked. “Hey, your body’s not blocking the TV screen any more. It’s only Hyeon-jung on TV today, isn’t it?” I moved aside so she could see the rest of the screen. Mother often joked around when she got tipsy. On TV the pretty boys were grimacing and eating rice cakes stuffed with wasabi as a penalty for losing a game. “Pretty people even look pretty when they’re eating.” Mother began talking to herself. “They say that when you get old, you look gross when you eat. Who wants to look at something gross? That’s when it’s time to take a person’s food away. It’s time for them to die. They say that’s what happens when you stop caring about someone. When love fades, there’s nothing worse than seeing that person eat. Wanting to take food away from someone, doesn’t that mean you want them to die? There’s nothing more shameful than eating. It’s said that liking starts with eating together and love grows at the table.” I remarked cynically, “If you look pretty when you eat, you’ll turn into a pig.”

Mother stopped wiping the grease from the frying pan and heaved a deep sigh. “Why don’t you go out and buy another bottle of soju. You say you’re losing weight but you don’t exercise. And don’t treat rice like it’s some deadly enemy.” Mother suddenly flung the greasy paper towel down roughly and started nagging at me. The more Mother drank, the more her jokes turned into lectures and nitpicking, which would then be followed by sob stories about her unhappy life. “You shouldn’t do that. It wasn’t that long ago that people went hungry because they didn’t have anything to eat. Don’t forget the spring famine. After all, back in those days, people did whatever it took to avoid starvation. Do you know how many families in our neighborhood sent their daughters to work in bars just so they could eat?” “It’s not like that anymore, I interrupted. “People don’t starve to death nowadays, so you—” I gulped down what I wanted to say next because she was glaring at me. Even after I stopped talking, Mother kept staring

hard at me. She looked both mystified and dubious. "What's wrong?" I asked bluntly, and Mother laughed feebly and replied, "Nothing, you just reminded me of someone."

### The Final Week

My body seemed to have completely shifted from synthesizing fat to burning fat. I regained the usual rhythm of my life and the change in my body was apparent from the astonished looks of everyone who knew me. If a client I had not seen for a while dropped by and commented in flattering tones that he hardly recognized me, the new female employee would chime in, saying how remarkable it was. Then she would add, turning toward me, "You have such pretty eyes." Whenever I took a few steps, I could tell that my butt had grown smaller. My footsteps felt as if they rang far more lightly. It was also easier for me to nod since my double chin was gone. "So, this is how you become a cheerful person," I murmured in front of the mirror.

My colleague congratulated me on the change in my belly. He even asked me whether his potbelly had anything to do with the fact that whenever he went mountain climbing, he would grab wildly at trees and rocks rather than tighten his stomach muscles. I explained that since the stomach is the fat storehouse that the body defends to the end, the fat around the belly was the last to go. The new female employee asked me why sweet foods were fattening. The easiest way that the body obtains energy is from a glucose injection. Next come sweet foods. Since it only takes a single step to convert them into glucose, the body naturally seeks sweets when it's tired. Because it's born with a fondness for sweetness, a newborn baby seeks out its mother's milk, which contains sugar, and is thus able to survive. Children, who need a lot of calories in order to grow, also can't help but like sweets. The reason old people are addicted to sweets is a little different. Mother, who could finish off a bowl of sweet-and-sour pork by herself, used to rationalize her gluttony by saying, as if it were a tried and true proverb, that growing old was like reverting to childhood. But, it's not because old people need a lot of calories like children do. Instead it's a strategy for obtaining energy easily, as the aged body, which has grown weak, doesn't want to work hard.

My physical changes were not the only thing. Fat people's larger frames tend to make their feet look disproportionately small and sad, but now I felt like my silhouette had come alive. My suit jackets that used to strain against my arms and back to the point of tearing were now much looser. It just so happened that all the department stores were having sales then. I bought two suits and a brightly colored spring shirt. I felt light-hearted, as if I had just finished preparing for a long-awaited outing.

I called the hospital for the third time. My hand was in a rush to dial the number. The second operation had ended in failure. The nurse, speaking in the same kindly voice, told me I should contact the hospital's funeral parlor. I dialed again with a trembling hand. The funeral was the next day.

I returned home and hung the new suits in the closet. They were different from the other clothes that had been hanging in the closet for so long. They had an air of politeness and dignity, their shoulders bowed forward slightly like they were entering someone else's house. Exuding all the luster and sense of vigor that new things should, like newly appointed replacements with innovative plans, the suits were dispelling the air of gloom that had settled in the long unchanging wardrobe. My gaze stopped at the sight of my old jacket hanging in the far corner. Unlike the new suits, the arms of the limp jacket were sagging like my old flabby shell, and the large space created by the back and chest looked empty, as if nothing could ever fill it. I took the jacket out and slowly removed the dust with a clothes brush. It was the only black suit I owned. I could hear Mother talking to herself in the kitchen as she set the table for dinner. She was probably grumbling about the dishes I had requested. As I listened, I felt a sadness more excruciating than any I had ever felt in my life.

## Children Born By Mistake

Back when we were kids, B used to joke that his birth was a mistake. “If my dad didn’t have 5,000 won for a motel room or 50,000 won for an abortion, one of the two, I would never have been born. But B’s story changed each time he told it. “Actually, my dad did give my mom money for an abortion. But on the way to the clinic, she was passing in front of a shopping center when a beaded handbag in a store window caught her eye. My mom blew all the money for the abortion on a handbag. Her motto for everything is “I’ll deal with it later.” That’s her style. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here. Anyway, that’s how I was born. I competed against a beaded handbag and lost, and that’s how my life began.”

Some days, B changed his story from a beaded handbag to a pleated skirt or a pearl ring. I envied the way he could joke about how he was born.

We were about thirty years old when B told me what had really happened. “The truth is, I used to have a *nuna*.” B’s parents had one son and one daughter, so I already knew B had a big sister, three years older than him.

“I’m not talking about her. I mean the one who was born the year before me. She’s still my *nuna*, even if she did die four months after she was born.”

B’s father was the only son born in his family for two generations; therefore, it fell to him to continue the family line. From the day their first daughter was born, the family elders started pressuring B’s father to have a son. Two years later, when his wife became pregnant again, B’s grandfather didn’t even consider the other possibility and prepared five potential names for boys based on the family’s traditional generation names. But this time as well, it was a girl. B’s father would come home from work every night to find his wife crying under the comforter, holding their baby. When the hundredth day since their daughter’s birth had passed and her postpartum recovery was nearing its end, B’s mother went next door to visit their neighbour. She put the baby down for a nap and took her older daughter with her. When she returned, the baby was dead, face down with her little nose and mouth buried in the comforter. B’s father despaired. Just the day before, he had secretly had a vasectomy. He thought it was the best solution to his family’s irrational expectations, which he found unacceptable. He didn’t want to impose those expectations on his wife after her second pregnancy had left her so depressed. But he thought he would be raising two daughters and hadn’t planned for the risk of raising only one. He went back to the hospital. The doctor told him some sperm could still be alive inside his body, so they might still conceive though the chances were low. Immediately after burying their second daughter, the couple jumped into bed. To their surprise, she got pregnant again and gave birth to a baby the following year. This time it was a boy.

B said he would never forget the shock of hearing his grandfather, who loved his grandson exclusively and believed that girls had no souls, describe it as the time the family narrowly escaped disaster. It wasn’t until much later that B was struck with amazement by the remarkable determination of the sperm that bore his name and stayed alive in his father’s scrotum for four days before emerging into the world and succeeding at its task. The way his newborn older sister had made the entire family happy by breathing her last feeble breath just a hundred days after her birth; the selfish, merciless family instinct that, in the end, whether anyone had intended it or not, conspired to commit murder; the bargain to swiftly exchange death for life—all of it sickened him. His parents had been little more than chimpanzees—the female lewdly shaking her red, swollen genitals, and the male running after her, grunting with nose aquiver. Had his mother really lingered so long at the neighbor’s with no ulterior motive? He had his doubts about all of it, but what troubled B the most in his adolescence was the sense of disillusionment he felt about his father’s desires. How had his father been capable of shuddering in sexual pleasure on the very blanket where his newborn baby’s corpse had lain? The only way B could endure it was by cracking jokes about his own birth.

B’s last words that day were still clear in my mind. “I think I’ve come to terms with it now. Life goes on, mean and dirty, and that’s how we learn about the world—through our fathers’ hypocrisy.”

“Maybe,” I replied coolly. But it’s different for you and me. Your dad slunk behind a surgical curtain to have you. My father never wanted me at all.”

Venus

I didn’t have the courage to go in and pay my respects before my father’s photo. I formally presented my condolence money at the entrance then took a step back behind other funeral guests who were arriving just then before retreating to the hallway. A young man dressed in black came up to me with a friendly look on his face. I reluctantly let him lead me into the crowded room where people were eating. No one took any notice of me. Of course, it wasn’t the sort of place where people show curiosity toward others, but then I realized that I was no longer so fat as to be conspicuous. I thought I would just sit near the entrance briefly and leave right away, but the young man in charge of the funeral arrangements politely asked me to sit further inside. There was an empty seat in the corner. I sat and stared blankly for a moment at the liquor bottles and food that were set out on the table.

A middle-aged woman with a white pin in her hair came to me carrying a bowl of soup on a tray. She set the bowl in front of me and gave me a friendly look; the whites of her eyes were bloodshot. She seemed to be a relative of the deceased. “Have some soup and rice. It’ll warm you up.” The spicy smell pricked at my nose, while the white grains of rice floating in the oily red broth already had me excited. However, instead of picking up a spoon, I quickly opened a soju bottle so that the grief-stricken woman with her kindly air wouldn’t feel embarrassed. Other guests kept coming in, making it hard to get up, so I just went on drinking soju. The soup quickly cooled off. Almost all of the seats were filled, except for the table I sitting at. As luck would have it, it seemed to be reserved for relatives. All my life, I had had almost no relatives. Ever since I was young, my mother didn’t like outings with her family, where they got together and attacked each other with unwanted advice. My father’s relatives greeted each other warmly, remarking on how long it had been, and after briefly shedding tears, set about sharing food and drink while talking loudly about all kinds of things. I had always imagined the people of my father’s world. All the adults would be dignified and warm-hearted, and the children would be innocent and clever. But these people who were gathered to mourn Father were the same as those I had always seen. Their wrinkles expressed both joys and sorrows, and while they seemed wearied by life, they apparently led ordinary lives, comforted by small things or putting on a brave front. There were also quite a few fat people. That was one more reason I hadn’t thought of as to why no one looked my way. It didn’t matter. They didn’t know me, and I didn’t know them.

“Oh, why didn’t you eat? It’s all cold now.” The same woman returned and brought me fresh soup even though I told her it was okay. Judging from the way relatives were addressing her, she must have been a sister of the deceased. A young man sitting next to me offered me a drink. “Excuse me, but I’m not sure who you are...” Instead of giving an answer, I quickly emptied the glass and returned it to him, thinking it was time to get out of there. The man didn’t ask me any more questions. Instead, he pointed to the steaming hot bowl of rice soup. “It’s okay. Please, go ahead and eat.” The reason he kept stubbornly pressuring me to eat was probably because it’s a given that an unknown person drinking alone in a place like a funeral hall, where friends and family gather together, has some kind of problem, and to anyone looking, I was drinking too fast. As I didn’t have the heart to shake off the blameless demands of the man, who even went so far as to put a spoon in my hand, I finally began eating.

Once I had chewed the grains of rice, they slid smoothly down my throat. I could feel my body cheering madly. My stomach squirmed like it was dancing while my insides grew warm with pleasure. Here are those carbohydrates you’ve been wanting so much. The spoon’s movements grew ever quicker. I had a strange feeling while I was shovelling in the rice soup. More than the affection of a father feeding his starving children, I felt like a messiah saving a suffering body. Feelings of despair and a self-destructive, impulsive spite accelerated the movement of my arm. In a flash I had completely emptied the bowl at a voracious speed, even dribbling some of the soup from the sides of my mouth, as befitting

an uninvited guest at a feast. As soon I swallowed the last drop of the soup and set down the bowl, the woman in the white mourning dress approached me and asked, as if she had been watching me: "Would you like another bowl? You had so much to drink." Her kindness might have sprung from a wish to avoid having an unknown drunkard make trouble at the wake, but I happily replied yes to the sister of the deceased, like a child eager for praise. I started gulping down the second serving at an excessive speed, slurping exaggeratedly.

In the age of stone axes, human beings were always hungry. So they diligently stored up fat whenever they got the chance. The human body has been unable to adjust to the present, where there is a surplus of fat. But we will eventually evolve. After all, isn't it typical of humans to keep pushing a rock up a hill even though they know it's bound to roll back down again the moment they reach the top? That's right. There's no hurry. It took tens of thousands of years to discover a technique for sharpening stone axes. That's one way of looking at it. Sometimes in life people are shipwrecked, suffer city-wide power outages, or are cut off by blizzards and forced to starve; how are they going to cope with such disasters if they have no fat stored in their bodies? So, it's still an effective system. Truly, there is no machine as honest and obedient as the body. I nodded deeply. After all, hadn't I lost twelve kilograms by not eating any carbohydrates for a whole month? My body had kicked and struggled, determined not to submit to my will, but in the end it was bound to yield results according to my design. It turned out that my body really did belong to me. Okay, then. Now, the primitive man inside my body is having a party on hearing that rice is on the way. If I eat rice soup like this, my body will immediately start to accumulate fat again. Then Mother and I will sit together again at a peaceful, loving meal table.

As I raised my head from the bowl of soup that I was devouring, someone addressed me in a loud voice. "Hey, you must be the third son?" He had half risen to his feet, while I sat bewildered. "When did you get back from the States? You're starting to look more and more like Uncle." "No." Dribbling soup, I dropped the spoon and staggered to my feet. At that moment the thought suddenly came to me that everyone there knew about me. I was gasping and my face turned red. I felt queasy, as if I were about to vomit. Pushing my way through the crowd I came out into the hallway and collapsed into one of the plastic chairs neatly lined up side by side. Through an open door, I glimpsed the room where the photo of the deceased was enshrined; it was completely empty. They must have been eating, because neither the chief mourner nor any other family members were to be seen. Far off I could dimly see Father's picture. Staggering slightly, I began to move forward to see what Father had looked like once he was really old.

Perhaps I had kept looking at Botticelli's Venus to avoid looking at something else. Whenever things I didn't want to see rose again and again before my eyes, Venus intercepted them and took me to another door. Then she told me the story of her birth. The youngest son of Uranus, the god of the sky, hid in his mother's genitals to cut his father's penis in half when it entered, and threw it into the sea. White froth gathered around his father's penis as it drifted in the sea, and soon after, a beautiful maiden was born in the foam—a goddess who would bring abundance and beauty to the world. But she couldn't free me from everything. In the end, the image remained of myself standing in front of a door that was always closed. In front of the door that wouldn't admit him, the fat boy took the clumpy parka, which looked even shabbier for being the only one left on the coat stand, while outside the snow fluttered down.

Ever since some point in my adolescence, another figure had sometimes appeared and disappeared behind that picture. It was a naked women standing firmly on elephantine legs, her entire body wrapped in fat like a pelt. She was another goddess: the Venus of the Ice Age. Anthropologists say that a woman as fat as that couldn't have existed in those days. Such a woman existed only in the mind of the artist who created that Venus. The artist of the Ice Age had imagined the most beautiful and voluptuous woman in the world, and she was the very picture of divine food.

I saw the oldest son of the deceased walk into the room, preceded by two children in black. When our eyes met, he bowed his head slightly to greet me as if I were someone he had been waiting

for. With his hands on the shoulders of his two fat sons, he looked at me for a moment with a superior glint in his eye, like my father had when he was younger. Father's portrait hung behind him. Scowling at him, I walked resolutely towards the portrait. Just as I had seen a world that differed from my own at that Italian restaurant, Father should also have seen a son who differed from what he knew. But he left with the memory of a fat boy. As I looked at Venus, I thought that all of the beautiful things in the world were looking down on me. I bowed slowly before Father's portrait, rose, and turned my face to spit a grain of rice out of my mouth. The queasiness, as if I were about to vomit, rose up in my throat once more. At that moment, the eldest son took a large picture frame that had been leaning against the wall from behind the funeral wreaths and handed it to me. The frame was meticulously covered in newspaper, as if it had been wrapped at home. It had been a long time, but the dimensions of the frame looked familiar. I did not ask what it was.

*Translated from the Korean by Sora Kim-Russell*