KIM Seo-ryung

“Where Should I Go?”

I am going to disappear.

My mother-in-law looked up.

“What did you just say?”

I raised my chapped hands and rubbed them over my face. There were dry patches at the corners of my mouth from not sleeping for several days now.

“I said you have to disclaim your inheritance. It’s better that way. He didn’t leave anything.”

“You……are in debt?”

I almost laughed in her face. How else could we have gotten this apartment if we didn’t go into debt. How else could we have opened the clinic to the tune of 300,000 dollars for the deposit and 20,000 dollars rent a month if we didn’t borrow the money.

“If you are in debt, you can sell off the house. How can you say such a thing to me, disclaim my own inheritance?”

I could have pounded my chest out of frustration. This apartment, which we did not own, was already mortgaged to death and we had lost the deposit for the clinic because of back rent. All of the equipment was going to be seized, too, as we had never made a payment for them on time. And what was I going to do about all that credit card and loan shark debt? B had left me with so much debt I could never pay it all off, not if I worked every day of my life until I died.

I was too tired to go into the details. I laid myself flat on the floor as if all the bones of my body had crumbled to ashes. The floor was stone cold because it had not been heated while I was at the funeral, causing me to shudder.

“Heart attack?”

Nobody at the funeral believed it. Their snorts of derision were low and cold. They shot daggers at me—nothing else bound them to the money B owed them. Oh, they still paid their respects, quietly laying a chrysanthemum in front of B’s picture and bowing their heads to me, but every time I bowed back I could feel the tips of my fingernails rattling. I am so sad right now. I am so sad and afraid I could snap in two pieces, so please do not look at me with such hateful eyes, I begged them silently.

It was pure fear that held me in thrall. My mother-in-law fainted repeatedly at the loss of her oldest son and her greatest pride, but I had no time for her.

B did not end it so cleanly.

His wallet was bursting with rolls of cash. All of his credit cards had been blocked a long time ago. He could have not gotten a cash advance, so he must have borrowed on whatever he could from a loan shark. What did he put up for that cash, I wondered.

B’s last stop before he went to his office that dawn was a hotel near the clinic. He had sex on the 17th floor there, the hotel where he usually parked his car.

“I thought he was acting a bit strange. Laughing and crying.....like he couldn’t control himself.”

B’s last sex date was actually tearing up. She worked at the hourly room salon in the basement of the same building as the clinic. B showed up at the room salon alone, she said, and polished off a bottle of Glenfiddich by himself before taking her to the hotel.

Laughing and crying….. Couldn’t control himself, eh? So he was desperate. Of course. He must have been paralyzed with rage and stupidity and the unfairness of it all. Better to cry than to agonize over what went wrong. It was a blessing not to have been B’s last sexual partner. I did not want to remember B like that.

The police let her go after a few routine questions, uncomfortable at our meeting. Did B climax as he stroked the soft skin of her naked body. Was he happy, if only for that infinitesimal moment. I almost stopped the girl as she scurried out the interrogation room to ask what his expression was like at that instant. Not that it would have made a difference.

What was the last time I had sex with B like?

It was not such a long time ago. He was sober when he came home and he took a long shower. And he slowly buried his face in my breasts. For a moment I felt sorry for him. He got a late start at med school, quitting a perfectly good job at a big company to do so. Afterwards he began his residency at a university hospital but soon quit that, too.

“I don’t think it’s necessary to waste all this time on a specialty. I’d rather open my own practice.”

He said after he proposed.

“Why do you want to marry me?”

I asked my twenty-eight-year-old question, and he gave his thirty-eight-year-old reply.

“Motels are such a waste of money.”

I thought it was an appropriate joke coming from a man who hated declarations of affection.

I thought so because there was an almost-wink in his eye when he said it. It seemed ridiculous to me as well, to drop fifty dollars a night on a motel two times a week. And so we were married.

I stroked B’s back as he breathed in and out slowly, his nose in my breasts. At forty-six his back had gone soft. The memory of feeling all the little bumps of his spine, the first time I held him, could have belonged to someone else. What a long way we had come.

Our 140-square-meter apartment in the new town was a splurge to begin with. Neither of us had anything, but the loan specialist at the bank was extremely helpful. We borrowed everything from the bank, the rental deposit for the apartment, the rental deposit for the 130-square-meter dermatology clinic, the money for the laser treatment equipment. My mother-in-law sniffed at my qualms, saying,

“As if a few years’ work won’t take care of that, such a fuss over nothing……”

B furnished the clinic chock-a-block with antiques and learned how to operate the laser equipment from the salespeople that came to set the machines up. The receptionist was dressed in a neat uniform and a slew of nursing assistants were hired. The shiny glass doors of the clinic, however, remained resolutely shut. He came home in a highly inebriated state and reported sardonically,

“I saw the door open twice today. Once for the silken tofu soup delivery, once to take the dishes back.”

Every commercial building in the new town had two or three dermatology clinics setting up shop in it. It seemed like there were bigger, fancier clinics opening every day. Apparently B was stuck there all day, doing underarm hair removals for the three or four young women that showed up. He tried changing the laser equipment, and offered special discounts. When the clinic relocated to a new building a few blocks away the opening had to be postponed because all the nursing assistants quit, angry over back wages. I tried to cajole him into taking a paid position at a hospital, but B would not listen. In the meantime the layers of fat built up on his back and my calves lost their firmness. Of course our debt snowballed far more quickly than that.

B raised his face from my chest and lifted my left leg. In one motion he pushed himself deep inside me. I let go of my breath, which I had been holding, and a long, weak sigh escaped from my throat. B paused for a moment at the sound and looked at me. A brief silence. B frightens me when this happens. He knew it, too. Seeing that his next move was to stroke my face slowly.

“You like that?”

He asked in a husky voice. I could not answer because his heated fingers were caressing my lips. He began to move rapidly. Slippery sweat dripped off him.

B, you were lonely too.

I almost teared up. Oh, B. Sometimes I don’t know what’s going to become of you. I responded to him purely out of pity. The body follows the heart, there was no denying that. For the first time in a very long time I found myself tightening around him.

“You like that?”

Don’t ask me that, B. But he did, again.

“You like that, don’t you.....answer me. You like that?”

I had to give an answer.

“Yes, I like it.”

I pulled him towards me by the back of his neck, afraid he would want to talk more. It was better to cover his mouth with a kiss. His face had come close to mine when B grabbed me by the hair at the top of my scalp. My head was yanked backwards. He applied more and more pressure to his grip.

“You really like it, don’t you? Isn’t that true?”

I could not speak or move my head. I managed to let out an affirmative whine.

“I thought so. This is all you know, isn’t it? You just…… love it when I fuck you to death, don’t you?”

I whined again. My neck felt like it was going to snap. His movements grew faster and more erratic. He breathed hot, heavy breaths in my face. Everything about him repulsed me. He did not let go of my hair.

Not long after, his knees went slack as he let out a deep sigh. B only let go of my hair once he had rolled off me. A cough burst out of my throat.

That night, I dreamed.

I had almost forgotten. The unfamiliar sound of something fluttering towards me, as I lay curled up in my dark cell. I raised my head and saw the blue and red and yellow lights glittering outside the window. It was a butterfly. A butterfly with huge blue, red, and yellow wings. I cowered even more, afraid of the insect that was trying to force its way through the barred window. It succeeded, twisting its wings out of the bars, and flew straight at me. The particles of light that covered everything in the cell when it spread its wings. They glittered dangerously. I allowed the butterfly to fly towards me, as there was nowhere to escape anyway. And I woke up. B was asleep, naked. I murmured in a low voice, so as to not wake him.

I need to disappear.

Mint-flavored gargle. A bit of eyeliner and fresh lipstick, and I’m almost ready to go. Something is missing, though. I try on a pair of small silver earrings. They brighten the inside of my cheeks. This is my first day back at work in five days.

The other employees are hesitant with me, unsure of how to offer condolences to a superior who was just widowed. I set to work as usual, taking care of all the business that had piled up in my absence. The secretary’s office called me to let me know President Ji was there. I cleared my voice in front of the bathroom mirror, giving myself a pep talk. I was determined to be remembered as the flawlessly poised Manager Park to the very end if it killed me.

“I’m so sorry. There are truly no words. No words.”

President Ji leapt up to give me a hug the moment I entered the room.

The president appeared to be more distraught than I was, so much so that I ended up doing the calming down and ushering back to the president’s seat.

I had already expressed my desire to leave the company, at the funeral. But here was President Ji, pretending like it never happened. I could see where this was going. But it was time for me to go. I silently held out my letter of resignation.

“Look, I know you’re having a hard time. Why don’t you take a nice long rest. You could come back after the 49 days of mourning, if you want……”

“I don’t want to come back. I’m resigning from my position.”

I said, interrupting. I was tired. President Ji buried her face on her desk.

“What am I supposed to do without you? How can you do this to me?”

I would bet anything that the twenty-odd employees of L Cosmetics Korea, Co. Ltd., had never seen President Ji this way. Now in her late forties, President Ji wore her hair in a short bob and rarely spoke more than a few words, preferring to communicate through a well-delivered “Tsk-tsk.” Her employees exhaled through their noses silently every time they heard the tell-tale sound. It was my job to interpret the president’s “Tsk-tsk.” If President Ji clicked her tongue when one of the employees bowed to her in the elevator, it could mean that the employee’s woolen skirt was pilling or that her foundation sitting too poorly for someone working at a cosmetics company. If President Ji clicked her tongue during a meeting, it meant that the employee doing the briefing was an ‘imbecile who didn’t have the foggiest idea about the French head office’s concept.’

The other employees looked to me whenever they heard President Ji utter a “Tsk-tsk.’ And they would apologize to me.

“I’m sorry, Manager Park.”

This was my cue to give them a sound verbal lashing on all the ways they had failed to live up to President Ji’s standards. They were like a bunch of country girls who would never be stylish, no matter how many tips I gave them. The girls, of course, must have had their side of the story. L Cosmetics had stores in every shopping mall and duty-free across the nation. It was the industry’s most recognized brand for body products, in particular, but at the same time it was also known for paying the lowest wages in the industry and its stingy practice of never giving samples to its employees.

The company sold cosmetics to its employees at a 30 percent discount, 50 percent for assistant managers and up. None of the employees used L Cosmetics’ overpriced products. Press releases and promotions were cobbled together from translations of the main office’s product descriptions. Everyone was expected to be at work by eight o’clock according to the company’s policy of starting the working day early, yet nobody left the office at five. By contract employees were entitled to a day’s leave of absence per month and 14 days of paid holiday a year, but nobody dared to take them. They quit instead. The longest the company ever kept an employee was little over a year. Such was their reputation in the industry that it was said anybody who had worked more than six months for L Cosmetics deserved to be hired immediately.

This was the place I worked for eleven years.

After graduating from university I went to America, where I enrolled in an English language course. I bluffed that I would earn my own living expenses, except that I could not. Mom was already struggling to pay the tuition of my two younger sisters but she could not let her oldest daughter starve, so she kept the money transfers coming.

And I still did not go back to Korea. The day I was accepted at a fashion school in New York I sat up all night, clutching the acceptance letter in my hands. I could barely contain my excitement. Surely this was my first step towards a new life. It was the period of my life when I believed that I was going to grow old as some replaceable office worker, which I believed to be my only job prospect as a graduate of a no-name university outside of Seoul. With the letter in my hands I already felt like a haughty New York fashion editor.

I could sense the blood draining out of Mom’s face even over the phone, but I insisted.

“Just get me registered. I can earn the rest while I’m at school. I can’t go back like this, Mom.”

It wasn’t easy. Nothing went the way I hoped it would. I washed dishes at a Korean restaurant well into the early hours of the morning, and when I woke up it was already past noon. I was flunking every class. It looked like I would never graduate. That was when I met President Ji.

I had landed a temporary job as her assistant while she was in New York. I was up to my eyes already but I was not even making rent. I needed the work. I brushed her shoes and fetched her well-pressed suits from the laundry. I was twenty-five years old and thought she looked impossibly beautiful and glamorous. The star-struck admiration in my eyes was plain for anyone to see. What a ridiculous little wretch I must have seemed to her. It was past my working hours, but I drew a hot bath and squirted just the right amount of toothpaste on my employer’s toothbrush.

While she was in the bathroom I folded back the covers of her bed invitingly. I was fishing hard for a tip when I did that. Instead of a tip, however, she opened a can of beer and handed it to me.

“Did I ever tell you……how cute you are?”

There was nothing to think over. I followed President Ji back to Korea. My family believed that I graduated.

President Ji knew better, but that did not stop her from bragging about my New York fashion school credentials to the rest of the employees at L Cosmetics. I saw no reason to correct her. My salary was less than I expected, but as the New York-educated secretary of the President of L Cosmetics Korea I was more than satisfied with my new self.

And here I was at thirty-six, Manager Minyoung Park. I still took care of President Ji’s dog’s vaccine appointments, and berated her personal housekeeper on her behalf. She had a hard time finding bras that fit her in Korea so I went shopping for her every time I went on a business trip, and every morning I made her a glass of milk mixed with freshly grounded organic black beans that I had waiting on her desk. After three years of the black bean treatment she stopped going grey. I had my hair colored twice a month at the salon.

“Why don’t you take a trip to the head office in France. Relax, maybe travel a bit.”

That is not what I want. President Ji lets out an exasperated shriek before I even answer, though.

“Shut up! Don’t you see what you’re doing to me? I said you could take a vacation. What more do you want from me?”

“Please, just……let me go.”

“Minyoung!”

She hadn’t called me by my first name in years. This must really be getting to her. There is no time of my life I dream of going back to. Not my university years, spent obsessing over things I didn’t have, and certainly not my years of drudgery in America. I wonder what kind of past other people have to look back upon so fondly.

She looked like she was going to cry now. I was past dealing with her tantrums.

What was I going to take to disappear?

I sit at my vanity table for a long time, thinking. I choose a moisturizing lotion and cream and some makeup products and stare at them blankly. A few pairs of shoes and suits, and was there anything else? I wish I could take the China teacups my younger sister brought me from England as a birthday present but decide to leave them. They would be too bulky to carry around, wrapped in protective layers. I would get a new toothbrush and toothpaste when I got to wherever…… My good earrings and necklace go in, and I am done. These are the only things I own in this 140-square-meter apartment. Incredible as it seems.

I wonder what will happen to the other odds and ends lying about the house. The thought of them being abandoned weighs me down briefly, but I turn away. I could cry, but there is nobody to give me a pat on the shoulder and has not been for a very long time. So I do not scream, though I want to.

London is my first destination because of its many connecting flights to other European cities. I had chosen my next destination carefully, obsessively checking maps of the world on the internet because it was not on my small desktop globe. I had to go where no one would recognize me. I was willing to mop guesthouse floors or wash dishes at a Vietnamese restaurant if it meant I could go completely incognito. And so I found myself on a plane going from London to a small island nation in the Mediterranean.

By the time I landed on the island it was already late. A light drizzle sprayed about in the night. It was a small, dark city. I had written down the address of my hotel but the taxi driver could not find it, so I had to call the hotel many times until we found the place buried deep inside an alley. My room was on the fourth floor and there was no elevator, but it appeared that the thought of helping me with my baggage never crossed the fat, lazy proprietor’s mind.

What are you doing here?

The ghost of B was breathing down my neck and in a panic I grabbed my trunk and lugged it up the stairs. There was a chill in the room that was impossible to get rid of because the windows did not close properly, and the covers were cold and hard. The bathroom tap yielded only a grudging stream of milky, calcified water. Was it my walk in the rain? I felt like I was coming down with a chill and a fever. It was a long night.

I opened my eyes but there was no clock in the room. My watch was still set to Korean time. Unsure of the time difference, I went to look out the window. The rain had stopped. It seemed like it was still early in the morning, to judge from the temperature of the wind on my face.

From my window I could see all the way down the narrow alley. It felt like the strangest view I ever came upon in my life.

Whitewashed houses were crammed against each other on either side of the cobbled road. Rows of white and blue-painted doors hanging one after another, with the pearly sky peeking in between the roofs. A salty tang wafted in on the wind but the sea was nowhere in sight. Oh! There was a white-robed monk walking towards my window. The sound of the small bell he held in both hands, tinkling…… I slammed the window shut. I felt properly frightened by the overly unrealistic sight that greeted my eyes. What had I done? Why had I come all the way here? My heart raced. I wanted to take a hot shower but the bathroom tap refused to run anything greater than a trickle.

Looking back, I always wanted to disappear from them.

I wanted to fall asleep before he did. Seeing him was hell for me, too. Every night he spread his bills out on the living room table and made notes. Card A had to be paid off this Thursday, so he was going to get a cash advance from bank B in the meantime, and card C had to be paid for next Monday so he was going to see if he could mortgage the car…… and couldn’t I cash my retirement money now? That was his routine. And if he still did not see how we could make it past the end of the month he would lie on the bed, blue in the face, staring up at the fluorescent lights. The look on his face was that of a dead man.

“I’m going to be a little late today. Don’t wait up for me.”

One night he called me when I was watching the news. There was a fire in the subway. So many people, burnt to death. I replied to B distractedly.

“Is something wrong? What happened to your voice?”

“Oh my god……somebody set fire to the subway. Those poor people. A lot of people died.”

“You mean you still care about that sort of thing? I’m totally done for trying to save my own neck.”

B snorted, and I sighed too low for him to notice.

“Sorry. It was just a bit of a shock. What time are you coming back?”

I knew what he was going to say next.

“Do you even care?”

Yes, that was it.

“Sorry.”

“That’s some life you have. Watching TV, worrying about strangers. I wish I had the time for that.”

Please, will you shut up…… Of course the words did not come out of my throat. I did not want to fight with him. I wished I could turn all the lights out and sink back into a couple of fluffy pillows and just drift away, if only once, before he came home.

That night, B choked me for the first time. He was the kind of man that could drop everything to come home to strangle me. It was as if there were razor blades hidden in his eyes, nose, lips, fingers, knees……right down to the little bumps on the inside of his ankles. I cowered away from those razor blades every hour, holding myself tightly together. My shoulders were ready to crack from being hunched all the time.

The hotel kitchen was closed and looked like it had been for a long time. Or perhaps there had never been anybody to cook for in this place. I stepped outside to get something to eat when some children came yelling after me. At first I wondered what was going on but it turned out that I was the attraction, the dark-haired Asian. I also noticed a woman with a baby on her back watching me from her window. She gave me a shy smile when our eyes met, but then she disappeared.

I walked down to the beach, where there were ruins of the old city walls everywhere. Probably they had been destroyed during the second world war, or even before. What kind of place had I come to? This place was strange. I thought I had been to my share of faraway places, but never anything like this.

In the end, B was found on the exam table in his office. They said that he had injected the anesthesia into his own arm. What were his last words when he plunged three 50 ml bottles of anesthesia into himself, one after another? Did he curse the world in all its cruelty, or did he breathe a sigh of relief that he never had to answer another call reminding him how much money he owed? Was he that afraid, B……enough to choose not to wake up forever?

No, I did not want to know any of that. I had spent too many hours wishing I could kill him, too many hours wishing he would let me go, that it was none of my business what he had done in his last minutes. Perhaps as he lay on the table in his drugged state, after jabbing the last bottle into himself, he had moaned and thrashed and beat himself on the chest, crying out at the injustice of the world. It made no difference to me now. I had flown all the way here by myself, as soon as the funeral was over, so I could disappear. I was not going to go back until I was forgotten by all of those I left behind.

There was just one thing.

I hoped that his white ashes I had scattered with my own hands did not find their final resting place in a place like this. I prayed that when B opened his eyes, he would not be so afraid and so alone that his entire body shook like I was doing right now. These were the thoughts on my mind as I was sitting by the docks, so it came as a shock when I stood up and saw the white streaks of lime on my skirt but I did not scream. I had long trained myself to restrain my screams. My legs shook a bit but it soon passed.

I was running a light fever when I arrived that persisted for the next ten days. According to my plan, I should have been looking for a job by this time, found a small room outside the hotel. I called the front desk and asked for more blankets. There were already seven blankets on the bed. It was warmer to sit by the docks than inside my lightless room, so I passed the time watching the middle-aged women that came to fish. They baited their lines with bread.

When I felt hungry I went to any of the restaurants that dotted the beach. And so I did that day. By this time I only ordered chicken salad, as I was tired of the stodgy pasta. The fisherwomen were preparing to leave, shaking off the rest of their breadcrumbs in the water. Seagulls flocked to them noisily. The blond waiter tapped my shoulder. He gestured at my plate, an apologetic look on his face. My salad had turned completely black.

I had been pouring the bottle of balsamic vinegar over my salad in some kind of trance. I had not even been aware of what I was doing until the waiter alerted me.

“I don’t think you’re being wasteful. It’s not good to put so much vinegar.”

I nodded to the waiter in agreement. When had I started putting so much balsamic on my salad?

All of a sudden I felt a constriction in my ribcage, as if a few of the white bones had collided against each other.

The last piece of bloated bread disappeared under the surface, and the seagulls flew away. Tiny fish the size of my little finger must be swallowing those crumbs under the pale water. Ahh. How did this happen.

I paid the bill and left the restaurant in a hurry. There was not so much as a Chinese supermarket nearby. Nor did I see any Thai restaurant where I might gulp a bowl of hot and sour Tom Yam Goong. I rushed to the nearest grocery and picked up a few cans of beer and a bottle of olives. At the cashier I went back for a bottle of pickled carrots and cucumbers. My mouth watered and my head was reeling. That day, I went back to my room and drank beer and chewed on pickled carrots and cucumbers out of the bottle. And I sucked on my puckered fingers. I counted back the days from my last period and decided it had been about eight weeks.

If only I could make myself a bowl of piping hot instant noodles, I thought, I could get rid of this chill in a second. I would have gone anywhere for some kimchi stew and a bowl of rice. The owner of the hotel shook his head slowly. He had never seen such a thing. There was a Chinese shop about thirty minutes by bus from here, but he was not sure if they sold instant noodles there. I got on the bus, clutching my wallet, but I could not find the Chinese shop. I fumed as I went around in circles trying to find the elusive shop. Why couldn’t he leave me alone.

It was my fourth pregnancy. Of course, B never knew about any of them. The second or third time I found out I was pregnant I asked B,

“What do you think if……we had a child?”

I don’t remember exactly what he was doing. It was late at night, and he was sitting at the table drinking soju by himself, or going over his credit card statements as usual. Anyway, his answer to my question was to smile and say,

“Why don’t you just kill us all and be done with it.”

I never raised the question again. And here was my hardworking, tenacious uterus doing it again, even though I had already raked it out three times before. That was when I finally remembered the dream I had that night. The blue and red and yellow butterfly. The one that flew at me almost vengefully.

I got on the first flight to Rome I could find.

By the time I had switched trains and got off at Termini station I was dead on my feet. I was so hungry I could think of absolutely nothing else.

How ridiculous my predicament was, I thought. A thirty-six-year-old woman driven from one country so she could avoid performing the customary 49 days of mourning for her husband, only to be driven from another out of hunger. There were a few other Asians milling about in front of the station, and one of them approached me.

“Excuse me, did you call to make a reservation just now?”

He was a Korean man in his early forties. Of course, I had not made any reservation whatsoever.

“No. But I’d like to see your room, if it’s available.”

The man looked at his watch, glanced around, and scratched his head. I hoped he was not going to insist on waiting for the guest that had made a reservation. I was almost fainting. I was just turning around to find someone else when he picked up my trunk.

“It’s a bit of a walk.”

I didn’t care. I walked after him.

The iron door was easily twice as tall as I was. Inside there was an old elevator, the kind with bars that look like a jail. The fourth floor on the right, and inside the door was the guesthouse shaped like a long hall. Three bunk beds in the room. It was a mess with all the belongings of the other guests, presumably young backpackers. I sat at the table without even bothering to wash my hands. Amazingly enough, the menu was freshly made kimchi. Not just any kimchi, but the kind brimming with cheap, MSG goodness.

It was past lunchtime so the owner heaped my bowl with all the leftover rice, scraping the pot to get the very last bit, but it was hardly enough for me. I finished the entire bowlful and still hovered over the kimchi, prompting the owner to say,

“I can make some more rice in no time, do you mind waiting a bit?”

He had a hint of an accent from Jeolla, the southwest province of Korea. I was sure he was just being polite, but sat at the table to wait all the same. Soon there was the smell of rice cooking and I knew he had taken the hint. The Chinese woman helping out in the kitchen frowned. I polished off another bowl of fresh, steaming rice and finally I was ready to sleep. I even had a fluffy quilt instead of a hard, scratchy blanket. I burrowed under the quilt like a mouse in its secret hiding spot and slept for a long, long time.

Mornings in the guesthouse were the most hectic, when all the young backpackers trooped out for their sightseeing of the day. It was evening by the time they came back in ones and twos. I slept during the daytime when it was quiet, and ate my meals at night.

“You could have my room, if the kids are too much for you.”

“Thank you, but I’m fine.”

The owner looked mildly embarrassed. I knew how strange I must seem, coming all the way to Rome to spend all my time sleeping. He pottered around the house, surfing the internet, cleaning the bathroom. Sometimes he hung around the living room, ostensibly on his way to the balcony to have a smoke. I just sat on the sofa, not doing anything. Come to think of it, I had not paid for my room yet. I had not even bothered to change my notes from the Mediterranean island country to euros. The owner seemed in no hurry to ask for payment. He looked a bit worse for the wear, with his uneven haircut and tanned skin, but seemed like a good person at heart. What he doing here, though, I had no idea.

“How did you end up here?”

I asked rudely, but he perked up.

“Hmm, do you have time for a glass of wine?”

No, I didn’t. Before I could answer, however, he had already disappeared into the kitchen.

Back in Seoul, they must be up in arms by now. I had basically fled the country leaving behind only a written disclaimer of inheritance. Not so much as a phone call to my parents or my in-laws. Even if I did not take on his debt, there was still all the money that B had borrowed in my name. If I was going to pay it off, I needed to work. I could file for bankruptcy. By agreeing to take responsibility for part of the mess he left behind, I was drawing a line in the ground. Up to here but no more.

You took all the money, you little bitch, it’s the only way this could have happened! I never wanted to hear the shrill accusations of my mother-in-law again, and my husband’s younger siblings were sure to pitch an epic battle about who was going to take care of her. I shuddered at the thought of being in the midst of that muddy fight. And while I no longer remembered how I used to feel, I was sure that I had never loved B enough to mourn his soul for 49 days.

I was never going back to President Ji either, who would brag in my earshot, ‘Manager Park is from New York. Isn’t she something?’ while driving me like a slave. Looking back over the past ten years, I had never once lived just for myself. I wanted to live somewhere out of their sight, whether I had to sweep the streets or iron shirts or somehow managed to land an administrative job. I had been counting on a life of day-by-day existence, earning just enough for my board and keep and to repay what money I owed, a little bit at a time. What now, then.

The owner came back from the kitchen with a plate of grilled yellow croaker. Two of them, their golden skins glistening with oil. The wine was a whole jugful.

“The thing about here is, they sell wine by the jug.”

It was not so long since I had eaten, but I could not resist. My appetite was insatiable.

“How much do I owe you for the room?”

He pretended not to hear.

“I haven’t changed my money yet, I’ll pay you tomorrow.”

This was met with a sheepish smile. I had to smile myself. He was a big softie.

I was carrying the equivalent of two thousand dollars or so. It was cash I found in B’s wallet, the day he died. I had never used his money before. His sister’s wedding, his mother’s birthday present, everything came out of my salary. Bean sprouts and tofu and shoe polish.

“I used to have a restaurant, but I ran it to the ground. Completely ruined. I ran over here when I couldn’t get any more credit. And then I took over this place……actually it’s more like I just manage the place, and we split the money.”

He must have had no one to talk to, I thought. Out loud I said,

“That’s why the kimchi is so good.”

After that it seemed like there was nothing more I could say to him. I stared at the glass of wine he had poured for me, while he emptied a few in quick succession. He was still mindful of me, however. Apparently he had no intention of acting like a boor in front of a woman.

“I guess you…broke up with somebody.”

I supposed that was a reasonable conclusion based on my behavior, coming all this way to stay in bed all the time. I realized that I had not talked to anyone in a long time, either. It felt a bit like I was back in university, sipping soju in an older student’s room off campus. I smiled, and he poured himself another glass of wine and neatly de-boned the fish for me. He probably did not get the opportunity to de-bone yellow croaker for someone too often, living here.

“It must have been years since you came here.”

“Yeah, I think it’s been, what, six years? I feel like I let everybody down so much, they must be waiting for me.”

Foolish man. Nobody is waiting for you. You left everybody else with a mountain of debt, and you think they’re going to miss you? I had never wished B back from the dead.

For breakfast next morning there was a plate of garlic chive kimchi, generously seasoned. There were squares of dried seaweed, surely hard to find in this place, served with a dipping sauce of sesame seed oil and soy sauce. But the big surprise came at lunchtime. All of the young backpackers swarmed back home at the time they were usually out and about in the city.

“We can’t thank you enough!”

They winked at me.

“It’s pork belly on the house today. We’re going out again afterwards.”

The pork belly was one thing, but the owner had peeled and sliced up fresh cloves of garlic as well. Mushrooms went on the grill beside the meat, with a tray of lettuce and sesame leaves completing a spread that would have not looked out of place at a restaurant.

“Wow, what’s the occasion? You really went all out today!”

The owner turned red as the kids teased him.

“Keep it down, OK? We always have barbecue for lunch once a week.”

“Naw, I’ve been in Rome for two weeks and we never had anything like this.”

“Come on! We know you’re trying to impress you-know-who.”

They sang out, undaunted. The pork belly was soon gone. The owner looked so put out that the others had eaten all the pork before I had snagged more than a few pieces, it was embarrassing. Some people let on their loneliness so easily.

After the meal the youngsters rushed to brush their teeth and scampered back out the door. They kept yelling over their shoulders, even while they were busy toeing their sneakers on.

“Hey, what’s for dinner?”

“What do you want?”

“Bulgogi!”

The dormitory was 15 euro a day, at the most. They were wringing him dry. Apparently the owner was more than happy to oblige, however.

“All right. I’m making bulgogi, so be back by seven o’clock sharp. I’m not keeping anything for latecomers.”

He may have been lonely, this man, but perhaps he had escaped fear when he escaped from his debtors. Would B have been able to avoid sticking himself with anesthesia, had he been dropped here? The police pushed the three 50ml bottles toward me, saying they found them neatly lined up by the head of his exam table. I did not turn away when I saw B’s body, but I closed my eyes at the sight of those bottles. No matter how many times I had wished him dead, my hatred had been weaker than their contents. I had never felt more afraid of anything than those glass bottles that had put him to sleep so swiftly.

That afternoon I changed my money into euros. I walked for a bit, glad to stretch my legs for a change, and noticed that my ankles felt heavier. According to the calendar I was already past nine weeks. I could not afford to wait any longer. I had to go back to Korea if I was going to take care of it. I was such a failure at life I could not even manage a proper escape.

By the time I got back at the guesthouse it was already dark. The owner threw up his hands and shook his finger at me.

“Don’t you know what kind of neighborhood this is? For Pete’s sake. They stab people here. Then they run off with your bag. Why didn’t you say anything, you should have asked if it was safe.”

If only someone would stab me, I thought.

I took a shower and was sitting on the living room sofa when the owner called out to me from the kitchen,

“Do you eat this?”

I craned my neck to get a look at what turned out to be fermented skate, of all things. The Chinese woman was scolding him something fierce, holding her nose. I could not understand because it was not in English. The owner merely snorted.

“I said I was going to eat this, and she says she’s going to quit.”

He sliced the fermented skate slowly. A couple of kids popped their heads in the kitchen to see what was going on before the smell sent them running back, squealing. His friend had sent it to him from Korea, he said. Jeolla skate in the middle of Rome. Apparently there was nothing that could not get past customs here except people. The slices of skate were artfully arranged on a white plate. He had had that skate for two years, he said, in the kimchi refrigerator. He’d never had anyone to share it with until now. I dipped the skate in sweet and sour chili sauce and crunched on the bony slices. He drank a lot of wine from the jug.

“Why don’t you go back?”

I asked, and he chuckled, his face flushed from the alcohol.

“Don’t go back! Can’t is more like it……”

“Don’t be silly. You could leave right now, you just need to pay a fine for overstaying your tourist visa. You must have made some money here, and you could get a job back home and start paying your debt off.”

The sound of his laughter grew louder. He must be getting drunker.

“Come on, you don’t really think that’s why I can’t go back, do you?”

“Why not, then?”

“Because nobody’s waiting for me to come back. Why would I, when I know that……”

I ended up drinking a glass a wine. B, was it like that for you, too? Was that what you were afraid of, nobody waiting for you. The sharp smell of the skate made my nose sting. I chewed on another slice and my eyes began to water. Life is so, hot. I excused myself to go to bed when he stopped me.

“I just want to let you know, if you need a place to stay, you’re welcome to stay here.”

I looked at him quizzically, unsure if I was supposed to smile.

“Oh, I’m not asking you to marry me or anything. I’m not trying to…. I just mean, if you’re in a spot, or you just need some time to yourself, you can stay here for a while. You can have the little room to yourself….”

“I have to go. I was going to leave tomorrow.”

That sobered him up at once. His eyes widened. He hastened to say,

“I’m sorry if you thought I was being fresh with you, I don’t mean that.”

“I know.”

I really did. Even I could tell he was not being fresh with me.

The owner was out when I finished packing. I paid the Chinese woman for my room and left the guesthouse. The iron doors, easily twice as tall as I was, clanged shut behind my back. Generally speaking, when a door is closed it’s hard to go back. I would probably never see this guesthouse again. The wheels of my trunk clattered noisily on the cobblestones.

Four streets and five or so alleys later, I caught sight of Termini station in the distance. Like any major station, it was full of stands selling cheap souvenirs and street urchins running about. I clutched the handle of my trunk tightly and was making sure I had a good grip on my bag with my passport and wallet in it, when a woman holding a baby and a girl passed next to me. Gypsies.

The next thing I knew, my head was yanked backwards. The girl was gripping my hair. The woman with the baby was thrusting her palm in front of my nose, yelling in what sounded like gibberish to me. She wanted my bag. The other gypsies that had been sitting on the pavement sniggered, like it was some kind of entertaining spectacle. The souvenir sellers feigned indifference. I screamed to be let go but the girl had actually looped my ponytail around her hand. The street urchins were positively bouncing with excitement. I was still struggling in this awkward position when I saw the owner of the guesthouse running towards me from a considerable distance. He flew at the girl and pried her off me.

“You crazy bitches, you want to go to the police? You’re all crazy for a taste of jail, is that it?”

The woman with the baby made some final protest, but in the end they shuffled away. He took my hand and dragged me inside the station.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake. My God. Why’d you go off like that by yourself? I just went to get some pickled radish to make you some kimbap for the road. How many times do I have to tell you this is a bad neighborhood?”

My neck ached. I stood there holding the back of the neck while he made a fuss over my sorry state.

“Look at your hair, it’s all pulled out…… Why don’t you stay another day, rest and get better.”

The situation was so ludicrous I felt like laughing. But then I was crying. Embarrassed, I switched to laughing, and back to crying again. What a mess I was, behaving like I was on my way to kill myself like B. The owner backed off for a moment, watching me.

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know.”

He pounded his chest audibly.

“No, not that! I mean, where are you going now. Are you going to Venice, are you going to Paris, are you going to London! Or are you going back to Korea!”

I could have beat my own chest.

“I really don’t know. I wish I did.”

I felt sorry, like I was holding out on him on purpose.

“All right, all right. Have it your way. I don’t know.”

“You should get back to your place. I need to think for a while, too.”

I looked down and finally noticed his slippers. He had run all this way wearing those. I rummaged in my pocket for change and got him a can of coke from the vending machine. It was a meager offering of thanks compared to the fresh kimchi and garlic chive kimchi and pork belly and fermented skate. I offered my hand to him in a parting shake and he dropped the can inside his pocket to take it.

“Have a save trip. Don’t take the train the wrong way.”

I nodded. His tracksuit pants sagged from the weight of the soda can. When he turned away I would be so much more lonesome than I was now. I held onto his hand a bit longer, not knowing where to go.

Translated from the Korean by [???]

\*\*\*