

KIM Young-Ha

From *Photo Shop Murder*

Translated by Jason Rhodes

The Portable Library of Korean Literature

(Seoul:Jimoondang, 2003)

Photo Shop Murder

Why do murders always seem to happen on Sundays? I mean, it's not like I've seen exact statistics, but at least it seems to be that way in my case. Or else they happen on my days off. Maybe suddenly getting called to work while resting at home is what makes me feel that way. Anyway, this murder also happened on a Sunday. I was at church with my wife, listening to some boring sermon, when suddenly my beeper went off. Son of a bitch, it was the chief. The chief's code, 3143, along with 1, the code for murder, flashed up on the screen. The chief used the beeper's "group summons" function to put out a call to the detectives. Burglary was 2, Rape, 3. Everything else was 4.

"I've gotta go. They need me on a case."

My wife didn't turn to look. A hymn started, and people began singing in unison, wearing their most somber possible expressions. I gave my wife's shoulder a squeeze, and headed out of the church. There was a guy named Jesus standing between me and my wife. Ever since that day, when some part of her had just left. But there was nothing I could do about it. That guy Jesus was just too cool. He always made you confess your sins. Made you laugh, made you cry. That was stuff I couldn't do for my wife. Besides, Jesus wasn't a guy you could threaten with a pistol. He wasn't gonna piss his pants if I pointed my gun at him.

The church parking lot was packed. It was next to impossible to get my car out. I handed the security guard 5000 won, and he pushed some cars that had been left in neutral out of the way to make room. It still took stunts to get out of that narrow spot, and then I took off, leaving behind the security guard who was bowed at 90 degrees. I flipped on my siren and emergency lights, and hit the accelerator. The crime scene wasn't the urgent thing. I mean, wasn't the person already dead? The urgent thing was something else. With every murder case came tons of paperwork. First the body had to be examined, and then after the basic evidence had been gathered we'd have to hurry back to the station and send a quick bulletin over to the situation room. And then over to the prosecutor's office and the national lab. Anyway, it was tedious work. I just hoped only one person was dead. Two people would double the paperwork.

The chief looked like he'd just come from the sauna or something, his face all flushed and red. "Sorry to have called you in on your day off," or other such pleasantries, were things we'd long since forgotten.

"You got here quick. Cho's already on the scene, but this is his first murder case, you know. I said I'd send you over when you got here, so first get over there and check things out. It doesn't seem like much," he said with a sniff. "Photoshop owner got his head smashed in at his shop. The local cops are in charge now, so take over from the station chief when you get there."

As I took a memo with the address and phone number of the place on it and turned to leave, the chief said, "Get a handle on the situation, and get back here and get started on the reports, alright?"

When I got to the place, it was crawling with curious bystanders. A cop handling crowd control gave me a salute. Sometimes I wondered. What part of me looked so much like a cop? How were they always able to tell right away?

"Have you seen Inspector Cho?"

"He's inside."

It was a typical photo shop. "17 Minute Express" read a sign with yellow background, black letters, and a Kodak emblem on the left-hand side. It was the kind of place you could find anywhere in the city. You couldn't shoot a big family portrait there, but it looked like it could handle passport-sized photos and stuff like that. At the entrance, there was a long, glass display case full of all kinds of film, camera lenses and accessories, and parallel to that was a fake leather sofa where people sat while film was developed. On the wall were various-sized photos of a smiling girl in a bikini holding a parasol.

A little further inside was a wide space with lighting equipment, along with a roundtable and a stool off to one side. Cho was there with another inspector, gathering fingerprints.

"How's it going?"

"There're lots of fingerprints, but I don't know whether they'll amount to anything."

"How bout a weapon?"

"Nothing."

"You search the area?"

"I looked around with the local cops a few minutes ago. Didn't find anything."

The corpse was face down on the floor. From the looks of the wound, he'd been struck with a blunt object in the back of the head. The area around the wound was a mass of congealed hair and blood. Guy looked to be in his early 40's.

"Pretty unlikely they'd just walk out carrying the weapon," I mumbled, looking around the room. There really wasn't anything that would serve as a club. Could they have somehow used a camera? But there weren't any cameras with blood on them. Two overturned chairs left a faint trace of the victim's struggle.

Cho stood up, his hands covered with fingerprint powder, and pointed in the direction of a corner in the room. There was a woman crouched on the stool, her knees drawn up to her chin.

"She said she's the victim's wife," he explained.

"You had a chance to ask her anything?"

"Haven't had time."

It was important to get the statements of eyewitnesses and suspects as soon as possible at a crime scene. They often unconsciously spill the truth in all the confusion.

"Let's hear what happened, ma'am."

She was a bit young to be called ma'am. She looked like she'd just turned 30. Thirty-five, tops. Short hair, no perm. She was pretty. Was she having an affair?

"So what happened here today?" I lit a cigarette, and cut to the chase. The woman was shaking.

"I don't know. I got back from the market, and..."

"When you got back, he was laying there like that?"

"Yes."

“You’d better not be lying to me, ma’am. You understand?”

She nodded. .

“Did anyone see you on your way to or from the market?”

She shook her head.

“So how can we believe you? Do have a receipt or anything?”

With a desperate look, she shook her head again.

“OK. When you got back, did you notice anything strange? Like anyone had come and gone? That sort of thing.”

The woman sat silently, her mouth clamped shut. She seemed to be lost in thought. Cho approached and, banging the table with his hand, barked loudly.

“You playing games with us? Wasting our time? If you saw something, spill it!”

The woman stood up, and walked to the display case. Cho and I followed. She picked up an envelope full of photos laying on the case.

“This was here when I came in.”

“What is it?”

She pointed to a box.

“It should have been in there, but it was laying out like this. So the person who came for these pictures came and left. I thought it was strange when I came in. If the pictures are out, it means someone came for them, and they should have paid for them and gone, but instead the envelope was just sitting out here on the display case. So I went back there to ask about it, and that's how he was.”

The woman covered her face, as if in horror at the thought. I put gloves on, and pulled out the pictures for a look. They were very well-taken, like they’d been shot by a professional with an expensive camera.

“Get the fingerprints off these pictures, too.”

I slid the photo envelope into a plastic evidence bag, and sealed it.

“Ma’am, you’re the only witness so far, so you’ll have to come on down to the station with us. And if the inspection team’s done, lets call an ambulance and get the body out of here, and then seal off the area and go. Cho, you take all the pictures of the scene?”

Cho held up his automatic camera in response. The inspection team took off first in a van. I took another quick look around, and headed for the station. The woman sat in the back with Cho. I don’t know what it was, but this woman gave off a funny feeling. Cho was a rookie, so he wouldn’t be able to tell, but I could smell it. Like a sanitized bathroom. Not a drop of water on the floor, a slight trace of deodorizer. Or a secret that’d just been let out. Something dirty that’d just been scrubbed clean.

Made a brief report to hand out to the reporters at the station, gave the results of the initial investigation to the situation room, talked with the prosecutor. The time flew by.

“Leave the rest to me and get a statement from that woman,” the chief ordered.

“As a suspect? Or a witness?”

He gave me a blank stare which said that he couldn’t decide, either.

“First treat her as a witness. After we get the fingerprint results and an approximate time of death, then we’ll look into the suspects. OK?”

I sat the woman down and booted up my notebook computer. You could hear the whirring of the hard drive. There was nothing beautiful in that thing. Killings, rapes, robberies, scams. It was full of that kind of shit. There was a time when I wanted to write a novel with that computer. A really beautiful love story. What a luxurious thought that had been. Everything inside me had been dulled by this point. Not even gang rapes or the

murder of a lover stirred any feeling in me anymore. It was just part of my work. Like the way a drycleaner felt when he saw a fur coat, or a cram-school tutor when he read student exams. That was all.

Could I have written the story of me and my wife? I didn't think so, not anymore. Too much time had passed for writing that. And I doubted anyone would want to read it. To me, it was something that bore down with all the weight of life itself, but to anyone else it'd be just another story of a guy who's wife ran around behind his back. My hard drive had become the lowest place on earth. A refinery of waste. Everything that came here turned to garbage. I lived by disposing of that garbage. And after you dispose of garbage for awhile, everything starts to look like trash. A beautiful love story? There was no such thing. It was all either cum-soaked crimes of passion, or the kind of sentimental bullshit you'd find in a high-school girl's diary.

I asked the woman for her address and citizen's registration number, about her job and whether she had a record. Name: Kyoung-hee Ji. Occupation: Housewife. She said she didn't have a criminal record. She was nervous about something. She kept asking me to repeat my questions. She was confused about the time she'd gone to the market. And of course it was the same about the time of return. Had she done it? But it looked like it'd have been pretty difficult for her to have killed her husband, who was a whole head taller, with some object that wasn't even designed as a weapon. Was there another man? That seemed like the most likely possibility.

"By any chance do you have a lover?"

She looked up quickly. I asked again.

"A boyfriend?"

She slowly shook her head.

"You know you can't lie to me. You'll be charged with perjury. And that means prison."

Of course that was a lie. Perjury didn't extend to statements at the police station.

"Look here, ma'am. You have no alibi. Do you understand what I'm saying? What kind of housewife goes to the market and doesn't even bring back a single receipt? You're not even sure what time you went or came back. What's anyone gonna think, except that you did it? Did you kill him?"

The woman waved her hand, protesting violently. "I didn't kill him! Why would I? I have no reason to!" We were in a tight spot. Even without an alibi, without finding a weapon at the scene, there was no way we could prosecute. There was no clear evidence. We'd have to get her to confess. Or else widen the search to people the guy had financial relations with, or other people around him.

"OK, let's say you didn't kill him. Is there anyone you might suspect? Someone who was angry about money, or anyone else he was having problems with recently?"

The woman started biting her nails. At this rate, it was going to take all night. After sitting silently for awhile, she finally opened her mouth.

"I'm hungry."

My heart sank.

"You can be hungry at a time like this?"

She nodded her head weakly. And then I realized that I was hungry, too. I checked the time and saw that it was already past six. There was nothing I could do. We had to eat. On the way out, I told Cho to head back to the scene and find out what he could about the woman. Rumors, her reputation, whatever.

The woman sat silently, shoveling rice soup into her mouth. And then suddenly, with a decisive look, she raised her head.

“Inspector. Do you remember those pictures?”

A little bit of broth trickled down the side of her mouth.

“Those pictures on the display case, the ones someone left behind?”

“Yes.”

“What about them?”

“I think it was him.”

I put my spoon down.

“It’s a man?”

“Yes.”

“Does he come often?”

“Yes. Very often.”

“What’s his occupation?”

“I don’t know. He always comes once a week. He takes a lot of pictures.”

“And?”

She blushed.

“I, well, I think he likes me.”

My stew was getting cold. I took another spoonful, and then began to press her.

“Keep talking.”

She’d stopped eating her soup, and, with a blank expression, started talking a blue streak about this guy.

She said that at one time, she’d been an accountant at a construction firm. It was her first job out of high school, and she hadn’t found much to be of interest. After killing time there for about three years, she found another job, but it was more or less the same. So then she quit her job, and fell in love. But after four years, the guy had left her, and married another woman. At that time, her father died. He’d been her only living relation, and she was left alone. And then she’d met her husband by chance in the photo shop, and as fate would have it, they started living together. He’d already had one failed marriage, but he seemed to treat women pretty well, and he taught her how to operate the simple developing equipment in the store. There weren’t any problems with their marriage (she hesitated at this point, and then, with a look that said she’d entirely surrendered, continued) but that was the problem. Nothing ever happened between she and her husband. They never had a child (she didn’t explain whose problem this was the result of) and I could certainly understand the tedium of spending day after day in a four by four space developing and printing other people’s pictures.

At first, looking at other people’s pictures had been kind of fun. But then, after awhile, they were all just pictures taken as proof that people had gone somewhere, or graduation pictures, school entrance pictures, or pictures of little kids playing. They were all the same, and she quickly got bored. Real photography was usually developed by the photographers themselves if it was black and white, and even color was usually taken to the places in Chungmu-ro. She could hardly expect to see any of that.

“So? What’s this all about?”

I had no idea how any of this could be related to this case. The woman put her spoon down, and wiped the edge of her mouth with her napkin. Her lips were small, but full. Her long, slender face had a nice curve. She was elegant, graceful. I was getting a different feeling from her than I had at the crime scene or in the interrogation room. Could I have an affair with this kind of woman? Suddenly, for no reason, I found myself

wondering that. Spend the night in a motel, and then in the morning, our clothes all rumpled, have some soup to chase the hangover, say good-bye and then miss each other. Could I live like that? She continued her story.

“But then that man came. At first, I didn’t pay any attention to him. I just took his film, wrote his name down, tore off the name tag and handed it to him. But when I developed the pictures, I saw how good they were. They were scenery shots from somewhere like Cheju Island. They were well-taken, so I was looking at them carefully, but then there was one strange picture stuck in with the rest. Scenery shot after scenery shot, and then suddenly out of nowhere there was a picture of a person’s bare foot. And then scenery shots again. So he took all these scenery shots, then a picture of a bare foot, and then back to scenery shots again, right?”

The color started rising in her cheeks. This woman’s husband had just died today, and here she was blushing while talking about another man. What the fuck?

“So when he came to pick up the pictures, I just asked casually. ‘What did you take the picture of the foot for?’ He laughed, and said, ‘So you saw it?’ And then he asked, ‘Don’t you ever want to take a picture of a foot?’ And I said, ‘Whoever takes pictures of things like feet? You could take hundreds of people pictures and never take a picture of a foot. I mean, you might take one by mistake.’”

That was true enough. But what was this foot talk about?

“That was the beginning. Who knows? Maybe that’s how this guy hits on women in photo shops. Mixing in pictures like that that grab your attention.”

“That’s possible.”

She took a sip of her tea. Just then, my cell phone rang loudly. He wanted to know what the hell kind of dinner it took to eat that long, and I told him we’d be right back.

“We’ve gotta get back. I’m getting heat from upstairs.”

The woman let out a long sigh, and, standing up, gathered her things one by one.

“Do you really think I did it?”

“No,” I said. “We’ll find that out when we investigate.”

Darkness had already settled heavily. We walked with plodding steps. From the back, the woman looked off-balance somehow. She’d just lost her husband (regardless of whether she’d loved him), and if by chance she’d been having an affair with the guy who’d been coming to the photo shop, well, she’d just thrown him away, too. If we get the fingerprint results tomorrow, and if her alibi did n’t get any better, for all I knew she could be arrested and prosecuted. And after that, spend the rest of her life in Chong-ju Woman’s Penitentiary.

I approached the chief and briefly summarized her account of that man. He told me to put him on the investigation list for now but first to finish my questioning of the woman. Quickly. The man would be called in for questioning soon, if we could confirm his identity.

“Should I send her home when we’re done?”

“We have to. She’s still just a witness.” He sniffed. “Send her home, but get some of the boys to tail her. We’ll detain her if anything turns up from Inspections before she goes.”

The woman was sitting in the interrogation room. She looked fatigued.

“Let’s continue.”

The woman let out a deep breath, swallowed once, and continued her statement.

“Like I said before, he came often. He left film every time he came. As time went by, the pictures got stranger. After the foot, it was a belly button. Oh, do I have to tell you this?”

“Tell me.”

“A butt. There was a picture of a butt, too. A man’s. He’s a good photographer, so it didn’t really seem that crude. Like a crescent moon on a clear night. That’s how he shot it.”

“So did you say anything to him after seeing that?”

“Yes.”

Pretty forward woman. Even if someone takes a picture of an ass, if you just give it back without saying anything, wouldn’t that be the end of it?

“What can I say? It just seemed like he was talking directly to me. You wouldn’t understand, Inspector. Just sitting there all day was so boring. My husband was pretty gruff, and he was hardly ever in the store.”

“Where did he go?”

“Well, *he* said he went to the paduk* club. He likes playing paduk, you know? But it doesn’t seem like he was going there. There’s no way of knowing where he went. Anyway, I was often alone. You know, just sitting there, feeding film into the developing machine. God, I was bored.

*Korean chess

So when this man started sending messages to me like that, well, I don’t know how it sounds, but I was happy. I was thankful. Oh, God. Babbling on like this on the day that my husband died. You must think I’m crazy.”

I pushed my computer off to one side and took a sip of coffee.

“No. Go on.”

“We talked a lot.”

“About butts?”

It just slipped out subconsciously, and I felt like a jackass the second I’d said it. The woman was glaring at me, her eyes burning with resentment.

“Now that we’re having this kind of conversation, I guess talking with some gabby woman at the police station must really just hit the spot.”

“I’m sorry. Please continue.”

“Ok. Let’s move on. He said he was a lecturer at some junior college. He started learning photography as a hobby. He’s married, but he said his wife didn’t like him taking pictures because it cost too much money. Anyway, he kept bringing me film. And then one day he took a full nude of himself, and brought it in. He had a nice body. I just stood staring at it for a long time. What was he trying to say? I wondered. Honestly, I thought that if he wanted to sleep with me, he didn’t have to go to all this trouble. Oh, God, what am I saying? That was just my thought. The picture wasn’t at all pornographic or anything. His body was curled up, like a ball. And you couldn’t see that part. But then, when I saw that picture, the idea came to me that I wanted to pose for pictures like that, too. You know the feeling. Like we’d become accomplices or something. Like exchanging love letters without my husband knowing, that kind of thing. So when he came back, I asked him. ‘What does it feel like when you do a nude shot?’ He smiled. He looked really good when he smiled. And then he told me. He said it was like returning to his childhood. Really fresh. He said if I wanted to try it, to just say so. I waved him off and told him he had to be kidding. So he said good-bye, and left.”

I was starting to get pissed.

“Get to the point.”

The woman looked surprised, like someone who'd just been awakened from a dream.

“I'm sorry. I talk too much, don't I?”

“You've got to hurry up and get home too, you know.”

I looked at my watch. It was 7:40.

She took in a deep breath, and started to talk.

“But one day he ran into my husband. He always made sure to come when my husband wasn't around, but that day my husband was on his way back from somewhere. It's strange. Men seem to know. My husband took a long look at him. I guess he could feel it. I quickly handed the envelope of pictures to the man. Later on, he asked about my husband. ‘Who's the old man?’ he'd said. I lied about it, and told him he was just a relative. He didn't seem to believe me. But one day, my husband found out. I was developing the man's film when my husband came in. ‘Go and take a rest,’ he told me, and pushed me out of the way. I told him I'd do it, and stayed in my seat, but on that day he was stubborn for some reason. But the pictures that day...”

“What were they?”

“They were of me.”

“Nude?”

She flushed, grinning sheepishly like a high school girl.

“Noooo. They were just snapshots. Me in the photo booth, coming back from the supermarket, riding a bike, that kind of thing.”

“Your husband saw them?”

“Yes.”

“Did he get angry?”

“No. He seemed to get depressed. He started drinking heavily, and had trouble getting to sleep at night. I felt kind of sorry about it. He asked me what kind of relationship I had with the man, and I told him we didn't have any relationship. I told him the man just had a crush on me. That was all.”

“Is that everything?”

“After that, he kept hanging around the store, but he never came in. My husband was always in the store to keep an eye on me, and even when he left, he often came back unexpectedly.”

“That must have gotten on your nerves.”

The woman hung her head.

“To tell the truth, yes. I hated my husband. Ah, but, even still, not to the point of wanting to kill him.”

“So what are those pictures we got back there?”

“Oh, those? This morning, he came back for the first time in a long time. When my husband wasn't around. I was happy, but also a little uncomfortable, because I had no idea when my husband would be back. And then he told me as he handed me the film that this was the last time. I developed the film right away.”

“What was it?”

“What else? Scenery shots. They looked like they were taken around Seoul Station. But in with those was one of a chalkboard. He had written that he loved me with a piece of chalk, and taken a picture of it. My husband came in right when I was looking at it. He grabbed it out of my hand, and got really mad. I made excuses, but he didn't believe me.

He got so angry that I left. And actually, I didn't go to the market. I just wandered around the neighborhood. And while I was out, he wound up like that."

She sniffled. I called the lab, and asked them to bring over the pictures.

A clerk came running with the pictures. I took them out and looked at them, one by one. A flock of pigeons flying over an overpass. Bums sharing some booze, the wheels of a train blasting out smoke as they start to move. That kind of stuff. And then, suddenly, just like she'd said, there was one taken of a blackboard, on which was written, "Kyoung-hee, I love you."

"Do you know the man's name?"

She pointed towards the envelope with a finger still bearing the light blue traces of a manicure. On it was written the man's name, Myoung-sik Jeong, along with his phone number. I went to the chief.

"Chief, I think we're going to have to call this guy in."

"Yeah? There somethin' suspicious about him?"

"Just before the crime was committed, the victim fought with his wife over a picture taken by this guy. The guy used strange pictures to make advances on this woman, and recently started taking a lot of pictures of her."

"First just get him down here. As a voluntary witness."

As per his instructions, three investigators were dispatched to the man's house. The woman looked like she was beside herself. I kept pumping her for information, and we finished up what remained of her statement. After I finished reading it back to her, I rubbed her manicured hand with red ink, and had her "sign" with her handprint. Her hand was limp as she let me do it.

"You can go now, but don't go too far. Just stay at home, if you can."

The woman stood up, and, nodding a quick bow to myself and the chief, walked out, her high heels clacking loudly. With a jerk of his chin, the chief gave the order to Inspector Kim, who followed out behind her.

Breaktime. Until that man got here. I went over to a bench by the Petitioners Office, and smoked a cigarette. There's always a Traffic Bureau nearby the Petitioner's Office. People who've smashed into people with their cars are there with their families, mixed right in with the victims in the same place. Some smoke nervously, others proudly rattle off their presumed knowledge of the law, tossing around huge figures like they're prices of gum. But for some reason this place always seemed to soothe my nerves. Maybe it was because here I could stop being a cop, and just become an anonymous individual.

Who killed that guy? The antiseptic, sanitized bathroom lady? The guy who had a crush on her? Some third party?

My cell phone rang. It was Cho, who'd been sent over to find out what he could about the woman.

"Lietenant. It's me. Min-ki Cho."

"You get anything?"

"Nothing. The people in the neighborhood say she's a quiet woman who minds the store."

"What about her husband?"

"There's a little something there. He was often seen going in and out of a certain neighborhood tea shop. You know the kind. And he had a habit of frequenting massage parlors." "He's got a young wife. What's he doing at those places? Alright. He have a mistress?"

“Hmmm. Would a photo shop owner be able to afford that?”

“You check his insurance policies? Give a call to the Insurance Association. They’ll tell you everything.”

“He’s clean. Had nothing but auto insurance and a pension.”

I scratched my head.

“What the fuck?”

“Should I come on back in?”

“Yeah. Come on back and check her credit cards.”

The husband was clean. So what if he sometimes went somewhere else to get off? No insurance schemes, no faked burglary, no real bad blood with anyone. Running that little shop, there was no way he could be borrowing or lending too much money. The only possibility left was the relationship between the woman and that man. But even still, it didn’t seem like a conspiracy. If it was, she wouldn’t have just confessed everything like that, would she?

My beeper went off. It was the chief. I put out my cigarette, and sauntered back to the station. At times like these, I felt like I had become the suspect. Especially because they’d recently removed the bars from the windows at the station. You stay here long enough, and you start feeling like it’s you that’s stuck in here, not them.

“That’s him,” the chief said, pointing to a man seated on the sofa. “Finish up with him before you go home.”

I brought the man over to my desk. Name, citizen’s registration number, address, occupation. I started the interrogation. He was wearing a well-tailored, ash-colored suit, and a turtle-neck sweater that came up to his chin. High-brow type. I tested his grip when we shook hands, but he didn’t seem very strong. He and exercise had apparently never been particularly close friends.

The man protested.

“I didn’t do anything. What do I have to come all the way down here for?”

“I’m sorry to have called you down so late in the evening. We just have to check a few things, and we’ll be done. Let’s see. Before I start taking your actual statement, let’s just start with a few questions. Are you familiar with Youngsin Photo?”

“Yes.”

“Are you aware that the owner died today?”

“Yes, I heard about it on my way here. But what does that have to do with me?”

“And there was a female owner as well, right?”

“Yes.”

“She said the two of you were close.”

“Close? We just talked a bit when I’d go to pick up my pictures, that’s all.”

“Really? According to the woman, you were giving her some pretty strange pictures.”

“Strange pictures?”

“Nude shots of yourself, for example. You know.”

The man grimaced.

“Is it a crime to take nude pictures of myself?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“She also said you took pictures of her.”

“That’s because she gave me the film and asked me to. Is that a crime now, too?”

I pulled the photo envelope out of a drawer in my desk. I found the “Kyoung-hee, I love you” picture and showed it to him.

“You took this picture, correct? Ah, just look, don’t touch.”

The man hesitated, staring at the picture, and then suddenly broke into a smile.

“That’s my kid’s. He’s in the first grade, and has a thing for one of his classmates. One day he took me to school, wrote that on the board, and asked me to take a picture of it. He said he wanted to give it to his friend. Look at the handwriting. It’s obviously a little kid’s.”

Now that he mentioned it, it did look that way.

“Were you aware that the photo shop woman’s name was Kyoung-hee?”

“What?”

The man looked surprised. No, more than that, he looked confused. After a minute, he shook his head vigorously.

“No. How could I have known? I had no reason to know. She would have known my name, but I had no reason to know hers. I just took my pictures to her. That was all.”

I sat and stared for a long while at the “Kyoung-hee, I love you” picture that had been tossed onto the rubber matting on my desk.

“Look here. I’m an amateur photographer. I’m more than 30 years old. Do you really think I’d do this sort of childish thing? If I were going to confess my love with a picture, I wouldn’t do it with a photo like this.”

Did I have to put this in the report? Jesus, what was I supposed to do? Call this guy’s kid in and put him through the wringer? How ridiculous would that be? ‘Did you ask your dad to take this picture to give to your little girlfriend?’ Was I supposed to ask that? Even if I did, it’s not like it would prove anything. Or call the kid’s teacher, and find out if there’s a kid in the class named Kyoung-hee? But if this guy was telling the truth, it meant the woman was lying.

“Have you ever seen the man who owned the store?”

“Yes.”

“You ever fight with him?”

“Ah, I heard he wasn’t too keen on me for taking pictures of his wife. I wanted to avoid any misunderstanding, so I stopped going there. Aside from that, no, we never had any direct confrontation.”

I pushed my computer in front of me. The man got a nervous look on his face. It was a typical response for people being interrogated. It always makes people uncomfortable when there’s something only you can see, and they can’t. That’s one thing a detective’s computer and a camera had in common. Who knows, maybe I was a kind of photographer myself. Sitting people down and snapping shots of the evidence. Click!

You see a variety of facial expressions when you conduct a criminal interrogation. People are being asked to put one segment of their hastily lived lives on display. What did you do on that day? Who did you drink with? Why were you drinking? What time did you drink till? Who paid? People had to remember. If they couldn’t remember, they were finished. The end. Click.

“All right. Let’s get started.”

I began typing up a few things I’d need for the inquiry. And then I zeroed in on his alibi. He’d been at school at the presumed time of death. Not in class, but in the library, doing research.

“Do you have to scan your ID to enter the library?”

“Yes. If you check with the library, there’ll probably be a record that I was there.”

“That’s not good enough for an alibi. You could always have lent your card to someone else. Did you happen to meet anyone at the library?”

“Yes, I did.”

His face brightened.

“I met my assistant and some colleagues. We all went down to the smoking room together for a cup of coffee.”

I wrote down their names, as well as their departments.

“So you never went to the photo shop today?”

“That’s right.”

That ended the interview right there. I took the man’s thumbprint, and he got up from his seat with a carefree look on his face.

“Uh, just a minute.”

The man flinched, and turned back to look at me as he headed for the door. I handed my report to the chief, and headed out behind the man.

“Let’s have a cup of coffee.” The man followed reluctantly as I headed in the direction of the Petitioners Office.

“Have a seat.”

He took the cup of vending machine coffee from my outstretched hand.

“That woman, Kyoung-hee Ji.”

I blew the heat off the top of the coffee, and threw the question at him without a glance in his direction.

“What’s she like?”

“What’s she like?” he echoed.

“What kinda feeling you get from her?”

“What are you asking me that for?”

I decided to stick it to him.

“She thinks you did it. That’s why you’re here. She thinks that you fought with her husband because you’re in love with her, and that you killed him.”

I shot him a look out of the corner of my eye as I took a swig of coffee. He seemed baffled by what I just said.

“Well, I might as well tell you now, she’s a pretty strange woman. To be honest with you, I was kind of reluctant to say much when you were questioning me just before. But now that my alibi’s been proved, I’ll speak frankly. When I went there the first time, she was alone. She’s pretty, you know? But it’s not just her looks. There’s something about her. And she seemed kind of lonely, too. She liked my pictures, so we talked a few times. She didn’t know anything about photography. I think she probably just learned instant developing from her husband. And she sometimes showed interest in my self-nudes. Asking me how I shot them, and stuff like that. Well, you know. I’m sure you can understand. Men tend to get a little excited at times like that. It sure didn’t make me feel bad. It was all fine up to then. But as time went by, she started to get a little out of hand. Finally she just came out and told me that she wanted to pose for me.

The man hesitated a bit at this point.

“Keep going.”

I gulped down the last of my coffee.

“Then one day, it was like this. She told me her husband was out of town for a memorial service, and said that she was ready to pose. She wasn’t exactly being subtle, if you know what I mean. I said no, but she wouldn’t listen. She drew the shutters and locked the door. Well, you know, seeing her go that far, I started to get a little turned on.

Sometimes a few friends and I go in on a model together for that sort of thing, but that's pretty rare. And she had a nice body, and looked like she'd be photogenic, so I figured what the hell. You know the place in the shop where they take the ID photos? I set up the lighting and we did it there. About a rolls worth."

"Do you have that film?"

"No, she's got it. That made me uncomfortable, and I was planning to go see her one day and ask her to give it back. Or to throw it away."

The man buried his head in his hands, and gave it a squeeze.

"These were nudes?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm."

He sat there, his face nothing but a vacant stare.

"Anything else happen, by any chance?"

"Anything else?"

"You sleep with her, or..."

He jumped.

"What are you treating me like this for? I've got a family too, you know! It just ended, just like that. She sat silently for awhile, and then she asked me to take more. And I said I couldn't. I was actually pretty nervous, because I figured it'd be fairly obvious to the people in the neighborhood that something was going on."

How much of this was true? An accident squad in one of the vans was coming in from handling an accident. They looked exhausted. Everyday they saw cars and people that had been smashed up like mashed potatoes. Measured skid marks and had to listen to the shouting matches and excuses of those involved. Murder investigation was clean work by comparison. With murder, at least one side was quiet.

The man threw his paper cup in the trash, and then, after a quick parting bow, headed out of the police station. There was something he couldn't conceal as I watched him from behind. Maybe it was relief. About the fact he hadn't slept with her. Or else it was regret. Why had he allowed himself to be so easily taken in by her bullshit? He exuded dreariness as I watched him from behind, probably from a mix of such emotions. And I wondered if I looked any different when people walked behind me.

I called home. My wife was sleeping.

"Late again today?"

"I'm all finished."

"Did you solve the case?"

After 10 years as a policeman's wife, she'd become a cop herself.

"No, we've gotta wait for the fingerprints to come out tomorrow. I'm finished with all my reports."

"Hurry home."

My wife's man. I had pointed a gun at him and threatened to kill him. He'd pissed his pants. Soaked himself. And grabbed my knees and begged for his life. My wife had gone out of her mind, and just stared watching me from where she'd crammed herself into a corner of the wardrobe. Some part of my wife disappeared at that moment. She was a different person after that. She put the piss-soaked bedspread in the bathtub and washed it, stomping on it with her feet. I yelled at her to throw it away, but she didn't respond. For 20 minutes or more, she pressed the bedspread with her feet. After she finished washing it, and hung it out to dry, she went to the hospital and had an abortion. She knew it wasn't

mine. And that turned out to be the only time she ever got pregnant. Later I found out I had a low sperm count. That was when she started loving Jesus.

This all happened when I was young. Now, even if my wife did find another man, I wouldn't be able to get all wound up like that. But would I be able to just tell her to leave? I couldn't know. But it's not like I'd pick up a gun and say let's play Russian roulette, that's for sure.

I checked Myoung-sik's alibi the next day. His assistant and colleagues confirmed that he'd been in the library. I called Kyoung-hee back to the station. She looked a lot more nervous than she had the day before.

"Myoung-sik claims he shot nude photos of you."

Her face turned red. And then her shoulders began to heave.

"Don't cry, ma'am. Just answer the question."

Was I being cruel? No. There was no such thing as a "personal life." Every single one of our private cravings was constantly ready to spring out into the open. Like a genie in a bottle, they whisper that they'll give us everything if only we'll pop the lid, but once they're out, they become a huge monster and pin us to the ground. "Look here," they say. Who bottled me up like that? People, that's who. People, just like you." And that's when they grab you and gobble you up.

The woman nodded.

"Why did you tell me that yesterday? You said he just took a few snapshots."

"Do we really have to talk about that?"

She glared at me with tear-filled eyes. I flinched. There was something beautiful about a provoked woman with tears in her eyes, and I became aware of my state of arousal. And then I took a long look at her nude body using the imaginary camera that lay between us. Her round shoulders, still firm breasts. Her delicate neckline.

I decided to push a little harder.

"Look. Your husband's dead. He got his head smashed in. So I want to hear about anything that could possibly bear even the slightest relation to your husband's death."

She bit her lip.

"We took pictures. Lots and lots of pictures. Of me with my ass in the air, and of me with my legs spread wide open. There. Is that enough?"

Suddenly, she let out a scream, and everything got quiet inside the violent crime division. Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at me and the woman.

"Hey, get back to work! It's none of your business!" I bellowed, spinning around in my revolving chair before turning again to face the woman.

"It's OK. Now, about that 'Kyoung-hee, I love you' picture. According to the man, he went to school and shot that picture because his son asked him to. And he said that you were the one who asked him to take the snapshots."

She raised her head.

"Mr. Jeong said that?" Her shoulders drooped.

"Yes."

"If that's what he said, then it's true."

Her head sank, and she was quiet.

"What's that supposed to mean? Look, I'm asking you to tell me what really happened!"

"What do you mean, 'what really happened?' That's what happened. That's all. Think about it, Inspector. Let's say you get flowers from some woman. Now don't you

think you're probably going to think that she likes you? But then she shows up, and tells you that there was a mistake with the delivery. Or that she was just bored, and had some extra money. Or maybe that she has a flower shop, and had some leftover flowers that she was worried were going to wilt if she didn't do something with them. It's just that sort of thing. That's what happened. And now that you've got the flowers, you look like a fool. Isn't that right?"

"All right. Let's talk about something else. Myoung-sik says that he never went to the photo shop yesterday. I checked it this morning, and his alibi's solid."

The woman let out a sigh.

"That's a relief."

"What's a relief?"

"It's a relief that he didn't kill my husband."

That's what she said, but I saw a brief trace of bitterness pass over her face. She seemed to be relieved and disappointed at the same time. Maybe it's something every woman wants once. For some man to kill her husband out of love for her. To risk his life.

But hey, that kind of thing doesn't happen. And when it does, it's bad news. Just your run-of-the-mill crime of passion. Turns into nothing more than an obscenity in the metropolitan section that they use to sell papers. Life just wasn't set up to be all that dramatic.

Three or four phones on the chief's desk started going off loudly at the same time. He somehow had the ability to answer them one after the other, in the space of a few seconds. He whispered something, then approached me.

"Let's talk." He sniffed.

The chief walked me over to the window.

"That woman. Send her home."

"Why?"

"Found some bastard sleeping in a parked car near the photo shop this morning. Han sussed him out, and found a blood-stained baseball bat in the trunk. The blood-type checks out. The fingerprint results came in, too, and his fingerprints were on the display case. Guy's got four counts of assault on his record. All we need now his confession. Cho's bringing him in. Says he's on his way."

"Why'd he kill him?"

"We'll find that out when he gets here."

I headed back to my seat, and folded up my computer. Hands clasped tight, I stared blankly at the woman. Eyes still wet, she stared right back.

"We've found a suspect."

There was no change in her expression.

"And it wasn't Mr. Jeong?"

"No."

She took a mirror out of her handbag and checked her appearance.

"You can go."

After re-doing her make-up, she stood up. Staggering a little, she looked around for the entrance. I got up from my chair, and showed her out. A woman who couldn't retrace her own steps. For all I knew, she was like that all the time. 'What am I doing here? How in the world did I get to this place?' Maybe she'd been asking those questions her whole life. I walked her out to the front of the building. Wasn't there something I should say? 'It wasn't my fault.' 'You're the one who brought it up.' 'I didn't bring you down here to talk

about nude photos.' The woman left without giving me a chance to speak. But maybe that was for the best. Excuses would be tiring for both of us.

The suspect was dragged in in handcuffs, and Cho was put in charge of the interrogation. The chief and I took turns questioning the guy, and he resisted a little, but when we showed him the evidence, the confession came quick. The waitress at the tea room the photo shop owner regularly frequented was his mistress. When he got out of jail, he found out that she'd been cheating on him with the photo shop guy, and when he saw Kyoung-hee leave the store he'd gone over to give him a little scare, but had wound up killing him.


So that's all it was. I felt like I'd just been through a maze. I told the chief I was going to go home and take a rest. I started driving slowly home, and stopped in front of a crosswalk. On sudden impulse, I spun the car around and headed back in the direction of the crime scene. The shutters were open, and you could faintly see a woman's silhouette inside. I watched from my car for a long time. After about an hour, Myoung-sik appeared. Hesitantly, he entered the shop. As soon as she saw him, the woman collapsed into a chair. It looked like she was crying. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders. A few minutes later, she came out of the shop, and pulled the shutters down with a hook. She then walked around to the back door, and went back inside. I lit a cigarette, picked up my cell phone, and called the school Myoung-sik said his kid went to. I asked to speak to his teacher. After a long wait, they put me through.


The teacher was a woman. I asked her whether there was a girl named Kyoung-hee in her class. Sounding suspicious, she said that there wasn't. Those kinds of names weren't popular anymore, she said, and gave me a laundry list of names the kids were running around with nowadays. Sae-lom, Hana, Han-byol, Cho-long. Names like that. I thanked her for the information, and hung up. I headed for home. My wife greeted me in a tired voice. I stretched out in a chair. My wife sat beside me, slicing fruit. I grabbed her feet. That fornicating bastard's piss, that pissed-soaked bedspread, those feet stomping relentlessly to wash it. I grabbed those feet, and held on tight. My wife tried desperately to kick free.





"Please, stop!!" she begged, as she struggled break my grip, and when I wouldn't let go, she slashed down across my forearm with the knife. A red streak appeared immediately, and then the blood began to flow. Casting me an angry, sidelong glance, she went and got some disinfectant, and applied it to my arm. That's when I fell asleep. In my dream, I'd become a fruit, and my wife was peeling my skin. It was a happy dream.

*


Whatever Happened to the Guy Stuck in the Elevator?

Life can deal you some pretty strange days. You know, the kind that make you feel everything is twisted from the minute  wake up. And all the things that just might happen once in your life suddenly happen, one by one, like they've been waiting for the chance. Today was that kind of day for me.


My razor broke while I was shaving this morning. I really wasn't pressing very hard, but it suddenly just snapped off at the neck. "Was it a disposable?" you wonder. Hardly. It was some new contraption Gillette just came out with  and the thing cost me nearly 6000 won. You couldn't find a stronger razor, and wouldn't be able to break it if you tried. But even though I'd only been using it for a month, it suddenly snapped, just like that.

Because of that, I was only able to shave half my face. The left side was nice and clean  the right side wasn't. "You're g to work looking like a jackass," I thought with disgust. I looked at my watch. 7:40. No time. Dried my hair, got dressed, left my apartment, and waited for the elevator. Didn't come. Must have been out of order. Looked at my watch again. 7:55. I began my descent from the 15th floor, racing towards the bottom like a Chinese food delivery guy. As I passed the 5th floor, I noticed that the elevator was stuck between the 5th and 6th floor with the door open. Two legs were hanging out of it. One foot was shoeless. Was this guy alive or dead? Just then, some other tenants rushed by, shoving me out of the way. Dressed sharply in business suits, they were on their way to work. How could they just ignore this guy jammed in the elevator, not even caring whether he was alive or dead  but there really wasn't much I could do, either. I looked at my watch. Exactly 8:00. Shit.  I cast an anxious glance down the stairs. What to do? I gave the shoeless foot a tug (it was about on level with my face).

"Hey!" I yelled.

The toes wiggled. I heard some groan that sounded nothing like speech. He seemed to be alive. But I had neither the energy nor the time to pull him out. "Listen," I said. "I have no idea how you got caught in the elevator, but I'll give 911 a call on my way to work. Or I'll let the security guard downstairs know about it, so just hold tight, OK?" 

I dashed down to the first floor. "On Patrol," read the sign in the security guard's window. I checked outside, but there was no sign of him. There was nothing I could do. I ran to the bus stop.

The  didn't come. I turned to the guy waiting next to me.

“Do you have a cell phone by any chance? Some guy is stuck in the elevator, and I have to call 911.” The guy looked at me like I was a total creep, told me in a flat tone that he didn’t have a cell phone, and turned back in the direction of the expected bus. I got a similar reaction from the woman standing behind him.

“There’s a pay phone right over there,” she said, pointing across the street with a finger that she made seem as heavy as a dumbbell. I explained the situation.

“What happens if the bus comes while I’m over there?” I asked. “My boss is a tyrant, and he’ll kill me if I’m late. And think about the guy stuck in the elevator. Think about how much pain he must be in.” The woman gave me a cold smirk as she got on the bus that had just arrived. I’ve got to get a phone, I thought, and realized that this was the first time I’d ever regretted not owning one. Just then, my bus arrived as well and I squeezed into line and got on. I reached into my back pocket for my bus card, only to discover that I didn’t have my wallet with me. The driver told me impatiently to pay with cash if I didn’t have a card, and I explained that since I didn’t have my wallet, I couldn’t do that either.

“So get off the bus!” he barked. The people behind me began to push passed me, casting me sidelong glances as they swiped their cards and headed for their seats. I begged the driver.

“I’ll pay twice tomorrow. That’ll work, won’t it?” Just then, a dump truck veered over the middle lane and came careening straight for our bus. The driver was busy yelling at me, so he couldn’t see it, though even if he had, there probably was nothing he could have done. In fact, the only one on that packed bus who could see out the front window at that moment was me (that may be the luckiest thing that happened to me all day).

“Uh, uh, uh...” I said as I stumbled desperately backwards and crouched down while the truck slammed headlong into the front of our bus. People came crashing down on top of me as the bus was filled with a mix of screams and groans. I was just glad to have gotten out of the bus card situation. After the initial shock wave had passed, people slowly began picking themselves up. The front of the bus had been smashed all the way to the card scanner by the door, and its front mirror was pressing into the driver’s chest. Fortunately, aside from a dull ache in my lower back, I didn’t seem to have been injured at all.

Once people recovered from their shock, they immediately began reaching for their cell phones. The guy who had just told me he didn’t have a cell phone was no exception, pulling out a sleek new fold-up model to make a call. The whole bus was filled with the sounds of people calling 911, their families, and work.

“Mom? It’s me. The bus I was on was in a wreck. Yeah, I’m OK, but the bus is completely totaled.”

“Is this 911? Something just slammed into the #88 bus. We’re right in front of Samdong Apartments. Please hurry.”

“Mr. Jang? This is Mr. Lee. I’m right in front of my apartment, and something just crashed into the bus I’m on. Yes. I think the driver’s dead. Me? Well, a bunch of people fell on me, so my back kind of...Right. Ask Mr. Park about that. He’ll know all about it.”

I tried to borrow a phone from someone after they hung up, but they told me they had other calls to make. People called their families, work, friends, and even the traffic report. Soon we heard sirens, and a fire truck arrived. They told us to stand back, and used a hammer to smash one of the bus windows. One by one, people began jumping out of the windows. Soon my turn came, and I was out. Rescue patrol workers were systematically

checking people, to see if they were OK. One guy asked me if I was all right, and I told him about the guy in the elevator.

“There’s a guy hanging out of the elevator shaft in that apartment building over there,” I said. “You’d better go quickly.” I explained that I’d been trying to report it, but that I didn’t have a cell phone, and that no one would lend me one. By the time I was done talking, he was already checking on somebody else. Maybe with 911, you could only report things by phone. Maybe a phone call was more believable. I mean, who was going to believe a story about an elevator emergency at the scene of a car wreck? With my hand on my aching lower back, I headed across the street to the pay phone. I pushed the glass door open and entered the booth—the phone only took phone cards. And of course, no wallet. Damn. I pushed my way out of the phone booth, and asked some of the people who had gathered to view the accident if I could borrow a phone card. A plump, middle-aged woman immediately cut me off.

“Who are you going to call? If you’re calling 911, you don’t have to. They’re already here. Besides, last time I lent my phone to someone, they used more than 3000 won. There are lots of people like that running around these days,” she jabbered, not giving me any chance to speak. I told her that I was calling 911, not for this accident, but because there was a guy stuck in the elevator. With a withering look, the lady told me that you didn’t need a phone card to call 911. I went back into the booth and dialed, but got nothing. That’s when I saw the sign on the top of the phone—“Under Repair.”

Just then the cops arrived, looking for eyewitnesses to the accident. Suddenly I realized that everyone who had been on the bus was pointing in my direction.

“That guy was right up front. He got in a fight with the driver, because he got on without a card. If it weren’t for that guy, maybe this wouldn’t have happened. See, the driver couldn’t take off, because he was arguing with him.”

Two cops in uniform approached me.

“Sir, did you see what happened?” they asked.

“Yes, I did,” I replied, “but actually, there’s something a bit more urgent than that. I have to give a presentation at work today and what’s even more urgent than that is that there’s this guy stuck in my apartment elevator. He’s hanging out the door, wedged in between the 5th and 6th floors. You’d better go quickly. Seriously.” Without even a glance in my direction, one cop opened his notebook.

“Did you see the accident?”

“I told you I did. The truck crossed over the center line and smashed right into the front of the bus. But that’s not important right now. There’s a guy stuck in the elevator.”

The other cop cut me off, and asked in exasperation, “When did the guy get stuck in the elevator?”


“It was at about 7:50.” I looked at my watch. It was already almost 8:20. The cop grabbed the wireless radio from his belt and put it to his lips.

“Has anyone reported a guy stuck in the elevator at Samdong Apartments?” The cop re-fastened the radio to his belt, and said with annoyance, “Look here, mister. Are you playing games with the police? What’s your citizen registration number?” I gave my phone number and my citizen registration number.

“Can I go now?” I asked. They said that I could.

Meanwhile, a huge crowd of people was crowding onto the next bus. I quickly got in line. Because of all the time that clearing the wreck had taken, there was a huge number of people waiting, and they packed onto the bus like sardines. The lucky thing was that this bus wasn’t making people pay. I let out a small cry of joy. It was going to be tight, but hey,

it was free. I couldn't bear the thought of running all the way back to the 15th floor to get my wallet, and I really didn't want to have to see those feet hanging out of the elevator again. What in the world could I say to him? The security guard's on patrol, no one would lend me a cell phone, the pay phone's out of order, and my face is only half-shaved so the police wouldn't believe my story? And anyway, I was already late for work, and I had to give my presentation. It was an important report about more efficient use of office supplies. To be more exact, I had to get up in front of the trustees and speak clearly and confidently about my plan to reduce the use of toilet paper at the office. But my razor broke, a guy was stuck in the elevator, and a truck had slammed into a parked bus. This obviously wasn't my day.

Do you think the ride on the second bus was uneventful? Of course not. I felt something down around my right hip, and when I looked down, I saw that this guy was grabbing the ass of the woman next to me. These kinds of bastards are still around? I shook my head in amazement. I was pretty angry about it, but since it wasn't my ass, I decided to try to keep my cool. But then the woman started staring right at me (of course she was on  unshaven side), and giving me dirty looks. Finally, I just couldn't stand it anymore.

"Look, miss," I said. "I'm not the one feeling your butt. And the reason this side of my face is unshaven is because my razor broke this morning, and my suit's all wrinkled because the bus I was just on got smashed by a dump truck." Do you think that got me anywhere? Suddenly, everyone around me was staring at me. And the guy who'd been grabbing her ass quickly moved his hand away, so it was now impossible to tell which bastard had been touching her. With a "don't even think you're going to get away with this" look on her face, the woman twisted her way towards me, and shoved her face right up against mine.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Do you know who my brother is?" She pushed her face even closer to mine.

"Who's your brother?" I asked. I realize now that I shouldn't have said anything. That was the same as admitting that I'd been grabbing her butt. She didn't let me know who her brother was, or what he did, but instead just said, "You'd better be careful, before you get thrown in jail."

When her nose was just about touching mine, I suddenly sensed an urgent need to get off the bus. That was because just then the bus driver, who'd heard the whole thing, said in a loud voice, "Miss, would you like me to make a stop at the police station?" The woman, who seemed quite satisfied with the effect she'd had, made no reply. Meanwhile, the bus came to a stop, and I had to push through the people getting on, and quickly escape through the front door.

I looked at my watch. It was 9:00, and I was already 30 minutes late for work. I had gotten off at Chung-jeong-ro, and even if I walked fast, it would take me about 30 minutes to get to Jeong-ro, which is where my office was. There was no way to make a phone call or take a cab, and so I had no other choice but to trudge in the direction of my office. I had to give this report about a plan for the reduction of toilet paper use at the office, but what about the guy stuck in the elevator? I really started to hate that woman on the bus. I mean, if I had actually grabbed her ass, I could understand. God, this is all because of that stupid broken razor. If my razor hadn't broken, I would have been able to leave my house a little earlier, the elevator would have worked, and then maybe even the bus accident wouldn't have happened. I wondered whether I could sue the Gillette Company for damages. In the midst of these miserable thoughts, as I was passing through

Kwang-hwa-mun, my beeper rang loudly. I checked the number. It was work. I began to run. The company was the only thing that would save me now. Someone who knew me there would lend me money, and I'd be able to make phone calls and ride buses. I could use the phone on my desk to call 911, and then everything would be OK. Run, run! With my tie flying in the breeze, I ran down the streets of Kwang-hwa-mun. My lungs felt as if they were about to burst. My back hurt from the accident, but there was no time to worry about that now. I arrived at my office building all out of breath. My office building had six elevators. One was the private elevator of the CEO whose office was at the top, and everyone else used the remaining five. I got on one of those. It was already well past the time most people arrived, so I was the only one going up. Once again, I thought of that guy stuck in the elevator. Surely by now someone would have reported the situation, and he would have been rescued. The security guard would have thought it was strange that the elevator wasn't working, and gone up to check, especially because the 5th floor wasn't that high up. But if everyone had been as busy as I had been, and if the security guards had all gone to some meeting to demand an increase in their wages or something, that guy could still be wedged up there in the elevator shaft, and just think how much he must be hating humanity at this point.

Ding. Fifth floor.

One woman got on the elevator. We may have seen each other a few times. She looked familiar to me. The fifth floor was the accounting department. She was wearing a purple uniform, and her long hair was pulled back. The fact that her hair was long meant that she wasn't married yet. I wondered why women always cut their hair as soon as they got married. While I was wondering about that, the elevator suddenly made a clunking sound, and came to a stop. At first, the woman pretended to be calm. She shot me a quick look out of the corner of her eye, but then continued staring straight ahead at the elevator door. But after awhile, when it became clear that the elevator wasn't going anywhere, and the doors weren't opening, she gave me an "Isn't there anything you can do?" sort of look. I shrugged my shoulders, American style, and looked helplessly on. The elevator suddenly felt extremely isolated and stuffy.

"It seems like it's broken. Should we try pushing the emergency button?" the woman asked anxiously.

"That's a good idea," I said, nodding. The woman pushed the button slowly at first, but soon began nervously pushing on it again and again. She finally stopped after her fingers had been turned red with the effort.

"It doesn't seem like anyone's down there," she said. More time went by. We decided to try to get people's attention by pounding on the door. We pounded as hard as we could with our hands and our feet. But then I mentioned that such force could cause the elevator to fall and crash, and the woman got a horrified look on her face, and stopped pounding.

"This morning, I saw a guy whose body was wedged up in the elevator shaft," I said. "We're lucky we're just stuck." I was hoping to offer her some relief, but I only made things worse. She sank to the floor.

"Whatever happened to him?"

"I saw him on my way down the stairs, but I haven't had a chance to report it yet. I had to get to work, and I didn't have a phone. Hey, right! By any chance do you have a cell phone?"

With a look of despair, she replied that her cell phone was in her handbag. We both let out long sighs. If only she had her cell phone with her. We'd be able to call someone to get us out, and we could also call 911 to report the guy in my apartment building.

"Do you wanna give opening the door a try?" the woman suggested. But as we put our strength together and started trying to push the door apart, she suddenly let out a shriek.

"Look at this!" she cried. I looked in the direction of her pointing finger. "Warning. Do not attempt to open doors by force."

"Right. That guy this morning was also originally stuck in the elevator, just like us. But then he probably started getting worried that he'd be late for work, and so he tried to open the doors. And when they opened, of course he tried to get out. But that's when the elevator started moving again. Poor guy. I've got to call 911 right away, but what am I supposed to do? Of all days, why did I have to forget my wallet? And then the pay phone didn't work, and no one would lend me a cell phone. And then, the bus I was riding on got smashed into by a truck, and, well, just look at my clothes! I got buried under a pile of people and they got all messed up. And then on the next bus, I got ridiculously accused of touching this woman's backside, and had to get off the bus. Hey, don't look at me like that!. I didn't do it, this other jerk did, but she mistakenly thought it was me. You know how that kind of thing can happen."

The woman scooted over to a far corner of the elevator, and looked like she was ready to plant her high heels into my shins if I tried anything. At the same time, she was pushing the emergency button as fast as she could.

I tried to reassure her, saying, "Don't worry, I'm not a bad guy. Hey, we work for the same company, and you know exactly who I am, so surely you don't think I'd do some terrible thing. Anyway, it takes some kind of karma for two people to meet like this, so when we get out, how about having a cup of coffee?" but she just sat silently, saying nothing.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" I asked, pulling a pack of cigarettes from my front pocket. I figured that if she was by any chance a smoker, cigarettes could make the situation a whole lot more comfortable.

Giving me her coldest possible look, she hissed, "Smoking is forbidden inside the building."

I protested. "You know there's no way to go to a smoking area or the roof right now. If I could go there, why would I smoke here? Let's just smoke one." The woman refused, shaking her head vigorously.

"You can't smoke in this kind of narrow space! Don't you know how harmful second-hand smoke is? In America alone, every year 6 million people die from exposure to second-hand smoke. They say second-hand smoke is even more dangerous because you're not aware of it. And second-hand smoke here at work really drives me crazy. I mean, the boss may be the boss, but what right does he have to blow smoke into my lungs? And you know, there's probably not a country in the world with as much second-hand smoke as Korea. You can't find a non-smoking area anywhere! Think about the major holidays! Every man in the family gets together and smokes at the same time! In bars, cafes, the street. Oh, yeah, the street! Take a look at my skirt!" She turned her backside towards me so I could take a look. There was a single mark in one corner of her skirt. "Some jerk was smoking a cigarette at a crosswalk, and he burned my butt! Do you really think that's right? I'd love to kill every bastard I see smoking in the street."

“Ok, ok, I won’t smoke,” I said, as I pushed my cigarettes back into my pocket. I began to feel a chill as the sweat which had completely soaked my shirt began to cool.

“It’s cold in here. Since I left my wallet at home, I had no money for a cab, and I had to run all the way to work. Look at this. See, my suit coat is soaked all the way to my back.” I turned my back towards her and showed her my wet spot.

“Oh, but we haven’t even introduced ourselves,” I said. “What’s your name?”

She looked up and glared at me.

“Miss Jeung,” she said evenly.

“My last name’s Jeung, too,” I said happily. “I’m in Resource Management.”

She gave me a vague nod which let me know that she was definitely not interested, and there was a long spell of silence as we sat upon the elevator floor. The whole time the woman was silently pushing on the emergency button.

“Who in the world is managing this building? If the elevator doesn’t move for this long, wouldn’t someone wonder whether or not anyone was stuck, and come up and check? What the hell is going on? It doesn’t matter whether there are five other elevators or not, for Christ’s sake.”

Even as I was saying this, my beeper was ringing loudly. It was my boss. God, my office was right in front of my nose, and there was no way of getting there. I began to seethe. I was totally screwed. This was going to cost me my job.

“I don’t care whether we get wedged in this elevator or not. Let’s get out of here.” My suggestion was met with a reluctant look.

“Ok, fine. You stay here. If we can get the door open, I’ll jump down myself, so just give me a hand with the door. And then I’ll go and get help.” The woman nodded. We put our strength together again, and started on the business of forcing the door open. It turned out to be a lot more difficult than I expected. The sweat was pouring off of us as we pushed against the door, but each time we got it open just a bit, it would slam back shut.

“Aren’t you any stronger than that?” Ms. Jeung demanded, venting her frustration. I got mad.

“Look. I’ve already been slammed into by a truck this morning, and I ran all the way to work. What kind of energy do you expect me to have? Besides, my back is killing me.” After making these excuses, I thought for a second. The trick was to make sure that when we got the door open a bit, it wasn’t able to shut again. But there didn’t seem to be anything that we could use to stick between the doors. There was nothing I could do besides take my shoes off. After having run to work, they were soaked with sweat and stunk.

“Ok, if we get the doors open a bit, we’ll stick this shoe in between them. That’ll give us a wedge to get our hands in.” We both gathered our strength again and each pulled back on one side of the door. As Ms. Jeung crouched and pulled, I got a full view of her breasts over the top of her uniform blouse.

“What the hell are you doing?” she cried. “Stick the shoe in there!” With great effort, she raised her head and, staring me straight in the eyes, vented her rising frustration. In my confusion, I somehow stuck my foot, rather than the shoe, in between the closing doors. It hurt like hell, but I tried to ignore the pain. Through the small opening, you could see the dividing line between floors 9 and 10—the floor of the 10th floor. It looked like we’d be able to crawl up to the 10th floor if we could just get the doors open a little wider. We pulled against the doors again, and when we’d opened it a little wider, I suddenly threw my body in between them, to preserve the gains we’d made. Now there was a space

wide enough for someone to get out. I felt like my lungs were being crushed, but since I was in front of a woman, I decided to play it cool.

“So what should we do now? If I get out, the doors are going to close again,” I said in a worried tone.

“Here,” she said. “Prop me up. Then I’ll be able to get up to the next floor. Jumping down to the 9th seems too dangerous, I think. I’m pretty thin, so getting out will probably be easier for me.”

The 10th floor was about on level with my head. But if she were going to get up there, she was going to have to stand on my shoulders and get out through a space no wider than the width of my body. I clasped my hands to give her a footing. She stepped up. She then grabbed onto the 10th floor, and slowly moved her feet from my hands to my shoulders. Her heels dug deeply into my shoulders. I practically screamed with pain, but somehow kept my mouth shut. Looking up, I got a clear view up her skirt. She was wearing a white-laced girdle. She then kicked hard off my shoulders, and made it up to the 10th floor. I felt like letting out a cheer. With my body still crushed between the elevator doors, I gave her my heartiest congratulations.

“Hey, Ms. Jeung! You did it! All right! Hey, please let people know I’m stuck here as quickly as you can, Ok? And it’d be great if you could tell the people in my department...”

There was no response. I suddenly had a pretty bad feeling about the whole thing. I pushed my hands and feet out with all my strength, and got myself out from between those crushing doors. The doors shut with a dull “gong” that sounded to me like the closing of a coffin. I hadn’t done anything to that woman, I told myself. I had even lent her my hands and shoulders for her escape. And given the fact that we worked in the same building, and would almost definitely run into each other again, surely she wouldn’t forget to let someone know I was here. But 10 minutes went by, and then 20, and still nobody came. I slumped to the floor of the elevator in despair, and began singing some children’s song, the words of which I could hardly remember. Over and over again I sang the song, and just when my exhaustion from singing had me on the verge of sleep, I heard a loud noise coming from the outside. The elevator doors opened a bit, and a person’s face appeared.

“Hey! What in the world are you doing in there?” That was exactly the question I wanted to ask. “What in the world am I stuck in here for? You’re responsible for the elevators—you tell me!” I was furious, but worried that if I said anything, he’d walk off and leave me, so I answered in the politest voice that I possibly could.

“The elevator seems to be broken.” The elevator guy then asked me another question. “Are you alone?” Again, I tried to sound as friendly as possible. “Well, I wasn’t. There was a woman by the name of Ms. Jeung. But just a moment ago she stood on my shoulders and got out, so I was left by myself.” The elevator guy went to get someone else, and in a moment they came back and opened the doors. I grabbed onto his hands, and they pulled me up. I looked down, and realized that in the process, the whole front of my suit had been smeared with oil and dust. That’s when I realized that the same thing must have happened to Ms. Jeung, and I started to view her a bit more sympathetically. I mean, I’m a guy, so a little grease and dust doesn’t make much difference, but what was she supposed to do?

As soon as the elevator guy had gotten me out, he really started making a fuss

“We just had this blasted elevator checked out—how the hell could it be broken down already? Aren’t the big firms supposed to be a bit more reliable than this?” That was

the start of a long rant about corporate sleaze, and the incestuous relations between big business and the media. I tried to calm him down.

“There’s no need to be such a pessimist,” I said. “There may be some bad apples out there, but they’re way outnumbered by good people like you,” I said reassuringly. And then I told him just how much I appreciated his help in getting me out of the elevator. That’s when he looked down at my feet.

“Hey, what did you do with your shoes?” I smacked my hand on my forehead. I had taken them off to hold the doors open, and then since I’d just used my foot, I guess I’d somehow forgotten about them.

“Oh, jeez,” I said. “I seem to have left them in the elevator. Listen, I really don’t have time to go back for them right now. Would you mind getting them for me, and bringing them to the Resource Management department on the 15th floor?”

“Not at all,” he said. I looked down at my watch. Somehow, it was already a bit past 10:00. This had been a pretty rough ride to work. I momentarily considered taking one of the other elevators up to the 15th floor, but then just decided to walk up the emergency stairs. When I entered the office, I saw that Ms. Lee was the only one there, sitting by the phone. It seemed like everyone else was already in the morning meeting. Ms. Lee stared at me in a state of shock.

“Mr. Jeong! What happened? Did you decide to take the sewer to work? Take a look in the mirror!” I looked. My hair was a mess, my face was half shaved, two deep grooves had been pushed into my shoulders by that woman’s high heels, the front of my suit was covered with grease, and everything was still wrinkled from the bus accident. And my shoes were in the elevator.

Just then, the conference room door opened, and my boss’ face appeared.

“Hey, Ms. Lee! Hasn’t he arrived yet? Oh, there you are! Do you know what time it is? Get in here and give your report!” I gestured towards my clothes, and shot him a pleading look, but he just slammed the door and returned to the meeting. There were definitely a few things I needed to do before I went into that meeting. I had to call 911 and report that guy, I had to find Ms. Jeong on the 5th floor, and give her a piece of my mind, I had to go to the bathroom and try to get cleaned up, and I had to find my shoes. But I pushed all of those things aside, and headed into the meeting. Half the people were sleeping, and the other half were flipping through the materials they were going to use for their presentations. My department head and our division head, and one guy from the Board of Trustees were the only people paying any attention, and they were staring right at me.

They asked. Why I was late, and why my clothes were such a mess. I explained. That morning, someone had gotten stuck in my apartment elevator. A truck slammed into my bus, no one would lend me a cell phone, and since I’d left my wallet at home, I had no way to call anyone. Then I got accused of being a pervert on the next bus, and had to get off at Chung-jeong-ro, and run all the way to work. And then the elevator here broke down, and I was stuck in that for 30 minutes, and the marks in my shoulders were caused by this woman who climbed up on me to get out, but then never went for help the way she was supposed to, and just went on her way, and I got covered in grease when I finally got out of the elevator, and in all the confusion I left my shoes in there. I told them that I was sorry, and that I deeply apologized. I don’t know what I needed to feel sorry for, but I said that I was. But the department head cut me short.

“Fine. Let’s hear your report.”

I drew back my shoulders, and gave the essentials of my incentive plan to stimulate the use of 2-sided copies, which would result in paper saving of epoch-making proportions. And I let them know that the best way to reduce the use of toilet paper at the office would be to special-order rolls from which could you only tear off exactly one-meter's worth at a time. I explained that while most rolls tear off every 10 centimeters, the 1 meter rolls would cause people to use only one meter at a time, resulting in an incredible savings in tissue. According to our employee surveys, most employees use 1.2 meters of tissue paper each time they tend to their business. But apparently it was pretty stupid of me to let them know about this nearly 20% potential reduction in the use of toilet paper with such a disheveled appearance.

The objections were immediate. Ms. Eun-hee Lee was the first to raise her hand. "You know, women will tend to use tissue even for things that don't require much. I mean, I don't know about other people, but I don't use a meter's worth of tissue. For me, 30 centimeters is usually more than enough, so if we move to the 1-meter tissue, isn't that actually a waste of 70%?"

Then the guy from the Board of Trustees, who was starting at me with eyes that let me know just what he thought of my plan, jumped in.

"What makes you so sure that people who've been using 1.2 meters of tissue are going to reduce their use to 1? Isn't it also possible that they'll just use 2? Do some more research, and come back with a slightly more reasonable conservation plan." The division and department heads were both nodding their heads in agreement. I really had to wonder. How many meters of toilet paper could these people possibly be using in the bathroom? And why in the world wouldn't 1 meter's worth be enough?

The meeting lasted until 12:00. As everyone else noisily left for lunch, I went looking for my shoes. It looked like the broken elevator was working again. Taking no chances, I took a different elevator down to the first floor. I started heading towards the front desk, which is where the security guards were. The woman who'd been sitting at the information desk suddenly stood up, and then the security guards all started heading in my direction.

"May I help you?" she asked. But her expression was hardly friendly, and she wasn't looking at me, but rather at the approaching security guards. She was obviously giving them some kind of signal. They surrounded me, and bluntly told me to leave the building.

I protested. "I work here, in resource management. My name is Jeung. I left my shoes on that elevator that broke down, and I'm just trying to find them. Look here..." But even as I was saying that, they were pushing me out the building. "Hey! Give a call up to Resource Management!"

The guy who saved me was a guy named Han, who'd joined the company at the same time as I did.

"Hey Han!" I cried. "It's me! It's me!" Thanks to him, they let go of me, and I was able to explain what had happened.

"Hey, Han, thanks" I told him. "I owe you lunch." I thanked him from the bottom of my heart, and then turned around and explained to the security guards about the elevator and my shoes. But no one knew anything about the broken elevator, and they said they had no idea who had gotten me out. They called and radioed here and there, but after 30 minutes they still weren't able to find anyone who knew anything about it.

The last thing they said to me was, "We're sorry, we have no idea. You should probably just wear a pair of slippers from your office, if you have some, or find a shoe store

nearby and buy a pair of shoes.” I nodded my head weakly, and decided to head back up to my office. I waited for an elevator, and the first one to come was the one I’d gotten stuck in. I had no intention of taking it, but as the door opened, I noticed my shoes sitting side by side on the floor of the elevator. I pounced on them like a desperate cheetah, and managed to get back out of the elevator before the doors closed. I was ecstatic. Nearly bursting into tears of relieved joy, I slipped into my shoes one by one in the building lobby. Once I’d gotten my shoes on, I thought again of the guy in the elevator at my apartment. There was no way I could go to a restaurant looking like this anyway, so I went up to my office and called 911.

“Hello, is this 911?”

“Where are you?” the operator asked in a kind voice.

“Ah, this is Jeong-ro.”

And then the operator suddenly said, “You’re in the Kum-jeong Building, right?” It seemed like 911 was somehow staring right down at me, from the ceiling. I explained that the accident location was not here, but rather in Samdong Apartments. She seemed rather suspicious. But her tone was still friendly.

“What sort of accident is it?”

“A person is stuck in the elevator.”

“And when did that happen?” She was beginning to sound rather annoyed, as if she didn’t believe me at all.

“It was at 7:50 this morning.” The operator then spoke to me as if she had had quite enough.

“Look here, sir. We’re very busy here. I don’t have time to joke around.” I decided I’d better explain pretty quickly. I told her that I’d tried to report the accident as soon as it happened, but that no one would lend me a cell phone and the apartment security guards weren’t around, and then the bus I took to work crashed. Then, as soon as I arrived at work, the elevator broke, and then there was an important meeting, so I wasn’t able to report it until now.

“Could you please let me know whether he was ever let out of the elevator?” I asked. The operator told me that it wasn’t 911’s job to handle such calls, and advised me to call the local fire department. I then asked whether it would be possible to send over a rescue squad, just to check. I explained that everyone in the building was at work, including the married women, and that it was possible that no one had reported it until now. But she said nothing other than “thank you,” and hung up the phone.

Things at the office went smoothly for the rest of the afternoon. I continued to study ways to reduce the use of toilet paper, and prepared another survey to pass out the office employees. At 5:00, everyone began heading for the door. I borrowed 10,000 won from Ms. Kim, and started for home. When I arrived at my apartment, I checked my mail. It was stuffed full of memos. I threw a few of them in the trash can by the security guard’s office, and headed for the elevator. Fortunately, the elevator seemed to be working normally again. I got on with a few other people, and went up. They eyed my tattered appearance warily, and stood in the opposite corner of the elevator. I decided to ask them.

“Do any of you know by any chance what happened to the guy who was stuck in the elevator?” Everyone just shook their heads, without saying anything.

“Well, when I was heading to work, the elevator was stuck between the 5th and 6th floors, and there was a guy wedged in between the 6th floor and the floor of the elevator. Didn’t you hear about that?” No one responded, and as soon as the elevator reached their

floor, they got off as quickly as possible, and headed for home. One mother was holding her daughter, who looked to be about 5, tightly in her arms, and eyeing me closely.

When we finally got to the 15th floor, the woman who got off with me ran for her apartment at top speed. I opened my door and went inside. I took off my suit, tossed it on the floor, and got in the shower. As I rubbed shampoo into my head, I kept wondering. What in the world happened to that guy? I'll have to call one of the security guards. But when I'd finished shampooing my head and turned on the water, freezing cold water blasted out of the shower head. No matter how I turned the faucet, I couldn't get any hot water. Shivering from the cold, I barely managed to rinse the soap off before picking up the security phone to buzz one of the guards. As soon as I started to say "hot water," he cut me off in a tone that told me he'd already gotten the same call dozens of times.

"Didn't you read the notice? Starting today, we're doing work on the pipes. We've been announcing it on the PA system for weeks," he said, as if he were scolding a child. And then he hung up.

So I'm still wondering. Whatever happened to the guy who was stuck in the elevator?
