

소년, 소녀를 만나다

## **Boy Meets Girl**

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Father and Mother crashed the car one fine day in May, on their way home after a luncheon with friends. Mother was behind the wheel; she had had her driver's license for exactly two months. They said that Father, an experienced driver, was quite drunk. Mother died on a nameless road, her skull bashed in. Father was taken to the hospital, where he lasted another six days. The doctor said one of Father's ribs had pierced his heart too deeply. In other words, their death anniversaries are six days apart.

The Saturday afternoon that Father breathed his last, a Major League Baseball interleague game between the Chicago Cubs and the Chicago White Sox was scheduled to air. I didn't want to miss the ballgame, so I prayed for Father to stay alive just one more day. It didn't seem to matter if he died as long as it wasn't before or during the game. But, against my wishes, Father died that Saturday morning and I missed it.

I was thinking about the outcome of the game all the while I kept vigil so the grief didn't feel real at all.

“How did the game go? Did Sammy Sosa hit his 500<sup>th</sup> home run?”

These were the first words out of my mouth the instant one of my friends, who was also into baseball, arrived at the funeral. He said, “You idiot! What difference does that make now? You're an orphan.”

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Father and Mother were known among our family members as a loving couple. Two of my aunts, one on each side of the family, openly envied Mother. According to these two aunts, their husbands didn't measure up to Father. It was always a little embarrassing to watch Father smile with a blushing boyish face when receiving such flattery.

The way I remember it, Father and Mother seemed to sparkle, bright and bubbly like an adolescent boy and girl. They liked to go shopping at department stores or to attend performances at the community center, in light and immaculate clothing; and they often went to the mountains or the seashore on vacation, dressed safari style, and carrying backpacks on their backs. Perhaps these were the things that made my aunts envious. Envy is incredibly common and universal.

Our refrigerator was always well stocked with many of Father's favorite beverages and vegetables. Our garden was bigger than most and the lawn lush and

green. Father and Mother had the habit of taking an evening stroll in the garden, exchanging gentle talk, the soft rays of the setting sun painting a pretty picture for them. Anyone who knew anything of their sunny life together must have been shocked to hear of their absurdly tragic last moment.

Whether they liked it or not, Father and Mother had left the trappings of this world as the saying goes, to Brother and me. Preoccupied with a vague dread and, at the same time, a curiosity about the life ahead without our parents, Brother and I didn't cry during the whole mourning period. And now we were left to create new days unrelated to our memories of them. We were well aware of this reality.

Perhaps this awareness explains why the first thing Brother did after the long and tiresome ceremony was to place a chair before the front gate then climb up to take down the marble nameplate. "This is a momentous occasion. So why am I laughing?" Brother said, as he pried off the plaque with a chisel.

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The other day was the first anniversary of Mother's death. It also happened to be a holiday. Brother and I went to ride the Viking and the Rolling X Train at Everland in Yongin. Caught in the vertigo of the Rolling X Train, twisting, turning and loop-de-looping, I wished time would stand still so that nothing would ever come back into focus. I opened my eyes wider to disguise my fear. I turned to see Brother, who was in the seat behind me. He looked troubled, probably because of the phone calls from the aunts earlier that morning reminding us of the anniversary. Imagine what a dull and depressing holiday it would have been for two brothers like us to have to pay a visit, flowers in hand, to their parents' grave. Still the aunts had phoned and pressed us to do just that.

"It's been one year to the day since your mother died such an untimely death. Go visit the grave with some flowers."

Brother, however, simply told each aunt, bluntly, as if it were a matter of principle, that we couldn't go. When necessary, Brother could be counted on to take control of the situation—like the majestic lion in Yongin.

After hanging up, Brother spoke in a half-hearted way.

"Wanna go to the amusement park?"

Since I didn't have any plans, I went along with his suggestion. If I had turned him down, saying, Today is the first anniversary of Mother's death, he might have punched me.

However—

If he hadn't suggested it, I would have. The weather was too wonderful to

stay inside, besides there weren't any baseball or basketball games on TV.

And so, on the anniversary of our mother's death, Brother and I met a girl in Yongin. As we boarded the Viking, we headed straight for the seats in the stern, acting as cool as can be; we wanted to go for the maximum thrill of the ride. I opened my eyes wider to disguise my fear. Just as the ship-shaped ride began to tilt sharply, with Brother and me sinking in the stern while others seated near the prow rose up high, a glittering object fell on us. Brother managed, brilliantly, to catch it with both hands.

At first I didn't know what he'd caught, but Brother, who was three years older than me, quickly identified it as a girls' hairpin.

The gold hairpin in the shape of a ribbon had a red jade stone on the knot. As we would soon discover, it belonged to a young girl, almost child-like in appearance, who was carrying an Eastpak backpack. The moment the ride stopped and our safety belts were unbuckled, Brother started to look for the owner and, amazingly, spotted the right girl in less than a minute.

Brother walked up to her and said, "This fell on me."

The girl said, cool and unimpressed, "I knew someone would pick it up. Thank you."

The girl offered to buy us lunch in return for getting her hairpin back. We decided to go to a McDonald's near the park to get some chicken and cola. She must have been hungry because the girl gobbled up the sizzling hot chicken while the oil was still dripping. I couldn't help but look at her lips, glossed with grease, and felt the urge to kiss her rosy lips, slick and utterly juicy.

I was still looking at her lips when Brother came back from the restroom and lightly slapped the back of my head, which made the girl giggle and laugh, her mouth wide open. It was the kind of laughter that makes others feel cheerful and light-hearted. Brother poured some of his cola in her cup, which had nothing but jangling ice left inside. Only then did I reproach myself for not having thought to do the same.

On the anniversary of Mother's death, Brother and I met a girl. She was 19 years old, a college freshman carrying an Eastpak backpack. Brother tapped her on the shoulder as she devoured the fried chicken.

"Hey, slow down or you're gonna choke. You don't seem to mind hot food."

"I prefer to consume things I like quickly," said the girl with her mouth full.

She was devouring the chicken not because she was ravenous but because

she liked it. Simple as that. She was a reckless girl who laid waste to the things she liked, and she spent the rest of that afternoon with us. She mostly hung out with Brother, with me tagging along. I sometimes took a look at her butt. She had great big eyes, a long neck, and shiny hair and lips. It was the first anniversary of Mother's death when Brother and I met her. The girl gave Brother her cell phone number as we said good-bye.

A few days later, Brother left a message on her voice mail inviting her to our place.

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It was the day the girl was coming over. Brother and I had decided to clean up our big and tall house and had swept and mopped every corner the night before. After Mother died, the aunts would come over from time to time to clean our house. But our place was in a terrible mess because neither Brother nor I was good at keeping things clean and tidy.

With all the dozens of windows open, the crisp summer evening breeze blew through the house and made an odd sound, which to us sounded like the most beautiful music. It stroked and stirred our souls.

We stayed up most of the night cleaning and our mucky rooms started to look fairly neat and bright. Brother and I had stuffed all the laundry including dirty socks and undergarments into our washing machine, the latest model; climbed the ladder to clear the cobwebs in the corners near the ceiling; and sprayed air freshener throughout the house. Whenever we ran out of energy, we'd take a break and listen to invigorating music. In the midst of all this activity, there was a little accident: While I was wiping a thick layer of dust off the door and the doorframe, my hand wrapped in a cloth, Brother slammed the door and my fingers got caught. My middle and index fingers turned black and blue, losing sensation. Embarrassed by his carelessness, Brother went to look for some white bandages to wrap around my fingers. My fingers badly hurt, but I kept saying, "I'm O.K. I'm O.K.," because I didn't want to make the situation any worse for him.

We'd been up and about with all the lights on making noise all night long. Someone must have been disturbed enough to call the police because in the morning, a policeman showed up at our door. Maybe the aunts had asked our next-door neighbors to keep an eye on us.

'These poor kids lost their parents. Please keep an eye on them.'

Our kindhearted neighbors probably didn't have the nerve to turn down our aunts' request, which called for a mercy and compassion atypical of modern

urbanites. But Brother saw it differently. On one occasion he said, “They watch us not out of kindness but because they are afraid we might upset their stable lives.”

“Was there some sort of trouble here last night?”

As he spoke, the young officer seemed to be wondering whether or not he should use honorifics in addressing us. His eyes revealed blatant curiosity. He peered at my fingers, clumsily wrapped in white bandage. It was pretty clear how much of a fuss the neighbors had made when filing their report about us.

“They were carousing all night, playing loud music, every single light in the house ablaze, like they got high or sniffed glue or something.”

Brother spoke to the police officer in a clear and decisive voice.

“We cleaned our house last night because a girl whom we met at an amusement park is scheduled to pay us a visit today. Other than that, nothing out of the ordinary happened. Please leave us now.”

“We are at peace.”

These words came from my mouth. They sounded really good to my ears.

The police officer turned to go. I stared at his back as he walked down the stairs with a bitter smile on his face and imagined him as a boy, most likely not happy and energetic. I thought how he would never have understood what it had been like for us last night. To be honest, I didn’t want his understanding and Brother probably didn’t, either. Understanding often requires the hassle of human interaction.

11 a.m.

The door bell rang. The girl we met on the Viking appeared. She impressed us by bringing some flowers—a bunch of freesia so fresh that I wanted to munch on the blossoms. She was wearing a red sleeveless dress. As Brother and I, who had never before received flowers, stood awkwardly staring at the bouquet in her hand, she just about threw them into Brother’s arms. At that moment a fragrance pricked my nostrils, and I couldn’t tell if it belonged to the freesia or the girl.

Brother ushered Girl to the living room and put the flowers in a vase on the Sony stereo system. I went to get the cold cola and fruit from the refrigerator and served them.

“I hope you didn’t have a hard time finding our place,” Brother said, sitting beside her on the sofa.

“Not at all—I heard a lot about this rich neighborhood,” Girl replied, patting Brother’s shoulder.

“This place is great! And you have this big house all to yourselves.”

“Yes, we’re at peace.”

These words came from me, the one who was seated before Girl.

Girl settled comfortably on the sofa, sipping cola. Brother watched her with affectionate eyes. This look was quite familiar to me as if I had seen it before. It was bizarre. Yes, Brother’s eyes were exactly like Father’s when he gazed at Mother. I nodded to myself imperceptibly.

Girl, Brother and I decided to order in stir-fried beef with green peppers, seafood salad with mustard sauce and fried chicken. Brother stood up, saying that he would go get some beer. Girl asked if he would like it if she came along, and Brother looked me in the eye briefly then said, No, I’ll go myself, and disappeared out the front door.

After buying a few bottles of beer, Brother stopped at a video store and rented “Green Fish,” a Lee Chang-dong movie, which Girl and I had seen but Brother hadn’t.

How did I know that Girl had already seen “Green Fish”? She and I talked about the movie while Brother was gone. She said that the scene where the two stars, Han Seok-gyu and Shim Hye-jin, meet had made a big impression on her. I, too, remembered the scene well: Shim Hye-jin is standing in the doorway of a moving train and the moment that her scarf slips free, caught by the wind, Han Seok-gyu, who is also at the door, rescues it. With this insignificant incident, the two of them fall in love. Still, Han Seok-gyu dies in the end.

While I was alone with Girl, I’d said, “When my brother caught your hairpin on the Viking it was like that, like a scene from a movie.”

Brother slid the tape into the VCR and said, “I’ve heard this movie is really good.”

Girl replied, “Yeah, I wanted to see it, too.”

This was the first lie she told us. Her and my eyes met briefly but I pretended not to notice. I couldn’t know for sure why she’d lied but at the same time I felt that I had a vague understanding. The coming attractions were over and the movie was about to open with the scene that had made such an impression on Girl when the delivery man from the Chinese restaurant rang the door bell. Having already explained that I had seen “Green Fish,” I set the table in front of the sofa while Brother and Girl watched the movie. I winced each time the weight of the dishes pressed against my bandaged fingers—the flesh, black and dead-blue, beneath the nails. Apparently, Brother had forgotten all about my fingers.

Then Brother and Girl and I watched the rest of the video, sitting side-by-

side on the sofa. Brother seemed to focus his full attention on each scene, it being his first time, but since Girl and I were second-time viewers, we were easily distracted. She would drink a little beer and then get up and go to the bathroom. Several times when she came back from the bathroom, Brother paused to summarize what she had missed. Every time he did so, I couldn't help thinking how stupid he looked.

Stir-fried beef with green pepper was Mother's favorite food. When Mother prepared to go to dinner parties or events with Father, she would wonder aloud if this dish would be on the menu. Not even lobster or escargot could please her more than stir-fried beef with green pepper. So we had eaten it too many times to count. Watching Mother eat green peppers and beef in a flour wrapper made Father so happy. It's excruciatingly funny to think that Father died because his heart got pierced thanks to Mother's heedless driving. But it seems to me that he wouldn't have blamed her, not even in the moment that he gasped his last breath.

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Brother and Girl got up and went to Brother's room, holding hands. The seafood salad with mustard sauce was left nearly untouched while the stir-fried beef with green pepper was almost gone. Girl enjoyed this dish just like Mother. The fried chicken we'd ordered for her, which arrived late because the delivery man had trouble finding our house, remained unopened. I turned the volume up loud and listened to Lee Oscar's "Before the Rain" as I drank beer, stretched out on the sofa. The song was well suited to this July day. The sky had grown dark with rain clouds and it looked as though it might pour.

If Father and Mother had lived, would Girl, whom we had met by accident, be here now? Would I have dared to turn the music up loud and drink beer, lying with my feet up on the living room sofa? I thought such thoughts, watching the storm clouds gather. I emptied the pilsner while I thought these thoughts. If Father and Mother had passed away sooner, I would have enjoyed this comfortable life that much sooner. How would it be different if Mother had survived the crash and only Father had died? Could I have lain on Mother's bed, my head pillowed by her arm, smoking or listening to music? The aunts would surely be shocked to hear my thoughts. They'd blame it all on an immoral imagination. But it's really just one of many possible outcomes in this world.

I was beginning to feel tipsy and got curious about what Brother was doing with Girl in his room. It didn't take long for curiosity to turn into petulance and somehow I broke a beer bottle while swinging my hand. Then the phone rang.



The call was from Park, one of Brother's friends from school, so I went upstairs to get him.

I knocked on Brother's door as I would have on any other day. I waited for him to say, "What is it?" During the couple of seconds before his voice reached my ear, I fought the strong urge to grab the round doorknob and twist it. Then the door opened and Brother stuck out a face that gave away nothing. I stood there slightly stooped.

"What's going on?"

"You came up here to ask me that?"

"No, Park's on the phone."

Brother gave me another blank look and stomped down the stairs to answer the phone. He was careless and left the door open. I took advantage of the opportunity to get a look inside his room, which was always aglow in blacklight blue.

In the far corner of the room, imbued with dim blue light, Girl was lying stretched out in her red dress on the white bed. It was the queen-sized bed which Father and Mother used to use. Brother had thrown away everything left behind by Father and Mother with the exception of this bed, which he'd moved into his room.

I wondered if Girl was asleep. Her silhouette looked blurry, as if a visible aura surrounded her, making it hard to assess the distance between us. I approached her like a ghostly sleepwalker. As I got within reach, Girl, who seemed to be sleeping, thrust out her hand, smiling as if she had been waiting for me to come closer. I held her hand, feeling floating and languorous, as if my body might be sucked into the void at any moment. She spoke as she tugged my hand lightly.

"Don't be afraid."

She caressed my hand for a while and then began to carefully loosen the bandage wrapped around my fingers. I didn't know what was expected of me so I closed my eyes and only sensed her fingertips and her scent as the white bandage piled up on the floor in a soft, thick heap and my bruised fingers were exposed. I felt close to tears when, suddenly, she slipped one of my fingers inside her mouth and started to suck on it. When she spoke, her words were distorted, my finger in her mouth.

"How's this? You fall good?"

'Fall' must have been a garbled version of 'feel.' All I know is that only two thoughts occurred to me at the time: I was wishing she weren't sucking my finger but my penis, and I was hoping Park kept Brother tied up on the phone for a long, long time. As my finger grew warm and I felt the blood that had been cut off from

the tip, rotting in a pool, stir and slowly resume its flow through my veins. A lost memory slowly emerged from a long forgotten time. It must have been ten years ago, maybe more.

Father was hammering a nail into the wall to hang the newly framed portrait of our family. He wasn't very skilled with a hammer and managed to smash his fingertip rather than the head of the nail. He barked 'Ugh' with pain as he dropped the hammer. And Mother, who had been making apple juice in the blender, rushed to him.

She helped Father over to the sofa where he lay curled up like a baby with his head cradled to her bosom. She held him while she sucked his stinging finger. Though Father's cry had drawn me out of my room and I was standing there watching them, Mother didn't care at all and kept right on sucking his finger.

Was this how Father felt back then? Girl continued to suck my finger with her warm lips and tongue. My body buoyant and supple, I felt like I was falling into a deep and endless sleep. But this peaceful, fantastic sensation was abruptly broken when Brother reappeared.

He strode into the room and gave the back of my head a whack.

"What are you doing in here? Go downstairs."

I opened my eyes. The fuzzy blue hue of the room disappeared but my finger was still in Girl's mouth. When my bashful eyes met hers, she parted her lips to release my finger. Her red lips shone with saliva. I wanted to kiss those lips. Brother said.

"Go on. We're going out."

Brother took Girl with him to hang out with Park and Park's girlfriend. I followed them to the garage where Girl marveled at Brother's car.

"Is this car really made for driving?"

She said this, and no wonder. Brother's car looked more like a sleek sculptural piece than an amalgamation of machinery. Girl was clearly fascinated by everything Brother had and watching her was beginning to exasperate me. I didn't know why but just didn't want to think about it.

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My buddy called me the day he got out.

He hadn't changed much. He'd been charged with theft and locked up in juvenile detention for six months but was still just as sarcastic and cocky as before.

"You're the only one from school who's happy to see me."

He said as soon as we were seated at the rib place where I'd taken him. I

half-smiled as I patted his shoulder, which hid hard, bulky muscles.

“So what are you gonna do?”

“Well, I’d like to do something big. No more of this kid stuff that keeps landing me back in detention.”

He had a big build, twice the size of a normal kid, and had been my bodyguard and gofer at school. He protected me from the bullies in exchange for material comfort. Then one day he refused to accept my backing. It was probably right after he’d seen movies or TV shows about righteous gangsters. He’d assumed an unusually grave tone of voice.

“I won’t take your money anymore. I’ll protect you for nothing. As a real man, I’m ashamed of using violence for personal gain. You gave me money but also kindness. In return I’ll protect you without any expectation of a reward. That’s loyalty.”

Buddy, as big as a bear, almost cried. I, too, was overwhelmed and returned the favor with even more warmth and affection. My teachers and friends invariably found it strange that a little model student like me would stay close to such a rough and inferior hooligan.

“You must have had a tough time in there.”

“No, it was mostly just boring. There’s just a bunch of kids so it’s no fun.”

“You must need some money. Here.”

I handed him the semi-monthly allowance that Brother gave me. After Father and Mother died, my spending money had gone up exactly 500 percent. Of course, Brother’s had probably increased even more so since he was in charge of setting the amount.

Buddy seemed a little reluctant. But, he took a quick glance at my eyes then reached out his hand for the money.

“Thanks. Call me if there’s anything I can do for you.”

Though I protested, he wrapped a piece of meat with nice grill marks in lettuce and put it into my mouth. And he chuckled. I thought how the only time he resembled a boy like me was when he laughed.

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One day, when the dreamy, drowsy summer fever had almost died down and the fall semester was about to begin, I was immersed in the Three Kingdoms computer game, half-listening for Brother’s return from his photography club meeting when the door bell rang. Brother never rang the bell since he always carried his keys with him. I opened the door to find Girl standing there in the rain. She was wearing a

fresh blue striped T-shirt and carrying three heavy-looking bags in her hands and slung over her shoulders. I'd been so absorbed in the game that I hadn't even realized it was raining. So the appearance of the rain-soaked girl seemed all the more innocent and enchanting.

“What on earth... are you... doing here?”

I was stupefied and my words came out in a stammer.

“Your brother would have already taken my bags for me.”

I felt my earlobes burn with shame and grabbed her bags.

She spoke as she handed them over.

“I'll be staying here from now on. In your brother's room. He said I was welcome to come any time.”

In a flash, Girl from a city in Gangwon Province had moved out of the boardinghouse and into Brother's room. Brother was the one who was happiest to have her living with us and next came me. Or, maybe that's not true.

Our life together passed peacefully, in an atmosphere where we tried to interfere with each other as little as possible, the way it had long been established between Brother and me. With time, the three of us grew closer and the daytime hours were so much fun that sleeping seemed a waste of time. We took pride in just being with each other. Girl, who had been renting a cramped room in a house full of meddlers and busybodies, enjoyed this freer life in a spacious house. She confessed that for the first time she understood the meaning of the word freedom, which pleased Brother and me to no end. Brother and Girl had a running joke, this routine they acted out about the day I opened the door to find her soaking wet and weighed down by three heavy bags and it hadn't occurred to me to help her with her bags before asking what on earth she was doing there.

Life was good and quiet. I received loving care from Brother and Girl. I ate the meals that Girl prepared and did the errands that she told me to do. Brother gave me as much affection and care as before Girl moved in (He took the time to tell me about the latest hits on the Billboard charts, various computer utilities and online communities. In particular, he shared his expert knowledge of MLB and NBA, knowledge that I needed). Girl showed an interest in what I was doing and what I wanted to do as well, just like Mother once did.

Thanks to Girl, our refrigerator was once again fully stocked with vegetables and fruits and meats, and in the garden the plants grew greener. Dirty socks and underwear no longer piled up in the corner. On Sunday mornings Girl threw open the windows and cleaned the house then, in the evening, she cooked a special meal,

something fried or grilled. She went to the department store with Brother and bought a trunk full of provisions which enriched our home. All of this reminded me of Mother of course, but when she sang while making coffee she was an exact replica. While I watched her, my eyes would sometimes seek out Brother's in what could have been an attempt to acknowledge the amazing coincidence of this resemblance, or an indication of the guarded tension between us over an attractive girl. In any case, at that time, she was clearly more Brother's than mine.

Someday, I thought, I'll tell Brother that I fell for Girl at first sight. Then Brother, a gentle and sympathetic soul, would give her up for me. How good that would be if it really happened.

At night we'd chat or snack together until the stroke of midnight when they entered their room as if fulfilling a promise. Then I would play Three Kingdoms or listen to music in my room, but many times it didn't feel like the hands playing the game or the ears hearing the music were really mine. At times like this, I'd fidget and hang around waiting for the night to end.

Sometimes Brother and Girl stayed in their room all day long. Those were the days when I lost my appetite and couldn't eat. It felt like I was burning up with fever but I didn't have a cold so what could it have been? I often sat up all night unable to stop thinking about it. More than a few times I walked upstairs to Brother's room and stood there for a while just outside the door wanting to knock but giving up because if I knocked on that door, it seemed I would burst into tears. The memory of crying outside the door goes back to over a decade ago.

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There were times when Father and Mother didn't leave their room either. No matter how hard Brother and I pounded at the door and cried out of hunger, their door didn't open. Even if migratory birds flew all the way from Northern Europe and built a nest, laid their eggs and hatched a bunch of little ones above their wooden door, Father and Mother wouldn't have opened up. That door wouldn't open until our tears had dried up and, exhausted and hoarse, Brother had left with a friend who had dropped by and I lay stiff as a board on the living room floor. Mother, frightened to find me in such a state, stood me up on my feet and held me in her arms, but my body was so tense and covered with goose pimples that I could no longer feel any tenderness. To make matters worse, Mother's breasts reeked of Father's pomade, which made me sick to my stomach. In Mother's embrace, I would glower with bloodshot eyes at Father who had followed Mother into the living room. And I probably thought horrible thoughts for a child my age.

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Restlessness grew into insomnia as my thoughts kept returning to what Brother and Girl must be doing on the other side of their door after midnight. I started sipping the strong stuff in the living room liquor cabinet hoping to get some sleep. I couldn't say exactly when, but it became a habit. A shot of high-proof alcohol scratched its way down my throat and I could feel my poor soul being comforted, at least for a moment. The buzz that followed would loosen my body and I would begin to get sleepy, but then I would hear Brother making his way down the stairs to get a drink of water or I would hear the toilet flush and I'd be wide awake again. I had just about given up on sleeping at night. Irritability and sleeplessness left my body pathetically thin while Brother's body grew sturdier and more solid.

I watched and waited while Brother and Girl grew more and more intimate, like husband and wife. I had yet to confess my love for Girl and my eyes full of envy and jealousy could only watch the loving looks that they shared. All the while, I could hear cries echoing in my heart. Off in my room I would think about Girl and tear at my hair, masturbating like a lunatic. With my body and soul totally spent, it was a wonder that I could muster up enough semen to ejaculate.

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One long dark night I stayed up clenching my teeth and bolstering my courage to knock on Brother's door and divulge my love to Girl when the day dawned.

Early that morning—it must have been around four o'clock—I was pouring myself a drink when I saw Girl coming down the stairs. Though I sat across from her at the lunch table, she looked so unfamiliar, as if we hadn't seen each other in ages.

She came closer to where I was sitting on the sofa.

"I knew you were having trouble sleeping."

I asked her if Brother was asleep. I needed to know that more than anything.

"Yeah, he's sleeping. He played tennis until late."

She grabbed the glass from my hand and put it down on the table with a thud. She spoke in a whisper.

"Don't let yourself get dependent on liquor. Come on. I'll help you get to sleep."

She held my hand and led me upstairs towards Brother's room. Halfway up the staircase I asked her why we were headed for the second floor. She gave my backside a little pat.

"I'd like to caress you in bed beside your brother."

At the door to Brother's room I hesitated.

“Don’t let your brother’s presence scare you off. You’ll never do anything if you’re afraid of him.”

Girl opened the door and led me into the dim darkness. She lowered me onto the bed, stroking my trembling body. It was obvious that Brother was in a deep sleep. Don’t be afraid. I kept saying to myself. My heart felt explosive as Girl crept up into the space between Brother and me. As she moved, her body stirred up a sweet scent. I inhaled the scent deep into my lungs and calmed my breathing which had grown wild. Then her white hand was creeping across my chest and began to fondle my body, slithering now like a snake. Soon, my breath became a series of low moans. Her fingertips were adept at smoothing out each and every goose bump on my prickly body, one after the other. A pleasant coziness softly spread through my skin as if I were sauntering in a misty dream. Her meticulous touch left my body glowing.

Girl started to suck my fingers, one after the other, and my body convulsed with tremendous rapture as I fell into a kind of vertigo. I blurted out the wish that I’d been harboring since the day she sucked my wounded finger.

“Please suck my penis.”

As if this were part of her plan, she unzipped my trousers without hesitation and slipped my penis out of my boxers. I was practically out of mind with shame and anticipation for the thrill of the impending flood of sensation. This can’t really be happening. That was the last thought I had before I lost my mind.

My eyes were shut tight and my whole body was waiting to be engulfed by the shock waves of ecstasy. But the sound that hit my eardrums was like a full glottal stop. Is it possible that she didn’t know such words had the power to instantaneously obliterate the many-layered history of desire that had been accumulating in my body since the dawn of time? She spoke so casually.

“It’s pitifully smaller than your brother’s.”

It was like I came to all of a sudden and my eyes opened to see Girl grab my organ and prepare to put it in her mouth. I gave her a shove and stood up. She looked puzzled. My penis had already shrunken into a little nasty nub.

Brother’s back, which I had nearly forgotten was at hand, loomed large in my eyes. The muted atmosphere of the room, which had felt tranquil, turned icy and arrogant.

I didn’t waste time adjusting my trousers and nearly ran out of the room. I could hear Girl faintly imploring me not to go.

Brother, awake now, though I hadn’t noticed, shot what sounded like a jeer

at my back.

The bottle was right where I'd left it in the living room. Only the bottle seemed real to me. I took a greedy swig of hard liquor and drank myself to sleep on the sofa. And I had a dream, the first in a long time.

Brother was in a deep sleep and I was about to make love to Girl. I pulled down my trousers but there wasn't anything there. My penis had disappeared. I felt like crying and Girl tried to console me saying, No problem. You can borrow your brother's penis while he's sleeping over there. I agreed, clapping my hands. Then I pulled down Brother's pajama bottoms, detached his gigantic organ and put it where mine should have been. It felt so good that I didn't want to give it back after I finished making love to Girl. What do I do with this feeling?

The next day I sobered off then covered in my room, shivering once more with humiliation and mortification. Once I peeked through a crack in the door and saw Brother and Girl eating sandwiches at the dining table, exchanging loving smiles. My facial muscles contorted with rage.

I resigned myself then and there, swinging my head and murmuring.

"I can't stand it any more. It's too hard."

\*

So the horrible thought came to me, the most horrible thought that a boy my age is capable of. If I had been the one who'd caught the hairpin as it fell from the prow of the Viking, glittering in the sky in Everland, I would never have thought such a horrible thought. But it was Brother who'd caught the hairpin and this seemingly insignificant incident flung him towards something that no one could have anticipated but from which there was no escape. Anyone can see that it is not all my fault. I can't be blamed for everything.

If it were possible to turn back the time, Brother and I shouldn't have gone to Everland on the first anniversary of Mother's death. Failing that, we shouldn't have gotten on board the Viking ride. We would have been better off if we'd stuck to walking around looking at the odd menagerie of elephants, bears and ostriches that day. But we rode the Viking and we met a girl. It all seems so long, long ago. Time had telescoped and already the second anniversary of Father's death was drawing near, a matter of days away.

\*

It was the day before the day Father's panting breath stopped for good, his heart



pierced by his rib.

The three of us had decided to throw a party at home. I was the one who suggested the idea the night before. So Brother drove Girl to the supermarket early the next morning to buy groceries. We'd decided to cook a few dishes ourselves and order some favorites—like stir-fried beef with green pepper and fried chicken.

“Tomorrow is the second anniversary of your father’s death. Go visit his grave with some flowers.”

This phone call from Father’s younger brother had interrupted our excitement, but Brother had responded in a voice that was clear and unperturbed. When he spoke, he was like the kingly lion we had seen in Yongin the year before.

“Don’t put pressure on us about this. Our only duty is to live our own lives. We’re at peace now.”

We’re at peace. Brother had echoed my words.

Brother and Girl went to their room to change clothes and when they returned, wearing big smile, they told me that in addition to our party the two of them would be celebrating their engagement this day. Brother was all dressed up in a beige suit and Girl had on a pure white dress. I looked at them as coolly as possible and chewed gum noisily.

Brother would have preferred to go mountain climbing rather than have a party because the weather was fine. He enjoyed taking pictures so he often went mountain climbing with his camera. But Girl had been reluctant to go along with his suggestion, saying that she didn’t have hiking boots so Brother had abandoned the plan. If Brother had been more stubborn and we had all gone to climb a mountain, I would have been disappointed.

Lively music blared in the living room and the three of us danced to the rhythm. When we felt thirsty from dancing we drank one of the many bottles of beer in our well-stocked refrigerator. It was fair May. The following day would be the second anniversary of Father’s gruesome death after the car accident. But we didn’t give it a thought.

The candles on the cake were lit and the engagement ceremony for Brother and Girl got underway. They held hands as they blew out the candles then exchanged rings I didn’t know when they had purchased and kissed each other on the forehead.

The party was in full swing. Brother was upbeat and I poured him as much beer as I could get away with. Brother was a lightweight when it came to alcohol and his cheeks flushed red.

Don't drink too much. You'll get drunk. Girl expressed her concern but Brother said that he'd like to get drunk because it was a happy occasion.

As the alcohol and stirring music livened up the mood, Brother and Girl kissed and caressed each other in front of my eyes. They waltzed around the spacious living room, holding each other close. Perhaps Johann Strauss was playing at that moment.

When the beer ran out, I took the strong stuff out of the liquor cabinet and filled Brother's glass to the brim.

And I said.

"Bro, I wish you happiness."

"Thanks, kid."

As he said 'thanks, kid,' he turned his bleary, unfocused eyes in my direction. At midnight Brother and Girl headed for their room as usual. Brother was dead drunk and couldn't even control himself. I couldn't help wearing a faint smile as I supported his limp body.

Right on schedule, at four o'clock in the morning, my cell phone vibrated. I took care not to make any noise as I pushed the foyer door then opened the front door. Every limb trembled lightly with nervous energy. Buddy, in a black mask and black clothes, was waiting for me to open the door.

Under my guidance he walked into the living room where he tied me up and taped my mouth shut with cellophane tape in a dexterous manner. He said.

"Bear with it even if this hurts."

I shut my eyes. His heavy fist gave me blow to the jaw and then something sharp pierced my thigh with a cold pain like an icy wind penetrating an overcoat. With taped mouth, I couldn't even groan at all.

"Good. You did well."

At the sound of his voice I opened my eyes. My thigh, skillfully cut by his sharp knife, was dripping drops of blood like flower petals.

His eyes met mine in the darkness. I nodded and managed to groan a few hushed words.

"Make shir no hun gal"

'Make shir no hun gal' was my swallowed attempt to say 'make sure not to hurt the girl.'

He made two fists for me as if telling me I've got this under control, then quietly crossed the living room and started to climb the stairs. I watched his back as he climbed the steps one by one. He looked so steadfast. It is lucky for me to have

such a guy as a buddy. He is my middle school friend who'd spent more time in juvenile detention than he did at home. He'd told me he didn't want to go to reform school again because it was for babies. Now, even if things don't go as planned, he'll get his wish. The crime he's about to commit is sacred, historic, something he could never have put together.

The dawn is always quiet. At the quiet dawn, those who have a religion pray and those who have a lover have sex. And those with murderous intent might kill.

Me? With no religion, no lover and murderous intent, I keep my ears open in the quiet dawn. My jaw stings and my thigh burns but I open my ears as wide as ever. Because in no time Brother's scream might shatter the silence like a symphony. The scream is a prelude to the new beginning of my life. The day is slowly breaking.

Today is the second anniversary of Father's death.

*Translated from the Korean by Lee Yoo-jin, with Janet Thompson*