LEE Chae Won

Door to Sadness

1. Sixty Years Later

Why had the girl wanted to go there? She's gone, said the girl's husband. He said "gone" in a tone as impassive as the word itself. Gone? You mean she's gone on a trip? I asked, and he replied that she'd gone somewhere on her own and died in a car crash. He said it had already been a year since then. I couldn't believe this was how I was finding out about the girl's death and that I hadn't even known for a year. Reeling in inexpressible shock and sorrow, I asked where she'd gone on her own, and he told me it was there. Where her mother was buried. Where my big sister was thought to be buried. You should've told me, I muttered weakly to the girl's husband. But why had the girl wanted to go there? I added, before putting down the receiver.

The girl's husband had said "gone," delivering the news of her death simply and without embellishment. Now that I'd heard him say it, describing people who passed away as "gone" struck me as quite fitting, as if they'd been on a visit somewhere and had simply headed back. After all, they came into the world, stayed for the time given, and left. Just like my sister and me, the girl and I shared nothing between us during our stay here after we came into this world. My sister and the girl were gone, just like that.

Why had she wanted to go there after all this time? Not once had she mourned for her mother in front of me. Far from mourning, she resented her mother and tried to deny she was her mother's daughter. But it wouldn't be right for me to use the words "not once" because they carry a hint of accusation. People who meet frequently can utter them, but not a failed aunt to her orphaned niece. I saw her on only a handful of occasions in my life. The first time was when she was four, the next was a little before her wedding, and then it was the wedding day itself. Years later I saw her at my daughter's wedding, and that was it.

2. Spring 1951

A black cotton dress and white vested jacket. That's what comes to my mind whenever I think of the girl. She was wearing them the first time I met her. They were the clothes children in the countryside put on to muck around in. It pained me to think that she had on such clothes. Would she have been wearing them if her parents were alive? Back then, even though there was a war going on, I thought they were not fit for her to wear. But in times like those, who cares what you wear and how vain it was of me to care—when her parents were killed and their bodies never found, when her baby sister starved to death because there wasn't even rice gruel to feed her.

Not long after the war broke out, my family was ruined. In the first year of the war, my sister and her husband were killed, and my second oldest brother went missing. As soon as the year passed, my oldest brother, who was released after being detained for taking part in the People's Committees, died from the after-effects of torture. My sister died sometime between October 6 and late December of the year the war came, but most likely in October. My parents were distraught, and I managed to pull myself together just enough to go and see my sister's daughter in the following year, when the azaleas began to bloom. It was only then that I started searching for where my sister was buried, so perhaps it was no surprise that I couldn't find the spot.

The girl had curly hair, like my sister. Her grandmother burst into tears when I went to see them, and she followed suit. Without knowing what was going on, she clung to her grandmother

as if she was too scared to let go and kept crying until her grandmother dried her eyes. That's my first memory of her. I may have experienced various plights during the war, but I wasn't married then and I was just a 22-year-old girl. I didn't know how to embrace the crying figure before me. All I could do was to grieve, taking her grandmother's hands in mine and shedding silent tears. Her grandmother brought me to the place where my sister's body was moved to and interred after it was retrieved. I held out my hand to the girl, but she didn't take it and only hung onto her grandmother. I grabbed the alcohol and jerky I had brought with me and followed her grandmother out of the house. I'd soon have to see the place where my sister's body lay buried with my own eyes. The girl's grandmother, once all tears were spent, could not stop talking about the horrors of the past year: the South Korean self-defense forces killed her son with a bamboo spear and his body was still missing; she had hardly recovered from the shock when she received news that her daughter-in-law had been shot to death. Her daughter-in-law had promised to come back soon from hiding. She told me that the news came not too long after the execution and she ran to the execution site, where she fainted at the grisly sight that met her. Inside a pit, she said, was a faceless heap of dusty-white hair pulled back in buns, bald heads, and dead bodies clothed in white and black, drenched with blood. When she turned over the bodies, she saw that they were marred beyond recognition. But she thought one of them looked familiar, with its thick curls and navy blue sweater, so she wailed, "If it's really you, tell me!" As soon as she said so, blood trickled out of the body's eyes and nose. So she pulled the body out, moved it to a nearby spot, and laid it to rest it there.

She said she had marked the spot with a stake, but no such thing was in sight, and she couldn't find the exact place where she'd moved and buried the body. This is where the big pit was, so I would've moved her to around here, or did I bury her there? Muttering, she searched for a long time and grew flustered. She paced around in agitation until she finally cried out, how could this be? She slumped to the ground and dissolved into fresh tears. The girl started crying, too. Choking back tears, I said to the girl's grandmother that if my sister was indeed buried somewhere around here, then let us just pick a suitable spot for her grave and pay our respects. I placed the alcohol bottle and jerky on my sister's arbitrary grave and bowed. When I straightened up, I saw azaleas shimmering from afar. I had followed the girl's grandmother there as that was where she said my sister's body was buried and I had bowed down upon that ground, but I didn't believe my sister to be dead. I felt like she was still alive, hiding out somewhere. When the time came, when the war ended, I felt like she'd come back. The grandmother had the girl bow, too. As she bowed, her black cotton dress and white vested jacket billowed out into a round puff and fluttered back down. As I watched, tears spilled down my face so I quickly wiped them away. Just like that, we paid my sister our respects and returned to the house.

The girl had stared wide-eyed at me without knowing who I was. When would she realize who I was? She had stopped crying and was tagging along by her grandmother's side to see me off. Even after I came back home, her image haunted me. The image of her in the black cotton dress and white vested jacket. I really wanted to do something for her, but I couldn't think what. Then I found some yellow-green silk in my closet, so I bought a length of deep pink rayon from the market and began making clothes for her: a *hanbok* jacket with a layer of pink rayon sewed onto its cuffs and ribbons, a dress in the same pink fabric, and a pair of *beoseon* socks to fit her feet. As the war had left my family destitute, I couldn't think of what else I could do for her. Still, I was handy with a needle and thread, so I sewed those clothes for her, stitch by stitch. Dwelling all the while on how she had looked in that black cotton dress and white vested jacket, and how strange my sister had looked the last time I saw her. That was all—all I did as an aunt for a niece who didn't know her parents were dead.

While I was making her clothes, Gyeongho dropped in from time to time. Gyeongho was a close friend of my oldest brother's eldest daughter, who was only three years my junior. Gyeongho had no family because her parents and siblings had all been killed for siding with the

Commies. Despite her masculine name and features, she was surprisingly sociable. Claiming she was no good at needlework, Gyeongho seemed to be keenly interested in the clothes I was making for the girl. I told her who I was making them for and what the child had gone through. Then Gyeongho would talk about her story and we'd end up crying together. Since I could only work on the clothes in between my regular sewing jobs, they took me a long time to finish. How should I get these to the girl when they're done? I was thinking out loud when Gyeongho volunteered to deliver them as she was running errands for the inn she was working at anyway. I was grateful for her kindness and thought it was because she understood that we were both going through a tough time.

When the clothes were finished, I bundled them up in the finest wrapping cloth I owned. I had my niece ask Gyeongho when she'd be available and she said that as it happened, she was going on an errand soon to the village where my sister's in-laws lived. I called her in and handed her the bundle of clothes, repeatedly imploring her to make sure the girl gets it. Gyeongho told me not to worry as she promptly took up the bundle in her arms and left. She never came round to my house after that, so I assumed her job at the inn was keeping her busy.

My family's situation worsened so that we, including my two brothers' wives and children, were scraping by each day with barely enough food to go around. The hardest part for me was listening to my father swallowing saliva down his famished throat as he sat alone in his study. My father regretted not having found a husband early on for me, his youngest child. Watching my father starve was distressing, but all I could do was to sew and my only source of income was the occasional sewing job. While this was nowhere enough to feed a large family, I found comfort in the idea that at least I'd managed to send the girl some clothes in these desperate times. If I hadn't done even that, the image of her in the cotton dress and vested jacket would have weighed heavily on my heart for years to come. But the clothes were delivered to the girl and she would be wearing them by now, and the thought gave me some peace of mind. Ever since I sent off the bundle of clothes, I began to see her wearing them in my mind's eye. A yellow-green jacket and pink dress. Whenever I pictured her in that yellow-green jacket and pink dress, I became acutely aware of the fact that she was my sister's daughter. I didn't meet her again until I heard she was getting married and went to visit. After the war, I got married and left the place that had long been part of my life far behind.

3. Spring 1970

I remember the day I went to see the girl after I heard she was getting married. Although I was busy because it was the farming season, I felt compelled to go and meet her before her wedding. As I was planning to contribute to her dowry, perhaps I was visiting to alleviate the embarrassment of never having been a proper aunt to her. Plus I'd never gone to visit her until that day, after she was all grown up and about to be married. Could I defend myself by saying that I'd had to get through tough years? I was tingling with curiosity over what she looked like now and whether she took after her mother. In my memory, the only image I had of her was the four-year-old girl I saw that day long ago. The girl who had stared wide-eyed at me in that black cotton dress and white vested jacket.

She didn't look anything like her mother apart from her curly hair and she had become the owner of a hair salon. She told me she'd wanted but couldn't afford to go to high school, so she took up hairstyling instead after finishing middle school. Having never looked in on her despite being her only aunt, I had no right to think this but I wished she'd continued her studies for her parents' sake, and my eyes stung at the thought. Indeed, it wouldn't have been easy for the uncle who took her in to have done as much as he did, especially when he had his own children to

worry about in those difficult times. And for her part, no doubt she had the sense not to keep insisting she wanted to study more when she was living off her uncle.

We were meeting for the first time since I paid her a brief visit when she was four. She did not remember that we'd met before. Without looking particularly pleased to see me, she offered to do my hair even though I was a complete stranger of an aunt, so I sat down and let her have a go at my hair.

"Why do I suck at this so much? Was my mom like this too?" she said sharply as she raised her scissors to my hair. Then she went on to blame her parents for ruining the whole family as well as her uncle's life. Maybe she couldn't contain her anger, but she yanked my hair hard with the straightener. If they were going to croak, they should've croaked without stirring up this Commie shit and making her life miserable, she said in a rant against her parents and more so against her mother. My hair hurt from the yanking but I couldn't say anything and just sat there, waiting for her to finish, to vent all her anger. I recognized that without harboring such spiteful determination, it would've been impossible for a tragically orphaned girl to have done so well for herself. She had cried so pitifully the day we first met, but today her eyes were dry. As she talked about her mother without shedding a tear, I tried to fathom the kind of life she must've led and wept alone, clutching her hand. She must've been shamed for being the child of Commies and grown resentful. Even after she became an adult, her resentment toward her mother wouldn't have dissipated—which was why I couldn't possibly talk about my sister's life in front of her. Why I couldn't bring up how gloriously her life had shone, or how melancholy she'd looked on that day. But come to think of it, I had no idea myself what was welling up inside my sister's heart back in those days. While the girl went on a tirade, I couldn't say anything and continued to weep until we parted.

That was our second meeting. A good chunk of my already thin hair seemed to have been plucked out. Perhaps that was why, but my head throbbed on my way back home. In between the throbbing, my eyes misted up as the image of the girl when she was four came into my mind. Of her black cotton dress and white vested jacket, billowing out into a round puff and fluttering back down.

4. Late Spring, 1950

"I just want to try a ciggie, alright?"

My sister was quite strange that day. She'd turned up at our parents' house alone and unannounced and was helping herself to a cigarette in front of Mother. She had just retorted to Mother's shocked interjection, do you think this is a bar? Mother quickly went to find Father for help. My sister had always been closer to Father than she had been to Mother. Father called my sister, who was home for the school holidays, into his study and had a chat with her. But on that day, my sister came out of the study shortly and locked herself in the master bedroom. It was a little while before the war broke out. My sister, whom I hadn't seen for some time, looked drawn and old. I supposed it was because of her marriage troubles brought on by her husband who, immersed in ideology, quit work to participate in an underground movement. Her husband was also suffering from tuberculosis. My sister sat with a faraway look on her face, puffing on her cigarette.

"I should go to college."

She spoke abruptly as she blew smoke out. So, she was thinking of going back to school again, even though she was already a teacher. I stared at her in surprise. Even as children, I found it hard to approach her. There was no room for sweet, tender sisterhood to form between us. From a young age my sister was hailed as a prodigy and graduated from Gyeongseong Normal School (where all the prodigies went) on a government scholarship. When she went to take the

Gyeongseong Normal School entrance exam, Father accompanied her and later told us that she'd looked more confident than any other test-taker in the room. So it pained Father to watch such a daughter lean increasingly toward a different ideology under his son-in-law's influence. He wanted to talk her out of it, but she belonged to her husband's family now. Father spent his days reliving the image of my sister getting accepted to the school. Of his eldest daughter who once made him a proud father.

Mother asked disapprovingly why on earth my sister wanted to study more when she'd already done enough, and would her husband let her?

"They say a husband and wife are equal, so we're free to do anything."

My sister's visit to her parents' house was so out of the blue that the whole family was worried that something was wrong. That was the last time I saw my sister. Try as I might to recall any other images of her, the only clear image that came to mind was how she'd looked that day. How strange she'd looked with that faraway look on her face, smoking her cigarette. Had she already known then that her dreams of a new future would never come true? Why had she suddenly visited her parents and acted so strangely?

Sixty years passed between then and today, when I received news of the girl. Sixty years . . . I should've met her at least once more. I should've told her about how my sister had looked that day, about the yellow-green jacket and pink dress. If I'd just met her one more time, I could've told her about how her mother had looked that day, about the yellow-green jacket and pink dress.

It had been some time since I last spoke to her, but I decided to call her house at my daughter's request. My daughter had her eyes on a piece of land in the country and she said it was located in the city where the girl lived. She liked the land but wanted to look into it more before she signed the contract, so she got me to ask the girl's husband for information. She reasoned that the man would know the ins and outs of the city since he'd lived there his whole life and was a policeman. I also privately thought it would be nice to spend my last years in the area as it was close to my hometown. Partly to ask for information on the land, I phoned the girl's house and that was when I received the news from her husband.

But why did I get the feeling that I hadn't just phoned her house on account of my daughter's business? Even before my daughter made her request, many a time I would find myself thinking about the girl and debating if I should give her a call. Although we hadn't visited each other much, perhaps some sort of signal had passed between us all this while. Yet, I didn't reach out lest she find my calls bothersome, especially since she hadn't thought much of her mother's family.

She must've felt her way around the area, her memory of what she'd heard from her grandmother as a child being her only hope. Could the spot have remained intact when the whole country was undergoing development? It could've become a road or been turned into an apartment complex. Even if the development boom hadn't reached there so that it hadn't been repurposed yet and the scene of that day was left unscathed, how could she have found the place relying solely on what her grandmother mentioned when she was a child? If she'd contacted me, I could've accompanied her and shared with her what I remember, but why on earth had she decided to seek out the spot all alone? She would've wandered aimlessly about the area she was visiting for the first time in sixty years, where no trace of her mother would've remained. She may not have gone there expecting to find anything. Had she simply wanted, for once, to tread with her own feet the ground where her mother perished? She would've felt her way around the area with nothing to guide her except the fact her mother was shot and cast into a pit somewhere nearby. Maybe she remembered her grandmother saying how one of the many marred bodies in the pit was presumed to be her mother's based on its hair and sweater and was moved to a nearby spot for burial. Or maybe, recalling that a wild animal had already dug up the

spot and erased all markings, she was too busy thinking about her mother to notice a car hurtling toward her.

When I heard she adopted a foster daughter after ten years of a childless marriage, I suspected her husband might've fathered the child with another woman. She didn't exchange news with me in detail as we rarely met in person, but she seemed to be doing okay when I occasionally made phone calls. I would be relieved then and think no more of it. But now she was suddenly dead. For me, she had been proof that my sister was alive in this world. On the day I met her before her wedding, I didn't think I could explain the turmoil of the past to a girl who was pulling my hair with a straightener and shrieking why the damn Commies had to give birth to her. Although I wanted to calmly tell her my sister's story, my head still swam whenever I thought back to those years like I was caught up in a whirlwind. To think that her parents' bodies were never found and her baby sister had starved to death, I was sad and numb.

5. Autumn 1950

What would the girl have thought if she heard the story I'm about to tell? That day when my sister was smoking wasn't actually the last time I saw her. That was before the war. I saw her once more. The last time I saw her was in jail after Seoul was recaptured. My sister was the last person I'd expected to see there. Why had I not mentioned seeing her there? Why had the image of her smoking been my last memory of her? Had I tricked my own memory to hide the fact that I once collaborated with the North? Or to forever hide the feelings I once had for a man?

It all started when a friend of mine from elementary school asked me to come out to an event at the town hall—and then there was no going back. When I arrived, I recognized a lot of familiar faces and saw that a student leader from the North was delivering a lecture. I continued to go there with a bunch of friends for several days. Then a friend introduced us to the North Korean college student, and I fell for him the moment I laid eyes on him. Considering I'd never had a crush before then, I was surprised to find myself attracted to a man from the North. This was definitely something I couldn't share with anyone. A while later, the leadership informed us that none of us would survive if we didn't go to the North and that we'd set out soon. Then one day, I suddenly heard the cry, commence the purge! That was the first time I'd heard the word "purge" and I didn't know what it meant. I'd gone there only because my friends were going and because I enjoyed meeting the North Korean college student. The leaders ordered everyone to get into formation. Those shouldering submachine guns stood in the front rank, followed by those carrying hiking sticks with hatchets and spears tied to them. My friends and I stood at the back. We were told that a purge was liberating the people confined in police station jails. We were each given a bamboo spear by the leaders, who said they didn't want to waste guns on a purge. We brought up the rear, bamboo spear in hand. The march began. Was I really going up North without even seeing my parents? I was scared as I held onto my fearsome spear. But a part of me felt safe because the North Korean college student was with me.

Looking straight ahead, we were marching by a secluded area when a man sprang out at us. Those in the front suspected him of being a spy and killed him on the spot. Although I was standing far behind, being in the presence of an actual human killing was enough to make me shake all over. We marched by night and went into village homes to beg for food. By day, we snatched some sleep sitting down with our backpacks still on. At one point, our group reached some police substation, freed the people detained inside, and killed the people guarding them. So that was a purge. The group would stop by every police station on the way to free the prisoners and kill the guards. On "Forward!" we ran, on "Halt!" we stopped. We arrived at another police station. The leaders bore down on us, insisting that every member must participate in purging dissenters in order to raise morale. The prisoners were freed, while the

dissenters were dragged out and lined up in the station yard. They were made to stand in a row with their backs to us. One member darted forward and pierced a man through the head with his hiking stick. When the man fell, gushing blood, people in the front rank roared and chaotically began to stab the dissenters with their bamboo spears. Amid this particularly aggressive group, I thought I glimpsed a woman who looked like Gyeongho. People in the rear ranks looked away, their eyes shut tight. Terrified that I might be made to kill someone too with a bamboo spear, I trembled uncontrollably as the minutes ticked by. I was so scared that I turned to a friend next to me, shaking, and asked what we were going to do when our turn came. Well, if they tell us to do it, then we do it, replied the friend without the slightest show of concern. But the execution of dissenters was done, thank goodness, before my turn came. They swept the murdered people altogether into a compost pit.

A few days later at sundown, we had stopped marching and were resting when we heard gunfire from somewhere in the distance. The leaders said that the sound was from battleships opening fire in Daecheon or Incheon or somewhere far. The sound, ringing across the tranquil air, gave me chills that I could not express in words. Moonlight pooled around us as the night wore on. Suddenly, the North Korean student bellowed, "Dismissed!" He was going to call on the names of people he was taking with him, and those who weren't called were to go home. Everyone was confused. Where were we supposed to go? Were we really being dismissed here when we'd come all this way believing our only hope for survival was to continue marching? We'd been so focused on not breaking ranks and following the leaders that we had no idea what was going on in the world outside. You don't have to worry, comrade. That's what the North Korean college student said to me in a low voice, before he called me and my friend's names to our great relief: we were going to live. More than anything else, I was glad that he had personally told me not to worry. It made me happy to think that I'd made a favorable impression on him. He ordered everyone to change their names from that point forward. Thus, the march began for those with new names. We frantically tore through mountains and fields. A few of the people whose names weren't called also trailed behind us. Sometimes we'd march without eating a morsel. But I wasn't miserable. Even though I, who had grown up in a wealthy family, was utterly starved, I could march without feeling exhausted because I could see him.

One day we sent out scouts and went into a home to scrounge dinner, but it looked like someone had already reported us. We bolted before we could eat our dinner. We streaked across a bean field (or whatever field it was) until we stumbled into a house and asked for a meal, but we were refused. We felt like we were being cornered. One of the leaders had no choice but to take us to his house, which was nearby. This meant that in spite of marching for so many days, we'd just been going around the area in circles. We ate at his house and packed some rice balls for good measure. As soon as we set out again, military police began firing at us. Someone had reported us while we were eating with our guards down since we were at the leader's house. Not pausing to think, we fled up the mountain. Bullets were whistling past us. Up, up the mountain we went without any kind of plan. Another bullet flew toward us when my friend yelped, ah! from beside me. I think I've been shot! The bullet had grazed my friend's cheek and earlobe. That made me go weak at the knees and I began rolling down the mountain. I tried to stop myself but I kept tumbling downhill. My friend was rolling too, and she later told me that she had copied me because she thought I was rolling on purpose. At the foot of the mountain, military policemen standing guard seized me by the collar. They said that they'd only fired warning shots and had not fired to kill. All of our number was caught and loaded onto military police trucks. The North Korean college student was put on another truck. That was the last I saw of him. There was no way to know if he had died or gone back to the North. I only remembered the marching songs I'd learned from him. While I was being transported, one of the soldiers hummed, "When birds cry at night, after you they pine." It reminded me of all the marching songs I had learned.

As the police station was already full of people captured before us, we were temporarily imprisoned in a hotel, which was the largest building around. At gunpoint, cops rounded us up before making us put our arms up and turn around, one person at a time. Then came the order:

"You will now be executed by firing squad. Say your last words."

So I was going to die. Was this really the end? A chill ran down my back. But maybe the police were just trying to scare us because instead of shooting us, they dragged us to the station. It was October 6. We were locked up in six cells, men and women separated. The police wrote up reports the whole time we were there. Then one day I heard a shout outside my cell. We've arrested Ms. Kim Jae-hee! In her navy blue sweater, my sister walked in. I pressed my eyes to the cell door and tried to call out to her. She shot me a warning look and pretended not to notice me. I didn't know why she stopped me from calling out or what that meant. Neither did I know which cell she was locked in nor why she was arrested. I heard from my sister's acquaintance later that she had left her baby behind and when her breasts filled with milk, she had suckled someone else's starving baby, weeping. Had my sister's baby still clung onto life then? Or had she already let go of it?

Since felons were executed after an immediate trial, my sister would've been executed by firing squad sometime in those few days if she had indeed been killed. But I didn't know this for certain so was just speculating. Or, she could've been moved to another location for her execution. This was likely, considering where the girl's grandmother said she had found my sister's body. The look my sister gave me that day was the last image that she ever left me. It wasn't even a meeting—just a look in a split second.

Before long, my oldest brother was also brought in and beaten daily to reveal the whereabouts of my second oldest brother. He's dead! I would hear someone shout from the men's cells at night. Every night the men died, one by one. I was worried sick about my oldest brother. In the two months or more of staying in the cells, none of the women, whether young or old, had our periods. I didn't know if my sister and brother were okay despite being detained in the same police station, and remained there until I was released under a Christmas pardon. Almost everyone was released except the ones who had committed actual murder. I couldn't find my sister, but I carried out my unconscious oldest brother with Father. It was only the year after that I managed to go and see the girl.

6. Spring 1946

My sister met her husband through a relative. He was the son of a wealthy land owner and had graduated from Bosung College. Although both he and my sister had received a modern education, they decided to get married after only seeing each other once. Mother didn't approve of him, but the marriage went ahead anyway because Father gave permission. Mother had objected to his looks when the relative brought a picture of him. "Too pretty for a man, he is. Doesn't look like the type to care for his wife." Despite such objection after she saw his picture, Mother's opinion was ignored. The family was run according to Father's wishes, so Mother always said she was just a hopeless dunce who didn't know anything. It was no surprise then that my sister's marriage was carried out on Father's decision alone, never mind what Mother thought. Plus my sister was the daughter that Father loved the most and from whom he expected the most. My sister was someone who had weaned herself from her mother's touch, earned her father's recognition, and strode out into the world.

If my sister was Father's child, I was Mother's. Always keeping me under her wings, Mother taught me that I should keep my head down because the world was a scary place. I came to believe that the world was not where you went on daring adventures like my sister did, but somewhere you should only fear. Unlike me, who was hanging onto Mother's skirt and peeping

outside the house fence, my sister was spreading her wings in the wide world outside. Ever since my sister enrolled in the normal school, Mother went on about the downsides to senior schools, citing my sister as an example every time. "Your poor sister's staying in rooms without heated *ondol* floors. She has to sleep on those tatami mats. But a woman's got to keep warm down below, remember." Mother seemed to think of a normal school as a place to sleep rather than a place to learn. "They say men and women mix freely there, the nerve of them! Never become like your sister, mind." She advised me against going on to senior schools, and I did as she said. I feared senior schools and resolved to steer clear of them.

At first my brothers also thought the man in the picture didn't make a suitable match for my sister and opposed the marriage. He was jobless and didn't look manly enough, so my brothers worried that their little sister might have a difficult marriage. When my brothers told her so, she said *she'd* put food on the table then. My sister was no delicate flower and a tad hot-tempered. I saw the picture too and the groom-to-be, with his slender face and pensive expression, struck me as a very different kind of person than my sister.

After they got married, my brother-in-law came round to our house more and more. My brothers began to treat him differently too despite having initially protested his marriage to my sister. The three men spent increasingly longer hours talking together, until at one point they started to sit up all night conversing in low voices, shut up in a small room. Mother, who hadn't liked my brother-in-law from the get-go, watched these proceedings with disapproval. My brother-in-law brought bundles of books by Marx and Lenin and such over to our attic and kept conversing with my brothers. Sometimes they would be joined by strangers. Then my brother-in-law left those books in our attic and went away, never to come back.

My brother-in-law had been in the front line of an underground movement that mobilized after the country gained independence. He was arrested when the October Resistance Movement erupted in 1946. It was an uprising staged by those frustrated with the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea. I heard it was because people had started dreaming of a new world after the country was liberated, but the American military government had let them down. The resistance movement flared up when police fired shots in front of Daegu Station, and it spread to the rest of the country like wildfire. When the war finally broke out, my brother-in-law seemed to glow with a new light. Only until recently, the man had wrapped himself up in blankets even when he was indoors and coughed up blood because his tuberculosis had become so bad after he was released from jail, but for some reason he was getting noticeably better.

On his advice, my sister quit teaching and joined the Women's Federation as a director of operations. She conducted operational activities at over twenty townships on foot, carrying her baby on her back. That baby was the girl's little sister—the baby that had starved to death without so much as rice gruel to feed on, while my sister had gone into hiding and been killed. She had said she would only need to hide for a little while. Her husband had buried a cauldron in a bamboo grove and had hidden inside it, but the South Korean self-defense forces received a tip-off and killed him with a bamboo spear. Since they had dumped his body, there was no way to find it. In spite of her assurances that she'd come back soon from hiding, my sister vanished and we learned of her death only through rumors. Would her death have felt more real to me if I'd seen her body? Belatedly finding out about her death, Mother said she should at least bring the body home for fear it might become food for wild animals and proceeded to scour the foot of mountains. As she recalled the image of her daughter smoking when last she saw her, Mother grew weak and fell ill. She didn't know whether her youngest son was alive, and when she lost her eldest son too, Mother gave up the fight and died. So the days went by as my family died out, and my sister's death was buried in the back of our minds. My sister, who had graduated Gyeongseong Normal School and from whom everyone expected great things. My sister, who had been barely thirty and still so young.

6. Autumn 1953

Was it also the war's fault that my clothes never reached the girl? It was two years after I'd sent the clothes. My niece had just come back home in a rush to tell me that the daughter of the inn's owner was wearing the exact same clothes that I had made and sent up to the girl. I racked my brains over how this could possibly be, but no clear answer came to me. As this was something that should never have happened, I had trouble believing my niece's words. Those clothes should've been worn by the girl. By the poor girl whose situation was pitiable beyond comparison. My niece said she'd gone to the inn to see Gyeongho and spotted the owner's daughter, who was wearing clothes so like the ones I'd made that she looked at them very closely. I followed my niece to the inn. In those days, guests from all walks of life stayed at the inn for extended periods or convened to draw up secret plans. The inn's owner ran a branch of a magazine and knew my brothers. Once, he had paid my house a sudden visit that left the family perplexed. Had he visited intending to intimate my sister's death? I heard he'd turned up one day out of the blue to see my father. That was when I was away from home, mixing with a crowd people called "partisans." He hadn't said much though apparently—just bowed deeply to my father and sat in solemn silence before taking his leave. My family hadn't been able to make head nor tail of it, until they heard rumors soon afterwards that my sister was dead. Had he come to deliver the news of her death but couldn't bring himself to say the words?

Musing about such things, I reached the inn and waited for the owner's daughter to appear. When she did so without warning in the yellow-green jacket and pink dress, for a moment I thought I was actually seeing my sister's girl. I walked up to her and examined the clothes. The seams and the stiches, oh they were mine. It was clear that my clothes had not been delivered to the girl. I remembered Gyeongho's grin as she said she'd make sure the girl gets it. My niece said tearfully, she didn't know the bitch would take advantage of Auntie's errand like that.

Having no family, Gyeongho was doing menial work at the inn to earn her keep. She would've needed some means to secure her stay there. When she found out I was making clothes for a child, she must've decided to rope me in. I imagined how euphoric she must've felt when she took that bundle of clothes from me. Had she thought the clothes were simply changing hands, from one child to another? Every stitch I sewed thinking of the poor girl had been in vain. So too were the yellow-green jacket and pink dress I'd made for the girl.

Would Gyeongho have considered doing such a thing if it hadn't been for the war? On that day during the march, I thought I'd glimpsed Gyeongho among the group that was striking with bamboo spears. Maybe it had indeed been her, seeing that she was released later than the people who were granted Christmas pardons. Maybe she'd gone off somewhere to do something, but Gyeongho was nowhere to be seen at the inn. What would I say if I saw her? Even if I did see her, I didn't think I had anything to say. I gazed at the inn owner's child for a long time. She hopped on the spot. I remembered how the girl had bowed to her mother's grave. I saw again the round form of her black dress and vested jacket as they fluttered down. Then it really seemed as if the girl was wearing my yellow-green jacket and pink dress.

When my oldest brother passed away, his wife turned nasty. I couldn't impose on her any longer when she was dropping broad hints that I leave the house, nor could I afford to cherry-pick my life partner when I came from a family of Commies who brought ruin on themselves. I couldn't say no to an old widower's marriage proposal. That was the only way if I couldn't move out with my father or earn enough to support my brother's family. Father said, as he cleared his raspy throat, the only way I could get my brother's wife off my case was to get married. True, I needed to escape somewhere, anywhere. Father—who had envied Mother for witnessing less of the disgraced world by leaving before him—passed away immediately after he married me off.

The world in the wake of war was a dreary skull. Stripped bare of my own flesh and blood, leaving nothing but deceit.

7. Spring 2010

Why had the girl wanted to go there? It was no use thinking this now, but I should've met her at least once more. I should've told her about the yellow-green jacket and pink dress I never got to give her, about how her mother had seemed that one day, about that last look. Why did life pass before I had the chance to do these things, which shouldn't have been so difficult? I felt again the savage grip with which the girl yanked my hair.

Sixty years ago, the girl had stood beside her grandmother and stared wide-eyed at me. I wondered what she had felt back then. Fear? Some kind of yearning? I had left the girl there without finding her mother's grave for her properly. It had not occurred to me then to take her under my wing, even when she'd lost her parents and baby sister all at once. As she had her father's side of the family, I believed it wasn't up to our side of the family to meddle. Besides, we weren't in a position to take anyone in, being in a shambles ourselves. I was relieved when I heard that her uncle was taking care of her after her grandmother passed. Then I moved on. Just like that. Carrying a yellow-green jacket and pink dress in the depths of my heart.

Translated from the Korean by Sung Ryu

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