

Hye-kyung LEE

The Highest Point

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My eldest brother's voice faltered when I told him that I was going to miss our mother's memorial ceremony, her *jaesa*. It was as if I had pointed out a flaw in his new car. He made a sound like air escaping a puncture, *shhhh*, then responded sharply.

"What do you mean? This isn't just any day, it's the anniversary of your mother's death. You're her only daughter and now you're missing her memorial. I don't care how busy you are."

Without any older family members around the *jaesa* would not be a particularly formal event, but my mother had raised us on her own from an early age and it was an important occasion for our family to gather. Having momentarily lost his composure, having momentarily crumbled, my brother started telling me about his car again, his conceit. But I was not ready to get back to this conversation yet. I felt like driving his new car along the highway, through the mud, the sunlight glaring. He would not dare miss a *jaesa*, he would not dare because he knew that without him, his siblings would get together and gossip about his shortcomings. He would attend whether I did or not. It weighed on his mind that had I called him first to tell him that I would not be going, rather than giving the news to my second brother, who was also preparing the ceremony.

"What kind of place do you work for that can't be flexible about this? I know you're tied to your job, but all the same..."

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I wonder what his response would be if he discovered that I had deliberately chosen the dates. Ordinarily, he would tell me how “well” I had done. This would be his way of biting back, of expressing his disappointment.

What am I supposed to think when you say you’re going away on business?

Unmarried, I am tied to my eldest brother, and I follow his lead, as do my other brothers. But I control the interactions between them – news of the two younger brothers reaches the eldest through me, and I selectively communicate his news to the others. This way, no one can hold us up to examination. This way, I can churn up the anger directed towards our eldest sibling, or I can take the other road and share my indignation with him.

Look, look what’s happened.

Only with me does my eldest brother comport himself conscientiously as the senior in the family. Anxious at the thought that I will grow old alone and unwed, he lists off the names of single men of his acquaintance, and every now and then he turns up with one of these men near my office. We meet up, he withdraws. When I moved house, he came with his tools, connecting the washing machine, driving the nails into the cement. But this apparent thoughtfulness masked a differed purpose. He thinks I don’t know that when he bought the four tires for his newly purchased car, that two of those tyres belonged to me. When I sent the money, he’d said he needed money quickly - not a word about a new car. While I mused on this, he calmed down.

“Right, okay then. So you’re telling me that you have to miss the *jaesa*. You have to have a reason. Are you going somewhere?”

“Yeah, a branch office out in the country.”

“Where? It’s not that far away, is it?”

If you hurry back once you’ve finished your work, you’ll be late but you can still make it.

He dragged it out, reluctant to let go. I’ll be busy with work there; I need to disabuse him of the expectation that I will go, and I’ll keep talking at him until he accepts this.

“Myongchon. I’ll stay the night there then spend the next day working.”

That’s right, I’m a hard person, don’t expect anything more.

Myongchon, a three-hour train ride from Seoul. A town we pass through on the way to our ancestral home, Yosan.

“Myongchon?”

He repeated the name then was quiet for a moment. I seized the opportunity to bring the conversation to a close. *I’ll call you when I get back.*

His indecision – remorse or anger? – showed. Maybe he’s thinking how happy I am about his new car. He has a special talent for making people angry, making them angry for his own purposes. If only I had spent a little more time listening to him talk about his perfect car before telling him that I would not be going to the *jaesa*. Likely as not I chose our mother’s memorial day to go on a work trip just to avoid seeing him.

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“Sonae. How have you been? I’ve been meaning to call you but I haven’t been able to get a hold of you. The last time the kids went around to their aunt’s house, I saw one of your books. I went to call you then but...are you still very busy?”

From the other end of the line came Minja's slow drawl. Minja, a friend from middle school, was the first person who came to mind when I thought of Myongchon. The month that we published a feature article on cooking mushrooms, I wrote the editorial note about this friend who had put down roots in Yosan. Once in a while she sends me a box of mushrooms, and when I open that box, my hometown wafts out. I had been urged to get the editorial down on paper while on the way home one day; it was the last editorial I wrote.

The company I worked for earned its keep through the "Daily Study" student workbooks for preschool/elementary school children. It incorporated, then started to expand at the end of last year. A public relations team was established to sell to housewives, and so on the expansion went. But having so recklessly expanded, the reliable income started to drop off and a heavy frost settled over the company. There were rumours of a retrenchment, and one day the notices were posted. The newly hired editors were told directly – they were going.

What's going on. How can this have happened?

Those like myself who had not been chosen, who would have an easier time of it, wanted to do something about the situation, but then the new hires were gone.

How could I have joined such an outmoded company?

In an instant, their desire to stick it out crumbled away. Departments deemed unnecessary were closed and wages were harvested from the first-tier employees in the remaining departments. When these first-tier employees sat in front of me at my desk, they gave each other meaningful looks. One or two got up and went to the break room.

What are we here for? You'll be like me, suddenly out.

These faces, still young, these employees spoke to me like this. They were not just cold, they were indignant. If I were their age again, I would feel the same way.

When I was younger, I wrote a letter of resignation shortly after having started at a company. The director said he wanted to help those people who had not made the cut to find a new job. This was the nature of business, but the lack of warning left the staff feeling unprotected. I felt there was no alternative but to put in my letter of resignation. I cleared my desk, then had one last cup of team with one of my senior colleagues. I asked her the question suddenly.

Are you really just going to stay on working here?

I just wanted to know why she was taking this course of action. This colleague, born in the countryside, with no particular talent, bore it solemnly. Rather than answer me, she looked out the window for a while. The people on the other side of the glass were grappling with what was happening, swept up in the events. Her nose was long, narrow, her cheeks freckled, not wholly covered by powder, her face melancholy. This was not something you asked. Biting my lip, I watched the desolate face beside me, but she could not focus on an answer. I was young, I could not preserve the silence, I sought an explanation, justification...that was who I was then. After a while, she spoke.

Well then, leave. But I can't go. I just can't leave now.
Her eyes had been desperate.

Kang Sonae, I can't look you in the eye. If you leave our department, a few months later, we'll give you a call, ask you to come back. I've made a promise, you understand.

Pak, the director at Daily Study who had head-hunted me from a women's magazine, spoke tersely. I recognised her

expression – a mix of sincerity, regret, confusion, guilt, and finally coolness. There was no room to doubt the sincerity of the promise Pak had made, but I had not received an official announcement that this promise would be kept. Now, to leave, to start again, well, it was a fearful prospect at my age. Rather than go to a different company and start anew, I decided to choose the security that a big company like Daily Study could give; I had been brainwashed, and in the end I chose to change only the nature of the work I was doing.

“Hey. Has all been well? Are the children doing well?”

“Yeah. I haven’t been able to go up to Seoul because of the kids. So, what’s up?”

Minja asked the question outright. I had not called her more than a few times in the last year. Once to wish her well after a trip to Seoul. Once to thank her for the mushrooms. Once when I was reminded of her as I cooked something with the dried mushrooms I had in my freezer. And once after a discussion on farming and farm produce aired on the television.

“Nothing in particular. Will you have time one evening at the beginning of next month? Some work has come up in Myongchon and I thought if you had time, we could catch up.”

“You? In Myongchon?”

It was unexpected...I could visualise the expression on her face. Every year or so Minja would come to Seoul and without fail she would get in touch with me. But I was the opposite, I only rarely made it back to Yosan. After we moved my father’s grave from there, I all but stopped going.

“Yeah, some work has come up there. So how about it? Will you be free?”

“Me, I can make any time in the evening. Let’s see...I have some things to do on the Wednesday at my in-laws’ place and I

don’t know if I’ll be late getting out of there...if not then, how about Thursday? Thursday the fourth. You know Myongok, don’t you? The joker, the little one who would come out on picnic days who would sing with us. Right. Well, now she has a karaoke business in town. If you come around, we can meet up with some friends. Is that okay with you?”

“The joker”. I was startled by the pleasant sense of anticipation at this nickname – but the other friends? All at once I was hesitant, I wanted to withdraw.

This won’t do.

It had crept up on me. While I was talking with Minja on the phone, I flicked through my diary. The fourth was circled. Our mother’s memorial day.

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The shrill, tinny voice advised us that we were departing, and when the train started to move, I was sitting by the window, with the feeling deep down inside that something was falling apart. My memories of this road were foggy, remote, I could not go back.

In my new job, I hold my heavy bag, standing outside closed doors, setting up the portable desk in front of the apartment complex where I now worked from, handing out fliers. This work, I felt I would die of shame. Towards the end of the month’s deadline I ran into a roadblock. Out of nowhere had come the directive to lift performance over and above the previous month. About midway through the month, six subscribers had pulled out, some to go to other publications.

To fill these empty places, I needed new subscriptions. In the end, I secured ten new ones.

In the train, the curtains of sleep smothered me. Lying beneath the surface, concealed but abruptly exposed when plucked at by unthinking fingers was fatigue; the release of tension was like a surprise attack and I almost fainted into sleep. My body felt heavy, my sleep tormented. A compressor silently weighing on my heart, I felt as if I were collapsing under the pressure.

Brrrrr.

Like a small animal trembling nearby, uttering a low moan, my mobile phone was vibrating, the screen was lit up.

“It’s me. Where are you now?”

My big brother. I peered out the train window blearily. The fields were illuminated with the afternoon sun. A typhoon looming in the distance, over the fields, visible above the sunlight, and in anticipation of its arrival, farmers were busy in the rice paddies tying the rice into clusters. The rice paddies could not stand on their own, awaiting the inevitable; just like me, after the storm they would not be able to get up on their own.

“I’m on the train. Why? Is anything the matter?”

“No, nothing in particular, where are you?”

“I’ve just passed Yedang. You?”

“I had some work to do yesterday so I went to Chunchon, I’m on my way now. It’s the weekend so the roads are a bit congested. So, are you going to go to Yosan as well?”

“No. I don’t have the time.”

“Really? All right then. Have a safe trip.”

Yosan was only a twenty-minute drive from Myongchon. We still have the main house there, a country estate where all

the locals turn up at the front gate. Outsiders do not go to Yosan, and the villagers rarely leave. The inertia of country life is hard to shift.

My eldest brother left this place, with its worn-out blood lines and conventions; he first left to go to merchant marine college but he quit the first time he went out to sea. Around the time I went to university, he told me how he had been able to turn his back on the sea so quickly, the sea that he had dreamt of, with the world map stuck on his wall.

Well, I got to take out that boat like I wanted to, but when the land fell away and there was nothing left but the blue waves, I changed my mind. I felt helpless at the thought that I could go and live so far away from the world. So I made up my mind then. I said I’d work from the centre of the world.

But my brothers interpreted his actions differently. Rather than take his story at face value, they saw him as quitting up in the face of hardship.

The view I had of my eldest brother as the centre of the universe was continually put to the test; the rest of the family watched as I leant on this dream, then tripped and fell flat on my face. My grandfather’s assets were passed down when my parents married, but my mother lost her husband early and assumed responsibility for the family estate. My brother stole a tidy sum of money from the house, hoisted his sails and took off; some months later he drifted back to the village, grasping at the flotsam of his failed endeavour. Did he gamble away the money? Was he tricked? Or was it a woman? My brothers and I wondered at this. But because my mother was a woman, my brother had been granted power of attorney with the death of our father, and instead of asserting strict controls, our mother

could say nothing, even though deep inside she was at odds with his actions.

She heard a rumour from the village that he had taken her personal seal and the mortgage papers, but even so, she envisaged living out her days in the village. We dreaded the phrase “ill-bred bastard” the most, and even though people would ask after my eldest brother, my mother suffered from the shame of the villagers looking down their noses at her. We left Yosan.

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When I alighted from the train at Myongchon, the clock on the outside of the shabby station house, tinged with the late summer sun, pointed to twelve o’clock. Home. The discoloured vermilion numbers, with time as a catalyst, had faded away like yellowed paper. It had been a few seasons since I last saw this clock. The long hand, pointed at the end, and the short hand, only just visible, would not move again, despite their determined stance.

A truck spewing disinfectant gas appeared with a shout from some children and the smell of disinfectant filled the stifling air. A group of children was chasing the van as it slowly moved forward. The children had their mouths open wide to draw in the gas belching from the rear of the van as it wound its way along the steep, narrow lanes. I pitied their efforts as they tried to fill their lungs. The distance between the disinfectant particles and the children’s greed seemed akin to the distance between an outsider like myself and the unchanged villagers here. The elderly villagers sitting by the side of the

road, watching passers-by with hollow eyes, these people have lived here for so long. I looked along the streets with the eyes of an outsider. It was the first visit I had made here since we moved my father’s remains to a different grave site five years ago.

We relocated to Seoul, where my second brother was attending university, and as we moved from place to place in the poor mountain districts of the city, our fields in Yosan started to disappear little by little. My eldest brother had embarked on a new, unreliable enterprise. He had expenses, so many expenses commensurate with the standing of a person undertaking such an enterprise. In order to keep up with appearances, he bought all the brand names, he put on a show. Presumably to buy all his trappings he did not need to actually earn money. He would use the estate; it was always a case of ‘the business needs money quickly’ and finally, growing weary, our mother would tell him that it was his business, that he should deal with it, and she would turn her back on him. And then if the money was not forthcoming, things would change and suddenly it was needed to keep him out of jail.

My mother, upright and proud, a “capable woman”, sought out a bedsit of her own about the time that my third brother was preparing to get married. She would lie on the floor of her room trying to balance the books with money she had collected from here and there, then she would close her bankbook with a snap and go outside, absent-mindedly picking the buds off the tree outside. Outside the door of her room, at the very top of a steep mountain slope, choked in soot and car exhaust, grew acacia trees, and even here flowers bloomed. The milky white sky was just outside her front door. Having walked to the highest point, she sighed to herself.

I divided up the big house and left so that boy could get married, this is how I've become a Seoul beggar...

'Seoul beggar', these words so oft repeated like a lament by my mother, became linked to her resolve that even if it killed her, she would not go back to Yosan. On the day our mother was buried in the crowded garden cemetery, the clouds cast a shadow over our hearts, but we were thinking that we had done the right thing by her, by burying her here and not Yosan. This way, we could drop by her grave on the weekend or when passing by, and we began to enjoy the trips to the restaurants after visiting her.

Having buried our mother, our eldest brother suggested that we move our father's remains from the family graveyard in Yosan.

"What do you think about moving dad's grave so that he can be buried next to mum? It's easy enough to visit her like this, and it's difficult to get out to his grave unless there's a big occasion. If they are buried together, it would make it that much easier to see them both."

Unlike me, who had had our second brother to help me through, my third brother had paid his own way through university; penniless, he studied classics at school, then got married. He had clearly expressed his opinion.

I'd like to see the day that our big brother actually works for a living.

Deep inside, my feelings echoed his.

"Let's do it then. I feel uneasy whenever I visit mum's grave as well, but going about reconstructing the tomb won't be easy..."

"Of course it won't be easy, but if we think of it as a simple endeavour, it won't be that difficult either."

Running away with the family's money, our livelihood, starting up a business and then turning away from it to start yet something else, divorcing your wife, these are all things that our messed up brother had thought easier than I had. Ordinarily, when our first brother spoke, my third brother would scoff; now his silence was taken as encouragement. This had been the first time that anything the eldest had said was worth listening to.

"How did we manage to get a position where the grave was shaded by the gully like that? Well, regardless, our home has been ruined and we wouldn't want to keep living like this because of where his grave was located."

Our expressions suddenly hardened. We had bought apartments in Seoul, on birthdays we went out for buffet dinners, and in summer we went to the beach or the mountains to escape the heat. This was an average life. But every now and then, something would happen that showed this life to be wanting. Underlying this was my mother's lament. She had been wrongly dragged into a life of regret by my eldest brother. He cut in quickly right at the moment my third brother had opened his mouth to let him know how we felt.

Of course, you all view your hardships as my responsibility, that I didn't do enough.

Although I agreed with his admission of wrongdoing, that he had made it was unprecedented.

I had imagined an eager, pretty acacia root in the grave pit entangling, coiling around the coffin, but in reality, when we opened the grave mound, the soil was yellow and comfortable. And so it was that my big brother's misgivings regarding our father's grave were unfounded. The thread connecting us to our ancestral home had been severed.

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“Kang Sonae, did you say that Myongchon was your hometown? I’ve been there before, the seaside is very nice.”

Our branch manager had started to talk about Myongchon at the end of last month. I thought then that he had wanted to visit there and so was being nice to me. In meetings he would talk about me.

Look here at Kang Sonae. She wrote articles for a prominent women’s magazine. When she first arrived, I worried a bit about her. I wondered if this person, coming from such a position, could go door to door canvassing for our magazine. But look. Has anyone else sold this many subscriptions in just three months?

I regretted the decision to make a living by selling things; people were dull and I was timid in dealing with them, but I did not have the heart to tell the branch manager. I did not trust him – and not because he was standing in front of us speaking about me like this. Just three days after I had started this job, he called me into his office and told me to write a letter of resignation.

“Why?”

From the very first his attitude towards me had not been right. Whenever he came into the office, I would sense his gaze upon me. If I raised my head, he would quickly glance away, saying something inane. And even as he called me in that day and told me to sit down, he avoided my gaze as he spoke.

“This is not work for someone like you, Kang Sonae.”

“Why would you think that?”

“In the time you’ve been here, many people have commented that your personality doesn’t fit. And I don’t feel you have the right kind of sociable disposition for this job. This work is conducted face to face with housewives. If you aren’t sociable, it will be hard to get by.”

“But I’ve only been here for three days. How did you come to this conclusion in that time? And besides, I was moved here by the head of the company, losing me will show that you are unable to hold onto your staff here.”

Eye for an eye. In difficult times like these, people can take pride in working in a strong company like “Daily Study”...by chance, I found out that the branch head, coming from regional stock with no background in business affairs, considered his elevation to branch manager to be a big promotion and he was working hard to fit in with the contract teachers, who unlike me could be cut at any time. While he worked at showing people weaker than him that he was strong, he did not want to show his true colours to his superiors. And at that moment, I made a strategic move by referring him to the personnel section in the main office; he was disbelieving, unhappy at their response. He grimaced. The ten days of training in the art of persuasion that I had received were bearing fruit.

All the people who had been removed from the public relations, advertising and new media sections had been sent through training at an in-house institute to get them ready for work in the regional offices. At six o’clock in the morning, the blankets were snatched from the foot of the bed to the sound of the song ‘Hands Holding Hands’. Every day, we ran, we ate, we took classes and we were tested, and so the assembled trainees began to feel strongly about why, in the study primer

market, our publication was called ‘the high-school educated housewife’s choice’. We learnt about persuading people rather than teaching school subjects. If you were to meet a mother and she said, “I want to stop maths,” how would you persuade her? If you were to meet a mother who uses a different study primer, how would you go about presenting a vision to her that would persuade her to change to “Daily Study”?

The branch manager was my first practical exercise. Say one day you were faced with coercion to write your resignation letter, how would you persuade in order to retain your position? I prepared myself and with studied courtesy, asked the branch manager again.

“When you received me, you were not made aware of my personal history, were you? I’m sure that you were not made aware, because you probably wouldn’t have consented.”

“So, I would consent to this?” he responded, “There is too much of a distance between you and the other instructors, and this promotes instability in the workplace.”

For the first time, his motivation was laid bare. When I had received my marching orders, I had been the head of a department, and because I had been head-hunted directly into the company, I earned more than the branch manager. When the official orders for retrenchment were sent out, wages were cut, but to the branch manager, who had been able to retain his staff, I was a thorny problem. Because I had been circumspect, and because of my demeanour – diffident towards the current situation – he had finally decided to let me know what he was really thinking.

All pretence aside, why should your branch receive someone turned away from the head office?

If that’s the case...

To disguise the tremble in my voice, I exhaled slowly and said the following.

“If you feel like this, it might be best for you to contact the head office personnel section.”

The branch manager’s bearing was that of a man who had surreptitiously scaled a fence then discovered a pit looming on the other side; he executed a 180-degree about-face within a week. I stood in the hallway in front of his office door, peering through the fish-eye lens, looking for a sign while he mulled it over. As stiff as a board, he asked for the head office’s assessment, considered their response and, uneasily he unbent a little towards me. But I could not dispel my disquiet. And I could not view his references to Myongchon as good omens.

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“Hello there! People of Myongchon looking for some time out, the Echo Karaoke Rooms has just opened its doors today. Please enjoy some free time at the Echo Karaoke Rooms, with the newest equipment and comfortable rooms. Our place to go, Echo Karaoke Rooms!”

The nasal voice came through the hand-held microphone, filling the quiet streets. Under an arch of red, white and blue balloons, two girls dancing in mini-skirts with sailor hats on their heads screeched into the microphones. The two were just on the verge of twenty years old and with their short skirts and high heels, were showing as much of their legs as possible. They were the sort to be found late at night in hotels in strange cities, getting into cars, hands massaging their legs. For me, the moment the stockings are removed, tight around the skin, I

feel a sense of relief, like releasing a breath I had held for so long. I could not take my eyes off those legs, stockings sleekly stretched. My feet felt swollen.

There had been a rumour for a number of years that the neighbourhood I was responsible for at work would be redeveloped, both the many apartments buildings in the complex and the surrounding houses below. There were no elevators in the apartments so I had to walk up the steps. There were so many that I could not count them. The narrow, dirty stairs were covered in remnants of gum. There were many occasions where I would climb up and up those stairs for an appointment to find the door closed. But I had an appointment with the next child and I could not wait. The next day, I would receive a call to tell me the subscription had been cancelled. Dandelions grew out of cracks in the edges of the buildings; flower buds would often sprout there. They were weeds, not competitive, but robust plants all the same. Weeds are usually overtaken by stronger plants, but in barren locations, they adapt and grow; I saw a documentary about this once. At night, the stems of these weeds would thicken, just as my legs would as I slept. I often get cramps in while sleeping. My legs would lose all sensation, the left leg tender; if I raised it a little, I worried that the numbness will make its way up to my head. But those long legs in front of me are not yet familiar with the idea of cramps at night, they would be able to stand at the starting line of a marathon. Hands extended towards me, beckoning.

“Welcome, mother. Would you like to look around our karaoke rooms?”

The place opens at six, Minja had told me.

If you come before that, meet us and we'll go in together; if I'm late, come directly inside.

Assuming that Minja had already arrived, I went down the stairs.

“Hey, aren't you Sonae? It's Sonae, isn't it? Can it really have been this long?”

Before I could make it through the people gathered in the entrance way and around the counter, through to find Minja, I was met by a voice. It was Aekyong, a friend from middle school. As soon as I saw her face, twenty years fell away; the sound of my name was wonderful. And laughing, Myongok approached me, dressed in a simple, modified *hanbok*, a traditional dress. I remembered Myongok as being taller.

“Minja told me she'd been in touch with you but I had no idea that we'd be able to catch up with you like this. Thank you for coming.”

“Congratulations on opening your business. May you become a rich woman.”

“How is it that you haven't been down this way? I guess since you moved away, you wouldn't have had much reason to come back. Minja's next door getting some rice cakes, she knows the owner. So how long has it been?”

Watching Aekyong as she joined the chatter, the worries of the world disappeared and we visited a time when we had been happy. It was as if I could wash my face and my disposition would be as it had been then, rinsing away the times that I had scolded my staff. I wanted to follow Aekyong blindly, like a young girl with short hair, her positive spirit making such an impression on the awkward room. Minja greeted us as she entered the room, tray in hand.

“Sonae's arrived. How long has it been for you two?”

“Yeah. Now that you’re here, we can see it all in Sonae’s expression. You two were always together at school. Really, how many years has it been? Let’s stop for a moment – take this tray into that room over there and have a seat. If you’re bored, sing a song or two. When I’ve sorted things out I’ll join you.”

We each took one of the plates of fruit and rice cakes prepared so carefully by Myongok and went into the room. From inside we could see a man through the open door. The man was scruffy and striking in his jumper, his dirty hair as shiny as lacquer. Aekyong poked me hard.

“Do you remember him? That crazy idiot. Why, he was always hanging around in front of our school.”

Crazy idiot.

At those words I felt prickles up my back. I was surprised. I hadn’t heard the name “crazy idiot” for such a long time. I swallowed, feeling some deep emotion.

“That guy, the one outside our school? I thought someone had said he’d died.”

“He didn’t die but no one saw him for years, then he reappeared. Who knows what he was doing for all that time, but recently he turned up in town again. He’d remember you, that crazy idiot. In any case, he knew this place was opening today so he came looking for something to eat.”

The front door was packed with people, but this man had managed to slip through. His dirty face was screened by his hair at first, but his cautious bearing brought back memories from long ago.

When I was in middle school, he was already known as that “crazy idiot”. His demeanour was like that of a small insect at the base of a tree, under the fallen petals. He had disappeared

in silence when the fallen leaves were swept up the lanes by the wind. His expression was like he had only just awoken from a long sleep. The rude children would dog his heels, imitating him spitting, pretending to wipe clean the dirt with their sleeves. The consensus was that he was crazy in a scary way. Every so often he would wash his face in a stream and the outline of his beautiful face would be visible for a while; like pink flowers fallen on the ground, rotting beneath the tree.

“Where does he live now?”

“Who knows. He probably lives in storerooms and empty houses.”

“He used to live with his father.”

“That old man died some time ago. But are you interested in that crazy idiot? We all remember something was odd there.”

He was called the ‘crazy idiot’ but my mother and her close relatives called him by his name, Myongjae. When he appeared, standing quietly by the entrance to their houses, people understood that he was hungry and gave him something to eat. When my mother ladled out the cold rice, she gave him more than she would give the other beggars. But he avoided one house in the village – the main house, the centre of village life, my great-grandfather’s house. One day, a father and a son had come into the village. The son had fallen boldly in love with another of the same blood-line but of a different name, and he was beaten for that love until his head was turned. His lover was my father’s cousin, and she had lived in that house. Some years earlier, after my father’s cousin had departed this life, killed by uterine cancer, Myongjae appeared on what would have been her sixtieth birthday. So he’s still alive. He had rubbed out all that was inside him and kept on going.

“We should get out of here, that crazy idiot will be coming begging for some rice cake. Let’s go quickly.”

Aekyong propelled me forward; I couldn’t take my eyes off Myongjae. Either the karaoke rooms had started business for the night already or someone was testing out the equipment. The sound of singing was coming from inside one of the rooms.

Today, I will chew the bodice ties...

The door, open for a moment, closed most of the way. The hem of my skirt fluttered, the door was open just a crack. Rather than go out into the passage, I turned my body so that I could see Myongjae through the crack – he was receiving a plate of food, grinning. His mouth, missing a number of teeth, was like the entrance to a cave.

*

One, two glasses of alcohol were put in front of me. I drank. A couple of old classmates joined us a bit later in the karaoke room and we ate dinner and drank more.

These classmates, having not seen me in such a long time, seemed to feel obligated to tell me how they had been getting along. These people I had forgotten, their stories were like delicacies, sidedishes for the alcohol. Stories of someone who had opened a large restaurant in a neighbouring town and was raking in the money, someone who married her boyfriend from middle school after 10 years together, a divorce after three years, the remarriage to a bachelor, someone’s child had caught her putting on lipstick, on her way out to see a man on the side.

“Sonae, you work for ‘Daily Study’ don’t you? There are a lot of children here using that primer as well.”

One of my classmates, Songhee, somewhat primly, was speaking.

“So are you a tutor as well?”

Aekyong asked the question, Minja responded in my place.

“What...she is a magazine journalist there. Her books are at Myongok’s house. Where are you getting your information from?”

I hesitated momentarily. Should I tell them that I was a tutor? But it had not even been decided yet...I laughed, choking on the lie.

“No, I just have some business at the branch office. I have to go over that way tomorrow.”

Last week I received a call from head office, from personnel. No one was working in Myongchon and because of my existing links with the town, they wanted to send me to work there. I had given an answer of sorts to my branch manager, who had told me the news. First, I would go down to Myongchon, then I would make a decision.

Make a decision?

The branch manager’s face was wrinkled, giving the impression that he was older than his years.

This deciding business, it isn’t really anything, you know this don’t you.

At first I had turned down the occasional offer to work at a rival magazine because I had only been in our company for a short while. So now my colleague from head office were asking me:

If that’s the case, why go now?

But leaving in such a shabby way, trying to establish rapport with the mothers, grasping my pen, being treated differently...bit by bit I lost the will to engage in a different line of work. In the end, having taken a break and put my neck out for the newer employees, I could meet people and say, “Won’t you look at this study primer, how about it, take a look.” Bit by bit I die. Of all places, why so near to Yosan?

Myongchon, *deep down inside I miss you so.....* But it was not my ancestral home any longer. My mother, in the knowledge that generation after generation of our ancestor’s bones were buried there, had extracted herself from that place. My big brother had bankrupted us and we were shamed but not broken. More than anything else I dreamt of winning the people of Yosan over, but this was as yet unfulfilled. And here I am now, an impostor. I had not returned here for show, but I just could not consider distributing student primers here.

“You should all change the books your kids use to ‘Daily Study’. Especially you, Minja. Sonae, you shouldn’t be such good friends with Minja either. Her kids don’t use primers, let alone attend after-school lessons. It’s not normal. Your kids enjoy their freedom now, but you’ll regret it later. Can you sleep knowing this?”

Minja opened her mouth at once to respond to Aekyong’s censure, her strength evident in her voice and in her stance.

“I don’t tell my children to study. What of it if they’re not smart. I tell them that if they aren’t good at studying now, they can work a screwdriver some day. How would it be if we all just studied? Don’t there have to be the guys who wield the screwdrivers as well?”

Minja’s words, breaking through my inebriation, hurt me. Why? Minja was not talking to Aekyong, she was not talking

to the others, she was talking to me. And it was definitely not my leg that was hurting me. My fear grew that I would meet someone who knew that I worked in that construction site of an apartment block. Standing outside the door of an unfamiliar house, my hand always pauses mid-air on its way to ring the bell at the thought that the person inside could be known to me. She asks how it would be if everyone studied.

Don’t there have to be people to wield screwdrivers?

Minja’s words hurt me anew. Would I be able to take root here? Wherever I went, it was unfamiliar to me. Oil from the griddle spat and crackled, spots of grease floated atop my drink. I drank the glass, oil and all. Here and there, the dialect being spoken reminded me that I was raised in this place. This dialect comes back to me so naturally, when on the phone to Minja, or on the train headed back to my hometown, despite my smooth Seoul accent. This place that has made me who I am. I wonder when Myongjae met my father’s cousin for the first time. The sin of loving a woman...Myongjae would have had his wits then. He came here to put down roots, but his feet hardly touched the ground, he floats through life. I wonder if, before she closed her eyes for the last time, his lover was thinking of him. I wonder if my big brother is running in the night alone, pausing for breath. While mulling these things over, I had absent-mindedly chewed a piece of meat into a paste.

On the pretence of going to the bathroom, I picked up my mobile phone and slipped outside. I took a step towards the centre of town, but in the small street I had the unaccountable feeling of being followed; Myongjae was nowhere to be seen. The breeze caressed my face. A breeze that said, *I am ready to pull the leaves from the trees.* To the extent that it could, an

intertown bus was driving along the street, pulling up in between the parked cars. Its destination was Yosan and it looked like the last bus for the night. A number of school students dressed in their uniforms were getting on the bus, probably to fall asleep as soon as they sat down. Country women were going high into the hills. From the parking lot, I could see a number of faces in the bus. Hidden from sight behind the bus on the street corner, I pressed the keypad on my mobile phone.

“Hello?”

A voice, weighed down by the world, answered.

“Big brother, it’s me.”

“Sonae? Where are you?”

His voice lifted, the heaviness completely gone. Today’s *jaesa* had probably been a brittle affair. And he was probably lonely.

“I’m having something to eat with friends. You?”

“I just came out for a moment to get some fresh air.”

Family members were supposed to attend the ceremonial table while the *jaesa* was underway, but my big brother, unable to fill the empty spaces, had probably slipped out to smoke a cigarette or to take an important call. Some time ago, he had sought to restore face with us, his siblings, but we were well acquainted with how he had brought our mother down, and on seeing him, we would never ask after his health, nor would we wish him well on his way. Perhaps to our brother, courtesy from us would seem like censure. We viewed him as a pernicious weed, gripping on until the end, always dreaming of the big payout but finding it to be a mirage. Perhaps his endless ambition and bravado were some form of self-purification. Now he was stubbornly silent, like a child.

Sssshhh.

The silence was like a breeze.

“Hey, well...”

“What’s up, is there anything wrong?”

“No. Myongchon’s changed a lot. You’d better go back in.”

Finishing the call, I wondered if it had been necessary to end our conversation that way, telling him to go back in. All of a sudden I wished that I had told him that Myongjae was still alive. Maybe he already knew – he came to Myongchon much more often than the rest of us. More than that, I guess that Myongjae, to my brother, would be no more important than the broken clock tower. That Myongjae of old, he had come back to the world, he was hungry but could find food, and in front of so many, he could appear ashamed of his scruffiness. Why would I want to talk of these things? I didn’t know where to go, so I stood for a long time on that corner where Myongjae had slipped away into the night streets.

Translated from the Korean by Jeanette Rimmer