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Eel Stew

Eel Stew (La matelote d'anguilles).

So reads the title of the painting on the last page. And yet I've been sitting here for a long time, unable to bring myself to close the book—because just underneath that painting is written a recipe for eel stew. Rather uncharacteristic for a collection of art.

To make 4 servings of eel stew, you need: 1.2 kilograms of eel, 2 tablespoons of olive oil, 2 carrots, 2 onions, 2 thick stalks of green onions, 2 sticks of celery, 3 heads of garlic, 100 grams of butter, 1 bay leaf, a pinch of herbs...

The recipe has its own special title, “Jacqueline’s Stew Recipe,” and is said to have been taken from *Picasso’s Table*, published in 1996 by Albin Michel Publications.

It’s not that I have an uncanny interest in eel stew or anything. But *this* is “eel stew made by Jacqueline.” Jacqueline. Picasso’s last woman. The last woman to have belonged to that old artist who, granted, was a genius but was nevertheless a lecher who lived a ridiculously long time, past the age of 90. Maybe it’s the feeling that gets stirred up by the combination of the word “stew” and the concept of “last.” Throw in “eel” on top of that, and it’s just too much.

Eel stew. It’s a metaphor more suitable for life than bibimbap.¹ Because more than anything, what drifts towards you from *Eel Stew* is the smell of passing days.

So many women...Eva, Olga, Marie-Thérèse, Dora, Françoise, Jacqueline...

As I flip through Picasso’s art book, I come across a lot of portraits of such women, all of them loved by Picasso. Their images appear grotesque, their frontal views meshed with their profiles. He wanted us to see, wanted to show us parts invisible: the eye or even the breast of a woman that lie on the opposite side of our vision.

Crossing over the many paintings of disfigured women, *Eel Stew* is compiled on the very last page of that thick book. The arrangement is reminiscent of how the old artist lived—burning up most of his life with flames of passion and ending it with the quiet and subtle heat necessary to warm up a pot of stew. The thing to remember when you’re cooking eel stew, after all, is that the heat can’t be strong. It has to be the softest fire, peaceful and serene.

This is what the painting is like. Over the railing of a veranda lies a green background. In the foreground is a long brown table, and on top of it the ingredients for eel stew are arranged, ready to be used any minute now. A large onion sits on the left side of the table. In the center on top of a spread out sheet of newspaper, the black bodies of eels are riotously entangled with one another. To their right, someone has placed a woman’s coin purse. And in front of that lies one clumsy but sharp kitchen knife.

¹ Bibimbap is a Korean dish made of rice mixed with various vegetables and smothered in a spicy red pepper sauce.

The picture is almost viciously simple and flat. Plain enough to be called junk compared to the brilliance and grandeur of *Demoiselles d'Avignon* or *Geurnica*. Uncomplicated and companionless, painted by a 79-year-old artistic genius whose cubism took the world by storm. And attached to this picture is a dedication to a woman—as if Picasso painted it in his final years in offering to the last woman he loved.

“December 3rd, 1960, dedicated to the stew Jacqueline made for lunch. Bestowing this painting upon her, I can only hope she finds eternal happiness...”

For some reason, the painting makes me feel a little lonely. From it, I can sense the reverence he felt for everyday life, the deference he felt for his last woman...in the twilight of his existence. Perhaps life is neither brilliant nor grand but is instead something that gently boils down passion, like water boiling down a pack of ferocious, writhing eels... Lately, at least, that's what's been seeping into my mind. That I might be living like the bottom of a stew pot, enduring heat. That is, until the bell sound of a timer controlled by some god rings.

Then again, so what if the painting hadn't been of eel stew? Samgaetang.² Gomtang.³ Well, these are also things that gently boil along.

But then, the thought of a Woman floats to the surface. She who is quietly standing in the kitchen of a run-down apartment in the Parisian suburbs, where a misty rain drizzles down...

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There are three cockroach traps set up in the kitchen. Made of folded up pieces of paper, they look more like houses than traps. Passageways don all four sides of each edifice like huge windows, and cockroach food is sprinkled inside. On the surface, the houses seem like a pretty good deal, but one step inside, and there is no escape. A potent glue is spread across the bottom.

Outside, a light rain is falling as usual. For the Woman in the kitchen, the rain is what really brings home the fact that she is “here.” In a place where the humid air of the wet season tames her body the same way it would dampen a crisp piece of seaweed. Yes. After three months, she is home.

A few things have changed in her absence. The dust is thicker, and the cockroaches have multiplied. In the seven years she's lived here, there weren't any cockroaches until now.

Some things have increased, it is true. But there are also things that have decreased. Like her husband's weight. Their bank account.

The Woman peers inside the three cockroach traps like a building inspector. Half of the bugs scattered about are already dead and crusty. A grand total of about ten cockroaches have been caught today. She can tell which ones are new from the luster of their bodies—they still shine, like a pair of polished shoes fresh out of the warehouse. Those that have been dying for awhile grow slightly duller with each passing day. Unable to get anywhere near the food, they lay dying in front of the doors they came in. They frantically wriggled their bodies and antennae around with their three

² Samgaetang is a Korean soup in which a whole chicken is stuffed with rice, ginseng, and dates (red jujube) and boiled for a long time in water; the soup is considered extremely healthy and is traditionally eaten on the hottest days in summer to increase one's stamina.

³ Gomtang refers to any Korean soup that requires boiling on low heat over a long period of time.

pairs of legs stuck to the ground. Cockroach droppings decorated the floor like the black seeds of rose moss.

As she looks at the trap set next to the kitchen sink, her eyes suddenly freeze on a female cockroach standing dangerously near the food in the center. A long, milky pouch, slick and shiny, is in the process of poking its way through the roach's rear end. Her feet glued to the ground, she shakes her antennae and bottom about, helpless to do anything but lay her eggs on top of that sticky adhesive, even in the face of death. The sack of eggs slipping out of her looks warm.

The Woman's hand cautiously approaches. Her thumbnail hovering over the house, she smashes the roof down with one quick movement. The sound of the sack of eggs exploding with a delicate *pop!* is audible. Inside the trap, the ceiling briefly sticks to the floor and then peels itself away. The eggs have disappeared without trace, and in their place, a yellow liquid is spreading.

"What are you doing?" As her husband enters the kitchen, his eyebrows furrow in a scowl. "Are you looking inside those traps again? Don't you know how disgusting that is?"

Surprised, the crouched over Woman jumps back up.

Without taking her eyes off of the cockroach house, she begins to peel garlic. "I guess bugs don't realize that they're about to die. Even with their legs glued down, they keep bending and unbending them, shaking their antennae around... I mean, why use up so much unnecessary energy? What's the point? But for some reason, they just keep right on doing it, up until the day they die, those bugs."

"What else can they do?" her husband retorts. "Did you pick up the dates and the ginseng?"

The Woman gestures towards the cabinet with a nod of her head. Opening the cabinet, her husband picks out the largest ginseng root and a handful of dates and begins to rinse them under the tap. Afterwards, he pulls the chicken that the Woman has already rinsed closer to him. With its two legs perched tightly atop its breasts, the chicken strikes a rather obscene pose. He shoves dates into the opening of its anus. Later, as he stuffs it with the ginseng, he speaks.

"You know, there was a time when I couldn't eat chicken. When I was a kid, my mom used to catch the chickens we raised at home, but as I grew older, she started making me do it. She was so good at breaking their necks. In our family, my dad was always sick, and my mom was the strong one. The first time I went to catch a chicken, I couldn't bring myself to twist off its neck. So I stood there with a kitchen knife, shaking like crazy. With my eyes shut tight, I went to chop off its head. But this chicken starts screeching, so I completely freak out. The chicken is bleeding everywhere, and its head is dangling from its neck, but it still manages to escape from me, knocking over the laundry rack on its way. A white bed sheet falls to the ground, and the chicken drips blood all over it. My mom, who was boiling water for feather-plucking, starts screaming, "That bastard chicken!" After that, the chicken ran off somewhere. I couldn't find it no matter how hard I looked.

"Later, at dawn the next day, I woke up from a bad dream, and I could hear something that sounded like moaning..."

He stops in the middle of packing ginseng into the chicken's groin and lifts his head as if about to sneeze. His profile pales slightly.

Once the urge passes, he finishes his the rest of his story slowly. "Oh yeah, that chicken. The chicken I couldn't kill? Can you believe it was sitting right next to my head? Practically dead, and it

was still looking at me through half-closed eyes. Then, gradually, like curtains falling, its eyes slide shut, and it dies. Think about it. The small eyes of a chicken closing ever so slowly...”

“Are you serious?” the Woman gasps.

“I didn’t start eating chicken again until I went to the military. You know, because the military can change anything.”

“There probably aren’t any more boys who have to carry around that burden. You don’t have to kill chickens at home anymore, now that they sell them so well-prepared.”

“Yeah. Probably. Problem is, people who haven’t killed anything can’t love anything either. You get so used to dead chickens like this, and even if you began raising your own chickens now, you wouldn’t be able to feel any affection.”

There are times when her husband loses himself in his words. Even now, absorbed in his own wisdom, he distractedly murmurs the last two words dangling at the end of his story. He places the stuffed chicken inside a boiling pot of water.

Near the roach trap set next to the kitchen table, a plump, shiny cockroach loiters about. Like an uncertain housewife pacing restlessly after having left home, the roach is hesitating in front of one of the passageways. The Woman does her best to suppress an impatient desire to watch the little bastard crawl inside. Go inside... Go inside of that house where tempting food awaits you. Spread out your antennae to your heart’s content. Go inside...and after quivering around all the remaining days of your life, just die. What else can you do? Like the Pillar of Salt, your legs will be fused to the floor in penance for one moment’s indulgence into temptation. Scream with your antennae, and then die, slowly...

Powerless to seduce the cockroach, she simply follows its path with her eyes. But her thoughts seem to inadvertently register upon its antennae, because once reaching the trap’s passageway, it changes directions and scuttles away.

The Woman peers inside the roach house. “My God!” she cries out in a low voice, unable to believe her eyes. Like swarming sesame seeds! The eggs lain by a now dead mother-roach have hatched, and tiny baby roaches are in the midst of crawling out of the egg sack. Why didn’t she notice before that a roach had laid eggs on top of this table? How can it be that the crusty corpse of the long-dead mother remains glued to the floor while new life is emerging on its own out of this mass of eggs? How is it possible that this many baby roaches were born, spiting her efforts to crush every sack of eggs she sees? A chill runs down her spine. Oddly enough, the freshly hatched baby roaches are not sticking to the glue but are instead crawling over each other’s bodies, making their way out of the house.

“What is it? What the hell are you looking at!” In a sudden move, her husband flattens the cockroach house with the wide palm of his hand. Even in the face of such madness, the terrified babies scatter in all directions, looking for escape. The Woman suddenly senses an old feeling she once had for her husband quietly slipping back to her. A dim feeling but one that, somewhere along the way, she has long grown used to. Her desire to kill him.

“I didn’t know you loved cockroaches so much.” Practically spitting these words out at him, her lips curve in a smile.

“Not nearly as much as you do.” His eyes glitter at her cruelly. Lifting the hand he used to smash the roaches, he strokes the nape of her neck. She is certain that he feels a desire to kill her too.

Having placed the chicken in the stew pot, he lowers the stove to mid-heat and sets the timer for one hour. Then he takes the Woman to bed.

Laying her down, he laces his fingers through hers, raises her arms above her head, and begins to kiss her, starting with her right wrist. The smell of the garlic she peeled moments ago is probably pungent on her hands. It’s an old habit of his to signal the onset of foreplay with a kiss on that wrist. To the Woman, that moment of having her arms pinned over her head is one of complete surrender. She has always been rather compliant, actually. Like a submissive prisoner.

Her husband is now licking at her right wrist with his tongue. Strictly speaking, it’s not her wrist he’s licking. It’s the scar crawling across one of her purple veins like a knotty worm. He runs his tongue over every inch of that scar, as if it is a special erogenous zone belonging only to her, not found on any other woman. It isn’t until she grows pliant under his hands that his aggression begins to build. He wanders over various places on her body, gradually growing more and more forceful, until he arrives at his final destination—another one of her scars, this one trailing along her lower belly. Plunging deep inside of her, he finally explodes.

The scar on her lower belly was created long ago, when she was busy trying to extract a child from her womb. It looks like a piece of barbed wire. Neither the worm on her right wrist nor the barbed wire on her stomach has anything to do with her husband. They were on her body long before she met him.

That he makes love to her scars no longer offers her any solace nor stirs up any particular emotion in her. But she remembers the first time he placed his lips on them, remembers how hard she cried, though she’s not one to let herself drown in sentiment during sex.

She was twenty years old when she got those scars. From that age, she’d slept with many men, but the first one to warmly lick at her wounds without making her feel dirty was the man who would become her husband. She’d felt as if he’d healed her. He asked her no questions. Seemed to understand her wounds as much as a doctor who had often inspected them would.

After the first time they had sex, he said to her, “Baby, you... You are a woman...who can really love life, you know that?”

It wasn’t just because of those words, but she married him.

Once, though, as if the thought had just occurred to him, he asked her about it. It was on a clear summer afternoon. A time when they were still taking road trips together, without any particular destination in mind. They’d parked the car off the side of a small country road and were drinking beers on a café terrace. The Woman was nearly orgasming from the feeling of the sun’s fingertips running erotically over her bare skin.

That was when he asked her, rather curtly. “But why the right wrist? You’re not even left handed.”

Her previously closed eyes popped wide open. For a split second, she considered explaining. But then, in a bout of self-mockery, she immediately responded in a playful tone, “Good question. Hmm... I guess now that I think about it, what held me back until the last minute was that I couldn’t decide which hand should hold the knife. Funny, isn’t it? I wanted to play games with my life until

the moment I died. In the end, I decided to use my left hand. Figured, since I'm so right-handed, my right hand would be really strong, but my left hand wouldn't. Look how messy the scar is. If only I'd cut my left wrist, I could have finished it in one go... It would have been cleaner that way."

But for some reason, as the words left her mouth, she felt like a coward. Misery revisited her underneath that bright sunlight. If right then he had pressed her right wrist against his lips for awhile and looked into her eyes, things might have been different. But it was impossible to discern the expression hiding behind his sunglasses.

Anyone who looks closely enough will find that in life, there is always a moment when illusions shatter. Looking back, that moment for her happened during that trip.

When the two of them returned to the car, they picked the Etretat beach along the coast of Normandy as their destination. It was the closest beach to Paris, and they'd already been there twice to see its famous elephant-shaped sandstone cliff.

Once there, they left the waters behind and climbed to the top of the cliff. The cliff's steep trail opened up into a wide grassy meadow, and sitting on top of the grass was a small church. A cool sea breeze drifted refreshingly towards them. Below the cliffs, flying seagulls screeched loudly. It was just before sunset, and the ocean waters were glimmering like the cold, smooth surface of a black pearl. The left side of the trail broke off into a steep precipice. Some spots near the edge felt dangerous, the kind of dangerous that made her want to curl her toes. Warning signs were plastered everywhere.

Her husband stood right behind her. She thought, If he shoved me from behind, I would plunge straight down into the sea. Turning to look at him, she deliberately dramatized her fear of heights and made him switch places with her. But now that he was in front, she was suddenly horrified that she might feel the urge to push him off instead.

It was amazing how many tourists had braved the cliffs just to see the red glow of an ocean sunset. As soon as they reached a flat area, her husband settled himself down on the ground and pulled out a sketchbook. Leaving him to his work, the Woman climbed all the way to the top of the meadow and entered the small church. In this tiny stone cottage, so tiny it could hardly be called a church, spirits of the dead were enshrined. The names of the souls who'd lost their lives at Etretat beach were engraved inside. She took a quick look around and started to follow the other tourists out, but a chill on the back of her neck stopped her. Was it a draft unique to stone cottages? Or was it because darkness was falling upon this resting place for the dead?

Gathering her wits, she looked back. A Girl, shrouded in a white glow, was standing inside. Light spilled out of her enormous eyes. Her middle-aged French parents were trying to drag her out of the church by her sleeve. Even as her body twisted around, the Girl kept her eyes fixed on the Woman before her parents pulled her out.

When the Woman stepped outside after them, she was greeted by the magnificent hue of a purple sunset. From the path leading down the cliff, the Girl was still staring at her as if trying to bore holes into her with her eyes. Her hair, set ablaze by the setting sun, shone like gold.

But as the Woman got closer, it was apparent that the child was Asian. The light that had spilled out of her eyes so intensely in the church turned out to be tears swimming inside.

The old woman standing next to the Girl kept an arm wrapped around her as she spoke. “Hello. I am this child’s mother. Her name is Amélie, and she’s twelve years old. Excuse me for bothering you, but are you by chance Korean?”

The Woman said nothing in response.

“We adopted her from Korea, you see. We’re from a small village near Clermont-Ferrand, located in the mountain ranges. Hardly any Asian people. Forgive us if we are bothering you. It’s just that this is the first time in Amélie’s life that she’s seen an Asian woman or anyone who looks like her.”

As soon as Amélie’s tears plopped down her cheeks, new ones nestled themselves like spring water in her huge black eyes. Through her tears, she stared into the Woman’s eyes. Unable to endure looking at this Girl, whose gaze was full of a complexity and heaviness so unbecoming a child, the Woman turned around and walked down the path.

But that night, at a restaurant serving the village’s specialty seafood, she came face to face with the Girl again. She and her husband were eating a late dinner at a table by the window. She was patiently cutting into a lobster with her knife and using her fork to dig out its flesh when that same old French couple appeared with their child. The Girl no longer had tears in her eyes.

“Oh, goodness, you were here! We’ve been looking for you.” The mother addressed her happily, as if they were old acquaintances.

The Woman averted her eyes and lowered her head. This time, it was the father who asked, “You are Koreans, yes?”

“Yes...” her husband answered hesitantly.

The mother kept her eyes on the Woman and spoke kindly. “Please help us. We’re going to be here for about three days. If it’s not a big problem for you, we’ll even get a room at the same hotel you’re staying at, if you would just tell our daughter all about her native country, please. Just as long as you’re here. We’re willing to pay your hotel bill. She was adopted from Seoul twelve years ago. Her Korean name is Eunseong, and they tell us that it means ‘silver star.’ Pretty, isn’t it?”

Today, my heart almost broke when I caught a glimpse of the pain hidden within the heart of this small child. It shames me that we never prepared ourselves to handle the confusion that was bound to happen the minute she ran into the truth about her identity. If she wants it, we’d even like to find her Korean birth mother for her. That’s why we’re so happy to have met you. It feels like we can finally do something for our daughter. Would you mind waiting here for just a minute? My husband and I will return. We’re staying at the Grand Bleu Hotel next door. Amélie, you stay here for a second.”

And with that opening speech, they left.

Her husband pulled the Girl into the seat next to him. Though she was twelve years old, she was smaller than the average French child.

The Woman looked at her husband angrily. “Get up,” was all she said to him before leaving the table.

“What’s your problem?”

Clueless, he continued to sit at the table as she hurriedly paid off the check and didn't leave the restaurant until he realized that she was already in the car gunning the engine. When he got in the car, she drove roughly out of the parking lot. She wasn't going to look back, didn't want to. But the image of the Girl's round, yellow face flattened against the glass of the restaurant window pane appeared like the moon in the rearview mirror and followed her around. The car zoomed past Amélie's parents, who were busily hurrying back to the restaurant.

As she drove along the dark, secluded coastline, her husband didn't say a word. From somewhere, the smell of pine drifted inside. Was it coming from the pine trees? Or was it the smell of turpentine that always emanated from her oil painting husband's body? It made her thirsty. She pulled the car off to the side of the road. Then, suddenly, she crushed her husband to her in a tight embrace. Her body was trembling uncontrollably, and she longed to feel his arms wrap reassuringly around her, but no such thing happen. Instead, he climbed out of the car and slowly took a piss.

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I think about why she fled the city that night, that city of beaches famous for its elephant cliffs, as if she were being chased. And I think about why, years later when a misty rain was falling, she stood in the kitchen of a run-down apartment next to the Seine River and crushed that sack of cockroach eggs.

In life, small beads labeled "pastimes" and "memories" are scattered about. But perhaps it is not our allotment to be able to connect those beads together on a piece of string. Is such an ability only allotted to the gods? To fate? I consider this. The only thing I know for sure is that even as we wander aimlessly through the paths of this labyrinth we call life, all of us try to connect those beads in a perfect necklace, right up until we die. And yet as we do so, there are times when we overlook the most important bead, the one bead we wanted to string the most.

Right now, as the husband of that Woman presses his lips against the barbed wire-like scar running down her lower belly, she is well aware that he is about to enter her. She closes her eyes. Maybe her body is now a bug pinned down by her husband's penis. A cockroach stuck to the bottom of a trap, helpless to do anything but move around its antennae and limbs. Within that kind of body, various sensations would probably come together like electricity particles to create sparks on their own, and her soul might briefly vacate. To a space where time stops and places disappear. A vacuum. If I close my eyes, I can find her, still trapped in that space.

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In this city, there is a small zoo. And of course, as a zoo, it has a monkey pen. So in this pen, they say, there once lived a family of monkeys: a mother, a father, and four babies.

Like all zoo monkeys, they yawned lazily on nice, sunny days, basked in the sunlight, and affectionately picked the lice out of each other's fur. The parent monkeys were excellent imitators. At times, they would sit in front of zoo visitors, mimicking their movements. You could say they became mirrors. The baby monkeys too earned affection from the visitors by performing as many cute antics they could think of.

But one day, the she-monkey disappeared. Reportedly, the caretaker forgot to lock the cage after feeding the animals that night. It must have been near dawn when she went missing. A passerby was taking a walk around that time and reported seeing the dusky silhouette of a monkey near the river that intersects the city. But the idea was so extraordinary that he'd passed it off as some vagabond wandering the late night streets.

Perhaps the she-monkey had just gone out for minute to take a walk. Still, she has not yet returned to the pen. Nor is there anyone in the city claiming to have spotted her.

I remember the TV news the day she went missing. "It was dark," said the old caretaker, "and the monkeys have a habit of returning to their quarters and sleeping right after eating. I just forgot to lock their cage, is all, the door itself was innocently shut. It shouldn't have crossed the mind of anyone inside that pen that it was open... I mean, as long as a monkey doesn't deliberately get out of bed and try to open the door, it's not a big deal. But it's almost like she was waiting for her chance to escape. Even after she left, the pen was shut, just as it was before. When animals run away, there's usually evidence left behind. Like the door is left open, abandoned, or something... But the door was latched and shut...it was flawless. Looks like that monkey closed it after leaving the zoo. That's why we didn't find out about it right away."

It makes me wonder, where did the she-monkey go? Was she really trying to break-out? Did she think the wide-open prairies of her native Africa lay just outside of that cage? I don't know. She left to take a short journey, maybe.

But now, the monkey pen lock is more secure than ever. And, you know...sadly, they say monkeys can't open locked doors...

When the fog of daybreak thickens over the river, I stir in my sleep... visited by the phantom illusion of a restless she-monkey, pacing just outside of that locked monkey cage.

It might have been because of the smell of coffee...the Woman stirred from sleep to a moment's disorientation. She was in her house in France, she thought. In the outskirts of Paris, overlooking a branch of the Seine River. Where, as if heralding a new day full of secrets, the morning mist, wet with the scent of coffee, fell like a white veil. But as her head cleared, she knew she was facing a new morning in unfamiliar surroundings. This was definitely not her oldest brother's house, where she'd been staying up until now, either. There, the day always opened to the sound of steam spurting out of a rice-cooker like an angry steam-engine.

She narrowly opened her eyes. Through the slits of the venetian blinds, the blinding morning sunlight poured inside, bleaching the unadorned room and its cream colored walls and bed sheets. There was a Matisse reprint hanging on the wall. Black silhouettes of naked women were dancing together in a circle. And the mirror... in the mirror was her white, naked body.

She heard the sound of a man whistling outside. And the sound of chopping. A knife sliced lightly through a cucumber or some similar vegetable, its rhythm indicating time-honored skill. She got out of the bed. For a second, a wave of dizziness washed over her. A headache followed, and a vicious thirst choked her throat. That's when she remembered having drunk too much the night before. Ah, her staccato-like, selective memory. The memory of her body, dried out like a grave of

sand from too much alcohol. Like those hollow sand houses⁴ she'd made on the shores of the beach when she was young. A black hole in danger of crumbling. Had a man entered her empty, hollow body the way a hand would penetrate that sand house? And had she carelessly crumbled like a dry sand mummy? She looked for her clothes but couldn't find them. After lingering for awhile, she finally left the room naked.

A man stood with his back to her in front of a sink, a green apron wrapped around his naked body. He was completely absorbed in something. The muscles of his raised shoulders and bare butt cheeks, peeking out from under the firm knot of the apron string, were tightly clenched. She snickered at the sight of it.

"Oh, you're awake? I'm making a salad. I thought we'd go with French dressing." He was carefully pouring salad oil into a measuring spoon. Mixing it together in a glass bowl with vinegar, salt, and pepper, he stuck a finger inside and tasted it. As he sucked on his finger, she noticed his chin had darkened. Yesterday, he'd smelled of cologne, and his face had donned the slightly bluish tint of a man who'd just shaved. On this face, a black stubble had grown overnight. The impulse to run a hand across his scratchy chin stirred briefly in her. His chin was special. The tip of it was provocatively clefted like a peach seed.

"Where are my clothes?"

"Why, so you can put them back on? They're coming off again anyway. If we want to make up for years of not having sex, we've still got a long way to go." He grinned at her. She hadn't seen him in three years, but he hadn't changed much. He was still a bachelor. But he'd moved in to a larger apartment, and a decent amount of gray hairs were now visible around his head.

"Do you know you drank way too much last night? Do you remember? Damn, I think I'm going to have to move out. I'm too embarrassed to stay in this neighborhood. You were shrieking and blubbering so loud, 'You bastard! You beast!' You don't remember? You've changed a lot, you know. You're pretty violent now. Look at how you scratched me up with your nails like some animal. It stings."

With his finger, he pointed out the scratches on the back of his neck. He looked like he was rather enjoying the memory. A few red lines were dizzily etched across his skin. As she stared, a vivid image suddenly floated up in her mind. Was it an illusion, perhaps? In this image, the lights were off, but it wasn't dark. Maybe it was the moonlight, maybe it was the streetlight. She got the feeling that he'd molested her after she'd passed out. To a woman that drunk, last night's sex couldn't have been anything more than something physical. A pathetic assault on a paralyzed body. Sex with him had been violent. Violent. Ah, she remembered now—that every time they had sex, she would think about him tightly grasping her by the throat, using the space between his thumb and forefinger.

Even as she'd writhed last night, she'd opened her eyes at one point and recoiled in shock. Hanging on the wall had been the shadow of steel prison bars. An unyielding jail cell. Inside of it, the shadows of two frenzied beasts. One of the white walls had turned into a projection screen on

⁴ The actual word used for "sand house" is "dookkobijip," literally "toad house." In Korea, children often build dookkobijips on the beach by burying their hand in sand, packing it tightly, and slowly pulling their hand out, leaving behind a hollow sand house.

which the light from a streetlamp shone through the half-opened venetian blinds. The prison created by the light and dark contrast was cast over them like an impenetrable cage for two animals. The shadow of the blinds majestically imprisoned them. They were animals in a pen. She felt like a chimpanzee or an orangutan. With cold indifference, she faced the wall and watched the image of the two animals writhing, driving each other to madness, the way she would watch a shadow puppet show. After awhile, she turned her head in the opposite direction and saw a mirror. Like the surface of a dark water well, it reflected them so clearly, without bias. It hadn't seemed such an inhumane a scene. Trusting that the mirror spoke the truth, she'd fallen asleep.

Yesterday had been the first time she'd called the man's cell phone in three years. It had been five months since she'd sent him that letter, the one where she'd written the story about the zoo in the country she'd lived in before. Taking out her weathered pocketbook, she went as far as to dial the ten digits of that nameless phone number before hesitating.

This particular man had said something to her. Had said it fifteen years ago, ten years ago, eight years ago, five years ago, and again three years ago.

"Whenever you want to come, come. Because I'm always open. No, not even that—I don't have a door at all. I'm pavilion standing in the wild. Sure, a lot of people in this world want to make houses with doors and lock them shut with keys. But if you ever want somewhere just to nest, like some evening bird, you can always rest your wings on the ledges of my pavilion."

Perhaps that was the reason. No other man on this planet had ever said anything like that to her. True, every time she'd come to Korea and met up with him, she'd always been exhausted like a bird at sunset. And after she'd hung around under his roof for just one sweet day or so, she'd always left.

But this time, she'd been scared to call him. Because now, she had no place to go. Because to her, he was a home she rested in only in order to return to some place else.

A few days ago, she'd received a letter from her husband. It had been 58 days since she'd left home. This was possibly his last letter.

"By chance, I was looking in your closet, when it hit me. You said you'd only be gone for a month, but not only did you taken your winter clothes, you went and took every stitch of your summer clothes too. Whether you want to lengthen your journey or whatnot is up to you. And if you don't want to return, there's nothing I can do about that either—because you are a free woman. But when I think about the fact that you didn't say anything this entire time, that always, by yourself, you were vigilantly looking for a chance to escape, I can't stand it. I, at least, think that we should have made an effort to communicate with each other.

If that's not something you want to do, I can't do anything about it. As I am now, all I want is for you to finish your journey quickly. For the moment, I will leave a backdoor open for you in my heart. But keep in mind—I don't have the slightest desire to wait for you without some kind of promise.

It's a February afternoon, helpless against a carelessly falling rain."

She'd pressed the letter to the edge of her nose and sniffed. The faint smell of rain seemed to emanate from it. She thought about that Parisian drizzle, so thin that she could never decide whether to keep her umbrella open or shut. When that kind of rain fell on her, there was no longer

any choice. The last line of her husband's letter came to mind. *It's a February afternoon, helpless against a falling rain...* She was too far away from that place, she thought, and had been dragged to a different place without her knowing it by the gravitational force of someone else's magnetism.

She had always been just on the verge of something, and her husband had been the one who'd been helpless. If she was a bird, always wavering over whether or not to fly away, then he was part of that foreign land, like a horse chestnut tree in a garden. Her husband never tired of painting and believed he would live in France forever doing just that. Yet his paintings didn't sell. To her, it seemed that he'd forgotten the basic sense of responsibility most men in the world felt as the heads of the household.

So that was how, with the help of an acquaintance's referral, she'd ended up working at a shopping center in Paris, in a corner specializing in products for Korean men. Mostly she sold them cologne, neckties, and wallets. But sometimes men would come to the store, wet with ennui, looking to buy her as well.

A little later, when an economic crisis hit abroad, the seed from Korean tourists dried up, and the Woman was promptly fired. A vast emptiness looming ahead of her, she took long drives on rainy nights in her '88 Peugeot 205 around the Vincennes and the Boulogne Woods. Often called the lungs of Paris, the two forests were situated on opposite sides of the city, one on the east and one on the west. Their atmospheres during the afternoon changed completely at night. The civilians who had been sipping tea under the clear sunlight or walking their dogs in the afternoon all disappeared at nightfall. The forest would turn gloomy, like the black cavities that show up in the X-rays of a tuberculosis patient. Drag queens and "night flowers," prostitutes, would start to spring out like poisonous mushrooms in the dark. Men who had slowly driven their way to the place where the Woman had parked the car would ask her, "*Combien?* (How much?)"

One day, after a verbal spat, she stopped allowing her husband to enter her. Unable to put up with it any longer, he told her that marriage was a sex contract and accused her of breaching it. She looked at him for a long time before she spat out, "A contract? And when have you ever paid me just compensation for my services!"

At this, he'd let out a shaky breath. "You filthy whore!" Looking ready to explode, he stormed out of the house. The Woman kept her torn night gown on and stayed up all night staring out of the window. Eventually, the morning fog cleared up, showing clearly the long, dark branch of the Seine River that twisted its way around their apartment. It was just like a black stocking that a whore had tossed off. She remembered making this comparison about the river to her husband at some point. She'd thought, *It's more like my life is the whore's black stocking.* And suddenly, her had body tingled and stung with loneliness.

Yesterday was extremely cold, even for late winter weather. She'd rung the man up, and though it had been late into the workday, he'd told her he would be right there. When he showed up with his car, he asked her, "So where should we go?"

"Take me to the ocean," she answered.

It was a cold day, but the sky was overwhelmingly blue, and the sunlight was clear and bright. On this languid afternoon, when the shadows of tree trunks were lying across the building walls, the Woman was tempted to gently lean her head against the man's right shoulder and fall asleep. He was

in the middle of driving. But perhaps he was reading her mind. Pulling her left hand to him, he placed it on his right knee and stroked it back and forth with his own. Occasionally, his hand would leave hers in order to change gears.

By the time she opened her eyes from a catnap, the sky had already been splashed the color of peach.

“Traffic was way too bad coming out of the city. The ocean was too far, so I came here on the freeway instead. Take a look at the winter river. The water glowing red from sunset—it’s a fantastic sight, isn’t it? Let’s just take a drive and look at the river. Since you’re leaving right away, right? We don’t have much time. Let’s not waste the time we have driving all the way to the ocean.”

She looked past his profile and saw the Imjin River stretching past behind the car window. The river wrapped itself around the wind-rustled reed patches and drowned under the sunset. As the man drove past this setting, his face was hard like a statue. So this was the man? The man who’d spread out his arms and become the eaves that had offered her shelter? His house, a desolate pavilion. A shelter that, having no walls and no doors, merely stood alone, as empty as the wind.

She’d met him and fallen in love with him when she was twenty, and since then, all she’d wanted was for him to take her in. She thought, If I’m to be imprisoned, I want it to be by this man. Perhaps that was why she’d gotten pregnant behind his back. Without his knowing, she’d given birth to his child. But this man was not someone who could build her a house that would shut out the wind. As young she was, she’d known that much. She also knew that she would never really be able to escape him.

In the end, under her parents’ orders, she’d put the baby up for adoption, and sent it to a far off place, where the sky would be different. It was a week after the baby was born. After careful consideration, she’d been on the verge of naming it “Nuri.” The baby left the Woman unnamed, leaving her with nothing. And so she’d ended up with only the dim memory of her child’s first movements deep inside of her and the faint traces it had left behind while climbing out of her lower belly.

Bringing her out of her reverie, the man asked her, “What do you think about at twilight?”

She sighed in response.

“As soon as twilight set in,” he said, “my mother would hover around the front door of my older brother’s house, demanding that he let her have her shoes so that she could leave. She died last year though. Suffered for about five years from dementia. Because of her, my brother installed a lot of security systems, and at every sunset, she would jerk at the door, rattling at the locks and stamping her feet. There were times when she took advantage of how old and shabby the security system had become and actually escaped. Every time she left, we thought about how much she’d wanted to return to her birthplace, the same neighborhood she’d lived in her whole life with my father. But instead, she kept insisting that she had to get to Solmijae before sunset, some place none of us had ever heard of. So whenever the sun went down, she’d jump up and down on her feet and throw a tantrum like a child. I didn’t find out where this Solmijae my mother had babbled about was until she died. When my aunt and brother called upon me to offer their condolences, I happened to hear them mention the place during their conversation. My aunt clucked her tongue for a long time, muttering, ‘Oh Lord, why didn’t she just let her soul fade in peace? It would have been best for her

to have taken it to her grave.’ So this was what she told me, out of obligation. Before my mother married my father, she fell in love with a man who lived across the river in a town called Solmijae. I’m not exactly sure why, but he lived in a coal furnace deep in the mountains. Two nights before her wedding to my dad, she showed my aunt a train ticket in secret. But the next day, a typhoon hit, and the river swelled up from the pouring rain. Running off with her lover from Solmijae, getting to the train station—it was all a hopeless case. The flood trapped her inside of her native village.

“Nowadays, I’ve been pondering over it—where ‘home’ was in my mother’s heart.... Sad story, huh?”

The Woman thought she’d like to get blistering drunk right about now.

She asked him, “So if you ever found your shoes at twilight, where do you think you’d go?”

“I’d just give up. Because I have too many places to go...” Turning his head, he looked at her. For a moment, her gaze wavered under his. He gradually slowed the car’s speed and pulled over to the side of the road. Towards the west, the sky was still awash with the sun’s intoxicating glow, but darkness had quietly started to fall all around them. The man turned towards her. Burying his left hand in her hair, he suddenly crushed his mouth to hers. The kiss was hot and passionate. He folded her seat back in one quick move, and her legs jerked up and down in response. As he mounted her body, she heard the seam of her tight two-piece suit ripping. Other cars on the road blinked their signal lights and drove past them.

A little later, he pulled himself off of her, her lipstick smeared all over his face. He looked like a cosmetically-impaired clown. Biting down on a cigarette, he mumbled through his teeth, “People who leave don’t understand.” What it was that they didn’t understand was impossible to tell, but he puffed on his cigarette angrily.

Was he complaining? she thought. It was so unlike him. Perhaps he was growing lonely with age. He’d never said anything to her before about her staying or going. Were such constraints not the very reason so many women lost their men? The thought occasionally crossed her mind. This man never tried to confine any of his women to him, arguing that such behavior was exactly what made them leave.

In place of the lipstick she’d spread across his face, his cologne had smothered itself all over the back of her neck. From her years of working in the men’s department at the Parisian shopping center, she’d recognized the scent as Chanel’s “Egoist.”

She considered the idea of him being an egoist. He preferred solitude by nature. A man who didn’t like to suffocate or break in his women. Such men always exuded a savage hunger. And it was that very hunger that ignited sparks of passion in the bodies of women everywhere.

Back to the morning after. After taking a shower in the man’s bathroom and wrapping his white bathrobe around herself, she opened one of his cabinets to discover three or four pairs of lady’s underwear neatly folded inside. There were also a contact lens case and a bottle of perfume.

Freshly washed, she ate breakfast with him. The smell and taste of the coffee was exquisite, the bread had been toasted to perfection, and the eggs had been fried flawlessly. The dressing was spread evenly throughout the salad, which had been tossed just enough to keep the vegetables fresh.

“Oh yeah. You should have used the beauty wash I left in the tub. And if you want, you can wear the extra panties I have in there. I washed them and boiled them until they were disinfected.”

“Whose are they? You have a woman living with you now?”

“No, I didn’t feel like tossing them out, so I just kept them.”

“How very like you.”

“Oh, speaking of which, your handkerchief and some of your hairpins are in a drawer somewhere. You left them here five years ago.”

“And did you ever lend those to another woman?”

“Yeah, up until awhile ago, a woman named Haegyung used your hairpins sometimes while she was here. I almost married her, but...”

“So all of that stuff in there belongs to Haegyung?”

“Nope. It’s a big mix.”

She laughed out loud as she munched on the salad. “So why didn’t you marry her?”

“She lived with me for three months or so, but—wouldn’t you know it—she ran off. Best sex I ever had too. Her technique was so adventurous, she was a real *avant garde* in bed. I still think about her a lot.”

“Well, someday, she’ll probably come over to rest under the shade of your pavilion roof.”

“Probably.” He let out a gloomy laugh. He turned around and started to clear away the salad plates and coffee mugs. But almost immediately, he dropped what he was doing, lifted the Woman into the air, and sat her down on the table. He buried his face in her knees. “I thought about you sometimes. Wondered if you’d drop by sooner or later. You can’t know how much it breaks my heart every time you appear like a hurricane and whirl out of here just as quickly. Every time I hold you, I think of it as the last time. But even so, life goes on, and I can’t help waiting for you. Sometimes, I even think, Wouldn’t it be great if I went looking for her? But it’s all useless. I guess I’m getting old. I’m not like how I was before, I get lonely a lot these days. But I love the way we are now. How we love each other with our entire bodies just so we can leave each other.”

When his scratchy, warm chin grazed against her thighs, she took him by his head and laid him on top of her across the small table. Her shoulders touched the table’s edge, and her head fell backwards over it. With her long hair brushing against the floor, she hung upside down like a weeping willow as she stared at the view outside of the window. The sky shook nervously like the inside of an aquarium, and when the light bulbs on the ceiling seemed on the verge of crashing down on her, she closed her eyes. The man would spend the entire day with her like this. And she would once again think of her body as a hollow sand house. And she would crumble as he clawed at the inside of that house with his hand, digging the hole under it deeper, widening the emptiness until it fell apart. His hand would hollow her out like a rake without abandon, she would shatter into pieces. And he would fall out of her in the end, his hunger deepening. That was how it always was.

A relationship without commitment. What kind of love was this? The woman never asked the man this question. And he never once told her that he loved her. At some point, she had also stopped believing herself in love with him. Nonetheless, she always came looking for him every two or three years. An addiction, perhaps. An emptiness. Maybe it was something that waned when the moon grew full, a physical necessity like a menstrual cycle, an instinctive impulse. When she lost her mind with age and started waiting for death, she would probably look for her shoes at twilight too and wander about, calling his name.

She took him all the way inside of her body to empty herself out just a little more. Her eyes still closed, she desperately gripped the legs of the table with both hands as if hanging upside down from monkey bars. Then, a thin melody started playing from somewhere. The squeaking sound of the table's legs came to stop, and the man pulled himself off. He moved his body into the living room, and she heard him pick up the cell phone lying on the coffee table in front of the sofa. A young woman's voice leaked out of the phone and vibrated throughout the cavernous apartment.

The Woman opened her eyes. The sunlight is fabulous, she whispered to herself. In the living room, where the sun's rays poured in easily, the man stood under the wall clock hanging next to the window. Maybe it was because the clock was upside down, but she couldn't tell right away what time it was. Without a word, he swept his sweaty hair away from his forehead with his right hand. A drop of sweat bounced off of his hair and seemed to reflect the sunlight for a brief second. He glanced up at the clock. The sun brought out the beautiful lines of his nude body, drenched in sweat.

"Yeah, okay. Today's no good. Look, I'll call you later. No, I told you, I'm not at home right now."

Just when her neck was beginning to hurt unbearably, he sat lightly on the table and lifted her by the neck as he pulled her into his lap. Twirling her long hair around his finger, he sucked on her lips. "Don't worry about it. I get bored real easily with women who just want to have power over their cheating husbands. You do that to your husband too?"

In response, she reached out her hand and stroked his chin. She began to scratch at the cleft with her thumbnail. He shook his head in annoyance.

"You don't know how hard it is to be alone. These days, I want to get married too. There are so many times when I get so lonely that my back feels ice-cold. Sometimes I think, man, even without a wife, I'd at least like to have a kid, you know? The warmth of having a child...well, when you get old, you start yearning for things like that."

Was it that he was growing old? All fathers in this world were fools, she thought. Her heart reached out to him. She remembered the eyes of the girl she'd met at Etretat so many years before. How would his expression change if she told him his child was growing into a woman in some country in Europe right about now?

Again, the Woman's head hung over the table, and its legs began to squeak fervently. The sugar bowl that they'd failed to clear off beforehand rattled loudly, then fell to the floor and smashed into pieces. Her hair shook like seaweed riding an angry river current.

Out of her closed eyes, a tear escaped and flowed its way towards her eyebrow.

*

After sex, she examines her husband, who's just fallen asleep. Sweat glistens on his forehead. She wipes it away with her hand and pushes it into his hair. She looks at the lines on his forehead, which have deepened without her noticing. As she sweeps the front of his hair aside, she stares at the white hairs scattered about. In the twilight of his own existence, would this man also find the beads he lost

along the way, put on his shoes and wander about aimlessly? Compassion suddenly boils up in her chest.

When the time for passion ends, what is left behind? As long days pass, deep wounds created in a single instant leave behind scars. During the days she would spend with her husband, he would lick at her scars, and even if that isn't love, perhaps it's still all right. Isn't it possible for her to just consider it a loving habit, his way of enduring, his loyalty to her? Life is something that persists, after all. Like a string looped through beads. A string that persistently weaves love and hate throughout each and every day.

Her husband wanted to cook samgaetang for her, the Woman who had returned home.

*

I am looking at that Woman right now. She is leaning her upper body against the kitchen window facing the river. With the window open, she is smoking a cigarette. As smoke spurts out of her, her bare shoulders move up and down. Though her cheeks are flushed, she looks serene.

Some indistinct form of moisture, be it rain or fog, is hovering over the river. From a distance, on a rainy day like this, she will seem quite cozy inside of her house. The sound of the samgaetang rattling in the kitchen will be drowned out by the sound of the rain. Like her muffled sobs, the pulse of her husband's heartbeat, asleep after a bout of rough sex, will boil gently. As the samgaetang boils, she lets herself drown in peace. Shoving everything that makes her heart throb into a stew pot and letting it cook slowly. Getting used to peace rather than passion or the desire to kill. These might be signs of forgiveness.

Yes. She is home.

The bell sound of a timer rings. (FINIS)

Translated from the Korean by RIM Na-eun
