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A fragment

How do dogs laugh?

1.

"Hey, you!....what?.....What did you say?.....How could you say that? You bastard!.....villain, bad egg, you swindler! Don't ever, ever go away! I'll be right back with some change."

It seemed she ran out of coins. With the last flippant shout, the woman rushed toward a bus commuter ticket stand nearby. The scene happened in the telephone booth right next to the bus stop. Everybody watched her, speaking amongst themselves and pointing at her discreetly.....I felt both frustrated and ashamed as a woman to see her same nasty conduct every morning without knowing that she was made fun of by others. Today my bus, No. 132, happened to be late. However, today fortunately, there were many people around, including some girls. When there were only two women, she and I, with all men waiting for their buses, I felt as if all of the men were staring at me, not at her.

Belonging to the same sex, what do you think about her behavior? - the insidious gazes of the men seemed to stick on my body and ask me. It was disgusting.....

"Honey, why are you doing this to me? How can I live without you?...No, please, come see me once again.....Please, just one more time!"

This time, it was different.....The tone of her voice and the message, all were entirely different, though her loud voice was the same. Intentionally I tried to not listen to her voice; but it was so loud and yelling.

The first time I saw her, I thought she was a collector pestering a debtor with phone calls. I didn't know why her mood changed so fast, now like boiling red-bean porridge soup now playing the coquette, now getting mad. Her strong, irritably reproaching voice, her disgusting features, boiling with rage, the vinyl apron on revealing that she sells fish--all these made her look like a creditor who has been cheated. It was not long before I knew she sells fish in the shop of my apartment complex. I don't know why but they called her 'Suncheon-daek' [note: a married woman coming from Suncheon].

After watching her talk on the phone several times, I came to realize that she was insane. She had habits deviant from the norm.

Whenever she called, she only slipped in one coin; when she got cut off, she stupidly tried all the process from the beginning again. Moreover, as she dialed again, her message took turns to change-- like today. Throwing tantrums and then playing the coquette to make the listeners around blush - so, after spending all the change she brought, her talk on the phone ended for the morning. She always left the message that she would call again in the evening. Strangely, she always used the busiest booth in the most crowded bus stop. When it was occupied, she stood in line. In most cases, when the woman, Suncheon-daek appeared, nobody dared to use the phone booth.

But usually, the woman wasn't like that. She was a little tough, as most merchant women are, but she was an ordinary woman. When she called someone in the mornings and evenings, she made such a scene.

Gradually, there were more and more at the bus stop. Although avoiding normal commuting time, I couldn't help avoid people at the bus stop at just any time of the day.

"Hey, you fucking fellow! Are you making excuses after screwing around with me? You dog, bitch, damn bastard! Damn it, break your dick while fucking!"

All of a sudden, her hysterical voice burst sharply out of the telephone booth. Everyone stared at her. The words were too abusive to be spoken in public. Again, the lewd laughing gaze of men was directed straight at her. On the other hand, all women blushed. The scene was embarrassing and shameful. Why isn't my bus coming?.....No, if I hadn't fought with my husband last night and gotten up early I wouldn't have had to come across her.....All the women who happened to be her had to suffer being insulted because they were the same sex as the woman. Is it our destiny to be slighted for no any particular reason?

I would often think that she was paying back for old wounds by talking on the phone. I wonder whether she dials numbers that have actually have a recipient. Who would answer those sorts of calls every time? Anyone would hang up in a minute.

However, it seemed obvious that someone was answering her. Otherwise, such natural acting would not have been possible. If all that laughing, crying and getting mad in turn was only play-acting, the woman could not be insane. She was bombarding the telephone with abuses, without caring about the others sneering at her.

As is commonly said, this is the privilege of the insane.....They needn't mind others. Whenever I came across her, I felt the bruise in my heart begin to sting.

Cigarette tar permeating every corner of the room assailed my nostrils.....The permanent stench!

It is so strange. When the shop was filled with patrons smoking one after another, the room was a bit smoky but not so stinky. When the people left, cigarette tar remained. People leaving traces behind.....Moreover, leaving bad odors.....Like dogs dripping and leaking here and there to mark their territory.....Every morning the stale urine smell of tar left in the shop nauseated me.

I turned on the fan, checked the coffee and the creamer, the various kinds of juice, milk and Korean tea-bags. Leaving other chores for my attendant Miss Lee who will come soon, I took my seat in the corner, near the entrance. Only in this seat did I feel comfortable.

Dogs do laugh.

When I say dogs laugh, it may sound a joke, like I'd say dogs yawn; but dogs do laugh. If you don't buy that as general experience, I will claim this is my personal experience.

I saw a dog that laughed, and I loved him.

We tend to believe that only human beings' faces have muscles to smile with; we consider the description 'the dog wagging its tail' more proper than 'the dog's smile.' However, as I said before, dogs laugh just like men do.

I met the dog first when I was in third grade. One day in early spring, my father brought home a puppy. It was me who discovered that the dog could smile. As time passed, we became familiar with each other and the puppy seemed to get over its separation anxiety. Then one day, when I came home from school, it smiled at me instead of barking!

It was an amazing discovery. That dogs should smile like human beings.....

My family wouldn't believe my word, but after a while they couldn't help admitting the fact. The dog grinned tenderly at all members of my family, making lines appear around its muzzle. They say that among facial expressions, smiling is the most difficult one. When we make our face smile, hundred or more muscles must move simultaneously. I know many people who gave up smiling because they don't want to bother working the complicated muscles. Now, my dog smiled. Naturally, my smiling dog also

knew how to make an embarrassed and an angry face. But most particularly, it could grin and it could burst into laughter.

After that, I thought the dog was barely different from men except that it couldn't speak men's language.

"Madame! You came early. What are you doing? Are you writing a story again?"

Surprised by a sudden voice of man while reading the story I wrote yesterday, I hurriedly raked in the manuscript.

"Darnit, are you a stray cat or something? You scared me!"

"I saw you were open, and waved. You were so deep in your writing."

It was Miss Lee. Raking up the papers and looking up at her, I frowned.

"Hey, look at your appearance! It's getting cold and....."

"What? You mean the shorts? Nowadays, everyone's dressed like that."

Miss Lee, in shorts which completely bared her thighs, pouted. She tried for tricks that were cure, but her pouts provoked my temper.

"My husband may drop by. You'll get a dressing-down from him for your pouting and your borderline shorts."

"Is he coming today? Didn't the school begin?"

"He has no class today."

"I'll get into trouble. What should I do?"

My warning worked. Right away, miss Lee became embarrassed. She had more scruples in front of my husband than me.

"Don't panic. Didn't you bring any other clothes? You should change."

"Anyway.....He is so picky! How can he teach college? College women are far more liberal in their clothes."

"Don't you worry about that. They can't take his class. He expels those in miniskirts right away."

"Do they accept that? Wake up, they don't have any respect for a part-time lecturer. They don't even honor their teachers any more. 'Don't dare to tread on the shadow of your mentor'--that belongs to the good old days. Teacher' authority has plummeted to the earth already!"

"Well. That's enough."

That's her way of talking. If I allow that, how can she go on like that in front of me? I stopped there, afraid of becoming more frustrated

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Around noontime, customers appeared one after another. The first visitor was Mr. Lee, the photographer; then came Mr. Kim, the graduate student; after that came Mr. Song. He was said to be an artist but he never appeared to have had an exhibition. In the mornings he made frequent visit to my shop, in the evenings to the bar next door. I wonder when he painted. They were the frequent visitors to my coffee shop "Yisang" who usually dropped around this time since I started to run it several years ago. Soon the reporter Kwon would come to see Mr. Kim, and some rakes of Song's friends would appear. All of them made a set of properties of "Yisang." It was a familiar and comfortable scene for me....."Yisang" was no more "Yisang" without them. Miss Lee could manage to serve them all by herself. I returned to my pile of manuscripts.

The dog might have been destined to be born as a man, but due to some miscalculation it was born as a dog.

A dog is said to resemble its master, from its appearance to its characteristics. However, our dog--by the way, it was called by the name common for dogs, that is, 'Happy', but I don't like that name so I called it 'youngjun'--was different. He had some character.

He had what you might call dignity. He never roamed around shit like ordinary stray mongrels. He never ran after bitches. He ate regularly, when we did. He frowned and refused to eat if his bowl was filthy. His sleeping place had to be clean. The only thing lacking was that he was not a pedigree. However, the facts stood out. To excel in the crowd, escape from his common lot! My mother hated him for not knowing his own identity.....

Looking back when I was nine, Youngjun was younger than a one-year-old human boy. He was more like adult. After learning the way of our village, he walked with slow and stately steps like my father taking a walk around the village with his hands in his back.

The time has come to say a few words about my father. I may sound like an adolescent girl but I have never seen a man better than my father. As I am a married woman, someone would ask me to compare him with my husband. In that case, I might hesitate for a moment, but still my answer would be that my father is the most wonderful of men.

I don't remember my father having a job to make enough money.....When I was young, after much thought I concluded that my father should be

properly called a 'poet'. He was not a man who wrote poems. He enjoyed literature, however, and he told me more beautiful stories than any other poems that I have read.

Before I was born, my father had worked as a correspondent in a newspaper and had taught for a while. Since my childhood, he never had any job. I have never been told the story of why he quit his jobs. I only guessed that he must have been wrongly implicated in a bribery case prominent at that time. I remember that sometimes the county office sent a page boy to collect his articles. He also wrote for the county newsletters, and promotion letters as well.

Actually, it was my mother who earned living for my family. She was a tough woman who worked furiously to make money. Thanks to her diligence, we didn't have to worry about poverty. She ran a shoe store in the marketplace and earned a lot. Afterwards, she opened a selling agency for the electronics. We were the first to wear rubber shoes and enjoy watching television in the neighborhood. Strictly speaking, it was my mother's hard work that raised me and my siblings. However, when I look back, I am inclined to think that it was my father's innate virtue that enabled him to meet a hardworking wife like my mother.

In short, my father was a man who cherished everything that resounds from the word 'father.'

Sometimes people are inclined to obey unexpected impulse, and I was a point in case. I don't know why I wanted to write. I tried to write a novel, but it just looked like an essay or some scribble. Anyway, when I reviewed my self-intoxicated memories of my father, I was reminded that I might have inherited his blood, or his taste for literature.

When I chose my spouse, my father's influence must have made an impression. He too wanted to write, and taught as well. When my husband wanted to quit his teaching job at high school and apply for a doctoral degree in University, I willingly agreed.

For a year, we could manage to live on his retirement, and some money that his family sent. That didn't last long. I felt the economic crisis impending. He drank and grumbled that he should seek a teaching job again. Then I announced I would make money. I started to run a coffee shop without any business experience. Under all of these changes there must have the underlying respect for my father.

But my husband was not like my father. He was blunt, demanding, stubborn and forceful, which was the other side of his complex. My father didn't lead an ordinary life but he never revealed his complexes. My husband was different.

The coffee shop became crowded.....Now it was the time to come out of serenity and peace, and blend into the noisy routines.

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The painter Song came toward me. Aren't you tired, he asked. No, I'm all right, my guests are respectable, as you know. I said, with smile. By the way, how's your husband, how's he getting along.....He should get a job teaching college as soon as possible.

Mind your own business, I wanted to shout in his face, but I smiled. When did he get his degree? A year before last winter. Then it has been three years, already? Yes!.....

"Is he drinking as usual?"

"....."

"I happened to see your husband the other day, and he was drinking like fish....."

Happened to see? What a joke. The world knows you and my husband would indulge in drinking every night.....

Ring-! Ring-!

Opportunely, the bell rang. I hurried to pick up the phone.

"Yisang coffee shop."

"Mom?"

It was my elder daughter and she was almost crying.

"What happened?"

"Well, it's dad....."

"I see, I'm coming right away!"

"Come quickly."

"Is he drunk, again?"

"Yes, mom."

As I hung up and stood up, suddenly I felt dizzy. My husband's red drunken face, yelling at kids, and their white faces trembling with fear--they shimmered in my eyes folded in yellow light.

[...]

Translation from the Korean by