

## Abstract

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When Heaven Falls and Other Stories

Mark Lee Keats, Master of Fine Arts, 2007

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When Heaven Falls and Other Stories deals primarily with the theme of identity and how one transcends the barriers of two cultures to accept themselves; conflicts between immigrant parents and their children born in America; and illegal border crossing in Northern China. South Korea is a major component in all of the stories. Some stories incorporate factual information, but all of the stories are fictional.

When Heaven Falls and Other Stories

by

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*For my mother,  
both here and there...*

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## The Waiting Room

It was Monday morning in February. And with it came the usual blistery cold. It cut into the people who dare walk on the sidewalk and those waiting for the bus. Further along it blew into businesses, some old, but most recent additions to the decaying neighborhood where the doctor's office stood. The building itself was very old. And inside was no indication that it would last another generation. They took the elevator up and slowly managed down a poorly lit hallway to 110.

The room was small and square and didn't deviate from what rooms typically were. A woman and her daughter were seated near another door which most likely led to the doctor's inner office. There were two pictures on the wall. One, which was above the woman and her daughter, was of a docked boat with the sun receding in the background. It appeared to be evening though it could very well have been morning. The other was a landscape void of any town or movement but provided an absence, a peaceful sense. Perhaps the absence of people in the paintings had been the doctor's idea so that the patients could place themselves there.

Jin-chul Moon, the eldest son of three boys, was sitting next to his father who wore an old brown flannel shirt and dark red cardigan with dark brown or ruby buttons and fading corduroy pants. His skin was heavily wrinkled and spotted, and his teeth, though straight, were stained, leaving a yellowish hue. Jin thought of candy corn when he saw his father yawn. And he was reminded of how he hated that kind of candy when he was a child.

Jin's father smelled of smoke and his hair was sticking up on the left side revealing the nature of his sleep. Jin, dressed in gray wool slacks, a blue dress shirt, black dress shoes, and a long black winter coat, thought his father could have at least combed it or put on his old baseball cap, the one from his college days. But he had not done either.

"It's kind of cold these days, huh?" Jin asked his father in Korean.

His father nodded.

"So, is it serious?"

His father mumbled before sounding like he wanted to spit. "Shouldn't be. It's awhile though—since I was here."

It had been almost six months since Jin had spoken to his father. At that time, he had dropped out of a Georgetown law school to pursue writing, and his father had refused to speak to him until he returned and received his degree. "What Korean writer ever made a comfortable life?" his father had asked his son then.

His father usually spoke in broken English to his sons because they were more accustomed having been born and educated in America. It was his way of trying to understand them because their Korean was already disintegrating. But when he was really upset, really disgusted, he would spew forth Korean faster than anyone they knew. "작가," Jin's father had said before. "굶어죽기 딱 좋겠네..." His father had said repeatedly. But Jin was not starving. He was not a published writer, but he had realized the power of choice.

"You—working?" his father asked.

"Part-time."

"You could go back part-time," his father suggested.

“I could,” Jin said. “But I’m okay, I’m doing okay.”

Jin’s father had made his money through physical labor sweating it out in the fields and eventually heading a crew of about fifteen before he retired, his children either graduated or graduating—the dream partially captured. His father was a man who believed in paying with cash and only having a credit card to prove your status as an American capable of purchasing something greater than the bi-weekly checks would ever allow in a month, year. He was not a man who saw pleasure in reading stories, not a man who took his children to museums or even church. At times, there were games to be played in the backyard, birthdays to be celebrated, report cards attached to the fridge, but mostly, his presence was usually absent, occasionally felt. He never materialized into much more than a puff of smoke, an orange glow outside with his children peering down wondering who this man was in their yard.

Jin looked at the clock.

His father sat leaning forward, hands clasped together as if he were in prayer though he hadn’t stepped inside of a church in more than fifteen years. Jin’s mother still attended regularly, alone, always dressed very well and donating more than her husband thought. Jin’s father never quite understood what his wife got out of attending every week besides the comfort of native speakers, Korean, but he had never tried to convince her to stop. He figured everyone needed a hobby or interest. He had baseball, his wife, church.

Jin’s mother was a quiet, but intelligent woman who came with her husband as a twenty year old partially educated daughter of country people. The idea to come abroad had been enough for her to give up the security of language and family. And those that



could leave, and come to America, never thought twice. Jin's mother had secretly hoped she might continue with her education, possibly work, but after the birth of Jin, and then his brothers, she had given up on herself to prepare for her children's future.

"Eating enough," his father asked.

"Yes," Jin said.

"And this work, you are making money?"

"I'm okay."

Jin couldn't believe he was sitting with his father now. But looking at his father's eyes he saw himself and his two younger brothers again. He saw himself dressed up and at different houses holding open brown bags and uttering words he did not understand only to receive candy he disliked. But his father had been adamant that they should be grateful regardless if they liked it. Jin remembered his father's words, "During the war, we ate many things you'd find disgusting. But you had to. I can still remember your Uncle Ahn's face, how his eyes were open, but there was no life in them."

His father had always seemed absent from his memory until Jin remembered the smoldering of tobacco leaves between his father's fingers in the early dusk. The orange glow, moving upwards and then away, almost danced in the early morning before school began and while the busses were still making their rounds.

Jin looked at the clock and then at his watch. It was exactly the same. Maybe fifteen minutes had passed since they had entered. His father had begun to doze off.

Sitting directly below the docked boat was a young woman with her daughter seated next to her. She wore dark blue jeans and black heeled boots and a thick purple sweater. Her black jacket was folded across her legs. Her daughter was still bundled in

her jacket that almost touched the ground. She did not smile like most children her age. She remained in the state between falling asleep and sleep.

A young woman was behind the counter adjacent Jin and his father. Only the top portion of the woman was visible. She had her hair pulled back tight and she wore a bright blue smock. The woman and her daughter were seated directly across.

Jin looked at the clock, cracked his knuckles.

How had he come to be in this position he thought. It was only a few hours ago, not even a day, that he had received an urgent call from one of his younger brothers, a dentist, who, when needed, acted as an intermediary between father and son.

“I know you’re busy, but Gracey is real sick.”

“Oh,” Jin had said. “Is it bad?”

“She’ll be okay but she can’t go to school and I have to take her to the doctor. So I can’t take dad to his appointment.”

“What’s that?” Jin had said.

“I’d ask Jin-Tae, but he’s knee deep in exams and other school work.” Jin’s brother had said. “Besides, dad would never make him stop studying to take him to his appointment.”

“That’s true. But I haven’t spoken to him in awhile.”

“I know, I know,” his brother had said. “It’s been awhile. You know, ever since mom told him you got that article published in the paper last month, he seemed less worried about you. I guess you could say he’s begun to accept it.”

“She never said anything about that to me.”

“Well, you know mom, and well it takes dad forever to come around sometimes, especially if he’s wrong.”

“Yeah,” Jin had said.

The woman behind the counter asked for something but Jin’s father was asleep and Jin was focusing his attention on one of the paintings.

“Excuse me, Mr. Moon, you didn’t specify about any previous problems with medication.”

“What’s that?” Jin’s father asked startled.

“You didn’t check either no to the above, or check which ones—,” the young woman with her hair pulled back said from behind the counter now standing. She motioned for him to approach, but he did not.

The woman opened the door on the side and handed Jin’s father the form.

“You didn’t check any of these. You need to—”

Jin’s father remained silent as if he couldn’t hear her clearly. He looked at his son.

The woman looked at Jin, too, hoping that he could convince his father of the seriousness and necessity of these forms, but Jin’s eyes were blank.

“Didn’t the last doctor send over his records?” Jin asked.

“I don’t think we have them yet.”

“I see,” Jin said taking the form. He tried to remember if his father had any allergies or previous ailments, things he might suddenly forget. Jin’s father did not bother to look, but gripped both armrests firmly as if he were on a flight.

Jin's father put a cigarette in his mouth and slowly got up. He looked at his son and touched his chest pocket with his cigarettes. Jin nodded, waved his hand, and looked at the clock. He handed the forms back to the woman and scratched his head trying to remember if his father really had any serious complications. But nothing came.

With his father absent, Jin picked up the sports magazine though he had never been gifted athletically or particularly interested in the sports world. On the cover was a baseball player, an Asian baseball player who had been having success since joining an American team. The photographer had perfectly captured the moment of impact: a blurred ball, more a blob of whiteness, Jin thought, exploding upwards and out.

The young woman coughed and Jin suddenly glanced upwards. His eyes met the young girl, now, with her jacket off who sat below the boat painting.

"Catch the ball," Jin's father had said, but Jin had dropped it.

"I'm not good."

"You've got to try at least. Here, when the ball hits, squeeze the glove tight."

"Okay," Jin had said. His father threw another ball, high. But Jin had missed it.

"I don't make you come out here to embarrass you Jin. I do it because—well because it's good exercise for us. We don't get much daylight to share, do we?"

"Couldn't we just see a movie together," Jin had asked tossing the ball back.

"Not the same," Jin's father had said removing his glove and lighting a cigarette.

"When I was growing up we were playing ball despite the occupation. Any chance we got, we played. Took our mind off of things."

"You played?"

“Sure, we played. Me, your uncle, our friends. Later, when we were in the army fighting, if we’d missed a target, we would have been dead.

You had to be accurate as hell back then. Otherwise some Jap would slice your throat and piss on you. Think I wanted to be on that kind of field? It was hell. But you kids these days don’t know sacrifice, don’t understand loss. I’m not sure you even know true friendship. I suppose it’s my fault too. It was my idea to come here.”

Jin closed the magazine and leaned forward, arching his feet upwards.

The clock now read forty minutes later. He looked with compassion at the young girl and hoped she would never endure what he had. And part of him thought that because she was a girl, she would never know the difficulty of failing a father at sports. But then, he thought, she would undoubtedly experience worse failings, things that, even he could not fathom. He placed the magazine down and looked at the entrance. Jin half expected his father to reenter with two baseball gloves asking him for a light. But he did not appear. No one else entered.

The woman behind the counter opened the door on the side and called Mr. Moon. Jin told the woman that he would go and get him and she nodded waving to the little girl.

Jin left behind the land and seascapes, walked down the well lit hallway, and past the doors of the professional building which all looked the same. He walked down the metal stairwell towards the main door. As he approached the door he was momentarily blinded by the sun. Its ray sliced through his immediate vision and Jin thought he had seen the center of the gaseous bulb, but only for an instant. The ray subsided. But

between the immediate closing of his eyes to the fluttering that came next he caught the glimpse of a figure. He squinted.

As the rays penetrated Jin and the warmth of a normally cold February morning embraced him with the opposite, he tried to remember something different about his father, perhaps something important. But his mind drew a blank. Jin placed his hand on the glass, accepted the transfer of warmth. As he looked out he could see people waiting for the bus and a few others walking along the sidewalk. He looked as far as his sight would allow. He stood in silence for what seemed a long time and looked at the figure smoking. It was his father and it was not.

## Snow

It was a very small town about a few miles north from Dandong. It was on the border between the two communist states. The town did not act as a trading zone or even for military operations though soldiers were patrolling the area at certain times because of where the Yalu River snaked and became narrow. The small town had the unfortunate stake of existing on the border.

It had begun to snow. And Kyung-ja feigned a smile. She pulled her jacket tighter and rubbed her hands together fiercely. She loved to see the snow blanket everything. She recalled as a child when the snow had covered her town, how it covered any trace of movement unless someone was move. She liked the idea of it hiding the border.

She recalled her father and mother, when times had been tough, but when they were still one unit. Kyung-ja thought of her sister, Kyung-hwa and when they had played in the snow. They couldn't have been more than seven when their world was destroyed. She wanted to cry having been reduced to simple memories. She suddenly, and for a moment, did not want to continue. But she realized her weakness. She thought of her sister. And quickly, she pushed on.

It was cold. And the ground was stiff. At first, it felt as hard as the cell floor had. It had softness when pressed. Punching the ground here would not necessarily result in bloodied knuckles or broken bones. Here, the ground gave a little, and although it was beginning that frigid decline, she knew it could be broken.

She had only a bag with clothes in it. Her “broker” told her to bring nothing more, nothing less. He had told her of the time and place when the border patrol would change. He had only to get her to this point safely. The rest was up to her.

Kyung-ja had been here before. She had crossed over and completed half the journey to freedom. She had made it farther than most. She and a few others had lived in a safe house in Northern China close to DanDong after crossing the border. It was a room in an apartment complex on the third floor where many natives had migrated some decades earlier. And this complex was housed near the middle of the small town. The official link to the larger cities the world knew of was not far away. But this town had not been considered a threat and many of the crossers had sustained in this area in relative peace.

The group had stayed there for about three weeks gathering strength and weight, plumpness in their cheeks, a glow from eating regular meals. But they could not rest, and they could not sleep easily. Peering out nearly every hour was to prepare for Chinese military strikes against rooms housing refugees. And although this sleepy town was not teeming with patrolling officers, no one could let their guard down.

They ventured outside. They wore bright colors and took pictures. They watched the streets for suspicious movement. The daughter of the married couple played at the playground. At night some of them floated through the night market occasionally buying small amounts of food but mostly trying to relieve themselves of the situation, trying to find someone to communicate with. Often because many of the locals had migrated legally and stayed there, they could talk, a little.



The group consisted of a brother and sister, an older gentleman—widowed, and a husband, his pregnant wife, and their five year old daughter. Kyung-ja had felt closest to her because she was also pregnant. Touching her belly made her recall the past.

When Kyung-Ja was six the North's regime was slowly building its strength. But the country was slowly petering on collapse. Her father had been the second one sent to the gulags when she was a child, and her mother had died of physical complications a year later. At the time, living conditions were marked by starvation and severe malnutrition. Children ate off the muddied ground where market workers sold grains and other prepared food. They were dazed and filthy often wandering without a parent nearby and often beat for stealing food. Kyung-Ja's older sister had just vanished one winter night when they went to the market for grain. And an uncle, who was suspected of slander and propaganda, was the first one sent to the gulags, the first one to die.

The moon lingered above like a finger nail. The wind blew. At times it cut into her once fleshy cheeks. It was bitter and relentless, then suddenly stopped. It was relentless.

She lay down on her stomach with her dried hands cupped to protect her small mouth. She waited and looked ahead. Her heart pounded so thick and rhythmic that it was hurting her ears. She could feel the thumping even in her toes which were layered two pairs of socks

She breathed heavy and so she tried to slow herself. But it was difficult. Kyung-ja exhaled onto her cold mouth and dry, chapped lips. She smacked them repeatedly as if she were savoring some warm and spicy *jigae*.

She rose a little and knelt on the ground again. The dirt clung to her soft pants; shards of stiff grass and dead leaves compressed beneath her weight. And silence.

It would only be a few hours before sunrise and the time when everyone she knew in her small village would be subjugated to praising the dear leader with song.

*“Both day and night, for the sake of our happiness, we always, with all our heart, believe and love our dear leader...”*

It was ritual. And it was ingrained. She had never questioned it until her uncle, and then her father, were taken away. Today, though, she would be absent.

The wind began its howling and tortured routine as if it suddenly remembered the past. It cut into her every exposed piece of flesh, and then again, bit into her cheeks. She closed her eyes and tried to evoke an image of her parents, of home, of someplace warm.

Kyung-ja thought for a moment of her previous capture and of the pain. She could see his face. How could she ever truly forget the face of the man who had spat on her and called her a traitor? How could she forget the man who had crushed her?

She remembered the pleasure he seemed to enjoy when he interrogated her beneath a single worn bulb in the damp room near the gulags of #22 far, far North. She remembered his chain-smoking, his deep, constant hacking, and his spitting. She recalled his hands, rough from the cold and the work, and his small eyes, his diminutive stature.

Then she thought of the cold cell floor, and the absence of food, real food. How could she forget the taste of that poisonous water, the almond gruel? How could she forget the smell of human feces, frozen toilets—impending death?

She remembered the cries of other captives. The rapes and hangings. The family gas chambers. And also the dreadful silence when people were either killed or had given

up. She recalled a woman, a pregnant woman, who had been tied to a tree. It had begun snowing that morning.

“You cannot do this. Why would you do this?” the woman had cried and pleaded. She struggled to break free, to run and to possibly strike him as Kyung-ja had so fantasized. But the man with the small eyes had been silent if not indifferent to her. He lit his cigarette. He offered her one but she refused. He turned and looked into the distant mountains; he put his hand out to catch some snow flakes.

He exhaled and reached for his gun. Right before he shot her, she had cried out. “It’s yours, but it’s yours!” Her head fell limp; her body slouched forward. He bent down and checked her. He exhaled, rubbed his hands together, and peered back out at the mountains with their snow capped tips. He mumbled something to himself and spit. He lit another cigarette and called for the soldiers, who had tied her, to take her away.

Huddled near a crooked wooden fence, she could see lights ahead in the town. The Yalu was insight. Most people were sleeping, but some farmers were eager to begin the day. Their figures were indiscernible at first. Just specks of movement. And she thought she might have imagined it or been drifting off. But gradually, as she moved forward, they took their forms. Arms and legs, heads. She could hear more clearly their language. She peered behind and listened to the Yalu. She took in the meditative movement, the murmurings of water gently passing, its cold, frigid, but constantly moving shape.

She was getting closer. She inched ahead then stopped. The sun was beginning to rise and she had only a short time to make her move. She thought she could hear voices

again, as if they were talking to her, urging her on. She could make out the farmers more and more, almost smell their morning tobacco. She kept pushing forward, slowly. She did not look back. Dirt and debris was pulled mercilessly alongside her as if trying to prevent her crossing.

The cold did not subside. Winter was not yet full, but the transition had begun brutally. “It will only get worse,” she thought. And right before she crossed she thought she heard one of the men call out, “*xue*.<sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> *Xue* is the Chinese word for snow.

## Mother and Father

It was cold enough that it looked like everyone was smoking. There were three students, one seated, the other two standing. Their exhalation floated lazily upwards until it vanished completely. I stood in my apartment, gazing down at them, picturing myself, Eun, and Ju-ma waiting for the 8:15 to arrive. It had only been about seven years since we graduated. I wasn't sure why these students had grabbed my attention. Perhaps it was the girl and her plaid scarf, her constant shifting on the frozen metal seat, and her repeated jamming of her gloved hands into the pockets of her dark pea coat that reminded me of Eun. While looking at her, I began to focus on her face, in particular her eyes. They seemed vaguely familiar as if I had encountered someone with the same dejected look so many years earlier.

My mother used to cook for the locals when I lived with her in Pusan. In a run-down and oxidized shack, with the obligatory leaking roof, the tired and overworked customers would eat noisily. All the while, my mother and her sad eyes would refill their bowls again and again. The dogs would await the strands that fell to the floor off the chopsticks. At that time, so many dogs roamed the streets of our city that they seemed like a tattered family. Licking each other's wounds and never fighting for scraps, I often wondered what was wrong with us. I studied and played by the sea to avoid the customer's abruptness, their constant chewing and slurping. And the dogs, a few would always follow hoping I'd have something for them.

Times were extremely hard as our country began its crawl from the depths of war. Or so my mother would often lecture me. We were with that long procession of

struggling countries climbing back from the fresh rubble of war, though ours was both civil and world. America seemed like a dream, the mere thought of its name brought many questions and confusion. But *omma* had persisted with the idea. She had always talked about America with great enthusiasm as if she were ashamed of Korea. She talked so much that her talk eventually became an idea, and I would soon go to America and stay with a distant aunt. It would be better there she had always told me. Her sister, who her father had disowned for marrying an American man, lived in New York City and was perfectly settled with the idea that I would soon come join them. The phone startled me back from my daydream.

“*Yoboseyo?*”

“Hey, it’s Eun, how are you?”

“Oh, fine, thanks. And you?”

“Not bad. Are you free to watch Hanna tonight?”

“Of course. We can finish our discussion on communist regimes,” I said with a chuckle grabbing an apple.

“Don’t start with that. She had a headache the last time. She said you bored her to death and then fell asleep. Is that how you spend your time with her?”

“Eun, really. I think you know me better than that. Anyway, got a date tonight?”

“Something like that. Jealous?”

“I wonder,” I said.

“Yes. You wonder a lot don’t you? Anyway, can you still help my father with the shed this weekend? He’s counting on you.”

“For you, sure. Only if I can discuss Korean bureaucracy him.”

“Never mind having a serious conversation with you today,” she laughed lightly. It was a laugh that had drawn me to Eun initially and one that recently I had not heard.

“Well you gave it a try.”

“Yeah, I guess I did. I’ll be over in an hour.”

“Sure,” I said and hung up.

I went back to my window, mug in hand, but the three students were gone. Somewhere on a bus their core temperatures were slowly thawing back to normal and seated, they would be without complaints for a few moments. Looking out my window had become a habit of mine since I was out of work. Seeing the students made me feel invigorated as if I were there with them worrying about the same things a college student worries about. And every time I looked, I happened to be reminded of my mother who had died not long after I had arrived in America. I wasn’t told immediately or even during that first year. Another relative kept the secret by sending me letters once a month in my mother’s script. “미안하지만, 엄마가 잠시 어디 좀 가야할 것 같애... 몇 밤만 자면 돌아올께, 아가야.”

Oddly, I had begun having recurrent dreams of Korea and of my few years there. I had had these dreams as a teenager, but only in broken segments, as if I was too young to handle the complete picture. But now, at twenty nine, my dreams had become more vivid and I could remember them with an almost complete assurance. At times, I would be tempted to assume they were nothing. Perhaps it was merely regression.

I was with *omma*, hand in hand, listening to the crunching beneath our feet. We were bundled up from head to toe, and she carried a large bag. I can safely say that it was a winter scene though the coldness never chapped me until I awoke. “*When we reach the*

*entrance to the woods we will have to separate. Do you understand?" she would always ask. Yes, I do, I would reply.*

"Appa!" Hanna crashed onto me.

"Hanna, how are you sweetheart? Your mommy really dressed you up nice... *ye puda!*"

She smiled and tilted her head forward before jumping off of my lap and running around the apartment in search of Mr. Kitty though Mr. Kitty had disappeared sometime last week.

"Hi," Eun said with a big smile carrying in an overfilled grocery bag. "Here is some food I made last night and books to read to Hanna."

"Sure thing. Smells good."

"Have you given much thought to what we discussed last weekend?"

"Yeah," I said looking straight, then scratched my eyebrow.

"And?" She said, sitting next to me and taking my hand. "We made real progress. I'd hate to think we were moving backwards."

"Yeah. I understand. I just think—it's still not right."

"I see." She stood up and turned away from me. You know Ju-ma called me about the cat. Any luck?"

"No. Did you tell Hanna yet?"

"I thought I'd leave that to you."

"I see," I said somewhat surprised.



“I won’t force it on you,” Eun suddenly said. “But, it would be nice to keep up with this conversation. It’s sort of a good thing. And besides, the legality of the matter is not the question. I am more concerned with commitment. Are you committed to me?”

“Yeah, I think so. Maybe I need a little more time to think.”

“About? Never mind. I won’t pressure you. But in the meantime I’ve begun seeing someone. I just wanted to let you know.” She glanced at the picture of Hanna holding Mr. Kitty on the end table.

“Yeah, I figured. You can’t wait your entire life.”

“I can’t,” she said continuing to look at the picture wiping away imaginary dust particles. “And we...you lost the cat.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that too.”

“Hanna,” she said.

“*Ye, omma...*”

“Have fun with your *appa* and behave.”

“Ok,” she said.

Eun left, and Hanna and I watched television. Hanna curled up next to me wearing a soft red cardigan and navy skirt. I gave her a good tickling and she squirmed with delight eventually losing both of her shoes and a sock. It was about an hour later when I explained to her about Mr. Kitty. Her eyes evoked a thorough understanding and sadness.

“Well, I hope he comes home. This is his home, too,” Hanna said.

The weather was good enough so I took Hanna to the playground. I was also hoping to find Mr. Kitty around the neighborhood lazily sleeping on a neighbor’s front

porch or eating from another cat's bowl. Instead, I happened to meet Ju-ma, a mutual friend from college, there with her daughter, Su-min. We still kept in touch somewhat regularly.

"So, any luck with Mr. Kitty?"

"None."

"Has she run away before?"

"Never. It's not like her to," I said.

"Yeah, it's strange. But you know animals can sense when there's a problem in the house. You aren't having problems again, are you?"

"You mean Eun?" I asked.

"You know, you're the only guy I know who has a daughter and isn't married. Not that I want to judge you, but you should think of Eun and Hanna here."

Hannah was running around playing tag with Su-min and the other children. I sat on the bench with Ju-ma and regressed again as Hannah's head disappeared behind an oak tree.

*"When we reach the woods we have to separate," she said. "Okay," I said, yet holding her hand tighter as we neared them.*

There was a way my mother always spoke to me that made her words seem permanent. "자장 자장 우리아가. 자장 자장 우리 아가... 엄마는 우리 애기를 하늘 끝까지 사랑해. 잘 자." Perhaps her words were sung to me and weren't meant to be forgotten. And at the same time there was always an ambiguity with which she spoke

where I never quite knew what to say. I always listened carefully. It was as if she was trying hard to tell me something more, as if she didn't really want to leave me.

We left the park and I promised Ju-ma that I'd call her if I wanted or needed to talk. And she said she'd keep an eye out for Mr. Kitty.

"Do you want some ice cream Hanna?"

"Yeah, please." She shouted, then lowered her voice and repeated her response. Children were always so easy to please, I thought.

I could see the resemblance of Eun in Hanna and yet I could never quite see what Hanna had received from me. But there must be something; something of me that is in her that is not part of Eun. We were standing in front of the slanted frosted glass. Hanna's head barely reached the counter. Regardless, she always knew what she wanted, orange sherbet.

"Ummm, yummy, yummy." She marched forward to an outside bench.

"I hope so, sweetie."

Sitting outside among the living we were enjoying a cool spring evening. I wrapped my jacket around Hanna and she sneezed, blowing ice cream out and wiping her mouth like kids do. I had to wipe her face and at the same time I tickled her again. I would need more napkins.

We came home and I decided to give Hanna a bath and get her ready for bed. I wondered how Eun was doing out on her date.

"Hannah, time for your bath."

"No!" she said and ran.

"Hanna? Where are you?"

I found Hanna hidden in the closet. She had a sad look in her eyes.

“I don’t want a bath.”

“Why not, sweetheart?”

“Because, it means mommy will be coming to get me.”

“Hanna, you’re staying tonight, remember? And besides, don’t you like your mommy?”

“Yes, but I like you too?” Hanna said with a smile.”

“Of course.”

The tub was filled and was a mild enough temperature for her babyish skin. Hanna sat still while I bathed her and carefully sprayed water to wash out the shampoo.

“*Appa?*”

“Yes, Hanna.”

“Do you love *omma*?” Hanna wiped her eyes.

I was taken back with her sincerity and innocence. Hanna looked at me, like Eun had done when Eun had first told me she loved me. The seriousness of her eyes, that’s what Hanna and I shared. That look of longing and hoping to hear the right answer. It was maybe a year after we had begun dating when Eun had released those words upon me. I was dumbfounded when she had calmly said them. Washing Hanna, I remembered it had lingered in my head, and suddenly, I could feel myself drifting off.

“*I want you to know something,*” *omma* said.

Hanna splashed me with soapy water and brought my attention back to her and of her needs.

“I love your *omma* very much Hanna. And I love you.”

“I love you *appa*,” she said then splashed me while laughing uncontrollably.

I dried Hannah off and helped her with her pajamas that were covered with pictures of bananas. We sang an old Korean nursery rhyme while I combed and dried her hair. “자장 자장 우리아가. 자장 자장 우리 아가...”

Still singing to her, I tucked Hannah into her bed. I read her a short story and gently kissed her forehead.

“*Appa?*”

“Yes Hanna?”

“*Na no sarang hae.*”

“I love you too.”

As I walked downstairs my head began to wander again. I wondered how Eun was doing, where she was, and with whom.

“Hi.”

Eun surprised me, sitting downstairs, her eyes puffy and red.

“I didn’t know you were here,” I said folding the wet towel in my hand.

“I need to ask you something.

“Sure,” I said.

“Do you love me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then say it, please say it out loud for me,” Eun said.

I took a step forward and leaned in making it impossible for her to escape. Then I embraced her. I kissed her softly. I looked into her eyes and said, “Eun, I love you. I have always loved you.”

“I know.”

“What?” I leaned back.

“I just needed to hear it out loud.”

We sat on the sofa not speaking. I put her legs on my lap and rubbed her feet, tickling them. She laughed, like Hanna, and threw a pillow at me. Her tears had begun to dry and I wiped one with my finger and examined it closely as if an answer to our problem might be hidden there.

“I think I’m ready.”

“Really? Are you sure? Because—”

“Of course. Seeing Hanna so upset tonight was a terrible thing.

“I saw some one, but nothing serious. Just an old friend, really.

“I understand.”

“Ju-ma said it really bothered her to see us like this, apart. She hated it because Hanna needs us both so badly.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

“Ju-ma gave us Mr.Kitty because she knew we would take care of her. Since she ran away, I felt it was a bad sign.”

“I’ve been neglecting someone Ju-ma and Mr. Kitty know well.”

“Yeah,” Eun said

We went into the kitchen to make coffee. While it was brewing I stood and she sat.

“It’s eight-thirty.”

“Yeah, kind of late for coffee.”

“Yeah, but we have a lot to talk about.”

She got up and slipped her hands into her pockets. Slowly she paced and walked over to me. She hugged me and whispered softly in my ear the nursery song that I had sung to Hannah. I was flooded with memories once again. I could remember my *omma* had sung them to me when I was little. And suddenly I could remember something else.

“엄마는 우리 애기를 하늘 끝까지 사랑해. 잘 자.”

## When Heaven Falls

### I

When I was nine I got lost. I was separated from my parents. Maybe for a kid, I wasn't lost, but merely exploring, searching for something. Every now and then I dream about that instance. I'm with my parents, who are setting up camp and I leave them to go exploring some. I hear my mother say something and my father kind of grunt, "He's not a baby..." And as soon as her head turns, or the image of her turning away happens, I'm deep in the woods, alone, but probably only meters away because I can still hear them.

I walked along some trails marked with colorful ribbons. But eventually I veered off course because I thought I saw a fox. From the stories I grew up with, *kumiho* meant trouble. *Kumiho* translates into nine-tailed fox. And the stories said that they can transform at will, and often turn themselves into beautiful young women. Often changing into a bride whose own mother cannot tell the difference, the *kumiho* is only caught when her clothes are removed, but even then, it can be too late.

It couldn't have been more than a colorful blur, but when you're nine, everything seems more than it is. I gave chase that day and ran, walked, and slowly ushered myself in its direction trying carefully not to disrupt the natural scenery unfolding before me. I told myself, I only wanted a look, perhaps a confirmation of what I'd seen.

I got lost for a day and spent the night in the woods of the *Soraksan* National Park. My parents and the local rangers and some volunteers found me two miles north and sleeping against a large tree. When they found me, I was awoken from a dream of the



very thing that had pulled my attention away from the marked trail. And even in that dream, I had not captured the *kumiho*.

When you're nine and alone in the mountains, things aren't so scary. When you're a kid, you're somewhat invincible, somewhat oblivious to the situation that would make an average adult panic. I had my canteen of water and my Choco pies. I had my time in the mountains, and had my chase for an animal that lured me deep within the woods. This dream would occur until I began high school. During high school, because it was such a change of pace, I rarely remembered anything I dreamed and I certainly forgot about the *kumiho*.

But another dream I have is very different. I've had it every year since I came to America to study as a fresh faced and eager nineteen year old. I often think recurring dreams symbolize something and when I researched the thought, I never particularly liked what I'd found. I cannot deny that the transition was difficult. The language, the food. America was not what I had read in books and seen on television. America was both strangely different and beautiful.

I'm digging. I'm one with the shovel; it's merely an extension. I am in deep concentration. I shove the tool in to the wet ground. I press my foot and force my weight down on it. I pick the shovel and toss the muddied dirt above. But I realize I am not alone. I feel someone's presence. It seems the man keeps signaling me to shovel. For some reason I feel very anxious. If I stop, something really bad will happen to my family. I am not sure, but I always have this sensation that he has a gun pointed at me. So I keep digging, but it's becoming too unbearable. I lose my concentration and I feel myself

losing my grip on the shovel. I almost drop it. And then I do drop it. At the moment right before I can look up to see who is standing there, I wake up.

Something else happens for sure. But what happens, I never know. I always feel some sense of losing something important and am always searching for it in sleep. As I got older and the daily effects of life took over, my dreams became more sporadic in their regularity and display. Like how one might forget some childhood memory in exacting detail, only fragments of those dreams persisted. But with every year, that persistence became fuzzy until I only had a feeling I dreamed of something, not for the first time, but again. And then, with the expectation of our first child those dreams stopped. Or perhaps, I just didn't have the capacity to recall them anymore.

## II

My wife appears near the bathroom door of our newly built townhouse but is not entirely visible. I can hear the water running and then it stops. It is followed by the sound of her brushing her teeth, slowly. Then mouthwash. The back of her legs and the white nightgown that hovers above her creamy pale knees are like two images, like some ancient symbol. But I do not know what it means. While she is finishing, I am reading a new history book a colleague has sent me from one of our collegiate partnerships in Seoul. The book depicts individual stories of *wieanbu*—of comfort women and is something I learned growing up in junior high, but never really gave much attention to. I am familiar with this topic because of my parent's adamant dislike of the Japanese though time has allowed harbored resentment to peel away, a little. I often wonder if war

crimes, if war atrocities can ever truly be forgiven. But it is an issue of another generation, one where war, both world and civil, devastated a nation.

Our nightly routine is undisturbed.

“How’d the appointment go today?” I ask.

“Good,” Kumiko says.

“Everything’s still okay then?”

“No complications,” she says. “I wouldn’t worry too much. It’s still early.”

“It’s just, the last time—”

“I know. I was there and I know.” She squeezes my hand a little then releases. Her nightgown drapes listlessly on her petite frame before she pulls the comforter onto herself suddenly hiding her exposed flesh, and any ideas I might be forming, from me.

I adjust myself on the bed, prop a pillow behind me for support as if I were planning to engage in a lengthy talk with my pregnant wife, and really, who says I’m not going to. But my wife yawns—a long yawn, and instead of propping her pillow, kisses me on the cheek, pulls the comforter up close to her neck, and prepares for sleep.

“I know you don’t like talking about it. But, it still worries me.”

“I know,” Kumiko says. “But does me not wanting to talk about it mean it doesn’t bother me, too?”

“I didn’t mean that Kumiko.”

“I’ll be fine—we’ll be fine.”

Before closing the book, I search for a place marker and find an old receipt. I turn off the light, kiss my wife on the cheek, and stare into the void. My imagination begins to dance, and I think I see the shadows emerging as my eyes begin that adjustment. For an

instant, I think of when I was a kid, but after the incident in the woods. I used to pull the covers over my head after my father had told me a scary story, and for days on end, I'd breathe heavily beneath always afraid of something lurking in the shadows, but never truly understanding what fear is. I believe my fear stemmed from the idea of the unknown. And the anticipation. The waiting.

The older I got, the more I was to understand the idea of fear and displacement. Even in those first few years in America, my preparation proved pointless. It proved this way because one cannot simply expect to understand a culture through learning in books and from people's own opinions. No—that had been my mistake as I struggled to adapt to the western world. It would prove far more difficult than my time in the woods because adults are often too busy grasping reality, bills, careers, cancer, while children play for the moment, accept a challenge without fully understanding the consequences, but enjoying the process.

Complete blackness gradually shifts to incoherent blobs of stationary objects around the bedroom. But soon, I can make out the dresser and television, a chair with a belt and jacket hanging which in ways resembles a slouched figure. The pitch black darkness suddenly reveals itself to be only dark and not completely absent of light. The neighborhood hum drifts back. Lights twinkle, car doors are being shut, alarms sound their function—trash is being put or dragged to the curb. I can hear the muffled sounds of neighbors coming home. My eyes become heavy and soon I go under.

The next day begins like the previous one, only it's the weekend. The newspapers lay out front and there are people cutting the lawn already. The trash cans are pulled back

inside and people are venturing out for their weekend brunches and shopping errands to replenish the past week's supplies. We eat breakfast and drink coffee on the veranda that I sweep while Kumiko is brushing her teeth. It's early morning, but the sun has already risen. I have the feeling I dreamt about something vivid and important, but the more I try to recall it, the harder it is to clearly remember anything. I lose myself for a moment in the lawnmowers humming.

I think of the last time Kumiko was pregnant and our excitement. We had tried a lot of times without success. So, when she finally got pregnant we were ecstatic but careful. When she had the miscarriage things changed dramatically. Something about her was different. Perhaps, because of my gender, I cannot grasp what was lost. But I assume that a connection must have been severed. And that for a woman, the death of a child before it is born, is something a man can never truly understand.

We enjoy a long leisurely Saturday brunch while reading the paper, discussing current events, planning for the baby. As the steam from our coffee mugs drifts lazily upwards, vanishing into our related breaths, I suddenly think of my mother and of a recent conversation.

My mother has expressed her desire for me, her only child, to come back home. While my father has expressed his interest, it is merely to appease his wife of some thirty odd years. It's not that my father doesn't want to see me or have me closer to home; it's more an understanding between father and son, perhaps even respect in some regards in having made a life for oneself, and not in just any foreign nation, but America. But I've had reservations on returning. The job market is terrible and the competition annoying. Friends who have graduated from top universities are still living at home without many

leads or even options, while their wives, who are also educated and with degrees (though not all are married and with degrees) become pregnant and anxious.

“What are you thinking,” my wife says, both hands cupping her mug forcing me from my thoughts. The mug is one of the ones I received as a gift from running in the school’s annual 5K road race. We have a collection of six, including the two Kumiko ran. The mugs are of good quality and are of deep unnatural tones.

“Nothing really.”

“Are you sure? You look different.”

“It’s nothing. Just thinking of my mother.”

“Oh, how is she?” Kumiko asks.

The words to express what my mother has told me, what my mother expects of me fail me when I want to include Kumiko into my family. For the most part Kumiko understands—even accepts the differences of being in an interracial marriage. And we are in an interracial marriage though on the outside, some neighbors and co-workers, friends and strangers, we don’t warrant the attention of being different, of being something as easy to notice as black and white. Despite physical similarities, the dark hair and almond eyes, our lives and our heritages represent something in stark contrast to what people readily see. We are not simply an Asian couple bound by a unifying language or culture. But we do share a history of occupation and colonialism. And history would dictate we are enemies sharing a bed, sharing our feelings and compromising our futures. History would assume we would have not totally forgotten or forgiven and would not rear a child as an object of our push forward or as some symbol of atonement.

Kumiko understands or at least can fathom why my parent's had disliked her, or the idea of marrying her. But she cannot grasp it entirely. Since she didn't grow up in Japan, she was not presented with false history lessons of what the Japanese had actually done during the war. She was not instilled with total loyalty for one nation.

"She's fine," I say.

"It's nice being home and having a quiet moment like this," she says.

"Yes, it's always good to be home."

"I'm a little concerned how our lives will change," Kumiko says.

"That sounds like something I should say," I say smiling.

"It's just that, well, our lives are going to change so much. Before, I was so worried and anxious. And while I still feel that way, I almost think, now, it might be an inconvenience."

"That's awful Kumiko."

"I know," she says smiling. "Seriously, I just wonder if the time has passed. We're older now."

"That's true."

Kumiko looks off into the distance still holding her mug. I adjust myself on the metal chair and glance at the paper on my lap. I scan the scoreboard, but can't locate our university. I look at my sandals and the whiteness from my socks peeking out. I've become what my colleague in Korea calls an *ajoshi*. I know the term, but refuse to acknowledge it or respect it because middle-aged men in Korea usually play tennis or take up golf. I'm still playing basketball twice a week with some of my graduate students. I swim and run half-marathons when I have the chance. I don't feel the bulge creeping,

though it's begun. I don't smoke or leave the house without shaving. It's the socks though, he says. The socks and the sandals. Even my wife laughs, agrees and laughs. She finds the term cute.

"I just wonder sometimes how our child will grow up," Kumiko says. "It's not easy to grow up here."

"It's better than a lot of other places," I say ignoring my socks.

"But is it the right place?" she asks sipping her coffee.

"Is any place perfect? Neighborhoods constantly change. It seems people always move westward, even if it's still in state or even the county."

"I suppose," she says

"Sometimes, it makes you wonder what America really stands for. Before I came here, people kept telling me this and that, what to be careful of, who to be afraid of. These were people who had never even stepped foot outside of Seoul, let alone the country. It's hard to admit, but that thinking really influenced me when I first came here."

. "I admire Ethan and Judith, although they don't have children, they seem so together, so perfect for each other. They've been here for a long time too."

"I like Ethan and Judith too. I'm sorry they never had children. Ethan seems like the fatherly type. And Judith, well, she's warm enough at times. Maybe they couldn't have children," I say.

"Maybe," Kumiko says.



### III

After graduating with a doctorate in History—Asian History, I found a job in a small state university in suburban Maryland. It's the kind of place you'd want to raise a family or possibly retire in. Newly planted saplings that will one day reach full maturity and freshly pruned shrubs welcome the driver into all brick homes and town homes, while rows of annuals, coneflowers, blazing stars, and cardinal flowers accent the entrance.

The main highway is less than a few miles away with plenty of scenic back roads near the backend. One does not need to venture far to reach a town that is full of the usual fast food chains and gas stations, but also has organic food markets, local coffee joints, and various outdoors shops, even a good used book store and single family owned movie theater.

We have winding park trails around artificial lakes, a small camp ground. There are new tennis courts and baseball fields that also double as soccer fields; a nice indoor recreational center is nearby the book and coffee shop. Main Street is unusually clean and booming with small businesses catering to almost any age group, while the local churches invite anyone to stop by and have a chat over freshly brewed coffee and cinnamon squares.

Of course there is some moderate crime, a broken in to car here and there, sometimes a petty robbery or hit and run, teenage vandalism at its prime. But no reported rapes or talk about domestic abuse, no animal cruelty or local government fund shifting, no major drug issue in school. There is in fact an increasing economic flow and the diversity is quite amazing. We enjoy living in such an area where race is not an initial

issue or even meant as subtle commentary—a place where we are not figured as a realty statistic. We find the people here both warm and welcoming if not a little private and protective of their moderate and comfortable lives.

Kumiko and I settled here about three years ago. We had a small ceremony once I finished graduate school. A few friends and our parents. My parents had wanted to remain in Korea because they did not readily approve and because they were a little worried having never visited America before but only hearing the horror stories of other friend's children, some of whom were robbed and harassed and involved in minor and major car accidents. One was even murdered. And a few married off with foreigners only to never return to Korea again or return with a mixed child and divorced, apologetic and defeated in the worst way. So it took a lot of convincing, but in the end resulted in them making the trip to America. And for them, marked the first and last occasion they would visit me in America and the first and last time they met Kumiko.

I am thirty-seven years old and Kumiko thirty-four. She is well past the marriage age in Korea and Japan. Though the times are changing, my own parents had thought she was too old. Before they expressed their sentiment of her background to me, I assumed it was because they didn't know her well or because she didn't speak Korean. But, this was an excuse to mask their distaste of their only son marrying a foreigner and a Japanese woman of all things.

Kumiko is Japanese-American and while she exudes a certain Asian-ness, she will forever be at odds with native Koreans like my parents. It's not only the harbored resentment of the Japanese occupation or the refusal of acknowledging the comfort women or the consistent brutality of the Japanese towards us throughout history, or even

claiming the East Sea as the Sea of Japan. I often feel it stems deeper to simply not wanting one's child so far away from home. Perhaps if we had lived in Korea things could have been worked out, possibly forgiven. But being in America, being six thousand miles away, and not married to a Korean woman, problems were inevitable.

I teach two history courses a semester with titles like, "*Modern Asian History*" and "*East Asian Disparity*." I write books about the collective histories. Japan and China—Korea, the interactions, spilled blood, rapes and occupations, violence and road to peace. Because history encompasses both our present and future, because it repeats itself, I was drawn to studying it in high school and then college. I often find myself wondering what kind of person Kumiko was then. Sure, I've asked her and we've exchanged those nostalgic personal memories. We've admitted to dating such and such a person or having a certain kind of dated hairstyle, even liking a kind of music. But even in remembering those instances and reciting, one cannot expect full disclosure or even an accurate description of events of how we were so many years ago. Most people, if not all, would have changed though the degree would differ dramatically. An embellishment here or denial there. Truth does not always exist in history or photographs or in expressed sentiment or memory. Truth is a present reflex that disappears as quickly as it surfaces. So I trust what she has told me, but I also find myself wondering too.

I also plan trips to Washington D.C. and work with the international studies program to bring distinguished lecturers, and at times, survivors here. The survivors have been from China, Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines, even Japan. In their stories, my students and I learn firsthand the awful brutality that man can commit towards another.

I want to broaden the school's East Asian Department with my current research project. Perhaps it's foolish thinking for a young history professor and maybe even a little arrogant. But I still think it's worthwhile. I feel it necessary to understand what has happened in regards to the book my colleague sent me. I don't think it's purely sentiment. The more I probe and search for meaning behind the brutality, the deeper I become entangled with something I fear I might find within myself. While my research has focused on the brutality of the Japanese military, I reason it is not only Japan, but many countries, many men, who have been deeply involved in such brutal crimes against women and children, the innocent. I suddenly think of my own actions and venture to think of how I would have handled the situation if it were reversed, if we had landed on Japan's shores under cover of night and murdered the empress and raped the virgins. Would I have been any different, even compassionate?

I enjoy my work. But sometimes find it burdensome, tedious. During heavy research, I find it hard to sleep. I cannot easily discuss my work with my wife. I cannot find comfort in her arms, in that kind of embrace a man shares with a woman he loves. Dealing with war crimes and sexual deviance, allowing oneself to be consumed whole by simply trying to find out, *why*, can destroy a person, a relationship. It can push people into corners of their own homes and minds. Kumiko and I have had the discussions, and we've had arguments about our collective pasts. I've never hit my wife, but when the conversations have gotten really heated, and our loyalties tested, the thought had crossed my mind. I am only human and am capable of all that I research, read, and write about.

Recently, my colleague, Jung-ho, in Seoul, arranged a small research trip and interview session with a living comfort woman. My university has accepted the terms.

And so my wife and I will head to Korea for a few weeks. The semester has just finished and I hurriedly read over the final papers giving most of my students' good grades and failing no one. Kumiko accompanies me to the university to drop off some forms and we stop by the school café. This will be perhaps the last time we can enjoy a quiet moment in peace.

"It's nice to see the students," Kumiko says sipping green tea.

"Yes. It's a nice environment."

"I wonder what our child will study," Kumiko asks.

"Hopefully something technical, so we'll be taken care of," I remark jokingly sipping coffee.

Kumiko smiles and hits me under the table with her tennis shoe.

"Have you thought of what language?"

"If you want my parent's to like you, it'll be Korean."

"How could I not," she says smiling.

She's wearing white shorts and an olive green shirt. I am glad she has to wear these shoes instead of the pointed heels she would probably be wearing.

When I first met Kumiko, as a third year graduate student, she always dressed fancy—at least in my eyes. She'd wear skirts and heels, starched white blouses, tan and black blazers, some with stripes, and some with solids and plaids. She had an assortment of dress pants and shirts. Maybe thirty pairs of shoes, and many, many accessories to accentuate her already natural features, black hair, petite frame, and long toned legs.

"Either way, our child should have an easier time than us," I say.

"You think so," Kumiko asks. "I was thinking it might be harder."

“I suppose,” I say. “Anything’s possible. But for the child’s sake, I hope easier. Really it depends on where we raise our child.”

“Yes, that’s true”

“I suppose the world will always become harder for the next generation,” I offer.

Kumiko visits her parents and they make her promise to call if and when the baby comes. Her parents are typical if not extraordinary. Her father came here as a student and acquired a law degree, something she also did. Soon afterwards, he met a Japanese-American woman and they married and had Kumiko. She has no siblings and very few cousins. Since her father returned every summer to Japan, Kumiko was exposed to Japanese culture, but she often says how she feels more comfortable in America, more familiar with English than Japanese, hungry for pancakes instead of rice.

I phone my parents and stop our mail, begin packing and shave. I decide to buy my parents many things I believe they would want. I purchase vitamins and assorted nuts, maple syrup and other dried goods—things that would cost at least double or triple in Korea. But only in America can you buy such quantities of things, only here did the idea of needing such large amounts erupt. It’s different in Korea because there is limited space. I only imagine it is why Koreans think and act a certain way.

On the porch, I drink Earl Grey and peer out. There are tall trees that separate us from the next development. It’s cool outside, but not cold. Lights twinkle and flicker. Someone just arriving home, perhaps someone leaving, about to meet a friend or spouse for a late dinner—possibly a night cap. Maybe they’ll discuss the weekend or an upcoming vacation plan. Afterwards they’ll stumble in and fumble for each other. Clothes will come off. Shoes will hit the floor. She might whisper something in his ear

and he might scoop her up and place her softly on the bed. It might have been weeks since they've felt this young, might have been weeks since they've felt the urge. Or perhaps they're young, newly weds. Perhaps this is their routine, a simple distraction from the hard life ahead or present. I sip my tea and stare out. I hear a dog yelp in the distance and turn the porch light off, and just sit not expecting anything.

In the morning I go out for the paper and run into our neighbor, Ethan, who is a writer and also teacher and someone who has lived in this area for the better part of his working life.

"How's Kumiko?" he asks.

"She's fine, still sleeping. And Judith?"

"A pleasure after twenty five years," he says smiling.

Ethan and Judith have been married for a much longer time than I have even known Kumiko. What I see in their relationship is what I hope we are moving towards. In their joking manner, and in their subtle sarcastic talk, I see two people who've withstood a lifetime of ups and downs, and survived something I cannot put into words.

"We'll be heading south soon. Judith can't stand this weather you know."

"It's mild so far," I say. "But that sounds like fun."

"It'll be good to go fishing and seeing some old friends. So how's the research these days?"

Ethan knows the issue I'm tackling and even sympathizes with me having written books about the Holocaust and having his own grandparents survive the gas chambers. We haven't had deep conversations or really spent the night over drinks discussing our

backgrounds. It's not for a lack of wishing, but a lack of timing. We've planned outings and dinners, but have never gotten past these driveway conversations—but these I do treasure.

“Difficult wouldn't describe it honestly.

“Well, you know, history is always there. Uncovering it, that's the really nasty part. Getting your hands dirty with the reality of such things.”

“How'd you handle it last time?” I ask.

“Judith and I agreed to live separate lives at moments. I was knee deep in it sometimes. It was just horrible. But, at the same time, there was a kind of slow meditation involved. I got a deeper sense of something important, something beyond myself. I suspect you'll understand that soon enough if you haven't already.”

“I hope so,” I say.

“Well, Judith is awaiting the newspaper. Just remember, it's not a pretty profession, history, but a necessary one.”

Inside I decide to shave and think of what Ethan has said. We haven't known each for too long, but long enough to begin to respect one another, not for our work or research so much, but for being people.

“Are you okay?” Kumiko asks because I'm staring into the bathroom mirror.

“Sure. It'll be good to see my parents—”

“I didn't ask that,” Kumiko says.

“—haven't spent much time in Korea since high school. Sometimes it feels so foreign to me. I guess I've become too accustomed to American food and culture. Not that I understand everything totally.”



“Betwixt and between” she says smiling.

“Something like that,” I say and rub my chin looking at a mole and feeling the growth beneath.

“Hey, have you remembered your dreams lately?” she suddenly asks.

“Actually, somewhat,” I say. I peer deeper into the glass before me and speak as though to myself. “It’s strange, really, I mean—I can recall having a dream, but the details are so fuzzy. It’s right there, on the tip of my brain, but for whatever reason, I just can’t remember the order.”

“I had a dream we had a dog,” she says.

“Oh,” I say in surprise. “What kind?”

“Hm,” she says. “A golden one.”

“Shall we get one then?” I ask.

“You’re enough for me,” she says laughing.

My wife is in tan shorts and has short athletic socks on. She is wearing a yellow cotton shirt with three buttons, seashell earrings from our trip to the Cape last year, and a yellow hair ribbon. Part of her attire resembles a young school girl, and another part exudes that of a woman. The bulge lends to femininity— it represents womanhood. I am happy that my wife is pregnant again. And it will be nice to have another voice in the house, someone who reflects both of us.

#### IV

Our flight is for the most part comfortable. We sit in coach because the tickets already cost us over two thousand dollars. Since we had a fund for our first child, we had some savings, but still, it costs a lot to fly to Korea.

We watch movies and listen to classical music to pass the time. Kumiko mostly sleeps. I cannot. So in between reading my books on comfort women and “The Nanking Massacre,” I look at her—her vulnerability, her innocence. I suddenly think of the author of the book I am reading, Iris Chang, and of her suicide. I wonder what she must have been thinking after writing her book, after researching that devastation. I wonder if I am strong enough to handle this meeting because part of me feels that she didn’t give up, but couldn’t continue on with what she had discovered.

I study Kumiko’s features. She has smooth wrinkleless skin. Only when she frowns do I see hints of the wrinkles beginning. Her nose is tiny like a chestnut. Her ears do not stick out too far and her silver earrings glisten beneath the dim lighting. She looks a lot younger when she sleeps.

Her nose suddenly twitches and I take her hand, feel a slight squeeze in return. Her hair is lightly dyed so it is not entirely absent of color. It is cropped short; she can barely tie it back now. She’s not wearing makeup but her skin has a soft glow as if she has just woken up after a long night’s rest. Her eyes are dark, but very rounded, somewhat unusual for Japanese or even a Korean woman.

She has a small mole underneath her lower lip and another one above her left eyebrow. She has a slight overbite but no gap in between her two front teeth. She breathes through her nose and with each exhalation I hear a slight whistling sound as if

something is blocking her airway. I resist the temptation to squeeze her nose, wake her up, and kiss her.

We have a short layover in Kansas and eat ham sandwiches and drink black coffee.

“Everyone really looks alike here,” Kumiko says.

I look up from my sandwich, which is extremely thick and falling apart.

“I guess they do. I wonder if any of these people will be stepping out here,” I say.

“This airport seems more like a middle point for most people.”

The airport is bustling; the intercom is noisy and regular. Our flight wasn’t so crowded, but now I think, when we fly to Los Angeles, it will be much more uncomfortable. I help my wife to the restroom and while I wait, I visit the snack shop and buy gum, water—a sports magazine. I hear the intercom again but it’s not any clearer. People continuously filter through though some look more occupied than others. There is only a thick sheet of glass that separates us from where we will be with the early boarders.

Once we board the new plane, I feel tired. Kumiko yawns and buckles in and takes my hand. Lately, she sleeps a lot and is sometimes depressed. I know it’s the pregnancy, but cannot offer her much solace. Sleeping, I think, is the best thing for her. Before our plane even takes off, she is gone.

I read for awhile and take notes. When that becomes impossible, I read the magazines in front of me by the small, white emergency bags. I pull my wallet out and check its contents. Credit cards, some cash, business cards and some coupons. I look at my drivers license and then at a picture of Kumiko. I study the picture not knowing exactly why I’ve pulled it out. I suddenly want to cry a little but resist the urge. I put the

photo back and press the button for the stewardess to bring me some coffee. I drink it and look out the window at the whiteness. Before I go under, I look out the window and see frozen tundra—whiteness, and think we must be over Alaska.

## V

The voice seems familiar. It tells me to dig and that if I look up, my family will suffer, will die. The rain is pelting hard like hail, and I stretch my neck out focusing on keeping my eyes shut tight. Inside, I want to scream, and I want to lunge up with all my might. But I dig. And dig. And the rain does not let up even a little.

## VI

When I wake up, I look at my wife, who is watching a young mother feed her baby. This image tells me something important but I do not know what. The baby is calm, peaceful. There is no sign of an eruption of necessity. The mother has long hair with a yellow hair piece. She appears tall but it's difficult to tell because she's sitting. Either the husband is in the bathroom or at the arrival gate, or somewhere far, far away.

Lately, I have dreams, but can only remember parts of them—the parts that reflect tangible living things and not so much thoughts or emotions. I don't wake up with a sense of urgency. Again, I try to recall my dream from a few days ago, but to no avail. I think of my wife's dream and of the dog and suddenly remember a fox. But those dreams seem such a long time ago. And things have changed. Lives lived.

“Who's picking us up—is someone getting us,” Kumiko asks sleepily.

“A colleague, Jung-ho,” I say.

“That’s nice. It’s always nice having someone waiting for you. When we visited Japan those summers, my aunt always picked us up. And we always tried to see who would catch the other one first.”

A baby begins to sound and Kumiko quickly cranes for it.

The baby my wife is looking at is beginning to show signs of life and restlessness of a longer flight. The young mother gently pats the baby on the back and rocks slowly. The baby soon complies with her efforts but not without some cries.

“To think we were eating ham sandwiches in Kansas a few hours ago and before that, drinking tea at the school café,” Kumiko says wide awake now.

“Yes, time is weird when you’re on a plane for so long. Sometimes you wonder if you’ll ever touch the ground again.”

“It’s quite a journey,” Kumiko says glancing out the window which is now completely dark. “I could never wait to get off when I was younger.”

We cross the twilight now. It’s a strange sentiment to see both night and day converge. I sometimes wonder if this is where we go when we die, but it’s a fleeting thought. It’s beautiful at the same time, I think. I begin to think of what I’ve read. The atrocities are too much to bear. While history prepares oneself for such things, it can never prepare oneself about the idea of it never stopping. There is always a kind of foreshadowing in history that never seems to be respected or even noticed until it’s too late.

The rest of the flight is peaceful if not long. I sleep a little more and Kumiko sleeps deeply, again. The baby has settled in and does not make a sound until we begin to descend. It’s nighttime in Seoul and as I peer out the window, lights pollute the sky,

reflect the modernization, and does little to remind its inhabitants that civil war had leveled it only decades earlier. We've arrived, I think, we've arrived. I think of our morning routine in the states. We'd be getting up and having breakfast, coffee. Perhaps I'd be talking with Ethan.

Jung-ho meets us at the gate, shakes my hand and. He's a little taller than me and has no signs of grey. His skin is dark and his smile is pleasing. He's dressed in jeans and white Nikes. He is also wearing a large grey pea coat and red baseball cap with a single letter H on the front.

He bows at Kumiko who also bows. And although it is custom to bow lower, Jung-ho knows Kumiko is pregnant and tries to prevent her from this action. Kumiko smiles lightly as he grabs her arm. We all smile a little in the spaces of silence that erupt out of an unspoken understanding.

I don't feel strange bowing. It's been a long time, maybe a decade, since I have had to engage in such traditional mannerisms in Korea. Even in America, yes, I have Korean friends who I easily and readily exchange such things with, but America has also spoiled me and some of them. Leaving one's home cannot completely obliterate ingrained culture, but it can surely put a kink in it.

Jung-ho first takes us to our hotel with which we will stay a few nights before settling into a dorm at the local university for the summer. Arriving at Korea University reminds me of my own college days though they were in America. Seeing the students dispersed throughout talking and smiling, engaging one another in their own joys and problems—I suddenly realize I am home.

After we have dropped off our luggage, Jung-ho takes us to his home for dinner. The ride is smooth and quiet inside his large, but domestic Hyundai. Traffic is normally terrible in Seoul—the burgeoning city it has become—but Jung-ho maneuvers with ease as if he was born to drive here. Much of Seoul’s surface resembles New York City. The throngs of people, taxis, and neon signs. Night tries to take over; tries to reduce the city to slumber, but it cannot win against the brightness of human invention. The people will sleep when they are ready to sleep I think. This is Seoul. The stop and go movement of cars and buses all racing to inch themselves closer to their objective. The honking and speed. The American establishments. The living.

Jung-ho’s wife greets us politely and introduces their two young daughters both of whom exude characteristics from both Jung-ho and his wife. Their names are Ye-jin and Ye-rim and I imagine what our child might become.

“How are you sweetie?” I say to the younger one who has her hair in pigtails.

“Good,” she says very politely and bows.

Jung-ho tells them to wash their hands before dinner and before he can remove his coat, they are both gone.

“How was your flight,” his wife asks.

“Long,” I say and smile.

“Not too bad,” my wife adds.

“Good,” she says. “Please, sit down here.”

She brings us tea and offers me a beer which I gladly accept. Jung-ho also has one and my wife and he drink tea—discuss the baby.

Jung-ho's apartment is nicely furnished and very clean. There is no carpeting, only smooth waxy, wooden floors. The gleam is almost too much to look at, but the kitchen counter exudes a bit of normalcy with mail scattered, keys and cell phones, a pocketbook, and small plant. Two massive bookshelves are on either side of his large television. He has Korean newspapers on the coffee table, but also English and Japanese ones. A Chinese dictionary. I notice a copy of Iris Chang's book and other books I've been reading. His two daughters reappear and we all talk a little before dinner.

## VII

That night I was in the woods chasing the *kumiho*. The dream did not start out at the campsite with my parents, but with me running frantically as if someone or something were chasing me. Only when I thought I had cornered it, I was in a dug out hole looking up. A man peered down and smiled. He offered his hand to me and as I tried to climb out, it began raining, hard. At the moment, I became very afraid and let go of his hand. He continued to watch me; his face emotionless.

The next day is Saturday and we head back to Korea University to discuss the research project concerning the living comfort women. We are trying to present an historical account of the few surviving comfort women. In doing so, we hope to bring to light these women's stories so the world will not forget.

But we have to work fast. The women are older now, and many are living in horrible conditions, many have no family. Where others have failed, we hope to extract the truth. Historical accounts must be noted and compared. Documents must be sorted and dissected. People who claim these events never happened, or Japanese nationalists



who try to deny Japan's role in the war, in these particular atrocities, must be heard, even respected. They must be heard so we can further our own truth and so that these kinds of crimes will, hopefully, never occur again. But it's tiring and tedious. There is no glory in writing about war and the history of mankind, only a kind of simple satisfaction of uncovering the truth among half truths and complete lies. A historian's job is a solitary existence. Jung-ho and I know this. Though we live apart half way around the world, we can sympathize with one another. But we will not open up deeply; we will not release any emotion or tears together.

In his car he tells me of the current economic situation, tells me I should, if I'm interested, look for a place south of the *Han* River now because of steadily increasing prices. Before we enter he smokes a cigarette, and for the second time, my surroundings sweep me away. In the distance, I can make out what I believe are the *Namsan* Mountains.

Our creation myth is one that involves a bear and tiger who wanted to become human. They prayed near a sandalwood tree. Hearing their pleas, the Heavenly Prince, who was already sent down to govern the peninsula of Korea by his father, the Heavenly King, gave the bear and tiger mugwort and twenty bulbs of garlic. The Heavenly Prince told them if they could survive eating these things and remain in the cave for one hundred days, they would become human. The bear and the tiger ate the garlic and the mugwort and went into the cave. But the tiger ran away shortly, because it could not stand sitting inside the cave and eating only garlic and mugwort. However, the bear endured and after twenty one days was transformed into a beautiful woman. The woman was joyous and prayed to have a child by the sandalwood tree. She became the queen and soon after she gave birth to *Dan-gun*, or the First King of Korea.

“It’s not easy. Some of them won’t even acknowledge that they were comfort women,” Jung-ho says. “Some don’t even want to come forward.”

“It’s understandable,” I say.

“The Japanese government doesn’t make it any easier either.”

“I’ve read.”

“Did you know about Iris’s death?” I ask.

“Yes, it’s terrible. I can’t imagine what was going through her mind.”

“I imagine we can guess,” I say.

“I suppose. History—it has a kind of grip on you sometimes. It’s been hard on my kids sometimes because I don’t see them often. And when we do things together, I get really upset like something terrible is about to happen or should.”

“I’ve thought about hitting Kumiko before,” I add.

“Because of the work? I guess I can’t say that I’ve always been able to contain my own demons. But, I’m lucky my wife is so forgiving. I don’t know where I’d be without her or my children.”

“We’ve—just we’ve had some conversations that pushed our marriage, really our identities to the limits. I’d say we’re both pretty lucky.”

His office is, in comparison to his home, a mess. Books stuffed with sheets of paper sticking out from all angles clutter every available space. They’re countless journals and papers strewn about. Four mugs half-full lay around, some with coffee, some with tea, others with water. The ground is covered with more books, stacked. Pens and pencils, an eraser. Calendars from China and Japan. A traditional Korean mask hangs

crookedly on the wall as does a small Korean flag and a poster of the national football team. A picture of his wife and children is evident near his monitor which is caked with dust. The things that grab my attention, however, are the photographs he's handling like a nervous child who's witnessed something life changing. He offers them to me.

The photographs have a grainy quality to them much in contrast to the gleam and the smoothness of the paper they're printed on. The clearness of each girl's expression, their face caught in the moment, is evident if not loud. One girl, who Jung-ho points out is the survivor I will interview, is flanked by other girls her own age and perhaps even younger. Her expression though is void if anything. It is in stark contrast to the other girls who bear their positions earnestly as if procuring the camera to retain a part of them that has already been lost. Despite her look, it is easy to guess her youthfulness. The slightly chubby cheeks and hair drawn back tight. And one singular mole near the bottom of her lip. Her hands remain locked on her legs and her whole body seems to rest as if she were floating.

Jung-ho gives me her address and some more books.

"I've heard she's a lot more willing to speak than the others."

"I see," I say fingering the photo. "You ever think of cleaning this place?"

"Did my wife put you up to that," he asks while he cleans his glasses.

"No, I was just curious."

He looks at a mug, picks it up and sniffs it. "I've got a system here, really."

"Seems so," I offer.

"I think she's lives alone. It's not far from here," Jung-ho says fingering coins in his pocket. The gentle clinking suggests he's thirsty. I offer to buy some coffee and we go

down to the entrance where the machine is located. He offers me a cigarette and I accept. I think it's been years since I've last smoked but for some reason, it seems right. And I feel a slight numbness after I inhale, hold, and then exhale.

"This stuff won't get any easier," he says.

"I appreciate you going to interview her. I think I'm exhausted from the last few I did. My wife—my wife would prefer me to focus on something else, you know?"

"I would think so," I offer, but am suddenly distracted by some laughter. A group of young college students, girls, approach us.

"Really, what am I supposed to tell my daughters if they ask me what it is I do?"

"The truth."

"It's only a matter of time for the oldest."

## VIII

When I arrive back at the hotel, Kumiko is lying on her back listening to music, her head slowly moving with the sounds that echo inside her small ears—inside their small ears. Before I sit beside her, even before she has the sense to glance up because of my presence, I look at her and feel a pang in my heart. What will become of us, I venture to the part of my brain that is so far hidden from the person Kumiko knows and loves, that I have never questioned it myself, not until now. It is here where I struggle between who I am and what I will ultimately become. Here, I do not exist in the middle of two worlds. I do not have to choose a language or sentiment because, here, everyone cries the same way, everyone laughs the same way, and everyone is the same. There is no designation of races or inability to forgive. No one draws imaginary lines or argues over

trivial instances. Home is where I make it and with whom I make it with. I realize that the woman in front of me has, in some ways, become more than my wife. Home is not always where one comes from or where streets are familiar or even where one has had such experiences that have shaped his life dramatically.

She opens her eyes and taps the floor lightly without looking over. The space encompassing her has been penetrated. But, really, I think, she's known I was here all along, watching.

"Are you supposed to be lying down like that?"

"Sure, why not," she offers then moves a bit until she's leaning against the sofa.

"I'm just not sure you should lay down like that being pregnant," I say.

"It's okay. I was just resting I've felt so tired and a little sick."

"Then why not go to bed?"

"I guess I dozed off. But how'd your meeting go?"

"It was fine. I meet with the comfort woman tomorrow morning. She's not far from here."

"That's good."

"Yeah."

"Did you call your parents yet?"

"They're coming tomorrow to see us. My father's been a little sick so they didn't come here earlier like they had planned."

"Is it serious," Kumiko asks.

"I'm not sure."

After my wife is settled in and dozing I begin to review my notes. Later, I am huddled over Iris Chang's book, barely able to keep my eyes in focus before I go under.

Walking beneath skeletons of trees, I look above to see the earth's twinkle. For what seems to be a lack of color, my thoughts become demure. I bring my gaze ahead of where I am, and a dog suddenly appears as if a thought had forced it. It remains complacent at my side and it, too, is looking ahead. Where the dog came from I cannot be certain but I have a strong feeling I have encountered it elsewhere. We continue our march in silence.

After what seems a long time, we reach a house on a hill with a single light on. There are mountains in the distance. As I approach the house, I again feel I have seen this before. I push the door open but it feels weightless in my hand. When I enter the house, I instinctively hear a baby's cry from the room upstairs. The dog walks into the living room and lies down. It yawns before eventually falling asleep. As I walk upstairs, the baby's cries stop and I hear a woman's voice. I listen hard and realize she's singing a nursery rhyme.

I begin to walk upstairs but the woman's voice seems to get lower. As I approach the door to the baby's room I hear nothing. Then I am standing above the crib—an empty crib. There is a woman in the corner crying softly. I feel the need to touch her and walk towards her. She looks familiar, but she is not someone I instantly recognize. As I kneel down to touch her I appear outside again lying on my back staring directly at the moon, now full. The dog comes out and nuzzles my hand as if he wants something, but I just stare at the moon. The mountains appear again as I stand.

The dog's head suddenly lifts and turns, his front leg tightens in anticipation. And then he is off, fast, into the woods.

There is a horrible stench in the air and it is strange because not even the unified sound of insects can be heard. It's as if the whole world is holding its breath. Evening has once again turned into that meaningless time when you begin to wish. And you find yourself regretting past things and longing for home, for familiarity.

There is a cadence to your thoughts if you try. But also an ebb and flow that hinders the possibilities of stark truth, nakedness. Perhaps the obscene.

The sky is clear. Dark. Penetrating.

When you enter the barracks, constructed on land now deemed the Emperor's, there are banners flowing down on either side that read: *Asia for Asians* and *Light of Asia: Japan's blessed emperor...*

These particular stations are tiny crude inventions if they are anything.

Shacks and huts. Hung sheets. Congestion.

They do not silence anything or provide privacy. They are closely knit together. They form one ugly fluctuation among the war and its victims. They reverberate with the nature of their construction, and their purpose.

Iron. Water. Oxygen.

The eventual outcome of these manifestations is to appease the morale of troops— to prevent rape. But they do neither.

This is where you come.

This is where you wait.

Inside one of the rooms a girl remains in a huddled position on a cot that slinks downward. When she moves it creaks slightly. But she does not move often. She does not say a word and there is an immense silence weighing down the room—a kind of slow suffocation as if a noose were slowly being tightened around your neck.

You wonder how she was transported here. Did she volunteer for the war effort (or was she kidnapped?) As you reach for your boots beneath the cot, she suddenly moves and tries to grasp hold of something, perhaps to strike you though most likely to defend herself from the next soldier.

This is instinct.

But no girl has been able to retaliate in any way. Those that have tried are tortured and shot, often made an example of.

Bodies collecting in a makeshift grave.

Even speaking Korean is considered an offense punishable by death. The girls must only speak Japanese. One girl is decapitated, another hung to reveal the seriousness of the commands. Many more are tortured in ways that leave most of the girls submitting to their wartime roles. Some attempt and commit suicide if given the chance.

She does not cry. She has no time for that. She only looks at you though you cannot tell what she is looking for. Outside the barracks soldiers are lined up and the movement of their shadows gives impetus to the future. Like primal beating, the harshness of their language accentuates the situation and you suddenly feel the heat of the night penetrate you harshly as if this girl's eyes were suddenly witnessing a soldier slicing at your innards.

(Would she smile or have the same look of vacuity?)



Amidst this thought you stumble and fall to the ground as if you really have been cut into. But your hands break your fall and you see no blood.

Dirt. Sand. Softness.

As you lift yourself up, you feel very ashamed and reach into your pocket and search for candy. You also feel the slips of paper that allow you these moments. You offer her some candy, but you know this is pointless. Looking at her, you wonder where she came from, what town she was born in, perhaps who her parents are, and if she has any siblings. You wonder what she looks like when she smiles. You probe deeper and think of her before the war. You imagine her life was stable if not a daily struggle in Korea. Perhaps she had even enlisted in the war effort to help the emperor's cause.

The trees begin to shift outside, causing the leaves to rustle and they remind you that while death is permeating throughout the air, the world is still turning, babies are crying for their mothers, fathers are playing with their sons, perhaps people are returning home. Their movement prompts you to stand up and button your shirt quickly.

Her eyes do not leave yours as she clutches her waist. There are remnants of blood. It's somewhat dry so you suspect that someone before has claimed her chastity, broken her hymen. Her hair is braided and it's a sure sign of her chastity. Even her skin exudes a sense of innocence, of clarity and elasticity. Her hair still has a healthy sheen to it. So you think she is new.

In the end you succumbed to the normal yearnings of men on the daily brink of death. You gave into.

Warmth and friction. Departure.

You would do anything to release yourself of the pressure of having killed so many people, of having witnessed so much carnage even before you were ready. War is not a pretty thing. But it is beautiful—yes; it's fleeting and lingering like some awful perfume that one gets accustomed to, an odor that only others can detect. You know there is a thin line between life and death.

The insects' cries become louder, drowning out her attempts of speech, and you falter with any kind of response. You are at a loss for words, but you are not obligated to engage in conversation with this girl—no one is. The crickets' unison reminds you of another insects cry, the cicadas. When you were younger you were like any other person in Japan when the cicadas made their cry.

You put on your socks dusty from the floor. Next you put on your shoes, tie the laces, and close the makeshift door lightly, resisting the temptation to look back like before.

As you walk down the corridor, the lantern above rocks back and forth gently. It creaks lightly. It's a dim light and you hear sounds that seem unnatural at first then remind you that a war is going on. Other girls are crying, some screaming, though many remain silent. The smell is strong before you reach the exit.

Sweat and urine. Blood.

There are flashes in the sky and the smell of mortar as you continue from the comfort station. With each blast, you unwittingly become comfortable in your movement away. Crossing a small open field, you pass by other men, though they are completely silent in their approach. You begin to hear the sound of crickets less the further you remove yourself from the station. Once again, you think of where that girl has come from. You

wonder what kind of life she has had. You venture to think she has siblings and a dog, a father who dotes on her and a mother who is harsh though still wants her to be partially educated. You think it would be nice to date such a girl. Pushing your hands into your pockets and whistling a tune you pull out a cigarette, light it and exhale. The moon allows you to see just far enough ahead, and there is a light in the distance.

## IX

I wake up and am breathing heavily. I rub my eyes and suddenly have the urge to pee. So I stumble to the bathroom, leave the switch off and sit down. I wash my hands and go to the tiny kitchen for a glass of water. The clock reads 2:10am. It's 1:10pm in Maryland and I'd be eating a sandwich, maybe sipping soup. I dump out the glass of water and return to bed though I am not sleepy. I look at my wife sleeping peacefully and touch her shoulder. She's warm and I feel the coldness in my feet from having been up.

When I wake up Kumiko is gone, but I smell coffee and know she's in the kitchen.

"You're up early," I say.

"Coffee?" she asks.

"Please," I say. "Hey, I had a strange dream last night and I remember most of it."

"You did?" she asks in surprise. "I had one too."

"Oh," I say. "Are you okay?"

"What happened in your dream," Kumiko asks.

"We had a dog," I say. "And a house."

"We had a girl," Kumiko says.

Kumiko is buttering a piece of toast and then begins to cry. In all the time I've known my wife, she has never really cried. So I think it is good—but, I don't know why she is crying. I approach her and pull her close.

“What's wrong,” I ask.

“It's nothing. Just hormones,” she says wiping tears from her face.

“We had a daughter,” I say quietly to her. “That's nice.”

“She was beautiful,” Kumiko says and hands me a plate. “Beautiful.”

Outside the city is in full motion. I peer out the window and can see students crossing the courtyard. Further out, traffic is moving slowly. It looks cold and I think I should shower, shave, and get ready to catch the main line.

I take the main line—the oldest subway line. It's surprisingly crowded to me, but then I can recall my high school days and the extra lessons after class, the all-nighters, preparing for the entrance examinations. I remember that seeing students still in their uniforms in the evening, and in groups, is not such a strange picture—not in Korea. Students, business men and women. Young wives and babies. Old men. *Ajoshis* and grandmothers. They carry backpacks and purses, groceries and snacks. Some fiddle with change in their pockets while others anxiously mouth a cigarette or open and close their hand phone. The ride is rough and jarring but I have a firm grip on the railing above. I forgot how clean the subway is in Seoul. I peer out the window and at the city screaming by, its fluctuations matching my heartbeat. I lose myself in my reflection and I am suddenly thrust back to my childhood when I would take the subway to my after school academies where I learned English and writing.

When I was a child my routine consisted of roughly the same thing and rarely did it ever diverge from anything ordinary. My father, at that time, was hardly around and my mother clung to her motherly duties, which meant, and since I was the only child, to admonish me for any mistake, any failure. I was to be the child who conquered English and who would someday carry the title, “Doctor...” I was to graduate highest and from the best university. I was to make no mistake that would bring shame to my family and I was to understand this from the beginning.

A child cries for his mother. I glance over at her. She’s a petite woman, pretty. She’s wearing a white jacket with faux fur lining around the hood. She’s wearing dark colored jeans and pointed dress shoes. But she lacks self assurance, strength. She’s dressed like a young college girl, and not a young mother. If I was to glance quickly, one might even think this was her baby brother or cousin. Her child is relentless and she only mildly reacts as if she knows this will do no good. I reach in my pocket to find something that will appease him. I offer her child candy, but not before smiling and quickly gaining the child’s favor with direct attention.

“Thank you,” she says.

“It’s nothing,” I offer and look out the window again.”

“I don’t know what to do with him these days. He just cries a lot.”

“How old?” I ask searching for more candy.

“He’ll be four in a few months,” she says.

“I’m sure he’ll grow out of it. I’m sure I was no better.”

She smiles at this thought as if she, too, is recalling a past moment, as if part of her had forgotten she was ever that age. And she suddenly appears more assured about something important, but I haven't a clue as to what she is thinking.

I get off a few stops before it reaches the end and with each step the reality of my foot exchanging energy from the cement below and pushing me on becomes more true and less dream like. I have returned, but for what? Eighteen years absence can change a person. I begin to wonder what has really brought me back home. Sure, it's the opportunity to meet and interview, even share a moment with someone whom history had tried to ignore, forget. It's a chance to remember my grandmother's generation and the reasoning behind such hatred and anger, tears and sorrow. It's a chance for my wife to experience another culture, another land, a chance for things to be forgiven and forgotten, released and honored.

I take out the directions Jung-ho gave me earlier and proceed. The neon repose of Seoul is overwhelming having spent the last few years in a quiet suburb, in a place where businesses close at nine in the evening, a place where people watch television, enjoy a beer within the confines of their home, peer from behind their curtains every so often when they hear a door shut, or children playing.

I suddenly feel overwhelmed. The sounds and smells ingrained in me bubble up. And I think I grew up here, went to grade school. High school. I was used to the twilight, used to studying more than sleeping, accustomed to pushing my physical limits and all without ever questioning why. I played soccer on dirt fields with my classmates. We laughed and joked. We knew folk tales. We had our own version of Cinderella, our own games. My day consisted of taking the subway to school, it involved studying after

school, eating *dukbuggi* and steamed buns with friends. I visited parks and theme parks with friends. I kissed my first girl here. I lost my virginity. And I planned to leave it all for the lore of America, for the education America had to offer.

I stop in a bakery and buy a small cake. Coffee. The woman working behind the counter is pretty and thinks she recognizes me, but I tell her I just arrived. She has no idea that I am a more than a decade removed from what seems natural to her. She has no idea I've spent the better part of my twenties and thirties in America. And she doesn't realize what, if anything, that means. She asks me about my hometown—hears the accent slightly. I tell her and she smiles. She's from there too. I smile and pay and resist the urge to look back. I think maybe we did know each other. In another time, we could surely have been classmates, lovers, even man and wife. Her slightly curly hair pulled back tight with a fashionable hair piece, her pale pink cardigan and light dusting of make up, her soft lips and round eyes make me long for Kumiko, make me suddenly aware of my manhood and I feel ashamed to have such thoughts about this woman.

I call home again and but my parents do not answer. When I call their mobile, they pick up and say they should be in Seoul within the hour. I double check that they have the address and know I won't be back till later. They agree to try and hold off until dinner, but will try to take Kumiko out some if she is feeling up to it. The idea of my parents and Kumiko wandering the streets of Seoul, sitting down and having a meal, even talking makes me feel odd. They will not speak in English, but Japanese. Kumiko speaks well, but my father will manage easily. His youth was spent learning Japanese as Kumiko would have if she had been born and raised in Japan. Only, my father was forced to learn Japanese during the occupation. I can only imagine how he will feel having to speak to

his daughter-in-law in a tongue he dislikes and feels such terrible memories. But, I think, they can communicate, they might reach some understanding.

Walking along the street past grocery and stationary stores, convenience marts and florist shops, the reality of being in Korea is suddenly overwhelming again. It hits me in waves, in little ripples. Each memory, each segment of time expands a little in my mind. It's not a full recovery of those memories, of those moments previously stored, but it suddenly feels comforting and familiar. Comparisons are inevitable. Perhaps, I have tried to assimilate too much during my college days in America. Maybe I even wanted to marry against my parent's wishes to prove to them that I was not a child, that I was not going to be everything they hoped for, expected. Maybe it is just a longing for something new, different.

People pass by on either side talking, laughing, sharing ice cream or snacks. Some friends are hand in hand, while other arms are over shoulders. Men and women hock their merchandise in deep robust voices. Some smoke and simply watch the crowds stream by. Other vendors call out. The smell of fish cake and hotdogs, sweet cakes and pizza fills the air. Small children hand in hand with their parents race by to some known and unknown destinations. Some walk slowly, others faster. The generation gap is too obvious and hurts the eyes. I only imagine that the generation that absorbed the occupation and war, that sacrificed itself for their children and their grandchildren, can find peace in this orgy of modernization, this fusing of western ideals.



I reach the address. I double check it and then push the front door open, hear the creaking sound. I walk up the steps and as the door closes behind am enveloped in utter silence.

## X

The door creaks open and a woman emerges from behind. She is small. And she looks like any other grandmother, like any woman who has lived a long and remarkable life. But something seems strange, even out of place. I know she has not had a good life, even an adequate one. I know she has suffered for years, for her whole life. I realize, perhaps, she still suffers, alone.

“You must be Dr. Lee,” she says.

“Yes,” I say making sure to speak as politely as I can.

She opens the door and welcomes me in, but I can feel in her words she is not totally comfortable with my presence, with what we might next discuss. I bow and offer her a small cake as the obligatory gift. She thanks me weakly.

With the cake in hand she leads me out of the tight alcove, passed a tiny kitchen, and into a small open room where the bedding has already been laid out. If I weren’t here for an interview, I’d be any other person visiting their parent or grandparent. She shuffles ahead of me slowly and each step is conscious on my part. Her room is immaculate. The fragrance almost sweet.

The warmth of the *ondol* floor at first seems to sear the flesh of my bare feet, but soon subsides. It’s something I almost forgot about Korea—something that I had loved as

a child. The curtains are drawn. And I imagine she spends most of her time in the shadows trying to forget. Or perhaps she's grown more comfortable here in memory.

She motions for me to sit and then disappears. When I hear the slight clattering of plates and cups being gathered, I stand up and go to assist her. She hands me tea and a slice of cake. She also has a bowl of sliced apples and pears. I feel at ease—at home with this routine. I might have had this same memory stored somewhere if my grandmother had not passed before I was born. I take her tray with the food and walk it into the main room. I help her to sit down.

We begin.

“I'd like to ask some general questions and then if you're okay, I have specific questions I'd like to ask you,” I say.

“I understand,” she offers.

“What is your story?” I ask.

She breathes in and seems to sigh. She closes her eyes. Silence.

“I was a young girl. We were not well off, but we weren't so poor. My mother stayed home to take care of the children, and my father worked various jobs. I was the youngest child. I had an older sister and brother. We all went to school for awhile until money ran short, and then only my brother went to school. By then though, my sister had been educated past elementary school. I had only begun. Because I was bright and curious and learned to read quickly, my teachers often told me if I had been born a boy, I would have had a good future—”

She stops and looks down at the floor, then up at me.

“Since Japan ruled us at that time, we always obeyed the officers. Coming home from a friend’s house, I was approached by an officer and a local leader. They told me to come with them. I hesitated, but they had told me my father was asking for me. Since he worked odd jobs and new many of our neighbors, I followed them.

We reached a truck. There were other girls inside, and I suddenly felt something was strange. I tried to turn to leave, but the officer grabbed my arm, hard, and pulled me close. He promised me a job and education if I got on board and said my father had set the whole thing up. I nodded and he helped me up.

The other girls were older than me, but Korean. I was twelve at the time. Once we stopped somewhere in *Busan*, we were taken aboard a larger freight ship. There were other girls inside, about twenty in all. Once inside, we were put together, handed clothes and shoes and given rice balls and pickled radish for our meal. Some of us talked and learned of each other’s hometowns. Some girls were very excited, but some of us were felt very strange.”

She sips her tea, both hands cupping the ceramic mug. I join her and as I bring the cup to my mouth the steam envelopes my face and for a moment I am not here in Korea with her. I am in her words, in her ordeal.

“We were told we were going to China to help with the war effort. While there, we would be partially educated. That sea trip changed everything for us. Many of us got sick. At one point, we went to the deck and saw that some of the other ships had been destroyed by opposing fire. We all knew a war was going on, but nothing prepared us for such sights. We were forced down below. Our ship was also struck and many thought we would go down. As I was running, a man pulled me into his room. He was Japanese and

he appeared to be a sailor or soldier of some kind. He pushed me onto his bed and pulled his pants off quickly. Since I was so young, I was very shocked by his behavior and tried to run, but he was so much stronger than me. In that moment, he took my virginity. I remember it being so painful. There was so much blood. I thought I would die there. And afterwards he simply put his pants on and left.

Our ship had not been hit too badly and we were able to finish our journey. But we were not in China. We figured we were in Taiwan. The man who raped me turned out to be a man named, Nakamura, and he was to be the captain in charge. When I met up with some of the other girls, I found out that many of them had been raped in the same way. From then on, we knew we were not going to work or school, but some of the girls still thought this would happen.

Since I was so young, Nakamura allowed me to clean and cook instead of going into the comfort station directly. I would wake up early and prepare everyone's breakfast. We ate around 8:30 and our only other meal was at 5:30pm. We never got meat unless there was a holiday and even then, it was only scraps. I continued to work in the comfort station for about two more years after which Nakamura was sent to another area to work and a new man, Tamada, took over. Oddly, after that first instance, Nakamura never touched me again. I became General Tamada's personal woman. He raped me after about the first day he was there. But sensing I was so young, he took pity on me and often took me out to restaurants and gave me small toys and candy. But if I tried to talk to him, he would get very upset. So I learned to do my work in silence and not mistake his generosity for kindness. In that first month, he only slept with me twice.

When I was sixteen, and had spent already four years in the station, Tamada told me he wanted to marry me. I was quite shocked. He proposed a plan and said when the war was over he would take care of me in Japan.”

“He wanted to marry,” I ask quite taken back.

“Yes,” she says.

“Of course, I said I would very much like to marry him. I realized that to survive meant to go along with whatever crazy idea or thought the Japanese had. He seemed very pleased with the idea and took me out to celebrate. I believe he was in his thirties at the time, and married.

During this time, I had some contact with the other girls who were of course being subjected to serving soldiers numerous times a day. I would know of this fate sometime later after General Tamada went back to Japan alone.”

“How long were you in the station for?”

“About eight years. I had not seen my family in over eight years. For the first few years, I had only been raped a few times so I was lucky. After Tamada went home, I was sixteen. The officers noticed I was not so young anymore and so they placed me with the regular girls. I had had some special circumstances until that point.

We were sent to another station. By now, the war was raging and soldiers would not always wait their turns. There would be men watching as one finished. Usually we were supposed to go clean ourselves with water and rags and then be ready for the next man, but at certain moments, with the war in the air, these men acted like wild dogs. We even had to be with them during our periods. They gave us cotton swabs and rags.

When the air raids began, we were taken to the nearby caves and underground tunnels. We ate with them and sang for them. And some of the men proceeded to rape us there on towels and blankets. They had no sense of compassion.”

“Did you ever try to escape or did others?” I ask.

“Once, early on, a friend had tried to at night. After most of the men had been serviced, she and a friend asked to use the toilet. The guards were reluctant so they brought them beer and entertained them by singing. They asked again, and this time the officers allowed them. Once out of sight, they ran. But they hadn’t realized the length of the field and within a few minutes other officers had caught sight of them running. They beat them severely and brought them back. Captain Nishida was so annoyed, and he was very different than Nakamura or Tamada had been, that he woke the other girls and brought them outside. He said, ‘These girls tried to escape. Do you know what we do to girls who try to escape?’ He pulled his sword out and with one swift motion cut one girl’s head off. The other girl was tied to a tree and shot. After that night, no one tried to escape. No one even talked about it. Captain Nishida had proved his point.”

She stops. Silence. It’s as if she is thinking of those two girls deeply. We decide to take a break. I help her to the bathroom and stand waiting as if I’m on guard. I suddenly feel strange and tell her to call me if she needs assistance. I sit down only feet from her in her tiny apartment on the third floor. We are in Southern Korea, hours by bus from Seoul in a little sea port village.

I look around. There is no indication of history. No pictures of children grown and with families of their own. No pictures at all. Just wallpaper and paint. The apartment is

sparsely finished. One small table in the corner and one small wooden chair occupy the space of Kim's world.

She comes back slowly and quietly. She could have stood in the darkness and looked at me. She could have tried to understand something about men. But she comes over and sits down. I rush to help her, and she accepts taking my hand. I relieve her weight with my own body; I help her sit down on the small pillow.

"What was life like when you returned?"

"What could I do? My parents were shocked when I came home. I can still remember my father's eyes when I came back. He was so sad to see me. They thought I was dead. I was so ashamed. I couldn't tell them what had happened. How could I tell them where I was?"

I told them I had gone to work overseas and educated at a women's school. All they wanted for me was to get married, to settle down.

But I couldn't fulfill their wish of getting married. That's all they wanted for me. They wanted someone to take care of me."

"I can understand that sentiment," I offer.

"But, how could I? Who would marry me? So my parents died with me unmarried."

"What did you do then," I ask.

"I left home again and went to work in a snack shop selling alcohol and snacks. You know, things change when you're gone. My family was still working hard, still poor. Things weren't suddenly normal when I returned. We went back to work and our usual problems.

Eventually, I married a widower, but he beat me. He drank and beat me. So I divorced him and opened a small store selling cigarettes and other small things necessary for life.

I don't have any children. The one step-son I had, died very young."

There is a silence but I am blank. I cannot form words to a sentence to say to this woman. There is nothing I can do for her, nothing I can say. I feel extremely reticent.

"Do you have children, Dr. Lee?"

"My wife is pregnant now," I say. I look for a picture in my wallet and offer it to her.

"She's very lovely," she says holding the picture close to her face as if inspecting every detail.

"If you could have something back, what would you want," I ask.

She's slow to answer, not because she's thinking about it, but because she's knows it too well.

"A child," she says slowly and clearly.

It is raining heavily when I begin my return home to the dormitory. The sky is a deeply painted gray and the wind is nonexistent. It's cold. Puddles are forming in the road's cracks and school children, returning home, are jumping into them. Adults rush by with their umbrellas, but pay no attention to the children who seem disinterested in them as well. Having just finished my assigned task, I wonder where they are headed, which companies they belong to, whose parent's these children are.



The children's laughter reverberates in my ears and makes me smile. I think of our child. Two girls walk hand in hand, their backpacks oversized for their frames. Some junior high boys race by. A couple of college students smoke and talk. A man and woman hold hands, separate momentarily as they are divided by the boys formation. I realize that I might miss my train and head down to the dryness ignoring the world behind me.

My feet echoes the loneliness of the underground station, each step ricocheting and repeating that empty feeling as if I were throwing marbles into a metal can, slowly. Only a young college looking girl stands waiting. Reading a book, she glances up at me and smiles then returns to her book. I feel completely alone and tap the floor with my umbrella, again listening to that echo. Eventually more people begin to line up for the subway.

Standing there beneath the city, I imagine Kumiko sleeping with our child. One hand beneath her head, the other resting atop our baby. Our baby, too, is peaceful in sleep oblivious to the outside world and all it contains. The baby breathes quietly as if amongst the dead. And all three of us are asleep somewhere far, far away.

In my dream it's raining. I am digging a hole and the ground becomes almost impossible to penetrate, let alone move piece by piece. The man is still there peering down at me. I catch him out of the corner of my eye. He does not say a word and his hands are by his sides. I throw the shovel down in to the muddied earth, and I turn. I want to scream at him, want to threaten him at this moment. I feel the anger and hatred boiling. I am not scared of what he will do. But when I finally look at him, when I at last make eye contact, the very contact that I had been so afraid of, I am shocked to see myself standing there peering down.

