

## “Boiled Cat” by Kim Munsu

Introduced by Bruce Fulton

Translated by Daniel Jacinto, with Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton

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Kim Munsu (1939–2012) was born in Munŭi, North Ch’ungch’ŏng Province, and was educated at Tongguk and Kungmin universities. He was a journalist and university professor in addition to authoring one hundred-odd stories and novellas and a dozen novels during a writing career extending over five decades. Like Yi Mungu, a fellow Ch’ungch’ŏng native with a similar life span, he was a gracious individual and an engaging writer.

“Chŭngmyo” (Boiled Cat), the story translated here, was published in three installments, in the June 1971, December 1971, and September 1972 issues of *Wŏlgan munhak* (Monthly literature), and then reprinted in 1972 in the author’s first story collection. Written shortly before the promulgation of Park Chung Hee’s Yusin Constitution, which strengthened the powers of the ROK president, it captures the tensions and uncertainties of a society still in recovery from the trauma of the Korea War, a society whose citizens come increasingly under police surveillance and are haunted by the misadventures of family members.

The recursive style of the story, a limited third-person narrative in which the protagonist is repeatedly assailed by memories both past and recent of fatal disasters, suggests that author Kim Munsu wished to re-create for his readers the experience of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), a signal symptom of which is intrusiveness. The protagonist appears to be traumatized not only by his unwitting revelation of his uncle’s hideout (an incident reminiscent of the crux of Pak Wansŏ’s 1975 story “Kyŏul nadŭri” [Winter Outing]) but also by his seduction at the hands of the uncle’s widow. The protagonist notes that karma may be linking these two formative experiences in his life, a possibility reinforced by the ending of the story, in which the protagonist is sealed in the same environment (an underground pit) as that of his uncle-in-hiding. Noteworthy also in this respect is the resemblance of the narrator

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both to his uncle, who was summarily executed upon his discovery by an enemy soldier, and to the tearoom waitress's brother, the casualty of an apparently self-determined car accident.

Readers might note that the birthday of the protagonist (May 10, 1939) is only five weeks apart from that of the author. Is it possible that in crafting this unusual narrative Kim Munsu was drawing on trauma he himself experienced coming of age in a period of national division, civil war, and autocratic rule? If so, then he is to be commended for tempering the horrors of "Boiled Cat" with sly humor and with characters who share a perhaps universal desire to find healing and closure in their lives.

## "Boiled Cat"

### 1

He stepped off the bus and turned down the alley. A two-minute walk and he would find another alley on the left. The first building on the left of that alley would be the bathhouse. Past the bathhouse and down that alley he would find the massive concrete wall staring him in the face as if to say, "Dead end!" First-time passersby would inevitably be confused by the imposing wall and either turn back or have to ask the old lady who ran the small shop across from the bathhouse whether the alley indeed ended there.

No longer, though, did anyone make such inquiries. A month or so earlier a sign reading, <<<Cotton Batting Shop, had been posted on the wall to indicate where the establishment was located farther down the alley.

He entered the alley with the bathhouse, glanced at the old lady hunched up inside her shop, and muttered, "Who gives a shit if someone wants to wipe his ass with chestnut burrs?" He'd been saying this for a month now— or more precisely, starting two days after the sign had appeared—whenever he passed her shop.

That was the day he'd been flagged down by the hook-nosed man in the bomber jacket who was sitting next to the old lady in the shop. He was about to pass them by when the hook-nosed man leapt to his feet and emerged from the shop crying, "Hey!"

"Sorry, are you speaking to me?" he had answered as he instinctively scanned the alley. But no one else was there. Only he who'd been summoned and the hook-nosed summoner. Why would this guy be calling to him? And so he repeated the question: "Excuse me, are you speaking to me?"

The answer was both blunt and pointed: "You see anyone else in this alley!?" The man glared at him. It was a bizarre situation. But strictly speaking, Hooknose was right. The next moment he regretted what he'd done. Why did he have to grovel like an idiot as if he'd committed some huge crime? And the *Are you speaking to me?* My God, he'd said it not once but *twice*, and so prim and proper with the *Sorry* and the *Excuse me* to this asshole who talked down to him — didn't he know he was being such a kiss-ass? Why couldn't he have come back with something like *What do you want?* or *What's your problem?*

While he was buried in these regrets Hooknose had walked up to him and unzipped

his jacket, produced a badge holder from inside and flashed it, then placed it back inside. Zipping up his jacket he said, "Let's go," spitting out the words in a grave tone and gesturing with his chin toward the entrance to the alley.

The next thing he knew he was following Hooknose into the police substation at the bus stop. And when he was taken into the night duty room he knew for sure that Hooknose was a detective.

"Know why we're here?" Hooknose asked.

"No, sir."

"You don't?"

He fell silent, lost in thought, as if this were an oral exam and he had to get his thoughts in order and somehow come up with the right answer. But he absolutely couldn't figure out why he'd been brought here. He couldn't even guess.

"You don't know. Is that what you're saying?"

"I don't really know, sir."

"You don't really know? So you kind of know, but not quite. Is that it?"

"It's not that, it's—"

"Then what the hell *are* you saying!?"

The ceiling and the paper-paneled sliding door seemed to tremble at the detective's outburst. Reminding himself he had to stay calm, he took a deep breath.

"Shall I tell you why you're here?" the detective continued.

"Yes sir, please do."

"Yesterday, you went down that alley *five* times. Is that correct?"

"Who said that?"

"Answer me, punk!"

"No, it is incorrect."

"Oh? What if I told you I have a witness?"

Which meant the old lady must have told him. *So what if I went down that alley? Five times, five hundred times, who gives a shit? Is she afraid I'm going to wear out the pavement or something?*

"Still, it is incorrect."

"Asshole!"

Before he knew it, Hooknose had whacked him across the cheek. The sound of the impact shook the ceiling and the sliding door.

"Incorrect—it was *seven* times!" His outburst likewise reverberated through the room.

"Oh, so only now does the truth emerge?"

"And it wasn't just yesterday."

"We know that, asshole. And guess what the little old lady at the shop said."

"What did she say?"

"She said you're always hanging around there. You're like the ghost of the alley."

"Ghost of the alley?"

"Yeah, asshole, a ghost. She thinks you're suspicious."

He smirked. *Suspicious? The ghost of the alley? How absurd.*

“Why do you keep going back to that alley, anyway?”

“Just going for a walk.”

“Oh, I get it—the son of a bitch likes to *walk!*” And again, Hooknose slapped him across the cheek.

His ears rang from the blow. Suppressing his surging anger, he shut his eyes and searched for answers. *So, I’m the proverbial guy who draws suspicion by bending over to fix his straw shoes in the middle of a melon field or by re-tying his hat strings under a pear tree? Then where’s the melon field? And who owns the pear tree? And how the hell did I end up looking suspicious?*

“Hu...what’s this one?...ri.”

He opened his eyes to see Hooknose frowning as he looked through the various IDs he’d taken from him; they were fanned out on a table like a hand of cards.

“Hu-something-ri, house number thirty, right?”

He realized Hooknose was examining his residence card and couldn’t read the second of the three Chinese characters designating the precinct where he lived. “It’s *p’yōng*,” he told the detective.

“Hup’yōng-ni, house number thirty?”

“That’s right.”

“Which *p’yōng* is it?”

“The one that means ‘field’—” Just then the door creaked open and a patrolman beckoned Hooknose with his eyes. And so the helpful explanation with which he meant to follow—that *Hup’yōng-ni* was known more familiarly as Twittül, “the fields out back”—was left perched on the tip of his tongue. Twittül, Twittül.... Suddenly his heart dropped with a clunk, just like a coin deposited in a payphone clatters into the coin box. This sensation was inevitably followed by the same nightmarish scene: He and the other kids in Twittül had gone out to Wōnbaemi Field to hunt grasshoppers, only to be greeted by a horrifying sight: a corpse wedged into the ditch surrounding the field. It was bent at a right angle, the trunk embedded in the muck and the legs raised so that the soles of its feet—still clad in dark sneakers—faced the sky. Above the bean leaves that covered the ridges between the paddies a long-headed grasshopper, what the locals called a dirt-hopper, was fluttering about. It had escaped him three times now, provoking him to no end, and damned if he would let it get away this time. He stalked the grasshopper with catlike steps and just as he was about to pounce, the grasshopper leapt onto the sole of the corpse’s sneaker-clad foot. He let out a shriek and toppled to the ground. The corpse had blended in seamlessly with the lush summer growth of weeds, shrouding itself as though ashamed of its unsightliness.

The corpse’s dark sneaker hung like a shoe showcasing a cobbler’s trade, encasing the bony white ankle from which the flesh had started to peel. At the time, he lacked both the discernment and the presence of mind to recognize that those sneakers belonged to his uncle. Instead he was gripped by a fright that paralyzed his entire being, a fright so dreadful that for two days afterward he remained in bed, delirious. Even now he could see the twinkle in his mother’s eyes as he regained his senses, almost as if she were right there in front of him. But it wasn’t until he began to see the world for what it was that he understood why

one morning around that time he had awakened to see his aunt lying beside him, her hair disheveled. He had a vague idea but it conveyed no sense of immediacy. It was like a strip of undeveloped film that had yet to be dipped in processing solution.

But as time went by, that incident had ever more sharply imprinted itself on him through the processing solution of maturity. At the same time, he began to realize what suffering really was. This realization was the prologue to the grand narrative of misfortune that was soon to befall him.

He and his naïve tongue! Boasting of his uncle's skill in shooting the pheasants that came to rest in the millet field, and emphasizing the glittering badge that identified his uncle as a second lieutenant in the National Defense Corps, he had allowed that submachine-gun-toting Commie soldier, clad in a uniform as green as the frost-stricken poplar leaves, to find his uncle in the tunnel beneath the fodder pile by the barn. He hadn't known his uncle was in hiding, and if he happened to awake in the middle of the night and hear his uncle murmuring from the room across the way amid the clattering of rice bowls, he thought only that his uncle had returned late at night from some far-off place. At any rate, it was because of him that his uncle, last seen being prodded off ahead of the soldier, had for some god-forsaken reason been reduced to a hideous corpse stuffed into a ditch alongside Wönbaemi Field.

The year he graduated from middle school he began seeing his uncle in his dreams. In these dreams, he would rush up and wrap his arms around his uncle's waist. But his uncle wouldn't seem the least bit happy; if anything, he was angry. "Uncle, I know I screwed up, I'm sorry!" He would pull and yank at his uncle's waist, but then it was no longer his waist—it was his legs. The legs of his uncle's corpse that was bent at a right angle and embedded in the muck of the ditch. The legs whose flesh had begun to peel from the bony white ankles. He would emerge shrieking from the dream, unable to breathe, his heart dropping with a riotous clamor like a coin clattering into a payphone box.

His thoughts had reached this point when he heard the door to the night-duty room opening. Probably Hooknose, back from his summons by the patrolman. And then he heard the detective's flustered voice: "Huh? What's going on here?" And felt the man's hands on his shoulders, shaking them.

"Hey! Look at me! What's wrong with you?"

He imagined Hooknose's bewilderment at the sight of his detainee, head buried between upraised knees, convulsing intensely. Then he felt his head being jerked up and wrenched back and forth. All that did was intensify his seizure. He still couldn't breathe.

"Hey, HEY!"

*Breathe. You have to breathe....* His mind had cleared, but his body wouldn't obey. *One last time!...* And heaving a great sigh, he finally felt the air flowing again. His convulsions had stopped.

"A—are you all right?" Hooknose had pulled up a chair and was sitting right in front of him. His tone, mild and concerned, was the opposite of the earlier interrogation.

"Yes. It's just that every now and then—"

"Every now and then you get these symptoms?"

He stared at Hooknose. *What's with the look? I'm not an epileptic, for God's sake.* Then managed a wry smile.

In response Hooknose, perhaps petrified by the thought of being found responsible for sending him to an early grave, switched to the sweetest tone you could imagine. The first of the sugary expressions, "I'm sorry things turned out this way," was followed by a string of cloying excuses: "I swear I'm not a bad person. It's just my job—you gotta do what you gotta do, you know?" and so on and so forth. The long and the short of Hooknose's spiel was that he had been brought in on suspicion of theft. Goods valued at 100,000 *wŏn*, including a television, had been taken from a home that happened to belong to the man who had put up the lofty concrete wall in front of it. This man was a community leader and the respectable president of a large textile factory in the area. It turned out that the actual burglar had just been brought into the substation. He was a factory employee who had frequented the president's home.

"I'm sorry how this turned out," Hooknose said again as he handed back the IDs, "but you really ought to take this opportunity to do something about your weird habit of hanging around. People have started calling you the 'ghost of the alley.'"

*So here we are, the melon patch and the pear tree. Walk tall, yes, walk tall...*

And past the old lady's shop he went.

"Who gives a shit if...!"

And as he walked tall he tried whistling but it came out sounding like the muffled squeak of an ill-fitting drawer. He found himself in front of the sign for the cotton batting shop. The sign on the wall was a straight shot from the front of the old lady's shop. He turned in the direction indicated by the arrow. Ahead of him the alley opened in a V. To the right was a smoke shop that doubled as a comic book outlet, and to the left, a grain store. He checked the time; his old wristwatch read two o'clock sharp. *Meaning thirteen minutes to two*, he muttered to himself while staring at the minute and hour hands. You wouldn't find it gathering moss, that watch of his—it was thirteen minutes fast.

A voice grazed his ear as he stared at the watch. It was Hooknose sending him off a short time earlier. *"Try not to give the old lady a hard time, okay?"* And then the same voice: *"Son of a bitch likes to walk!"*

From the police substation he'd gone back down the alley and past the old lady's shop. Suddenly he was reminded of the pawnbroker woman felled by Raskolnikov's axe in *Crime and Punishment*. More precisely, he was seized by an illusion of his own right hand bringing the axe down on the crown of the old lady's head.

He came to a stop at the smoke shop. Lighting a cigarette, he tried to recall how Dostoyevsky's novel began. *A young man emerged from the alley and walked hesitantly... toward the bridge.* Something like that. He felt as if the passage described his own wretched appearance as he stood hesitantly, where the alley forked.

*Alyona Ivanovna, Alyona Ivanovna... a young man emerged from the alley... and walked hesitantly toward the bridge.* He moseyed toward the alley with the grain shop. At the end of the alley with the smoke shop was his residence, where his aunt was waiting for him. His aunt, age

forty-three this year, was the textbook definition of a young widow. As she had aged she had become regretful, resentful, and resigned to her fate. She regretted marrying the second lieutenant who served in the National Defense Corps. She resented the division of the country. And she was resigned to the fact that all of this was simply her destiny. She was unaware of the secret he kept deep inside. And so she vehemently resented the divided country and cursed the submachine-gun-toting soldier who had sent her husband trudging off ahead to his death. But she couldn't have dreamed that her own nephew's naïve tongue had led to the Commie soldier's discovery of her husband in the tunnel. Not even the ace fortuneteller she frequented had divined this. Another fortuneteller, a famous one, had said to his aunt, "You never should have married into a widow-maker household."

The year he entered middle school his aunt had sold off the family's land in accordance with her fortuneteller's prognostication and had brought him to Seoul. Truth be told, even if his mother were still alive at the time, his aunt would have left to find a decent man to live with, so set was she on making her own destiny. But because his widowed mother had died of stomach cancer and he'd been left an orphan, his aunt was not free to go her own way.

And now she was waiting for him in the home that crouched at the end of the alley with the smoke shop. But he wasn't going home now. Instead he headed down the alley with the grain shop until he saw where it split into three more alleys like the prongs of a fork. These alleys were dead ends and he wouldn't be entering them. His destination was the window of the home with the iron gate that was halfway down the main alley on the right.

He went down this alley so that he could go past that window. Just thinking about the young woman inside made his heart race. She was fresh out of university—or so he believed. There was no basis for this conjecture, it was simply a blind assumption.

It was on a Sunday two months earlier that he had discovered her. He was waiting for his change from the man in the booth behind the display window of the smoke shop when the face of a woman flashed along the glass. He wondered if he was hallucinating—her face was an exact replica of that of the ideal woman he had imagined in his adolescence. But the image was no more an illusion than the click-clack of her high heels on the alley pavement. He was captivated. And even now, two months later, the heart's radiant flames that hid in every nook and cranny of this alley waited for him, ready to storm his heart in an ambush of ecstasy.

He arrived at the window to her room. It was shut, but although the curtains were open she was nowhere to be seen. He hovered about the window. Sending out one cloud of smoke after another, he cast quick glances inside, but as he expected, he wasn't to be graced with the sight of her. And even if she were to appear, what then? He could make do with a glimpse of her, even from afar. But it wasn't as if she would show up at the snap of a finger. He grew impatient. For the time being he couldn't be caught loitering, lest he draw suspicion again. And this time around he'd be mistaken for a big, bad spy rather than a petty thief. Such was the risk of falling under the public gaze.

He turned around so that he was facing the grain shop. On his way back he would pass the smoke shop, this time on the left, and the grain shop on his right where the two alleys joined at the V. And then he would see, stretching out to the left, the high wall enclosing the

textile factory president's home. At the end of the wall the alley would bend back to the right. And from there he would come upon the bathhouse to his right, the old lady's shop to his left, and finally the main street.

*What could her family name be? Chang?*

According to the nameplate on the metal gate to the home, she would have to be Miss Chang. But he had no solid proof of this.

*What could her family name be?*

*And what might Miss Chang be? Most likely a university student?*

Not a question to be solved by thought alone. To soothe his aching heart he tried to picture her standing before him. But for some reason he just couldn't re-create her face. And yet he'd seen her fleeting reflection in the smoke shop window—what had she looked like? He mobilized his powers of recollection but her face wouldn't appear. It was damned frustrating. He tried once more and the image of a face unfurled before his eyes. It wasn't her face but rather that of his aunt. "*So you're seeing someone these days—isn't that right?*" He could almost feel her tongue tickling his earlobe as she pressed him for an answer. He banished his aunt's face and tried again to picture the young woman. But she wouldn't appear. Again his aunt's visage came to life before his eyes, but this time she appeared just as she had that one time when he was young.

He had awakened drenched with sweat as though he'd just been fished out of the water. The *ondol* floor was blazing hot. And he was all by himself. He was certain that he'd gone to sleep lying between his mother and his aunt. Where were they? It was of course his mother's absence that hit him first, but his aunt too—her hair disheveled the last few days—was nowhere to be seen.

From the kitchen he heard the crackle of barley straw burning. Wondering why the floor was blistering hot, he opened the door. Just then it occurred to him that his mother and aunt were probably boiling grain to make taffy. He went to the kitchen and sure enough the two women were there. His mother was squatting before the firebox feeding it barley straw and at her side was his aunt, dressed in a white mourning skirt and jacket. He couldn't help but feel dismayed—they weren't making taffy. What they were doing he didn't learn until later. His aunt had placed a bowl of the purest well water on the low serving table with the curved legs. With her hands placed together, she was kneeling before it. Inside the cauldron bubbling on the cookstove was not taffy, but a cat. They were boiling a cat alive in order to soothe his uncle's spirit.

His aunt and the other women in the village had a penchant for catching cats and boiling them. It was a ritual prompted by a theft or a cheating husband. The spirit of the poor creature dying in the blazing cauldron would cling to the thief and blind him or latch on to the woman the husband cheated with and render her sterile. His thoughts returned to his aunt bowing before the imposing bowl of well water on the low table. He remembered her pleading, "Poor creature, you are boiling in the cauldron so that my dear husband may be avenged, so be not resentful. It is at the hands of my dear husband's foe that you have fallen into this sorry state and so, should you become a spirit when you die, we ask that you seize

that bastard and seek vengeance.” Watching his aunt offering up this prayer of sorts, her face glowing from the cookstove embers, he felt as if she herself had caught fire.

Fumbling among these memories, he was about to head back past the window when a woman’s face leapt into view. He barely managed to suppress a shout. It was the very same face that had flashed across the smoke shop display window. He froze. She briefly studied him as if she found his reaction odd. Then she whisked past him and disappeared down the alley. No need to return to the window now. Instead he decided to follow her.

He hastened down the alley after her, his fretfulness engendering the most preposterous thoughts: by what sorcery had she been able to disappear into thin air like that? He ducked down the same alley, his eyes darting about diligently. There—she wasn’t yet gone with the wind! She was walking past a pottery shop. What could she be doing at this darkening hour? Where could she be headed?

In order not to lose her he made a point of closing the gap between them, but not to the extent that she would notice him. The challenge was to keep his distance and at the same time keep her in sight. But then he was hit with a strange thought: it wasn’t he who was doing the following; rather *someone* was following *him*. The thought remained embedded in his gray matter. Far from disappearing, it developed from a hazy notion into something concrete and rational that left him wandering in uncertainty.

One night he had awakened to find himself engulfed in pleasure, as though his entire being was melting. He couldn’t help but feel startled, especially when he realized he was held fast to his aunt’s bosom. Granted he had just awakened, but there was no way out from her embrace. It was too late for that anyway, now that she was thrusting him into this crucible of ecstasy. Never had he felt a passion so intense. Swept by the waves of excitement, he lapsed into nothingness, held to his aunt’s bosom and knowing not what to do. When finally he extricated himself he realized it was raining. The patter of rain on the tin awning was to his ears the sorrowful whimpering of a dying animal. It was the rain of spring and he was nineteen years old. As of that night he was no longer a virgin.

His naïve blabbering to the submachine-gun-toting soldier had had the effect of soothing him in his despondency at having lost his virginity. It occurred to him that if his responsibility for his uncle’s death was the cause, then losing his virginity to his aunt was the effect. It was his karma.

He glanced back. Nobody was watching him, but his uncertainty remained. Again he looked back, and suddenly he found himself wondering if it was the soul of that poor cat that was following him. He shuddered at the thought.

He found the young woman at a bus stop. Waiting for a bus, he assumed. Again he grew fretful. At any moment a bus would arrive to steal her away. He ran for the bus stop. In the meantime several buses pulled up and opened their doors. Fortunately she was still there when the doors closed. She was still waiting.

He recalled what his aunt had told him several days prior when he returned home. Kitty, the family cat, had gone into convulsions and died, apparently from eating a poisoned rat. It seemed to him that her voice was trembling. Just as it had the time she told him, “You need

to find yourself the right woman and marry her.”

His aunt was incapable of lying. Her trembling voice would give her away. But that didn't stop her from trying. He knew the story about Kitty dying from eating a poisoned rat was a lie, but he didn't let on. Instead he looked toward the kitchen. He could almost hear a dismal cry issuing from the soul of poor Kitty, Kitty who had been made a sacrifice of love in the cauldron.

His aunt had sent Kitty's soul after that woman, he was sure of it. He imagined her, head bowed, mumbling, *“Kitty, be not resentful. By this woman who has captured my dear nephew's heart you have fallen into this sorry state....”*

As he was submerged in these thoughts a bus arrived and the woman hopped on. It was an express bus bound for Midop'a Department Store by way of Ch'anggyōng Palace. Her gaze clung to him and turned doubtful as he got on after her. Unperturbed, he went past her and found an empty seat. He kept thinking about Kitty, wondering which part of the woman Kitty's soul had been sent to by his aunt. Lost in these thoughts, he began to wonder if he was following her of his own accord, or if Kitty's soul was luring him to her. In the meantime the bus came to a halt at Chongno 2-ga. The woman rose, glanced in his direction, then got off.

He hesitated, then realized he had to get off too if he was going to follow her. He found her stopped on the sidewalk just a step ahead of him. She was focused on her watch. Although it was obvious she knew he was following her, she was pretending she didn't. Trying to act unfazed, he set off toward Shinshin Department Store.

He took a look back and realized his assumption was on the mark. The woman was walking, or rather racing off, in the opposite direction. He quickly reversed course and resumed the chase.

He knew that several paces ahead she would come to a crosswalk and most likely cross the street. The light at the intersection was green, so he had to hurry. If she made it across before the light turned red he would have to wait and watch her fade into the distance until the light turned green again. The chase would come to an anticlimactic end. His fretfulness had begun to reassert itself when praise be, the light turned red, stopping her dead in her tracks at the near corner. With renewed peace of mind he slowed his approach. He wondered if Kitty's soul was lurking in her handbag. Did the woman, like his aunt, have a coin-sized mole under her left breast? She took a quick look at him as he smiled to himself, lost in thought. Then she launched herself onto the crosswalk, which was clogged with traffic. She was irritated—no way would she let him keep following her—and he was flustered. If he had been desperate, he could have rushed into the busy street like she had. But did he really want to chase after her so stubbornly?

Halfway across the street, she glanced back. Wanting to remain hidden, he ducked among the waiting crowd. She scrutinized the throng and finally seemed satisfied that he was no longer there. She turned forward again, but she still had the swarm of cars to contend with. Raising her handbag high up to signal for cars to stop, she struggled the last several paces toward the far corner of the street.

That's when he heard the screech. And the long, loud shriek of metal against metal.

And the whine of locked brakes. An object flew through the air and came crashing to the pavement. He knew it was the woman he'd been stalking. He'd caught a glimpse of her long hair scattering in all directions as she became a projectile. It happened in the blink of an eye.

The speeding vehicles came to a halt all at once. The throng of pedestrians gathered around. He imagined hundreds, no thousands of Kitties freed from red-hot cauldrons, their whiskers perked up as they congregated around the woman. Once again he felt his heart plummet. He couldn't breathe. He collapsed in a heap.

## 2

Here he was again in the second-floor tearoom, puffing away on his cigarettes and staring out the window. He'd been here about an hour. An endless line of vehicles sped along the street below, practically bumper to bumper, grinding to a halt when the light turned red. And then a human tide of pedestrians would mass at the blocked intersection.

All of this he could see at a glance from his place beside the window, which you might have thought was reserved for him. Those who frequented this spacious loft of a tearoom wanted a respite from the hustle and bustle of the street below and so his window seat was never occupied. He didn't come here for the usual reasons— to meet others or relax over a hot drink. His sole purpose, rather, was to command a view of the crosswalk and its surroundings. And this place by the window, noisy though it was from outside, was just right for that.

"Are you by yourself again?" said the young waitress. She had long hair and the smile she sent his way revealed a snaggletooth.

"Yes." Flicking the ash from his cigarette, he stared at her.

"Oh my, you look so surprised—why would that be?"

"Surprised?"

"Oh my, you didn't realize you look surprised?"

*Surprised? Why would I be surprised?*

"Sir, out of all the nice places to sit, why do you always choose this noisy spot?"

Again he fixed his gaze on her. *Does she know why I choose this spot? Is that why she's asking? No, there's no way.* Instead of answering her question, he asked curtly but with exaggerated politeness, "Could you please bring me a coffee."

"Oh I'm sorry. I guess I'm being a chatterbox."

She smiled just enough for her snaggletooth to come into sight and then she disappeared, her hair swaying, toward the serving counter. The next moment he unwittingly let out a sigh of relief along with a cloud of smoke from his cigarette.

The home of that beautiful young woman whose face just happened to be reflected in the smoke shop window, the nameplate on the gate with the family name *Chang*, him following her, the bewilderment she displayed at the realization she was being followed, the red light at the crosswalk, the woman dashing amidst the speeding cars to escape, the long, drawn-out shriek of brakes, her hair flying every which way as she went into the air, her body crashing down, the cars screeching to a halt in a domino-like sequence, the swarm of

onlookers. He closed his eyes, lost in the illusion of hundreds, no thousands of cats freed from red-hot cauldrons, their whiskers perking up as they congregated about.

“Your coffee, sir.”

Startled, he opened his eyes and found her standing before him—a cup of coffee in one hand and a magazine in the other.

“Oh my, why are you still so jumpy?”

“Umm, I was thinking of something...”

“Gosh, and here I am disturbing you.”

“No, no—it’s nothing that serious.”

“Then, would it be all right if I sat for a minute?”

“Huh?”

“I’m asking if it would be all right, sir, if I joined you for a minute?”

“Please do,” he said, again with exaggerated politeness.

But he had no sense of what was happening. *What’s up with this waitress? Why does she want to sit with me all of a sudden?* He searched his thoughts but the reason escaped him. Granted, he’d been coming here practically every day for the past week and his face was probably familiar to her. *Still, why now? She must have a reason.* He didn’t show it, but he was pretty baffled.

“Sir, are you sure I won’t be disturbing you?”

“Why would you disturb me?”

“I mean, if you want some peace and quiet.”

“Not really, but...”

“Not really but what?”

“Why do you want to sit with me?” He realized his voice was trembling as he said this. *What the hell is it with her?!* He thought back to the way Hooknose had slapped him when he brought him in on a bum rap. His heart sank.

“I just figured I needed to talk to you about something, that’s all.”

*What?! Just figures she needs to talk to me about something.... What the hell is that supposed to mean?* Again he fixed his gaze on this young woman with the snaggletooth. But she didn’t immediately follow with what that “something” was. Instead, for no apparent reason, she produced a sweet smile that left her snaggletooth visible for the whole world to see.

“What did you want to talk about?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“What do you mean, ‘Excuse me’? You said there was something you figured you should talk to me about. So what is it?”

“Oh dear, you seem angry.” She said this with a cute scowl and then the sweet smile returned. “Sir, shall I guess your birthday?” Her tone was playful.

“What?!”

“Oh my, there’s no need to be so surprised. It’s really *very* interesting, you see.”

“Something...interesting?”

“Yes, that’s right! Something *very* interesting.”

Transfixed by the gaze of the tearoom waitress sitting directly opposite him, he felt as if

he'd been possessed by one of those fox-turned-women from the old folktales.

"Your birthday, sir...it wouldn't happen to be May 10, 1939, would it?"

One surprise after another. How on earth had she figured that out?

"How did you know that?" *Damn it!* Her sharp gaze was still fixed to him. He must have left something behind on one of his visits here. But the next moment he was thinking *No way!* His residence card was the only piece of ID that showed his date of birth. *My residence card, yes, that's it.*

But there was no way he could have lost it here—he couldn't recall even taking out his wallet. Just to be sure, he felt the inner pockets of his suit jacket. *And if it's not the residence card...?*

Head cocked, he continued to scrutinize her expression. But he found no clue to this riddle.

"Sir, I know where you're from too."

"What!?"

"North Ch'ungch'öng Province, am I right?"

"Huh." He didn't know what else to say. It was unbelievable. No, more than that. It was bizarre.

"And I know your name, sir."

"You know my name!?" And then a thought raced through his mind. *Ab, I get it.* He almost smacked his knee to punctuate the notion.

She seemed to find his triumphal expression strange. "*Now* do you catch my drift?"

He nodded, then launched a series of questions of his own. "Well *I* know where *your* house is, young lady."

"Oh my. No way."

"Shall I guess?"

"Please do."

"Ch'öngjin-dong, correct?"

She giggled, her reaction telling him he was way off.

"What, am I mistaken?"

"You're not even close!"

"Really?"

"Sorry but I'm from Yöngdöngp'o."

"But maybe you have relatives or know someone from Ch'öngjin-dong?"

"Well, I've heard it's a good place to go for hangover soup and mung-bean pancakes, but I've never been there myself."

So the riddle was no closer to being solved. Even so, he felt so pleased with himself that he almost slapped his knee.

He went back in his memory to that night a week earlier. The night of the accident at the crosswalk. That night, languishing among auditory hallucinations, the shriek of cars slamming on their brakes, and the illusion of those myriad whiskered cats springing out from red-hot cauldrons—he was drinking his brains out at some bar in Ch'öngjin-dong. When it

came time to pay he found he was short on money and he had to leave behind his residence card in lieu of payment. So maybe the teashop waitress had a connection with that place? Maybe she was the daughter or the niece of the guy who ran the place? But if he was to believe what she'd just said, then his theory was rubbish.

"I also know your height, sir, down to the centimeter."

"You do?"

"But of course."

"I don't even know exactly how tall I am— how could you possibly know?"

"Now, now, don't lie to me."

"What, you don't believe me?"

"Well, didn't you just say you don't know how tall you are?"

He snorted. "You have to be kidding me."

"Well, if you really don't know, then I guess I should tell you." When he didn't reply she told him. "A hundred and sixty-eight."

He remained silent.

"Am I off?"

"Well, since I don't know myself..." *What the hell!*

Residency cards don't show a person's height. Which meant she hadn't gotten her information from the place in Ch'ongjin-dong. This made things all the more curious and frustrating. Not that a hundred sixty-eight was wrong. He hadn't had himself measured for years and couldn't have said exactly how tall he was. But if someone were to ask, he would say a hundred sixty-eight. So, back to the riddle: *how* had she learned his personal information in such detail? And that question returned him to the encounter with Hooknose.

"*Know why we're here?*" Hooknose asked.

"No, sir."

"*You don't?*"

*He fell silent, lost in thought.*

"*You don't know. Is that what you're saying?*"

"*I don't really know, sir.*"

"*You don't really know? So you kind of know, but not quite. Is that it?*"

"*It's not that, it's—*"

"*Then what the hell are you saying!?*"

*The man fell silent once more.*

"*Shall I tell you why you're here?*" *the detective continued.*

"*Yes, sir, please do.*"

"*Yesterday, you went down that alley five times. Is that correct?*"

"*Who said that?*"

"*Answer me, punk!*"

"*No, that is incorrect.*"

"*No? What if I told you I have a witness?*"

The memory of his interrogation flooded his thoughts and he felt goose bumps all over.

He was gripped with an indiscernible anxiety.

*Who are you? What are you? A detective disguised as a tearoom waitress? And if that's the case, then what in heaven's name do you want from me?*

Again he felt himself trembling. Cars screeching to a halt, the woman sent flying with her hair all over the place and then crashing onto the street, the horde of cats with their whiskers perking up.... Wracked with anxiety, he allowed this delusion to play out. These were the symptoms that surfaced at times of mental anguish—the sensation of suffocation, his heart dropping like a coin clattering into a payphone box. Feeling these symptoms and his vision bleaching out, he clutched his face and hung his head and tried desperately to get the air to flow again.

And when it was finally over he removed his hands from his face and looked up. She was still sitting across from him.

“My goodness, why the scary face?”

When he didn't respond she produced a hearty smile, her snaggletooth slightly visible. As if the game was over, she placed on the table the magazine she'd been holding and opened it to a page she had folded back at the corner.

“It just came out today,” she said with no further explanation. The next thing he knew, she was standing before him and muttering, “That's the most interesting thing you've said so far, sir.” And then she disappeared toward the counter.

All he could do was blink as he tried in vain to make sense of what had happened. After a time he picked up the magazine and looked at the cover. It was a women's magazine and had indeed been issued that day. He moved on to the opened page. *What?!* That was him in the photo. He took a closer look. Yes, that was his face, no doubt about it. It had been cropped into a circle about two centimeters in diameter, and elsewhere on the page were another half dozen photos of him of the exact same size. Beneath each photo were the three Chinese characters that constituted his name—and not one wrong stroke in any of them—appearing in Gothic font. Next was the sidebar. It was titled “Youth Brokerage” and was essentially a marriage-proposal article that read, “I am such-and-such a person, and if you happen to like what you see then let's go on a date. If we seem like a good match then I'm willing to tie the knot.” He read the sidebar again, this time more closely.

- 1) Your name?
- 2) Your birthday?
- 3) Your permanent residence?
- 4) Your height?
- 5) Your occupation?
- 6) Your monthly salary?
- 7) Your ideal woman, in one word?
- 8) Your savings account?
- 9) Your contact information?
- 10) Your face?

The sidebar started with these ten survey items that more or less formed the basis of the

answer that followed: “That’s me in the photo. I’m a hundred sixty-eight centimeters, I work at such-and-such a company, and I make just upward of thirty thousand *wŏn* a month. As for the woman I’m looking for, it’s all right if she’s not that beautiful, but it would be great if she didn’t blow my meager salary performing in some rip-off symphony orchestra. It would also be good if she has more than a high school education. I’m sorry to say that the only number you’ll find in my bankbook is my youthful age, as I have 0 in savings. If I am still to your liking, then please do contact me at one of the following addresses.”

It had to be the work of his friend K, an editor for this magazine—who else could have made the piece read as though he himself had written it? *And if that’s the case, where did that dickhead find my photo to pull such a ridiculous stunt with?* He had no clue. His curiosity piqued, he got up and went to the counter, intending to use the telephone there to call K.

“That’s you, isn’t it?” said the waitress. “When I saw it I swore I’d seen that face before. And then I realized it must be you, no?”

The moment she said this the other waitresses who were gathered at the counter and chattering among themselves, burst into laughter.

“Is he that desperate—” one of them said, doubling over in laughter. *To get laid?* was how he imagined the rest of it.

K railed at him the moment he picked up the phone: “At an age where you should be getting married and having kids you’re at a lowlife bar boozing it up. You are so pathetic, you have to leave your ID because you can’t pay. So I decided to do you a favor!” He was at a loss. “And how did you end up leaving your ID at my regular hangout, anyway?” As if this scolding weren’t enough, K went on to remind him that he’d taken care of the seven-hundred-*wŏn* tab. To top it all off, K ended by teasing him that he could come by at any time to retrieve his residence card.

“I’m not going anywhere near you!” he shouted, his wrath boiling over.

“Hey—listen up, asshole, unless you want to live by yourself the rest of your life. I’m telling you this for your own good—what, you think I’m getting something out of it?”

“Shut the fuck up!” And with that he hung up and stormed out of the tearoom. The snaggletooth waitress followed him to the door and called out, “Take care!” He glanced back to see the same charming, gentle smile, revealing her snaggletooth. “Take care!” “Come again!” and the like were the obligatory greetings at any old tearoom. But there was none of the impersonal formality in her voice. The next moment K’s words were buzzing about his ears again: “... *unless you want to live by yourself the rest of your life. I’m telling you this for your own good....*” He felt a sting of emotion in response both to K’s attempt to lay claim to their shallow friendship and to the snaggletooth waitress’s standard “Take care!” which would normally have gone in one ear and out the other— except that there was also a warmth to her parting words and he felt them envelop his entire being. He raised his hand in lieu of a formal goodbye and walked off.

He and K had met only two months earlier, working in the editorial office of that very same women’s weekly. In that short time there had been an incident. One of his responsibilities was to sift through the articles submitted by readers and select those that

might be publishable. During his one-week summer break this and many other of his tasks were handed off to K on account of where they sat in the office. He wasn't sure if the same arrangement was in effect now, but back then there were ten employees total in the editorial office. The editors—eight in all—sat across from one another, four on each side. The editor-in-chief and the senior editor sat at opposite ends on opposite sides. One of the other editors termed it the “two-track desk arrangement.” The editor-in-chief and the three editors on his right formed the A Team. The senior editor and the three on *his* right formed the B Team. This distinction between the A and B teams was a very convenient way to divide up the editors when necessary. During vacation periods, for example, tasks that couldn't be completed by one side would be transferred to the other. And thus it was during his one-week break that his responsibilities fell to K, whose desk was opposite his. When he returned, that week's issue was already in the bookstores.

It was during that week that something strange had occurred. It involved the very last contribution to be accepted for that issue, and thus the contribution prepared the most hastily for printing. The problem was with the photo that had accompanied the piece, which happened to be a woman's sob-story titled “Now That My Skies Are Forever Blue.” A woman had appeared at the office bawling that she had read the article. She demanded to know *why* her photo was in a piece that had absolutely no connection to her and *where* it was they had obtained the photo. The publisher of the magazine was subjected to a full week or more of accusations of libel and to demands to divulge the source of the photo. These came from the poor woman's brother (who claimed that he occupied a lofty position somewhere or other). Ultimately the publisher settled by offering to run a full-page correction together with an apology for the next three months. It was merely a compromise between the victim and the company.

The publisher fumed over the matter and made it painfully clear that he intended to fire someone. There was no possibility of persuading him to do otherwise, for he was already planning to let someone go on account of various management problems.

But the matter wasn't quite that simple. It could be viewed from multiple angles, and at a full editorial meeting the board interpreted the incident in four possible ways:

- 1) It was the doing of some man involved in a love-triangle with the victim.
- 2) The person who claimed to have been victimized included the photo with her submission then pretended she hadn't in order to demand compensation.
- 3) A member of the editorial staff mistook a photo sent for use in the Letters from the Readers column—which was similar to the Devoted Readers Correspondence Column—for a photo of the author of the essay.
- 4) An editorial staff member stumbled upon the photo and, seeing that it was of a woman, decided just for fun to add it to the submission.

The editor-in-chief referred these four scenarios to the publisher, who with no basis for his supposition decided that the third scenario was correct and insisted that the carelessness of a staff member was to blame. The pool of possible culprits boiled down to him and K, who had taken over his assignments during his one-week vacation. He could, of course, have

heaped the blame onto K, and K for his part could likewise have thrown him under the bus and avoided responsibility. But he was so disgusted with the publisher's attitude that he tossed in a resignation notice. He had seen through the scheming of his boss, who would shuffle through the time cards with bloodshot eyes as he lamented the financial woes that had begun more than a month prior; already he was plotting who would be the first to go. He could have held out to the bitter end, but if he were then able to prove himself innocent, K would be found culpable. But K had five mouths to feed. And he had only one. His own. The choice was obvious.

As he waited for the bus that would take him home he continued to be assailed by thoughts of K. *"Listen, if I were you, if I were in charge of the letters to the editor, I would whip something up and claim the manuscript fee, I'm telling you."* This was K scolding him over a drink one night for his stick-in-the-mud attitude. But why had this fleeting memory popped up only now? Whatever the reason, it set the gears of his imagination in motion. *Yes, I'll bet it was K, he probably found a photo of some woman lying in the street. Then he writes a letter to the editor, adds the photo, has someone submit it, and pockets the fee.*

But then he shook his head. *No, he couldn't have.* He kept muttering this to himself, but before long his muttering was replaced by K's voice resounding from the telephone receiver at the teahouse: *"At an age where you should be getting married and having kids you're at a lowlife bar boozing it up and having to leave your ID because you can't pay. That's pathetic—and so I decided to do you a favor!... Hey—listen up, asshole, unless you want to live by yourself the rest of your life. I'm telling you this for your own good—what, you think I'm getting something out of it?"*

He realized he was nodding in agreement. Thinking back on how K might expropriate the photo on his ID, he became dead certain that the incident at the publishing house was that bastard's doing as well.

His bus pulled up and he climbed aboard.

*Hey—listen up, asshole, unless you want to live by yourself the rest of your life. I'm telling you this for your own good—what, you think I'm getting something out of it?"*

*"Take care?"*

*Hey—listen up, asshole, unless you want to live by yourself the rest of your life. I'm telling you this for your own good—what, you think I'm getting something out of it?"*

*"Take care!"...*

The voices of K and the snaggletooth waitress circled incessantly, one after the other, around his ears. He was steeped in thought. To think that his friendship with K gave him a hair-raising chill while his encounter with the snaggletooth waitress brought him a cozy, warm feeling!

*Hey—listen up, asshole, unless you want to live by yourself the rest of your life. I'm telling you this for your own good—what, you think I'm getting something out of it?"*

*"Take care?"*

*"Hey—listen up, asshole, unless you want to live by yourself the rest of your life. I'm telling you this for your own good—what, you think I'm getting something out of it?"*

*"Take care!"...*

Cold water, hot water, cold water, hot. Cold water, hot water, cold water, hot. He sank into the illusion of jumping back and forth between the hot and cold tubs at the public bathhouse.

He stepped off the bus and turned down the alley. At the corner with the public bathhouse he went left into the next alley. The high concrete wall rose before him as if to block his path. The <<<Cotton Batting Shop sign on the wall came into view; he read to himself its red text and then quickened his pace and followed the arrow. He grew frightened and picked up the pace. The V-shaped fork in the alley stretched out before him. He felt his hair standing on end. He came to a stop. A figure in white was crouched where the alley forked.

*That woman pleading desperately, feeding the fire for the cauldron with the cat inside it—is that my aunt?* The long, drawn-out, deafening shriek of metal against metal pierced his eardrums. Something went flying into the air. He plunked himself down, his heart dropped, and his windpipe tightened. The dark sneaker hung upside down like a shoe displayed on a cobbler's shoe hanger, the legs of his uncle jackknifed in the ditch, the woman with her hair flying every which way as she crashed to the pavement... After a good while he came to his senses and cautiously looked up. No one was there—not his aunt, not his uncle, not the corpse of the woman with her hair strewn all over, no cats with their whiskers perking up—nobody except the old gentleman from the grain shop who, clad in white, was crouched over with his back toward him, perhaps culling un-hulled grains of rice. He scurried back up the alley.

Despite having visited that tearoom for an hour a day over the course of the previous week, he didn't stop by for the next three days. He wasn't sure why, but the snaggletooth waitress's "Take care!" which had left him with such a warm sensation, weighed heavy on his mind. Even while he found it much more appealing than an earnest "Be sure to come back tomorrow, too!" he had to admit that her plain, ordinary greeting scared him. To be more precise, he was scared of seeing her. Because the more frequently he saw her the more likely the possibility that something horrible would happen. That was his hunch. Or perhaps it was the instinct of an animal deep in the mountains anticipating a storm.

But on this the fourth day he abandoned his decision. It was about one on a Sunday afternoon. He had left home after lunch to buy cigarettes. The grain shop came into view but he was stopped short by the sight of a young woman with long, drooping hair asking something of the old man from the grain shop. The old man peered down at a slip of paper in his hand for some time before pointing toward the steep alley where he himself had stopped to take in the scene. The young woman turned to where the old man was pointing and locked eyes with him.

Her expression froze for an instant then blossomed into a friendly smile. A snaggletooth was barely revealed but the next moment was lost to sight. It was her, the teashop waitress, he couldn't deny it. Snatching the slip of paper from the old man's hands, she turned and rushed up to him.

"What's going on?" he asked calmly, careful to avoid letting her sense the affection for her now welling up inside him.

"I'm looking for someone's house." Her face had a red glow that radiated fresh, youthful abundance.

"A friend's place?"

She shook her head, and now she was blushing.

"Come on, let me see." Seeing that she was reluctant to hand over the slip, he pressed the issue. "Just show me the address. Unless you know the house number you'll never find it. It's a huge pain trying to find your way around here."

She appeared to mull over the situation and finally handed him the paper. He glanced at it and felt as if someone had lit a match to him in his sleep. The woman, watching in close anticipation, burst out giggling. Her laughter echoed down the alley.

"Sir, you seem quite shocked, no?" she asked with a straight face.

He didn't reply, plastered to the address scrawled on the slip of paper—his address.

"Are you all right? Why are you just standing there?"

He returned his gaze to her face. She was right. This wasn't the time to be standing in a daze in the middle of the alley. His aunt would soon appear in this same alley, heading to market with her shopping basket. If she were to spot them she would pepper him with questions, starting with "Who's this girl?" Then she would pull him to her bosom and tickle his earlobe as she whispered into his ear like she always did, "So, you've been seeing someone—am I right?" before shooting him the "Who's the lucky girl?" question.

With these thoughts he threw a quick glance over his shoulder at the alleyway stretching up to his home. His aunt hadn't yet emerged. But any moment now she could be starting down toward them, her basket swinging. He was feeling antsy and before he knew it he was yanking her sleeve.

"Shall we go?"

"Where to?"

"Well, we can't stand around here forever, can we?" Again he swiveled his head toward the alley, before leading the snaggletooth waitress off at a quick pace.

"Where are we going?" she said to the back of his head, the click-clack of her high heels quickening. Again he glanced back, but instead of answering her he scanned the alleyway leading to his home.

"It seems like you're trying to get away from someone...or something." Again she was speaking from behind him. But the question didn't register. Instead, as he quickened his steps he recalled what his aunt had said in a quivering voice a month earlier, about how Kitty had gone into convulsions and died, presumably from eating a poisoned rat—a claim he had sensed was a fabrication. Now too a familiar vision unfolded in his mind's eye—his aunt boiling a cat while muttering, "*Kitty, be not resentful. By this woman who has taken my dear nephew away, you have fallen into this sorry state...*"

"Could you please slow down?"

He obliged, but remained silent. And then looked back.

"You *really* are acting like someone's after you!"

"Why would someone be after me?"

“Then what’s the rush?”

“I’m naturally a fast walker.” As he said this he glanced back once more.

“Don’t lie to me!”

“Lie? What do you mean, lie?!”

“Look, I know what’s going on.”

“What do you know?”

“You’ll have a hard time if the neighbors catch you going out with me, am I right?”

“Huh?” he asked, staring her in the face.

But she knew full well he hadn’t asked this because he didn’t understand. “Am I right?”

He shook his head.

“Then why do you keep looking back?”

He knew the barrage of questions would continue and yet without a suitable excuse to offer he felt compelled to keep his mouth shut. And then came salvation in the form of a sign for a tearoom.

“Why don’t we go to a tearoom where we can talk?”

She didn’t respond.

“I know, it’s pretty much the countryside out here, so it might not be all that great, but...” He regarded the snaggletooth waitress. Seeing that she hadn’t opposed the idea outright, he set off closemouthed for the tearoom. She fell into step behind him.

### 3

In the second-story tearoom he found a table by a window overlooking the alley and waited for the snaggletooth woman to sit. She stood before him, her eyes circling the interior. “Why do you always choose a spot like this?” He ignored her quibbling and through the window scanned the ever-so-narrow alleyway. He could barely see ten meters of it. Had the alley been perfectly straight, he would have had a clear line of sight all the way down to the end, but as it was, the alley bent sharply to the right those ten meters from his vantage point.

“What are you staring so hard at?”

At almost the same time he heard her question he caught sight of his aunt coming up the alley with her shopping basket. She had just emerged from around the bend. Flustered, he quickly averted his gaze from his aunt and fixed it on the face of the woman across from him.

“Sir, you have some very odd habits.”

“Hmm?”

“I said you have some odd habits.”

“Odd, you say?”

“More than that—*bizarre*. At our place you’re always by the window looking outside—and here you are doing the exact same thing.”

As he listened to her, startled, the crosswalk and surrounding area outside the second-floor downtown tearoom where she worked suddenly unfurled before his eyes. The next thing he knew, that scene had become a hazy backdrop for a fast-flowing sequence of events: *The home of that beautiful young woman whose face just happened to be reflected in the smoke shop window,*

*the nameplate on the gate with the family name Chang, him following her, the bewilderment she displayed at the realization she was being followed, the red light at the crosswalk, the woman dashing amidst the speeding cars to escape, the long, drawn-out shriek of brakes being applied, her hair flying every which way as she went into the air and came crashing down, the cars screeching to a halt in a domino-like sequence, the swarm of onlookers.*

Pulling himself back together, he said in a calm, unfazed voice, “What’s so bizarre about that?”

“How is it not? You have to be considerate of the person you’re with, no?”

“Oh, right.”

He rose awkwardly and settled himself in the next chair, a seat farther from the window. You might have thought he wanted to avoid the snaggletooth woman’s pretty scowl, but actually he was afraid that his aunt, who would soon come by, might spot him sitting at the window. But he continued to gaze outside. Not at the goings-on in the alley below, but rather for the signs of the eateries, bookshops, and such or the upper reaches of the utility poles lining the alley. Rooftops, signs, windows, flags fluttering above the news agency buildings—he gazed at what remained of the sky, obscured by these disorderly obstructions, at the patches of bright blue autumn sky the size of a hand or maybe a folded wrapping cloth. They were so tiny and perhaps for that, all the more blue.

“I called you at the office.”

“The office?”

“Yes, I thought that was where you were.”

*Now what?* Startled, he transferred his gaze back to her.

“I called, and then this gentleman, well....” That was far as she got, and then she burst out cackling like a madwoman. Her sharp, clamorous laughter rocked the tiny tearoom on the otherwise lazy outskirts of the city.

“Wait, what’s so funny?” he asked as her snaggletooth came into view. He wondered whether her tooth was showing because of her laughter or her laughter was meant to show off her tooth. Either way, she carried on.

“So I called, and some gentleman *immediately* said, ‘You’re calling about that spouse-wanted ad, aren’t you?’”

“What?”

“Well yes, that’s what he told me! I didn’t know what to say.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t you get it? They were treating your piece like a spouse-wanted ad.”

“That’s kind of what it is.”

“What?” Her eyes, theatrically widened, clung to his face.

He made a furtive attempt to avoid her gaze by pulling out a cigarette.

“So what you’re telling me, sir, is that when you submitted that article, you were, shall we say, trying to enhance its appeal?”

As he struck a match and brought it to his cigarette, K’s face popped into view, his friend’s voice dancing about his ears. “*Hey, asshole, I did this so you won’t have to live by yourself the*

*rest of your life—what, you think I'm getting something out of it?"*

In the name of friendship K had gone to the extent of swiping his photo and running it in the Youth Brokerage column to save him from bachelorhood.... His lips curled into a lonely smile and he let out a long stream of smoke. Again he visualized the Youth Brokerage article with K's fabricated answer to the ten survey questions.

*"That's me in the photo. I'm a hundred sixty-eight centimeters, I work at such-and-such a company, and I make just upward of thirty thousand wōn a month. As for the woman I'm looking for, it's all right if she's not that beautiful, but it would be great if she didn't blow my meager salary performing in some rip-off symphony orchestra. It would also be good if she has more than a high school education. I'm sorry to say that the only number you'll find in my bankbook is my youthful age, as I have 0 in savings. If I am still to your liking, then please do contact me at one of the following addresses."*

This mental summary prompted an incongruous laugh along with a stream of cigarette smoke. And then he saw in the eyes of the snaggletooth woman that she was demanding an answer to the question she had just asked. But what was the question? He felt like an absolute fool.

The question finally came back to life in his mind's ear. *"So what you're telling me, sir, is that when you submitted that article, you were, shall we say, trying to enhance its appeal?"* Her eyes remained expectant.

"I guess" was all he said.

"So, did it do the trick?"

He didn't respond.

"I'm asking you if the ad was very successful."

"Sorry?"

"What I'm asking is, were there very many women who wrote in or came up to you like I did?"

He kept silent.

"Well, given that you're not answering, it must have been *extremely* effective."

Only now did the point of her questions become clear.

"Far from it. No one—"

"Don't you lie to me."

He was surprised. Not by her raised voice, but because a vision of his aunt had imposed itself alongside that voice.

*Yes. Maybe it is a lie. That article ran in a regular column targeting single women.... There must have been some letters that came in—even as a prank? There must have been letters sent to my work address too. Wait—didn't she say the guy on the phone asked right away if she was calling about the spouse-wanted ad? Both my work and home addresses were listed in the article, so I should have gotten a few letters at home. Who would believe I didn't even get a single postcard? But does that mean...my aunt's been keeping them from me all this time?!*

Suddenly a voice was demanding his attention. His aunt's voice.

*"So you're seeing someone these days— isn't that right?"* On and on droned the voice.

*This woman might be right! Shooting down my claim about not getting a single letter...she damn well*

*might be on to something.*

Again his aunt's face swelled imposingly in his mind. He spoke deliberately, struggling to erase the vision of his aunt. "I haven't received a single postcard."

"So, the esteemed Mr. Pak never received a response...or are you saying that there were responses but someone kept them hidden from you?" she said with a twisted smile. Again the snaggletooth peeked out.

At the sight of that tooth he felt blood rush to his head. He swelled with self-hatred: how could those idiotic words "I haven't received a single postcard" have escaped his lips? He felt like a criminal. The next moment an event from the past flashed through his mind: Hooknose leaping to his feet and emerging from the old woman's small shop while crying out, "Hey!" To which he had stupidly responded, "Sorry, are you speaking to me?" And Hooknose then shouting, "You see anyone else in this alley?" It had taken the detective's ill-mannered tone to make him realize how idiotic he must have looked when he groveled.

Pondering that incident, unable to retract his gaze from the snaggletooth woman, he tried patiently to keep a lid on his wrath that was on the brink of boiling over.

*Why is she grilling me? Why did she come after me, anyway? Is the tearoom waitressing a disguise? Who are you?*

Buried in these thoughts, he shuddered all over, crippled by a writhing anxiety that made him feel like he was cowering in the cold. Again the symptoms emerged—his windpipe blocked and his heart dropping like a coin clattering into a payphone box. As his vision grew dark, he propped both elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands. As always when these symptoms emerged he tried desperately to steady his breathing. But yet again his aunt popped into sight. And now it was the snaggletooth woman's voice dancing around his ears: "So, the esteemed Mr. Pak never had a response...or are you saying that there were responses but someone kept them hidden from you?" He saw his aunt reverently place a bowl of the purest well water on the low table and clasp her hands together before the cauldron with the boiled cat; saw the envelopes with the responses from the readers of his article swept like fallen leaves into the firebox beneath the cauldron; heard the frantic yowling of the cat being boiled—and amidst all these visions he struggled to stabilize his breathing.

When he finally caught his breath he slowly raised his head and addressed the snaggletooth woman with a vacant gaze.

"Sir, what is the matter?"

Her wide eyes watched him intently. He was at a loss for words.

"You look like you're not feeling well."

He offered no reply.

"You're not well."

All he could do was respond with a weak nod.

"Can you tell me what's bothering you?"

"It's nothing. I'm all right now."

"Can I make a guess?"

"Huh?"

“About what’s bothering you, I mean.”

He gave her a questioning look.

“It’s your stomach, right? It might be intestinal worms.”

He gaped at her, tight-lipped.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” she cried out triumphantly. “It’s your stomach, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sometimes it feels like my stomach’s being ripped open.” This was a lie but he didn’t quite know how best to explain the sinking sensation and the feeling of suffocation he experienced, nor did he feel a compelling need to do so.

“Listen.” Brimming with confidence, she began to chatter. “I had an older brother...” He soon realized she had a knack for storytelling.

Her brother was six years older. Growing up in a farm village, he often experienced stomach pain from intestinal worms. Seeing him thrashing in agony, their mother would roll leaf tobacco in paper and make him smoke it. It was the only treatment for such pain. In her farm village they lacked medical facilities. By the time he graduated from elementary school he was dependent on nicotine. At the local middle school he no longer suffered from worm-induced stomach pains. But his cigarette habit grew nevertheless. During break time at school he would go to the toilet or find some other obscure place to have a smoke. One day he was enjoying a closet smoke when the school bell went off to signal the start of the next class. Frantic, he carelessly flicked away his cigarette and it came to rest on the roof of the school pigsty. In no time smoke and flames were surging from the roof. The school custodian, who just then was coming to feed slop to the pigs, witnessed the event, and her brother ended up being expelled....

At this point she stopped and with a thoughtful expression plopped her handbag onto the table. She began anxiously to search through it, then piped up with,

“Can you guess what I’m looking for?”

He hadn’t the slightest clue. Nor was he all that interested. So the best he could do was look on vacantly, though he was a bit curious.

“Well, can you?”

“How could I know what you’re looking for?”

“You could guess.”

“How am I supposed to guess?”

“Just try.”

What could he say? He was in a fix. But there she was, absorbed in her little game like an innocent girl, her eyes twinkling, insistent that he play along with her. Try as he might, he had no inkling of what she might produce from her bag. Unable to venture a guess, he simply continued to observe her.

“It’s something I really want to show you, Mr. Pak.”

“Show...me?”

“That’s right.”

“Something you want to show *me*?”

“That’s what I *said*! Something I really, really want to show you.”

“So what is it?”

“Oh my, you’re so silly! If I was planning to tell you, then why would I ask you to guess? I should have said straight up that I wanted to show you something, but I can’t just let the cat out of the bag.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is.”

“For goodness’ sake. What do you mean by that? I tell you, you men are so sly.” Out came the coquettish scowl again.

But now he was distracted. *Who is this woman?* Again he backtracked. *She’s a waitress at that tearoom. She came across that article about me, she remembered me as a regular, and then she actually told me about the article. And today she comes looking for me at home, using the address listed in the article.* He shook his head. *Of course, that’s what she’s doing.* But this assumption couldn’t allay the doubts now festering inside him. *This woman has come looking for me, that’s clear—but why? Is she just trying to go out with me?*

Again he shook his head. Where was the key to resolving all these questions to his satisfaction? He saw her watching him with intense excitement and told himself she had to be thinking he was racking his brains trying to guess what she was looking for.

“Look how hard you’re thinking, and still no clue?” And then she made a face to punctuate her teasing.

Only now that he knew she had come looking for him did he snap out of it.

“Well, it’s hard to say.” His tone suggested agreement with her—that he’d spent all this time on the riddle of what lay hidden in the handbag but still had no clue what was inside.

At that, the woman seemed all the more amused. “So...shall I give you a hint?”

“A hint?”

“Then you might get it real quick.”

He nodded.

She squinted and lapsed into thought. And finally, “I just told you about my brother, didn’t I.” Her voice had a clear ring to it.

“Yes, about how he had a nicotine habit when he was still in elementary school.”

“Oh my. An elementary school student gets addicted to nicotine—was that the main point of the story?” She couldn’t have looked more sullen.

He gave her a vacant stare. *It wasn’t? Wasn’t the fact that he was a grade-school kid with a nicotine addiction the main point?* But then the light came on and he corrected himself: “The fact that he also had a problem with intestinal worms, just like I did, that was the main idea.”

This brought a long, boisterous cascade of laughter during which the snaggletooth was in full view. And then her face grew stern again. “But stomach pain from intestinal worms isn’t the hint,” she declared. “What we’re talking about is my brother’s *something*. What I’m going to pull out of my bag is also my brother’s *something*, and the hint too is to get you to bear in mind that I really want to show you my brother’s *something*.”

“Huh!?”

“So *now* can you guess?” Spoken like an announcer on a radio quiz show.

By now it was all he could do to keep in mind the riddle she was posing to him. The

question of why she had surfaced today with all this nonsense was getting on his nerves. *What the hell is she trying to get from me?* He cocked his head. Instead of an answer he was hit with the fleeting thought that this conundrum would settle forever in the recesses of his heart. But that didn't mean he had to give up. One way or another he would resolve his doubts. *Who, really, is this woman, and why did she come to see me?* Again he cocked his head.

"Don't think too hard."

"Hmm?" He extricated himself from his thoughts and noticed she had reached into her handbag.

"It's like taking a test, you know? If you overthink a simple question, you won't be able to answer it till the test is over and you're done blaming yourself for missing an easy question—that's when you can crack it. I'm telling you, just guess!"

"The mouthpiece for his cigarettes!" he cried out without realizing it.

Again she erupted in cackling. He had an incongruous thought that her laughter was like air in a balloon filling the tiny tearoom and soon the tearoom would float off into the sky.

"What did I just say! It has nothing to do with cigarettes!"

"But didn't you say the stomach pain from the intestinal worms was important?"

"Well sure it's important, but I made it very clear that that wasn't the hint."

"Did you, now?"

"What do you mean, 'Did you, now?'" You're talking like you weren't even here when I said it!"

What could he say to that?

"All right, let's start over. It's my brother's...?"

*Here we go again.*

"My brother's...?"

"Hometown!"

"Dear me! My, oh my!" The exclamations alternated with the clamorous laughter, as though she found his ridiculous answers hugely entertaining. *Soon she'll be jumping up and down in delight*, he told himself.

"Didn't I say it was something I *really* wanted to show you? So what's with this hometown nonsense! You think I've got an entire village stuffed in my bag? Unbelievable!"

He had no response.

"Tell me, is there any way you could fit your hometown into your pocket?"

*Of course not. But you can carry it in your heart, for sure.*

Yet again she was laughing. But for him there was no laughter, only thick shadows gathering. The name of his home village, Twittül, began flitting through his memory like the region's signature grasshoppers. Again he felt his heart plummet and his windpipe tighten, but the vision stretching out before him now was the horrid scene of his younger self looking for grasshoppers in Wónbaemi Field; the corpse jackknifed in the muck of the irrigation ditch; the legs stretched up toward the sky; the dark sneakers on the corpse's feet; the soles of those sneakers aimed skyward like a shoe displayed on a cobbler's shoe hanger; his uncle—a second lieutenant in the National Defense Corps—arrested by the submachine-gun-toting soldier

because of his own loose tongue blabbing about his uncle's marksmanship....

"Sir!"

He couldn't respond.

"Mr. Pak!"

Nothing.

"Mr. Pak! Mr. Pak!"

He still couldn't answer.

"Sir, you seem quite unwell?"

Listening to the urgency in her tone as she called his name over and over, he told himself, *Breathe...you have to breathe....* And finally he was able to breathe normally again.

"Sir, you should take some medicine." He saw the concern in her expression. "I'll buy you some."

"Oh—no, no. No need."

"What do you mean, 'No need'?! You look seriously ill! I almost thought you were having convulsions just now. What shall I get for you?"

"I don't need medicine. It doesn't work for me."

"Not even painkillers?"

"It's not pain."

"No?"

"It's not a pain that painkillers can help with."

"Then what is it?"

"It's all right, I'm fine now.... What was that?"

"What was what?"

"You asked me to guess something."

"What about it?"

"Let's keep going with that." Rising uncertainly, he managed to dissuade her from rushing off to the pharmacy and gestured for her to sit back down. Her toothy smile re-emerged and she seemed more relaxed.

"Right, maybe losing yourself in a game like this can help you forget the pain." And immediately she was back on point, as if she were trying to bring a quick end to the guessing game.

"So, what was it? My brother's...?"

He gave no response.

"My brother's... what?"

"Gun?" he cried out, again more loudly than he had intended.

"Wow, you startled me!" But she didn't seem shocked in the slightest. If anything, she appeared to be quite amused.

"My, oh my! Why a gun? Where did that come from?"

He himself wondered where he'd come up with that answer.

She followed with another question.

"What do you think would happen if someone went around with a gun?"

The question made him feel like he was being charged with unlawful possession.

“Anyhow,” she added, “the answer is nothing quite that terrible. So think hard and try again.”

“What’s so terrible about a gun?”

“The point is, it has nothing to do with a gun. So guess again.”

He fell silent.

“My brother’s...?” Her ringing voice prompted him to give her the right answer. But how was he supposed to guess what the *something* of *her brother’s something* was?

*She said it wasn’t anything terrible... but terrible words are what I’m going to give her from now on.* He made the vow like a child throwing a tantrum, then waited for the next prompt.

“My brother’s...?”

“F—“

He had almost blurted, “Final resting place.” But the woman’s eyes suddenly lit up. Of course there was no connection between “final resting place” and whatever it was she was going to produce from her bag, but seeing her sudden change in expression, he was now confident that the name of the object started with an “f” sound.

The woman, perhaps sensing his leap in thought, quickly prompted him again.

“F...what?”

Encouraged by this unexpected progress, he found himself growing intrigued. It was time to focus and lay out his thoughts. An internal dialog followed.

*Her brother’s filial piety!*

*But how can you carry that around?*

*Her brother’s fruit snacks!*

*Sure you could carry those around, but that’s not the answer.*

*Her brother’s photo!*

*Photo! That could be it!*

“Your brother’s photo!”

“Correct!” She clapped and gave him a beaming smile.

He was puzzled. His answer was more accident than by design.

“You’re right! It’s his photo!” She produced a photo from her purse and handed it to him. “But sir! How did you know it was a photo?”

He offered no response. Lips sealed, he peered at the photo in shock. The man she called her older brother—the man in the photograph—was none other than his uncle.

*My uncle....* The next moment his heart sank heavily and he had the suffocating sensation. The symptoms were back.

“Are you feeling sick again?”

He couldn’t respond.

“Look, I told you to take painkillers, didn’t I?”

Still no response.

“Hey, sir!”

Again, silence.

“Mr. Pak!”

He remained silent.

“Excuse me!” she called to a waitress. “Could you please bring us some water? And add some sugar to it.” She shook him by the shoulder. “Mr. Pak! Sir!”

Still no reply.

“Oh, what do I do now? Sir! Mr. Pak!”

Again, no reply. The waitress arrived with the sugar-water.

“Mister! Please drink! It’s water— sugar water!”

Only then was he able to breathe, but just barely. He had a sip from the cup she held to his lips. His brow was slick with sweat. Finally, he returned to the photo he held.

“No way! There’s no way he can look exactly like—”

Suddenly he recalled something his aunt had told him. *“My my, you look so much like your late uncle.... Sometimes I wonder if he’s come back to life—the thought of it gives me goosebumps!”*

*But I don’t look like my uncle at all—if anything, my uncle looks exactly like this lady’s brother!*

“Are you all right now?”

“Is that your brother?” he asked, ignoring her concerned question. His mind was teeming with questions: Had a photo of his late uncle fallen into her hands by mistake? Had she confused his uncle for her brother?

“How are you feeling? You really should go to the hospital!”

“The hospital? What for?”

“What do you mean, ‘What for?’”

“I just don’t see any point to it.”

“Well, I know it’s hard to believe hospitals are half decent places in this day and age, but—”

“Is this person really your brother?” he asked. It seemed she had no particular interest in the photo of her brother and was far more concerned with his seemingly grave stomach issues.

“Why, yes, he is. He resembles you quite a bit. I mean there *are* some differences, but if you could see him in real life, he would look exactly like you.”

Again, he inspected the man in the photograph. Perhaps there *were* a lot of similarities between the two of them.

“He really does look like you, doesn’t he?”

“Maybe.”

“Oh my—what’s with the ‘Maybe’? Actually I’d say you the two of you could be twins.”

“If that’s the case, I’d like to meet him.”

At these words the woman seemed to recover her train of thought and she resumed the story of her brother.

After the pigsty burned down and he was expelled from school he ran off to Seoul. There he worked at a bicycle shop and delivered food for a restaurant. At the restaurant he caught the eye of a rich man, a regular there, who had his own car, and through that connection he became an apprentice driver. With several years’ hard work under his belt as

well as a knack for mechanics, he obtained his driver's license. He then brought her and their parents to Seoul from the countryside. That was how she was able to live in Seoul. But both parents were sickly and they passed away before she graduated from high school. Afterwards the two lone siblings carried on with their life in Seoul. However, her star taxi driver of a brother had died as well, killed in a wreck two years ago.

"And I killed him! That's right, my brother died because of me!" she wailed, trembling spasmodically. In spite of himself, he almost sprang to his feet to tend to her.

"I killed him—my own dear brother!" she said frantically, as if she had just re-experienced the atrocity, and then she burst into tears. Her story of hardship, if you were to stitch together what she had said as she was bawling her eyes out, went like this:

After she graduated from high school she passed the university entrance exam, but there was no way she would be able to pay the tuition on her brother's income. Her dream of attending university shattered, she decided she had to earn money and so she ran off. For her brother the emotional trauma of the departure of his sister—his sole remaining flesh and blood—was extraordinary. Based on her brother's driving skills and his ten years of accident-free driving, as well as the opinion of his fellow drivers, who after examining the scene of the accident claimed there was no way to determine the cause, she was convinced that either her brother wasn't in his right mind because of her disappearance, or he had taken his own life out of despair.

She wept sorrowfully as she explained.

"I'm telling you I came to find my brother—that's the reason! I didn't come to see you because of that article in the magazine. When you first came to our tearoom I couldn't breathe—I thought my brother had come back to life to see me!" Her shoulders heaved uncontrollably as she sobbed.

After the intensity of her sobbing had eased, he suggested they go out for lunch. She put the photo of her brother away and silently followed him.

Outside they set off toward the main road. There were no decent restaurants in the vicinity of the alley.

Just as they exited the alleyway his aunt popped into view from the far end. There she was, shopping basket swinging back and forth as she approached. He panicked. A vision unfurled before his eyes—his aunt placing a bowl of the purest well water reverently on the low table and clasping her palms tightly together.

*If my aunt were to know that she's with me...* He felt himself losing control.

"So you're seeing someone these days—*isn't that right?*" His aunt's voice assaulted the rim of his ear once more—the same question she'd asked him that rainy night that marked the start of his physical relationship with her. He didn't answer the voice he heard now. Not because he lacked an answer. More than once he'd wanted to shout to his aunt, *I'm not seeing anyone. But I probably should at some point!* But in the end these words wouldn't come. Whenever she shared her body with him she would ask such questions. There was also a night when she told him not to call her "Aunt." And after she pleased him she would complain about the injustice of being called his aunt. Those times too he was unable to muster a reply. Even though their

relationship was between an aunt and her nephew, he knew all too well that the boundary between *aunt* and *nephew* had long since been eliminated. In any case, as far as his aunt was concerned he had already ceased to be her nephew—the very notion of him as a nephew had lost all meaning.

He was still in the throes of panic. The three of them must not meet!

*What if my aunt were to see her?*

This thought heightened his anxiety a notch. If his aunt were to spot her, then in order not to have her “absolute being” of a nephew stolen from her, she would once more prepare that ritual to evoke the power of her profound faith—the ritual of the boiled cat.

As these thoughts unfolded in his mind an image of the snaggletooth woman being chased down by an army of cats flashed before his eyes.

The next instant they came to a side alley. With his eyes he signaled her to wait while he ventured down the alley. At the same time, he glanced back in the direction from which his aunt was coming, and with that glance he locked eyes with his aunt.

He dashed down the side alley but had gone less than twenty paces when he found it blocked by construction. *Now what!?* Having spotted him, his aunt would surely come down this alley after him. Frantic, he came across an uncovered manhole. Down he went on a ladder that had been lowered into the cavity. As he climbed down into pitch darkness he visualized yet again his aunt, the cat boiling in the cauldron, her hands clasped firmly together, and the violent struggles of the cat as it yowled. And then the vision changed: the snaggletooth woman was embroiled in a violent struggle. That image brought back the plummeting of his heart and the tightening of his throat. He felt the strength draining from his hands, his feet lost their purchase on the rungs of the ladder, and then he lost his balance and went crashing down to the bottom of the pit.

A short time later a pair of construction workers approached.

“All right, we’re done,” said one of them. “Let’s bring up that ladder and get out of here.”

“Are you sure?” said the other man, who kept picking at his teeth. “You know, what with everybody bitching about shoddy construction.”

Right then a middle-aged man looking down from a three-story building that was under construction barked, “Hey, you! We got a job to do—are you going to leave that thing open all day? Didn’t you tell us you’d be done in a couple hours?”

The man picking his teeth peered up and asked uncertainly, “You mean this here manhole?”

“I don’t care if it’s a manhole or your daughter-in-law’s pussy,” shouted the middle-aged man, “don’t you know you got to close it up again once you’ve opened it?!”

“Look,” said the first worker to his tooth-picking partner as he began hauling up the ladder, “it sounds like he’s under the gun too. Let’s just bring it up and close the hole.”

“Hey, are you listening to me?” yelled the man from above. “Just close the damn thing up and clear the area! We need to move this stuff down there, understand?” He pointed to the wooden poles piled beside him.

The two workers obliged, and placing the lid over the manhole, they began to pack up. They dawdled for a moment, scouring the area for any tools they might have left behind.

“What the hell are you doing?! Jesus fucking Christ, just get a move on!”

This last outburst from on high took the remaining wind from the sails of the two workers and they hoisted the ladder onto their shoulders and returned to the larger alleyway. Encountering a middle-aged woman with a shopping basket who was about to turn down the side alley, they intercepted her and pointed upward. “Sorry, ma’am,” said the first man, “you shouldn’t come this way. You don’t want those things falling onto you.”

And sure enough, the work crew above began tossing down the long wooden poles. The woman cocked her head dubiously, then hurried away. But just as the two men were about to follow her off, a young woman arrived and began looking about.

This time the second worker issued the warning. “Listen, lady! Unless you want to become a maiden ghost, you’d be wise to keep clear of this alley!”

But the woman didn’t seem concerned in the least as she watched the poles pile up around the manhole.

*Why would Mr. Pak have gone in there?* she wondered. And then she blushed and a peculiar smile formed on her slightly parted lips. Her snaggletooth very briefly caught the sunlight and twinkled, then it was hidden again.

*All right, nature called, but why make me wait here so long? Couldn’t you have gone at the tearoom?*

She couldn’t help but feel a bit irritated.