

석사학위논문

The Wife and a Catalpa Tree



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Abstract

This thesis is a translation of the Korean short story, *The Wife and a Catalpa Tree* written by Hyeon Gi-yeong. He was born in Jeju in 1941, and majored in English Education at Seoul National University. In 1975, Hyeon's work, *Father* was selected by Shin Chun Literary Art of Dong-A Ilbo where he made his debut to the literary world. He was awarded the 5th Shin dong-yeup Creative Works Prize in 1986, the 5th Manhae Literary Prize in 1990 and the 2nd Oh Yeong-su Literary Prize in 1994.

This short story falls into the fiction genre dealing with the issues that uprooted people face. Through the story of a catalpa tree and worms, this story depicts the vicious company management which forces factory workers to relentlessly work for more than twelve hours a day in dire working conditions and Seok-gyu's defiant attitude toward the society that made him give up his ideology. This story effectively illustrates Seok-gyu's psychological development.

The Wife and a Catalpa Tree

Seok-gyu sat in the house alone, waiting for his wife. When he looked outside while lying on the floor with his head on the threshold, the landscape of the yard appeared tilted toward the floor. The densely packed, broad leaves of a paulownia tree in the yard barely let the sun's rays inside. Only when a gentle breeze ripples intermittently through the leaves, does a dazzling shaft of wayward sunlight burst through the cracks in the leaves like a glint of fire, and disappear. The leaves back-lit by the sun's rays turn brilliant yellow-green like fresh, verdant May, and brightly reveal their clear veins spreading out like a web.

With the house facing west, the sun used to shine down into the house on summer days, heating up the room. This summer, it is shaded by the flourishing branches of the paulownia tree stretching out beneath the protruding corners of the eaves. However, with the days getting hotter as the dog days of summer set in, the shade provided little respite. The leaves drooping in

the scorching sun spewed out the toxic smell of heat into the room. This smell mixed with the blazing heat radiating from the concrete yard, and it was suffocating. To crown it all, the leaves were fairly riddled with worms. Among them, two leaves exposed their bare veins where worms had eaten up all the green tissues. Countless feathery plumed worms wriggling in groups, came into sight shrouded in something misty like a web. The window frames were probably covered black like coal dust with caterpillar droppings. His wife finally yelled,

"Do something! Catch the caterpillars, or prune the branches..... They are crawling everywhere, even in the room....."

But Seok-gyu holed up in the room, and turned a deaf ear to her complaints. Catching the caterpillars and pruning the branches wouldn't be a good solution. The damn tree should be cut down, He grumbled to himself, but he did not budge an inch and just lay down. He had never before helped his wife kill the worms. Since he shut himself in the room and did not stir, she could not help but to catch the caterpillars by herself. When she saw the feathery plumed worms crawling, she used to get appalled and stamp her feet, not knowing what to do. Now that she was

experienced, however she trod on, crushed, and squashed them with no qualms.

His wife, clad in jean shorts, stood on a chair and picked up the leaves where the caterpillars were feeding. His heart was in a flutter whenever he looked out the window, watching his wife standing on her toes and swaying her chubby bottom in order to reach for higher leaves. She had once been so skinny that it was actually painful to embrace her to his bosom because of all her jutting bones. When had she gained so much weight? Seok-gyu was surprised by his wife's chubby body, with obese hips and thighs bulging from her jean shorts. Like gasoline near flames, her eye-dazzling white thighs seemed dangerously risqué.

Her bottom was swaying, split like peas. His wife was out the window. It was within his reach. A groan was heard when she strained herself, absorbed in thrusting a rod up. It sounded like a groan she let out with warm puffs of her breath when having sex. It made him feel strange. His wife was definitely close enough for him to reach. If he snatched her arm and pulled her to him, she would not resist. But Seok-gyu shook his head slowly in despair. He had no confidence. Her provocative jean

shorts only gave him severe frustration, failing to spark his lust.

Shackled by inertia, he had been bogged down for more than a month just as if mired in a swamp. In the beginning, he considered it of little importance, thinking that it was only a momentary mental phenomenon, but there was no sign of improvement. How many times had he been humiliated in bed with his wife in the dead of night? However hard he tried, oozing sweat, he could not make it. No matter how he coaxed and cajoled, it did not crawl out of its skin. It just dangled uselessly.

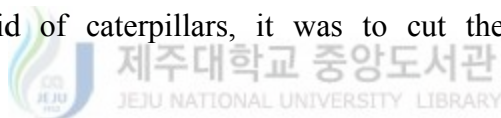
Thus, a long-standing practice was broken in which his wife came to his room a couple of times a week. It had been almost a month since she had stopped coming over to his room at the request of Seok-gyu who now felt incompetent. His wife stood on a chair and continued removing caterpillars, her jean shorts-clad bottom swaying as she worked. No matter how hard she tried, however, the caterpillars did not decrease. Instead, they were so numerous that they seemed to spread out in all directions.

The paulownia tree seemed to grow fast, enjoying the

caterpillars rather than being plagued by them. It outgrew the caterpillars. In fact, his wife's energy was equal to that of the caterpillars. The more rampant the caterpillars were, the more leaves his wife picked up, or the more scorching the early summer weather was, the more vigorously the paulownia tree sprawled its branches and put out broad leaves. It seemed to be more like an unpleasant primitive animal kind of like a dinosaur infested with ticks rather than a plant. It was never comfortable for him to look at his wife clad in jean shorts, clinging to a tree that looked like an odious male. In some ways, his wife looked like a trainer in a circus working in perfect harmony with strange animals. Sometimes he was even under an illusion that the thick branches were coiling around her white thighs.

Somehow or other, the tree started to overwhelm everything in the house. Almost all parts of the yard were under the tree. Its branches covered the soy fermenting jars, stretched out beneath the protruding corners of the eaves, and thrust their stinking points into his room. As the garden was shaded, *Korean Spice Viburnum*, *Zinnia*, and cocks combs withered yellow without blooming flowers. On top of that, dogs' hairs flew over and

covered the garden white like mold. She dug up all the withered plants and buried the gathered leaves riddled with worms. When the garden was finally filled with the graves of worms, she didn't know what to do with the caterpillars after catching them. If she tossed the wormy leaves into the trash can, caterpillars were likely to crawl out onto all the walls. Also she wondered if the garbage collector would collect the leaves riddled with worms. Because of this, the best she could do was to trample on and kill every crawly thing. Finally, his wife gave up. If there was a way to get rid of caterpillars, it was to cut the tree off at the root.



Four years ago, it was he that planted the tree when he moved to this two-room house after many years of living in a rent house. Its base was as thick as his calf. Also, the tree was sturdier and looked cheaper compared to others, so he bought it and planted it here. He later realized it was a catalpa tree. He thought it was a paulownia tree, but his mother-in-law told him otherwise when she visited his house. She recommended that he uproot it because catalpa trees weren't appropriate for planting near houses.

However, Seok-gyu did not listen to her, considering her remarks were superstition. "The tree is good lumber for luxury furniture and is used to make musical instruments. Why do people say it is an evil thing?", he thought to himself. When it rained in the summer, raindrops pouring onto the broad leaves created a pleasant sound.

She turned out to be right in the long run. The tree had grown out of control. It was appalling to see it growing and covering the entire house day by day at a blazing rate. Its eerie tentacle-like branches spread out all over the place and tied up the house indiscriminately. The garden turned brown and soy sauce jars were shaded by the branches. On windy nights, the dreary rustling of the branches against the roof of the house used to disturb Seok-gyu's sleep. Furthermore, feathery plumed worms crawled everywhere. In the cement yard, stains of caterpillars could be seen where Seok-gyu's wife had squashed them with her slippers. The caterpillars belched out a greenish liquid when they died, and she squashed the worms quite frequently because she went in and out of the house frequently to change charcoal briquettes.

He felt that he should get rid of the damn tree. It was not that he could not cut it down because he had bought and planted it himself. Then perhaps did he not dare to cut down the bulky tree because he could not even use a saw properly? Of course, it was doubtful that the big tree could be sawed down by a clumsy sawer like himself. He had never used a saw, so there wasn't one at home. He had to go somewhere to buy one, but in order to cut down the tree, a whip-like saw would never do. Besides, he did not have the heart to go as far as Chunggyechun to buy a saw simply for cutting the tree down. Therefore, in a way, it was a sense of impotence that made him put off cutting the tree down. He did not have the strength needed to take hold of a saw just as he lacked the guts to place his hand on his wife in jean shorts. The sense of helplessness that gripped him now was like the charcoal briquette gas poisoning he had experienced once when he had lived in a rent house. He was fully conscious, yet however hard he struggled to open the door and go out for fresh air, he could not move an inch because he felt weighed down.

He did not even want to lift a finger. It was very difficult for him to peel his back from off the floor. It was like he was bag

of barley leaned against the corner. Just as if poison had spread through his entire body, some portion of his flesh sagged down onto the floor at all times, and he had an overwhelming feeling of malaise and heaviness. Was this the disease that unemployed men suffer from? There was no question that suddenly staying at home after a career of ten years as a busy journalist had thrown him off his rhythm and left him out of sorts. Nevertheless, his symptoms were on the severe end.

Thirty days out of the month, ten days passed quickly. distasteful as it was, there was work to do. He had been commissioned by Christian publishing houses to translate a collection of sermons or theological books, but it was drudgery for him because he was not a Christian. It was a monotonous and tedious task that did not require any imagination, so he could not devote himself to the job. He had to browse through the Bible more often than the English dictionary. Therefore, he had only gained more and more unwanted knowledge of the Bible. It made him irritated and vexed without reason. Yet no matter how distasteful it was, he was not in a position to refuse the work because he had no other source of income. Now that

his family of three were solely dependent on the few hundred thousand won he earned by doing translation, he rather lamented that there was little work to do.

For the first two months since he lost his job, work had somehow continued to fall into his hands. He had been frequently asked to translate books dealing with current affairs such as an account of a journey by a second-generation Korean-American professor and Solzhenitsyn's speech other than theological writings. Unlike theological books, these writings involving current affairs made him constantly absorbed in his job with vivid descriptions and new information. He sat up straight and sweated at his job just as he was writing a newspaper article. Sometimes, he was so absorbed that he sat up all night. However, this tense life did not continue long. Translation requests tapered away and there left only religious writings. There was no telling when the publishing houses would bilaterally give him notice.

His wife packed translations and went out to hand them in to the publishing house, but she had not returned yet. Did something happened to her? He was worried if she might return without getting anything to do.

Of course, he was translating something other than theological writings. That was about Marcuse. He was not commissioned to translate it, nor did he start translating it with an ambition to publish it later. That was only the reading method he conjured up himself. When he was quitting his job, he thought he would catch up on some reading although he did not know how long he would be able to do so. While working as a journalist, he regretted not having the time to read books because of his busy schedule! Journalists never had time for reading because they squandered all their time going on drinking binges. That's the life of a journalist. Everytime he heard people say that the newspaper opinion columns of today were absolute rubbish that didn't even satisfy common sense, he felt embarrassed. It was all because of a lack of reading. However, he didn't start reading in preparation for a comeback to the newspaper company. He started reading to make up for the times he had been too busy to read while working as a journalist. (Well actually, it *was* true that he subconsciously wished that the company he had walked out on would call him in.)

However reading fell short of his expectations. Upon opening a

book, his eyes closed of themselves as if anesthetic gas had spewed out from the desk. Staring unblinkingly at the pages, he could not focus on the letters and a great sleepiness fell upon him like water oozing out of cracks. Therefore, as a method of active reading, he translated Marcuse's book. It was barely effective, however. He could not concentrate on reading, and his hopes that he would be reinstated in his former job were getting faint.

His seven-month unemployment was a battle against sleepiness. Once work to concentrate on disappeared, his brain became empty, and sleepiness crouched in the empty spaces. He hadn't realized before that sleepiness could be such a pain. Even though he had enough sleep, he felt sleepy at all times. He constantly kept yawning, wetting his eyes. How many times had he pounded his head against the wall and bit his hand to shake off sleepiness? To Seok-gyu, it was not only a large snake coiling in his head, but also like a bunch of blowflies attacking indiscriminately. Sleep was like a bunch of blowflies that flew away for a while if he shook them off his body, but that blanketed his body black again in no time! His healthy body was

gradually rotting under blowflies' attacks. It was crumbling.

In order to make up for income insufficient to make a living, he thought that he'd better get more materials to translate. He would meet Wan-hyeok and visit publishing houses. He always thought like that. Far from going out, however, he did not even make a phone call. He let his wife hand in proof-read translations as well as finding new material to work on. It would be worth going out for fresh air sometimes. Sometimes he thought, "Why do I hole up in the house and refuse to go out? Am I afraid of spending money?" Actually, it was true that he could not afford to waste money set aside for living because the monthly cost of subsistence was one hundred twenty thousand won, which meant there was no money left for him. Therefore, he had no choice but to quit drinking and smoking.

Perhaps then, these feeling of malaise were withdrawal symptoms springing out of quitting drinking and smoking. People say that those who quit drinking and smoking have a hard time for the first eight months, so was it that? He felt empty and tired for no reason. Since his cells had been soaked in nicotine and alcohol for decades, it was somewhat natural that he suffered

psychological ataxia after breaking a lifetime habit. Under the circumstances in which his cells were craving nicotine and alcohol, he could not possibly remain psychologically sound. However, his symptoms were too severe to be the result of withdrawal from alcohol and cigarettes. It did not make sense to say that he was worn out from channeling all of his energy into eschewing the temptation to drink and smoke, leaving him no energy to concentrate on any other work. These excuses didn't matter since he could not go out anyways because he had to save money. He had to get off his backside to get more work to do in order to make up for the lack of income.

At this moment, a breath of hot air blew in. The branches of the paulownia tree rippled in the wind, and the dog's hairs in the yard were scattered around like a hazy fog. Seok-gyu cast a glance at the garden. The dog was lying down as usual. It remained motionless like an inanimate fixed object. The damn dog never strayed out of the place. Of course, it had no choice because it was tied with a short string.

Even when the wind swept through, the dog never budged an inch with its ears drooping and eyes closed. Is it sleeping now?

No, maybe it's just enduring something with its eyes closed. Maybe it's enduring something. Well, is it really so? Seok-gyu was dubious. It seemed to him that even if taken off the leash, the dog would not leave the place. The dog might have gotten used to the place because it ate, shit, and stepped in its dung there, confined in the cramped place. How long had it been? Ever since bringing the dog from her parent's house, Seok-gyu's wife had kept the dog on a leash because she said it shit everywhere. Then how many months had it been? When he used to go to work, he was indifferent to the dog to the extent that he didn't know whether it was there or not, so he couldn't have remembered when she brought the dog in. It might have been roughly one year ago. Anyway, Seok-gyu became fully aware of its existence after loosing his job and beginning to stay at home. He realized that the dog had been always held on a leash. He felt pity for the dog when he saw it frantically dragging around its house to which it was confined. That was why he often unleashed the dog, which triggered quarrels with his wife several times. How could she be so cruel even after she named the dog Bongbong? In her chagrin, she got misty-eyed.

"I know how you feel, but don't denounce me as an oppressor. Do you think I am abusing the dog because I want to? It's because the whole house gets messy. It shits anywhere, and its hairs blows into the kitchen....."

"I see, then I will take the dog out to shit elsewhere."

That's when he started taking morning walks. He took the dog out to let it shit regularly every morning. The mixed-breed Korean Jindo-Spitz mongrel took to him. Everytime it saw him, it was overjoyed and would whine and piddle.

Besides Bongbong(the dog), his five-year-old son got excited when he stayed at home. Jin-cheol really liked to see his dad in person all the time when Seok-gyu used to come home drunk when the clock was ticking toward the midnight. However, his interest was short-lived. In less than a month, his eyes sparkling with interest and curiosity withered and eventually died. He showed no interest in playing with his dad anymore. He even seemed afraid of his dad, who holed up at home without shaving. When his mom went out(even when she went to the market), Jin-cheol deliberately followed her out because he hated to stay with his dad.

The only one that followed Seok-gyu was Bongbong. Every morning he took the dog out and it took care of its business. His wife had no excuse to keep the dog on leash any longer. At every dawn, he sprang up from the bed and rushed to the river bank. Bongbong followed close at his heels. They ran headlong in the dusky street at dawn, jumped over the iron fence along the road by the river bank, crossed the road, descended the steep bank, and tumbled down on the filthy pebbles covered with waste oil. He broke out in sweat, and did not loathe the stink of the rotten river that he smelled in every breath. That was the way his morning walk started. Although unemployment could be debilitating, the walk had a positive influence on his mental health, giving him a spark of vitality and helping him get back into the groove of things.

The scamper at dawn only continued for a few months, however. One morning, Bongbong was hit by a truck while crossing the riverside road with Seok-gyu. The dog was thrown onto the asphalt like a damp cloth, whining feebly. White bone pierced the skin and came out, and the red blood spread on the yellow line of the asphalt. The dog luckily survived, but one of

its rear legs was crushed and became useless. After that, no matter how hard he tried to pull the dog out, the dog refused to go out for a walk with him. Instead of going out, the trauma was so severe that he growled with his tail between legs even at the distant sound of a car. In fact, Seok-gyu himself was not in the mood to go out with the limping dog because it was embarrassing.

Finally, the dog was handed over to his wife, who chained it to a gate post. He used to drag his house around like a snail if tied to his house, but now he obediently accepted the leash. On seeing this, Seok-gyu strangely felt depressed. He felt that something that had propped him up was draining out of him. Perhaps his sense of malaise started this way.

He did not want to take a morning walk anymore. After losing his job, the only occasion to go out was the morning walk. Now that he abandoned that, he literally led a solitary life, just staying at home. He became a cripple whose legs were broken. He was only bent on translating at his desk. Even in the midst of focusing on translation, he used to run his hand over his neck, obsessed with extravagant delusions that his neck was leashed to

the leg of the desk. Filling in page after page, he sometimes regarded himself as a chicken on a chicken farm. He was a chicken, confined to a small space, that kept on laying eggs, his wife was a farmer who gathered eggs as soon as he laid..... But now he could not lay as many eggs as he used to. Translations decreased dramatically. Don't chickens that cannot lay sufficient eggs fall out of the farmer's favor and get sold as meat? He was now a sick chicken, constantly dozing off, laying a few eggs once in a while. Seok-gyu's wife could stand the situation no longer, and she recently had begun going around looking for he work. Seok-gyu had no choice but to look the other way.

The wind blew in again, and rattled the leaves of the paulownia tree. The dog slightly opened its eyes at the sound. The dog perked up its eyes, and listened to the wind drifting away for a while, and then made eye contact with Seok-gyu. The dog feebly, hardly noticeably, wagged its tail a couple of times. The dog seemed glad to see him. But the dog closed his eyes even before Seok-gyu turned away, and buried its chin in its front paws. Was the dog taking after Seok-gyu, or was Seok-gyu taking after the dog? The dog was obviously sick like its master.

He was sometimes possessed with the illusion that his body was crumbling away like briquette ashes, and recently, this illusion was often linked to the delusion that the foundation of the house was gradually falling down and collapsing. Seok-gyu thought that a water pipe was leaking somewhere in the house. About two weeks ago, he received a water bill, and it was twice the usual charge. He phoned to the Water Company, and complained about it, but it flatly said it was obvious that water was leaking from a pipe somewhere in the house, and it refused to admit that a meter reader had made a mistake. He promised himself that he would visit the Water Company in person before paying the bill, but it was not easy for one who was laying on the floor all the time, suffering from a vague feeling of sickness. Finally, as an excuse not to visit the bureau, the idea began to dawn on him that perhaps water *was* leaking somewhere. Such thoughts were more prevalent at night. He was already suffering from insomnia, and he even thought he heard the sound of dripping water, which made it more difficult for him to go to sleep. The constantly leaking water spread out everywhere. It eroded the pillars, and made the solid foundation on which the

house stood, malleable like bean curd. The place slowly turned into a puddle brimming with earthworms, and the house gradually sank down. On some occasions, he dreamt that the water came up to his chin, and woke up in terror. The day before yesterday, he had yelled out in the dead of night, waking up his wife who came across to Seok-gyu's room in surprise. As if she was treating a baby with convulsions, she dripped water on Seok-gyu's face. He was so terrified, he was unable to move. The freezing chill of the water, by degrees, brought him to himself. While wiping off the cold sweat covering his chest and back with a towel, his wife said,

"I can't leave the situation as it is. Now you even suffer from insomnia. I can't leave you alone in this room, or you will end up getting a more serious disease. This room looks like a filthy swamp. Also, sleeping separately is making me become more manlike..... So I came up with an idea. What do you say to this? Now that we have financial difficulties, let's rent out. Just this room, and you can move over to the main room....., isn't it a good idea?"

Seok-gyu said nothing. She was saying that she would rent

out the room because of their insufficient income. As the head of the household, there was nothing he could say because his income *was* insufficient. She probably wasn't serious. It wasn't at all likely that she had to rent out her husband's study because she was short of money. It might only mean that she wanted to sleep together. However her suggestion that they sleep together dampened his spirits as much as her idea to rent out the room. It literally meant that he had to come under her wing. Her remedy for insomnia was quite obvious. It was something she had read in a women's magazine, and it said that sexual intercourse was the best remedy for insomnia. Her suggestion that they sleep together in the same room seemed to harbor the ulterior motive of appeasing her hunger on the pretext of being concerned about his insomnia. During the past couple of months he hadn't had any interest in sex. Had her sexual drive flared up to the extent that she could not control it anymore? Seok-gyu was slightly concerned about whether he could cope with her unrestrained sexual desire while he was still in a funk?

The phone resounded through the room, shattering the moment. He was startled by habit. His body got extremely tense.

"Maybe.....," he thought, but the phone rang a couple of times more, and fell silent before he stood up to get it. His tense body got relaxed again. Getting startled everytime the telephone rang was an old habit of his. Although he left the newspaper company of his own will, he still felt a lingering attachment to his old company and was unconsciously waiting for their call, thereby becoming a slave to the phone. However, there had been no calls, and although the sense of expectation was now gone, his habit of getting startled every time the phone rang still remained. Particularly for the first month, he had fidgeted, thinking he had recklessly tendered his resignation, anticipating his resignation might be rejected. Finally, he received a message after one month, but it was a severance notice. Are habits like this too hard to break? He already received a severance allowance, and he had no lingering attachment anymore, but he got startled whenever the phone rang. He was disgusted with himself. Why was it so hard to get rid of such filthy attachments just as a dog shakes shit off its leg? If there was one thing he won during the seven-month struggle of unemployment, it was that he quit drinking, smoking, and reading the newspaper.

These days, newspapers are as detrimental and addictive as liquor or cigarettes. Long ago, daily newspapers lapsed into vulgar tabloid-style sensationalism. Although the press is supposed to lead public opinion in the right direction and admonish obtuse readers, on the contrary, the press now caters to the shallow tastes of readers and begs, using a variety of flattering words. Shame on them! On the day he received his severance notice, Seok-gyu stopped subscribing to newspapers cold turkey, which meant that he had severed the last tie with the newspaper company for which he had worked.

This, however, was not so easy as he thought it would be. He collared a newspaper boy, paid a monthly subscription fee in advance, and explicitly requested the boy not to bring the newspaper anymore, but the newspaper kept coming in. Even though he posted the 'No Newspaper' sign on the main gate, it was torn away the next day. When Seok-gyu used thick paste to make it hard to tear away, the boy meticulously scratched it off using a cutter. The boy was being insolent. Seok-gyu finally called the newspaper subscription center and lost his temper, telling them not to deliver the paper anymore. The newspaper

people pretended to be sorry and apologized, yet the paper continued to arrive.

A guy at the newspaper office tried appealing to Seok-gyu's emotions, and made the excuse that the newspaper delivery boy's father fell off the scaffolding while working in a construction site, and was lying sick in bed. The boy was frantically trying to earn money to buy medicine for his father, so the subscription service center employee pleaded with Seok-gyu to continue his newspaper subscription to help the boy. The employee added that if the boy got more subscribers, the boy could receive more commissions. However, Seok-gyu could detect falsehood in the newspaper employee's powerful oratory. It was an old and well-worn line. It seemed like the employee had gotten complaint calls so many times that he had become inured to such calls. Suddenly, Seok-gyu recalled the poor orphans who were forced to beg on the overpass, on the stairs down to the underpass and in the buses, showing their bleeding wounds which bled because they peeled the scabs off on purpose.

It it were another matter, he could take pity upon them. However, this was about ideology for Seok-gyu. It was this

"great ideology" that made him quit his job in the newspaper company.

In the end, the newspaper delivery boy could not help but yield to Seok-gyu's stubbornness. The boy delivered newspapers to Seok-gyu's house for another three months without asking for fees. Then, he made an abrupt appearance and demanded subscription fees, in vain. The poor delivery boy left with a sullen face because Seok-gyu collected all the delivered newspapers and returned them. Shortly after this, someone took away Seok-gyu's wooden nameplate affixed to the front gate of the house and it was almost certainly the boy that did it. Anyhow, Seok-gyu had been extremely exhausted for the past three months and thought that perhaps his current listlessness might be the result of wrangling with the boy.

On the fateful day when Seok-gyu lost his job, the director might have come to work exactly 20 minutes to 9 o'clock as usual. 9 o'clock was too early for the other clerks to arrive in the office. Only Myeong-suk was at the office wiping desks with a wet cloth. No matter how inept or dull that reporter was, he knew how to survive and how to get by. That explained why the

director came to work earlier than others. It might have been a survival tactic. In any case, the director showed up early that morning breathing a little hard after ascending the stairs. He might not have noticed any difference. The director would have gotten off a taxi shared with another passenger while a cigarette dangled from the director's mouth. He would have entered the office with the cigarette burning between his teeth, having no clue as to the terrible ruins that would unfold before his eyes. However, after taking just a couple of steps, the director stopped, awed and pop-eyed. His desk was split into two pieces and had fallen down. It was as terrible as cut up in pieces with a butcher knife. The desk vividly revealed its fair flesh from the deep gashes made by an ax.

It was not a simple accident that happened under the influence of alcohol. Seok-gyu had been on duty that evening, and returned to the office after having dinner and drinking half-a-bottle of *Soju*. He wasn't even really that drunk. How was his temporary insanity possible? Perhaps Seok-gyu had a fit. He had no idea at all. From the very moment he wielded an ax Seok-gyu's memory was blank, a total absence of consciousness. No matter how he

tried, he could not remember the moment in question like a missing clip from a film. He was never able to understand the context of the incident. Why had he caused such an accident? He thought about it over and over, but failed to find any logic or inevitability in his violent act.

All he did before the incident was write an article for about two hours and then sleep on his stomach for about 30 minutes. If it had been just another day when he had to write an article against his will by order of the director, he would have been upset. However, Seok-gyu himself planned the article, so he had an attachment to it. It was part of a series of articles covering ordinary civil servants' feelings. It gained good responses from the general public. Some of his colleagues even praised it as great work.

He penned the article with grace. He wrote smoothly without emotions until he fell asleep. He slept for about 30 minutes, slumped forward. He woke up because his head weighed down his right arm, making it numb. It was at that moment when an unidentified sense of despair overwhelmed him. It stuck deep in his chest and he felt horrified as if he had been stabbed. At that

moment, a lump came into his throat and he felt like he was tumbling into the abyss. He also felt as if a hand in rubber glove was firmly gripping his pounding heart.

In the empty editing room, desks and chairs were covered in shadow. Unfinished manuscripts were smeared with Seok-gyu's drool while he was sleeping. Seok-gyu's chest felt heavy and he took shallow breaths. He was running short of breath and his body felt like it would burst. Suddenly something gushed out of Seok-gyu's vocal cords.

At that very moment he was engulfed in a storm of insanity, but he could not remember. All he could remember was that he ran to the corner where the fire extinguisher was and detached a fire ax from the wall. How long was his memory erased? For one minute? Maybe it was only a few seconds.

When he regained consciousness, he couldn't believe the pandemonium before his eyes. The director's desk was cleaved in two and an ax was protruded from the back of a chair, revealing the dull side of the blade. He sweated profusely at the scene.

Seok-gyu shuddered when he even thought of his momentary ax-wielding madness. On that day the whites of his right eye

were bloodshot and did not return to normal for quite some time. In addition, he suffered for five or six days from the sore shoulder he got while behaving wildly.

Even though there was discord with the director, Seok-gyu had no idea that it would be expressed in this way. His action was no different from a suicide bombing. What physically blew up was a desk, not autocracy. The director was most likely surprised in his heart, but he pretended to be composed. He must have said out of compassion, "What a pitiful young guy! There must be something wrong with him." After all, it all came down to the fact that he was a manic-depressive and the broken desk would be replaced with a new one. That was it. The only things that were ruined were on desk and Seok-gyu himself.

However, that really wasn't true. If he really had been a manic depressive, he could have drawn sympathy. The next day, he couldn't get the thought of the director's destroyed desk out of his mind, so he mailed in his resignation letter. He wished that his behavior could be seen as harmless and incidental fit or at most, a trivial argument with his supervisor. Contrary to his expectations, however, the resignation was accepted without

hesitation even though it had been sent by regular, not registered mail. Not knowing that, he kept fidgeting in the hope that his resignation would be turned down. He kept waiting for a call. However, he got an unwelcome phone call from his friend Wan-hyeok instead of a call from the office. Four years ago Wan-hyeok had slapped Seok-gyu in the face and unilaterally broke off their friendship when he left the company after joining a mass protest against the owner of the company. Wan-hyeok had slapped him just because he had decided not to leave the company. Wan-hyeok insisted upon visiting Seok-gyu, but Seok-gyu coolly refused to see him.

Nobody in his company was willing to act as a mediator. Even his colleagues turned their backs on him. They did not give any empty words of comfort; no calls, no farewell party. That's the way it had to be. A verbal dispute can be resolved with words. Someone could calm the squabbling parties and attempt to reconcile them. However, Seok-gyu just committed violence by wielding an ax without saying a word. The totally destroyed desk conveyed Seok-gyu's message perfectly. There was no space for any verbal resolution. Violence far exceeds words. Besides, when

it came to ideology, his colleagues always kept their mouths shut. Nobody was saying anything about the incident. They acted as if nothing ever happened. In the end, Seok-gyu's ideology had destroyed him. One who holds a once-cherished ideal within their heart is like a time bomb waiting to explode; The force of the explosion will burst that person's heart. He didn't suspect for even a moment that he would become the slave of a long-forgotten ideal. Seok-gyu thought he had already abandoned all ideological causes a couple of years ago when he returned to work as a strike-breaker.

The strike participants blocked the door of the editing room and set up a barricade. They held out for five days until they were forced out to an inn by the guards of the company. They were also forced out of the inn by the innkeeper and stayed at various places. Some might say that time cures all things and others might say that time passes. Anyways, 20 days passed by while hopping from place to place. Their original enthusiasm cooled down and their tightly-knit solidarity began to dissolve. Directors actively took action to disintegrate the solidarity. 'Just come in first. The making of a newspaper should go on. You

shouldn't stop working for my sake.' Management's subversion never stopped. Wives of strikers were trembling with fear whenever they got calls from the directors. Finally there was a rumor that some of the strikers had contacted one of the directors. In addition, some people withdrew from the strike blaming health problems and some others were persuaded by their wives to stay at home when they dropped by their houses. When the management issued an ultimatum, strikers surrendered in groups. Seok-gyu joined them.

On the day when he parted from Song Wan-hyeok, an intimate friend since they were both cub reporters, Seok-gyu got slapped. Seok-gyu protested, "Going on strike is like giving up writing. For the sake of stating our opinions, we'd rather stay and put pen to paper than bang the door and go." Nevertheless it sounded like a lame excuse even to Seok-gyu, so he fell into low spirits. Wan-hyeok did not respond to the flimsy excuse. An awkward silence lasted for more than half an hour. At one point, Wan-hyeok, who kept heaving a sign and sipping Soju in silence, flew at him, gushing tears. From out of no where, a fist flew over a drinking table and hit his nose. "You bastard, you bastard,

you bastard!", Song Wan-hyeok held the edges of the table and cried out, shaking it. Blood trickled down from Seok-gyu's nose, staining his shirt red. All the people in the bar were looking toward them. The blow stripped Seok-gyu of justifications that had been his feeble excuse. Wan-hyeok and his group, who had left work, could never forgive Seok-gyu remaining at work. They were never willing to allow even the slightest excuse. Ideology and justifications were exclusive to them. Seok-gyu stood up first, grabbed the bill, and went out. He thought to himself, "Wan-hyeok, what do you want me to do? Your wife is a school teacher, but my family will starve to death without me. My parents live in the country and I have to send money every month to support them. I have a sister who attends college and I have to pay school expenses for another two years." Seok-gyu stopped by a clothes store, and there he stripped off his blood-stained shirt and changed into a new one.

Returning to work and collaborating with the newspaper literally meant surrender. The company owner disarmed Seok-gyu and his group. They took away all the cumbersome ideology and justifications. Without ideology and a fighting cause, journalists

are just salaried men.

Since then, Wan-hyeok had called Seok-gyu twice. Both times were to tell Seok-gyu to cover events taking place in the industrial complex. Songs about trade unions were clearly heard over the phone. Seok-gyu thought out of self-accusation that Wan-hyeok was calling to make fun of him rather than give him a news tip. So he answered back. 'Are you kidding me? The mass strike by female workers is not worth covering.' Wan-hyeok said angrily 'it doesn't matter whether it gets into papers or not, but does it make any sense that no damn reporters are around here in this important spot?' His voice over the phone was ear-splitting. Seok-gyu didn't yield to him and counter-attacked saying, "one ex-reporter is enough for such an affair. It wouldn't appear in the newspapers anyway. It makes no difference whether an ex-reporter like you or a present reporter like myself is there at the scene."

Seok-gyu always knew his place as a salaried man, and unconsciously got into a habit of rationalizing his behavior. This was due in part to his antipathy against Wan-hyeok's faction which left the company. The disagreement between Seok-gyu and

Wan-hyeok didn't end there. Seok-gyu took the position that low wages were unavoidable in the pursuit of high growth when Wan-hyeok called him to cover the low-wage issue.

Meanwhile, at the end of last October, Seok-gyu got an order from above to write a report dealing with the industrial complex in the southern coastal area. The intention of the higher-ups was not to take issue with low wages, in line with the 'New Community Movement' but to shed light on workers who were striving against all the odds to become major players.

Unfortunately however, Seok-gyu's report failed to meet the needs of management. This occurred because he was too much involved in the story. That was not the in-depth coverage the higher-ups were looking for. Only Seok-gyu was supposed to hear the one-sided opinion of production managers or officials from the Department of Labor and to interview a few female workers they introduced to him. In the evening, all he had to do was drop a hint for them to fix him up with a loose girl to soothe his sentimental thoughts overnight as well as sing tastefully at a drinking party arranged by the company. "That night in a strange land, the virgin and I....."

However, Seok-gyu did not meet them nor did he go inside the industrial complex. Instead he roamed around outside the factory complex. He visited from a *Ramyon noodles* restaurant, a bakery and a boarding house. He coaxed female laborers into confiding their stories to him while he treated them to some *Ramyon noodles* and bread. He coercively persuaded those who refused his interview requests and even took a look inside a worker's boarding house.

A female worker named Moon Ok-ja led him to a room close to the gate of a dilapidated thatched-roof house with crumbling. Upon entering the room, she hastily snatched a stained brassiere hanging on a nylon clothesline, and hid it behind the quilt. "Well, look around. This is the way we live." She feebly smiled. Awkwardly standing outside the door, Seok-gyu looked inside. Across the sagging ceiling paper drooping in the center, yellowish stains spread outward as if a rat had taken a piss there. Maybe it was just leaking rainwater.

She was the only one who could support her mother and elementary-school brother and she even cut corners on to save up enough money in her savings account. The bank account with

150 thousand won with a maturity of one year was the only hope for her. Here was a room devoid of hopes and dreams. She had absolutely no dreams that girls at her age might have. Her struggle was extremely terrible. Seok-gyu could not describe her as an industrial warrior who overcame adversities. It was as horrible as the story of one woman who won an award for saving a lot of money through pathological frugality. It was said that this woman even ate leftover fish thrown away in the garage to reduce spending on food. The ringworm on Ok-ja's lips must have been due to vitamin deficiency, Seok-gyu thought. She labored 12 hours a day. Buried in threads and fabrics, she pedalled day and night with her feet that were swollen as a result of uneven blood circulation.

It was a pity that he couldn't write about Ok-ja, who worked day and night as a standard-bearer and industrial warrior of the New Community Movement. On the other hand, Seok-gyu also didn't write about Ok-ja's medals of merit for industrial service for being a patriot. All the employers did to raise productivity and exports was to hire workers like Ok-ja at low wages and drive them relentlessly all day.

Some of her colleagues quitted because they couldn't put up with the terrible conditions any more. They were used to eating well and couldn't continue the life of Ok-ja, who frequently skips meals and makes do with noodles at the most. They ran away at midnight without paying the store for bread and noodles. These girls complained from time to time that they wanted to eat their fill, so they probably got jobs in restaurants or bars.

Seok-gyu happened to meet a barmaid in a joint near the Independence Gate, who had worked in that kind of factory. She doggedly refused to drink. While she was away, another barmaid whispered the reason to him. The "teetotaler barmaid" had attempted to commit suicide by taking poison three days earlier, but the boss found her before she died. Since then, the teetotaler couldn't drink any alcohol on account of her weak stomach. What was Seok-gyu's exact feeling at that moment? As soon as he heard her story, he felt all the conviviality drain out of him, to be replaced with unpleasantness. To be frank, rather than feeling sorry for the hopeless barmaid, it was kind of like the feeling a man might get if he went to a hostess bar where all the hostesses happened to be on their periods, thereby frustrating

one's amorous intention.

Actually the most shocking thing occurred when he returned to Seoul after three days of coverage. Ok-ja had asked him to visit her friend, Jin-suk, in Seoul. Jin-suk had sent a letter to Ok-ja just once since she had moved to Yeongdeung-po from Anyang two months ago and Ok-ja was anxious about her friend's health.

Ok-ja showed him the letter she had received from Jin-suk in which Jin-suk wrote that due to health as a result of working hard in a sewing factory, she had decided to move to Yeongil-dong, Yeongdeung-po. However, although her new job in a boutique paid much better and provided more personal time, her health was already so damaged that she couldn't continue her new job. Tears gathered in Seok-gyu's eyes when he read the part where she likened herself to a 'fresh green leaf' that had been shaken loose by a harsh rainstorm before Fall had even arrived.

It had been five months since Jin-suk, who had worked in the same crew with Ok-ja, had been forced out of the factory because she turned out to have an illness after a physical examination. Jin-suk developed hepatitis. It must have been a

vocational disease caused by two years of constantly standing as well as overwork. Her boss had pushed her too hard. Now she had a disease but the company couldn't provide a cure or even any medicine. The boss just fired her. She was just a disposable article of consumption. She had to seek another job in order to earn money for her medicine. She couldn't help but work in a small bonded subcontracting factory which didn't demand any health records. Those sorts of factories, as a rule, have miserable working environments. Ok-ja was about to cry, saying overwork in such an environment would almost cause a relapse. She implored Seok-gyu to visit Jin-suk on the pretext that he was there to do a story on bonded factories.

Seok-gyu went to Yeongil-dong, Yeongdeung-po gu relying on the address written on a slip of paper. He belatedly found out that Yeongil-dong was a very well-known red-light district. He quashed his sense of gloomy foreboding, but sure enough, he found her on the streets. Jin-suk had been lying about working in a boutique. Jin-suk in her flannel pajamas was gazing blankly at her feet while crouched on a wooden veranda. A cool ray of sunlight late Autumn fell over her bare feet. Her unpainted face

was bluish and dark. In particular, her left eye was blackened as if bruised by a vicious blow. She must suffer from severe liver trouble, he thought to himself. Seok-gyu hesitated before speaking. He couldn't say that he was here at the request of Ok-ja. He couldn't ask this wretched creature whether she knew Ok-ja. Jin-suk was like a woman who had fallen into a bottomless pit and was hiding herself from the world. What she *did* want from Seok-gyu was not news about Ok-ja, but a customer who would just stay for a while. Her dubious eyes seemed to say "I don't feel ashamed before my customers, but you're not a customer. Who are you?" Seok-gyu couldn't help pretending to be a customer visiting there on the recommendation of a friend. The room was choked with the smell of cigarettes her guests had smoked.

In the end, the report about the New Community Movement in factories turned out to be a survey on the current situation of low-paid workers and the hard-luck stories of people like Jin-suk and Ok-ja.

His director turned red with anger and cursed Seok-gyu while crumpling the report in his hands.

"Are you kidding, or what? What are you trying to achieve by writing such a report! What the hell?" Without any warning, nearly one hundred pages of Seok-gyu's report were torn in pieces by the director and thrown into a trash can. Seok-gyu was choked with anger. 'Why are you ripping up my paper? Why? If you don't publish the article, that's that. What gives you the right to destroy my work?' Seok-gyu had to put up with it. He trembled violently with anger. He felt an overwhelming urge to hit the director on his mouth till he shed blood. The director never stopped talking roughly, treating Seok-gyu like dirt. It wasn't the first time, though. Seok-gyu also wasn't the only man to be subjected to such abuse. The director had started to behave and talk arrogantly after the end of the strike. Up until then, field reporters had maintained parallel relations with management. The strike turned the relationship into a subordinate one. The director often tried to wield power as if he was their benefactor, saying "Look at those who quit the company. They are all hopeless. You came back to work on my advice. You made the right decision." Even worse, he looked down on Seok-gyu and the other strikebreakers saying, 'You bowed down and abandoned

your ideals. How much pride do you have in yourself, if any?' Seok-gyu suppressed the anger which threatened to gush up out of his throat. He had no choice because the director was beyond his control. The director, a devil of ideology, had gained power as a result of the strike. It was nothing but suicide to revolt against such a person. It was as useless as trying to break a rock with eggs.

If something was supposed to have happened on that day, it should have happened then, not three months later on that day. He should have kicked the director's eyesore of an armchair in front of his colleagues, rather than having broken it three months later in the presence of no one.

Seok-gyu wanted to drink with his colleagues and get flat-out drunk, but nobody was willing to buy him a drink to comfort him. They always spared themselves. Perhaps they thought that they couldn't possibly handle Seok-gyu, who surely swore at the director like a trooper.

Finally, Seok-gyu drank by himself to quench his thirst and then plodded on his way to meet Jin-suk. It had been a week since his first visit. Of course, he had never intended to cover

the real status of the bonded factory she had worked for. He didn't even mention Ok-ja. He just wanted to do it and to become her regular customer for a long time.

He didn't feel guilty and he thought that Jin-suk's black and blue face discolored by her liver disorder might make him sentimental. He wanted to press his healthy chest against her rotting chest forever. Jin-suk was pouring with cold sweat all night long. It must have been the symptoms of a terminal patient.

A week later when he visited her again, she had already left for her hometown. He surmised that she had let go of a last-ditch attempt to survive, and had gone back home to bury her dark face under the warm earth of hometown, Chang Won, South Kyoungnam Province.

Who made the 18-year old girl wear a dark shadow on her face in the prime of womanhood? Who left her suffering from such an incurable disease?

Covering factories had left Seok-gyu with indelible memories. In the course of his earnest reporting, he had unintentionally become emotional in his story. What exactly did Seok-gyu feel when the director tore up his writing pad and threw it away?

That was it - he had felt a strong resistance against his supervisor. It was the first emotion of its kind that he had felt ever since the walkout. Despite all his efforts, he had become a slave to ideology again.

At the same time, he also felt bitterly frustrated. What he felt when he bent over the trash can to pick up his shredded papers was not anger, but an abysmal sense of frustration. Even though he finally salvaged the papers from the trash can, they were still useless and couldn't be sent to any other publishing house. His listlessness might have started then. Ideology usually destroys ideologues. Having an ideology is like wearing a bomb vest; it will blow up on its own one day. Seok-gyu also self-destructed by chopping his supervisor's desk in two, just three months later.

Have I really self-destructed? Did I really blow myself up? Is this burnt-out listlessness all I've got? Did I get unmotivated, and just zone out? Will I be able to stand tall again and shine with enthusiasm once more? Seok-gyu struggled to cling to his momentary enthusiasm while burning the wooden chips. Unfortunately, he didn't have the guts to stick up for himself. He had no energy to help himself up. No, something must be done.

Instead of holding out at home and dozing off like a sick baby pheasant, he needed to make a decision. He shouldn't waste time without doing anything. He should make up his mind somehow and rise from the ashes.

Another thing was that his wife went outside more and more often than before. This morning she left home, saying she had to submit translated texts. She said she was meeting her friends from high school to get a side job or something. One day she returned home smelling of whisky that she said she drank with a friend of hers, and then made a great fuss about her friends; apparently, Banpo apartments are a good place to live, because dozens of her friends lived there. She put on make-up on her lips and eyes more than she had before whenever she went out. Seok-gyu felt bad all day long when his wife went out in such an outfit. He felt like he was leaving her to her own devices. 'It's good that Jin Cheol tags along with his mother, otherwise I would suspect that she is cheating on me. Oh, no! I'll have to make her stay at home. How dare she act as the prime breadwinner, replacing me. Am I a cripple?'

Seok-gyu couldn't help admitting that he should end his

seven-month long life of unemployment. He was on the brink of getting a job grudgingly. He had avoided getting a job at other companies until then, not because he had a slight hope that he might be reinstated but because of his inertia. His place was already taken by Kim Chung-sik of all people. Chung-sik was the one who had mapped out a draft statement and led the boycott. Some say a tougher stick breaks more easily. Kim's surrender had a deep impact on Wan-hyeok and his group. Wan-hyeok called Seok-gyu and talked furiously about Chung-sik's betrayal. (Although Seok-gyu persisted in not meeting him, Wan-hyeok often called. Actually, Wan-hyeok was the only person to call Seok-gye and relay the news to him.) However, Seok-gyu cynically answered him as if to provoke him, "I'm sorry. Because of me, Chung-sik betrayed you. If I hadn't quit the job, this wouldn't have happened. Anyhow I'm so, so sorry for that." Seok-gyu thought he had succeeded in provoking Wan-hyeok's anger. Contrary to his expectations, Wan-hyeok didn't get sulky and rather made a horse laugh on the phone, suddenly saying in a low voice. "We lost him, but we got you, Seok-gyu, in turn." Seok-gyu hung up the phone without responding. That's why he

had avoided Wan-hyeok. He was afraid that he might be persuaded by Wan-hyeok to join their group. He hated their life of unemployment. They were hanging around jobless as if they're still waiting for something. He hated their habitual heavy drinking and cynical outlook. They even looked narrow-minded.

Anyhow, Seok-gyu had no choice but to enter any profession. He had been offered a position as a deputy-manager in an electronics company owned by his wife's uncle right after he was fired. The company manufactured chips for radios and televisions and exported them overseas. It employed about three thousand female workers. Of all jobs, the job he was offered was managing workers. He personally felt the antagonism of female workers against factory managers when he covered industrial complexes in the Southern Coastal areas, so he refused the offer at first. Managers, acting as pawns of the owner, forced workers to overwork in the name of raising productivity and siphoned off their young spirits. Factory managers always swore at workers, and even checked how much time they spent in the restroom. Managers even hit the workers on the head with a blunt tool if they dared to nod off. Seok-gyu felt nauseated when he realized

that his uncle-in-law intended to taking advantage of his being a former reporter to solve labor-related problems with ease. Seok-gyu didn't accept the job offer. No matter how unpopular he was as a reporter, he couldn't accept that his experience as a reporter could be perverted in such a way.

His uncle-in-law said 'Take your time to consider the offer.' It had already been six months since then. The position was still open. His uncle-in-law was a man who could afford to wait. Seok-gyu tried to look for a job, unsuccessfully. Anybody who knew he was a former reporter turned him down.

Now he was at the end of his rope. He couldn't hold out any longer. He was driven to the end of the jobless life. The mere thought that he would inevitably enter the company run by his uncle-in-law gave him some motivation. However, such thoughts were not new. Seok-gyu already expected that he would eventually get desperate. That was the case now, which became another cause of his lethargy. His defeatism led to chronic lethargy. He was sinking into a deep mire of lethargy that he couldn't escape. He had hit rock-bottom, and there was no room to sink further. It was time to surface in a totally new shape.

'What is ideology or justification for? In these difficult times, they are nothing but an enemy of those trying to make a living; ideology takes away the spoon from our mouths. Clinging to ideology or justification is just paranoia. Ideology is a preconceived way of understanding things. I need to change that view. Why did I conclude that Jin-suk had died without ever checking? Who knows, she might be recovering from hepatitis in the clean air of her hometown. Seeing things from only one point of view was too self-absorbing. It is the height of sentimentalism,' Seok-gyu thought, but he still felt hollow.

At that moment, the bell rang noisily, startling him 'Damn it! What a bad habit! Who is it? Is the call for me or for my wife? Is it Wan-hyeok?' Seok-gyu braced himself in case the call was from Wan-hyeok. 'I don't know why, but I hope it's a call from Wan-hyeok. I'd like to see him. But, it's probably not. It must be from a friend of my wife, not from him. Since she began going outside, there have been more phone calls for her. This one must be hers, maybe from her friend who, she said, lives in Banpo Apartment.' Seok-gyu lost interest. He laid himself down again. The wife is out and her jobless husband is at home alone

keeping the house and answering calls. Seok-gyu felt ashamed of himself keeping the house alone. The phone continued to ring.

Out of the blue, he felt choked with some emotion. His body curled up. He felt like he had gotten an electric shock. He couldn't breathe. Seok-gyu sprang to his feet. The pounding of his heart sounded painfully in his ears. 'No, it can't be. My wife might not be Or, maybe it's a call from a guy who wants my wife, otherwise it's from a woman who's calling at the request of some guy.' Seok-gyu ran into the main room to answer the phone, but it stopped ringing right before he picked up the receiver. He stood in front of the phone while panting and said, 'She must be not with Jin Cheol. She probably leaves him in the care of her mother. Once unencumbered, she must be hanging around with some guy. Let's see.' Seok-gyu dialed his mother-in-law with trembling hands. Ring-a-ling, ring-a-ling. Hearing such a sharp dial tone emphasized the fact that there would be someone else on the other end listening, so he tried to calm down and took a deep breath. His mother-in-law answered his call.

"What's up? What a surprise to get a call from you."

She sounded a little pleased to get a call from her son-in-law. Seok-gyu didn't care about that, though. He pressed her hard for information of whether Jin Cheol was there or not.

"Is he there?"

She hesitated a bit with his sudden question.

"Why are you looking for Jin Cheol all of a sudden? He's playing with me right here....."

That's as he expected. He felt dizzy. His ears were full of buzzing sounds. He sweated hard.

"Do you know where his mother is? Didn't she tell you?"

"You really don't know where she is, do you? She is out for insurance or something. She's very enthusiastic. Although she just started her job less than a week ago, she insisted on her sister buying an insurance policy."

"Insurance? What insurance?"

"Didn't you hear that yet? She's working as an insurance sales woman."

"What?"

"Hey, you are such an indifferent guy. You don't even know what your wife is doing, poor guy. It's been more than ten

days."

He stood stunned, unconsciously dropping the receiver. 'Unbelievable, she never let me know..... It might be a lie. It might be a smoke screen she's laid down, knowing that her husband is on her trail, an alibi prefabricated for a perfect crime.....'

Notes marked with red letters scribbled in the calendar above the mirror caught his eye. There were some letters scribbled in the margin. What were they? Seok-gyu was startled when he took a close look at them.

They were the names of his friends. 14th: Assistant manager Oh Mun-jung, 15th: Professor Lee In-gyu, 16th: Manager Mun Su-il, 17th: President Han Ung-seop, 18th: Reporter Park Sun-cheol..... in this fashion, something was written by all the dates until the 30th. All the names were those of Seok-gyu's friends. What is she doing? How dare she make plans to see his friends? Confronted with an ominous thought, Seok-gyu hurriedly pulled open the drawer of the mirror stand, and rummaged inside. There he found proof showing that his wife was an insurance saleswoman. There were blank insurance application forms ,

several brochures, and a pocket notebook with clients' names. On the notebook, there were names of Seok-gyu's friends and the names of women, presumably her friends, written in her unique round handwriting. They were, so to speak, her prospective clients. Only then, did he heave a sigh of relief, freed from the morbid suspicion of his wife's fidelity. 'She secretly copied all the names from my address book. But how could she persuade my friends to buy an insurance policy? What an embarrassment! She's gone too far. She might have kept it a secret because she was afraid that I would hit the ceiling, when I found that. Damn it! Let me see. Today is the 15th. According to the notes in the calendar, she went to the university to see Lee In-gyu. In-gyu is absolutely glued to tennis. He might be playing at the tennis court. Was she lucky enough to visit him before then? Or perhaps she fell a step behind after he left for the court? She hasn't returned home yet. It seems that she got there late, so she might have gone to the court to see him. But it can be assumed that she cannot approach the court crammed with men in jean shorts so she would be waiting for the game to finish, sitting on the bench far from the court. Damn it! In-gyu's white tennis wear

might shine brilliantly against the backdrop of the court's brown playground. In-gyu might move swiftly. My wife keeps track of a parabola flying over the net for a good while. Suddenly, the parabola is snapped, and crowds collectively groans. The ball catches the net. At this moment, what would my wife be thinking?' She might heave a sigh, thinking it would be better for her husband to be obsessed with tennis than with something else. In contrast to her ponderous husband lost in thought, In-gyu's agile movements after the ball might seem amazing. It might dawn upon her that optimistic movements without any anxiety or agony might be a real life. While he was possessed by such thoughts, he sensed that his body was gradually swelling up with something. What filled his body was anger. The dreadful urge, from which he destroyed the desk last year, grabbed him again. The urge vented out aggressively. Tearing up his wife's notes, he shouted.

"No! I will never work at your uncle's company!"

Seok-gyu rushed out of the floor, fuming. There he grabbed a knife and ran directly to the paulownia tree in the yard. BongBong was lying there and got startled, springing up. He

climbed the tree and indiscriminately started wielding the knife. The sound of the knife being stabbed into the tree and that of Seok-gyu's heaving breaths could be heard at the same time. Leafy branches clattered to the ground one after another. Some fell down onto soy sauce jars with a crash. Others were suspended on the washing line. He leaned his weight on the dull knife to cut the big branches and broke them off. A myriad of worms fell onto his shirt soaked with sweat, and his palms were sticky with green sap. 'Hey, there will be some other place where I can work other than your uncle's company if I look hard enough. I might get a lower salary, but we'll tighten our belts. In lean times, belt-tightening is the best policy. Come home now! Just come home without meeting In-gyu. Instead of meeting In-gyu, I will have to meet Wan-hyeok. We can live like him. I'd better call him right away. If I call, he will come running to my place. How long has it been since I met him? It will be the first time to meet him face-to-face in three years. Damn it! These branches won't cut easily. This will not do. I'll ask Wan-hyeok to pick up a saw on the way here in the evening. I'll saw it down at the base!'

Seok-gyu stripped off his shirt jumbled with sweat and worms, and jumped off the tree. Startled Bongbong was running amok around the house.



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