# 📖 Leaving the Last Gleam

*An Award-Winning Korean Novella Translated into English*

## Translator’s Note

This work, recipient of the **2025 Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs International Literature Award**, is presented here in English for the first time. The translation is not literal or machine-produced, but a literary rendering that seeks to preserve the imagery, rhythm, and emotional depth of the Korean original. My aim has been to allow English-speaking readers to experience both the wonder and unease at the heart of the story, just as Korean readers did.  
**At its core, the story reminds us that while humans are social beings, they are also, across time and culture, what we fear most.**

## 1. Childhood

When I was in first grade, I walked to school alone and came home alone. My legs always hurt, and the bag slung across my shoulder felt unbearably heavy, so I trudged along the path home. One afternoon, a man on a bicycle kept offering to give me a ride. Too shy and awkward to respond, I just shuffled on. He pedaled slowly beside me, pointing again and again to the wide carrier on the back of his bicycle. Then, suddenly, another man appeared and berated him in a harsh voice. The cyclist vanished with a hiss. My legs still ached, and I couldn’t help but feel a pang of regret for letting the chance slip away. That evening, when I told my mother, she sighed with relief and warned me: if I ever followed a stranger, I could lose her forever.

## 2. Painted Hills

By the third day of our trip, Kyungmin and I had driven the rental car without any fixed destination. We weren’t following an itinerary—just an indifferent journey of steady miles, turning at a few points along the way. On the first day we drove to Portland, about three hours south of Seattle, wandered the city, browsed a famous secondhand bookstore, and bought two pairs of Nike shoes—maybe out of need, maybe out of superstition. On the second day we stopped in Bend, a city of neat low buildings and carefully laid-out roads, as if its bid to be a tourist town were still fresh. We visited a natural history museum displaying local raptors and artifacts from the old West, and later drank beer at one of the breweries along Bend Ale Trail. On the third day, we aimed to cross into Idaho before nightfall.

The road stretched endlessly, flanked by open land that seemed untouched by human hands. I set the cruise control and lifted my foot from the pedal. Kyungmin, snapping photos as if even the sparse shrubs were miraculous—like plants rising from the surface of the sea—pointed out, “Isn’t it strange to find desert this high up?”

Most of the road cut across a high plateau, broad and dry yet rimmed with snow and streaked with hardy plants. Just when we began to wonder if we were truly driving across a desert, jagged mountains appeared like a folding screen, taking our breath away. The landscape repeated itself: open expanses, sudden ridges, a rhythm of awe and solitude. I felt both lonely and strangely elated. “Even nature here feels American,” I muttered with a grin. Kyungmin didn’t catch it. We crossed the high desert where few cars passed, our voices muffled inside the hum of the cabin, and when sharp cliffs loomed like sentries, I pressed the brake and slowed.

At the overlook we parked alone. Winter, off-season—no one else in sight. Kyungmin beamed at the view: cones of bare earth layered in bands of ochre, red, and yellow, streaked with black seams like brushstrokes frozen in time. It felt as if the land itself were crying out to be remembered for its long, stubborn endurance.

“ChatGPT told me last night,” Kyungmin said, climbing the ridge to take more photos, “that these colors were formed over millions of years by volcanic ash and plant matter, shifting climates, minerals reacting in strange ways.”

I trailed after, gasping in admiration. From above, the two of us must have looked like ants on the vast earth. For a moment, I felt the weight of unseen eyes. Turning quickly, I scanned the empty land.

As we returned to the parking lot, a white van wound up the entrance road. I hesitated, watching it appear and vanish along the bends. Kyungmin strode ahead, eager to see the next trail. When the van passed us by, I glanced at the faces inside—probably a family—and muttered, half to myself, “Do we really need to see another hill?”

## 3. Blue Basin

We should have taken Highway 26, but missed the turn and slipped onto another mountain road. The navigation voice insisted on rerouting, but we ignored it, entranced by the scenery—towering basalt cliffs, colors that looked painted in turquoise. We drove deeper, seduced by beauty, dopamine overruling reason.

The sky dimmed. At the basin, we parked in silence. The trail wound past gnarled shrubs and sheer drops that made my knees tremble. The rocks above glared in shades of green and blue, packed tight as if ready to break loose.

Kyungmin pressed ahead with the camera. I paused at a narrow wooden footbridge, staring at moss-covered boulders that looked like fallen giants. Suddenly, the air pierced with a cry: high, sharp, and desperate. Coyotes, with pups whining faintly in between. Though the sound came from the far side of the mountain, it carried clearly through the hollow night air.

I cupped my hands around my mouth, whispering toward Kyungmin: “Did you hear that? Coyotes. Let’s go back. I’m scared.”

He laughed, then quickened his steps toward me. “They won’t come down here. They’re more afraid of us.”

But fear gnawed at me. What if hunger or the instinct to protect their young made them reckless? As the last light faded, we hurried back to the car.

## 4. Highway 26

Kyungmin admitted we’d have to retrace an hour to rejoin Highway 26. By then, the swollen creek rushed louder, like a dark serpent chasing us. The road jolted under the tires, branches whipped across the windshield, and when we finally reached the main highway, dusk had thickened into a heavy gray that felt like a thriller scene.

Cars ahead moved cautiously, but Kyungmin grew impatient and overtook them, the tires screeching against the line. Soon the traffic vanished altogether. Snow flurries fell, and mist thickened. The mountains disappeared, and the road became a bridge suspended over a sea of fog, forward and backward swallowed in darkness. We drove on, enclosed in a halo of light, the world beyond swallowed in pitch. It felt as though we were not just travelers in America, but strangers in a world that seemed unwilling to claim us.

## 5. The Stranger

At last, Kyungmin pulled over. The rear tire was torn. We had insurance that promised roadside help, but our phones showed no signal. The radio was silent. There was nothing—no internet, no voice.

We decided to change the tire ourselves. In the beam of our headlights, Kyungmin wrestled with the jack and wrench, his breath rising in pale clouds. I held up my phone’s light, scanning the road, wishing for a passing car yet fearing one might stop.

A white pickup appeared, then sped past. Relief mixed with dread: what if it turned back? My pulse quickened. We worked in silence, wrench against stubborn bolts, breath and muttered curses echoing in the cold.

Then another vehicle slowed. Its headlights blazed, then shifted, dimming. A dark red pickup stopped nearby. The driver’s door opened. A tall, thin white man stepped out, his features sharpening with each step. My breath caught, my body frozen.

“What’s wrong? Looks like trouble.”

“Our tire blew. Almost done changing it,” Kyungmin said, forcing cheer.

“Need a hand?”

“No, we’re fine. Thanks.”

He lingered. “I live in a village nearby. Fewer than a hundred people. Was heading home.”

So he wasn’t alone—his wife must be in the passenger seat. Perhaps she was watching us even now. Did she warn him to be careful of the hooded figure by the car—me? Did she tell him to carry something, just in case?

Kyungmin grunted, tightening the bolts. The man stayed a few paces away, offering the occasional low word of advice or praise. His manner was polite—the kind I had often seen in Americans, the kind that feels learned rather than lived, a reminder that I was not of this place.

Finally, Kyungmin wrestled the spare into place. The man stepped closer. “Want me to check it?”

I held my breath. He moved around the trunk, flashlight in hand. I couldn’t hear his words, couldn’t read his face in the shadows. For a moment, the beam caught his eyes, glinting strangely—whether from the light or something within, I could not tell. My fists clenched in my pockets.

Kyungmin slammed the trunk shut, his laugh too loud, thanking him. The man only warned us: “About sixty miles ahead, you’ll hit Highway 84. Watch for police—speed traps everywhere.” Then he returned to his truck and drove away.

## 6. Epilogue – Leaving the Last Gleam

Kyungmin accelerated cautiously, testing the tire. I watched the mirrors: one minute, two, ten—no headlights behind us. Only then did he press harder, as if to make up for lost time. Yet I thought: maybe it was never about time.

Darkness wrapped us entirely. I whispered, “When he got out of the truck, I thought I heard a woman’s voice. Maybe his wife told him to be careful. Maybe she told him to leave if something happened.”

Kyungmin’s reply was faint, nearly lost to the roar of the tires: “You know, I was gripping that wrench the whole time. I never let it go.”

Snow hissed against the windshield. The road twisted and straightened again, drawing us into silence. We alone moved through the circle of light.

Static cracked from the radio. My phone flickered: two bars of signal. I opened the map—still no towns, no villages nearby. Not for miles. Out of habit, I tapped YouTube. News flashed: the U.S. President’s face, headlines about anxious immigrants. Everything looked strange, as if in another language.

I leaned back, clutching a bag of fruit. Then I saw it: faint headlights winding toward us from behind. “There’s a car following,” I murmured. The lights grew closer, brighter, faster. My chest tightened with memory—running home at eight years old, stumbling, skinning my knee, terrified of the stranger who might catch me. My mother’s words returned: people are what you should fear most.

“…and as the road disappeared into silence, I heard again my mother’s warning: people are what we should fear most.”