Please Look After Mother

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1

Nobody Knows

IT'S BEEN ONE WEEK SINCE Mother went missing.

The family is gathered at your eldest brother Hyong-chol's house, bouncing ideas off each other. You decide to make flyers and hand them out where Mother was last seen. The first thing to do, everyone agrees, is to draft a flyer. Of course, a flyer is an old-fashioned response to a crisis like this. But there are few things a missing person's family can do, and the missing person is none other than your mother. All you can do is file a missing-person report, search the area, ask passers-by if they have seen anyone who looks like her. Your younger brother, who owns an online clothing store, says he posted something about your mother's disappearance, describing where she

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went missing; he uploaded her picture and asked people to contact the family if they'd seen her. You want to go and look for her in places where you think she might be, but you know how she is: she can't go anywhere by herself in this city. Hyong-chol designates you to write up the flyer, since you write for a living. You blush, as if you were caught doing something you shouldn't. You aren't sure how helpful your words will be in finding Mother.

When you write 24 July 1938 as Mother's birth date, your father corrects you, saying that she was born in 1936. Official records show that she was born in 1938, but apparently she was born in 1936. This is the first time you've heard this. Your father says everyone did that, back in the day. Because many children didn't survive their first three months, people raised them for a few years before making it official. When you're about to rewrite 38 as 36, Hyong-chol says you have to write 1938, because that's the official date. You don't think you need to be so precise when you're only making homemade flyers and it isn't like you're at a government office. But you obediently leave 38, wondering if 24 July is even Mother's real birthday.

A few years ago, your mother said, 'We don't have to celebrate my birthday separately.' Father's birthday is one month before Mother's. You and your siblings always went to your parents' house in Chongup for birthdays and other celebrations. All together, there were twenty-

two people in the immediate family. Mother liked it when all of her children and grandchildren gathered and bustled about the house. A few days before everyone came down, she would make fresh kimchi, go to the market to buy beef, and stock up on extra toothpaste and toothbrushes. She pressed sesame oil and roasted and ground sesame and perilla seeds, so she could present her children with a jar of each as they left. As she waited for the family to arrive, your mother would be visibly animated, her words and her gestures revealing her pride when she talked to neighbours or acquaintances. In the shed, Mother kept glass bottles of every size filled with plum or wild-strawberry juice, which she made seasonally. Mother's jars were filled to the brim with tiny fermented fish or anchovy paste or fermented clams that she was planning to send to the family in the city. When she heard that onions were good for one's health, she made onion juice, and before winter came, she made pumpkin juice infused with liquorice. Your mother's house was like a factory; she prepared sauces and fermented bean paste and hulled rice, producing things for the family year round. At some point, the children's trips to Chongup became less frequent, and Mother and Father started to come to Seoul more often. And then you began to celebrate each of their birthdays by going out for dinner. That was easier. Then Mother even suggested, 'Let's celebrate my birthday on your father's.' She said it would be a burden to celebrate their birthdays separately, since both happen during the hot summer, when there

are also two ancestral rites only two days apart. At first the family refused to do that, even when Mother insisted on it, and if she baulked at coming to the city, a few of you went home to celebrate with her. Then you all started to give Mother her birthday gift on Father's birthday. Eventually, quietly, Mother's actual birthday was bypassed. Mother, who liked to buy socks for everyone in the family, had in her dresser a growing collection of socks that her children didn't take.

NAME: Park So-nyo
DATE OF BIRTH: 24 July 1938 (69 years old)
APPEARANCE: Short, salt-and-pepper permed hair, prominent cheekbones, last seen wearing a sky-blue shirt, a white jacket and a beige pleated skirt.
LAST SEEN: Seoul Station subway

Nobody can decide which picture of Mother you should use. Everyone agrees it should be the most recent picture, but nobody has a recent picture of her. You remember that at some point Mother started to hate getting her picture taken. She would sneak away even for family portraits. The most recent photograph of Mother is a family picture taken at Father's seventieth-birthday party. Mother looked nice in a pale-blue *hanbok*, with her hair done at a salon, and she was even wearing red lipstick. Your younger brother thinks your mother looks so different in this picture from the way she did right before she went missing. He doesn't think people would identify her

as the same person, even if her image is isolated and enlarged. He reports that when he posted this picture of her, people responded by saying, 'Your mother is pretty, and she doesn't seem like the kind of person who would get lost.' You all decide to see if anyone has another picture of Mother. Hyong-chol tells you to write something more on the flyer. When you stare at him, he tells you to think of better sentences, to tug on the reader's heartstrings. Words that would tug on the reader's heartstrings? When you write, *Please help us find our mother*, he says it's too plain. When you write, *Our mother is missing*, he says that *mother* is too formal, and tells you to write *mum. When you write, Our mum is missing*, he decides it's too childish. When you write, *Please contact us if you see this person*, he barks, 'What kind of writer are you?' You can't think of a single sentence that would satisfy Hyong-chol.

Your second-eldest brother says, 'You'll tug on people's heartstrings if you write that there will be a reward.'

When you write, *We will reward you generously*, your sister-in-law says you can't write like that: people take notice only if you write a specific amount.

'So how much should I say?'

'One million won?'

'That's not enough.'

'Three million won?'

'I think that's too little, too.'

'Then five million won.'

Nobody complains about five million won. You write,

We will reward you with five million won, and put in a full stop. Your second-eldest brother says you should write it as *Reward: 5 million won*. Your younger brother tells you to put *5 million won* in a bigger font. Everyone agrees to email you a better picture of Mother if they find something. You're in charge of adding more to the flyer and making copies, and your younger brother volunteers to pick them up and distribute them to everyone in the family. When you suggest, 'We can hire someone to give out flyers,' Hyong-chol says, 'We're the ones who need to do that. We'll give them out on our own if we have some free time during the week, and all together over the weekend.'

You grumble, 'How will we ever find Mother at that rate?'

'We're already doing everything we can,' Hyong-chol retorts.

'What do you mean, we're doing everything we can?'

'We put ads in the newspaper.'

'So doing everything we can is buying ad space?'

'Then what do you want to do? Should we all quit work tomorrow and just roam around the city? If we could find Mother like that, I'd do it.'

You stop arguing with Hyong-chol, because you realise that you're pushing him to take care of everything, as you always do. Leaving Father at Hyong-chol's house, you all head home. If you don't leave then, you will continue to argue. You've been doing that for the past week. You'd meet to discuss how to find Mother, and one of you

would unexpectedly dig up the different ways someone else had wronged her in the past. The things that had been suppressed, that had been carefully avoided moment by moment, became bloated, and finally you all yelled and smoked and banged out the door in a rage.

When you first heard Mother had gone missing, you angrily asked why nobody from your large family went to pick her and Father up at Seoul Station.

'And where were you?'

Me? You clammed up. You didn't find out about Mother's disappearance until she'd been gone four days. You all blamed each other for Mother going missing, and you all felt wounded.

Leaving Hyong-chol's house, you take the underground home but get off at Seoul Station, which is where Mother vanished. So many people go by, brushing your shoulders, as you make your way to the spot where Mother was last seen. You look down at your watch. Three o'clock. The same time Mother was left behind. People shove past you as you stand on the platform where Mother was wrenched from Father's grasp. Not a single person apologises to you. People would have pushed by like that as your mother stood there, not knowing what to do.

How far back does one's memory of someone go? Your memory of Mother?

Since you heard about Mother's disappearance, you haven't been able to focus on a single thought, besieged by long-forgotten memories unexpectedly popping up.

And the regret that always trailed each memory. Years ago, a few days before you left your hometown for the big city, Mother took you to a clothing shop at the market. You chose a plain dress, but she picked one with frills on the straps and hem. 'What about this one?'

'No,' you said, pushing it away.

'Why not? Try it on.' Mother, young back then, opened her eyes wide, uncomprehending. The frilly dress was worlds away from the dirty towel that was always wrapped around Mother's head, which, like other farming women, she wore to soak up the sweat on her brow as she worked.

'It's childish.'

'Is it?' Mother said, but she held the dress up and kept examining it, as if she didn't want to walk away. 'I would try it on if I were you.'

Feeling bad that you'd called it childish, you said, 'This isn't even your style.'

Mother said, 'No, I like these kinds of clothes, it's just that I've never been able to wear them.'

I should have tried on that dress. You bend your legs and squat on the spot where Mother might have done the same. A few days after you insisted on buying the plain dress, you arrived at this very station with Mother. Holding your hand tightly, she strode through the sea of people in a way that would intimidate even the authoritative buildings looking on from above, and headed across the square to wait for Hyong-chol under the clock tower. How could someone like that be missing? As the headlights of the train enter the station, people rush forward,

glancing at you sitting on the ground, perhaps irritated that you're in the way.

As your mother's hand got pulled away from Father's, you were in China. You were with your fellow writers at the Beijing Book Fair. You were flipping through a Chinese translation of your book at a booth when your mother got lost in Seoul Station.

'Father, why didn't you take a cab instead? This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't taken the underground!'

Father said he was thinking, Why take a taxi when the train station is connected to the subway station? There are moments one revisits after something happens, especially after something bad happens. Moments in which one thinks, I shouldn't have done that. When Father told your siblings that he and Mother could get to Hyongchol's house by themselves, why did your siblings let them do that, unlike all the other times? When your parents came to visit, someone always went to Seoul Station or to the Express Bus Terminal to pick them up. What made Father, who always rode in a family member's car or a taxi when he came to the city, decide to take the underground on that particular day? Mother and Father rushed towards the train that had just arrived. Father got on, and when he looked behind him, Mother wasn't there. Of all days, it was a busy Saturday afternoon. Mother was pulled away from Father in the crowd, and the train left as she tried to get her bearings. Father was

holding Mother's bag. So, when Mother was left alone in the station with nothing, you were leaving the book fair, heading towards Tiananmen Square. It was your third time in Beijing, but you hadn't yet set foot in Tiananmen Square, had only gazed at it from inside a bus or a car. The student who was guiding your group offered to take you there before going to dinner, and your group decided it was a good idea. What would your mother have been doing by herself in Seoul Station as you got out of the cab in front of the Forbidden City? Your group walked into the Forbidden City but came right back out. That landmark was only partially open, because it was under construction, and it was almost closing time. The entire city of Beijing was under construction, to prepare for the Olympic Games the following year. You remembered the scene in *The Last Emperor* where the elderly Puyi returns to the Forbidden City, his childhood home, and shows a young tourist a box he had hidden in the throne. When he opens the lid of the box, his pet cricket from his youth is inside, still alive. When you were about to head over to Tiananmen Square, was your mother standing in the middle of the crowd, lost, being jostled? Was she waiting for someone to come and get her? The road between the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square was under construction, too. You could see the square, but you could get only there through a convoluted maze. As you watched the kites floating in the sky in Tiananmen Square, your mother might have collapsed in the passageway in despair, calling

out your name. As you watched the steel gates of Tiananmen Square open and a squadron of police march forth, legs raised high, to lower the red national flag with five stars, your mother might have been wandering through the maze inside Seoul Station. You know this to be true, because that's what the people who were in the station at that time told you. They said they saw an old woman walking very slowly, sometimes sitting on the floor or standing vacantly by the escalators. Some saw an old woman sitting in the station for a long time, then getting on an arriving train. A few hours after your mother disappeared, you and your group took a taxi through the night-time city to bright, bustling Snack Street and, huddled under red lights, tasted 56-proof Chinese liquor and ate piping-hot crab sautéed in chilli oil.

Father got off at the next stop and went back to Seoul Station, but Mother wasn't there any more.

'How could she get so lost just because she didn't get on the same car? There are signs all over the place. Mother knows how to make a simple phone call. She could have called from a phone booth.' Your sister-in-law insisted that something had to have happened to your mother, that it didn't make sense that she couldn't find her own son's house just because she failed to get on the same train as Father. Something had happened to Mother. That was the view of someone who wanted to think of Mother as the old mother.

When you said, 'Mother can get lost, you know,' your sister-in-law widened her eyes in surprise. 'You know how Mother is these days,' you explained, and your sister-in-law made a face, as if she had no idea what you were talking about. But your family knew what Mother was like these days. And knew that you might not be able to find her.

When was it you realised that Mother didn't know how to read?

You wrote your first letter when you jotted down what Mother dictated to send to Hyong-chol, soon after he moved to the city. Hyong-chol graduated from high school in the small village you were all born in, studied at home for the civil-service exam for a year, and went to the city for his first assignment. It was the first parting between Mother and one of her children. Back then, your family didn't have a phone, and the only way to communicate was through letters. Hyong-chol sent her letters written in large type. Your mother always intuitively knew when Hyong-chol's letters would arrive. The postman came around eleven in the morning with a large bag hanging from his bicycle. On the days when Hyong-chol's letters arrived, Mother would come in from the fields, or from the stream where she would be doing the laundry, to receive the letter personally from the postman.

Then she waited for you to come home from school, led you to the back porch and took out Hyong-chol's letter. 'Read it out loud,' she would tell you.

Hyong-chol's letters always started with *Dearest Mother*. As if he were following a textbook on how to write letters, Hyong-chol asked after the family and said he was doing well. He wrote that he took his laundry to Father's cousin's wife once a week, and that she washed it for him, as Mother had asked her to do. He reported that he was eating well, that he had found a place to sleep as he had started staying overnight at work, and asked her not to worry about him. Hyong-chol also wrote that he felt he could do anything in the city, and that there were many things he wanted to do. He even revealed his ambition to become a success and give Mother a better life. Twenty-year-old Hyong-chol gallantly added, *So, Mother, do not worry about me, and please take care of your health*. When you peeped over the letter at Mother, you would see her staring at the taro stalks in the back yard, or at the ledge of tall clay jars filled with sauces. Your mother's ears would be cocked like a rabbit's, trying not to miss a single word. After you finished reading the letter, your mother instructed you to write down what she would tell you. Mother's first words were 'Dear Hyong-chol'. You wrote down, *Dear Hyong-chol*. Mother didn't tell you to put a full stop after it, but you did. When she said, 'Hyong-chol!' you wrote down, *Hyong-chol!* When Mother paused after calling his name, as if she'd forgotten what she wanted to say, you tucked strands

of your bob behind your ear and waited attentively for your mother to continue, ballpoint pen in hand, staring down at the stationery. When she said, 'The weather's turned cold,' you wrote, *The weather has turned cold*. Mother always followed 'Dear Hyong-chol' with something about the weather: 'There are flowers now that it's spring.' 'It's summer, so the paddy bed is starting to dry and crack.' 'It's harvest season, and there are beans overflowing on the paddy banks.' Mother spoke in your regional dialect unless it was to dictate a letter to Hyong-chol. 'Don't worry about anything at home, and please take care of yourself. That is the only thing your mother wishes from you.' Mother's letters always swelled with a current of emotion: 'I am sorry that I can't be of any help to you.' As you carefully wrote down Mother's words, she would shed a fat tear. The last words from your mother were always the same: 'Make sure you eat all your meals. Mother.'

As the third of five children, you witnessed Mother's sorrow and pain and worry when each of your older brothers left home. Every morning at dawn after Hyong-chol left, Mother would clean the surface of the glazed clay sauce jars on the ledge in the back yard. Because the well was in the front yard, it was cumbersome to bring water to the back, but she washed each and every jar. She took off all the lids and wiped them clean, inside and out, until they shone. Your mother sang quietly. 'If there were no sea between you

and me there wouldn't be this painful goodbye . . .' Her hands busily dipping the rag in cold water and lifting it out and wringing it and rubbing the jars, Mother sang, 'I hope you won't leave me one day.' If you called to her at that moment, she would turn around with tears welling in her big guileless eyes.

Mother's love for Hyong-chol was such that she used to make a bowl of ramen only for him, when he came home after remaining at school till late at night to study. Later, when you brought that up sometimes, your boyfriend, Yu-bin, would reply, 'It's just ramen – what's the big deal?'

'What do you mean, what's the big deal? Ramen was the best thing back then! It was something you ate in secret so you wouldn't have to share it!' Even though you explained its significance, he, a city boy, seemed to think it was nothing.

When this new delicacy called ramen entered your lives, it overwhelmed every dish Mother had ever made. Mother would buy ramen and hide it in an empty jar in the row of clay jars, wanting to save it for Hyong-chol. But even late at night, the smell of boiling ramen would nudge you and your siblings awake. When Mother said, sternly, 'You all go back to bed,' you would all look at Hyong-chol, who was about to eat. Feeling sorry, he would offer each of you a mouthful. Mother would remark, 'How is it that you all come so quickly when it has to do with food?' and fill the pot with water, make another ramen, and divide it among you and your siblings.

You would be so pleased, each holding a bowl filled with more soup than noodles.

After Hyong-chol had left for the city, when Mother reached the clay jar she used to hide the ramen in she would call out, 'Hyong-chol!' and sink down, her legs giving way. You would slip the rag from Mother's grasp, lift her arm up, and drape it around your shoulder. Your mother would break out in sobs, unable to control her overflowing feelings for her firstborn.

When Mother sank into sorrow after your brothers left, the only things you could do for her were to read your brothers' letters out loud, and to slip her responses into the postbox on the way to school. Even then, you had no idea that she had never once set foot in the world of letters. Why did it never occur to you that Mother didn't know how to read or write, even when she relied on you as a child, even after you read her the letters and wrote replies for her? You took her request as just another chore, similar to heading out to the garden to pick some mallow or going to buy some paraffin. Mother must not have given that task to anyone else after you left home, because you never received a letter from her. Was it because you didn't write to her? It was probably because of the phone. Around the time you left for the city, a public phone was installed in the village headman's house. It was the first phone in your birthplace, a small farming community where, once in a while, a train would clatter along tracks that stretched between the village and the vast fields. Every morning, the villagers heard the

headman testing the mike then announcing that so and so should come over to answer a call from Seoul. Your brothers started to call the public phone. After the phone was installed, people who had family in other cities paid attention to the microphone, even from paddies or fields, wondering who was being sought.

Either a mother and daughter know each other very well, or they are strangers.

Until last autumn, you thought you knew your mother well – what she liked, what you had to do to appease her when she was angry, what she wanted to hear. If someone asked you what Mother was doing, you could answer in ten seconds: she's probably drying ferns; since it's Sunday, she must be at church. But last autumn, your belief that you knew her was shattered. You went for a visit without announcing it beforehand, and you discovered that you had become a guest. Mother was continually embarrassed about the messy yard or the dirty blankets. At one point, she grabbed a towel from the floor and hung it up, and when food dropped on the table, she picked it up quickly. She took a look at what she had in the fridge, and even though you tried to stop her, she went to the market. If you are with family, you needn't feel embarrassed about leaving the table uncleared after a meal and going to do something else. You realised you'd become a stranger as

you watched Mother try to conceal her messy everyday life.

Maybe you'd become a guest even before then, when you moved to the city. After you left home, your mother never scolded you. Before, Mother would reprimand you harshly if you did something even remotely wrong. From when you were young, Mother always addressed you as 'you, girl'. Usually she said that to you and your sister when she wanted to differentiate between her daughters and sons, but your mother also called you 'you, girl' when she demanded that you correct your habits, disapproving of your way of eating fruit, your walk, your clothes and your style of speech. But sometimes she would become worried and look closely into your face. She studied you with a concerned expression when she needed your help to pull flat the corners of starched blanket covers, or when she had you put kindling in the old-fashioned kitchen furnace to cook rice. One cold winter day, you and your mother were at the well, cleaning the skate that would be used for the ancestral rites at New Year's, when she said, 'You have to work hard in school so that you can move into a better world.' Did you understand her words then? When Mother scolded you freely, you more frequently called her Mother. The word 'mother' is familiar and it hides a plea: *Please look after me. Please stop yelling at me and stroke my head; please be on my side, whether I'm right or wrong*. You never stopped calling her Mother. Even now, when Mother's missing. When you call out

'Mother' you want to believe that she's healthy. That Mother is strong. That Mother isn't fazed by anything. That Mother is the person you want to call whenever you despair about something in this city.

Last autumn, you didn't tell her that you were coming down, but it wasn't to free your mother from preparing for your arrival. You were in Pohang at the time. Your parents' house was far from Pohang, where you arrived on an early-morning flight. Even when you got up at dawn and washed your hair and left for the airport, you didn't know that you were going to go see Mother in Chongup. It was farther and more difficult to go to Chongup from Pohang than from Seoul. It wasn't something you'd expected to do.

When you got to your parents' house, the gate was open. The front door was open, too. You had a lunch date with Yu-bin back in the city the next day, so you were going to return home on the night train. Even though you were born there, the village had become an unfamiliar place. The only things left from your childhood were the three nettle trees, now mature, near the stream. When you went to your parents' house, you took the small path towards the nettle-lined stream instead of the big road. If you kept going that way, it would lead you straight to the back gate of your childhood home. A long time ago, there was a communal well right outside the back gate. The well was filled in when modern plumbing was installed in every house, but you stood on that spot before

entering the house. You tapped the sturdy cement with your foot precisely where that abundant well used to be. You were overwhelmed with nostalgia. What would the well be doing in the darkness under the street, the well that had supplied water to all the people in the alley and still sloshed about? You weren't there when the well was filled in. One day you went back for a visit and the well was gone, just a cement road where it had been. Probably because you didn't see the well being filled with your own eyes, you couldn't stop imagining that the well was still there, brimming with water, under the cement.

You stood above the well for a while, then went through the gate, calling, 'Mother!' But she didn't answer. The setting autumn sunlight filled the yard of the house, which faced west. You went into the house to look for her, but she wasn't in the living room or in the bedroom. The house was a mess. A water bottle stood open on the table, and a cup was perched on the edge of the sink. A basket of rags was overturned on the floor mat in the living room, and on the sofa was a dirty shirt with its sleeves flung apart, as if Father had just taken it off. The late-afternoon sun was illuminating the empty space. 'Mother!' Even though you knew nobody was there, you called one more time, 'Mother!' You walked out the front door and, in the side yard, discovered Mother lying on the wooden platform in the doorless shed. 'Mother!' you called, but there was no reply. You put on your shoes and walked towards the shed. From there you could look over the yard. A long time ago, Mother had brewed malt in

the shed. It was a useful space, especially after it was expanded into the adjacent pigsty. She piled old, unused kitchen supplies on the shelves she had mounted on a wall, and underneath there were glass jars of things she had pickled and preserved. It was Mother who had moved the wooden platform into the shed. After the old house was torn down and a Western-style house was built, she would sit on the platform to do kitchen work that she couldn't easily do in the modern kitchen inside. She would grind red peppers in the mortar to make kimchi, sift through beanstalks to find beans and shuck them, make red-pepper paste, salt cabbage for winter kimchi, or dry fermented soybean cakes.

The kennel next to the shed was vacant, the dog chain lying on the ground. You realised that you hadn't heard the dog when you walked into the house. Looking around for him, you approached Mother, but she didn't move. She must have been cutting courgettes to dry in the sun. A chopping board, a knife and courgettes were pushed to the side, and small slices of courgettes were cradled in a worn bamboo basket. At first you wondered, was Mother sleeping? Recalling that she wasn't one to take naps, you peered into her face. Mother had a hand clutching her head, and she was struggling with all her might. Her lips were parted, and she was frowning so intently that her face was gnarled with deep wrinkles.

'Mother!'

She didn't open her eyes.

'Mother! Mother!'

You knelt in front of Mother and shook her hard, and her eyes opened slightly. They were bloodshot, and beads of sweat dotted her forehead. Your mother didn't seem to recognise you. Weighted with pain, her face was a miserable knot. Only some invisible malevolence could cause an expression like that. She closed her eyes again.

'Mother!'

You scrambled onto the platform and cradled your mother's tortured face on your lap. You hooked your arm under her armpit, so that her head wouldn't slide off your knees. How could she be left alone in this state? Outrage flashed through your conscience, as if someone had thrown her in the shed like that. But you were the one who had moved away and left your mother's side. If one is deeply shocked, one cannot figure out what to do. Should I call an ambulance? Should I move her into the house? Where's Father? These thoughts raced through your head, but you ended up gazing down at Mother lying across your lap. You had never seen her face contorted like that, so miserable, in such pain. Her hand, which was pressing down on her forehead, fell listlessly to the platform. Mother breathed laboriously, exhausted. Her limbs drooped, as if she could no longer exert the effort to try to avoid the pain. 'Mother!' Your heart pounded. It occurred to you that she might be dying, just like this. But then Mother's eyes opened calmly and trained themselves on you. It should have surprised her to see you, but there was nothing in her eyes. She appeared to be too weak to react. A while later, she called your name, her face

dull. And she mumbled something faintly. You leaned in.

'When my sister died I couldn't even cry.' Mother's pale face was so hollow that you couldn't say a thing.

Your aunt's funeral was in the spring. You didn't go. You hadn't even visited her, although she had been ill for almost a year. And what were you doing instead? When you were young, your aunt was your second mother. During summer holidays you went to live with her, in her house just on the other side of the mountain. Your aunt had the closest relationship with you among all your siblings. It was probably because you looked like Mother. Your aunt always said, 'You and your mother are cast from the same mould!' As if she were re-creating her childhood with her sister, your aunt fed rabbits with you and braided your hair. She cooked a pot of barley with a scoop of rice on top and saved the rice for you. At night you lay across her lap and listened to the stories she told you. You remembered how your aunt used to slide an arm under your neck at night to fashion a pillow for you. Even though she had left this world, you still remembered your aunt's scent from those childhood visits. She spent her old age looking after her grandchildren while their parents ran a bakery. Your aunt fell down the stairs as she was carrying a child on her back, and was rushed to hospital, where she found out that cancer had spread through her body to such an extent that it was too late to do anything. Your mother told you the news. 'My poor older sister!'

'Why didn't they catch it until now?'

'She'd never even gone in for a check-up.'

Your mother visited her sister with porridge and spooned some into her mouth. You listened quietly when your mother called to say, 'Yesterday I went to see your aunt. I made sesame porridge, and she had a good appetite.' You were the first one Mother called when she found out that your aunt had died.

'My sister died.'

You didn't say anything.

'You don't need to come, since you're busy.'

Even if your mother hadn't said that, you wouldn't have been able to go to your aunt's funeral because you had a deadline coming up. Hyong-chol, who went to the funeral, told you that he had been worried that Mother would be devastated, but she didn't cry, and she told him she didn't want to go to the burial grounds. 'Really?' you'd asked. Hyong-chol said he thought it was strange, too, but he honoured her wishes.

In the shed that day, Mother, whose face was marred with pain, told you she couldn't even cry when her sister died.

'Why not? You should have cried if you wanted to,' you said, feeling a little relieved that she was returning to the Mother you knew, even though she spoke without revealing any emotion.

Your mother blinked placidly. 'I can't cry any more.'

You didn't say anything.

'Because then my head hurts so much it feels like it's going to explode.'

With the setting sun warming your back, you gazed down at Mother's face cradled on your lap as if it were the first time you were seeing it. Mother got headaches? So severe that she couldn't even cry? Her dark eyes, which used to be as brilliant and round as the eyes of a cow that is about to give birth, were hidden under wrinkles. Her pale fat lips were dry and cracked. You picked up her arm, which she'd flung on the platform, and placed it on her stomach. You stared at the dark sunspots on the back of her hand, saturated with a lifetime of labour. You could no longer say you knew Mother.

When your uncle was alive, he would come to see Mother every Wednesday. He had just returned to Chongup, after a nomadic life of roaming the country. There was no specific reason for the visit; he just rode in on his bike and saw Mother and left. Sometimes, instead of coming into the house, he called from the gate, 'Sister! Doing well?' Then, before your mother could get out to the yard, he called, 'I'm going now!' and turned his bike around and left. As far as you knew, Mother and her brother were not that close. At some point before you were born, your uncle had borrowed quite a lot of money from Father, but he never paid it back. Your mother sometimes brought that up, bitterly. She said, because of

your uncle, she always felt indebted to Father and Father's sister. Even though it was your uncle's debt, it was hard for your mother to come to terms with the knowledge that he didn't pay it back. When four or five years went by without news from your uncle, your mother often wondered out loud, 'What could your uncle be doing these days?' You couldn't tell if Mother was worrying about him or resenting him.

One day, your mother heard someone push the gate open and enter, saying, 'Sister, are you in?' Mother, who was inside eating tangerines with you, threw open the door and ran out. It happened so quickly. Who was it that got her so excited? Curious, you followed her out. Mother paused on the porch, looking at the gate, shouted, 'Brother!' to the person standing next to it, and ran to him – not caring that she was barefoot. It was your uncle. Your mother, who had run out like the wind, beat his chest with her fist and cried, 'Brother! Brother!' You watched her from the porch. It was the first time you had heard her call someone 'brother'. When she referred to her brother, she always called him 'your uncle'. You don't understand why you were so surprised when you saw Mother run to your uncle and call him 'brother' in a delighted nasal tone, when you had known all along that you had an uncle. You realised, Oh, Mother has a brother too! Sometimes you laughed to yourself when you remembered what your mother was like that day, your aging mother jumping down from the porch and running across the yard to your uncle, shouting 'Brother!' as if she

were a child – Mother acting like a girl even younger than you. That mother was stuck in your head. It made you think, even Mother . . . You don't understand why it took you so long to realise something so obvious. To you, Mother was always Mother. It never occurred to you that she had once taken her first step, or had once been three or twelve or twenty years old. Mother was Mother. She was born as Mother. Until you saw her running to your uncle like that, it hadn't dawned on you that she was a human being who harboured the exact same feeling you had for your own brothers, and this realisation led to the awareness that she, too, had had a childhood. From then on, you sometimes thought of Mother as a child, as a girl, as a young woman, as a newly-wed, as a mother who had just given birth to you.

You couldn't leave Mother and return to the city after seeing her like that in the shed. Father was in Sokcho, with some people from the Regional Centre for Korean Traditional Performing Arts. He was supposed to be home in two days. Although Mother got over the severe pain, she couldn't free herself from the headache, and she couldn't smile, let alone cry. She couldn't even understand your suggestion that she should go to hospital. When you helped her into the house, she walked gingerly, trying to keep her pain in check. A long time passed before she could talk. Mother said that she always got headaches

but only had terrible ones 'once in a while', and that she could put up with it since those moments passed.

Did your siblings know about Mother's headaches? Did Father?

You wanted to tell them, and to take her to a big hospital as soon as you returned to the city. When she was able to move around by herself, Mother asked, 'Don't you need to go back?' At some point your visits home had become shorter; you would come for only a few hours and return to the city. You thought of your date the next day, but told your mother that you were going to stay the night. You remember the smile that spread across her face.

You left the live octopus you'd bought at the Pohang fish market in the kitchen, since neither you nor your mother knew what to do with it, and you sat across from Mother at the table like old times, quietly eating a simple meal of rice and *panchan*, side dishes of water kimchi, braised tofu, sautéed anchovies and toasted seaweed. When Mother wrapped a piece of seaweed around some rice, as she did when you were little, and held it out, you took it and ate it. After dinner, to digest the food, you and Mother walked around the outside of the house. It was no longer the same house you grew up in, but the front, side and back yards were still connected, like before. In the back yard, on the ledge, there were still so many tall clay jars. When you were young, they were filled with soy sauce, red-pepper paste, salt and bean paste, but now they were empty. As the two of you walked, Mother

sometimes leading and sometimes falling behind, she suddenly asked you why you'd come home.

'I went to Pohang . . .'

'Pohang is far from here.'

'Yes.'

'It's farther to come here from Pohang than from Seoul.'

'Yes, it is.'

'What made you come here from Pohang, when it seems like you don't ever have time to visit?'

Instead of answering, you grabbed Mother's hand, desperately, as if you were grasping for a lifeline in the darkness, because you didn't know how to explain your emotions. You told Mother that in the early morning you had gone to lecture at a Braille library in Pohang.

'A Braille library?' Mother asked.

'Braille is what the blind read with their fingers.'

Mother nodded. As you circled the house, you told Mother about your trip to Pohang. For a few years, the Braille library had been asking you to visit, but each time you couldn't because of a previous engagement. In early spring, you'd received another call. You had just published your latest work. The librarian told you that they wanted to publish your newest book in Braille. Braille! You didn't know much about it, except that it was the language of the blind, as you told Mother. You listened to the librarian impassively, as if you were hearing about a book you hadn't yet read. The librarian said they wanted your permission. If the librarian hadn't said 'permission,' you

might not have agreed to go to the Braille library. That word 'permission' moved you: blind people wanted to read your book, they were asking for your permission to re-create your book in a language only they could communicate through. You answered, 'Sure,' suddenly feeling powerless. The librarian said that the book would be completed by November, and that Braille Day was also in November. He said they would appreciate it if you could come that day and participate in the dedication ceremony for the book. You wondered how things had got to that point, but you couldn't go back on your 'Sure.' It probably helped that it was early spring, and November seemed far away. But time passed. Spring passed, summer came and went, autumn came, and soon enough it was November. And then that day had arrived.

Most things in the world are not unexpected if one thinks carefully about them. Even something one would call unusual – if one thinks about it, it's really just a thing that was supposed to happen. Encountering unusual events often means you didn't think things through. Your trip to the Braille library and the events that occurred there were all things you could have predicted if you'd really thought about the Braille library. But you were busy in the spring, summer and autumn. Even on the day you went to the Braille library, you weren't thinking about the people you were going to meet there; you were worried that you would be late for the ten o'clock meeting time. You barely made it onto the 8 a.m. flight, then arrived in Pohang, took a cab to the Braille library, and

went to the waiting room. The director sat down facing you, with the help of a volunteer. He greeted you politely – 'Thank you for coming all this way' – and held his hand out. Trying to mask your nervousness, you shook it, saying brightly, 'Hello.' His hand was soft. The director talked about your book until right before the event. You smiled and nodded at this blind man who had read your work, even though he couldn't see you smile or nod. That day was Braille Day, their holiday. When you entered the auditorium, four hundred people awaited you, some still trickling in with the help of volunteers. There were men and women of all ages, but no children. The ceremony began, and a few people came to the front, one by one, and made little speeches. Some people received certificates of appreciation. They spoke about your book, and you went to the front to receive the Braille version. Your one book became four volumes in Braille. The books given to you by the director were twice as big as yours, but they were light. You heard applause as you returned to your seat with the books in your hands. The ceremony continued. As plaques were given to congratulate readers, you opened one of the volumes. At once you felt faint. An infinite number of dots on white paper. It was as if you had fallen into a black hole – as if you were walking on stairs you knew so well that climbing them didn't even register in your mind and, while thinking about something else, you missed a step and tumbled down. Braille proliferated on the white paper, each letter a hole made by a needle, words you couldn't decipher at all. You told

Mother that you'd flipped past the first page and the second page and the third page, and then closed the book. Because your mother was listening intently to your story, you continued.

At the end of the ceremony, you stood in front of everyone and talked about your work. When you laid the books on the dais and looked out at the audience, your back stiffened. You had no idea what to focus on, standing in front of four hundred people who couldn't see.

'So what did you do?' your mother asked.

You told her that the fifty minutes given to you seemed never-ending. You were the type of person who looked into someone's eyes when you talked. When you talked you sometimes told the entire story, or maybe only half, depending on the feeling you got from the person's eyes. Some eyes coaxed out stories you'd never told anyone. You wondered, Does Mother know that I'm like that? In front of four hundred blind people, you didn't know who to look at or how to start talking. Some eyes were closed, some half open, and some hidden behind dark glasses; some eyes seemed to stare straight through you and your nervousness. Even though all eyes were aimed at you, you became silent in front of eyes that couldn't see you. You wondered what would be the point of talking about your book in front of these unseeing eyes. But it wasn't appropriate to talk about something else, such as anecdotes from your life. If anything, they should be telling you their life stories. Because you felt stuck, the first thing you said into the mike was 'What should I talk about?'

They all burst out laughing. Did they laugh because they thought you meant you could tell any story? Or to make you feel more comfortable? A man in his mid-forties replied, 'Didn't you come to talk about your work?' The man's eyes were pointed at you but were closed. Focusing on them, you started to talk about the inspiration behind the book, the things you experienced emotionally during its writing and the hopes you had for the book after you were done. You were surprised. Of all the people you'd met, they listened to your words the most intently. They demonstrated with their bodies that they were listening carefully. One person was nodding, and another pushed one foot forward, and someone else was leaning into the person in front of him. Even though you couldn't understand a word of their writing system, they had read your book and asked questions and shared their thoughts. You told Mother that they revealed such positive feelings about that book, more than anyone else you had encountered. Mother, who was listening quietly, said, 'Still, even they've read your book.' A short silence flowed between you and Mother. Mother asked you to go on. You continued.

When you stopped talking, one person raised his hand and asked if he could ask a question. You told him to go ahead. 'Even though he's blind, he said travelling was his hobby, Mother.' You were stunned. Where would a blind person travel? He said he'd read something you had written a long time ago that was based in Peru. The character in the novel went to Machu Picchu, and there

was a scene where a train went backwards. He said after he read that he wanted to ride that train in Peru. He asked if you had personally ridden the train. It was a work you had written over ten years ago. You, who had such a bad memory that you often opened the refrigerator door and forgot why you had opened it, and would stand there for a while with the chill of the fridge washing over you until you gave up and shut the door, started to talk about Peru, where you had travelled before you wrote that book. Lima; Cuzco, dubbed the Belly Button of the Universe; San Pedro Station, where you took the train to Machu Picchu at dawn. About the train that started forward and jerked back many times before starting off to Machu Picchu. You told Mother, 'The names of the places and mountains that I'd forgotten about poured out.' Feeling friendship from eyes that had never seen, eyes that seemed to understand and accept any flaw of yours, you said something you had never said about that book. Mother asked, 'What was it?'

'I said if I were to write it again I don't think I would write it like that.'

'Is that such a big deal to say?' she asked.

'Yes, because I was rejecting what exists, Mother!'

Mother gazed at you in the darkness and said, 'Why do you hide those words? You have to live free, saying whatever you feel,' and pulled her hand from your grasp and rubbed your back. When you were a child, she used to wash your face the same way, with her big soothing hands. 'You tell such good stories,' she said.

'Me?'

Mother nodded. 'Yes, I liked it.'

She liked my story? You were moved. You knew that what you'd said wasn't all that good; it was just that you were talking to her differently after your experience at the Braille library. After you'd left home for the city, you'd always talked to her as if you were angry at her. You talked back to her, saying, 'What do you know, Mother?' 'Why would you do that, as a mother?' you'd rebuke. 'Why do you want to know?' you retorted coldly. After you figured out that Mother no longer had the power to scold you, if she asked, 'Why are you going there?' you replied curtly, 'Because I have to.' Even when you had to take a plane because your book was being published in another country, or you had to go abroad for a seminar, when she asked, 'Why are you going there?' you stiffly replied, 'Because I have business to take care of.' Mother told you to stop taking planes. 'If there's an accident, two hundred people die at once.' 'It's because I have work to do,' you'd say. If Mother asked, 'Why do you have so much work?' you replied, sullenly, 'Yes, all right, Mother.' It was difficult to talk to her about your life, which had nothing to do with hers. But when you talked about feeling lost seeing the Braille version of your book, and the mounting panic you felt standing in front of four hundred blind people, she listened as intently as if her headache had gone away. When was the last time you'd told Mother about something that had happened to you? At a certain point, the conversations between you and

Mother became simplified. Even that was not done face to face, but by telephone. Your words had to do with whether she ate, whether she was healthy, how Father was, that she should be careful not to catch cold, that you were sending money. Mother talked about how she made kimchi and sent some, that she had strange dreams, that she sent rice, or fermented bean paste, that she'd brewed motherwort to send you, and that you shouldn't turn off your phone because the messenger would call before delivering all these packages.

Carrying a paper bag that held your Braille books, you said goodbye to the people at the Braille library. You still had two hours to kill before your return flight. You remembered standing at the dais and looking out the window, averting your gaze from those blind eyes, and seeing the harbour dotted with boats. You thought, Well, since there's a harbour, there's got to be a fish market. You took a cab and asked to be taken there. You like to visit the market whenever you have time to spare in a place you've never been. Even on a weekday, the fish market was bustling. Outside the market you saw two people cutting apart a fish that was as big as a car. You asked if it was tuna, since it was so large, but the vendor said it was an ocean sunfish. You were reminded of a character in a book whose title you couldn't remember. She was from a seaside town, and she would go to the

huge aquarium in the city every time she had a problem, to talk to the ocean sunfish swimming inside. She would complain that her mother took all her life savings and went off with a younger man to a different city, but then, at the end, would say, 'But I miss my mother; you're the only one I can tell this to, sunfish!' You wondered if that was the same fish. Thinking it was a unique name for a fish, you asked, 'Really, it's called an ocean sunfish?' And the vendor said, 'We also call it *mola mola*!' As soon as you heard the words *mola mola*, the tension you had been feeling inside the library dissipated. Why did you think of Mother as you wandered among the heaps of seafood, which cost a third of what they did in Seoul: live octopus with heads bigger than a human's, fresh abalone, scabbard fish, mackerel, and crab? Was it the ocean sunfish that made you think of Mother for the first time at a fish market? That made you recall preparing skate at home, by the well, next to Mother? You could see Mother's frozen hands peeling the brownish mucus stuck to the flesh. You stopped at a store that had a boiled octopus as big as a child's torso hanging from the ceiling and bought a live octopus for fifteen thousand won. You bought some abalone – though they were farm-raised, they had been fed different kinds of seaweed. When you said you were going to Seoul, the vendor offered to put your purchase in an ice chest for an extra two thousand won. As you walked out of the fish market, you realised you still had a lot of time left before your flight. Holding the Braille volumes in one hand and the ice chest in the other, you

hopped into another cab and told the driver that you wanted to go to the beach. It took only three minutes to get there. The November beach was empty except for two couples. The beach was big. As you walked towards the water, you almost fell twice. You sat down on the fine sand and stared at the sea. After a while, you turned around to look at the shops and apartment buildings facing the ocean across the road. People who lived here could jump into the ocean on a hot night, then go home and take a shower. You absent-mindedly took out a Braille volume from the paper bag and opened it. The white dots on the pages sparkled in the sunlight.

Tracing your finger along the indecipherable Braille in the sun, you wondered who had taught you to read. It was your second-eldest brother. The two of you lying on your stomachs on the porch of the old house. Mother sitting next to you. Your brother, a gentle soul, caused the least trouble among your siblings. Unable to disobey Mother's orders to teach you how to read, his expression bored, he directed you to write numbers and vowels and consonants over and over. You tried to write with your dominant left hand. Every time, your brother rapped the back of your hand with a bamboo ruler. He was doing Mother's bidding. Even though it was more natural for you to favour your left hand and foot, Mother told you that there would be many things to cry about in life if you used your left hand. When you used your left hand to scoop rice in the kitchen, Mother wrenched the scoop

out of your hand and put it in your right hand. If you tried to use your left hand anyway, she would grab the scoop and slap your left hand, saying, 'Why won't you listen to me?' Your left hand became swollen. Even so, when your brother wasn't watching, you quickly switched the pencil to your left hand and drew two circles, one on top of the other, for the '8'. Then you switched the pencil back to your right. Your brother, who knew that you had stuck together two circles as soon as he saw your '8', told you to put your palms out and slapped them with the ruler. As you were learning how to read, Mother looked over your crouched form while she mended socks or peeled garlic. When you learned to write your name and Mother's name and read books hesitantly before enrolling in school, your mother's face bloomed like a mint flower. That face overlapped with the Braille you couldn't read.

You stood up and hurried back to the road without bothering to brush the sand off your clothes. You decided against taking the plane to Seoul, and instead took a taxi to Taejon and got on a train to Chongup. Thinking all the while that you hadn't seen Mother's face in almost two seasons.

You remember a classroom from long ago.

It was a day when the sixty or so kids filled out applications for middle school. If you didn't write an

application that day, you were not going to middle school. You were one of the kids not working on an application. You didn't completely understand what it meant that you would not be going on to middle school. Instead, you were feeling guilty.

The night before, Mother had yelled at Father, who was ill in bed. She had shouted at him, 'We don't have anything, so how is that girl going to survive in this world if we don't send her to school?' Father got up and left the house, and Mother lifted a squat table from the floor and threw it into the yard in frustration. 'What's the point of having a household when you can't even send your kids to school? I might as well break it all!' You wished she would calm down; you didn't mind not going to school. Mother wasn't appeased by throwing the table. She opened and banged shut the door of the cellar and yanked all the laundry off the line, crumpled it, and threw it on the ground. Then she came to you, cowering by the well, and took the towel off her head and brought it to your nose. She ordered, 'Blow your nose.' You could smell the intense stink of sweat on Mother's towel. You didn't want to blow your nose, especially not into that smelly towel. But Mother kept telling you to blow your nose as hard as you could. When you hesitated, she said that way you wouldn't cry. You were probably standing there looking at Mother with an expression bordering on tears. Telling you to blow your nose was her way of saying, Don't cry. Unable to resist her, you blew your nose, and your snot and the smell of sweat mingled in the towel.

Mother came to school the next day wearing that same towel. After she spoke with your teacher, your teacher came to you and handed you an application form. You raised your head and looked outside the classroom as you wrote your name on the form, and you saw Mother watching you from the hall. When your eyes met, she took the towel off her head and waved it, smiling brightly.

Around the time the fee for middle school was due, the gold ring that used to be on Mother's left middle finger, her sole piece of jewellery, disappeared from her hand. Only the groove on her finger, etched by many years of wearing the band, was left behind.

Headaches attacked Mother's body constantly.

During that visit to your childhood home, you woke up thirsty in the middle of the night and saw your books looming over you in the dark. You hadn't known what to do with all of your books when you prepared to go to Japan for a year with Yu-bin on his sabbatical. You sent most of the books, books that had stayed with you for years, to your parents' house. As soon as Mother received your books, she emptied out a room and displayed them there. After that, you never found the opportunity to take them back with you. When you visited your parents' house, you used that room to change your clothes or to store your bags, and if you stayed, that was where Mother

would place your blankets and sleeping mat.

After you got a drink of water and returned to your room, you wondered how Mother was sleeping, and you carefully pushed her door open. It looked as if she wasn't there. 'Mother!' you called. No answer. You fumbled with the switch on the wall and turned on the light. Mother wasn't there. You turned on the light in the living room and opened the bathroom door, but she wasn't there either. 'Mother! Mother!' you called as you pushed the front door open and stepped into the yard. The early-morning wind burrowed into your clothes. You turned on the light in the yard and glanced quickly at the wooden platform in the shed. Mother was lying there. You ran down the steps to the yard and approached her. She was frowning, as she had done earlier, asleep, hand on her head. She was barefoot, and her toes were curled under, perhaps from the cold. The simple dinner and the talk you had shared while you strolled around the house together shattered. It was an early morning in November. You brought out a blanket and covered Mother with it. You brought socks and put them on her feet. And you sat next to her until she woke up.

Thinking of ways to earn money other than from farming, Mother brought a wooden malt-mould into the shed. She would take the whole wheat she harvested from the fields and crush it and mix it with water and put it in the

mould and make malt. When the malt fermented, the entire house smelled of it. Nobody liked that smell, but Mother said it was the smell of money. There was a house in the village where they made tofu, and when she brought them the fermented malt, they sold it to the brewery and gave the money to Mother. Mother put that money in a white bowl, stacked six or seven bowls on top of it, and placed it on top of the cabinets. The bowl was Mother's bank. She put all her money up there. When you brought home the invoice for tuition, she took money from the bowl, counted it out and put it in your hand.

Later in the morning, when you again opened your eyes, you discovered that you were lying on the platform in the shed. Where was Mother? She wasn't there, but you could hear chopping from the kitchen. You got up and went in. Mother was about to slice a large, white radish on the chopping block. The way she held the knife looked precarious. It wasn't the way she used to thinly slice radish to make coleslaw, expertly, without looking down. Mother's hand holding the knife was unstable, and the knife kept slipping off the radish onto the chopping block. It seemed she would cut her thumb off. 'Mother! Wait!' You grabbed the knife from her hand. 'I'll do it, Mother.' You moved to the chopping block. Mother paused but then stepped aside. The steel basket in the sink held the languid dead octopus. There was a stainless-

steel steamer on the gas range. She was going to put a layer of radish on the bottom of the steamer and steam the octopus. You were about to ask, Aren't you supposed to parboil the octopus, not steam it? But you didn't. Mother arranged slices of radish on the bottom of the steamer and adjusted a stainless-steel shelf inside. She put the whole octopus in and placed the lid on top. This was the way she usually cooked seafood.

Mother wasn't used to fish. She didn't even call fish by their proper names. To Mother, mackerel and pike and scabbard fish were all just fish. But she differentiated between types of beans: kidney beans, soybeans, white beans, black beans. When Mother had fish in her kitchen, she never made sashimi or broiled or braised it, but always salted and steamed it. Even for mackerel or scabbard fish, she made a soy-based sauce with red-pepper flakes, garlic and pepper, and steamed it on a plate over rice that was cooking. Mother never put sashimi in her mouth. When she saw people eating raw fish, she looked at them with a distasteful expression that said, What are they doing? Mother, who had steamed skate from the time she was seventeen years old, wanted to steam octopus, too. Soon the kitchen was filled with the smell of radish and octopus. As you watched Mother steaming octopus in the kitchen, you thought of skate.

People from Mother's region always put skate on their ancestral rite table. Mother's year was structured around the ancestral rites she held, once in spring and twice each in summer and winter. Mother had to sit next to a well

and clean seven skates each year, if one counted New Year's and Full Moon Harvest. Usually the skate Mother bought was as big as a cauldron lid. When your mother went to the market and bought a red skate and dropped it next to the well, this meant that an ancestral rite was approaching. It was hard work to clean skate for the winter ancestral rites, in weather that instantly turned water into ice. Your hands were small, and Mother's were thickened from labour. When Mother made a slit with the knife in the skin of the skate with her red, frozen hands, your young fingers pulled the membranes off. It would have been easier if they came off in one piece, but they would fall off in sections. Mother would make another slit in the fish, and the whole process would be repeated. It was a typical winter scene, you and your mother squatting by the well, which was covered in thin ice, skinning the skate. The cleaning of the skate repeated itself each year, as if someone were rewinding film. One winter, Mother gazed at your frozen hands as you sat across from her and declared, 'Who cares if we don't skin it,' stopped what she was doing, and confidently cut the fish into chunks. It was the first time that the ancestral rite table had seen a skate with its skin on. Father asked, 'What's wrong with this skate?' Mother replied, 'It's the same skate, just not skinned.' Father's sister grumbled, 'You have to put care into food for the ancestral rites.' 'Then you try peeling it,' Mother retorted. That year, whenever something bad happened, someone brought up the unpeeled skate. When the persimmon tree didn't bear

fruit; when one of your brothers, who was playing a stick-throwing game, got poked in the eye by a flying stick; when Father was hospitalised; when cousins fought – Father's sister grumbled that it was because Mother hadn't bothered to skin the skate for the ancestral rites.

Mother placed the steamed octopus on the chopping block and tried to slice it. But the knife kept slipping, just as if had when she was slicing the radish. 'I'll do it, Mother.' You took her knife again, sliced the hot radish-scented octopus, dipped a piece in red-pepper-and-vinegar sauce, and held it out to Mother. This was what she'd always done for you. Each time, you'd tried to take it in mid-air with your own chopsticks, but Mother would say, 'If you eat it with your chopsticks, it doesn't taste as good. Just open your mouth.' Now Mother tried to take it with her own chopsticks, and you said, 'If you do that it won't taste as good. Just open your mouth.' You pushed the piece of octopus into her mouth. You tried one, too. The octopus was warm and squishy and soft. You wondered, octopus for breakfast? But you and Mother ate it with your fingers, standing in the kitchen. As you chewed on the octopus, you watched Mother's hand as she tried to pick up a piece and dropped it. You put a piece in her mouth for her. Soon she gave up trying to eat the octopus herself and waited for you to plop it in her mouth. Her hand seemed unfocused. Eating the octopus, you said, 'Mother, let's go to Seoul today.' Your mother replied, 'Let's go up into the mountains.'

'The mountains?'

'Yes, the mountains.'

'Is there a hiking trail from here?'

'I've made one myself.'

'Let's go to Seoul and go to the hospital there.'

'Later.'

'Later when?'

'When your niece's entrance exam is over.' She was referring to Hyong-chol's daughter.

'You can go to the hospital with me instead of with Hyong-chol.'

'I'm fine. It'll be fine. I'm going to the Chinese doctor for it. I'm getting physical therapy, too, because they said something's wrong with my neck.'

You couldn't persuade Mother – she kept insisting that she would go later. Then she asked you what the world's smallest country was.

The smallest country? You stared at Mother, a stranger asking you a random question: What is the smallest country in the world? Mother asked you to get rose rosary beads for her if you ever went to that country.

'Rose rosary beads?'

'Prayer beads made of rosewood.' She looked at you listlessly.

'Do you need prayer beads?'

'No, I just want prayer beads from that country.' Mother stopped and let out a deep sigh. 'If you ever go there, get me a set.'

You were quiet.

'Because you can go anywhere.'

Your conversation with Mother stopped there. She didn't say another word in the kitchen. After the breakfast of steamed octopus, you and your mother left the house. You went across a few paddies at the back of the village and stepped onto a trail in the hills. Even though it wasn't a path people used, the trail was clear. The thick layers of oak leaves on the ground cushioned your feet. Sometimes the branches that reached into the trail hit your face. Mother, who was ahead of you, pushed the branches back for you. She let go of them after you walked through. A bird flew away.

'Do you come here often?'

'Yes.'

'With who?'

'Nobody. There's nobody who would come with me.'

Mother walked this path by herself? You really couldn't say you knew Mother. It was a dark path for anyone to walk alone. At some parts, the bamboos were so dense that you couldn't see the sky.

'Why do you walk here by yourself?'

'I came here once after your aunt died, and I kept coming back.'

After a while, Mother stopped on top of a hill. When you came up next to her and looked where she was looking, you shouted, 'Oh, this path!' It was a path you had completely forgotten about, the short cut to your mother's mother's house, which you used to take when you were young. Even after they built the big road that passed through the village, people often used this moun-

tain trail. It was the path you had taken one day when your grandmother was busy preparing for her ancestral rites, a live chicken trailing behind you on a rope. You had dropped the rope and lost the chicken. Though you had looked for it everywhere, you weren't able to find it. Where had that chicken gone? Had the trail changed so much? You used to be able to walk this path with your eyes closed, but now, if it weren't for the hill, you wouldn't have known it was the same path. Mother stood there, staring at the place where her mother's house once stood. Nobody lived there any more. The people from that village, which once must have numbered fifty households, had all moved away. A few empty houses hadn't been torn down, but it was a village that people had stopped coming to. So Mother had come here by herself to look down at the empty village she was born in? You wrapped your arm around her waist, and suggested again that she come to Seoul with you. Mother didn't reply, and instead brought up the dog. You had been curious when you first noticed that the dog wasn't in the kennel, but you hadn't had a chance to ask.

A year before, when you'd gone home in the summer, there was a Chindo tied next to the shed. It was sweltering, and the chain was so short that it seemed the panting dog, unable to get out of the sun, would fall over dead at any moment. You told Mother to untie the dog. Mother said that if she did people would be too scared to walk by. How could she chain a dog up like that, especially in

the countryside . . . Because of the dog, you argued with Mother as soon as you arrived, not even bothering to say hello. 'Why do you keep the dog tied up? Let it roam.' But Mother insisted, 'Nobody, not even in the country, lets their dog run around. Everyone ties their dog on a chain – if you don't, it'll get lost.' You shot back, 'Then you have to get a longer chain. If you tie it up with such a short chain, how is a dog supposed to survive in this heat? Do you treat it like that just because it can't speak up for itself?' Mother said that was the only chain in the house; it was the one she had used for the previous dog. 'Then you can go buy one!' Even though you'd come home for the first time in a long while, you drove back to town before setting foot in the house and brought back a chain so long that the dog could wander down the side yard. That's when you realised the kennel was small. You went out again, saying you were going to get another kennel. But Mother stopped you, insisting that there was a carpenter in a neighbouring village whom she could ask to build her a new kennel. Your mother couldn't fathom paying for a house for an animal: 'There are pieces of wood everywhere, and all you need to do is hammer it here and there, and you want to pay money for that? You must have money rotting in your pockets.' Later, when you left for the city, you gave her two ten-thousand-won cheques and got her to promise that she would build the dog a big kennel. Mother promised she would. Back in Seoul, you called a few times to make sure that Mother had the kennel built. Though she could have lied, each

time she said, 'I'm going to, I'll do it soon.' The fourth time you called and heard the same answer, your anger overflowed.

'I gave you the money for it and everything. Country people are terrible. Don't you feel bad for the dog? How is it supposed to live in that tiny space, especially in this heat? There's faeces inside, and the poor thing has stepped all over it, and you don't even clean it up. How can such a big dog live in such a small contraption? Otherwise, let him roam free in the yard! Don't you feel bad for the dog?'

The phone went silent. You started to regret saying that country people were terrible.

Mother's angry voice came shooting across the line. 'You care only about the dog, and not your own mother? Do you think your mother is the kind of person who would abuse a dog? Don't tell me what to do! I'm going to raise it my way!' Mother hung up first.

You were the one who always hung up first. You would say, 'Mother, I'll call you back,' and then you didn't. You didn't have time to sit and listen to everything your mother had to say. But this time your mother had hung up on you. It was the first time Mother had been so angry with you since you left home. Once you moved out, Mother always said, 'I'm sorry.' She confessed that she'd sent you to live with Hyong-chol because she couldn't take care of you well enough. Mother would try as hard as she could to lengthen the call when you phoned. But even though she hung up first, you were more

disappointed in the way she was keeping the dog. You were puzzled. How had Mother become that person? She used to look after all the animals in the house. She was the kind of person who would come to Seoul for an extended stay and three days later insist on going home to feed the dog. How could she be so clueless now? You were annoyed at your mother for becoming so insensitive.

A few days later, Mother called. 'You weren't like this before, but you've become cold. If your mother hangs up like that, you're supposed to call her back. How could you dig in your heels?'

It wasn't that you had been stubborn; you hadn't had time to think about it for that long. You would remember how Mother had hung up, angry, and think, I should give her a call, but because of one thing or another you would push calling her to the end of your list.

'Are all educated people like this?' Mother snapped, and hung up.

Around Full Moon Harvest, you went to your parents' house and saw that there was a big kennel next to the shed. On the floor of the kennel was a soft layer of hay.

Standing next to you on the hill, your mother started talking. 'In October, while I was washing rice at the sink to make breakfast, someone kept tapping me on the back. When I looked around, nobody was there. It was like that for three whole days: I felt something tapping me,

as if they were calling me, but nobody was there when I looked. It must have been the fourth day; as soon as I woke up, I went to the bathroom, and the dog was lying in front of the toilet. You got angry with me last year, saying that I was abusing the dog, but that dog had been wandering around the railroad tracks, covered with mange. I felt bad for him, so I brought him home and tied him up and gave him food. If you don't tie him up, you don't know where he'll go, or whether someone's going to catch him and eat him … That day, he didn't move. At first I thought he was sleeping. He didn't move even when I nudged him. He was dead. He'd been eating well and wagging his tail the day before, but he was dead, and he looked peaceful. I don't know how he got loose from the chain. At first he was all bones. He'd fattened up, and his coat was getting shiny. And he was so smart. He would catch moles.' Mother paused to sigh. 'They say that if you take in a person he will betray you, and if you take in a dog he will pay you back. I think the dog went in my place.'

This time you sighed.

'Last spring, I donated money to a passing monk and he said that this year one member in our family would be gone. When I heard that, I was anxious. For an entire year I thought of that. I think death came to fetch me, but because I was washing rice to cook for myself every time, he took the dog instead.'

'Mother, what are you talking about? How can you believe that, when you go to church?' You thought of the

empty kennel next to the shed and the chain on the ground. You put an arm around Mother's waist.

'I dug a deep grave in the yard and buried him.'

Your mother always did tell imaginative stories. On the night of an ancestral rite, Father's sister and other aunts would come over with bowls of rice. It was when food was scarce, so they would all contribute. After the ancestral rites, your mother would fill the relatives' bowls with food for them to take home. During the rites, the bowls of rice sat in a row nearby; afterwards, Mother said that birds had flown in and perched on the rice, then left. If you didn't believe her, she'd say, 'I saw them! There were six birds. The birds are our ancestors, who came to eat!' The others laughed, but you thought you could see their footprints in the white rice. Once, Mother went to the fields in the early morning, bringing along a snack for later, but someone was there already, bent over and pulling weeds. When she asked who he was, he said he was passing by and stopped to pull weeds because there were so many. Mother and the stranger weeded together. She was grateful, so she shared the snack she had brought. They talked about this and that and weeded the field and went their separate ways when it got dark. When she came back from the field and told Father's sister that she had weeded with the stranger, Father's sister stiffened and asked what he looked like. 'That used to be the owner of that field. He died of sunstroke one day while he was weeding the field.' You asked, 'Mother, weren't you scared

to be in the field with a dead person all day?' But your mother replied nonchalantly, 'I wasn't scared. If I'd had to weed that field all by myself, it would have taken two or three days. So I'm just grateful he helped me.'

After your visit, you noticed how your mother's headaches seemed to be eating away at her. She quickly lost her outgoing personality and vivacity, and started to lie down more often. Your mother couldn't even concentrate on card games with hundred-won bets, which were among the few joys in her life. And her senses became dull. One day, after she put a pot of rags on the gas range to bleach them, your mother crumpled onto the floor of the kitchen and couldn't get back up. All the water evaporated, the rags began to burn, and the kitchen was enveloped in smoke, but your mother couldn't snap out of it. The house might have gone up in flames if a neighbour hadn't come in to see what was going on, after catching a glimpse of the column of smoke in the air.

Your sister, who has three kids, once asked you a question about your mother and her constant headaches: 'Do you think Mother liked being in the kitchen?' Her voice was low, serious.

'Why do you ask?'

'Somehow I don't think she did.'

Your sister, who was a pharmacist, opened her

pharmacy while pregnant with her first child. Your sister-in-law babysat for the infant, but she lived far from the pharmacy. The baby lived with your sister-in-law for a while. Your sister, who'd always loved children, ran the pharmacy even though she could see her baby only once a week. It was wrenching to watch her part with her baby. There couldn't have been a farewell as sorrowful as that. But your sister seemed to have more trouble with the situation than the baby. While he adapted to his life away from his mother fairly well, she drove him back to your sister-in-law's at the end of each weekend crying, her tears drenching her hands as they gripped the steering wheel on the way home, and on Monday she stood in her pharmacy with her eyes swollen from weeping. It was so bad that you would say, 'Do you really need to go to such lengths to run a pharmacy?' When your sister's husband was to go to the United States for two years of training, your sister closed the pharmacy, which she had continued to run even after she had her second child. She said she thought living in America would be a good experience for the kids, and you thought, Yes, please take it easy and take some time off. She had never once taken time off after she got married. She had her third baby in the States and then returned. Now she had to cook for a family of five. Your sister said that once they ate two hundred croaker fish in one month.

'Two hundred in one month? Did you only eat croakers?' you asked, and she said they had.

This was before their things had arrived from

America, and she wasn't used to the new house yet, and the newborn was still breastfeeding, so there wasn't time to go to the market. Her mother-in-law sent a chest of baby croakers, salted and gently dried, and they ate the whole thing in ten days. Your sister laughed and said, 'I would make bean-sprout soup and broil a couple of fish, then make courgette soup and fish.' When she asked her mother-in-law where she could get more, she found out that she could order them online. Because they had eaten through the first batch so quickly, she ordered two.

'When the croakers came, I washed them and counted; there were two hundred. I was washing the fish so that I could wrap four or five of them in plastic and put them in the freezer, to make them easier to cook, and all of a sudden I wanted to fling them all on the floor,' your sister said calmly. 'And I thought of Mother. I wondered, how did Mother feel all those years in that old-fashioned kitchen, cooking for our big family? Remember how much we ate? We had two small tables filled with food. Remember how big our rice pot was? And she had to pack all of our lunches, including the side dishes she made with whatever she could get in the countryside. How did Mother get through it every day? Since Father was the eldest, there was always a relative or two staying with us. I don't think Mother could have liked being in the kitchen at all.'

You were caught off guard. You had never thought of Mother as separate from the kitchen. Mother was the

kitchen and the kitchen was Mother. You never wondered, did Mother like being in the kitchen?

To earn money, your mother bred silkworms and brewed malt and helped make tofu. The best way to make money was not to use it. Mother saved everything. Sometimes she would sell a tatty lamp, a worn ironing stone or an old jar to people from out of town. They wanted the antiques that Mother was using, and even though she wasn't attached to any of those things, she haggled with people over the price as if she had become a market trader. At first it would seem your mother was losing, but then she would get her way. After listening to them quietly, she'd say, 'Then just give me this amount,' and they would scoff, 'Who would buy that useless thing for so much?' Mother would retort, 'Then why do you go around buying this stuff?' and take the lamp back. They would grumble, 'You'd make a good merchant,' and give Mother what she asked for.

Your mother never paid full price for anything. Most things she did herself, so her hands were always busy. She sewed and knitted, and she tilled the fields without rest. Mother's fields were never empty. In the spring she planted potato seeds in furrows and planted lettuce and crown daisies and mallow and garlic chives and peppers and corn. Under the fence around the house she dug holes for courgettes, and in the field she planted beans.

Mother was always growing sesame and mulberry leaves and cucumbers. She was either in the kitchen or in the fields or in the paddies. She plucked potatoes and yams and courgettes, and pulled cabbages and radishes from the ground. Mother's labour showed that nothing would be reaped if the seeds were not sown. She paid only for things that could not be grown from seeds: ducklings or chicks that ran around in the yard in the spring, piglets that lived in the sty.

One year the dog gave birth to nine puppies. After a month passed, Mother left two behind and put six in a basket and, because the basket was full, put the last one in your arms. 'Follow me,' she said. The bus you and Mother rode was crowded with people who were going into town to sell things: sacks of dried pepper and sesame and black beans; baskets weighed down with just a few cabbages and radishes. Everyone huddled in a row at the township bus stop, and passers-by stopped to strike a deal. You slipped the warm puppy you were holding into the basket with the other squirming puppies, squatted next to Mother, and waited for them to be sold. The puppies, which Mother had taken care of for a month, were plump and healthy, gentle, without any suspicion or hostility towards people. They wagged their tails at the people who gathered around the basket and licked their hands. Mother's puppies sold faster than the radishes or the cabbages or the beans. When she sold the last one, she stood up and asked, 'What do you want?' You held on

to her hand and stared at her, your mother, who had rarely asked you such a thing.

'I said, what do you want?'

'A book!'

'A book?'

'Yes, a book!'

Mother acted as if she didn't know what to do. She looked down at you for a minute and asked where they sold books. You took the lead and guided Mother to the bookshop at the entrance of the market, where five roads met. Mother didn't go in. 'Pick out just one,' she said, 'and ask how much it is and come tell me.' Even when she bought rubber shoes, she made you try on each one, and always ended up paying less than what the shopkeeper wanted; but for a book she told you to pick one, as if she wasn't going to haggle over the price. The bookshop suddenly felt like a prairie to you. You had no idea which book to choose. The reason you wanted a book was that you would read books your brothers brought home from school, but they always took the books away from you before you read them to the end. The school library had different books from the ones that Hyong-chol brought home. Books like *Mrs Sa Goes to the South* or *Biography of Shin Yun-bok*. The book you chose, while Mother stood outside the bookstore, was *Human, All Too Human*. Mother, about to pay for a book that wasn't a textbook for the first time in her life, looked down at the book you'd picked out.

'Is this a book you need?'

You nodded quickly, worried that she would change her mind. Actually, you didn't know what this book was. It said that it was written by Nietzsche, but you didn't know who that was. You'd just picked it because you liked the way the title sounded. Mother gave you the money for the book, the full price. On the bus, clasping the book against your chest instead of the puppy, you gazed out the window. You saw an old, stooped woman looking at passers-by desperately, trying to sell the bowlful of sticky rice that remained in her rubber bin.

On the mountain path where you could see your grandparents' old village, your mother told you that her father came home when she was three years old, who drifted from town to town, digging for gold and coal. He went to work at a construction site for a new train station and got in an accident. Villagers who came to tell Grandmother about the accident looked at Mother, running and playing in the yard, and said, 'You're laughing even though your father has died, you silly child.'

'You remember that from when you were three?'

'I do.'

Your mother said she was sometimes resentful of her mother, your grandmother. 'I'm sure she had to do everything herself as a widow, but she should have sent me to school. My brother went to a Japanese-run school, and my sister did, too, so why did she keep me at home?

I lived in darkness, with no light, my entire life . . .'

Your mother finally agreed to come to Seoul with you if you promised not to tell Hyong-chol. Even when she left the house with you, she kept asking you to promise this.

As you went from hospital to hospital to find the source of Mother's headaches, a doctor told you something surprising: your mother had had a stroke a long time ago. A stroke? You said that had never happened. The doctor pointed at a spot on her brain scan and said it was evidence of a stroke. 'How could she have had a stroke without even knowing about it?' The doctor said your mother would have known. Given how the blood was pooled there, she would have felt the shock. The doctor said Mother was in constant pain. That Mother's body was in constant pain.

'What do you mean, in constant pain? Mother has always been pretty healthy.'

'Well, I don't think that's true,' the doctor said.

You felt as if a nail hidden in your pocket had leaped out and ambushed you, stabbing the back of your hand. The doctor drained the blood pooled in Mother's brain, but her headaches didn't get better. One minute Mother would be talking, and the next minute she would be holding her head gingerly, as if it were a glass jar about to break, and she would have to go home and lie down on the wooden platform in the shed.

'Mother, do you like being in the kitchen?' When you asked this once, your mother didn't understand what you meant.

'Did you like being in the kitchen? Did you like to cook?'

Mother's eyes held yours for a moment. 'I don't like or dislike the kitchen. I cooked because I had to. I had to stay in the kitchen so you could all eat and go to school. How could you only do what you like? There are things you have to do whether you like it or not.' Mother's expression asked, What kind of question is that? And then she murmured, 'If you only do what you like, who's going to do what you don't like?'

'So – what – you liked it or not?'

Mother looked around, as if she was going to tell you a secret, and whispered, 'I broke jar lids several times.'

'You broke jar lids?'

'I couldn't see an end to it. At least with farming, if you plant seeds in the spring you harvest them in the fall. If you plant spinach seeds, there is spinach; where you plant corn, there's corn. But there's no beginning or end to kitchen work. You eat breakfast, then it's lunch, and then it's dinner, and when it's bright again it's breakfast again. It might have been better if I could have made different side dishes, but since the same things were planted in the fields, I always made the same *panchan*. If you do that over and over, there are times when you get so sick of it. When the kitchen felt like a prison, I went out the back and picked up the most misshapen jar lid

and threw it as hard as I could at the wall. Aunt doesn't know that I did that. If she did, she would say I was crazy, throwing jar lids around.'

Your mother told you that she would buy a new lid within a few days to replace the one she broke. 'So I wasted some money. When I went to get the new lid, I thought it was so wasteful and felt terrible, but I couldn't stop. The sound of the lid breaking was medicine to me. I felt free.' Your mother put a finger to her lips and said, 'Shh,' in case someone could hear. 'It's the first time I'm telling this to anyone!' A mischievous grin hovered on her face. 'If you don't want to cook, you should try throwing a dish. Even if you're thinking, oh, what a waste, you're going to feel so light. Of course, since you're not married, you wouldn't feel that way anyway.'

Your mother let out a deep sigh. 'But it was nice when you kids were growing up. Even when I was so busy that I didn't have time to retie the towel on my head, when I watched you sitting around the table, eating, with your spoons making a racket in the bowls, I felt like there was nothing else I wanted in the world. You were all so easy. You dug in happily when I made a simple courgette-and-bean-paste soup, and your faces lit up if I steamed some fish once in a while. You were all such good eaters that when you were growing I was sometimes afraid. If I left a pot filled with boiled potatoes for your after-school snack, the pot would be empty when I came home. And there were days when I could see the rice in the jar in the cellar disappearing day by day, and times when the jar

would be empty. When I went to the cellar to get some rice for dinner and my scoop scraped the bottom of the rice jar, my heart would sink: What am I going to feed my babies tomorrow morning? So in those days it wasn't about whether I liked to be in the kitchen or not. If I made a big pot of rice and a smaller pot of soup, I didn't think of how tired I was. I felt good that these were going into my babies' mouths. Now, you probably can't even imagine it, but in those days we were always worried that we would run out of food. We were all like that. The most important thing was eating and surviving.' Smiling, your mother told you that those days were the happiest in her life.

But Mother's headaches stole the smiles from her face. Her headaches jabbed at her soul and slowly ate away at it, like field mice with sharp teeth.

The man you went to for help in printing the flyers is wearing old cotton clothes. Anyone glancing at him would be able to tell that he's wearing a very carefully made outfit. Even though you know he always wears old cotton clothes, you can't help focusing on them. He has already heard about your mother and tells you that he will design the flyer based on your mock-up and print them out quickly, at a printing shop his business acquaintance uses. Since there aren't any recent pictures of

Mother, you and your siblings have decided to use the family picture that your brother posted on the Internet. The man looks at Mother's face in the picture. 'Your mother is very pretty,' he says.

Out of the blue, you comment that his clothes are very nice.

He smiles at your words. 'My mother made this for me.'

'But didn't she pass away?'

'When she was alive.'

He tells you that since he was a child he has only been able to wear cotton, because of various allergies. When other fabrics touched his skin, he became itchy and got a rash. He grew up wearing only the cotton clothes his mother made. In his memories, his mother was always sewing. She would have had to sew and sew to make everything personally, from his underwear to his socks.

He says that when he opened her cupboard after she passed away he found stacks of cotton clothes that would last him for the rest of his life. That his outfit today is one he found in that cupboard. What did his mother look like? Your heart aches as you listen to him. You ask the man who is remembering his beloved mother, 'Do you think your mother was happy?'

His words are polite, but his expression tells you that you've insulted his mother: 'My mother was different from today's women.'