**Again Autumn**

**Another Sunset**

**Here the Stars**

The cosmos, swaying in the wind, tickle Yeon-hee’s hand over and over again. 1 The child, led by her father’s hand as if dangling from it, is simply beaming, content with the flower petals brushing so close and the yellow fields beyond. 2 Well, whose daughter are you not to be content? 3

The school begins to appear in the distance. The buildings, which had long been single-story, now have an added floor, giving them a somewhat modern look. 4

“There’s Daddy’s school. I want to go there now, too!”

“Haha. Yes. Wouldn’t it be nice if Yeon-hee went to Daddy’s school?” 5

“Yes!”

It has been 35 years. My life’s first school.

A few children are darting all over the schoolyard. 6 The same as anywhere, they are thrilling rascals, testing their own arms and legs as they grow faster and stronger by the day, all with mischievous smiles on their faces. 7

“Hi.”

“Hi.” 8

“You don’t live here?”

“No.”

“Then where d’you live?”

“Seoul.”

“Then what’re you doin’ here?”

“Um… I’m going to go to school here, too!”

A handsome-looking boy readily approaches Yeon-hee, showing interest. 9

“I like you.” 10

On the day of the autumn sports festival in my first year of elementary school, I confessed my affection to a girl for the first time.

“Hee.”

My partner, so very pretty, just smiled shyly.

“My, my! As pretty as a picture, but brave as can be. Maybe they’ll be sweethearts later on. Haha.” 11

“If they both like each other, let’s just marry ‘em off! Haha!”

My mother, who is now eighty, was younger then than I am now. My mother and my partner’s mother, with their youthful smiles, looked upon their children, setting aside for a moment the endless chores of daily life. 12 It must have been over in that corner of the schoolyard. It was the first and last time my mother came to her youngest son’s sports festival, having stayed up late into the night packing a tiered lunchbox full of *gimbap*. 13

“Daddy, I’m hungry.” 14

“Oh? Let’s go get something delicious. Yeon-hee, what do you want to eat?”

“Jajangmyeon.” 15

Though it’s a dish she eats often, Yeon-hee is excited again today before a bowl of black bean noodles. And when I’m with Yeon-hee, I get excited about eating out, too. As the two of us eat our noodles, the ones that failed to make it into her little mouth, along with the sauce, are smeared on her face like the wild makeup of an African tribesman. 16 At times like this, I’m always reminded of our calf at home, who was cute and a little pitiful as it chewed its feed so deliciously. 17

“Hehe. I can’t see Yeon-hee’s white face anymore!”

“Yup. It can just get white again.” 18

After finishing her meal, Yeon-hee deftly wipes her face with her tiny hands.

“Wow. You’re spotless now~” 19

The new road, which has connected the villages since before I was born, now sees a fair number of cars. 20 Leaving the township center, the road winds on and on, enveloped by rice paddies, fields, and mountains. 21 The sky, spread out even without lifting one’s head, stretches over the fields, and the warm sunlight gently embraces the father and daughter. 22 Passing Cheondong Village, about a five-minute distance from the school, and after about twenty minutes, Dongam Village also comes into view, nestled on the slope of Mount Cheonun to the south of the new road.

“Daddy used to walk this road to school every day, and then walk back home again.” 23

“Really? Your legs must have hurt a little. But it must have been nice.”

My family and I are planning to move here, to Dongam, about halfway between the school in the township and Cheonun Village where I used to live. 24 I want Yeon-hee to also walk this path every day, to see the flowers along the road and the fields, and to feel nature change with the seasons. 25 Dongam is also the closest village to Mount Cheonun, so my wife and I will be able to hike and walk to our heart’s content. 26

It was around 9 p.m. 27 I walked and walked through a pitch-black space where only the moonlight faintly illuminated the new road and no other light seeped in. Chosen as the grade representative for the county math competition, I, along with a fourth-grade junior and a sixth-grade senior, had spent hours after school solving problems I had never seen before and listening to the teacher's explanations. 28 On other days, I had always gone home before it got dark, but with the competition just a few days away, the teacher, perhaps feeling anxious, kept us until night fell. 29 The senior, who was the son of the vice-township mayor, went back to his home near the school, and I walked with a female junior, who happened to live in the same village, passing through three villages without a word. 30

Never in my life had I been out of the village this late, no, not even a few dozen meters from my house in a night so dark you couldn’t see ahead. 31 I knew wild animals wouldn't appear on the new road, but I couldn't even make out my own feet. Being inside the pitch-black darkness I had only ever looked at was simply terrifying. 32 Beside me, the female junior walked without a word, so silently I was hardly aware she was there. No words would come out. 33 The two of us just walked as fast as we could, relying on the faint light seeping from a distant sliver of a moon. 34 If the moonlight had been brighter, we would have run, but we could only walk steadily. 35

The road, which felt impossibly long and took twice as long as usual, was finally coming to an end. Before my eyes, the bright lights from the houses in our village appeared. 36 I burst through the door and snuggled into the arms of my mother, who was snoring in her sleep, exhausted from working in the fields. Now I was safe. Now there was no darkness. 37

We finally arrive at the entrance to my hometown village. The low mountain that ran along the north side of the new road ends, and the first house comes into view. 38 Uniquely, between this house and the mountain, a round rock slightly larger than the house stands firm. 39 At a glance, it looks as if it could roll down onto the house, which is about an arm’s length away, but upon closer inspection, it only appears that way because it is situated right where the mountain ends. 40 I had heard that Hyuk still lives in this house, but I can't quite believe it until I see it for myself. Just like that rock. 41

Across the stream that flows south of the village, in a wide-open lot, I can see piles of pine logs stacked up to support the mine shafts. 42 The woodpiles are incomparably meager compared to before. 43 My father retired after decades of entering the pits to dig for coal, and later, operating the mine cart rails. My uncles, elder and younger, also dug for coal in the pits. 44 Back then, it was the best-paying and most plentiful job in the nearby villages, to the point that more than half the residents made their living from the mining office. 45

A few more steps, and I see Young-cheol’s house, so close to ours that we were constantly calling for each other. Across the new road, only the empty lot of the mining office’s clinic remains, the building itself gone. 46 The clinic’s front yard, located in the center of the village, was where all the neighborhood kids would gather to play as if at war. 47

I gaze for a moment at my father’s face, as quiet as if he were already asleep. When my father, who worked alternating day and night shifts at the coal mine, slept during the day, I was always very careful. It wasn’t because he was strict, but because he looked so weary. 48 Only after tiptoeing past the door and quietly stepping out the main gate did I return to being a thrilling rascal.

“Young-cheol! What’re you doin’! C’mon out!”

I and Young-cheol run at full speed to the clinic’s front yard, where about six or seven kids are already warming up. 49

“Whoa!”

A ball flying right at me hits me in the solar plexus, and I can’t breathe. For a moment, all the kids have worried faces. 50 But the first thought that comes to my mind is that if our team’s spirit breaks because of this, we’ll lose. 51 After catching my breath for a moment and the throbbing in my chest subsides, I force strength back into my eyes and straighten my shoulders. 52

“You really okay?”

“Doesn’t your stomach hurt?”

When the kids start chattering all at once, you have to raise your voice to get things in order. 53

“I said I’m fine! Start over from here.”

The kids return to the battlefield, running and colliding again. 54

“Daddy!”

Yeon-hee shakes my arm.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Daddy, you keep spacing out today. My legs hurt and I’m thirsty.”

“Haha. Is that so?”

“It’s because it’s been so long since Daddy came here, and it’s making me think of so, so much.” 55

Memories are packed tightly into a distance of less than a minute. 56

The new road is nearly at its end in the village, and the last alleyway comes into view. I enter the alley and walk maybe ten steps. I’m already at the door. 57 It wasn’t what I wanted, but I left through this door at age 11, and 35 years have passed before I came back here again. The gate is still the same iron gate. 58 But I can’t quite remember the color. It seems like it might have been blue like it is now, or maybe brown, or was it just unpainted iron?

“Can I help you?” a passing man asks.

“Hello. I was just looking at the house.”

“Right, but what’s the occasion?”

“Well… I used to live in this house.” 59

“Oh, really? The family here, they say they’ve been living here for about thirty years…” 60

He has a look of complete bewilderment, of suspicion.

“Thirty-five years ago, when I was 11, my whole family moved to Seoul. After living in this house for about twenty years.” 61

“Ah! I see. I moved to this neighborhood twenty years ago. Wait just a moment. I’ll go get the grandmother from this house.” 62

The man goes off somewhere for a moment—judging by the direction, probably to one of the fields down the alley—and returns with an elderly woman. 63

“Ah. You must be that family’s son?” “The resemblance is uncanny.” 64

“Hello.”

“Hello there. Hee.”

As we talk about the little stories of the past, my gaze lingers on the various parts of the house visible over the low wall. 65 The persimmon tree is still stretching its branches in all directions as if dancing with its arms wide open, but it no longer extends anything over the wall to the neighbor’s house. 66 The persimmons on the branches over the wall were picked and eaten by the neighbors, and we thought of that as a matter of course. 67 I don’t know when, but the branches that grew in that direction seem to have been cut off without exception. 68

“You’ve come to your old home after so long, come on in and have a look.”

The grandmother readily welcomes us, and I, as if it were my own house, swiftly open the gate and stride inside. 69

“Who is it?”

An old man opens the door to the main room (anbang) and stares at us blankly, his expression wary of a stranger. 70

“You know. It’s the youngest son of the man who sold us the house and went to Seoul.” 71

The old man scans my face and Yeon-hee’s, for a long moment flipping through the old pages of his mental dictionary of people.

“Ah. Yes. The eyes are almost identical. Haha. The granddaughter has the same face, too.” 72

“Hello, sir. You seem to remember my father’s face?”

“Of course. Even if we only met once, when you’re buying and selling a house, you take a good look at each other.” 73

“Aaaah.”

Yeon-hee lets out a light yawn in the middle of the adults’ rather serious conversation. 74

“You must be tired from the long trip. The child’s legs must be sore. Here, have a seat right here.”

The four of us sitting side-by-side on the wooden porch (maru) makes it look full. 75

“It seems it’s just the two of you living in this house?”

“Our children are all married and live far away, so we don’t see them much unless it’s a holiday.” 76

Though her tone is understanding, the grandmother’s expression is tinged with disappointment and longing. Including my uncle’s family who lived with us for several years, there were once more than 10 people living here; it must be too empty a house for just two elderly people. 77

“My, a precious child has come to the village. A young child is a treasure in the village, I tell you. This room and the one across are both empty, so if you want to stay the night, please do.” 78

The grandmother opens the door to the room next to the kitchen to show me. It is neatly arranged, with plenty of blankets prepared in a corner. 79 It seems ready for children and grandchildren to stay comfortably whenever they might visit. My own grandmother used to stay in this room, which got the most sunlight. 80 The room across from it was a study and indoor playground for my older brothers who were in middle school and up.

I am especially curious about the main room, the anbang, where I had lived with my parents ever since I was born. 81 There is no telling when I might get a chance like this again, so, though it may be shameless, I should ask to see the anbang as well. 82

“Elders. It’s been so long for me… would it be alright if I went inside the main room too?” 83

“Oh, of course. Take your time and look around.”

Unlike my worries, they readily grant me permission to see even the main room. It would be impossible at a land registry office, but it seems my share, the one called memory, is acknowledged here. 84

Dad, like he always does, starts with the soup, takin’ three or four sips of just the broth. Mom, she puts the end pieces of the radish kimchi and the leftover greens from the bottom of the dried radish-leaf soup onto a bowl of cold rice and eats it like it’s the tastiest thing in the world.

Us brothers, the only thing we can see on the table is the most precious side dish of all, a half-piece of grilled mackerel, but we’re busy weighin’ the amount of it left against the amount of rice left in everyone’s bowls, movin’ our chopsticks this way and that between the other dishes. If it weren’t for right now, we’d have to sit at the dinner table a hundred more times to taste mackerel or cutlassfish, but in our house, with a dozen or so chopsticks movin’ ‘cross the table, if I get greedy with my chopsticks, it’ll be a disaster. After we melt away the joy and sorrow of tasting that savory, salty flesh that melts in your mouth for the first time in a long while with a big bowl of scorched-rice water (*sungnyung*), our bellies bulge out, even though we know they’ll be empty again soon.

“You all finish your homework?”

Mom’s mind finally turns to somethin’ other than the bellies of us two still in elementary school.

“We do our homework as soon as we get back from school, I tell you.”

“Me too, I tell you.” 85

Me and my brother, the elementary schoolers, we don’t have any overdue homework yet. 86 Mom’s face, tired from doin’ laundry and field work, brightens for a moment. Even with many children, they all know to do their own chores. 87 Truth be told, if we didn’t, how in the world could Dad and Mom raise us all! I’m only 10, but I have thoughts like that.

The older brothers, in middle and high school, are quiet in the room across the way, maybe studyin’ or maybe just wantin’ to be alone. I wander around the yard for a bit, but as soon as it’s time for the pro baseball game—which just started this year—to begin, I hurry into the *anbang* and sit down at an angle behind Dad to watch TV.

Dad is always busy, workin’ day and night shifts at the mine and doin’ all the heavy liftin’ and fixin’ around the house, inside and out. Still, whenever he has time, he’s a scholarly man who reads difficult books with a magnifying glass and sometimes takes up a brush to write Chinese characters I don’t know, so he’s hard to approach. But, thankfully, Dad also really loves exciting sports like boxing, wrestling, and baseball. 88 That’s why I can watch almost all the baseball games, my favorite, and there were many times I watched the boxing matches he loved, my heart poundin’ strangely, feelin’ a sense of thrill.

In the other room, my brothers must be lookin’ at books packed with tiny letters. I remember one time we were having a boxing match in their room, and I got hit by a friend’s lucky punch and flopped down. I happened to open a book that had fallen with me and was as stunned as I was by the punch. 89 I knew numbers, but to put a weird mark on top of a number, or to mix in squiggly letter-like things between numbers and then say ‘calculate this’... My brothers are really somethin’ else.

In the kitchen (*jeongji*), Mom has finished cleanin’ up after dinner and is now preparin’ side dishes for Dad’s early morning shift and for our school lunchboxes. And so, havin’ finished all my chores for the day—which, to be fair, was just quickly doin’ my simple homework that was over in a flash and feedin’ the rabbits some grass—and now watchin’ my favorite thing in the world, baseball, it seems like me and my elementary school brother are the luckiest ones in our house.

“Hey now. Close your mouth a little. Your face is gettin’ closer and closer to the TV… haha.”

As the game gets more exciting, my mouth hangs open wider and my head tilts back, and just as I’m about to turn into Bubu Sam-shik, the fool from the comedy show, Dad corrects my posture every now and then. 90 If he didn’t, by this year I might be wanderin’ around with a shameful look, my head bent back and my mouth hangin’ open, becoming the laughin’ stock of the neighborhood kids.

Mom, having finished her kitchen work at some point, has come into the room and is now meticulously mendin’ the holes in Dad’s work clothes and our socks. Somehow, the tense situation of the bottom of the ninth, two outs, on the verge of a comeback loss, ends well, and while feelin’ the relief of victory, I see Mom, still holdin’ her needle, dozin’ off and then snorin’ while sittin’ up. I’m worried the needle in her hand might poke her.

“Mom! Mom!”

I wonder how many times I have to shake her and call her for her to hear.

“Mom. Lie down and sleep. Lie down now.” 91

“Mmm… yeah… okay… khhh… huh… ugh.. mmm.”

Her eyes barely open, she’s groggy yet looks peaceful, a strange expression on her face, drunk with sleep but she answers well. 92 If the work clothes and socks she’s holdin’ are needed urgently, she’ll wake from her doze and keep sewin’ late into the night. If there’s a few days’ supply, she’ll doze off leanin’ against the wall and at some point lie down on the floor and snore even more comfortably. 93 To be honest, I don’t yet have the sense to figure out which it is. Even if Mom is just dozin’ off, she knows what needs to be done and does it well. Still, I don’t know what might happen with the tip of that needle, so I have to say somethin’ to her a couple of times so I can sleep with some peace of mind.

“Daddy!”

Yeon-hee shakes my arm hard enough to make it sore. 94

“Daddy, I said I’m thirsty!”

“Hm.. oh.. right. Okay. Uhm.. I think Daddy was dreaming for a moment. I’m sorry. Haha.” 95

That’s right. I had kept forgetting that my precious only daughter, Yeon-hee, was thirsty. 96

“I made this for Chuseok, I wonder if she’ll know how to eat this?”

The grandmother brought two large bowls of sikhye (sweet rice punch) from the kitchen.

“I love sikhye! The floating rice grains are delicious too.” 97

“Oh, is that so? The little one knows the taste of sikhye.”

Yeon-hee drains the bowl in one go and licks up the rice grains with her tongue. She must have been very thirsty and tired. 98 As the sweet drink travels down her throat and spreads through her body, Mount Cheonun, visible across the way, seems to glow with a red light. Though October is drawing to a close, it looks like there are still a couple of hours until the sun sets. 99

“Sir, Ma’am. I’d like to take a look around the village. Would it be alright for the child to stay here for a bit?”

Have I, a person who rarely asks favors of others, become much more brazen? 100 Today, I am a wild animal that has escaped its enclosure and returned to the wild; I cannot stay still. 101

“Don’t you worry. We were just thinkin’ we won’t see our grandkids ‘til New Year’s, and we were missin’ the sight of ‘em.” 102

The grandfather and grandmother seem to enjoy watching Yeon-hee, who smiles brightly for no particular reason. 103

To get to Mount Cheonun from the village, you must cross a fairly wide stream, but the stone bridge that was always there is gone. 104 The area is so overgrown with weeds that a passing glance wouldn't tell you if it were a stream or a field of grass. 105 Just as I used to do in the middle of summer when the flowing water would swell frighteningly and submerge the stone bridge, I walk to the edge of the village and cross the cement bridge. 106

I pass the fields and now must enter the mountain, but I can’t find the entrance! The path that the villagers always took to find the valley in the summer should be visible, but thick weeds and bushes obscure the area around the mountain, and I don’t know where to go. 107 In any case, I can’t just linger around the mountain’s edge, can I? Haven’t I spent my weekends climbing high mountains whenever I had the chance? 108 Though, it was mostly on trails with neatly tied ropes on both sides, or at least with the ground leveled for easy footing. 109

I pick up a tree branch and push my way forward little by little. 110 Deep inside the forest, the trees are more majestic and splendid. Soon, a babbling sound comes to me, like a memory from a dream. 111 Over to the side, about ten meters in, water from a spring is trickling down. Could this have been the place where my father once cooked me ramen? 112 I drink a handful of spring water, and as my hazy mind clears, I see the path of the spring split into two before merging again. One side is quite steep; from the middle, no water flows, and the soil is covered with a good amount of grass. 113 Is there an underground water vein here? It’s a sight I’ve never seen before.

As I take my third step on the soil that feels crumbly, my foot suddenly feels incredibly light. 114

“Whoa!”

Suddenly, the ground around me collapses in an area wider than my body. I desperately grab onto a young tree branch on the slope next to me. 115 But its roots were only barely a couple of spans deep, and having lost more than half its footing due to the mess I created, it struggles along with me. 116 I spread my legs as wide as possible to lean on the remaining earth, but my feet sink deeper. Now even my waist is being swallowed by the ground. 117

I’m going to be completely sucked into the ground! In that instant, a rock, heavy enough that it would take two hands to wrap around it, appears before my eyes like a savior. 118 With all my might, I spread my legs wide, using the force from something solid—be it a tree stump or a rock—as a rebound, and throw my body towards the stone. 119 As I clutch the rock tightly, I thankfully start to tumble down the slope. 120

“Oh my!”

After rolling down for a while, the sound of the babbling spring reaches my ears again. Am I stopping now? I suddenly feel sleepy. 121

“Hey there. Hey! Snap out of it!” 122

Someone is shaking my body and lightly slapping my cheek. I open my eyes to complete darkness. I turn my head, and a resident is staring at me with wide eyes. 123

“You alright?”

“What in the world were you doin’ up here, I wonder…” 124

I drink a sip of spring water he offers me and survey the scene from above. Below the collapsed pile of earth, the grass is all crushed, and the ground seems a bit lower. 125 There’s blood on the rock that rolled down with me. A dark mound of earth bears a partial imprint of my face. 126 In truth, I don’t think I’ve been in my right mind since the ground gave way. My heart is still pounding wildly and won’t calm down. 127

“The cut on your head isn’t too bad. Don’t seem to be hurt much anywhere else.”

Like a doctor, the resident skillfully examines my body here and there and gives a diagnosis. 128

“It gets dark fast in the mountains, so pull yourself together and let’s head down for now.”

“C-...”

I feel like I want to say something, but I can’t think of what it is. 129

I feel a bit relieved to be going down the mountain I came up alone with a resident who knows the area well. 130 We carefully descend the steep part, and as the ground becomes more level, my tension eases further. 131

“This area here, unless you live here, there’s no proper path. It’s a dangerous zone, you shouldn’t come up here.”

“Dangerous?” 132

“They’ve been minin’ coal under Mount Cheonun for about 80 years now. If you’re not on that hiking trail over there, the ground can just collapse! It’s dangerous! Even if you wander off the trail, you gotta stick to paths you know, I tell you.” 133

The resident explains, sounding frustrated, but I can’t understand it at all. I don’t want to understand it. 134

“I only come by sometimes for the taste of that spring water. What would you have done if you’d passed out there all alone? Barely anyone ever comes through here…”

“Hmm.”

Mount Cheonun collapses, and my heart collapses with it. 135

Why would it collapse? Walking like an idiot, I find I’ve left the mountain’s edge and reached the stream. 136 When I get to the bridge, with its cement chipped away in places, my strength gives out and I slump to the ground. 137 The resident checks the wound on the back of my head for a moment, then takes a handkerchief from his pocket and presses it firmly. 138

“You should be fine if you just go in and rest now.”

He dusts himself off and stands up, as if to go home. 139

“Thank you. My name is Kim Young-han, born in the year of the Ox. I was born in this village and lived here for 10 years before transferring to a school in Seoul in the 5th grade.”

Since I am grateful, I politely reveal my identity in detail. 140

“...”

The resident, just like I was a moment ago, stares at me silently, as if he wants to say something but can’t. 141

“Young-han!”

“It’s me, Yoo Hyuk!!”

“...”

Hyuk? 142

Hyuk? Yoo Hyuk? The rock?

“Yoo Hyuk? Hyuk?”

“Yeah, you punk. Yoo Hyuk from the house under the rock!”

“ ”

“ ”

“Oh, my word.” 143

We both look at each other, laugh out loud, embrace, and then laugh again. 144

Watching the last of the sunset burn even redder, we sat down on the bridge again.

“What brings you here?” 145

“I’m planning to move to Dongam. My house and job in Seoul are pretty much sorted, so I should be able to move in about a month.”

“Have you lived in this town your whole life?” 146

“Except for after the army and about three years I lived in Gwangju, I’ve lived in that house my whole life. When I was young, this town and the house under the rock felt suffocating… but after some time, it got better. Thanks to the rock, I don’t have to worry about landslides from the mountain.”

“Yeah. I can’t stand apartments or the complicated city anymore. That’s why I’m moving now.” 147

“What did you do in Seoul?”

“Well, I worked at a company for a bit, and I’ve been teaching physics at an academy for quite a while now.” 148

“Is that right? It’s been almost 10 years since I started driving the mine’s commuter bus. I tried digging coal in the pits at first, but I couldn’t do it for more than a few months. I have no idea how our fathers, yours and mine, endured decades in there. Phew.” 149

Holding back a sigh, I go down to the stream bank, brush off my pants, and wash my face vigorously. Black water drips down. 150

“Hey, when I saw your face earlier, I thought you were someone who just came from working at the mine. The spot where you smashed your face must’ve been where coal dust mixed with groundwater and piled up, I tell you.” 151

Hyuk grins and says this as he watches me scrub my face.

“I guess so. Now I look like a coal miner, just like my dad. Ha.” 152

“But I’m worried it’ll be hard for your daughter to suddenly walk all the way to Dongam after going to school close by in Seoul.”

“What are you talkin’ about? Young-han, even country villages have school buses now. When do you think it was when we went to school!” 153

“Really?”

Right! Of course.

The sun is completely set, and only the red glow of the sunset remains in the sky, casting a deep darkness. 154 It feels like our conversation could go on forever, but I think of Yeon-hee waiting at the house. In a month, I’ll be able to see Hyuk as much as I want. 155

“Let’s head in now, too. Any longer and we won’t be able to see a thing. Stop by as soon as you move, you hear?”

Hyuk also looks eager to get going for his early morning work tomorrow and stands up. 156

“Give me those clothes and wear this. Your daughter will be shocked if she sees you.” 157

Hyuk rummages through his backpack and pulls out a spare jacket. It looks perfect to wear in the chilly evening weather. The guy came fully prepared for a mountain hike. 158

“Thanks, man.”

“By the way, Young-han. Why’d you roll all the way down and crack your head open like that? The ground only sank about chest-deep, you could’ve just climbed out.”

“Really??”

“Well…” 159

My head is spinning. I don’t even want to think about it.

“Right. Hurry on in and get some rest.”

“Yeah. You get going.”

Entering the alleyway alone again, tears well up in my eyes. 160 Yes, they say even mountains and rivers change in ten years. That’s right, of course, that’s right. A physics teacher can’t claim not to know that. Reaching the front gate, I pause for a moment to catch my breath and compose my heart. Yeon-hee’s dad is coming home.

“Daddy!!!”

The moment I open the gate, Yeon-hee, who was sitting on the porch, runs to me and throws her arms around me. 161 The grandfather, standing in the yard, also seems to have been worried.

“I’m sorry I’m late. I ran into an old friend by chance.” 162

“As the sun was settin’, the little one kept waitin’ for her daddy. Anyway, I’ll have dinner ready in a jiffy, so go wash up.” 163

The grandmother also comes out of the kitchen and says this, glancing at my completely different jacket.

The four of us—the grandfather, the grandmother, Yeon-hee, and I—sit cozily in the *anbang*, and after eating a spicy kimchi stew and savory, salty grilled saury, I feel my energy returning a little. The room my grandmother used to use has the faint scent of new wallpaper. It’s past 9 p.m., and the world is so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Yeon-hee and I are a little bored. I should take Yeon-hee outside for some fresh air.

I walk slowly around the spacious yard, holding Yeon-hee’s hand. I tilt my head up slightly and see countless stars twinkling. I look to my side and see the two prettiest stars in the world looking up at the stars shining in the black sky. A cool air spreads from the direction of Mount Cheonun. The stars above seem unchanged, still shining brightly, and beside me is an angel with clear, sparkling eyes and a bright smile. 164 Why did it take me so long to come back? I want to say something, but nothing clearly comes to mind.

“Yaaawn.”

The angel must be very tired. I’m starting to get sleepy, too.

A tickle creeps up my cheek. Bright, warm sunlight pours down on my whole body. I open my eyes and see Yeon-hee stroking my cheek and smiling, and I feel endlessly happy.

“Daddy. Hee.” 165

Yeon-hee calls me for no reason. She keeps making me smile, too.

The mountain opposite us forms a beautiful line, emitting a majestic and mysterious energy. It’s Mount Cheonun in autumn, how could it be otherwise? The sun is already quite high in the clear blue sky, and a cool yet warm air envelops the entire village. When today’s sun begins to set, the sunset catching on the persimmon tree branches as it sinks behind the western mountains will surely color my heart red as well. And when darkness completely settles here, the stars from the distant universe will arrive to light up the stage. My heart begins to beat powerfully again. At some point, so much has changed. I don’t know what will happen in the future. Still, even if it’s only now, I’m glad to be here again, in my hometown. I want to hurry and drink rice wine to my heart’s content with Hyuk and become completely intoxicated with my hometown. 166

The End.