

Sŏ Yŏng-ŭn | DEAR DISTANT LOVE

Mun-ja looked calmly through the dusty window, and when she saw the wind blowing furiously down the street she put on her wool gloves.

Because the wool shrank and clumped together when she washed them, she had to press hard on the valleys between the fingers as she worked her hands into them. Nobody wore these gaudy gloves anymore; they'd been out of fashion for years. Not only her gloves but everything about her was out of date, the clothing redeemed only by the lack of holes: her overcoat with its frayed cuffs, the ballet flats she wore summer and winter, the short, wide-cut dark gray pants that left her ankles sticking out, the lumpy socks with their layer of lint, the handbag smelling of her lunch whenever she pulled it from her desk drawer.

Her appearance was all the more pitiable. On the threshold of forty, a spinster with the highest seniority in the business and editorial departments of this children's book publisher, she had done nothing but proofreading since coming to work here.

Including the director, there were seven in the editorial department. Only Mun-ja had remained over the years; each of the other faces had changed numerous times. Recent university graduates didn't last six months. Their complaints began accumulating from day one: the chairs were rickety, the bathroom was filthy, the stairs were too steep. It became almost a ritual to punctuate their remarks with something like, "I've had enough. I'm fed up with this damned place." At that point you could bet they would last a month or two at most.

The younger ones excluded Mun-ja from their conversations. What pride could they take from having an old maid as a co-worker who had always occupied the bottom of the totem pole at this insignificant publishing house, where they had no future even if they stayed for the rest of their careers? And what had she to show for the ten years she had worked here, apart from the gray appearing prematurely at the part in her hair?

They liked to think that a frigid wind whirled at Mun-ja's back as she hunched over the proofs on her desk. They imagined coarse gooseflesh sprouting on her

chin.

After rushing out at lunchtime for marrow soup and rice, followed by coffee at a tearoom, they would be greeted by Mun-ja, a cup of hot barley tea between her hands. She looked so pathetic it made them sick, and if she happened to speak to them, they snapped back at her.

If Mun-ja was ever upset, she never let it show. It was embarrassing when the young director occasionally threw the blame for a mishap in her face, but she meekly absorbed the reproaches. And just as she never expressed dissatisfaction, she was stoic and faithful in observing company policies. When the others disparaged the company president and reeled off grievances about the facilities and their pay, she merely listened.

Her young co-workers assumed Mun-ja was keeping a low profile, so afraid was she of being out of a job. And so whenever they saw her, diffident and piteous, they promised themselves that before long they would leave for greener pastures; they would never become a ghost like her.

Mun-ja turned away from the window. Although it was twenty minutes past the end of the workday, the others were still chattering away at their desks. As closing time approached, they had all made telephone calls to plan their evenings.

Mun-ja picked up her bag and approached the director's desk. She waited patiently while he finished a conversation with one of the others, then said goodbye.

She had just started down the stairs when she heard Miss Ch'oe's flippant voice from above: "What a life—it's Saturday and no one calls her."

"And nobody waiting at home with a smile on his face."

"How can you say that? Even if she's not married, she must have *family*."

"You ladies are too much," said a man. "Working in the same office and you don't know anything about each other?"

"How? She never tells me anything."

"Well, I've heard a few things third-hand. Parents passed away when she was young, and her only brother moved overseas several years back. She's been all alone ever since. Seems trouble follows her around. All she has to her name is the lease money on her room in Yongdu-dong, or wherever it is."

"Strange, isn't it? Never wears new clothes, and have you ever seen her go out for lunch? She's been here more than ten years—where do you suppose her earnings go?"

"Who cares? The clock's ticking, Miss Ch'oe, you ought to put on the wedding veil yourself."

Mun-ja tiptoed down the stairs, knowing they'd be embarrassed if they knew she had overheard.

The wind stung, surprising her. A car or two was usually parked in the narrow alley, hindering pedestrians, but not that day. The eateries that were thronged on weekdays were nearly empty. The corner of a galvanized-iron roof thumped rhythmically in the wind like one end of a teeter-totter. Had the nails rusted and come loose from the eaves?

Mun-ja raised her coat collar. Emerging from the alley, she wondered if her life was as miserable a failure as others seemed to think. She bit her lip gently, stifling an urge to burst out laughing. What a splendid job she had done fooling everyone! What she concealed from the world was not the round seal engraved with horses that marked Master Yi as the king's secret envoy in the Ch'unhyang story. Nor was she the seemingly wretched heroine of television and movie fame who turned out to be the daughter of a conglomerate tycoon. She couldn't precisely explain it, but there was, well, an energy that charged her, a gentle current others could not sense. It mattered little to Mun-ja whether current fashions made her slacks wide or narrow and her coat long or short, whether her colleagues called her "Miss" or something more polite, whether her chair wobbled, whether the company president nagged her too much.

Some time ago a woman who styled herself the mother of all proofreaders had joined the staff. Not ten days on the job she got into a shouting match with the man next to her, because he had called her "Miss" rather than a more exalted title, and the following day she showed up only long enough to submit a letter of resignation. "Who cares what some idiot calls you?" Mun-ja had thought as she watched the woman shake her fist and bawl out the man. Back to her proofs she went, concealing a smile.

If others wanted to consider her wretched and pitiful, fine, they could think what they wanted. One day she had arrived at the office to find her desk emptied except for a stub of a pencil and a few caps but not the pens they belonged to. Rather than make an issue out of it, she had gotten by with the pencil and bought new pens. Be my guest, she had thought.

A longtime co-worker who was now a department head elsewhere kept offering her a higher salary to come work for him. But she declined. What do you think I am, a migratory bird? Don't worry, I'm not going to starve for lack of a few extra *wŏn*.

And when her office mates dumped their drudge work on her, or weaseled out when it came their turn to look after the office on a Sunday or a holiday, she took it in stride. She could clean the office; icy water and chapped hands wouldn't kill her.

They could saddle her with chores even more bothersome, a tunnel with no light at the end, but she kept her composure and never felt sorry for herself. She could bear the heaviest burden. Her spirit was strong enough to endure, yet humble enough to kneel.

To those around her, Mun-ja was as quiet as the dead. But none of them knew her silence originated from an absolute confidence that she could live under any conditions, a self-assurance that had been forming in an ongoing contest with a higher power, far above the plane of their existence, a confidence that hardened with each step she took along a solitary road that was longer than they could ever imagine.

But it was a different matter when she had to ask a favor. That was absolutely humiliating. And by this evening, she had no choice: she had to raise two hundred thousand *wŏn*.

As she walked along, this thought weighing on her mind, Mun-ja noticed a telephone booth. Inside, a young man clutched the receiver. Still some distance away, Mun-ja could hear his shrill laughter. When she had called her aunt several days before, the older woman had flatly turned her down. But Mun-ja was desperate now, and there was nothing to do but appeal to her once more.

The conversation in the phone booth was endless. The young man kept saying no, the timing wasn't good, no way was he going to miss the boxing match, they were carrying it live by satellite for God's sake.

Going up behind him and stamping her feet to keep warm, Mun-ja looked fretfully at the dreary clouds scudding above the building across the street. The wind hadn't let up. Finally the young man hung up. Savoring his triumph, he didn't emerge until he had lit a cigarette.

Mun-ja picked up the receiver, still warm from his touch.

"Auntie, it's me again." What else could she say?

The static was broken by the clucking of her aunt. "All right, you might as well come by and say hello."

Tears came to her eyes, blurring her vision, but Mun-ja collected herself. She kept passing her fingernails over the graffiti on the shelf where the telephone rested, as if this were her penance.

Mun-ja never asked why Han-su occasionally demanded a large sum of money in addition to what he took from her every month. For his part, Han-su felt awkward pocketing the money. "Damn it! Do you think I enjoy this? You wait and see—my chance will come."

It was always the same story: he needed money *now* for a night out with a potential investor in his mine. This would be the last time, he swore. Well, so what if he wasn't telling the truth? As long as he took care of Ok-jo, helping him meant she was helping Ok-jo.

It didn't matter if he wasted the entire amount on a night of drinking, like in the old days. Nothing he did could hurt her now. He had carved a thousand invisible scars into her, but she could live with those injuries, because he was already distant

from her heart. Her spirit had strengthened with every cut she had stitched up. She was like the legendary camel that draws eternal strength as it is burdened with load after load.

Han-su, like the others who had known Mun-ja, was oblivious. She was a good person, but foolish and gullible. But once, just once, she had done something that confused and frightened him.

Less than a month after Mun-ja bore Ok-jo, Han-su told his wife to fetch the baby from her. Not that he wanted the child—he and his wife already had a son and daughter. But by taking Ok-jo he felt he could possess Mun-ja forever.

Returning home, Han-su's wife had placed the newborn in front of him. "What a worthless slut. How can she live like that?" she said, her face red with indignation. "I wanted to break something, put a scare in her, but I couldn't find anything to break. Even women who have *nothing* at least have a dressing table. Not her."

In truth, Han-su's wife was relieved to see that Mun-ja had only a single cabinet in the way of furnishings. Her husband had always said Mun-ja had no belongings, but could she believe him? Back when he had directed a mining operation, businessmen had lined up at his office with money-filled envelopes and expensive gifts, and he could have hoarded these to his heart's content. So whenever he unexpectedly bestowed her with a mink coat, an alligator handbag, or jewelry, she would carefully sound him out, brimming with suspicion that "the slut" might have received better gifts.

But Han-su had then quit his job and gone into business for himself, buying a tungsten mine. He sold their house and the ancestral graveyard, along with his valuables and real estate, and invested all the proceeds in the mine. When his wife had to sell her one remaining gemstone ring in order to sustain them, she began seething all over again, thinking that *she* was going bankrupt while "that slut" was swaddled in jewelry, that *she* was the one who looked the beggar.

Decked out in the mink coat and sporting the alligator handbag she'd borrowed from Han-su's sister, she had let herself in through the doghole-sized side door of a dwelling next to the Yongdu-dong sewer ditch. One glance and she realized she had agonized for nothing. When the gifts she had imagined her husband giving Mun-ja were nowhere in evidence, she felt ridiculous and drained. The woman had nothing, not even a television, while she herself once had a set in every room of her house. Obviously her husband was just trifling with Mun-ja.

Had Mun-ja made a scene about the baby? Han-su had asked his wife.

She had fixed him with a hawkish glare. "Does the slut have any choice? You didn't put her on your family register. How could she raise a stink—she's the one who got herself knocked up. No, she just looked at the baby, not a tear in her eyes, and said, 'If she wakes up and cries in the middle of the night, give her a few spoon-

fuls of barley tea.' And that's it."

"She's a simpleton," Han-su had murmured to himself. "Her own baby, and she lets somebody walk off with it?" But then he clamped his mouth shut; he felt as if he had been speared in the pit of the stomach. Suddenly Mun-ja's utter silence had touched his heart, chilling him to the core.

It was an exceptionally snowy winter ten years before, when Han-su had first visited Mun-ja's rented room. Mun-ja was constantly shoveling the roof. If she let the snow pile up, the melting water would soak through the concrete ceiling and drip down into her room. Armed with her shovel, she climbed up and down the rickety ladder like a dancer, heedless of the high-tension wire close by. It didn't matter if the landlord and landlady, who operated a restaurant, stood on their veranda ridiculing Mun-ja with her flushed cheeks; effortlessly she scooped and threw the snow. And if a shovelful landed in a mud puddle and happened to splash a passerby, she would scurry down the ladder, wipe the man's pants, and apologize until he was satisfied. And back up she would go.

There was no running water in Mun-ja's primitive kitchen. She had to draw water from the faucet in the yard, which meant going out the back door of the kitchen and down a long, steep flight of steps. The other tenants, who had seniority over Mun-ja, saw those steps as a stairway to humiliation, a necessary means of survival. More than anything else these destitute women hated the thought of the landlady gloating at their backs as they climbed the steps, groaning under the weight of the full bucket they carried in each hand.

Mun-ja was a renter, just like they were, but that was the only similarity. When she appeared at the back door of the kitchen, her cheeks held the glow of someone who enjoyed what she was doing. Forgetting the buckets she held, she stood on the steps and gazed up at the sky. That's when the red in her cheeks deepened, lit from within. The steps became a musical scale, and she bounced up and down them like a lively melody. Mun-ja alone took advantage of those crude steps to enjoy the marvelous, beautiful world above.

At the top of those steps, Mun-ja could often be seen at daybreak vigorously fanning her portable coal-briquette stove. Sometimes she was humming, in spite of the acrid smoke. She had to use that smaller stove because water was seeping into the fuel hole of her cookstove. The landlord should have fixed the leak, and the roof and floor too, but Mun-ja didn't complain. Instead of being thankful, the landlord charged ridiculous amounts for the water and electricity. Mun-ja paid without questioning him, making it seem that she lived comfortably and couldn't be bothered with trivialities.

The other women decided Mun-ja was far better off than she appeared. One day they paid an unannounced visit so they could inspect her room. What they found

was paint fluttering from the water-soaked ceiling, and no furniture except the cabinet with its rusty handle. Now they were even more puzzled by the light that suffused Mun-ja's cheeks and the vitality that enveloped her body in song. And if they were grouped around the faucet and Mun-ja was the first to return to her room, they were left with the feeling that a fragrant flower had briefly touched their hearts. How to explain it? One of them gestured that Mun-ja was soft in the head, and the rest of them brayed in laughter.

And so they had seen for themselves that Mun-ja possessed nothing that others didn't have. She was content to think of the man she loved, no matter what she was doing. Whether she was cleaning bean sprouts, fanning the stove, or shoveling snow from the roof, the inner reaches of her heart were suffused with a warmth as if from a lantern, whenever she thought of him. She herself was unaware that this glow was what colored her cheeks and invigorated her.

Although Han-su came to her only on Sunday night, she thought of him as a lantern always present on her shelf. If she caught herself nitpicking over prices at the market she would stop and think, *What if he knew . . . ?* And if she was about to quarrel with someone, her anger dissolved at the thought of him.

From Monday to Tuesday and on to Saturday she gradually alchemized herself, and on Sunday everything turned golden at her touch.

Before Han-su could knock on her door, Mun-ja recognized his footsteps and went out to welcome him. She helped him off with his coat, she removed his socks, she brought a basin of hot water and washed his feet, and everything she touched turned the color of gold.

The meal she prepared for him was like the candle a poor person buys for a shrine with money earned from a week's labor cleaning floors with a rough brush and a wet rag.

When she picked up a piece of lean meat with her chopsticks, Han-su opened his mouth wide and ate. He never thought of reciprocating. Selfish and obtuse, he couldn't see the golden color filling the room; he couldn't hear the melody in their periods of silence. When he stroked her body he was unaware that a smell like that of ripe fruit was settling on his fingers.

Like an impecunious drunk dubiously counting the money in his pocket over and over even when he's found a cheap place to drink, he tried incessantly to read her mind. Could she really be satisfied with what he gave her? Would she devote her life to him? The time he could spend with her was limited to what would escape his wife's notice. And although he had a decent job as an aide to a national assemblyman in the ruling party, he earned too little to help with Mun-ja's living expenses.

Though Mun-ja never asked for anything, he was always anxious. What if she requested something he couldn't afford to give her? He knew she wasn't greedy: she

didn't use makeup, she didn't dress up, and she gave no indication of buying anything fancy for her room. Still, he kept his guard up.

In the meantime Han-su's assemblyman became a government minister. Han-su's degree was in mineral engineering, and with the minister's help he was appointed to head a quasi-public mine. With the increase in his salary he could have established Mun-ja in a home of her own. But he didn't. Instead he provided a splendid new house for his wife and children, along with fine clothes, servants, and more fruit and baked goods than the family could ever hope to eat before they spoiled.

He shared nothing with Mun-ja, not one apple, not a single orange. In spite of himself he sometimes picked up a fruit basket for her. But then he would put it back. He was afraid that once he started giving her things she would forever be holding out her hand to him.

But as always, Mun-ja asked nothing of him. When the landlord raised her rent she managed for a time to find the additional money, but finally she had to move. Prices were soaring, though, and she had to trim her weekly budget even more in order to serve Han-su a dinner as good as before. Instead of paying two bus fares to get somewhere she would take the first bus as far as it went and walk the rest of the way. For lunch she made do with instant noodles.

In contrast, Han-su's skin looked more glossy each day. And every time he visited Mun-ja, not only his shoes but his shirt, tie, cuffs, buttons, and underwear were different. He built up a collection of suits in various patterns and colors.

One day, as Han-su checked his watch and rose from their bed, Mun-ja clutched at his underwear. "Don't go! Stay with me just for tonight." She buried her face in his back, then immediately released him, just in time to check a flood of tears. She became dispirited. The things she had touched and turned golden now tore at her heart. As she took his suit jacket from the hanger, she choked up at the sight of a thick wad of money in an inside pocket. Her heart tore some more when she took out his shoes from the quilt on the heated part of the floor, removed the cloth she had wrapped them in, and noticed from the labels on the soles how expensive they must be.

There followed a procession of days that felt to her like the end of the world: she imagined incessant tidal waves poised to crash, thunder pealing, violent, swooping winds. The deep sorrow she wanted to pour out in tears at the side of a river or high on a remote mountain began to wash the color from her cheeks.

Again Mun-ja's rent went up. On her way home from a day's search for yet another room, she bought two bottles of *soju*. She drank them on an empty stomach and passed out. When she awakened the next morning, bright sunlight and sticky filth were everywhere.

Again she wept, the flood of tears mottling her vision. But then she clenched her teeth, and at that moment, the camel inside her came to life and confronted her pain: "Knife me if you want. Shred me with your cruel blade. You'll never kill me. If I can't stand up, then I'll hold myself erect. My head will never bow. You can hurt me more, but I'll never give up. My love for him is total, and through that love I'll take the pain he's caused me and transform it. And that will be my revenge. I'll stay where I am, I'll live with what's given me, and I'll never run away. Yes, I'll have my revenge, sweet revenge. Not just on him but on the god who gave me this fate and withholds his mercy until I can no longer endure!"

For two days she lay sick in bed, unable to go to work. The next day was Sunday. She got up as if nothing had happened, took a bath in anticipation of Han-su's arrival, went to the market, and decided to shell some gingko nuts.

That evening she noticed a pearl pin on his tie as she hung it up. But her heart was beyond tearing now. At last she was indifferent to his possessions. He could enjoy life after his own fashion and she wasn't going to let it bother her.

Mun-ja observed dispassionately as his insatiable desire reached ever higher, prompting him to scorn the gift boxes and money-filled envelopes brought by the businessmen who lined up at the door to his house.

And then early one morning the second movement of the *Eroica* Symphony was broadcast repeatedly over radio and television. Martial law was proclaimed and the National Assembly and Cabinet were dissolved. Not quite two months later Han-su staggered up to Mun-ja's door. His face was haggard and he was badly in need of a shave. He sprawled on the floor, too drunk to control himself, and lay spread-eagled as Mun-ja removed his clothing. Suddenly he clutched the hem of her skirt and said in a hoarse, tearful voice, "I'm nothing now. Nobody comes to see me anymore. But if you turn your back on me, I'll kill you."

Mun-ja waited in the living room while her aunt finished her bath. The sofa where she sat was like a feather cushion, and the thick carpet, so cushy beneath her feet, made her think of a Persian rug. Everything at her aunt's was cozy and pleasant.

Beyond the white lace curtains the trees in the yard swayed in the gusty wind. Even cold weather seemed tame and mild from inside her aunt's home. The gloomy sky gradually darkened to the color of black ink.

From the bathroom came the refreshing splash of water on the tile floor. Mun-ja was struck by a notion so chilling it numbed her: The weak build their lives on soft sofas and carpets, gilded fireplaces, expensive paintings, and comfortable beds. They grow used to the pleasant touch of such objects, and soon they're enslaved. Their craving is like the mane of a horse that sleeps well after constant stroking. But the mane of her spirit wanted to be blown high by strong winds, without

knowing satisfaction.

From the kitchen came the scuffling of slippers. Her aunt's middle-aged housekeeper appeared with a glass of juice on a tray.

"It's been a long time," said Mun-ja.

"You should visit us more often. The baby must be getting bigger."

"Yes."

"She looks so much like you."

"How do you know that?"

"There's a picture of her. Over there." The woman pointed toward the display shelves against the wall.

Mun-ja waited for her to return to the kitchen, then looked at the photo. She had asked Han-su to bring the girl on her fifth birthday, and had spent the day with her. The photo had been taken then, here at the aunt's house.

The photo showed Ok-jo in the arms of Mun-ja's cousins. She was smiling brightly. Her teeth, as even as corn on the cob, were a pure, almost bluish white. Mun-ja took the picture frame and carefully dusted it.

Just before Han-su's wife had taken Ok-jo, Mun-ja had dreamed for several nights that the baby was being stolen from her. Sometimes she dreamed she and the baby were being chased across hills and fields by a figure in black; other times she was a madwoman searching for her stolen child. After she awakened, the screams she had uttered in the nightmare, screams that sounded so unlike her, continued to whirl and echo in her ears.

She would turn on the light and see that the baby was there, twitching its eyelids in the brightness, yet wonder if she was still dreaming. She would look at the baby, and look again, but the phantom of her nightmare, instead of fading, clung to her more tightly. If only she could run away with the baby, run far, far away. On a sudden urge she knelt and made a tearful plea:

"Why can't I do that? It's been too much for me. I've always made do with as little as possible—that and my bare hands. Hands that have forgotten how to hold. But I don't want to give up my own flesh and blood. Let me be comforted. I can't refuse it this time! I'm hurting too much!"

At that moment the camel within her again came to life: "You can do it. Yes, it hurts to have a high place you want to reach. But the pain is your ladder to that place."

Mun-ja could only shake her head and moan.

But now she was capable of smiling calmly as she looked at the photograph of her daughter.

The splashing stopped, and presently the bathroom door opened. Her aunt's eyes had a fuzzy cast, as if she were enraptured by the feel of the hot water, and her

milky skin had a pinkish glow. As she approached the sofa she brushed her hair, which had been expertly dyed brown. Her undulating bosom, plump and elastic, seemingly ageless, was visible through the deeply cut collar of her silk bathrobe.

Mun-ja carefully returned the photo of Ok-jo to its place and turned to her aunt. “Are you going to leave Ok-jo with his family forever?”

The blunt tone told Mun-ja how little faith her aunt placed in her.

“Yes,” Mun-ja replied, clasping her hands squarely in front of her. Her expression was as firm and unyielding as packed earth.

“Why? Did they say they won’t give her up?”

“No. In fact, they asked me to take her back.”

“Well, thank goodness for that. Then do it, and break up with him. His luck has dried up. The longer you drag things out, the more you’ll be hurt—you know that.”

“I’ll not take Ok-jo back, Aunt.”

“No? You’re such a strange one. Don’t you feel any pity for the child?”

“Yes, I do. And I would love to take her back. But not just for my own satisfaction.

When I gave up Ok-jo, in my mind she had already left me. That doesn’t mean I don’t love her. It’s just that my love for her is different from that of other mothers. I was reading a biography of Genghis Khan. Did you know that after he conquered China he left his own son there? Left him with foreign people in a foreign land. He had the strength to abandon his own son, to suppress his love and walk away. And that was what made him such a great man. Having a deep attachment to my flesh and blood is like having a deep attachment to possessions—it’s something I ought to overcome. I feel like I’m living in a state of tension where I’m constantly having to stand up to someone.”

“I don’t understand a word you’re saying. Why don’t you drink your juice?” She asked the housekeeper for carrot juice for herself.

Mun-ja observed her aunt’s plump, well-preserved hands. They looked so relaxed after the hot bath. The fingertips wrinkled as they dried. The bluish gray nail color had started to come off, and her aunt became absorbed in scraping away what remained of it.

“Actually,” she said after a time, “I was about to call you. Now tell me, isn’t it about time you were married? I think I’ve found a man for you. If you can devote yourself to him *half* as much as you do to Ok-jo’s father, you’ll win his affection and have yourself a good life.”

Surely she didn’t ask me over to tell me *this*, Mun-ja thought as she stared fretfully out the window. By now the trees in the yard had also turned the color of ink. Perhaps Han-su had left for her room by now.

“Well, what do you think? Would you like to meet him? He’s fifty and has two children, but they live with his mother. I understand he has an apartment in Apk-

jōng-dong and a hill somewhere this side of Kwach’ŏn that might be good for pasture land. And he’s a lawyer. He has a drooping eyelid, and you might think that’s a defect, but you have your share of those, too.”

Her aunt expected a favorable response, but Mun-ja continued to gaze pensively outside. It was because of the money, her aunt realized, but she was reluctant to bring up that subject. She forced herself to yawn, her way of coping with an awkward moment.

Mun-ja turned back at the sound. The moment she saw her aunt’s eyes, their corners moist from her yawn, she was inexplicably angry. But the next moment she felt the camel within her tread gently over that anger.

“Aunt, what about the favor I asked?”

“You mean the money?”

“Yes.”

“I told you I don’t have it. But the housekeeper has some money I’m looking after. If you want, you can borrow it. But you’ll have to pay interest. Five percent.”

“All right.”

But Mun-ja’s aunt seemed in no hurry to fetch the money. She scraped at her nail color more aggressively, and continued her croon-like nagging.

“Am I getting through to you? As long as I can do anything about it, I’m not going to let my niece spend the rest of her life in a state where she’s not married and not single. Can you imagine how resentful your mother would be if she knew about this? And aren’t you tired of being strapped for money all the time? If you marry that lawyer, your luck will change in no time.”

Realizing by now it was useless to respond, Mun-ja merely said, “Yes, I know.”

“The thing is, you’ve had a monster inside you since you were a girl. People should turn around if there’s mud in their path, but you’re so pig-headed you try to march right through it.”

“Yes, I know.”

Mun-ja was no longer listening. Her attention had drifted to an article she had read about Libya. Libya’s per capita income was ten thousand dollars and its population three million, the writer had explained. One of the government’s immediate objectives was to increase the population. So on the one hand government officials advised couples to have large families. And on the other hand they tried to lure the people of the desert hinterland with heaps of money. The officials begged these people to move to the cities. They promised them a comfortable life in houses with plush carpets, air conditioning, soft beds, and running water pouring out at the turn of a tap.

But a sizable number refused these enticements. Instead they sank deeper roots into their chosen environment. Most people will do anything to avoid the constant

annoyance of something like thirst. These nomads, however, entrenched themselves more firmly in the desert, where there is nothing but thirst. The thirst of a land of death where rocks are scorched and crumble into sand. When the sun rises, everything between heaven and earth becomes a pink, steaming crucible. And when the sun goes down, the chill can be deadly. To protect themselves from baking or freezing to death these desert people must rely on their own resources. Why, then, do they voluntarily choose a life of thirst?

In Libya there is a legendary map that is said to have come down from the people's ancestors. On that map is drawn a blue waterway flowing deep beneath the desert. The people call it the Path of God. They say that only those who remain in the desert hinterland know the location of this waterway.

Again Mun-ja had to remind her aunt why she was there. While the older woman went to her room for the money, Mun-ja had another look at the photo of Ok-jo.

Poor girl. It's cruel, isn't it, this burden your mother has left you? You'll need your own camel someday, and you'll have it if you can learn to rely on yourself. That camel will help you understand why I've been so obstinate about leaving you beside a swamp of pain instead of a nice, pleasant riverside. You'll understand I did it out of love.

Her aunt handed her the money. Mun-ja placed it in her bag and turned toward the kitchen to thank the housekeeper. But her aunt, suddenly flustered, stopped her.

"Go. I'll thank her for you."

Perplexed, Mun-ja accepted the shopping bag her aunt had hurriedly stuffed with fruit.

Mun-ja was about to pay the shopkeeper when she noted a look of hesitation on his face.

"Uh, your husband took a dried squid and two bottles of *koryangju* a little while ago."

"Oh. All right. How much do I owe you?"

"Let me see . . . eighteen hundred *wŏn*."

Mun-ja paid and left with her groceries. The yellow glow in the windows of the clustered houses made her feel all the more tired and worn out; she wanted to rest. But this was impossible, because Han-su was there. These days he looked burned out and broken down and his drunken outbursts were more frequent.

Midway up the high, steep hill to her room she rested under an old tree. As always, the tree inspired her. Its trunk was gnarled, but the tree was tall and imposing. Each of its many branches resembled a hand longing to caress the sky. For

those longing hands to have stretched so high, the roots must have groped their way into the earth several times deeper than the height of the tree. When Mun-ja realized that the roots touching her feet never stopped extending their pure will into the cold, solid ground in search of the water of life, she was comforted, and the chilling pain of her existence lessened.

The landlady was waiting, her face poking outside the front gate. Mun-ja's heart dropped. Not again!

"*Ayu*, I'm so annoyed I could die. Look there, young lady!" Her landlady indicated the wall that faced the alley. "He pissed there again. Even the dogs don't do that. I can't believe it, leaving a urine stink near our gate. He might as well be doing it in our face. But what I'm really afraid of is if the man next door finds out—he'll go after him."

"I'm very sorry, ma'am. I really am. I'll wash it off right away."

Mun-ja entered her kitchen, set down her bag and groceries, and filled a basin with water. The landlady was still scowling venomously as she emerged.

As this latest humiliation stabbed Mun-ja in all her weariness, a mild skepticism stirred inside her: What if it's useless to climb the ladder of suffering? What if there's no end to this road I'm on? What if it's all a lie? What if my pain and suffering are linked in a cycle of more pain and suffering? But she kept swabbing. Her arms had long since become as tireless as the camel's legs.

Mun-ja had washed the wall clean and was about to go back inside when her landlady intercepted her.

"Just a moment, young lady." Her tone had softened. "I have a letter for you."

A moment later the woman reappeared with a blue airmail envelope and handed it to Mun-ja. Her face wore an incongruous, fleeting smile that made Mun-ja's heart drop again. She braced herself.

"Um, I know it wasn't six months ago that you moved here, but I hope you'll understand. You see, our boy keeps pestering us for his own room. If you can find yourself another place we'll pay the realtor's fee."

Mun-ja responded, "All right, I understand."

She went inside, picked up Han-su's shabby shoes with the cracked insoles and stood them neatly to one side, then opened the door to her room. He was sound asleep. The empty liquor bottles lay on their sides next to his head. His disheveled hair had grown below his ears, and the collar of his dress shirt was grimy. Looking at him curled up like a shrimp, Mun-ja wondered momentarily if it was only now that she loved him truly.

She remembered the letter she was holding. It was from her brother in America. She hadn't expected it, and she skimmed the contents, telling herself that dinner was her first priority.

While she was loading the dinner table in the kitchen she heard Han-su's voice.

"What's the letter all about?"

"It's from my brother."

"What does it say?"

"He wants me to come to America. His supermarket is doing great and he needs help."

Han-su snorted. "All this time not a peep out of him, and now he asks you to come give him a hand. You write him back and tell him to cut the crap. Wait till I get someone to bankroll me; I'll set up ten of those little supermarkets."

Mun-ja heard the crackle of a match being struck. It probably wasn't the letter that irritated him so much as her failure to tell him if she had brought the money.

Mun-ja left off her dinner preparations and returned to Han-su, who glanced at her with bloodshot eyes before turning away. Mun-ja produced the money from her bag and handed it to him. Instantly he crushed out his cigarette on the corner of a newspaper and rose.

"But dinner's ready."

"Dinner, dinner, dinner! Do you have any idea what time it is? What took you so long, anyway?"

Mun-ja helped him on with his jacket and overcoat. At moments such as these, when she saw his selfish, heartless character, her lips formed a smile but her heart wept.

While he buttoned his coat, Mun-ja went out to the kitchen and placed his shoes toward the door, slightly apart, so he could slip them on easily. The kitchen was steamy from the pot of rice she'd left uncovered after scooping each of them a bowl for their meal. She tasted the bitterness of grief but smiled without a word.

Leaving Mun-ja at the gate, Han-su stomped down the steps to the street. Down the hill he went and soon he was gone from her sight.

Farther and farther he retreated from her field of vision. Nothing else registered at that moment. Already she considered him not so much a man as the light of a spirit receding to a higher plane in order to present her with a greater ordeal. Her entire being floated like a horse's mane, yearning to reach that plane.