

Pak Wan-sǒ | IDENTICAL APARTMENTS

Ding. This short, gentle chime is soft as a timid tap on a xylophone, and yet I'm supposed to hear it in spite of the racket we all make when our after-dinner fun is reaching a climax. It's difficult making out that chime, and I dread having to do it.

To give you an idea of the commotion: it's prime time on the television in my parents' room; my younger brother bangs on the guitar in his room across the way; and farther down the hall my youngest brother listens to an FM station. My children, who are about the same age as my nephews, cry, laugh, and squabble, then chase each other from room to room playing hide-and-seek. Adults, children, and kitchen maid, all doing their own thing, produce a chorus of outcries that bring the commotion to a head, reminding me of a huge pot of motley stew cooked to perfection. And that's precisely when I'm supposed to block out the noise and detect that *ding*. I'm used to it, but still. . . . Lately, my ears are tired of straining, and sometimes I only think I hear the chime. *Yes, that must be the bell.* I go out and open the front gate, but no one's there beneath the light. I close the gate and go back inside, feeling like a fool in the presence of the others, even the teenage kitchen maid.

This place where I live is not "our house," it's "this house." It's my parents' home. But I've been married off and strictly speaking, if I'm to be living with a family, it should be my husband's. My parents knew the man I loved was poor, but they were only too happy to give our marriage their blessing. They opposed the idea of our renting a room, though. The least they could do was board us for a few years, they said, and after we had saved up we could buy a place of our own. We pretended we couldn't refuse. Actually, everyone in my family is nice to us, and there was nothing to complain about. So we moved into the spacious guest room. My older brother and his wife live here too, and I'm sensitive to her situation as an outsider, but we don't feel we have to tiptoe around her. My father is still the man of the house, and I'm his precious only daughter. Like me, Sister-in-Law wants a place for themselves, and devotes herself to saving up what my brother earns. And so we're sisters-in-law, we're partners in guilt, and that's made us buddies.

I have to confess that I've experienced none of the grief or regrets that come

with living with one's parents. Still, it's awful waiting for my husband in the evening. Each of us produces a distinctive chime. Father is slow and dignified, the bell ringing just like his voice. My older brother likes to push down hard on the button, then give the gate a kick. Younger Brother presses the button in a kind of frenzy, the way he plays his guitar, not letting up until someone opens the gate. My youngest brother is hopelessly ignorant of things such as doorbells; he rattles the gate for dear life, exasperating the entire family. "Good grief, here comes the young master!" says Mother. "The joker—get out there before he breaks down the gate!" she tells the maid, who drops what she's doing and dashes out. Lucky her, she's the welcome delegate—for everyone except my husband, that is. Even my sister-in-law remains plopped in front of the television. It's an accomplishment when she ventures as far as the edge of the veranda to greet her husband. The maid knows all, and does well by us.

It's my job, though, to recognize when it's my husband ringing the bell, and to open the gate for him. I'm not exactly sure when I inherited this duty. Maybe when we realized he pressed the button so lightly no one else could hear him; it *does* take acute hearing. Whenever I hear that distinctive, faint *ding*, I feel sorry to the bottom of my heart. My poor husband, cowering at his in-laws' gate, forcing himself to touch the bell ever so lightly. With the long face of a girl holding back tears, I go out, and there he stands. But my tears do not gush forth. For the man I see standing there certainly doesn't look timid. Instead he is pride itself, as hard and cold as tempered steel. So cold it occurs to me his faint touch on the bell is not timid but deliberate, something he does to play tricks on me.

I fell in love with a warm and tender man whose face looked slightly sad. Because I still think of him that way, I always feel a tinge of bashfulness at the gate. But it's not the same for him, and we proceed inside to our room.

Eventually the commotion dies down. Mother has unilaterally decided her son-in-law doesn't like noise. So the first thing she does is turn down the television. Then she goes from room to room saying, "Shhh, your brother-in-law's home," and the guitar and radio fall silent—my two younger brothers are very understanding. Even the children pipe down, and finally my children come into the guest room, which is to say, our room.

In comes the maid with my husband's meal tray. The dinner served to Father and Elder Brother is a smart, appetizing presentation, and my husband's is no different. But Mother follows it in to make sure none of the side dishes has been left out. And then comes the standard apology: "It's not much, but help yourself." "Please," my husband says, "You make me feel like a guest." To which Mother replies, "My son-in-law will always be an honored guest in our home." On occasion she brings out from hiding a bottle of whiskey that has the most beautiful

color: "Now I want you to try some of this." My husband accepts Mother's playing up to him as a matter of course, always proud, sometimes indifferent, never overwhelmed or even fazed by her show of favor.

Mother is that good to us. We're not inconvenienced in any way. Mother and the maid know how to take care of us, and except for letting in my husband in the evening, there's nothing for me to do. But that sole duty of mine is intimidating. I wish I could explain that to my husband. Sometimes I think that the steady growth of our savings is not a reward for my husband's hard work, but compensation for my one onerous chore. I feel I'm about to suffocate beneath the weight of the million-plus *wōn* in that account.

I wish I could appeal to my husband to ease my suffering. I wish he could be more sensitive to what I go through living with my family. But somehow I've soldiered through seven years of suffering, while my ears have been abused to the point of hearing imaginary *dings*, and my fleshy face has become drawn and nervous.

We've saved enough money for a small apartment, assuming we find a good deal, and the children are now of school age. The two of them will be starting school together. They're twins, you see. One conception, one bout of morning sickness, one childbirth, and two sons. Talk about killing two birds with one stone. And thanks to living with my family, child rearing is easily managed: no great strain, no big crises. In my eyes, those dashing boys with their fine features are a pair of jewels I've gotten for free. I couldn't possibly imagine anyone more handsome, and I couldn't be more satisfied that they're twins.

Mother and Father love those children of mine more than their son's children. My sister-in-law is an optimist and doesn't let this worry her; she thinks elderly people usually love their daughters' children more. But from my perspective, it's not a matter of sons' versus daughters' children. It's just that my sons were born so cute and innocent that everyone loves them.

The time has finally come for those boys to enter school. And for us to be independent. I've wanted my cute children to come home from school and bang on the gate of my home. No way do I want a repeat of who's-that-at-the-gate (though I've figured out my boys do it more softly and timidly than my nephews). It's too awful to imagine.

While my family is sorry we'll be leaving, they also encourage us. I don't doubt the sincerity of their sadness; they're all so sweet.

Will it be an apartment or a house? Here's where my sister-in-law and my mother weigh in. Sister-in-law favors an apartment: there's central heating, so no fussing with coal briquettes; we'll have all the amenities, including a modern kitchen, so no need for a maid; just lock and leave when we have to go out; com-

plete independence from our neighbors; you name it. But this independence scares Mother. Cold, uncompromising independence: that's what accounts for the occasional murders that take place in apartments, she declares. By her logic, murders in our country never take place anywhere else. On the other hand, consider what a neighborhood has to offer: the aroma of steamed rice cakes prepared with the neighbors for an offering to the spirits, the sizzle of fried cakes, the sharing of food, the huddling over matters great and small, people who are there to help. My sister-in-law and I look at each other and wink.

I agree with my sister-in-law. I don't like this old neighborhood we live in. The people here practice to perfection the proverb "A good neighbor is better than a distant brother." God only knows why, but they're way too interested in other families' affairs. They're experts at getting as excited as parents whose son has gotten into a first-rate university or high school, or at rushing over with sober faces to commiserate with parents whose children have failed in this respect, or at getting themselves invited to birthday parties for the elderly, where they eat and have fun, and then get all the dirt on these families and proceed to spread it around and speak ill of them.

I know that the moment my husband leaves for work in the morning and the moment he returns in the evening, the neighborhood chatterboxes *tsk-tsk* and sneer at him, asking why a big, strong man is living off his in-laws. They consider me a sneaky opportunist and the direct opposite of my sister-in-law, who is an angel from on high.

Mother isn't aware of my feelings. She assumes we can't afford a house, and this saddens her. She takes to sweet-talking me: who's going to complain if I live off Father for a few more years? Then she glares at my blameless sister-in-law. But Sister-in-Law pairs up with me for apartment hunting, and I find a suitable unit. After we sign the papers, I take Mother there. Surprise, surprise, look how small it is, she says: only eighteen *p'yōng*. We've been deceived, she insists, visibly irritated. "Goodness sakes, we have thirty-seven *p'yōng* of floor space at home, a dozen of us buzzing around, and we still have plenty of room. And you tell me this is eighteen *p'yōng*? Goodness sakes, you young folks have been cheated!" She is beside herself. I reply that *p'yōng* are measured differently now. "Well, that's true," she says. "A *kūn* of meat doesn't feel as heavy as it used to." She looks as if she understands.

As moving day draws near, Mother digs up her old concerns and starts worrying all over again. It seems she can never be pleased with a living arrangement where households are separated by thick concrete walls. And she has no confidence that I'm independent enough to run a separate household. In spite of that, she manages not to invite herself to the new apartment to meddle in our affairs, for neither my husband nor I have begged for her help. This is a matter of pride with her.

Our apartment building is the “stairway” type: you go up a flight of steps, and there, facing each other, are the doors to two apartments. At Mother’s insistence, we introduce ourselves to the people across the way. Although Mother seems to have expected that the woman of that family will be her age, it turns out she’s a young housewife like me. But she has a leg up on me—she and her husband have been on their own for eight years, ever since their marriage.

“She’s just a child.” With these words Mother cajoles the woman to help me learn how to do everything. But I’ve already formed a good impression of the woman myself. Her apartment is cozy and inviting, like something out of a fairytale. I want to decorate our apartment just like hers. I bashfully ask her help with furniture and interior decoration. Not to worry, she says, the shopping arcade on the ground floor has a furniture shop, a Curtain Center, you name it.

“Well, your sister-in-law is right. This apartment living is comfortable.” This from my mother, even.

Our apartment is quickly decorated. Father shoulders the expense, thinking of it as a kind of after-the-fact wedding present. I decide that my apartment will be more tasteful than the neighbor woman’s, but in the end it is similar in furniture layout and even the color of the curtains. My first reaction to her apartment was to feel overpowered, and so my tastes perhaps mimic hers more than I realize. In any case, my sister-in-law is envious and Mother and Father marvel at how pretty our apartment is.

Finally—I’m liberated from the feeble whimper of the bell during the early-evening chaos of our extended family.

In a pretty apron I steam rice and prepare the *panch’an* for my family. Ch’ori’s mom—the woman across the way—is my cooking instructor. She samples the side dishes, tasting the seasoning with a smack of her lips, adding a few drops of vinegar here, a sprinkle of red pepper flakes there. If she praises the taste of something highly enough, I gladly give her a plate of it. And when she returns the plate, it’s never empty. We go grocery shopping together. The supermarket downstairs has all sorts of things. That doesn’t mean she and I *buy* all sorts of things. But who cares? We simply put on our haughty connoisseur faces and buy bean sprouts, tofu, and pike mackerel. I quickly learn how to prepare and serve them up. Mother occasionally visits, and after eating her fill of the results she never fails to thank Ch’ori’s mom.

I get into the routine of housekeeping and people begin to praise my cooking. But sometimes I feel nauseated by what I’m preparing, it’s almost like morning sickness. Not that I’m gorging myself on my cooking, more like I’m sickened by Ch’ori’s mom’s cooking skill. Although I can cook quite well on my own by now, I can’t escape her influence. We might as well be eating the same meals as her family.

It makes me miserable to think that the same dinner awaits her husband as the one I set before mine. And then my husband gets into the act. At regular intervals he says cruel things about my cooking, pushing my misery to the crisis point. If I serve him a bowl of pickled radish, for example, he might take one of the flower-shaped carrot slices floating in the broth in his chopsticks, give me a look of disgust as if he’s caught a fly swimming there, and say, “Will you kindly dispense with the cute cooking school tricks and give me something with some taste to it?”

And I still dread the evening hours when my husband returns. Sure I have a home of my own, but now, instead of a doorbell that chimes there’s a bean-sized peephole in the door. I hate having to squint through the lens in that hole and see my husband standing beneath the twenty-watt fluorescent bulb outside our door. Whether it’s exhaustion after a day’s work or the light from the bulb, his face looks so pale and mean it frightens me. It’s the face of someone who’s hiding a length of cord in his pocket to strangle me with. It’s the apartment murderer that Mother worries about! That’s always my first reaction, but after I’ve jumped back from the door, I realize it’s my husband. Some of that initial fear and disgust remain, though, while I’m opening the door and helping him off with his jacket.

I want to confess my ridiculous fears to my husband and remove that glass bead from the door, but I’m not sure I can do so without hurting his feelings. I’m not good enough with words to make him understand me. I didn’t have to be good with words back in the days when he looked at me with warm and tender eyes. But now I’m forced to realize I need that skill in my relationship with him. And that makes me anxious and fretful. “Honey, I feel out of sorts these days—kind of nervous and at loose ends,” I’ll say. And in the most indifferent tone you can imagine he’ll say, “Huh! You’re neurotic. That’s what we get for being modern.” He has a quick mind and is good at snappy answers. But do snappy answers solve anything?

I ask Ch’ori’s mom about neuroses. I thought she’d ask me about my symptoms, but instead she tells me she’s neurotic too, and so is so-and-so, and such-and-such, and so on down the line until she’s named every wife she knows. She knows a lot of the wives in the building, and just as many types of neurosis. I’ve tagged along on a few of her visits. They’re similar women with similar households. All around us the apartments are the same, as much so as mine and Ch’ori’s mom’s. Sure, there are differences—one apartment might have a washer, someone else might have a piano—but no one enjoys these advantages long enough to indulge in a sense of superiority. Because someone soon copies her.

Western women go on diets to lose weight, but the women in these apartments diet to imitate others who are on diets or simply to be able to look like them. I shudder at this behavior. But in order to buy the washer that Ch’ori’s mom has, I go heavy on the bean sprouts, pike mackerel, and artificial seasonings, using only her

recipes. And Ch'ōri's mom, clearly desperate for a made-in-the-USA electric frypan like the one I received as a housewarming gift from my sister-in-law, cuts her grocery shopping to the bone and stops trying new recipes.

And so I waste day after day as I, Ch'ōri's mom, and women in other apartments try to live better than others, but instead end up resembling one another. And my husband, it seems, has lost seven years of time, tenderness, and warmth for the sake of an eighteen-*p'yōng* apartment.

There are plenty of cunning wives among the neighbors, women who pray for a miracle to deliver them from such vain, tiresome competition. Ch'ōri's mom is one of them. She and I lead a mirror existence. When I look at her I realize how bored, empty, and dispirited I am. But then one day she appears at my door and I find myself searching her face for the mirror image of myself. Her skin shines and her eyes gleam as if she conceals an ecstatic joy deep inside her. How can this be? I go straight into a funk. How would you feel if one day you looked into the mirror and saw a complete stranger instead of the familiar face you always saw, or if you saw a smiling face when you were sure you were frowning? Well, that's how I feel. What's worse, I can't help feeling humiliated when I see her like that.

I must learn the secret of her transfiguration. Tension quickly enters our relationship. I inspect every clue she gives off—the look in her eyes, her gestures, her speech, her smiles. Sly as the court doctors of old who checked the pulse of females not by touching the subject herself but with a thread tied around her wrist, I carefully pull my thread tight and focus my nervous energy on the end I hold.

What I eventually learn is that the woman's joy and tension are cyclical, gradually reaching a climax and then falling off steeply before being reborn. It's a weekly cycle, and Friday evening is the climax.

Friday evening—that's the key to it. Her husband isn't home yet and her son and daughter eat an early dinner and go to Building 9 for their piano lesson with a music school student. I quickly catch the scent of a steamy, thrilling affair.

Friday evening, when she looks ready to burst with joy and nervous anticipation; Saturday, when she's limp as a dishrag; and Sunday, when that gleam returns to her eyes, along with the joy that upsets me so—I have no doubt as to the cause.

And so one Friday evening I attack. I'm sure I'll surprise her in the act. What I find, though, is not an adulterer but a lottery ticket.

Lips parched, one hand clutching the ticket, the other beckoning who knows what, she sits on the floor watching a number wheel on the television. Every time the arrow settles on a number she leans forward as if she'll jump right into the television and become the arrow herself, and then her fleshy bottom pounds back onto the floor. All the while she groans in a strange, breathy way.

I realize immediately the reason for this woman's striking transformation, for

her glow of fullness. It's the possibility of release from these endless identical apartments.

The next day I go to the booth near the top of the steps leading to the supermarket and buy myself a lottery ticket from a woman whose face is full of dark splotches. But while waiting for Friday, I don't find myself undergoing the transformation of Ch'ōri's mom. And she seems as unaffected as I. Now that her secret is out, she's about as joyful as a punctured balloon.

Friday arrives. I worry needlessly, I grow impatient, and of course I feel no joy. I have zero interest in my ticket, but I *am* interested in Ch'ōri's mom's ticket. No chance in hell of my number being drawn, but hers is sure to be a winner. This thought is maddening. Maybe a group of lifers in prison would feel like me if one of them was released without reason.

With the eight million *wōn* riding on that ticket, she can go out and buy herself a hillside plot in a beautiful city out in the country where the air is clean, I tell myself. And she can design her own house. She'll build a cozy home with an attic and a pointed roof. That kind of house should be mine. Ch'ōri and his sister Nani can sit in the den in that attic, listening to the raindrops falling on the roof and reading *A Dog of Flanders*. My boys should be doing that. I *want* them to be doing that. That woman's going to steal it all away from me and give it to *her* children.

She'll plant grass in the yard, grow roses and lilacs, and make a vegetable patch just for Ch'ōri and Nani. She'll plant peas and corn and show the children the miracle of their sprouting. She'll say, "This plant is a dicotyledon and this one's a monocotyledon," and she'll smile the self-indulgent smile of a model mother. That's what I want to do, but that woman's going to steal it all away from me and use it up just like it's hers. I pant with vexation.

Ch'ōri's mom seems to be suffering the same anguish. We look at each other with bloodshot eyes, pretty well played out. One of us, I'm not sure who, comes up with the idea of buying our tickets together. If one of us wins, we'll split the prize half and half. We're only too happy to agree on this.

But the ticket buying soon loses its appeal, and as our interest wanes I suddenly see the light: What am I doing wasting a hundred *wōn* every Sunday when the chances of buying a winning ticket are several million to one? Good thing I'm so cool-headed. Ch'ōri's mom and I finally realize nothing is happening to us that will offer a release from these identical apartments. And so it's back to our boring lives.

On some dull days, I open the curtains and let my eyes wander across to Building 13, then try to calculate the total number of units in the complex. But that only makes my head swim with visions of flickering apartments.

At such times, for some strange reason I find myself disliking my boys. I can no longer stand the fact that they're twins. I get dizzy if I try to tell them apart, and I can't tell who is the older and who is the younger.

When I have to ask them, I feel so miserable I want to die. The boys find this hilarious. They giggle and say, "Mom, I'm older" and "Yeah, I'm younger." I'm skeptical about their quick answers and end up asking something stupid, like, "How do you boys know that?"

The boys giggle even louder and say, "You told us, Mom." That's right, I did. I told them. Otherwise, how could they have told me, all by themselves? But then how did I find out? Well, from the doctor. To make sure they didn't get mixed up, didn't he write down the exact times of birth on gauze tape and stick it to their chests before releasing us from the hospital?

Before long I didn't need the tape anymore. As their mother, I learned to tell them apart before I learned anything else about them. One glance at them playing together or walking toward me, whether up close or at a distance, and I knew. For me this was natural, but others were amazed. Some people pestered me to explain the differences between the boys. But I had risen above explanation; I had a mother's intuition going for me.

But now there are times I can't tell them apart. As my maternal intuition grows hazy, I begin to suspect the boys themselves. The little rascals must have hatched a plot: the younger calls himself the older, and vice versa. My suspicions pain me and leave me with a bad taste. I'm convinced that if the boys keep fooling me, perhaps the day will come when they'll forget who I am. I panic and call them to me; I won't give them any opportunity to trick me. When they appear, I inspect them from every angle so I won't forget how to distinguish them; I hug them tight, I touch them, I smell them. I try to break down their resemblance but I can't get it in my clutches. It toys with me, and I have to throw up my hands and admit defeat.

The effort wears me out and I decide to go easy on myself. So what if I get them mixed up? Two lives originated at the same time in one stomach, and existed side by side there, but out in the world it's decided that one is older and the other is younger just because the first one came out a few minutes earlier. Is there supposed to be some great significance in this?

But if the boys can be interchanged, does this mean that I, their mother, can be interchanged with another I? I shudder at this terrifying possibility; I can never let that happen. I'm swallowed up in chaos. It's a hell of a life when you're the mother of twins!

When I look in the mirror, yikes—what a weary, used-up face. You'd think I've lived out my earthly days. I call Ch'ōri's mom and ask her to help me with a facial of eggs or cucumbers. We take turns doing this. While she pretends to envy my flaw-

less, unlined face, she puts on cold cream, pats my face, rubs around and around with her fingertips, covers my face with a steaming washcloth until the skin is cooked, and after all this rigamarole she mixes up a concoction of eggs, honey, carrot juice, and whatnot and applies it to my face. As it dries it tightens the skin. While she's doing this, I can't laugh or talk. If I do, I'll end up with wrinkles.

Ch'ōri's mom is bored and she begins chattering about the most ridiculous things. Her aim is to make me develop wrinkles first; does she think I don't know this? "You know, girls are more fun than boys. That Nani of ours is such a bright little cutie. Yesterday she says to me, 'Mommy, who was the first diver in the world?' I try to look as if I know, and say, 'Well, I'm not sure, but I think it was an Englishman.' She holds her tummy, giggles, and says, 'Nope, it's Shim Ch'ōng of Korea. They threw her off the boat for a sacrifice, remember?'" That gets Ch'ōri's mom cackling for the longest time. She hopes I'll laugh too. But I don't. Not because of wrinkles, but because the story isn't funny. Comedians and disk jockeys have used that particular routine a hundred times over. These days there's no fresh material. The gagmen have picked up all the good jokes, East and West, past and present, and put every possible spin on them, and they're all used up. It's like chewing something till the sweetness is gone, then spitting out the remains. All you're left with is stale wordplay. Fat chance of being amused when you feel like gagging. It's like some worthless bum has spit out a piece of gum and popped it into your mouth.

Now it's my turn to help Ch'ōri's mom. I do unto her face as she did unto mine. A wife lying on her back with an egg facial in bright daylight looks ugly and pathetic. Like a cheap, synthetic rag.

I feel bored with myself, too, and want to chatter. But I'm in no mood to make her laugh. I'm loath to think of the mouth in that ugly, egg-covered face opening up and showing her teeth and tongue and throat. I dread it like I would goblins appearing in daytime. I'd like to hurt that woman. To do that, I'll have to make her jealous. I'll have to tell her about when my husband and I were dating. I know, it sounds stupid and silly, but that's what I want to do. Actually, I don't know whether I want to tell the woman or whether I want to hear it myself. And I don't know whether it's the woman or me that I want to hurt. But I ramble on anyway.

Before my husband married me he was a tall, strapping man, but whenever I saw him I felt sorry for him. This feeling came from my heart, and not for a moment did I think I was demeaning him.

We usually arranged to meet outside somewhere. Places like bus stops were good, because no one would look at us funny for waiting there: the end of the Hongnŭng line, the Ewha University bus stop, the Midop'a Department Store bus stop. It's not like we had high-class tastes; we weren't too picky for tearooms, or too poor to buy a hot drink. It's just that we fell into this pattern from the start. I got to

know him after he'd finished his military service and returned to school; we ended up in the same graduating class. We preferred to see each other off-campus, and while we had no trouble agreeing on the day and time, it wasn't so easy settling on a place. Neither of us had a favorite tearoom, and we couldn't think of a tearoom whose name and location would stick in our memory. Places came to mind, but we weren't exactly sure how to get there. What would happen if we chose for the all-important second date a place we weren't completely sure about, and something went wrong and we didn't connect? The first thing was to make sure we connected. And so we decided to meet at the S-dong bus stop.

The day arrived, and I went there early. From a far distance I was able to pick him out among a throng of people. He was different from the others. And that differentness was what made me feel sorry for him.

That feeling of pity deepened as I got to know him. I felt sorry for him because he looked nicer and more sincere than others. Other people had the hard, expressionless exterior of shellfish, but he displayed the softest, deepest skin a person could have, warm, gentle skin, and I pitied him for that. While others protected themselves he was vulnerable.

And so I enjoyed waiting anxiously as he drew near. I enjoyed feeling sorry for him, grievously sorry.

When we were together we walked around to various places, and when we got tired we took a bus outside the city. We took these buses anywhere, as long as it wasn't a well-known recreational area, and we got off anywhere we felt like. Once you get out of Seoul the countryside is pretty much the same. There are places that reek of manure, but if you go toward the foothills, the smell is diluted to something savory. And we enjoyed the sweet scent of green things: the emerald grass, wild edibles, and vegetables that filled the green countryside fields. The green of the low, near mountains turning bluer in the distance, the higher mountains far, far off, spreading out like a blue haze, the poplars along the embankments in the paddies, the ancient trees with the magpie nests at the entrance to a village, the gently winding footpaths—it was so delightful to observe these ordinary scenes in his company. But what I enjoyed even more was observing him.

I liked feeling sorry for him as I watched him in a crowd, but I enjoyed watching him even more when we were alone and I didn't have to compare him with anyone else. The fact was, I liked his warmth and gentleness more when I didn't have to feel sorry for him. This was how we grew close.

The first time we kissed, we were on a grassy hill where the paddies ended and the hills began. We were singing and being playful. My sex education had consisted of my mother and father using wild threats to scare me into believing all men were robbers. But I was never on guard against him. Quite the opposite. I played games

of childlike innocence with him, though at sudden moments I wondered apprehensively if he was one of those robbers.

Anyway, he went and hid somewhere, and a while later I suddenly felt a caterpillar crawling from the nape of my neck toward my cheek. It was blood-curdling! I jumped and screamed and carried on. But it wasn't a caterpillar. It was a foxtail he'd made into a mustache, and he'd sneaked up behind me to scare me with it. But unlike the face of a child who's pulled off a prank, his face was bright red and full of bashfulness and his eyes were sorrowful. I knew then that what he really wanted to do was kiss me, and that he was trying to disguise his desire with the foxtail. I felt compassion for a man who knew no more than that about kissing, and I almost burst into tears.

I drew near to him, removed the ridiculous mustache, and kissed his warm, gentle lips. His kiss, when he was finally able to get rid of his shyness and hesitation, was long and exquisite. I liked him; liked him so much it saddened me. He said he loved me, wanted to marry me, and I said yes. If he had said he wanted to die with me, I would have said yes.

My story and Ch'öri's mom's egg facial finish at about the same time. I clean her face with the hot washcloth, leaving it with a lurid red glow, as if the cloth has cooked and removed the outer layer of skin. She slaps some strong-smelling toner on her face, shivers in delight, then produces a lascivious smile. "That creep of mine doesn't have an ounce of tenderness. He's rough like an animal. Yuck!" She produces another huge grin that shows her strong white teeth. That grinning mouth gapes at me like an open wound.

Strangely enough, the vividness of her mouth and the blunt way of comparing "that creep of mine" to an animal leave me with a keen sensation, painful and pleasurable at the same time. A hunch runs through me like a surge of electricity, and I shudder violently.

My life continues to be dreadfully tedious. The identical apartments of my neighbors are dreadful, my inability to tell the twins apart is dreadful, but the worst thing of all is squinting through that bean-sized glass aperture to make sure it's my husband, home from work, who is standing outside the door. It's dreadful to mistake your husband, inhumanly pale and chilling in the light of the twenty-watt bulb, for the Apartment Murderer.

One thing is not dreadful: my hunch that I will have an affair with Ch'öri's mom's "beastly creep." I love that hunch. I love it for colliding violently with my tedious life and for the sparks that collision produces. I love the way that ordinary things change colors in the light of those sparks.

I chafe all over; I simply have to do something. I itch and chafe like a wild animal raised on bland premixed feed that gets a taste of fresh wild food. Have you ever craved something to the roots of your teeth?

One day Ch'öri's mom tells me she's going down to the countryside to visit her family. She says she'll buy some run-of-the-mill fabric for clothes for her parents —“Not a bad trade, eh, for the pepper, sesame seeds, garlic, and other stuff I'll bring back!”—and she asks me to fix something for her family while she's gone. She's told her husband she'll be back the same day, but although her parents don't live that far away, it is the countryside and it is her parents, and if she decides to spend the night there, “the creep” isn't about to kick her out for it.

I play up to her: “Do whatever you want. It's fine by me. Spend the night. Don't worry about the apartment or the meals. I'll take care of it.” I even make my eyes smile.

Everything falls into place. I bustle back and forth between the two apartments feeding the two husbands and the children and seeing them to bed.

When it's late enough, I steal over to the woman's apartment. Ch'öri's dad is fast asleep, and a blue nightlight burns dimly at the head of the bed. Imagine my surprise when I see him wearing the same pajamas I once went out with Ch'öri's mom to buy for my husband. I don't know if it's because of those pajamas or because of the blue nightlight, but his face looks paler and more weary than usual, and it kind of resembles my husband's. I feel compassion, but for whom? I'm not sure. I wonder if I should turn off the nightlight. A voice in my mind asks, *What if . . .* , and I find the fuse box and cut the power. Now it's pitch black.

I lie down beside him. I take his head in my arms. His hair stinks of pomade. My husband fancies the very same brand. Grin and bear it, I tell myself. I search for his lips and smell stale tobacco. He and my husband both smoke like chimneys. He stirs

and tries to push me away. I cling to him even closer. “When did you get back?” he finally mumbles, half asleep, and reluctantly he embraces me.

His lovemaking is nervous, weak, but sadistic. He makes me feel like a public toilet. His skin gives off a repulsive metallic odor. He's like my husband. I don't even feel like I'm being adulterous. I often fantasize about committing adultery while in my husband's embrace, but now that I'm actually doing it, I don't feel that way. No guilt, no pleasure.

When it's over he really conks out. I'm beginning to doubt this is really their apartment. I go to the children's bunk bed and reach out for them. I pass my hand along Nani's braids. It's good to have a son and daughter. All we have are sons, and twins at that.

Our children are fast asleep in their bunk bed as well.

I cover them with the quilts they've kicked aside and listen to their even breathing. My mother says that the happiest, most satisfying part of raising us was putting us to sleep, checking our breathing, and trying to imagine how nice and filial we would turn out to be. I try to be that way, too. But it doesn't work. I have no idea what my boys will end up doing when they grow up, or what kind of relationship they'll have with their mother. I feel emotionally cold and hopeless.

I go in the bathroom and turn on the light. I'm momentarily blinded. I want to see, bright and clear, what an adulteress looks like. I stand before the mirror. There I am. A woman flush with despairing innocence. A woman who looks like she's spoken with no one, consummated no relationship, in all her life.

My mood is one of pure anguish, and yet I feel like a virgin. Here I've played the role of a wife for almost ten years, I have two children, I've just committed adultery, and I feel like a virgin. A virgin—can you imagine?

⁴ *Hunchbacks*