

The hatmaker followed Venerable Kyoch'ŏn to the gate of his house. "Pay me for all the hats I gave you for free over the last seven years. You accepted my gifts without any scruple and now you give up your hat because of a small inconvenience. Isn't that deception? Isn't that betrayal?"

The clan elder disappeared into his house in embarrassment and anger. His entire family came out and tried to appease the hatter, but it was no use. The other townspeople looked on with heavy hearts. Tears ran down the old hatter's cheeks. Nobody could think of anything to say. Then somebody said quietly, "Let's go back. The hat doesn't belong to Kyoch'ŏn."

What that person probably meant was that the old hatter should wear the hat himself. But, wildly sobbing, the old man said, "You're right. This hat belongs to Ch'ilbok. Yes. Ch'ilbok's the rightful owner. Let's go to Ch'ilbok, quickly." Then he led the way, keening loudly, and muttering, "This town's come to an end. It's a town without shame."

He walked the mile to Kim Ch'ilbok's grave weeping, and sobbed even more bitterly when he stood before the grave. He addressed the grave, "Are you having a good rest, Ch'ilbok? Why did you leave in such a hurry? I'm sure you're resting peacefully in Heaven. You never did anyone any harm and were always kind to everyone. You were the only true man in these evil times."

Then he gathered into a heap the fallen leaves and dry straw scattered about the grave and, putting the hat on it, lit the pile before anyone could stop him. The hat burned up with a loud crackling noise.

"Ch'ilbok, I send you this precious hat. It's yours. You won't be ashamed to wear it where you are. It's the last great work of my life. Do you hear me, Ch'ilbok? Please accept it and wear it in your eternal home!"

Long after the hat had turned completely to ashes and the ashes grown cold, the old man continued weeping. Only after nightfall did he come down the hill, his steps uncertain.

After that, he didn't open his shop on market days and never came out of his house. Even when his signboard dangled precariously over the shop's entrance from a broken wire he did nothing about it. Out of pity, his neighbors brought him food, but he just turned to the wall, lying on the floor under his quilt. He died one April day, before it was fully spring. Somehow the news must have reached his daughter, for one day she appeared in town, colorfully attired and accompanied by a new husband. She sold the shop to the first bidder, then went away, never to appear again.

Translated by Sub Ji-moon

19. PAK WANSŎ

Pak Wansŏ was born in Kaep'ung, Kyŏnggi Province, in 1931. Like millions of other Koreans she was bereaved by the loss of family members during the Korean War. For almost twenty years she endured these tragedies, raising five children in the process, before finally giving voice to her experiences in the novel *Namok* (1970, trans. 1995 *The Naked Tree*). Since then she has written profusely, focusing in turn on wartime trauma ("Puch'ŏnim kūnch'ŏ" [1973, trans. 1996 "In the Realm of the Buddha"]), the ideological and territorial division of the Korean peninsula ("Kyŏul nadŭri" [1975, trans. 1993 "Winter Outing"]), the emerging middle-class lifestyle in Seoul ("Talmŭn pang tŭl" [1974, trans. 1997 "Identical Apartments"]), and changing women's roles and self-perceptions ("Chippogi nŭn kŭrŏke kūnnatta" [1978, trans. 1999 "Thus Ended My Days of Watching Over the House"]).

Pak deserves credit for introducing a variety of women's voices to modern Korean fiction. With the possible exception of Pak Kyŏngni, author of the sixteen-volume novel *T'oji* (1969–1994, part 1 trans. 1996 *Land*), she is the first female author to have achieved widespread commercial and critical success in Korea, her engagement with contemporary Korean history and society finding approval in the conservative Korean literary establishment and her empathic, chatty, and often wry narratives winning her a mass readership. She is also one of a handful of Korean writers who are household names not only in Korea but in Korean communities abroad. Such is her stature as a public figure who has personally borne witness to the upheavals of

modern Korean history and who through her writing has performed a cathartic function not only for herself but for an entire generation.

The "Mother's Hitching Post" trilogy (Ömma üi maltuk, 1979, 1980, 1982) concerns several of the themes just enumerated and is centered in a mother-daughter relationship. The story translated here, the second of the three, was first published in *Munhak sasang* and was honored with the fifth Yi Sang Literature Prize in 1981.

MOTHER'S HITCHING POST

Every disaster that has ever befallen my family, no matter how large or small, happened while I was away from home. I know by experience that if I leave home, body and soul, and thoroughly indulge in the delights of the outside world, oblivious to my family, I can expect an accident to be waiting for me when I return.

It was so when I had just weaned my first child. Dizzy with the relief that comes from having made it through the most difficult part of child rearing, I had stayed on after a get-together with friends to play *bwat'u* as if I had all the time in the world. My experience with the card game was limited to occasionally watching friends play before I would hurriedly take my leave, giving the lame excuse of living with parents-in-law and having to take care of my baby. But this time, winning with the proverbial beginner's luck, I had become caught up in the freshly learned merriment and was unaware the afternoon was waning.

"Look at her. I wonder if it's all right for a girl with a mother-in-law at home to stay out late," I heard someone murmur behind me and sobered up at once. Although even in those days I wasn't so naive as to let fear of my mother-in-law keep me from staying out late with friends, whom I met only occasionally, a very strange sensation came over me as I realized I'd never once thought about my home the whole day. I was also flustered to realize that I had let the charms of *bwat'u* thoroughly distract me from the mother's role I'd been so anxiously performing for my firstborn. A chill ran up my spine as it suddenly dawned on me that my fascination with the card game was due to a malevolent trick of fate, not of gambling; I had played right into the hands of destiny.

I knew immediately it was a preposterous thought but the uncanny sensation remained as vivid as a living creature. To shake off the nasty feeling I fussed over my winnings. I tried to cheer myself up with a cunning accounting of them. I told myself that besides having fun enough to lose all track of time, I had earned a small bundle.

I was soon to realize that the uncanny sensation was a premonition. While I was away from home, my toddler turned a kettle of boiling water over on her leg and had to be treated for severe burns in the emergency room. As soon as she saw me, my mother-in-law, who had been crying by the side of my groaning child, jumped up, not to scold me for being away from home all day, but to apologize.

"It happened in the blink of an eye. I got a bit hungry toward evening, so I boiled us some eggs, one for her and one for me. I brought the kettle into the room and was just turning around to get the salt—" She couldn't finish her explanation because her lips puckered like a child's and she burst into tears.

"It's my fault," was all I could stammer.

"Babysitting sure is a thankless job. . . ."

"It's all my fault, I tell you."

"The doctor says the burn won't scar as long as it doesn't get infected. And it won't get infected because she's got my skin. I was just like her when I was little. I spilled a piping hot bowl of soup on my left foot. It was so bad that when they pulled my sock off, my skin came off with it. That was a long, long time ago when soy sauce was the only thing we had to treat burns with. All they did was brush the burn with soy sauce several times but I healed like new. My skin sure deserves taking after. And they have so many good medicines these days. Oh, by the way, they also gave her some shots."

She was trying to make me feel better but I could hardly stand her endless babbling. What good was such talk when my child was suffering? It made me crazy that I couldn't share with my little girl even a feather's worth of the horrible pain she was going through. For the first time in her life, my little girl, a mere child who had come into this world because of me, was experiencing pain. She was too small and too young to know that people are strangers to each other; we're all on our own. Perhaps that's why I kept trying to attach significance to the eeriness I felt after neglecting her the whole day. I thought that uncanny sensation must have been a warning message sent through a mysterious cord invisible but surely existing between my child and me. If only I'd realized it was a warning, she wouldn't have had to suffer. I hated myself for being so dense I hadn't recognized the warning and vowed I'd never be guilty of such stupidity again.

Whether it was because her skin took after my mother-in-law's or because she was given good medicine, my daughter's burn healed without scarring. I had four more children at intervals of two years. Raising five children, I had gone through not just burns but broken bones, bad falls, car accidents, drug poisoning, and countless other accidents that made my heart sink and the sky

pale. And just like the first accident, they all happened when I was away from home. The strange feeling that always seemed to accompany my thorough neglect of my family was always the same as it was the first time but, as is true with everything, I became used to it and began to doubt its potency. If it was truly a premonition or a warning, the sensation should come before an accident, but I realized in retrospect that I felt it almost always *after* an accident happened. Although my children's accidents all occurred when I was away, what about the accidents that had nothing to do with my flesh and blood? Why did my mother-in-law's fall, a boiler explosion, a burglary, and the like have to happen when I was away? The answer was simple: it was the nature of an accident to occur in the absence of the person who was responsible for the safety of the family.

The eerie feeling was probably due more to my total negligence than to any mysterious ties of blood. The temporary neglect of my family and home was due only to my immersion in work or play. It was comforting to think that the eerie feeling was brought on by nothing more than the guilt and embarrassment any housewife who normally holds her family sacred would experience upon realizing she has been neglecting them. Once I had provided a rather sensible, if not reasonable, explanation for a work of supernatural energy assumed to exist between one's inner state of mind and the physical world, the magic of the eerie sensation dulled gradually.

In fact, the sensation was a false alarm more often than not. It was quite understandable, too. Now that all my children were grown up, my mother-in-law long dead, and we had moved into an apartment that seemed to have been built to be unlivable, it became quite natural for me to leave it locked up at every opportunity. There wasn't anyone or anything left at home to be involved in an accident. If an accident were to befall my family, it would occur outside our home rather than inside.

Strangely enough, I sometimes missed that unsettling sensation, and its uncanniness. It was not an ordinary feeling that would come over me every time I left home. I had to leave home in mind and body. After all, isn't it a housewife's lot to worry and wonder about her home even when she's away from it? My own superstition that the thorough neglect of family and home was the cause of accidents made me vigilant when I was away from home, and sometimes I would actually put the superstitious belief into play by telephoning home. Nevertheless, every now and then I would get carried away with the delights of the outside world and completely forget about my home, and each time I would be sobered up by that uncanny sensation. I came to love that feeling. For it cast a lightning flash on the dump of meaningless sediments of the routine that was my life and illuminated the ancient dust of my

household vividly and beautifully. Thanks to the magic of such moments, I was able to return to my routine anew, fresh and breathless like an actress on her first stage. How could it not be exhilarating to have boredom shine like happiness and dust sparkle like gold even if it was only the illusion of an evanescent moment? It was an unexpected blessing of life.

How I loved that uncanny, ominous feeling. When I was young, it was hardly ever wrong. I guess that's why I feel the way I do about my family and home, that I'm their mainstay, their foundation.

What's going to happen to the household without me? I would grumble as I flailed a duster after returning from a trip of only a couple of days. Perhaps I grumbled out of a vain memory of the glory of those days. At such times, it was a big disappointment to find that the only bad things that had happened during my absence were that the shelves had become covered with dust and a couple of dirty socks had been thrown in the corner. That would only make me reiterate my routine threats of what dire things would happen without me. My children would giggle and roll their eyes in mock despair. Of course I also grumbled I couldn't wait until the day I would be free from the worries and boring chores that come with being a housewife. Perhaps I said that a bit more often than the what-will-become-of-the-household line. However, it was only a halfhearted exaggeration, my secret intention being a lifelong reign as mistress of the household.

On that day, I had more fun than I had had in a long time. The snow that began to fall lightly on my way to my friend's farm turned heavy in the afternoon. The big trees at the entrance to the village were a soft blur like in a painting, their limbs misty in minimal lines of nobleness. Every now and then a tree branch would break with a wail under the weight of the snow. The fresh-smelling pine branches burning in the fireplace warmed the room and our hearts as well. In the garden just outside the window a Nanking cherry bloomed with snow flowers. It was heavenly. I never imagined there was such a place so near Seoul, near enough that my friend's husband could easily drive to his office at the center of the city every day with no difficulty. I had been invited here last spring when the cherry trees were in full bloom. I had come with my friends. Our cars packed the lanes in the garden and the orchard and our children's laughter rang through the clouds of blossoms, making the place look like a suburban tourist farm. In my mind that farm and the one I was now visiting were two different places, each of which I liked for a different reason. Because they were different, the sense of distance was also different for me. I felt peaceful and sweetly weary like the faithful followers

of the mystical Chonggamnok faith once they had found refuge at their promised haven on hallowed Kyeryong Mountain.

As I listened to the crackling of the unseasoned wood in the fireplace, I imagined the trees singing. It was still snowing outside and the window looked like a lace curtain swaying in the wind. It made the room seem like it was floating to some faraway place. If the room was moving, it was moving in time, not in space, and I was willing to move with it. The thickly falling snow was erasing not just the footprints of humans but their achievements and was returning the world to primordial times.

My friend poured a red liquid from a moonlike glass jar into a crystal glass. "Try it. It's Nanking cherry wine."

The wine was as beautiful and clear as a ruby.

"I've come to learn there's nothing better than farming. Take the cherries in the garden. I thought they were plain old garden plants, but I was grossly mistaken. They bore so much fruit we got three bushels from as many trees, and that was after our helper's children gorged themselves on them and I gave heaps of them to relatives, friends, and every visitor to show them off. The jar I used to use to make grape wine wouldn't hold them all, so I put them in a huge earthen pot and buried it. You can drink as much as you like."

"So, you think I'm a lush," I quipped.

I kept sipping the lovely, sweet wine without giving it a second thought. I could not stop marveling at the cherry trees, the days between spring and winter, between cherry blossoms and snow blossoms, when they were weighed down by three bushels, no, five bushels of fruit clustered on their short little limbs.

"This farming business, you see—" My friend was about to boast some more about farming.

Recalling the housewarming party she had had during the cherry blossom season, I couldn't help becoming sarcastic. "How can you talk as though you've been farming for years? You're making me green with envy. Wait until you've gone through some bad times. This city slicker who's been stuck in a concrete chicken coop her whole life wouldn't mind hearing some regrets coming from you."

"I've been farming less than a year, but why should the future be any different?"

She was right. Although she and her husband owned the orchard and surrounding farmland, they had other people do the farming, but not as tenant farmers because they did not expect any income from them. All they wanted from the farm was to be able to pick fruit to their heart's content and know

that it was all theirs. They had more than enough income from their business in the city. They had bought the farm in the belief that a change of air would be good for my friend, who had been unexplainably sick for a number of years. So what she meant by farming was gathering the fruit from the few cherry trees in the garden.

I found the whole idea ridiculous. The farm was too extravagant for a simple change of air for a nervous condition or some other minor illness. But I didn't let the thought bother me for long. Drinking always made me different—elated, talkative, and much too ready to laugh. Thoughts stowed away tightly inside me, absurd anxieties, and heartaches would pour out like water from a crystal-clear spring. I didn't care if my audience found them crystal clear or murky, enraptured as I was with the verbal release of the things that had long been pent up inside me. It meant liberation from them. Perhaps that was the way I could experience freedom, which for me was a star hung at the tip of a tree branch. I would climb the tree in vain to pick it. The higher I climbed, the farther away the star became and the farther away became the ground to which I had to return, so that in the end I was left with only a sense of crisis.

Maybe that was why I tried to indulge myself in freedom in such a tasteless manner, like a drunkard. My friend's farming truly deserved endless boasting. The cherry wine was so sweet, clear, and beautiful and its fragrance so pure that it made me giddy and lighthearted the whole day.

My friend's husband came home. The snow had stopped, but his trip through the snow-covered fields, guided only by the headlights of his trusty car, was like the homing of a wild animal. My tipsiness made me shower him with praise. Fortunately, whenever I drank, I could never get beyond being tipsy.

Flustered at my flattery, he offered to drive me home because the road to Seoul was hazardous. My friend hugged him and jumped up and down saying happily, "Would you? I've been wondering how I could dare entrust my precious guest to that rattly old country bus and expect to have a good night's sleep."

"Rattly or not, there's no bus. The drivers all got scared and disappeared some time ago. If your friend isn't going to stay the night, my car is her only way home. So if . . ."

So if they were to get rid of me, their only choice was to drive me was what he wanted to say, I fathomed even in my drunken state, and I promptly stood up to leave.

"I don't want you to fall asleep driving," said my friend, and so she came along. She sat in the front seat beside her husband, and I gladly went to sleep in back.

I had no idea how long the drive took. I struggled awake as they helped me into the elevator. When I opened my purse for my compact, I found a pack of gum on top. "Here, chew this so you won't smell," I seemed to remember my friend saying as she shoved it into my purse. I couldn't remember at what point during our journey she did so, but it showed she was concerned about me returning to my husband and children smelling of alcohol. Then I realized that I'd not even thought about my family until my friend mentioned them. No, not even then. I had forgotten them completely. A familiar feeling crept down my back. It was the most uncanny I had ever experienced. It felt like some reptile was creeping down my spine. The pleasure the day had given me disappeared like a dream. I staggered. Not out of drunkenness. I had already sobered up completely. I counted my years. I thought I couldn't go through another disaster or misfortune. In the order of things, it was my turn to become the disaster for my family. Although in recent years these uncanny feelings had proven to be false alarms more times than not, I didn't have a moment's doubt that one of my family had had an accident; the uncanny feeling that came over me that day was so powerful and vivid. The elevator stopped and the door opened. All of my family were there, each one hale and hearty, but rigid like a statue.

Yes, they were like people immortalized in stone, motionless but looking at me. Their stiff expressions not changing. They seemed not to know me. How could it be like this. It was a disaster. A disaster of my own making. I can't go through with it, I thought.

How lovely the tedious life from which I had run away could suddenly become when I was to be denied re-entry to it. Oozing flattery from every pore, I tried to give them a big smile. But one would have thought I was trying to smile for the first time in my life because my whole face tensed up, making it impossible for me to smile naturally.

"Sorry I'm so late. What a snowstorm. It was really terrible. The buses stopped running. They wanted me to stay overnight but I begged and begged so they drove me home. Them, not their driver. I was so uncomfortable, making my friend's husband drive me. They risked their lives to bring me home. Oh, it's really a horrendous snow fall," I babbled, looking over their shoulders and down the hall of our apartment, which was a far cry from the snowy scene.

"Mom, don't be alarmed."

"Dear, don't be alarmed."

"Something happened while you were away."

"Don't be alarmed, Mom."

Is there anything more alarming than being warned not to be alarmed? But then, that was the only thing I could say to myself to calm my pounding heart. Don't be alarmed. All your family are right in front of you, all in one piece. As long as they were healthy and intact, nothing could scare me. No, never. Even if they were conspiring to deny my very existence, I was not going to be scared.

"Grandma got hurt, Mom."

"She fell in the snow."

"It looks serious."

"She hasn't regained consciousness."

"We've been waiting for you."

"We couldn't wait any longer so we were just leaving for the hospital. Will you come with us?"

Everyone had something to say. There was not even the faintest trace of disapproval, but I felt so ashamed I wanted to hide from them.

"Oh, no. Please go ahead. I'll be along soon. My heart is pounding. And my legs are wobbly," I whimpered, covering my burning face with both hands.

"See, I told you she'd be shocked. We shouldn't have dumped the news on her that way."

"Why not? We had to tell her."

"Okay, okay. I've heard of people hiding bad things that happened to a child from its parents but I've never heard of hiding a parent's accident from a child."

The children argued among themselves. Quietly my husband hustled them out of the apartment, leaving one behind to keep an eye on his traumatized wife. Declining her company, I locked myself in my room and collapsed in a heap on the floor. Not because of trauma but because of my shame and sleepiness. How relieved I was when I realized it wasn't one of my immediate family but my mother on whom the disaster had befallen in my absence. I was embarrassed and ashamed, but my sense of guilt was not enough to keep sleep away. Feigning sorrow to my child who was so eager to offer me moral support, I slipped into sleep, a sleep as sweet as a clandestine affair.

The first thing that surged into my mind like an icy stream after the short but deep sleep was that my mother was as much a family member as my children, that she was as much my flesh and blood as them. Still I was relieved to

have shoved a disaster that could have happened to one of my children onto my mother as if she were a total stranger.

Moreover, I was the only first-of-kin my mother had left. I had five children but she only had me now. People say that though you have ten fingers, there is none that wouldn't hurt if you were to bite it, meaning that one's love for one's children cannot be halved and quartered into smaller pieces like a watermelon. Still, wouldn't a person cherish a finger all the more if it were that person's last one? This thought made me come to my senses.

I thought about my brother, who died during the Korean War. He was well known far and wide among our relatives and neighbors for being a model filial son. A vivid image of him as a young boy popped into my mind. When he, Mother, and I were in the pit of abject poverty, I used to pester Mother for candy money, although she only earned a pittance as a seamstress, and I finally caused her great financial difficulty by breaking the window of the candy shop. My brother took me to the old stone wall on Mount Inwang and beat me, crying all the time he was doing it. As if he were beating me awake now, my sleepiness disappeared completely and for the first time in a truly long time I felt him near me. His tears of that time made me cry even now. The nearer I felt him, the greater became my longing for him.

I could no longer avoid the reality that I was responsible for my mother. I pulled myself together and headed to the hospital.

To my surprise, Mother had regained consciousness; she even smiled faintly when she saw me. The two sons my brother had left in this world were now older than he ever was and had children of their own. With my big family and theirs, my mother's cubicle in the emergency room was impressively crowded. Because I had been thinking of my brother, I was saddened at the simple truth that the dead could not age.

As was appropriate for the first-of-kin, I hurriedly shoved them aside and grabbed Mother's hand. It was the proverbial arrival of the first-of-kin that is said to move even a corpse to tears. Tears welled up in Mother's eyes and streamed down her cheeks. The sorrow that I was the only child left to her crystallized into streams of tears for the two of us.

"How did this happen, Mom?"

"I was looking out the window at Sögi's dad clearing the snow and I thought I could help him, I'm not *that* old, but my first step out in the yard, I just . . ."

Sögi's dad was my brother's eldest son, my mother's grandson, and my nephew. Mother lived with him.

"Help him, my foot. You just wanted to meddle," muttered Sögi's mom.

"You mean all of you were there and let this happen?" I said, blaming my nephew and his wife automatically.

"You know how Grandma has to supervise everything. What could we do?" My nephew promptly sided with his wife.

My mother was long past eighty, and my nephew and his wife were both barely over thirty. It would be an understatement to say it wasn't easy for young people to live with a grandparent, when some people downright refused to live with their parents-in-law. Even so, never was my mother's unwanted presence so dramatically revealed.

I could hear the moaning and groaning of sick people and the agitation of their families coming from every corner of the emergency room.

"So where did you get hurt?"

My nephew's wife lifted the sheet and pointed. Mother's left leg was twisted to the outside and was so swollen it looked like someone else's leg was stitched to her body.

"They should be fixing it soon," Mother murmured as if to comfort us.

"Does it hurt?"

"It hurts so bad I wish I could faint again."

"Oh, Mother!"

A nurse called at that moment, and we all rushed over to the doctor who was with her. The resident in charge of the emergency room, he looked too young and too exhausted. The red hand on the clock on the wall was already past the twelve, and on the X-ray screen the bare bones of my mother's hip and thigh awaited judgment.

"We'll have to admit her and, depending on her progress, we'll operate."

"Excuse me?"

"What I mean is we have to determine if she can endure surgery. There's no possibility of natural healing."

"But she's eighty-six years old. Surgery would be too . . . Oh, my mother wants a cast. It doesn't matter how long it will take. Please put her leg in a cast."

"I'm mentioning surgery because she's too old for the fracture to mend in a cast. To put her leg in a cast at her age is to put her in a coffin. She would develop all kinds of complications and definitely end up dead," the young doctor said coldly.

"She believes she's getting a cast. Er, are you sure a cast won't do?" I implored.

"It's not a patient's job to diagnose or treat."

"So you're saying we don't have any choice."

"That's right. Surgery is the only way."

"Will she be able to walk?"

"If she makes good progress . . ."

"So you can't even guarantee the result of the surgery. This is pure nonsense!" I lifted my voice, hackles raised, but the young doctor was singularly unperturbed. His calm seemed to stem not so much from his medical knowledge as from fatigue.

"You can talk in detail with the doctor in charge tomorrow. In the meantime, you need to take care of her hospital admission."

"If you're not the doctor in charge, how can you be so positive she needs surgery?"

"Because that's practically the only thing today's medicine can do for her."

"Ha! You can't even guarantee the result!"

"I told you it was the only way. I didn't say it was the safe way. Sometimes the only way is risky," said the doctor, his temper finally roused.

"Come on, Auntie. This is a hospital. We've got to do as the doctor says." My two nephews, who had been watching in silence, stepped in.

"But you don't know anything. You don't know!" I shrieked in a blind outburst of emotion that was boiling up in me.

"What don't we know?"

"Your grandma is eighty-six. Do you think she can survive a big operation?"

"What else can we do? Let's get her admitted first. Then we can discuss it with the doctor tomorrow. This is an emergency room, Auntie."

My nephews manhandled me out to the hall as if I were a mobster. Little did we know that those few words we exchanged with the young doctor were to be the most comprehensive discussion we would ever have with Mother's doctors.

As is true of doctors' rounds at any big university hospital, the doctor in charge entered Mom's room with an entourage of residents, interns, and nurses the next morning and acted very dependable and authoritative. Perhaps it's their authoritative manner that makes people refrain from voicing what they want to say. I stood aside deferentially and waited for him to speak. He said several things to the residents that sounded like a foreign language and the next thing I knew he was gone. I hurried after him but all I could do was buttonhole the resident who'd been in the emergency room the previous night. Before I could utter a word, he told me the surgery would take place about three days later and disappeared into another room.

In the next three days, the only information I was able to glean from the doctor by chasing him here and there was that the prognosis was not very

that made her smile so broadly in the face of a serious trial at an age nearer to ninety than to eighty made me unbearably sad.

Our first winter in the house with the purse-sized yard at the top of Hyŏnjŏ-dong, which we managed to buy our first time in Seoul, was harsh. It was brutally cold and once snow began to fall, it kept falling for days like rain during the monsoon. Even our waterman, Mr. Kim, dared not trudge through the deep snow to deliver to us. No water was no big deal for us, however. All we had to do was shovel some of the snow that had accumulated in the yard, on the soy-crock terrace, on the roof, everywhere, and heat it in an iron pot. Water wasn't a serious problem, but fire was.

Every day we had to buy two bundles of thin pieces of firewood. Mother never bought firewood at the neighborhood store but went all the way down to the firewood market near the streetcar terminal, saying that even though they looked alike, the bundles from the market were heavier. The vendor would deliver them if she bought ten bundles at a time, but we must have been unable to afford even that, for every day my mother would bring one or two bundles herself. When the steep alleys of our neighborhood became dangerously slippery with the snow that fell night and day, my brother said he would fetch the wood, but my mother was not one to let her son do such a chore.

"I don't need such trivial shows of filial piety as fetching firewood. You're an only son so you should do far greater deeds. You must study hard so you can be successful and make lots of money. Then we'll be able to buy logs by the cartload at the Ch'ŏngnyangni market to cut and chop into enough firewood to fill the shed. Then we'll be warm all winter."

"That's then. We have to think about now. People will make fun of us if you keep doing it when you have a big, strapping son. It's not the way for a son, either."

"And sending him on good-for-nothing errands is no way for a mother to treat a son who's going to be a great person some day."

Because my mother was so stubborn, there was little my brother could do, even as deeply devoted as he was.

Then one viciously cold day, Mother returned home with cuts and bruises all over because she had slipped and fallen while carrying firewood bundles on her head. The injuries were not serious, although they looked frightful for some time. Her wrist, however, swelled up very large and caused her great pain.

My brother and I lay awake through the night listening to her stifled moans. We felt as if our very pillar of strength had been shaken. The next

morning, my mother did the household chores as usual and was as bright and spirited as ever with no sign of pretending. But try though she might, she could not do her needlework. She asked the old woman who used to bring orders from *kisaeng* to come retrieve the unfinished dresses, apologizing over and over. On seeing my mother's swollen wrist, the woman immediately cited a string of excellent acupuncturists, each and every one known to be the best in the city, but it was obvious that my mother had no thought of listening to her.

"I'll be all right soon. It's already much easier to move today than it was yesterday."

The old woman came back later with a few pods of gardenia seeds and said, "Try a gardenia paste. It does wonders for swelling."

Then she muttered to herself, "But what good will it do if the swelling goes away. She's got to have her bones joined. Mountain marrow is wonderful for joining broken bones, but that woman won't listen to anything that costs money. She's just too stubborn for her own good. When will she realize she has to take care of herself first if she's to take care of those children."

Brother also heard her. He got me out of Mother's earshot and asked me if I knew where the old woman lived. Without telling Mother, we went to that woman's house and Brother asked her what mountain marrow was and where we could find some.

"Your mom didn't send you, did she? I should think not. You certainly are nice kids. You're acting the way good young'uns should. That's why people have children. What's the use of bundles of money if you don't have any kids. Money's just useless," the woman fussed. Then she told us stories about mountain marrow that were outlandish, to say the least, but as fascinating as ancient legends. We had already taken our first step into the world of myth. To us in the throes of despair, without even a needle's eye of hope, myth had swung open its door, beckoning us to become its heroes.

The woman told us that there was only one cave in the whole country that produced mountain marrow and that it was on the ridge of Muak Hill not far from our place in Hyŏnjŏ-dong. She said the grains of marrow were shaped like tiny dice, just a bit bigger than millet and shiny like metal, and that each side of one had to be perfectly square for it to have a medicinal effect. She warned us that even though the vendor always did his best to select good ones, we should double-check them. Mountain marrow was very powerful, she said. One time they were moving the grave of a man who had taken mountain marrow for a broken bone and found the bone rejoined with a cluster of sparkling metal pieces so hard they could not break them free from the body.

It was more than enough to convince us that once swallowed, the mountain marrow would go directly to Mom's broken bone and put it back together.

"Is it expensive?" asked my brother, blushing.

"No, not at all. There's no reason for it to be expensive. It's formed naturally, like earth or sand. The man who's in charge of the cave charges something in the way of a premium, but it's not much. The people who go there are mostly people who can't afford a single prick of acupuncture—though there are plenty who go there after doctors and acupuncturists have failed to cure them."

"Let's go."

My brother and I climbed up Muak Hill. The climb was quite difficult, as the day was extremely cold and deep crusted snow lay everywhere. Still, it was not far from our house and it wasn't as though we had to climb up and down twelve steep hills as in a legendary journey after a miracle drug. So it was a good thing that the road was rough; that way, we felt the catharsis of myth.

The mountain marrow cave that we finally found after asking people again and again for directions was a grotto closed with a door. Although it was daytime, there were candles burning. We could tell at once that the cave was different from others. The walls and the ceiling, covered with tiny metal granules, sparkled, undulating to the dance of the candle flames, creating a mysterious, dreamy world. The master of the cave was a young man clad in a long white cotton coat. If he had been an old man with a white beard, we might have thrown ourselves at his feet and begged him to give us the divine medicine for our mother.

Nonetheless, we deified him. Emaciated and otherworldly, he had a spiritual air about him. My brother was a strapping figure compared with him. Looking up at him, I clung to my brother.

My brother bowed politely and told the man the purpose of our visit. The man went to a small table lit by a pair of candles and began to select some mountain marrow. Confirming what the old woman had said, he told us that not all of the marrow in the cave was medicinal, only the perfectly square cubes that had no blemishes. However, he didn't go so far as to say they would cluster around broken bones to rejoin them.

He selected the marrow in a most peculiar way. He knelt down in front of a table on which marrow was piled and nodding his head slightly as if dozing, picked up a few grains at a time and wrapped them in white paper. Being so entranced in his work made his pale, emaciated face look even more spiritual. He seemed to be doing the selecting with his mind's eye rather than his eyes.

Seeing that my brother was stooped in a reverential bow with his hands clasped together, I quickly did the same.

"I'll give you enough for ten days to begin with," said the man, bundling up the white paper packs. His voice was dry and hollow. "Come over here. It will work better if you pray to the Mountain Spirit."

Beyond the table in a deep corner of the cave, two candles illuminated a painting of the Mountain Spirit enshrined on an altar of mountain marrow. A bowl of water was on the altar and ten-*chōn* and twenty-*chōn* coins were scattered around it.

"Here, bow to the spirit and offer payment if you brought any. Pray to him for healing, like this."

Brother did as he was told. He prostrated himself again and again. Although I loved him dearly, I couldn't help being somewhat reserved and well behaved in my manner toward him, not only because there was a ten-year age gap between us, but also because he had a certain air about him that others found sobering. Clear intelligence and dignity that would never be tainted by stupidity or blinded by cunning superstition were his most prominent characteristics. Those marks of character that set him apart from the lowly brood of our impoverished neighborhood were the mantle I wore with pride.

And that brother of mine was kowtowing again and again to a cheap painting of the Mountain Spirit that even I could tell was the work of an amateur. Oddly enough, that superstitious ritual seemed to make him more dignified rather than degrade him. Maybe when you do something with so much care and heart, contradictory ways do not contradict but harmonize of their own accord. Unbid, I stooped reverentially and watched my brother absorbed in his ritual.

I have no idea if the amount of money my brother dedicated to the Mountain Spirit was enough for the mountain marrow, but his devotion was obviously more than enough to please the marrow man.

"I told you to try ten days to begin with but I can see that she will be hale and hearty in no more than ten. I'm never mistaken. You wait and see. Mountain marrow is a mysterious thing that works spiritually more than physically, and what spirit on earth could remain unmoved by your devotion? Besides, the Mountain Spirit is truly a miracle worker."

Needless to say, my brother's mountain marrow moved Mother deeply. She was much happier than before she got injured and, after reporting the decrease in swelling and pain every day with hourglass precision, on exactly the tenth day she announced she was completely healed.

Still, her wrist didn't look normal. She said the bulging was due to the mountain marrow that had clustered there to join the bones. To prove she

was healed, she resumed her needlework on the tenth day and her quality was as good as ever. She would lift heavy objects just to demonstrate how strong the mountain marrow had made her bone. And of course she resumed her routine of buying one or two bundles of firewood at the Yŏngch'ŏn market and adamantly refused my brother's offer to fetch the wood until the arrival of spring.

"Don't worry, son. If I slip again, I have this hand to break the fall. It's strong as iron," she boasted, flaunting her ugly, misshapen arm.

The meeting between a surgeon and the patient's family immediately before the patient goes into surgery is a heartwarming event in a TV show, a drama, or a movie. For a brief moment, the doctor sheds his armor of authority and shows warmth and compassion for the anxious family. The family is comforted by the feeling that, possibilities of failure notwithstanding, they have made the right choice to entrust their loved one to a fellow human being rather than a robot that doesn't make mistakes. That comfortable feeling makes them play the baby with the doctor and shamelessly beg and plead, and the doctor becomes generous enough to indulge their all-too-human weaknesses, though it is questionable if it is genuine generosity rather than condescension or sentimentalism.

I too hoped to have such a warm, if only brief, encounter with Dr. Hong outside the operating room. I couldn't bear the thought of entrusting him with my mother's ancient, frail, female body, made lifeless by anesthesia. I needed to be comforted by him.

But the operating room of the large medical center was more like an arena than a room. A multitude were operated on every day. Like products on an assembly line, patients were put through one process after another until they entered the operating room for a final processing and, after some time, were sent out. Many people did things to Mother before she entered the operating room, but I didn't feel that a single one of them was the type of person to whom I could pour out my heart.

The operating room was off limits to family, and we could not see anyone who was in charge, much less what was going on inside. Either the surgeons had a permanent residence in the operating room or they had their own private entrance somewhere, for I could not catch a glimpse of any doctor, including Dr. Hong, no matter how long I hung around outside.

I sorely missed the pre-operational ritual and rapport that was only natural to have when entrusting a human life to another person. I believed it was more important than signing the surgical consent form. In the midst of everything, my mother's cheerful innocence as she entered the operating

room was a great comfort for me. It was a wonder she could be so relaxed and free of anxiety when her more than eighty-year-old body was going to undergo a major operation. She was comfortable because she identified the operation with the mountain marrow treatment. For my mother, my brother was still her religion.

The surgery was a large L-shaped area with an entrance at one end and an exit at the other. The exit was no better than the entrance for peeping inside. A great many people, relatives of people undergoing surgery, hovered around the exit. A young mother who had sent her child all alone into the operating room was crying on her husband's shoulder, and an elderly woman was chanting with prayer beads for her grown-up son. A nurse came out every now and then to write some numerals next to names on a roster of patients. The numerals indicated the time the surgery was over and the patient was moved to the recovery room. It took another hour for the patient to be wheeled out. Every time a patient was brought out, people flocked around the gurney to see if it was their loved one.

There were TV scenes in which the door of the operating room swishes open and a doctor emerges and, still swathed in his surgical gown, calmly removes a mask that covers all but his twinkling eyes to reveal a fatigued but content smile peculiar to a person who has successfully accomplished a difficult task, and finally announces "It's all right. The operation was a success," whereupon the patient's family all look up at him adoringly or kowtow, spilling tears of gratitude. Such scenes never took place this side of the exit. There was only the entrance swallowing up the patients and the exit spitting them out, the families looking on helplessly.

The list on the wall had the name, gender, and age of all the patients scheduled for surgery. At eighty-six, my mother was the oldest. The next oldest was fifty-seven, which made having an operation at eighty-six seem all the more risky. Although it was nine in the morning when Mother went into surgery, it was not until after one in the afternoon that her name was listed as having been moved to the recovery room. We heard nothing more for the longest time. Every time the door opened and a patient was carted out, I would rush to the gurney to see if it was her. My eyes dimmed because of all my misgivings, fatigue, and hunger, and I took longer and longer checking each patient.

"God, Auntie. Do you think Grandma had her wrinkles removed?"

I hated my nephews' ability to joke at such a time, but I found their presence comforting nonetheless.

At last my mother was brought out. She muttered something when she recognized us, but we couldn't make it out because she was so feeble and she

didn't have her dentures in. The cotton sheet printed with the hospital's logo was not over her bare shoulders. Indignant about such mistreatment, I pulled up the sheet and tried to cover them, but the IV and drainage tubes made it difficult to cover her properly. Her naked body was shivering under the sheet.

"Cold?"

"No, I just can't keep from shivering."

Excited to hear her speaking lucidly, all the family flocked around and one after another tried to test her.

"Grandma, do you know who I am?"

"You're Sōgi's dad, who else?"

"Grandma, Grandma, what about me?"

"Sōgi's mom."

"And who am I?"

"Kyōnga's dad."

Passing the tests with flying colors, Mother smiled at me proudly. The eerie sensation with which I was so familiar shot through me.

Two robust orderlies wheeled the gurney rapidly down the long corridor and stopped at the elevator. Believing them to be proof the operation was a success, we continued our ridiculous questions as we hurried alongside, but once inside the elevator we began to ignore her.

"God, am I worn out. Tonight I'm going to have a real good sleep for a change."

"My stomach's hurting because I didn't have lunch. How was the beef soup in the hospital restaurant, Brother?"

"Whose turn is it to stay tonight?"

"Don't worry. I'll stay with her. She seems all right now but I expect she'll have a rough time tonight when the anesthesia wears off. All of you go home and get some rest."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. You stay tonight, Auntie, and I'll send Sōgi's mom first thing in the morning to relieve you."

"Grandma's really something, so wiry and tough. Can you imagine someone being so clearheaded after such a big operation, and almost ninety at that!"

"You naughty boys. Would you have been happier if she hadn't come around? She took forever in the recovery room. I was scared something bad had happened. After all, one can't cheat one's age. It took her more than three hours to regain consciousness when it took others less than an hour to come around."

"No, it didn't. I woke up soon enough," Mother butted in, having heard our whispered words. "I woke up and hollered for someone to take me back to my children, but nobody ever paid me any attention. And I was shivering all over. I told them I was dying of cold but it was no use. Although I was in my right mind, my voice just wouldn't come out. It was like something was pulling it back inside. Those folks in there were just heartless."

We winked at each other, our eyes conveying both our amazement and our disdain at the unbecoming toughness of the woman pushing ninety.

Back in her room, everyone became even more garrulous and Mother had to put in a word regardless of what we talked about. Even I became fed up with her toughness and began to ignore her now and then. It was tiresome to try to understand her speech, which was garbled because of the absence of her dentures, and worse still, it was embarrassing in front of my nephews and their wives. I wished she would pretend to be critically ill as was expected of someone who had gone through major surgery. Finally, I hustled them out even though visiting hours hadn't ended.

"Why don't you all go home. You look more worn out than your grandma does. Have a good meal and go to bed early. Besides, Grandma won't go to sleep with all of you around. She thinks she's all right, but who knows what will happen, her being so old. We should be extra careful so she can pull through without a hitch."

Even after they left, Mother kept babbling. She looked like a cow chewing its cud. I became increasingly irked at her inexhaustible strength.

In the evening, Dr. Hong appeared with residents and interns in tow. As it was not time for doctors to make their regular rounds, I assumed he was probably checking on the people on whom he had operated that day. However, it was no better than his regular visits, for he and his entourage left as soon as they arrived. The doctors I saw in the halls were no less hurried. They made rounds like a whirlwind. They swept by cold and fast like a wind that will not stay in one place.

I had prepared the highest words of appreciation to say to Dr. Hong but I couldn't. Such words should be said courteously, with a little hesitant stammer, but there was too little time for me to catch the right moment to do so. I hurried out into the hall after him and, after mumbling my thanks in the tritest, most desultory fashion, asked Mother's prognosis.

"The operation was a success. There's not much to worry about. But because of her age, she needs to be watched very carefully."

I dared not ask another question, overwhelmed as I was with his words, the most I had ever heard him utter, but I was far from satisfied.

Mother kept mumbling. Residents and nurses came and went frequently to check her and the many hoses and tubes that came out of her. They also instructed me how to care for her and to keep a log on her condition throughout the night. I was to encourage her to cough and spit out mucus every now and then, inform the nurses when the IV was running short and when the drainage bag for the incision was full, and keep a record of her urine output.

I tried to ask them all the things I had failed to ask Dr. Hong, but all I could get out of them was that Mother was progressing normally. And not a one of them failed to add that she was extremely old. Old age understandably was not a malady or health problem but an annotation.

Mother refused to cough, pleading a lack of energy, and gave me a fright every time she began to choke on mucus. It was useless to warn her that she would get pneumonia if she didn't cough up the mucus. She just kept mumbling, sounding like dry autumn leaves rustling in a breeze.

"Close your eyes and try to sleep, for god's sake," I blurted out when I could no longer put up with it.

Mother stared at me wide-eyed, her eyes pools of chilling resentment.

"Shall I turn off the light?" I asked shakily.

"No," Mother said, shaking her head.

"I'll cover your eyes. Relax and try to sleep."

I held her hand and, with my other hand, gently covered her eyes. She soon became impatient and brushed my hand away.

"The place that was cut hurts, doesn't it? It will tonight. But it'll be much better tomorrow. Tell me if it hurts too much and I'll ask them to give you something for the pain."

"No, it doesn't hurt a bit. I just can't sleep."

"Then I'll ask them to give you a sleeping pill."

I went to the nurses' station, asked them to give her something, and was told to wait in the room. Soon an intern brought a tiny pill and suggested I keep the room dark. After helping my mother take the pill, I turned off all the lights except for a dim lamp on the wall next to the guest cot. Mother didn't protest this time. Relieved by the knowledge that the pill would soon take effect, I became unbearably sleepy. After making sure there was more than half a bottle of IV to go and the urine bag and drainage bag were less than half full, I lay down on the cot with the intention of dozing for a few minutes.

I had no idea how long I'd been sleeping when I was awakened by a strange stirring. The room was astir with silent restlessness. My mother was beating the air with her hands. But not recklessly beating. She seemed to be working hard at something, beating the air regularly and purposefully. I

jumped up and turned on the lights. Mother squinted for a moment but her hands never stopped.

"What are you doing, Mommy?" I asked, unconsciously speaking in the way I used to when I was a little girl.

"Can't you see? When you do laundry, you've got to put the blouses with the blouses, the panties with the panties, and the socks with the socks. It won't do to bundle everything up together," she said in a strong voice.

"Laundry? You should be sleeping. . . ."

"How can I go to sleep with these things scattered all over the place? You naughty kids."

Screeching in a metallic voice, Mother stared at me. The look in her eyes was so cold it gave me the shivers. I wanted to run for help. She kept her hands busy sorting and folding laundry only she could see. Where did she find such energy after all the fasting and enemas of the previous day and the anesthesia and surgery of today? I was more frightened than amazed. A nurse walked in at that moment.

"My mother is acting strangely. She keeps beating the air. It seems like she's hallucinating."

"Some patients become like that because of the anesthesia. She'll get over it," the nurse said perfunctorily and, after checking Mom's temperature and pulse, left. I followed her out into the hall and begged her to do something to make Mother sleep.

"But she was given a pill already. You asked us to."

"It didn't work. Come to think of it, she's become worse after taking that pill. That must be it. Before she took it, she wasn't hallucinating even though she couldn't sleep. What should we do?"

"I don't think it's because of the pill. But even if it is, it's nothing serious. She was given a tranquilizer clinically proven to have the least side-effects."

"What could be more serious than this? She's out of her mind."

"She'll get better."

"Why don't you forget the tranquilizer and give her a sleeping pill or a shot."

"I can't."

"Why not? It doesn't make sense that a patient can't be helped to sleep in this big medical center where all kinds of operations are done."

"We know much better than you how to take care of patients. Families should cooperate instead of making such unreasonable demands," the nurse said, turning away in a huff. Angry and humiliated, I returned to Mother's room, vowing never to plead with the likes of her again.

It seemed Mother had not finished her laundry. Her hands continued the folding action until she suddenly thrust them out in front of her, palms outward, as if to defend herself. Her eyes, which had been like icy pits, now popped out with fear.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

I ran over to her. She threw her arms around my neck and hung on so tightly I could hardly breathe. Her strength was unbelievable. As I tried to catch my breath, she whispered in my ear in a terror-stricken voice coming from hell, "He's back. My god, he's come again."

Mother stared at the door, a hand still held defensively. I turned around to see who had followed me but there was nobody. My hair stood on end.

"Mom!"

Fear gave me the strength to shake her off. Her face contorted and she stared at the door, her body shaking uncontrollably. She was confronting whomever she saw there with all her body and soul. It suddenly dawned on me that she might be seeing the messenger from the other world come to fetch her. Terror-stricken, I dared not take a step toward the door to go for help. It was only natural the messenger from the other world would lurk at the doorway of this eighty-six-year-old woman. In all likelihood she was probably not only the oldest person to undergo surgery that day but also the oldest patient in the whole medical center. It was useless to whine and fuss if the messenger was that discerning. I had already made up my mind to let him take her. No one would complain that she had not lived out her allotted time. Still it was certainly abominable of Death to drag her away when the blood from her wound had not yet dried. But then Death would not be Death if he did not cause the survivors pain.

We're ready but for god's sake don't you show your ghastly self to her, I begged the messenger. It is us mortals' nature not to welcome death even after we have lived a hundred years. The greatest act of mercy you could do is not revealing yourself until the very last minute. Go away, I beg you. Go away, I implored silently, unable to bear the terror that was gripping Mother. I was also afraid that he might decide to reveal himself to me as well. Instead of going away, he was obviously coming nearer. I could see it in Mother's blazing eyes. My god, I was facing her death alone.

"It's him again. What're you doing? We've got to hide your brother. Hurry!"

"Please, Mom. Don't do this. Where's there a brother for us to hide?"

"Have they already taken him away, then?"

"Please, Mom."

Mother groped all around with her hands and, coming upon her bandaged leg, whispered anxiously, "Ah, here you are, my poor boy. Sit tight. I'll protect you."

Mother tried to hug her leg with her shaky hands. From that moment on, her leg was her son. Shielding her leg with her body, Mother glared at her enemy. It wasn't the messenger from the other world after all.

"Comrade Officer, Comrade, sir. There are just us women here in the house."

The chill in her eyes wavered pitifully, and a groveling smile appeared on her face. I realized what she was seeing in her hallucination. Poor Mother. It would have been much better for her had it been the messenger from the other world.

Mother was trying desperately to hide her leg but of course she couldn't.

"Comrade Officer, there's no one but us women, I tell you. You don't need to search, Comrade Officer."

I watched helplessly as she became even more frantic. As she clung to a strand of hope, beads of sweat popped out on her face, which was distorted with fear and servility. Her hands and emaciated shoulders trembled like tree limbs in the wind.

Poor Mother. God can be so heartless. It would have been better to let her die than make her undergo this horror again.

"Mother, Mother. Don't do this. Please calm down," I cried, shaking her shoulders. With a strength I could not fathom, she thrashed violently and shook me off as easily as one would a dead leaf.

"No. No. You wretched creature. You brute! You brute!"

Backed up against the wall and shaking helplessly, I could only watch her becoming increasingly agitated by the minute. Except for her wounded leg, all of her body was heaving up like raging waves. That made the leg look even more bizarre and alien, anything but part of her body. The leg frightened me. Identifying her leg with her son was contagious.

In her violent writhing, which was punctuated with harsh cries of "No, you brute!" and sly flattery of "Mister Officer," "Comrade Officer," and "Officer, sir," the IV needle was dislodged and blood ran out onto her hospital gown and bed sheet. The sight of the blood upset her even more.

"Stop right there, you brute. You'll have to kill me before I'll let you go in there."

With tears streaming down her face, Mother ground her gums together. There can be nothing more gruesome than to see a toothless person trying to grind her teeth. If only I were dreaming. Mother emitted ghastly shrieks and

pulled at her hair. She pulled out her catheter. I felt faint from the smell of blood. I tried to pull myself together and was just turning to go for help when a nurse ran into the room, obviously reacting to Mother's shrieks. The duty nurse followed her.

It took a lot of people to get all the things reattached to Mother. She was as strong as a wrestler. It took me and two nurses to pin her down so the duty nurse could replace all the tubes and gadgets she had pulled out. This time the nurse put the IV needle in her foot.

"How can things like this happen?" I addressed the head nurse bitterly.

"Don't be upset. This type of reaction is extraordinary but it is certainly not uncommon. She'll be better in no time," the nurse told me soothingly.

They thought my mother's nightmare was the result of her peculiar physical disposition. But then, who could really understand another person's nightmare?

My mother's writhing was desperate and hell-bent. The head nurse had Mother's arms and legs tied and the side rails of the bed put up on both sides.

"I know it's not easy to see one's mother like this, but you have to put up with it. This is the only way to deal with this kind of situation. Try to get some sleep. Otherwise, you'll end up sick, too. Don't worry about your mother, she'll soon be all right."

The nurses left me after making sure the restraints were tied securely. I was so tired I flopped down on the cot without even bothering to remove my shoes. But lo and behold, Mother, who had been growling like a rabid animal, let out a yell and the restraints broke with a crack. She was driven by an inhuman power. She was not uttering incoherent words but chilling shrieks and venomous curses. With a gut-ripping pain, the same inhuman power surged up inside me. I gritted my teeth and dashed to her. This time I wasn't about to ask for help. I would confront her head on. This was nobody's business but our own and we were the only ones who could deal with it.

I threw myself on Mother, practically straddling her. My body convulsed with hers. I knew I could not relent lest she should ride me instead. Still, I could not match her strength, and I had to slap her when she almost overpowered me.

"Calm down, Mom. Calm down."

I slapped her. Startled by the unprecedented immoral action committed by my hand, I slapped her even harder, and at the sight of the swelling hand mark on her face, I slapped her again. I was losing touch with reality. We were in either a nightmare or hell. Mother's strength was terrifying, but her face was even more terrifying. It was not my mother's face. Now I was not fighting with my mother but with the terror inside myself.

I loved my mother and I loved her face. My mother was one of those rare people who became more beautiful with age. Perhaps it had something to do with Buddhism, in which she had become steeped in her old age. Her trust in Buddha had helped her overcome the terrible rancor she harbored about her son's wretched death. As she aged, her face took on the gentle, complacent look of a Buddha. Although she lost her son, she still had his children and their wives and children to love. Loving them but never to the extent of obsession, she was aging happily. Watching my mother age more peacefully and beautifully than anybody I knew, so enchantingly beautifully, I thought she was a *Boddhisatva*.

The human heart is fathomless, but never did I imagine such violent emotion was hidden in my mother's heart. I was shattered to find that it was not goodness, peace, and love but resentment, curses, and hatred that were hidden deep inside her. Even if all other humans were hopeless bundles of sins, my mother could not be so.

She finally began to lose the violent and ruthless battle between two evils. Only then did I cry aloud, rubbing my cheek on the swollen finger marks on her cheek.

I don't know why at that time Mother thought that hilly slope in Hyönjō-dong would be a good hiding place. By then we had long risen above the poverty of that slummy neighborhood and had no reason to envy others, but we were in a predicament truly undeserved and unmanageable. We were helpless. I think it was this sense of helplessness that made my mother turn to the neighborhood that she had made her hitching post the first time she came to Seoul. It was also caused by the peculiar nature of our situation. Although it was only a tiny part in the great tragedy that gripped the nation during the Korean War, our predicament at that time was directly related to the hypocrisy and treacherous nature of that respectable middle-class neighborhood.

It had to do with my brother joining the North Korean Volunteer Army. He had participated in the leftist movement for a brief time soon after Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule. When we were unable to evacuate to the south and were trapped in Seoul under the Red army, he was extremely nervous lest his conversion from communism be revealed. He anxiously tried to learn what other converters in similar situations had done. The dubious information he managed to glean was that they had fled to the south at all costs and those who failed to do so had converted again. Unfortunately, that knowledge only increased his anxiety.

He cursed himself for gullibly trusting in the government that had proclaimed it would defend Seoul to the last, instead of heeding the ominous

roaring of cannons, thus missing the chance to seek refuge elsewhere. He cursed the government leaders for irresponsibly misleading people and then fleeing themselves. Nevertheless, he was not clever enough even to think about converting to the left again. Even though he had courageously converted from the left when he realized his mistake, my brother was the type of person for whom the word *convert* caused moral indignation. If he had thought his choice of communism was a lesser mistake, he would have stuck to his original choice just to be consistent and faithful to himself rather than rectify the wrong by converting.

My brother was like the literati of old, who valued integrity as the highest ideal. His conflict was inevitable, as the literati spirit could not tolerate the true nature of communism, which justified means for its ends. The only reason I was unaffected by the leftist movement that attracted so many young people on the eve of the Korean War was my belief that there had to be something wrong with it to cause a man like my brother to convert from it.

As one who loathed even the thought of converting as a means to survive, he greatly resented the bureaucrats who sweet-talked people into staying in the city, only to sneak out themselves, abandoning those people to the Red army. Day by day his mind was increasingly wracked by resentment, suspicion, anxiety, and loneliness. He was already ill when, betrayed by a neighbor, he was hauled away. There was nothing we could do but watch helplessly. We expected to hear that he was executed on the spot at a people's court, tortured, or even worse, so we were shocked when word came that he had joined the army, the first to volunteer at a large people's rally, and had even encouraged a great many young people to join. We had no way to check if it was true or what kind of trick fate was dealing him.

But then fate was playing tricks on all of us. The neighbor who had harassed us and reported my brother to the authorities now wielded great power under the Red regime. He changed his attitude completely and became a self-appointed patron for us. Although the conscription of young people had not been so severe at the beginning of the Red army occupation, it was now being undertaken at such a pace that there was virtually no family who had not lost a son to the Volunteer Army. Thus my brother's joining the Volunteer Army was no reason for us to deserve special treatment, but we received special benefits in food rations and other things, all because of that neighbor's influence on the People's Committee of our district. We didn't have the presence of mind or the nerve to question whether we should take the benefits. Just trying to make it through a day made us stuporous, and food was unquestionably necessary.

We would stop with a start while greedily gobbling down boiled barley, not because we were eating when others did not even have thin porridge, but because we were eating at the cost of selling a member of our family.

"A sharp stomach makes short devotion, they say, but how can I eat this well and this easily when I got this in exchange for my son, my precious son's life," my mother would lament, dropping her spoon abruptly. But she had no forebodings.

Three months later, when the world changed back to what it had been, we were persecuted by our neighbors. We were reported as being Reds, and members of the young men's association came with clubs and guns and ransacked our house. They broke our furniture and pots and pans and with their clubs they poked my sister-in-law's stomach that was huge with a baby, while our neighbors looked on with the same enjoyment with which they would watch a shaman entertaining spirits. The target of their revenge for the ordeal they had gone through in the three months Seoul was in the hands of North Korea, we could do very little to defend ourselves against their wrath.

"Listen. Who was it that abandoned people in the pit of fire and took to his heels? I will gladly die if you want to kill me for the crime of surviving that fiery pit but just let me die after I look that person in the face and ask of his crime." Sometimes Mother would wail and rail like this, but all she got in return were scornful comments that she was a cold-blooded cheat and that Reds sure were glib talkers.

That was nothing compared with the charge that we were hiding the high-ranking Red who had used and protected us. My mother, my sister-in-law, and I were summoned and interrogated for days, each separately and at different times. The ill treatment my young nephew received at our relative's home during those days left an indelible scar on every member of the family. At that time, the whole world would shudder with revulsion at the mere mention of the word "red."

Then the war reversed again and the army began to retreat. The first thing Mother did was send my brother's wife and son to her parents because her baby was almost due. Needless to say, Mother wanted to remain in Seoul to the last minute in the hope that my brother might come back. It was a reasonable hope, because quite a number of young men ran away from the Volunteer Army and returned home. Mother trusted her son would return, even if it was with the Red army, were he unable to run away from it. She didn't care if he was a Red or not, her only worry being if he was dead or alive.

My brother did return. But his return was more like an omen than a miracle. Even my mother, who had been waiting for his return with so much trust and hope, dared not welcome him on the spot. His hideous appearance

was understandable after a long period of starvation and ragged existence, but he was reduced to a complete wreck from deep inside. His eyes were glazed uneasily, never focusing on anything, and his body was emaciated due to acute insomnia. He became paranoiac and would suffer anxiety attacks countless times a day. He showed no affection for his family, nor did he miss or want to know the whereabouts of his wife and child. There was no way to know what harrowing experiences had wrecked him so completely. Like a timid child left alone at home, he locked himself inside his shell and denied the outside world.

To make matters worse, the war was turning from bad to worse and everyone was leaving Seoul, fleeing southward. This time the government didn't make the mistake it had made in the summer; it warned the people of Seoul of the impending crisis well in advance and helped them to evacuate. En masse the city's residents joined the ranks of refugees, preferring to risk freezing to death than go through another Red occupation.

His mind wracked as it was, my brother was more than eager to leave when it came to the matter of evacuation. He was desperate to leave. The only lucid thought left in his disheveled mind was that he should flee from the Reds. In his wretched condition, it would not have been possible in the first place without that obsession of his to break through the fierce battleground.

My brother did not have an identification card so he could not prove he was a resident of Seoul. Because of the possibility of spies or enemy soldiers hiding among the refugees, ID checks were getting stricter by the day. A young man would not dare step outside his home without proper identification, to say nothing of leaving the city. A person needed guarantees from two people in one's neighborhood to apply for an identification card, otherwise the person would have to go through a police screening. My mother begged and begged our neighbors to help, but no one would vouch for my brother. They would ask why someone should be afraid of being screened if he were not a Red, which was actually a quite reasonable question. When, before the return of my brother, the three grown-ups in our family applied for cards, we had to report to the police numerous times for investigation because none of the neighbors would vouch for us. We were the last in our neighborhood to get cards.

My brother's case was far more complicated, however, for he became petrified and trembled abjectly at the mere mention of the police. He begged us not to take him to the police even if it meant he would not be able to seek refuge or to go out of the house for the rest of his life. But then he would rave, "Let's go. We can't sit here and get stuck again. Let's seek refuge." He was so nervous he drove us nuts. When we proposed that we just set out, card

or no card, our situation being risky whichever course we chose, he glared at us with those glazed eyes of his and accused us of wanting to get him shot.

We were driven up the wall. My brother wanted us to get him a card by whatever means necessary as long as we did not involve him.

"Mother, sell everything. Sell the house and the furniture and buy me that damned card. What do you want to keep these things for?" He nagged Mother like a child until she burst into heart-wrenching tears. He clamored after me with unspeakable demands. "How come you don't get out there and hook up with someone powerful to save your poor brother, huh? What's the good of having a sister?"

These fits of shameful petulance were in truth the last convulsions of his wrecked spirit. The day the government announced its last evacuation order, warning that it was abandoning Seoul and that those still remaining should evacuate in an orderly fashion, the three of us left our house carrying bundles on our heads and backs. We had to show the few neighbors who had wavered to the last minute with false hopes that we too were fleeing lest they accuse us later of being Reds. Besides, we were deathly afraid of being in that house when the Reds returned. Running away from the Reds' Volunteer Army was obviously a far more serious crime than converting and deserved the supreme punishment. In those days, all of our thoughts and deeds were controlled entirely by the question of whether someone was a Red.

We mingled in the throng of refugees surging toward the south like a tidal wave, but we did little more than circle the downtown area several times to keep away from the checkpoints. Having no mind or will of his own, my brother was good for nothing except sensing the whereabouts of the checkpoints and dodging them, which he did with an animal-like instinct. I was so sick of the burden he had become that I was looking for a chance to run away by myself, when Mother suddenly said, "Children, let's go to Hyŏnjŏ-dong."

The moment I heard those words, I became as humble and meek as a prodigal who decided to return home after prolonged straying. Something like joy flickered through my brother's glazed eyes.

"Those shabby, ragged folds of Hyŏnjŏ-dong will be the best place to hide," Mother said calmly, obviously relieved at the thought. Her description of the village as shabby, ragged folds was more nostalgic than derogatory.

"That village must be deserted too. We can hide in any of the empty houses there and go back home when the National Army returns. I've never been so scared of people. Either I'm evil or the world is. But I wouldn't mind coming across one or two people there, they're all so good-natured."

The remembrance of the classic poverty and good-natured neighborliness of the shabby village where we had weathered our first hard years in Seoul glimmered like a key to salvation for us after we had been sneered at and hurr

by our pompous neighbors. We hoped that even my brother's wrecked spirit could be healed there. We climbed up the mountain slope to Hyŏnjŏ-dong, brimming with quiet happiness as if we were returning home, as if we were returning to the arms of the Buddha. Every little alley, familiar and friendly, seemed to welcome us. Being the evening of the last night of the evacuation, the village was completely deserted with no trace of any living thing. At our foot the city lay unlit and deserted in the dusk like an empty expanse of marsh.

Mother sighed softly and murmured, "The Reds are a hopeless lot. How can they say they will rule the Red way when they can't win even the support of the poverty-stricken people here?"

We went around to the houses of several people with whom Mother had kept in touch but of course they were all empty. We chose a house with a well and let ourselves in. Being a humbly built shack, it was easy to unlock. We could have chosen a better house, the whole neighborhood being empty and ready for us to break in, but Mother wanted to take one owned by people she knew so that later she could apologize and thank them.

For the next several days, we never came across anybody and had no way of knowing if the world had changed or not. We had brought staples that would last about a month and there were various grains, pots of kimchi, firewood, and water in the house. We were content. I wondered if it was a life like this that my brother had dreamed of as he ran away all that long distance. I became hopeful that not having the pressure of having to pretend in speech and behavior to impress others might help my brother. Already I could see tiny signs of healing. He indicated, though vaguely, worries about his wife and son, who had gone down south. He wondered if she had given birth at her parents' house. It was the first time he had shown any concern for them since his return, so we became excited at the possibility that he was beginning to open up to the people closest to him.

Overjoyed at finding a perfect shelter, we were blissfully unaware of its vulnerability. We were found one day by a party of soldiers of the People's Army who were wearing white bed sheets for overcoats. Stationed at the Sŏdaemun Penitentiary in the foothills, they had noticed smoke rising morning and evening from a few houses on the upper slopes. They had checked every house from which they had seen smoke rising, only to find invalids and old people who were half dead. But now their luck had changed, they said, greedily eyeing me as I opened the gate for them.

"Sure. Sure. There are just the two of us women here. You don't even need to check." Mother rushed out after me and rambled about things that would have been better left unsaid. They pushed her aside and went inside the house.

"You, too, are a woman, Comrade?" the officer at the head of the troop asked my brother with an icy sneer.

My brother became speechless at the sight of the soldiers and could utter only tortured moans and no coherent words.

"That's not a woman, but an idiot. He's worse than a woman 'cause he's a useless idiot. He's my curse, my deathly curse." Terror, humility, and flattery crossed each other on Mother's face. It was needless for her to emphasize this; my brother was not a whole person in anybody's eyes. He looked even more wretched because of the contrast with the rough, coarse soldiers. He was pale and emaciated, with vacant pits for eyes, and could utter only monosyllabic sounds no one could understand. If only Mother had not emphasized he was an idiot.

After that day, the soldiers took turns coming to our house. One of them was an intelligence officer who seemed to have a hunch about my brother. He would be talking to us good-naturedly about his home and family when out of the blue he would glare at my brother and in a piercing voice say things like "Did you run away from the People's Army, Comrade?" or "Didn't you straggle out of the National Army?" My liver would shrivel up to the size of a pea every time. My brother's pitiful trembling did not get worse or better no matter how often they showed up and the aphasic symptom he acquired the moment he first saw the soldiers did not go away. His idiot act was so flawless that we no longer thought it was an act. Sad and bitter as it was, we had to admit there seemed no chance of his returning to normal.

Nonetheless, the intelligence officer was exceptionally tenacious. He threatened, cajoled, and sometimes begged to learn the truth.

"I can't help being sorry for you, Mother. What happened to cause your only son to become such a mess? He wasn't born like that, was he? If he wasn't born an idiot, he can be cured. The medical advancements in North Korea are world famous. And the poor are given priority. I can send him to any number of good doctors. Just tell me the truth. Tell me when he became like that."

The man called Mom "Mother" and often talked to her like a pampered child, which made her more frightened than when he was icy and ruthless so that she would cringe and ramble helplessly. Her rambling made me nervous. When the man left, she would wink at me and say she was playacting. It was amazing.

There's nothing a person won't do to survive. Every day was a blood-curdling, life-splitting acrobatic act like dancing with a viper.

The sound of cannons loomed near again and the soldiers' eyes became bloodshot. Mother prayed day in and day out that they would leave without

causing any harm. "Please, let them not harm my boy. Please let them not harm my poor boy."

At last the intelligence officer came to say goodbye to us. But his way of saying goodbye was special.

"Comrades, did you think I could be deceived by such sly lots as you? It's not too late to tell the truth. Let's see if you really can't talk," he said, drawing his pistol and taking aim at my brother.

"No, you can't do this to us. No, you bastard!" Mother screamed and threw herself onto his arm. My brother only groaned like a stricken animal. The officer shook Mother off.

"Talk. Or I'll make you talk."

The gun went off. The bullet hit my brother's leg. Still, he merely groaned like an animal.

"All right. You asked for it."

The gun went off again. The same speech and the same sound were repeated over and over again. The officer aimed at the lower part of my brother so he wouldn't die on the spot.

My brother collapsed in a pool of blood and my mother, who had fallen down when the soldier shook her off his arm, let out a blood-curdling scream and fainted.

"I'm not going to kill you right away. I'm going to give you a chance to tell the truth before you die."

But the officer never returned, for in a few days the world changed again.

None of my brother's wounds was fatal, but he died in a few days from loss of blood and lack of proper medical treatment. He remained aphasic till the end. We could never forget all that blood and the unrequited grief of those few days that reached to Heaven. We could not forget those things, but we could hide them. I by meeting a man, falling in love with him, having children, and loving them, and my mother through raising and caring for her grandchildren and trusting in Buddha.

Mother was so exhausted from her exertions that she lay utterly spent for a long time. She was like a sheet of paper, thin, weightless, and breathless, ready to blow away at a whisper of wind. Relatives and friends who visited looked grim and shook their heads at the chance of her recovering. Some of them, thinking she was in a coma, would talk openly about funeral procedures, and some, as if they were already at her funeral, would say not to grieve because she had lived out her allotted life. We did not try to tell them otherwise nor did we resent their insensitivity. Mother showed only slight signs of consciousness, grimacing when the nurses gave her injections or when we fed her one or two spoons of liquid.

A friend came to visit me at the hospital. She took one look at Mother and said straight out, "Have you prepared her shroud?"

"No, why should I prepare such an awful thing in advance?"

"My, my! Then, how about her grave?"

"Grave? Do we have to get it in advance?"

"You haven't done that either, huh? You're really hopeless."

"What do you mean?"

"You're hopeless as a daughter, you dummy. What a pitiful thing to have no son, only a dummy for a daughter."

I didn't mind her calling me hopeless or a dummy, but it made my mother look rather bad and I thought I should do some explaining.

"We have our ancestral burial ground."

"Where is it?"

"You know. Kaep'ung County, near Kaesŏng."

"What's the use of having a burial ground in North Korea?"

"Still."

"Still? That's the most miserable excuse I've ever heard. Next, you'll be trying to get a loan on your land and home in North Korea," chided my sarcastic friend.

"I mean it's a kind of unspoken promise between us. Mother would want to be buried in her ancestral land even if she could never return there in her life. How could I get a burial plot elsewhere when I know only too well that she really pines to return even though she doesn't say it in so many words? Of course, it won't matter after she's dead. It won't be too late to buy some land for her grave when that happens. After all, a grave is just a house one needs only after death."

Mother opened her eyes. They were so clear and bright in her paper-pale face that my friend shrieked and grabbed hold of me.

"Come here," Mother called to me in a clear voice.

"Yes, Mother." I approached her nervously. She grabbed my hand. The warmth and strength of her hand surprised and saddened me.

"Don't bury me in a grave when I die," she said, her voice as calm and irrefutable as usual.

"Ah, you heard us."

"Yes, and I'm glad I did. I've been meaning to tell you. You think of this as my will and you do as I tell you. When I die, do for me as I did for your brother. Don't mind what others say, just do as I tell you. I'm asking you because only you can override what others say."

"Like you did for Brother?"

"Yes, exactly like that. You haven't forgotten, have you?"

"Forgotten? How could I ever forget?"

My mother's hand was as strong and commanding as when she was healthy, as when she pulled me over Nongbawi Hill when I was a little girl and we were moving from her hometown to Seoul the first time.

We buried my brother in a temporary grave at a corner of someone's field on the other side of Muak Hill. The burial was a shabby affair without formality, no better than a burial for a vagrant, but anything better was beyond the ability of us two women stranded in the deserted city.

As soon as Seoul was recovered and the crematorium resumed operations, Mother broached the idea of cremation. My sister-in-law, who had rejoined us by then, maintained that we should move his remains to the public cemetery because the least we could do for her fatherless children was to give them their father's grave. Mother had been meek with her daughter-in-law as if her young widowhood was her fault, but she would not give an inch in that matter. Although my sister-in-law was understandably hurt and disgusted by Mother's hardheartedness in emptying her husband's grave when she was still grieving for him, she eventually obeyed, overwhelmed by Mother's undefinable dignity and grief-stricken determination to carry on.

My brother's flesh became smoke and his bones a fistful of dust. Without a word, we followed Mother to the terminal for buses to Kanghwa Island. On the island, asking directions again and again, Mother found the seashore that overlooked Kaep'ung County in the north across the sea. There, toward the land that lay so near yet was so forbidding, she threw the dust to the wind. Granted, Kaep'ung County was the site of our family's ancestral burial ground, but I didn't think she was doing all this to appease my brother's spirit for not being buried there. There was no trace of a frail, pliant woman who meekly obeyed her destiny with sorrowful acceptance. She looked spirited and daring like a warrior heading into battle. With her fistful of dust cast on the wind, Mother was challenging something far too tremendous for her. The dust and wind were her only weapons to defy the monster called national division that trampled her life and destroyed everything she held precious.

Mother wanted me to repeat what she had done. This time she was going to become the dust on the wind and I had to do what she had done. Thirty years have passed. Is there no other way we can nullify that monster?

"I'm sorry. Please do as I ask. I beg you with all my heart."

Mother looked pathetic. She appeared truly apologetic that she had no other legacy to give me.

Ah, it seems I have to go through it again.

Mother is still fighting.

Translated by Kim Miza and Suzanne Crowder Han

20. O CHŎNGHŬI

O Chŏnghŭi was born in Seoul in 1947 and studied creative writing at Sŏrabŏl College of Arts. If Pak Wansŏ is the first woman writer to have gained widespread critical and commercial success in modern Korea, then O Chŏnghŭi is the author who has put Korean women's literature on the world map, her work drawing comparisons with such writers as Virginia Woolf, Alice Munro, and Joyce Carol Oates.

O was just out of her teens when she burst onto the literary scene with "Wangujŏm yŏin" (trans. 1989 "The Toyshop Woman"), the prize-winning story in a competition for aspiring writers sponsored by a Seoul daily, in 1968. That this highly original story was begun while the author was still in high school suggested the arrival of a gifted literary talent. O has since published some four dozen stories and novellas. A comparatively meager output for a writer whose career spans five decades, it is also an oeuvre of consistently high quality, consisting of provocative, densely textured stories, many of them infused with a restrained intensity that is often unsettling. Not until 1977 did O publish her first collection of fiction, *Pul ŭi kang* (River of fire), notable for the nameless first-person narrator in each of the stories. There followed an especially productive period in which many of her most memorable stories were composed—"Chŏnyŏk ŭi keim" (1979, trans. 1989 "Evening Game"), "Chunggugin kŏri" (1979, trans. 1989 "Chinatown"), "Pyŏlsa" (1981, trans. 1989 "Words of Farewell"), "Tonggyŏng" (1982, trans. 1993 "The Bronze Mirror"), and the story translated here. The first three stories appeared in her second volume of