

Is That So? I'm a Giraffe

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My Arithmetic

Must be nice to be a Martian. Summer that year was so muggy, I couldn't help thinking that way. The vocational high school's summer vacation was longer than I thought, so I wouldn't have been able to stand it if I didn't at least daydream about Mars. It was a long, long summer, and to make matters worse, I was holding down several jobs. The gas station in the afternoon, the convenience store at night. Sure, there were girls at each place, but you'd hardly notice whether they were there or not, and since you hardly noticed whether they were there or not, it was boring all the same. Did the rays of the sun that passed Mercury, Venus, and the stars hardly worth noticing, all the way to Earth compare to the way I felt? Mars—not hot, nice and far.

Going from job to job, it was only natural that all kinds of problems would arise, and that was exactly the case that summer. Since I was only making 1,500 *won* an hour at the gas station and 1,000 *won* at the convenience store, I felt disgruntled all the time. I mean, it started off okay, but I became disgruntled. My boss at the convenience store said that's how you learn about the world, but—even though I couldn't ask him if it was really so bad to earn 2,000 an hour while learning, and if so, how come he paid his own kids so much—I always thought of it as being worth at least 2,000 an hour. Seriously, only a 1,000! Too hot, too stingy Earth.

It was around that time that Coach came to the store one morning. How's it going? Fine. Since he was the one who got me the gig at the convenience store, I had no choice but to say I was fine. You could say he had the corner on all the part-time jobs in the area, so he liked helping the younger guys find jobs and coaching them on this and that. Well, that's convenient, I thought, taking out a Capri Sun and handing it to him. It's on me. I said it with a smile, but as I glanced up at the clock, I thought to myself, I hope you know that's worth 25 minutes of my life. This place I'm working now, the boss is an idiot.... Even today he touched a girl's thigh... I mean... is that okay? Right or wrong, if you touch a girl's thigh, you should at least pay her 10,000 an hour, I thought. Touching isn't wrong. It's just that giving her only a 1,000 is. At least, that's what I thought.

Say, are you good at push-ups? Push-ups? You know, press-ups. I automatically said I was. Saying yes automatically was what you had to do to get a job, that was already the basics of the basics by then. The pay's good. Three thousand an hour... but it's a little hard on your body. Three thousand? Even without hearing the rest, I could feel the words *three thousand an hour* boring straight into my ears. To think that a business with such a high rate of return existed near me. Even just getting the offer, I felt like I had suddenly grown into a member of a highly advanced industrial society. No problem. Do the rays of the sun that reach Mars, after passing Mercury, Venus, and Earth, compare to the way I feel? Whether it's there or not, whether I get it or not, so long, Earth!

That's the reason why I became a pusher. The good thing is that you get to ride the subway for free, your arms get strong, and it doesn't even interfere with your other jobs. In other words, once I'm done here, I head over to the station, take my turn in the ring, and that's it. Clean and easy. The pay is guaranteed since it's through the city, food tastes better because it's good exercise, and you can keep working at the gas station.... Coach's nonstop coaching was reason enough, but more than anything, the reason was the 3,000 *won*. So what you're saying is, you work less and earn more. Is that it? Yeah....I guess you could look at it that way. Coach looked confused, but I thought, that's definitely how it is. That was my arithmetic. Laugh if you want, but there are people in this world who have to do that kind of math to get by. There just are.

I'm sorry.

That's what Dad always said. There he goes again. It was the same every time I said I had to work. I liked hearing it the first time, but now it had lost all meaning. Thirty-five hundred *won* an hour at the age of 45, that was Dad's arithmetic. In any case, he worked in some office, the kind of place you just called The Office. Just once, I went to see him there. It was back when I was in middle school and Mom had sent me to deliver his lunch. Is this right? I kept checking the map Mom had drawn for me and wandering all over the neighboring alleyways. I barely managed to track down Dad's office—anyway, it was just sort of there, one of those types of offices. A dimly lit hallway that looked like it was used by mice, fluorescent lights, paint peeling off the wooden door. It almost made you wonder if you'd stumbled into some foreign country, it was such a “godforsaken” “godforsaken” place. That’s weird, I thought, where did

that word come from? Though we weren't well off or anything, I listened to a lot of Metallica and stuff back then. I used to wonder vaguely, Won't life be kind of like an ESP Flying V (the guitar model used by Metallica)? Yeah, that's how I used to think, but then I opened the door and saw my dad sitting inside with the wan expression of a man who had obediently eaten a packed lunch every single day. Dad, I'm here.

I used to be the playful type, but after that day, oddly enough, I turned into a quiet kid. I didn't realize it at the time, but I guess it was because some sense of my own arithmetic popped up inside me. Looking back on it now, I think that's what happened. It wasn't anything to be happy or sad about, and definitely wasn't anything to feel bitter about. It was just numbers. Instead of running off at the mouth, I started working hard at part-time jobs and saving up like a good kid. Go for the big payoff. My friends sounded like they pitied me, but I knew the drill. In the end, they, too, would have to do the same arithmetic. So what are you gonna do? Me? I dunno, lately I've been thinking maybe something in showbiz.

When it comes to people, everybody has their own arithmetic. And it's a sure thing that one day you'll discover what it is. Of course in this world, there are some lives that need mathematics, but for most, it ends at arithmetic. Like picking and eating a leaf from the highest branch—you painfully add and subtract from your tiny, unchanging pile of money, until one day your life draws to a close, The End. Maybe that day I saw Dad's arithmetic with my own eyes, or saw the answer to the mathematical operation or, who knows, maybe I even inherited it in its entirety. That was pretty much the case. Hand him his lunch, take his arithmetic. Handed him his lunch, took his arithmetic. And

from what I sensed, I turned into someone who never let the words "Dad, can I have some money" cross his lips again.

Seriously, that arithmetic of mine.

I'm sorry. Dad always said that, but I thought, Dad, this is my arithmetic. Installment savings, installment savings, and another savings account. When I thought about my hourly wages of 1,500 *won* and a 1,000 *won* each growing bit by bit in those accounts, life wasn't so hard. I guess you could say, that's how it was for everyone I knew. Even Coach had five accounts of his own. Coach didn't have a dad, but then again, he didn't have a sick grandma at home either. Same, same. His mom worked in a restaurant, and I don't know the rest because he never talked about it. I had heard that Coach was known for being a glue sniffer in middle school but I didn't believe a word of it at the time. Well, everybody has to get by on their own arithmetic. That's why I say,

MY arithmetic.

The Train Is Now Arriving

Passengers should stand behind the yellow line, but you can't. Everyone has to get on the train, but there's no more room. If you don't get on, you'll be late. The body's yellow line may be here, but life's yellow line is inside the train. Which one would you choose?

I'll never forget that moment when the first train arrived. I mean, not a train, but a freakishly huge animal crawled onto the platform and wheezed, paah, haah, then ripped its sides open and spewed out people like it was vomiting. Argh, I moaned involuntarily. It looked like a dam breaking, and I could feel the inside of my head filling with vomit through my eyes, ears, and nose. Hey! If Coach hadn't yelled at me, I might have fallen prey to the beast. When I snapped out of it, I saw that the creature's sides were sucking the pool of vomit back up. It did so with enough force to have generated electricity. Just then, Coach yelled. Push! So, despite myself, with a heave ho, I began shoving in spongy things, hard things, but even now I couldn't tell you what they were. Seriously, how dare I say they were human beings?

As the train left, Coach came up and gave me a firm warning. Keep it together. Yes, sir. I took a deep breath, but my legs shook all the same. Don't think of them as people. Think of them as cargo, or something. Got it? Got it? Got it, I said, just as another train was pulling in, so I braced myself once more. Paah, haah. The train bound for Uijeongbu threw up twice as many people. It was like all of humanity this time.

It went on for another hour. When I came to my senses, I was slumped outside the yellow line, that is, around the Please Stand Back point. And before my eyes—three tiepins, two buttons, and the broken leg of a pair of glasses like the crutch of an injured soldier were lying there. It was horn-rimmed. Collecting the lost objects of mankind, I realized suddenly that my entire body was soaked in sweat. Like I said, must be nice to be a Martian. Seriously, nice.

A week went by. Witness the tragedy of mankind by morning, catnap at noon, then work the gas station and convenience store at night. My body hurt so much, you could say my head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes ached all day, then the next day, my shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes, and knees ached, and then after that, it was the head, shoulders, toes, knees and toes, head, shoulders, knees and ears, nose, ears. This.... Shouldn't it at least pay 30,000 *won* an hour? I felt disgruntled again, but like Coach said, I couldn't quit now, so I gritted my teeth and kept going to work. Maybe that's the secret behind the pyramids. Can't quit now. Maybe, just maybe, that was the slaves' arithmetic.

Oddly enough, once I gritted my teeth and gave it my all, the work began to have a fun of its own. My head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes no longer hurt or ached, and, what the hell, I was having a good time. The early summer mornings were fresh and cool, and Coach was usually smoking a cigarette by the Gaebong Station entrance. We would get free tickets from Eldest Brother (that's what Coach called the ticket booth guy). Then, standing on the platform, we would wait at the very front of the train—as if it were a privilege. If it were the old me, I would have automatically waited at the line near the eighth exit (where I always stood because it was the shortest distance to my house), but that summer I was a pusher. Following Coach's cue, we would bow respectfully to the engineers, and they would usually open the door to the engineer's seat or the conductor's seat for us. How cool was that.

People hail us as legends. I even liked listening to the talks Chief gave in the night duty room—you could call them instructions, or rather, sermons. Age, experience, arm strength, cast-iron work ethic, and mongrel philosophy.... Our leader in every respect, we called him Chief. Since he was in charge of the pushers, his word wasn't just the light and the life, it was sir, yes, sir! Of course, of course, the point stayed the same—we were the backbone of the nation's economy, the Dutch boy (you know, the one who plugged the dike) preventing traffic chaos, not to mention legends of the trade. Sir, yes, sir!

Although we had no intention of playing the Dutch boy for 3,000 *won* an hour, there was one thing the Chief said that we all agreed with. That was the fact that we were “worth a 100 men each”. Best of the best, Chief always preached on and on that those who were not worth-a-100, best-of-the-best were not worthy of the post of pusher at Sindorim Station. He gave us tips on how to push people, how to rescue a person whose foot has gotten caught in the gap, or how many people one train was supposed to hold—and on top of that, he had a knack for catching a person off guard by suddenly saying something like, there's a new cookie called Oh Yes, it's really good, and then asking you, which do you like better, Choco Pie or Oh Yes? Ha, ha, sir, yes, sir!

A lot of things happened. A kid sandwiched in a crowd of adults blacked out. Who in the world would let their kid ride the subway at this time of the day? Chief muttered, all worked up and looking around for the kid's parents, but parents like that weren't the type to be on the train themselves. When the kid opened his eyes in the night duty room, he burst into tears, bawling that he was supposed to be at a math

contest and he was really going to get it from his mom. Chief offered to buy the kid, who said he lived in Bucheon, a Coke and an Oh Yes with his own money. The youngest guy should go get it, he said. I took the thirty minutes of his—Chief's—life that he handed me and answered sharply, yes, sir, which was different from the usual me.

Please.... I'm late. A girl said that to me one day. Just the back or shoulders... I was still having a hard time pushing a woman's body any which way. So I hesitated while two trains went by. She started crying right in front of me; it was too much for me to take. So I called for Coach. A train for Uijeongbu pulled in, but it was so full that even Coach couldn't squeeze her in. In the end, Chief was the one who got her in. Don't look at the train, here, look at me. I saw that he had no problem pushing her on the chest and stuff and shoved her in easily. Listen up. Guys go in easier facing front, and girls facing back. Got it? Why is that? Doesn't matter, it just is.

One time, one of the pushers got swept onto the train. He was shoved by the passengers behind him, and it happened in a flash. It was just something that could happen any time, but the problem was what happened next. One of the passengers picked a fight with him and punched him in the head. The reason was simple. He thought we were all jerks who pushed people. The guy he punched wasn't all that nice either, so the fight got bigger and bigger. It ended in a group beating. Took him three weeks to recover. None of the passengers that ran off were caught, so the guy had to pay for his new front teeth with his own money. After that, we never saw him again.

As for me, I saw a lot of perverts. Or rather, I never actually saw one, but I could tell when one was on the train by a woman's shriek or such. Once, a guy in his forties was caught red-handed, smearing semen on a woman's skirt. How did he have room to move his hands? I thought it was amazing, both trying something like that in there, and managing to catch the guy. There're a lot of them, a whole lot, Coach shook his head. But Coach...no matter how badly they want to do it.... Why would they want to get on that crowded train? I have no idea. Who knows what perverts are thinking? I have this friend who just became a cop. He said that one day he got a report of a thirty year old naked guy eating flowers in a garden. Did you say, flowers? Yup, flowers.

The man who got caught ejaculating turned out to be a habitual offender. His face was pasty and covered in moles, and he had a quiet look about him. Sweat kept dripping along the folds of his fat neck. Looks like the pervert's been to Hawaii or something. Chief kept mocking him, but the guy never raised his head. For no other reason, just that his flowery aloha shirt next to the uniform on the cop standing next to him looked so beautiful, I was struck by a sudden thought. Are there subways in Hawaii, too? Is there a stark naked guy eating flowers in a garden in Hawaii, too? And in Hawaii, are there pushers? Since the earth is round, if you keep on walking, then it's like, Aloha 'Oe.

Maybe in the end all human beings are habitual offenders, I thought. We habitually ride the subway, habitually work, habitually eat meals, habitually make money, habitually have fun, habitually harass others, habitually lie, habitually misunderstand, habitually hang out, habitually converse, habitually hold meetings,

habitually get educated, habitually ache in our head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes, habitually feel lonely, habitually have sex, habitually sleep, and, habitually, die. Seung-il! Put your whole body into it, your whole body! I started pushing people again. With my whole body, habitually.

By August, you could say, I gradually started getting the hang of things. Plus we kept getting more newbies. That was partly fallout from the group beating, and partly because the job was so tough that a lot of guys quit. As a result, I had to keep making my way closer to the center of the trains. There were more and more people, and the more I pushed, the more people poured out. Of course the pay got better, and there were fewer difficulties since everyone saw that I had guts, but that wasn't the real problem. Of course,

the money was good, but

witnessing the suffering of countless people every morning was turning into a big headache. Each time the doors squeaked closed, I would be confronted with someone's face pressed up against the glass. Ever see a balloon like that? I laughed until my stomach hurt at first to see all those squashed cheeks and lips about to burst and the flattened piggy noses, but as the days went on, the laughter went away. Fine, that's all fine, but what I want to hear is the face of humanity as you remember it! If someone from Mars were to interrogate me like that, I would feel pretty awful. When it comes to telling beings from other planets about it, just how sad is this montage of humanity?

The train is now approaching. Paah, haah. That's right, just ride the train, don't even think about the Galaxy Express. If this is what humanity is.

In the end, I got pushed down another space by a newbie, and found myself in charge of platform number eight. 8. Looking down at the number embossed in yellow, I suddenly thought of My Arithmetic. "Why do I have to live this way?" I thought foolishly, but then consoled myself, saying arithmetic is nothing more than numbers. My head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes felt especially heavy that morning. Paah, haah. Then the train came in as usual, the doors slid open, and somebody was bounced off by the pressure of another passenger; when that happened,

there was Dad.

How can I put this? I felt like throwing off all my clothes once work was over and heading for the nearest garden to eat the flowers. D-Dad ... I don't remember whether I actually said that or not. He only had to get to Sinseol-dong Station, but like the first time I had to push a woman, I just, I couldn't push him in, and I pushed a little anyway but he, he wouldn't go in. The train doors closed. Paah, haah. I bent over and put my hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath. Paah, haah. Dad stood there fixing his crooked tie with an awkward look on his face. Then briefly, a moment passed between us, barely long enough to tie a necktie but with a knot so tight it would never come undone, weaving us together. It was a really odd experience. Outside the knot, it was as noisy as could be, but between my dad and I, something resembling the

silence of outer space pooled between us. Within that silence, but beyond the wall that kept us from looking each other in the eye, the announcement streamed out once again.

The train is now arriving.

A Nearby Roof

Sometimes you realize, the earth really is spinning. This was especially true after work, when Coach and I would sit side by side on the bench near the station. When I straightened out my legs and leaned my head back a bit, I could see the clouds drifting past. It made me a little dizzy, but that was also why it made me realize that the earth really was spinning. I liked that feeling. So, I lay down on the bench a lot. I did the same thing the day I saw Dad, too.

Seung-il.... I've got to get on the train this time. When the third train pulled in, Chief saw at once that the current was against us and helped push. Push! Push! Of course, he had no way of knowing that the cargo was my dad, but he was still too rough, pressing his head, ramming his elbows hard into Dad's back, and shoving him in. GET in. GOT in. Barely audible, something like a faint sound seemed to seep out of my dad's chest just then. Paah, haah. But the train closed its chest, trapping the sound deep inside its lungs, and I no longer had any way of finding out what it was. Anyway, it was like an air bubble, a sound or a breath trapped inside the lungs of something like a train at rush hour—it was a stifling and

long, strange summer. Coach, the earth is spinning. Is it? I wanted to say something about my dad, but only totally unexpected words popped out instead. Want a drink? So I drank the cup of Mirinda that Coach bought for me, and that was it. After that, I saw my dad pretty often. We slowly developed a kind of immunity towards each other, but despite that immunity, they were still unhappy encounters. Towards the end of vacation, I sometimes managed to push him into the train right, and on those days, I always bought myself a soda. Those distant clouds drifted along, and I was thirsty.

Summer passed by like that. When vacation ended, my days as a pusher ended as well, and I returned to school. The second semester of school was in total chaos. There're no jobs, the upperclassmen said in unison. Unison or not, everyone knew about the global recession. It didn't matter if you were qualified or not, and the assumption that changing the name of the school to Information Technology High School would raise the employment rate was nothing more than a rumor. The seniors were losing heart, the clouds still drifted by, and I was thirsty. The world was one big train. It had a 180 person capacity, but in truth, 400 people needed to ride—the stifling and

long, strange summer ended, but a long, strange autumn took its place. Just then, September was on the verge of ending. Mom collapsed. She had been working for a long time as a janitor at a shopping center, and she collapsed due to overwork or something. Luckily she was taken to the hospital right away, but they couldn't tell what was wrong with her, and for the time being, they said that her nerves or something were totally shot. Let's keep running tests. That's what he said, the doctor. I guess we'll just keep running tests then. Because that's what he said, the doctor.

When I went into her hospital room, I saw Dad holding Mom's hand. How is she? He stared at me wordlessly instead of answering. It was a dark, dazed look—like an ostrich that's suddenly lost the use of one leg in the middle of a savanna. Actually, I too thought that we had been walking along, no, running along pretty well all that time. Mom's soon to be lost wages, Grandma's continuing medical bills, and Mom's soon to be doctor's bills.... That was when I first realized that Dad's eyes were an ashy gray. I guess you could say they were the same shade of gray as the dead display on a calculator that's run out of batteries. Now, the balance was off. I, too, couldn't get the figures to add up. In the unlit emergency stairwell of the hospital, I called Coach.

My homeroom teacher, who had also worked his way through school, was a pretty understanding guy. Hang in there. I'll take care of things for you. As a result, I started skipping first period and became a pusher again, thanks to him. It was once again up to me to control that tidal wave of humanity, and I saw my dad all the time, floating in there like a strand of seaweed. Oh right, where's my head at? What did Dad do for lunch then? Did he go hungry? I pushed Dad, who was one lunchbox lighter, again and again. Pushed by my hands, my father felt like he was sometimes crouching, sometimes drooping, sometimes flapping in the chilly autumn wind. A children's song suddenly came to mind: In the morning wind, in the cold wind, that wild goose cries then flies away.

Coach never stopped trying to hook me up with this or that part-time gig. Thanks, Coach. So even though my thanks were as stiff as a carved wooden goose, I

actually wanted to cry. The days passed by like new, insignificant figures flickering past on the display of a calculator with a fresh set of batteries. That's how it felt. One day when I looked in the mirror, I saw those ash-colored eyes. Two concentric circles the same shade as Dad's, I was my dad's mathematical operation after all.

3.1415926535897.... And

there was trouble with my boss at the convenience store. He didn't pay me, so I asked him to, and it became clearer and clearer that he was up to something. We were squabbling over it, and I wound up shoving him; even I was surprised to see how far he flew. He made a big stink about it, saying that his back hurt and he was going to press charges, but as always, Coach straightened it out for me. All he did was talk to him briefly in a low voice, and my boss came out and handed me the money. Or rather, he threw it at me. Let's pick it up. If oh-so-calm Coach hadn't been there, I might have gone for one more push. Is it all there? It's a 1,000 *won* short. Hey, it's a 1,000 *won* short! Coach yelled in a loud voice.

Oddly enough, I pushed Dad hard, really hard, that morning. It's embarrassing, but that's the mood I was in. Maybe it's because I had to pick the money up from the floor, one bill after the other, that's probably why. No matter how hard I tried to console myself, my mood didn't get any better. Seung-il. Wait...wait. Hang on a second, Dad's groan pushed its way into my ear, but weirdly enough, I didn't feel a thing. Dad, come home safe.

Home safe, Dad opened up to me that night about this and that. In a word, it came down to arithmetic. The company is doing worse and worse. I'm looking for another job. I'm sorry, we each have to pull some weight for a while. I'm not having a hard time at all, I said. The next morning I ran into my apologetic dad again, but I couldn't push him properly for feeling sorry. Dad, come home safe.

I straightened out my legs and tilted my head back, then watched the clouds drifting by and said, Coach, the earth really is spinning. Oh yeah? When I feel the earth turning like this, it makes me think. What? Well...we really are living on a planet...in outer space. So? So I mean, why are we living like this? Coach was silent for a moment then stood up and said, Let's get a drink. I drew my legs up and lifted my head to stop the earth from spinning, and there was a cup of Mirinda, extra full because he'd pushed the No Ice button, floating before my eyes. On the suspended earth, once again, a train was now approaching. Want to hear something funny?

After the now approaching train left, Coach suddenly threw that question out there. I figured, well, may as well skip second period, too, and wound up staying on the bench that day. His story was more weird than funny. This was back when I was sniffing glue all the time. As usual I thought I was as high as I was going to get, when suddenly I was floating over the roof. The funny thing was that I could see myself down below with my head shoved in the bag, and the me that was watching this was giving off a strange light. I automatically thought, am I dead now? It was so scary. I looked around, and there was another guy floating like me way over by Oryu-dong. His name was Jinho, and he used to hang out there all the time, sniffing glue. So of course I

thought, is he dead, too? Then, how long did it take? I came to and sobered up. Or rather, I came back to life, is what I thought then. I breathed a sigh of relief, but then the craziest thing happened that afternoon. Jinho came to see me. He asked if I was sniffing glue the night before. So I said I was. Then he asked if I saw him floating in the air, and said that he had seen me. I was so shocked.

Anyway after that, I became a totally different person. I quit sniffing glue, though I don't really know why. I mean, what if I left my body at any time, and went floating over a nearby roof? So I thought, maybe there's no other way but to live life to the fullest. A nearby roof? Yeah,

a nearby roof.

Is That So? I'm A Giraffe

Must be nice to be a Venusian. Winter that year was so cold, I couldn't help thinking that way. The vocational high school's winter vacation was harsher than I thought, and I wouldn't have been able to stand it if I didn't at least daydream about Venus. All winter long, I was still working odd jobs. From the early morning subway station to the late night kitchen of the barbecue joint to the paper route of three apartment complexes at the crack of dawn. Paah, haah. The puff of my breath and the sweat beneath my clothes. Looking back, it felt like I was looking down at myself from a nearby roof. As if from their point of view, the Venusians.

The early morning subway was like the Galaxy Express. Are you comfortable with saying that? Even if I were grilled by someone from Venus, I would still be able to say that. The dawn was vast and dark, and the biting air was always harsh. Just as it says in the *Thousand Character Classic*, “The universe (宇宙) is vast (洪) and wild (荒).” And me, I was alone. Everyone is sleeping, everyone is safe, I always thought to myself, swaying in the darkness of the rails past Guil and Guro to Sindorim. Inch by inch, the train swayed along, and inch by inch, so did my heart. Life, the world, was always in sway.

Not one of us was safe and sound. Coach quit working part-time and got a job selling apartment shares on the sly, and in a month he was a changed person. He got a car, even if it was a used one, and spent more money than before. I bumped into him once on the street, but I only caught a glimpse of the Coach I used to know. Looking safe and sound isn’t the same as being safe and sound, after all. Chief was the same as ever, but he wasn’t safe and sound, either. Rumor was that he was hit by a marriage scam, and afterward he didn’t show up for work for ten days, then suddenly he was back. He didn’t say anything, and neither did we. People have to learn. He would say that out of the blue, and I would respond, clipping my words, yes, sir! He would say it again, then suddenly ask me, have you tried the new cookie called Chic Choc? Which do you like better, Oh Yes or Chic Choc, he would ask—sir, yes, sir! Then

it happened one day that winter.

My dad disappeared.

He really was gone. He had shown no signs of leaving, and I had no way of guessing. At first I thought there was an accident and searched everywhere for him, but there was no trace of an accident anywhere. Can you tell us his last known whereabouts? I was the last one to see Dad, so of course I had something to say. I saw him that morning in the subway station. In the subway station? Yes, he was on his way to work and I was working part-time there. We ran into each other now and then, and that day as well I helped push him onto the train like I always did. Was there anything different about him? Hmm.... Come to think of it, he said, "Wait, I'll take the next one," and got off the train at once. He'd never done that before? No, I don't think so. So what did you do? I just thought he was tired. So I put him on the next train. He didn't resist? No, he didn't seem to.

And that, was the last of Dad. He didn't show up at work, and he didn't come home. He was, literally, missing. The police tried to comfort me, saying there were a lot of people like him nowadays, but what's the use of knowing there were lots of people like my dad? My memory from then on...is all mixed up. I got the two months of paychecks from Dad's company that they had been withholding, which wasn't an easy thing to do, and I prepared all the documents to send Grandma to an old folk's home, which was also a really complicated and difficult thing to do, went back and forth between the police station and the hospital, and went to work as usual, as I had to. Sometimes, when I put my tired body on the subway at dawn, I felt like someone was shoving me into the darkness. Don't push. Stop pushing, I said! Why is the world full of

pushers? Why are there only “pushers” in this world and no “pullers”? And, why is this train,

life, the world, always swaying? In that way

the swaying winter passed, and spring came. That spring was enough to make both the Venusians and Martians jealous. Dad didn’t come home, but Mom miraculously recovered consciousness. I cried with joy, not so much because she had recovered, but because she wouldn’t have to stay in the hospital anymore. Well, with as sad a reason as that, who wouldn’t cry? Now she just needs physical therapy. That’s what the doctor said. So she just needs physical therapy. Because that’s what the doctor said.

That’s how our family started breathing again. Because even though Dad had disappeared, we didn’t have the burden of Grandma, and Mom was paying her own medical bills. If you were watching us from a neighboring roof, it probably would have looked a lot like a small shoot sprouting out of a lawn. We were, alive. Far from safe and sound, but how great of a life’s blessing was it that I could still do similar arithmetic? Before it disappears, before it disappears, I mean.

How perfect was that spring day? After finishing work, I dozed off on a station bench and fell into a deep, sound sleep. Then I opened my eyes. I was thirsty. I drank my usual cup of Mirinda, and felt the rays of the spring sun prick my skin like the carbonation in the soda. The sun’s rays, which were naturally No Ice, held that much

more warmth within them. Aah. I straightened my legs and tilted my head back as if stretching. The clouds were still drifting and the earth was spinning, and when I lifted my head, I spotted a strange face floating near the platform roof on the other side. No way, it can't be,

a giraffe. It really was a giraffe. The giraffe was smartly dressed in a suit, and it was slowly strolling here and there along the platform. The station wasn't busy before noon, but no matter how few people there were, no one was paying any attention and they were acting like it was no big deal. I kept a close eye on the giraffe, thinking, come on, shouldn't at least one person be alarmed by this? Bobbing its head, the giraffe walked to a bench near the corner and stopped. Then, it SAT. And I have to say it that way because it was such a sweeping, disjointed movement. Oddly enough in that moment, it occurred to me that the giraffe was my dad. I don't know why, but I was sure of it. I was already running through the station. Before he disappears, before he disappears.

Luckily, the giraffe was sitting completely still. I hesitantly made my way over to it, then carefully and hesitantly sat next to it. Once I was sitting—I realized how tall the giraffe was, even when it was sitting, and on the whole it seemed gentle and indifferent. The giraffe didn't even look my way, but I was crying. Strangely enough, the tears wouldn't stop coming. Dad.... I pulled out the word that was in my heart, and placed my hand on the giraffe's knee. Through my trembling palm, I could feel the texture of the suit that only someone who had pushed it before with his hands would

remember. The shadow of the clouds zoomed by. The giraffe didn't react. Dad, Dad, it's you, right?

Please tell me what happened. I shook the giraffe's knee, but in the end gave up on getting a response and talked instead about how the family was doing. News about Grandma and Mom's recovery, and how I could learn how to do real estate, and how one of the older guys was trying to get me into the trade, an opportunity, how there's an opportunity. People say the economy is supposed to get better, Moody's or whatever upgraded our credit ratings, so things have gotten better. So come home. You don't have to worry anymore. The shadow of the clouds zoomed past again. Dad, then just tell me one thing, okay? It's you, right? Just tell me that.

The indifferent, but ash-colored, eyes turned to look at me vacantly. The giraffe lay its forefoot over my hand and, slowly, spoke.

Is that so? I'm a giraffe.