To Believe In Love

By Kwon Yeo-sun

Translated by Charles La Shure

Becoming a regular at a bar in your neighborhood might be a disaster as far as everyday life is concerned, but it is a boundless blessing when it comes to memories.

It was late one evening this past February. Even I was surprised that I had dropped by this bar alone. I didn’t enjoy soju or makgeolli, and this didn’t seem like the kind of place to sell wine or beer. Yet I opened the door, went inside, took a seat, and ordered a drink. I was served some kimchi and seasoned greens before the bar food I had ordered came out. I got the feeling that I had come to the right place, or rather that I had been hooked well and good. The kimchi and greens alone were more than enough for me to finish off half a bottle of liquor. From that time on I was a regular at that bar, dropping by two or three times a week.

As I drink alone—mung bean pancakes and makgeolli, or stew and soju, with some seasoned greens and kimchi—the thoughts that come to mind are trivial bygones, such as, That’s right, that’s what she said then, or, I wonder why she did that. The moment I enter that bar I am free of any uncertainty about the future or urgent problems that require my immediate attention. It has become a place that simply whispers to me: Memory... memory. As I drink slowly, images from my life flash before me like slides, and within my memories I lead a clueless life, like one who does not know his right from his left. Though it is really night, here I live in the midday of my memories. The
one for whom I wait now beneath that scorching sun is a woman, one I adore in secret, like a favorite bar you keep to yourself, but who would now probably think of me only as a friend and has long since forgotten me. It is here I learn that indulging in my memories shows that I am waiting, and the memories themselves are a way of waiting for someone who is not coming.

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There are times when losing love feels as hopeless as losing everything. Not all human beings experience this. There will be those who get over it easily and those who grow old without ever knowing that there ever was such a thing. On rare occasions—though I dread to even imagine such a thing—there will be those who experience nothing but this until the day they die. It’s impossible to say which life is better. What is possible to say, though, is merely that I had such an experience three years ago. At the age of thirty-five, it is nothing to be proud of, or anything to keep secret. I once believed in love, and I suffered as much as I believed. When I think back on it now, it feels absurd to admit that I once believed in love.

Love and believing, they are quite a difficult combination. Even if we set aside hope, it is hard enough to handle just one of these two, faith and love, and yet I have linked them together as predicate and object. It would be as bewilderingly vague and abstract to say that I had once loved faith. Such a timid and cautious person as I, so stingy with my emotions, once believed in something? Isn’t that as pitiful and ridiculous as a teacup puppy daring to take on a dragon?

There are times in life when something that seemed so far out of reach unexpectedly appears to be easily within reach. I was merely caught in one such
moment. Even more amazing is that there is no guarantee that these things might not happen again in the future. Yet that doesn’t mean we can prepare for them as we might pack an umbrella or bring along some medicine. This is because this strange experience of believing in love is a personal experience that does not follow the rule of “an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure,” an experience that barges in on us like a door suddenly swinging open. It is a pain against which we are helpless and must suffer in full.

But there is something even more amazing. And that is that I once swung open the door to someone’s life, left her with this pain, and then quietly slipped out again. At the time I had no idea what I had done. Yet that does not make my sin any less serious. Because I didn’t know, my sin is doubled by the addition of my ignorance. The sin of not knowing her love, a sin for which the soles of my feet should be beaten.

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As far as I remember, she wasn’t bad-looking but she wasn’t unattractive. This is just the way I talk, so clumsily and stingily. It isn’t easy for me to say that someone is beautiful or attractive. The moment I say that someone is beautiful or attractive, I grow uneasy, worried that some tiny part of my description might not fit that person. So I am more comfortable if, instead of saying that someone is beautiful or attractive, I use a sloppy double negative like a footnote, saying that it isn’t that they are not beautiful or it isn’t that they are unattractive.

But there is one thing I can say for certain about her—that although my first impression of her was plain, the groove running from the tip of her nose to her upper lip is so straight that it looks as if it were carved, and it captures the eye like a target. That
people then concentrate on the movements of her upper lip—in other words, on what she says—might have given her numerous advantages that a vaguely pretty face would not have had. She was of medium height and slender build. Like her figure, her personality left no aftertaste at all but was as refreshing as peppermint. She wasn't dim-witted or lazy. That isn't to say that she came off as being sharp, only that she was gracefully shrewd and clever, like an antelope ewe.

After thinking this much about her I was momentarily bewildered. I thought maybe the alcohol was making me too generous toward her. That might be true. I knew that she was just as clumsy and timid a person as I. I also knew that hers was a stingy character, one that would choose a shred of pride over the earnestness of overflowing emotions. But what can I say? The way she has existed in my mind since the last time I saw her brings to mind the silhouette of a ceramic jar, always elegant yet lonely no matter where it's placed, no matter what it holds. That might be because of the curious story she told me back then. It is a story of when I saw her again for the first time in three years, a story of the time when my heart was broken by another woman three years ago. It is also a story that involves a three-story building, so the law of threes seems to hold.

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As soon as we met, she said that we had to walk about fifteen minutes to the bar where she had reserved a table.

“That’s okay, isn’t it?”

I said that of course it was. She had no makeup on, and her complexion was dark and her cheeks were slightly swollen, making her look like she came from Southeast
Asia. She wore a hooded jacket and sneakers, and her quick stride fit her outfit. She turned toward me when we stopped briefly at a crosswalk.

"My eldest aunt died last week."

I said, Oh, is that so? but she laughed dryly, a short gust of breath escaping from her closed lips. I thought it was strange that she would say an elder relative had died and then laugh like that. When the light changed, she stepped out into the crosswalk, mumbling as if to herself. I couldn't hear her clearly, but it sounds like she said something was odd, or something like that. I looked around, but there was nothing odd. If anything was odd, it was her. Why would she laugh when her eldest aunt had died? Then again, she often used to do things that I found strange.

The bar she led me to was really narrow and long like a train. I was surprised that we needed to reserve a table at such a shabby, secluded bar. There were only four tables in single file on the left and an open space along the right wall that was just wide enough for a person to pass through. Opposite the entrance, at the head of the train, was the kitchen. In the left wall next to our seats at the third table, there was a small glass window, but it was a window in name only, being only a square piece of glass stuck in the wall that didn't slide or push open. Outside was a small parking lot. In the dark parking lot beyond the glass, I could see a few hunchedover cars and the faint light of the parking lot office.

"Give us half pork, half seafood, please."

The young-looking waitress blinked rapidly at her request.

"Half and half? Half and half what?" She seemed to have trouble understanding Korean.
“Half of this and half of that,” my friend said, pointing at each item on the menu posted on the wall. The waitress stared at a corner of the stained ceiling above the menu. The expression on her face was tortured as if she were doing some complex calculation. Just then, a woman who looked like the owner rushed out of the kitchen. In three seconds, my friend reached an agreement with the owner to pay 25,000 won for a combination of pork stir fry and seafood stir-fry.

“I ordered whatever I wanted…. That’s okay, isn’t it?”

I said it was fine. To tell the truth, I didn’t really like frozen ingredients stir-fried briefly in a red, spicy sauce, but I didn’t care either way when it came to bar food, so I didn’t object.

She lowered her voice and muttered, “This place is great, but they keep changing the staff. Every time I come here I order this combination, but if I get stuck with a waiter who doesn’t understand me I have to start all over again, so I never feel like I’ve made any progress.”

“You seem to have gained quite a bit of skill in ordering, though.”

“I guess so. It does seem that I spend less time arguing back and forth now.”

“You must come here often.”

“Not really. It’s too expensive.”

She seemed to have changed a little, and she was becoming a little unfamiliar to me. All the side dishes in the bar were 20,000 won. You could say that was on the expensive side compared to the way the place looked, but it was still only 20,000 won. For an extra 5,000 won, she had ordered a combination of two different 20,000 won dishes, just the way she had always done it.
We had spent a lot of time together in our late twenties. We got together two or three times a week at most, and we saw each other at least once or twice a month. I don’t remember ever arranging a meeting in advance. We did the same type of work, and so we ran into each other often and became close, thanks to our similar tastes and styles. We stopped getting together when she changed jobs. I had just begun seeing someone else at that point, so I never made any attempt to contact her.

The fact that she had developed a sense of economy, the fact that she ordered what she preferred, perhaps these were the parts of her that had changed? I don’t know. Judging by her attire, it was clear that she had become more modest than she used to be. Back then, even if she didn’t wear a necklace or ring, she loved to go around wearing unusual earrings, but on that day she wasn’t wearing a single piece of jewelry I didn’t want to fall back on the prejudiced idea that frugality was a result of poverty. But the fact that she ordered what she preferred, that was something to think about. It could mean that she had suddenly become a gourmet, or it could be because her concern for others had diminished. It could also mean, though I didn’t really want to consider this possibility, that she had so little opportunity to eat what she wanted these days that she had to satisfy her appetite when she had the chance. If that were the case, what could that mean when coupled with her surprising new frugality? Wouldn’t that mean that she had become poor, not only in material things, but in spirit as well? All in the three years that we had not seen each other.

“What has it been, two years?” she mumbled as if to herself. I was going to correct her and say that it had been three years, but she gazed out at the parking lot
beyond the window and added, since she'd first come here. I just said, really? After a short while, she spoke again.

"I found this place, thanks to a friend who had her heart broken."

I flinched at the mention of heartbreak, as if I'd been suddenly attacked. I was reminded once again of the simple fact that a woman I'd been engaged to had left me, and I felt as if a bitter shoot of pain was sprouting in the bottom of my heart like a poisonous plant.

"A heartbroken friend?"

"Yeah."

From what she told me, her friend had been bitterly betrayed by a man and had come to her for advice and comfort. The moment I began to show some interest in her words she shot up from her seat. She walked along the narrow passage toward the kitchen and gestured to the waitress, pointing to the refrigerator and the cabinets. She seemed to be ordering something to drink. It was indeed the kind of story that needed a drink. Especially for me.

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I sometimes think about the bond of heartbreak. There are some people in this world that I just don't get along with, the kind where I wish I or the other person would just leave for another planet, it didn't matter which one of us had to do the leaving. But let's say that by chance I found out that one of these people had their heart cruelly broken. Though only a few seconds ago I hadn't even wanted to live under the same sky as this person, I could take them home, give them a drink, and sleep under the same roof as them. I would even be prepared to give them a goodnight kiss on the lips, though they
still reeked of alcohol, so they wouldn't dream sad dreams. There are bonds such as the bond of hunger or the bond of poverty, as well as the bond between those under the strain of taking a test, the bond between vegetarians, and the bond between parents of missing children. Maybe I'm strange, but I can't imagine a bond so hopelessly drenched, so beautifully without judgment, as the bond of heartbreak. Perhaps that was why, as I watched her order the drinks in that train-like bar, I felt very close to this friend of hers though I had never even seen her face. My heart was restless with the mere expectation of the bond of heartbreak that would form between her friend and me. Of course, we needed my friend as a mediator.

She came back to her seat and said, “Since you didn't bring your car, you can have a drink or two, right?”

Of course I told her that would be fine.

“I ordered beer and soju, okay?”

“Oh, really?” I didn’t like soju, but I didn’t object. I could just drink beer. And with the train-like mood, I might want a glass or two of soju while listening to a story about heartbreak.

“Let’s mix the beer and soju. That’s okay, right?”

It was a frightening thing to mix beer and soju, but I told her it was okay before I'd even realized it. She only asked my opinion as an afterthought, after she had already made up her mind. I thought this might be another part of her that had changed. I felt as if all I had done since we'd met was repeat the phrases, Oh, really? and That's okay.

“So, did you say anything that helped your friend?”

“My friend? Ah.”
She smiled, turning up a corner of her mouth.

"I didn't need to help her."

"Why not?"

She said that her friend had reserved a place at this bar the day before, while still swept up in despair:

"Isn't that evidence that she had enough hope?"

"Hope? What hope?"

"As long as we have the will to live, we have hope. All I had to do was pretend to subtly interfere with that hope."

I had no idea what she meant by interfering with hope. She explained simply.

"Only then do you realize that you have hope. Just like you have to scatter things about to realize you have space."

This was again another of her odd qualities, that I felt even more confused after she explained something. Only by interfering with hope do you realize that there is hope? Only by scattering things about do you realize that you have space? What kind of explanations were these?

The waitress brought out a tray I glanced at it, and my gaze came to rest on the liquor bottle. Only then I understood what she meant when she said that she couldn't come here often because it was expensive. She hadn't been talking about the side dishes but about the drinks. Next to the soup bowls and side dishes were two bottles of beer and a long-necked ceramic bottle of the high-quality Andong soju. So she had been talking about mixing beer and Andong soju. This was also very odd.

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She told me that her friend, the one who had first brought her here, had taken pains to emphasize that the side dishes here were not prepared elsewhere and delivered, but that the owner went to the market every day for the ingredients and made them herself. At this, her friend poured her a beer and then mixed it in Andong soju without even asking. Pain will win forgiveness for an offense. Her friend tossed back her drink first while my friend sipped her soup. Like a creditor who barges in, downs a glass of cold water, and cuts straight to the chase, her friend put down her glass and asked urgently,

“What was it like for you then? What are you supposed to do to keep breathing and living at times like this?”

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Seeing my bewildered expression, she took a slow sip of her drink and spoke.

“I went through something similar the year before.”

It was the first I had heard of it. My head was a jumble of confused thoughts. If someone had seen me then, they would have seen a tortured expression similar to the one on the face of the waitress trying to understand what a combination dish was. If her friend had her heart broken two years ago and she had her heart broken a year before that, then that meant that she’d had her heart broken three years ago. Three years ago we were twenty-nine years old, and we got together every now and then, though not frequently. An absurd suspicion began to well up inside me as it suddenly occurred to me that I might know the man who had broken her heart. Yet once again I merely said, “Oh, really?”
One year ago, how had she kept on breathing? Did she also cling to a hope to keep on living? Of course she would have. It only took her some time to realize it since it wasn't really hope in any recognizable form.

"The moment that you feel you've lost it all..."

Her friend had lifted her head sadly upon hearing these words.

"You will realize, when you take the time to look back, that something is still left."

"What on earth could be left?"

"Well, how can I explain it? I suppose they're fairly worthless things."

"So what does that matter? I wouldn't care even if you said something great and wonderful was left!"

Her friend waved her hand exaggeratedly through the air.

"Not! It's all worthless! It's true, only the worthless things are left."

Her friend looked at her with dazed eyes. Within those eyes was the expectation that my friend would be able to offer a message of salvation and the resignation that nothing at all could save her, mixed half-and-half like a combination dish.

"But those worthless things can change everything. You might say that they can turn things around."

Her friend suddenly leaned forward.

"How can I turn things around?"

Her friend had misunderstood her. It just wouldn't do for her to understand the idea of turning things around to mean a trick that would somehow make her lover return. My friend felt the need to speak coolly.
“For example, you might go on an errand to a relative’s house, or offer congratulations or condolences to colleagues. Take on those sorts of tasks.”

In an instant her friend’s eyes filled with the hurt of betrayal. A relative’s house? Congratulations or condolences? Her friend thought that she was not taking her seriously, or that she was even mocking her. Her friend leaned back.

“I have no idea what you are talking about. If you don’t have anything to say, you should just keep quiet.”

Her friend suddenly started to cry into her soup. She normally cried a lot, but she started crying even more after she began dating, and you could say that she cried as much as she drank after her boyfriend broke up with her.

My friend took a sip of the beer mixed with Andong soju and concluded, “There are things that, though not invisible, are so wretched and worthless that we don’t feel like even trying to tackle them, aren’t there? These worthless things are scattered all around you. Whether it’s people or work, concentrate on the things that are left. If you can’t concentrate on them, create an ever so slight angle so that you’ll be compelled to care about them. Just slightly tip the motherboard of your heart.”

But her friend didn’t listen to what she had to say and she didn’t say any more. When she thought about it, even she hadn’t made any effort to tilt her mind or body a year ago. Though she writhed like a wounded creature, inside she held fast to the beaker of despair, taut with surface tension, and struggled with all her might to not let a single drop of that bitter pain fall. Inside she did not listen to any comfort or understanding, and in a state of immobility that could be called an insane balance, she glared straight at the impatient rampaging of her body. If she could just endure this time she would
inevitably become brutal, and that brutality would be an exceptional and beautiful brutality, like Andong soju diluted in beer. She thought that her friend, crying in front of her, would be feeling this as well, if only faintly. That she enjoyed this pain more than anyone. That she wanted to commemorate it for as long as possible. That it would be even more difficult to bear once the pain was gone.

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I drank the alcohol she had poured for me. The fragrance of the Andong soju was embedded like a sharp spike within the blandness of the beer. Her friend had already faded into the background. Now the bond of heartbreak was between the two of us, her and me. My tongue still bitter; I stammered: "How did you overcome, I mean, how did you cope then? What did you do?"

She put her spoon down next to her soup bowl and spoke "I was lucky."

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Her mother had played the role of an excellent interferer. My friend finally decided to visit her eldest aunt’s house. If her mother had not badgered her for days, and if her head had not been filled that morning with the delusion that perhaps her lover had left because of money, she probably would not have visited her eldest aunt’s house carrying that heavy gift.

"You had your heart broken because of money?"

I was even more surprised than when I heard she had been heartbroken. The embarrassing and absurd suspicion that I had been the one to break her heart disappeared without a trace. In its place was remorse like an older brother might feel,
wondering what I could possibly have been doing that I didn’t know she was seeing some jerk who would betray her because of money.

At least that’s what I thought, she said, and pushed her empty soup bowl to one side. Seeing my still doubtful expression, she shook her head.

“Now I can say for certain—it wasn’t money. But if you’re pressed hard enough, you think those sorts of things.”

The moment I heard her words I was suddenly seized by the delusion that perhaps my girlfriend had left me because of money. It was possible. It was more than possible. If that were so, then did that mean I was quite cornered/ right now? Absurdly enough, it was true.

She grabbed my glass and said,

“Drink slowly.”

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Her oldest aunt’s house was on the very fringes of the city’s edge, over an hour away by subway. Her aunt had moved there about a year before her visit, and she hadn’t visited her once since then. According to her mother, the building was four stories in total, and her aunt and uncle lived alone on the third floor.

“After all, they don’t have any children…”

Her mother’s words trailed off. It was not that her aunt and uncle had never had any children. Her cousin had died not as a child, but while he was still young. It was right before he turned thirty, and not long after he had passed the CFA exam, for which he had studied for three and a half years after completing military service. It was an unexpected accident—he was drunk, and on his way to the bathroom he fell from a
staircase that had no railing. He struck his head when he fell and was found dead a day later, his head covered with blood.

Her mother thought there was a good chance that the four-story building owned by her aunt and uncle would be passed down to my friend, their only niece, so she wanted her to visit them often, play the part of a kind daughter, and look over her future property. Her mother tried for days to convince her to visit her aunt’s house and take a present she had bought during a ten-day trip to America.

“I’m still not sure what it was, though. It was really heavy. I doubt she would have brought a jar of honey back from the United States, but that’s what it felt like.”

“Well, in that case, maybe it was jam?”

“Jam? Isn’t it a bit strange to give jam as a gift to old folks past their sixtieth birthday?”

“But old folks really like sweet things.”

“Is that so? Well, let’s say it was jam, then.”

With the heavy, wrapped-up jar of jam and only a rough map, she went out in search of her aunt’s house. Even though it was on the outskirts, it was still a four-story building. Since her boyfriend had so obviously left her, she needed to carefully take account of what he had left behind. She became absorbed in examining the value of each and every one of her possessions at that time. It was as if every time she took a penny for herself, he lost a penny. Such empty, greedy actions were her only way to take revenge on a person she would never see again. I thought it was fascinating that she had been engrossed in such arithmetic. If I could learn one thing from her, it would be that arithmetic.
When she arrived, she discovered that the commercial building owned by her aunt and uncle was unfortunately not a four-story building, but a three-story building. As with every other building, there was a small, matchbox-shaped room on the roof, and her mother had naturally included that in her calculations as one floor. The building was, in fact, located near an intersection packed with shops and stores, but it had a smaller square footage and was more run-down than the buildings around it. On the first floor was a restaurant that sold pork ribs, and on the second floor was a small travel agency. The rooftop room, or so-called fourth floor, had a fortune teller’s sign on it. She went up the stairs, practically dragging the heavy jam jar in its wrappings behind her. The door on the third floor where her aunt and uncle lived was ajar. Next to the doorbell was a small, red plastic sign that pointed toward the fortune teller’s house on the roof.

She thought about ringing the doorbell, but instead opened the door all the way. Once in the small foyer, a pleated gray curtain blocked her way. She had never seen a house with a curtain drawn over the foyer entrance. To her left was a shoe closet with a mirror on top. The small, square space with the curtain and the mirror looked so much like the interior of one of those automatic photo booths for taking ID photos they had in underground shopping arcades that for a moment she imagined she might have to put some money somewhere in the shoe closet and push a button.

She put down her burden and started to take off her shoes but then hesitated. She had no idea where to put her shoes. The red copper-colored tile floor of the foyer was already cluttered with several pairs of shoes. There were a pair of men’s shoes and a pair of slippers that she assumed was her uncle’s, and a pair of women’s shoes, a pair of rubber shoes, and a pair of sandals that she assumed was her aunt’s. Judging by the
shoes alone, it didn't seem as if her aunt and uncle lived lonely lives, but that they lived with a large, bustling family. She took off her shoes, put them in a corner of the foyer, and then pushed aside the wrinkled gray curtain. She couldn't say why, but the moment before she pulled aside the gray curtain, an unfamiliar and unsettling feeling washed over her.

The moment she pulled aside the curtain and put one foot inside she felt the gazes of those in the room fix on her. Though she had only stuck her upper body through the curtain since she was trying to drag in the bundle of gifts, she was still powerfully aware of their stares. A thick gray curtain had been drawn over the window as well, so the room wasn't that bright despite the fact that it was midday. Three women, sitting hunched over on the sofa to the left, stared at her with eyes filled with unbridled curiosity.

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The combined dish we had been waiting for arrived. The round plate, completely devoid of any garnish like lettuce or broccoli, held half a portion of each dark red food.

"Try it. Once you taste it, you'll never forget it."

She was smoking a cigarette. Feeling like a guinea pig, I took a sip of my drink then took a bit of pork and squid. How can I describe it... it felt like all the taste buds in my mouth had leaped up in surprise and were shouting for joy. The ingredients and seasoning were wonderful, but there was a smoky flavor after the spicy and rich taste, maybe because it had been pan-fried and then cooked over an open charcoal flame. The drink and the food joined together in a unique harmony of flavor, alternating in intimate layers.
"It's great!"

It occurred to me that this was the first time I had honestly expressed my feelings that night. She smiled as if she had known what my reaction would be, and then dropped her cigarette on the floor and ground it out with her shoe. Apparently this old-school method of putting out cigarettes was allowed here. I was suddenly cheerful. "So? Who were those women?"

"Hold on, hold on. I want to eat a little, too."

"Yes, of course. Eat up. Eat, then tell me."

It wasn't me speaking, though, but my taste buds.

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She had greeted the three women in spite of herself. The woman sitting furthest away nodded her head. My friend set her bundle of gifts by the wall and stood there silently. She could never have guessed that so many guests would have come to visit her aunt and uncle, who were supposed to have lived as quietly as water in a bowl. When she looked closer, she saw that the women were each of vastly differing ages. The one who had nodded in greeting was an old woman who was well past seventy. The woman in the middle, whose eyes were ringed thick with liver spots, looked to be in her late thirties. Only the woman sitting closest to my friend, the one with the corners of her eyes swept upward, looked to be nearly sixty, like her aunt.

"Sit over here," the old woman said. But, at odds with the word "here," her finger pointed to a round, backless chair across the room. It was probably the brightest spot in the room. For a moment, my friend wanted to refuse.

"Is Auntie here?"
At her question, the three women reacted as one. “Auntie?” said the old woman, and the woman in the middle replied, “I know,” while the woman with the ferocious eyes stuck out her neck toward my friend and said, “If she’s your auntie, then you must drop by often, right?”

The words “drop by” rubbed her the wrong way, but for some reason my friend felt the need to explain herself:

“No. I haven’t been able to come often, and this is my first visit in quite a while. Has Auntie gone somewhere?”

At this the women came alive. Why would she have gone anywhere, the door was open, wasn’t it, another guest was here when we arrived, we have been waiting, so you should sit there and wait—the words came out in a jumble and she couldn’t tell who had said what. The old woman pointed once again at the chair across the room, so my friend sat down on the edge of the chair in spite of herself. They all seemed to be waiting for her to speak, so she added,

“This is the first time I’ve come to see my aunt since she moved here.”

The women were agitated by her words. It was the same no matter what she said. The woman with the liver spots said, It must not have been long since she moved here. The old woman replied, Indeed, and the woman with the ferocious eyes stuck her neck out again and asked,

“Do you know when your aunt moved here?”

“I think it’s been about a year.”

“Where did she live before that?”

“She lived in Hwagok-dong, in Seoul.”
“Oh my, that’s where my sister-in-law lives. We should have visited her then.”

The woman in the middle cried out as if pained.

“So, did you visit her a lot when she lived in Hwagok-dong?”

This time the old woman asked in a wheedling voice,

“No, not often... maybe once or twice a year.”

She exaggerated the figure slightly.

The woman with the ferocious eyes pressed the point.

“Once or twice a year isn’t often?”

“You can’t really call that often.”

The old woman spoke meaningfully, as if scolding my friend.

“So, what brings you here?”

The woman in the middle asked carefully.

My friend didn’t know how to answer.

“Isn’t that a rude question to ask someone you’ve only just met?”

At the old woman’s question, the sixty-year-old woman with the ferocious eyes chuckled. My friend began to grow annoyed. Then the woman in the middle lowered her head and her shoulders began to bob. It looked as if she were about to burst into tears, but when my friend looked closer she saw that the woman was holding her knitting in her hands and had begun knitting. She had apparently set her colorful yarn and needles down on the lap of her colorful dress, but my friend had had no idea they were there and thought that her lightning-fast knitting actions were some sort of magical gesture to suppress her intense emotions.

The woman in the middle knitted quickly as she spoke.
“When I saw the name, I thought it was a man.”

The old woman muttered.

“I told you it’s a woman, a woman.”

“It’s actually better if it’s a woman.”

So said the woman with the ferocious eyes. They spoke as if they had talked about this before my friend had arrived, and they watched her for a reaction. My friend lowered her eyes and pretended not to hear. She even wondered if it wouldn’t be better to just leave the present and go before her aunt came. When she lifted her head, the three women looked at her expectantly. It felt like she was in the spotlight in the middle of a stage.

“All I really have to do is give this to my aunt. If I leave this here, will you let my aunt know?”

The old woman waved her hands in the air, as if the very suggestion were shameful.

“What are you talking about? If you’ve come this far you should at least see her.”

“Well, she has a lot of guests…”

The old woman had no intention of hearing her out.

“You’ve set aside a day to see her anyway, so you should relax and wait. It’s not like you have pressing business elsewhere. Won’t your grandaunt be terribly disappointed? And who knows? Maybe she will give you a nice present.”

The woman with the ferocious eyes chuckled again at the old woman’s words. It was a laugh that didn’t suit her advanced age. Although there was no way they could
have known, my friend wondered if the three women hadn’t figured out her intentions in visiting her aunt and were taking turns sizing her up. And she couldn’t understand why the old woman would call her eldest aunt her “grandaunt.” Seeing that they didn’t know when her aunt and uncle had moved here, they couldn’t have been all that close to them. My friend thought that they might have even come to ask a favor about business matters such as paying the rent for a shop below or housekeeping duties. So it seemed that they were trying to unfairly cast suspicion on her and figure out if she had an ulterior motive, so she decided to say as little as possible.

The old furniture that filled the house, the bric-a-brac that lay around, and the stained linoleum floor all spoke of the owners’ long neglect. She felt a little insulted that she had to sit there in the middle of that dilapidation with those strange women. The women finally began to talk between themselves, as if they had grown sick of her and her silence.

“What on earth is going on at home that you’ve come here?” the old woman asked.

“I really had no intention of ever coming.”

The woman in the middle replied, knitting quickly as if her life depended on it.

“Well? What brought you here, then?” Ferocious Eyes asked.

“My sister-in-law says I shouldn’t be so stubborn.”

“That’s so true! This must be the sister-in-law that lives in Hwangok-dong.”

“Yes, that’s right. She’s a schoolteacher. But even schoolteachers all go around just looking for the next best thing.”

“That’s the truth!”
Ferocious Eyes tossed in her two cents.

“So here’s what she says. There is nothing on earth that should never be done, and nothing that absolutely must be done. Those words cut me to the bone. Isn’t it true? Don’t people say that they would never do something, or that something absolutely must be done? But really, is there any such thing? Once I started thinking like that, I realized that there was no reason for me not to come.”

They were now absorbed in their own conversation and paid her no further attention. This only stirred her interest in them. She tried to find some hint of a friendship between them and her aunt and uncle, but the substance of their conversation was so hard to follow that it was not easy.

They took turns speaking as if following some predetermined order. First the old woman talked about some odd disease that sounded like it came out of an old storybook, then Ferocious Eyes talked about a kidnapping that had been reported in the papers not too long ago. Finally, the woman in the middle heaped criticism on the inconstancy of men. When they had each taken a turn talking, the old woman started again with a long-winded explanation of a folk remedy that used rats or bugs, and the woman with the ferocious eyes gritted her teeth and lamented the incompetence of the police in this country. The woman in the middle simply knitted quietly even though it was her turn to speak, and a silence fell over the room.

A short while later the woman with the ferocious eyes asked in a frail voice, “How many children do you have?”

“One.”

“One? It must be a son.”
The old woman interjected.

"Yes. He just started the third grade."

"He's one grade ahead of my youngest grandson."

The woman with the ferocious eyes solemnly intoned, and then added, If my grandson is still alive, that is. On cue, the old woman sang the praises of a cure-all salve like one possessed, the woman with the crooked eyes mumbled to herself, either in prayer or incantation, and the woman in her thirties began to sob softly. And yet she continued to knit quickly with both hands, except for when she wiped her nose.

My friend felt like her mind was going blank. There wasn't any meaning in their conversation that she could decipher, rather an energy that she sensed in it. It was like the pull of misfortune, sucking her in like sticky honey or jam. Their conversation went around with such a sadly rhythmical fantasy that she even forgot where she was. She only woke from her reverie when the old woman complained in a hoarse voice, "She's taking quite a long time, I'll say."

The sixty-year-old woman with her upswept eyes replied.

"The person before us must be taking a long time."

"Everyone has plenty to work out."

This was the woman in her thirties, who had stopped crying already.

"I'm parched."

"She doesn't even have a vending machine."

"Yeah, I know."

My friend thought that was a bit odd. Who puts a vending machine in their house? Then, from beyond the curtain, came the sound of the front door opening and
labored breathing. The women's heads turned as one. Her head turned as well. She heard the sound of sniffling and the smacking of lips as the curtain swung open, and there stood her uncle. She hesitated and then stood up. She could see in her uncle's dim eyes that he did not recognize her. He looked down at the women sitting there with a toothpick in his mouth. The old woman nodded and, as she had done with my friend, said, Sit over here. Her uncle ignored the old woman and mumbled.

"You all seem to be here for something..."

He looked further into the house for a moment.

"Is she still sleeping?"

He turned back toward them and gestured lightly for them to leave.

"If you're here for the fortuneteller, you need to go up another floor."

"What? It's not here?"

The three women stood up at once. The ball of yarn rolled off the colorful dress of the woman in the middle.

"Can't you tell? This is a private residence."

The old woman sat down on the sofa again, bent over, and pulled on the heavy socks she had taken off.

"Oh dear. People are setting up shrines in their homes these days, so we thought this was one of those places, too."

Her uncle slowly picked his teeth as he spoke.

"I'll have to tell him to take down that pea-sized sign and put up a big one right away."
She didn't know why, but my friend followed right behind the three women as they left. They stared at the red sign next to the doorbell, looking for an excuse for their misunderstanding. On the sign was the name of a man—the name that had caused the woman with the liver spots to say, “When I saw the name, I thought it was a man”—preceded by the word “Guru.” Beneath the letters was a thin arrow pointing upward, but the thin line earned the ire of the three women.

They went up the stairs and my friend went down. Although the fortuneteller in the roof-top room might not know that he had been called “a grandaunt,” she knew what sort of gifts the three women were looking to receive from the grandaunt fortuneteller. With each step she took she muttered prayers for them. She prayed for the complete recovery of a relative suffering from a rare disease, for the safety of a kidnapped grandson, for the return of a profligate husband, and for the peace and happiness of an old couple who had lost their only son. She had never prayed so earnestly for anyone. When she reached the bottom of the stairs she felt that she had become a different person. All she had done was go up and down some stairs, yet it felt like she had left not only the heavy jar of jam at her aunt’s house on the third floor, but the small chip that held the code to her nature as well.

Her uncle had died a year before we met in that train-like bar. Then she had heard word last month that her aunt had died. At least it had been a natural death. It was one year after her uncle had killed himself. Just one day before the anniversary of his death. Her aunt, who had been listless and in a constant trance after their son died, and who had never once prepared a proper lunch for her husband, got up early to buy ingredients for the meal after her husband’s first memorial rite. Frozen from a sudden
late cold spell, she struggled up the stairs to the third floor and once inside, drank some hot water to thaw herself out. That was the beginning of the end. The moment she swallowed the hot water she fell gravely ill, and she died that evening. The owner of the first-floor pork rib restaurant, where her uncle had gone down to eat lunch every day, waited by her aunt’s deathbed. Her aunt’s last words were, I should have drunk cold water. The three-story building passed on to my friend.

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That was where her story ended. It took three or four hours to hear it all. We had emptied one bottle of Andong soju and countless bottles of beer, and every twenty minutes we had taken turns going to the bathroom located in the parking lot. If someone were to ask me about it, I would only be able to sketch the outline of her story. Yet with a story like this, an outline is meaningless. Just as a faded antique yields the shape and colors of its detailed decorations when the dust is swept off of it with a fine brush, the meticulous description that flowed from her sharply cleft upper lip painted a perfect picture of what had happened in the living room of that house around noon in that old, three-story building. But this is the best I can do in retelling that story. I don’t know what happened inside her as she sat facing those three strange women. She wasn’t able to express that either. Whatever it was, if we were to try to tackle it head-on, it would probably end up being something worthless. But it was clear that it had changed her.

When we left the bar I realized that she had already taken care of the bill. She should have let me pay for the drinks since I was the one who had called and suggested we get together. When she saw a hint of reproach in my face, she laughed dryly. That dry laugh. That was it. In an instant I understood everything. My absurd suspicion had
been right. That was why she had laughed when she told me that her aunt had died. I
laughed then as well, but it was less of a laugh and more like a quiet spasm at the corner
of my mouth. I thought about what she had mumbled as she was crossing the crosswalk.
Sure enough, it was the relationship between her aunt and uncle and me that was odd.
When I began dating another woman while unaware of my friend’s love, she had visited
her aunt’s three-story building bearing the pain of heartbreak, and when I looked her up
three years later after having my heart broken by that girlfriend, she had inherited the
three-story building from her aunt and uncle. I thought of the old three-story
commercial building that might have been mine. The peculiar entranceway with the
gray curtain across it, the dark interior, and the red plastic sticker on the wall pointing
up to the roof top all were vivid in my mind.

She waved off the old man who came out from the parking lot. She was letting
him know that she hadn’t brought her car. She looked as relaxed as the hands of a clock
that read seven o’clock. If she was relaxed, then I was glad for her. But now, no matter
who she met, her heart would not leap in anticipation. And she would not want anyone’s
heart to leap for her. She seemed to have passed on to a place far beyond the pain of
love. She had become much more cordial and natural, but it seemed she no longer
believed in love. This thought made me sad. Where had that twenty-nine-year-old
woman gone, the one who had been engrossed in that powerless arithmetic, examining
each and every one of her possessions and taking each and every one of them from me?

I thought that my heart would break after the fact, thanks to the twenty-nine-
year-old woman I had lost without even knowing it. It would be so late that it might
not be too severe—it could not be too severe, and so I would not bite my lips till they
bled—but I had a foreboding sense that this was the beginning of days I would spend groping about in a trance until I wore my fingers down, as one traces silhouettes in a faded photograph. That premonition became true when I stopped by that bar last February.

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Becoming a regular at a bar in your own neighborhood is a blessing for yours memory, but it is a death knell for your youth. It means that the days you believed in love are over, and you are of the age where it is only possible to go forward by looking back. Now, at the age of thirty-five, I am passing the noon of my life. The sun blazes above my head, but already it is ready to set and leave me in darkness. This is the brightest time of my life. There will be no brighter days in my future.

If my life was a mountain whose summit was at the midpoint of my years, after which the slope fell off sharply at a right angle, then her life was like a high mountain ridge with a peak a third of the way up and a gentle descent beyond. Everyone has their own personal melody. The song she sent my way in her late twenties, when she was just as timid and stingy with her emotions as I, must have been in a very low octave, so soft and faint that I could barely hear it. I thought of that as one of her odd traits, something that had nothing to do with me. At the peak of twenty-nine years, she grew up too soon and her eyes adjusted too quickly to the coming darkness. Through those strange women in that dark three-story building, she must have seen the ridge of her future. Three years ago she already had the weary eyes of one who lived in the afternoon. So she failed to recognize my midday waiting. And all this came about because of the
deafness of my ears, the ears that had failed to hear her soft song and were led astray by the shrill song of another woman.

Even I knew that losing love is not losing everything. But the odd thing is that the persistent relationship between her aunt and uncle and me was not over yet. Passing by an old three-story building with a rooftop room on top always made me pause, and whenever I made a simple mistake or regretted something, I would say, “I should have drunk cold water.”

Before we parted, she asked me one last time; “Was it okay?”

“It was fine.”

Of course, she was asking me what I thought of the long, train-like bar, but as I listened to her story I felt the pain of the heartbreak I had suffered gradually grow duller. As I repeatedly told her that it was fine whenever she asked, I had begun to imagine that she was asking about me and I was telling her that I was okay. Are you okay? I’m fine. And I truly was fine. Everything was now the trivial past. I sat alone in my regular bar, the bar that reminds me of the train-car bar, and thought, That’s right, that’s what she said then, wasn’t it, or I wonder why she did that. I thought of her name, her story, her face when she laughed dryly, her graceful upper lip and the groove above it. She is not coming and I do not believe in love. Looking back on it now, there was no need for any great consolation. If love is worthless, then consolation should be worthless as well. That worthlessness changes us. All I needed to do was accept that chilling truth like cold water.