

Light of Spring

By Jeong Ji A

Father was smoking a cigarette as he sat in a comfortable squat by the forsythia hedge, its branches lavish with dazzling yellow blossoms, when the car pulled up. He did not in any way resemble an educated intellectual, the proper schoolteacher that he actually had been, despite the fact that, out here in the countryside where people rarely do, he was dressed formally in the exact same navy blue suit that the son remembered having worn on his first day of work at his first job, and which Mother had retrieved some time later on one of her visits to see him in Seoul, saying she might find a use for it as work clothes or something. Father was now just one of the old country folk. Stopping the car a few meters, the son turned off the engine. Father blew out a puff of cigarette smoke and watched as it dispersed in the warm spring air. The space around Father seemed somber, as if proximity to death gave his body the power to absorb the forsythia's bright yellow hues and even the dispersed cigarette smoke. Father showed no sign of noticing the car parked close by or that a pair of eyes was watching him intently. For some years already, he had been so deaf that turning the television up to its maximum volume had been necessary.

“Father!”

Only after the son hollered at him five times had Father slowly turned his head to look up blankly. The whites of his eyes were deep yellow, as though stained with nicotine. Goodness gracious if your father's eyes don't burn like a tiger's. Just one of those looks from him makes you want to shrivel up and die right there on the spot, don't it. Those eyes, once so full of fire that they could still have their effect on Mother after a

lifetime together, were now dulled, not entirely focused on him. Many years earlier, when he had summoned the words to tell Father that he would not repeat the university entrance exam again after having failed twice, Father's eyes had surged with energy as explosive as a volcano erupting after a thousand years' sleep. He had expected nothing less from Father, which was the only reason he had already wasted two years of his life preparing for an exam that he didn't even care to pass. He had mustered his own energy, girded himself for the battle to come. But the war that Father had in mind went in a completely different direction.

"Gave it your best shot, did ya? Did your best? Alright, then that'll have to be that. If that's all you've got, then there's nothing more to come of you from here on out. But there's no denying you're my son. I won't let you starve."

True to his word, Father neither asked nor expected anything of him after that day and never even grumbled at him. Once he'd made it through the mandatory military service, he somehow managed to earn a degree, belatedly, from a second-tier university, and landed a job better than would be expected of a second-tier college graduate, and married a woman six years his senior. No matter the circumstances, Father neither offered him praise nor criticism. It was clear that Father had drawn a line that day that he never intended to cross, and the son, in turn, never tried. Forsake me, I'll forsake you. Maybe that had been the pride at work. But here Father was looking absently at him as if none of this had happened, as if he'd never had such force of will, his eyes as dull and lackluster as the eyes of any one of a thousand old men. Was this what it would feel like then, to be the legendary swordsman who, after training all his life, jaw clenched, sharpening his blade for revenge until he eventually achieved mastery, descended Mt. Ermei only to discover that his hated foe had long ago died in a trivial spat? The son felt

let down, disappointed, and his anger flared up against nobody in particular.

It seemed to take Father about five seconds for his brain to process the sensory information received by his eyes and to recognize the man standing before him. Father's eyes, which until then had been blankly fixed on him, recovered a spark of alacrity for a split second. But it vanished just as quickly, like a flash of lightning in a pitch dark sky.

“It's you.”

Pressing down on one knee for support, Father rose slowly. He took tottering steps as he opened and passed through the gate, like a child still learning to walk. The son could not recall ever seeing Father sitting still. In his memory, Father was always on his way somewhere to do something, his steps sturdy and sure. Three o'clock every morning, without fail, Father would rise and rush down to the still dark fields. Mother helped with the farming, but Father managed his 20-*majigi* rice paddy and the other crops he grew in his 3,000-*pyeong* field better than any of the full-time farmers nearby though he held a regular job as an elementary school teacher as well. His sweet potatoes were all hard and dry as chestnuts, splitting clean when cooked, none of them spongy and worthless, and his zucchinis and red peppers and potatoes all grew bigger than those grown on other farms. These were the fruits of his toil, from weeding his field five times when others were satisfied with three, and carrying jugs with a yoke to fetch water from the brook a kilometer away whenever the day seemed a bit dry, going back and forth until the skin on his shoulders was rubbed raw. From time to time when help was critically needed, Father came looking for him, a mere ten-year-old boy, in the wee hours while the stars were still out, awakening him by pounding on his back. When, after lugging water jugs through the early morning hours, the son started to doze off at the breakfast table, Father would cluck his tongue in scorn.

“Done in? By a short spell of work at that . . . pipsqueak, I never slept more than three hours a night at your age.”

Father’s words always made him feel mistreated, leaving him sniffing and teary-eyed, further incensing Father

“Quit crying, boy! There’s no cause for tears You’d never catch me crying, not even the day my own father passed away. Mind you, I was just eight years old at the time.”

He’d done what he could on his part, but he was always the son who failed to live up to his father’s expectations. There were times when he tried hard to satisfy Father, and there were times when he gave up the effort altogether. It was only recently that he’d realized that this life-or-death struggle to please Father was a waste of time, no matter what strategy or direction he might choose. Both his decision to abandon the idea of going to college and his decision, many years later, to gain admission and graduate from college had been made with Father in mind. Even in recent years, Father had continued to be like a great mountain range blocking the path of his life. But now, without giving him enough time to climb up and over it, time itself was wearing down the huge range, causing it to crumble bit by bit. Time was what made it possible for a life to bloom in the first place, but now, cold-hearted as a ruthless loan shark, it was taking back what it had lent. He had believed Father would be the last one standing, long after every other human being had succumbed to time and fallen to his knees. Father himself had been emphatic about the point that he was a man who had overcome the harshest fate. Father would make time kneel, the son expected nothing less, just as he had vanquished his own fate. As if fully prepared to live up to this expectation, Father had displayed, until last year, memory and bodily strength no less sound than in a

young man, with the minor exception of his hearing. What'll we do if he lives to a hundred, perish the thought? When I die, he'll be yours to take care of You do your children a favor by getting it over and done with, that's what I think. What's the use of sticking around 'til you're nothing but a burden to your children? Already you two've got about as much interest in each other as a cow's got for a chicken."

Such had been Mother's attitude up until last year. Then, toward the end of the year, like a favor extended to the children before dying, Father's health had begun to rapidly decline. Mother, who had fretted about the prospect of Father's longevity, started calling, with concerns about Father's strange behavior. Can't you come visit, just once? she would anxiously implore. He'd ignored her pleading tone until early the week before, when, upon hearing from his wife that he had gone out for a walk, she called his cell phone, something she never did because it cost more. Upon realizing that she'd deemed the call important enough to overcome her usual frugality, he decided to use his monthly leave for the first time in his nearly twenty years of professional life. As soon as he had answered the call, Mother, almost in tears, started to speak without waiting to make sure she actually had him on the line. Oh, your father must really have grown senile. Yesterday, he went to make the loan payment, and when he got back from the bank, he argued with me that he'd only paid off two thousand, but he's really already paid three thousand. He's always dealt with the money, and that's worked out just fine, but what do I do now? I'm so upset I can hardly see straight. He gave me such a scare. We just this minute got back from the hospital. I told the doctor your father needed a check-up, and they did some tests. They told us to come back one day next week for the results. Tomorrow was to be the day. Although it would have been a shame to leave Mother to make her own way to a hospital in a strange city by bus, the situation did not call for

someone with a full-time job to travel all the way down there to help. Indeed, he himself found it hard to explain his reasons for taking the day off to come down and see them, especially considering the distant relationship he had with his father, like that between a cow and a chicken, as Mother had put it, ever since he had given up before taking the university entrance exam for the third time.

“*Aigo*, here you are. Was the trip okay? Too much trouble we give you, still hanging on for no good reason.”

Mother left the wooden porch where she had been sitting with his aunt, Father’s sister, and hurried over to greet the son. As a boy, he had been Aunt’s favorite nephew, but now, she sat slowly blinking as if watching the events unfolding from a great distance, her cracked hands cradling sweet potatoes.

“You recognize this one, don’t you?”

“No. Who is he?”

Aunt smiled shyly, twisting her rail-thin body like a coquettish new bride. She seemed to think she was being introduced to a total stranger. Aunt put the sweet potatoes down gently to free herself. Blood will tell, for like Father, she was more than diligent, and could never sit still for long. Even lost in senility, she was always working. All last winter, she had raised a ruckus digging into frozen ground in her effort to plant lettuce and chili peppers, nearly getting frostbite in her hands and cheeks. Mother ran herself completely ragged from chasing Aunt to put a stop to it all.

“I got to go.”

“What for? Stick around, it’s not like you have something better to do.”

But Aunt ran off without responding, dashing down the path behind the house. She might be senile, but her body was no less strong than before.

“What to do about your aunt—she’s so full of energy, she’s not packing it in anytime soon. Even her kids are sick of dealing with the trouble she kicks up. They don’t come around any more—I’ll go before she does, I tell you. If she could just sit still, that would help, but she can’t be still for even ten minutes. She’s always coming or going. Soon be ninety and strong as ever . . . there’s no telling what hot water she’ll get into next, the state she’s in.”

Mother sighed deeply and turned her attention to Father, who was now sitting absent-mindedly at the edge of the porch, and she whispered softly.

“And that one . . . your father’s going off too . . . maybe senility runs in the family. Just look at him, in such bad health, what’s to be done if he collapses? It keeps me up at night, I tell you. What if he’s really gone senile? It’s a pack of lies, all that stuff they tell ya about people who use their heads, how they don’t go senile. You tell me, how many people in this world would you say exercise their brains as much as your father has”

“We’ll find out tomorrow. Try not to worry. Besides, even if he’s diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, they can control it. They have medicines now that will keep the symptoms from getting worse.”

“Only if that’s so”

Unlike Father, Mother had always been full of worries. The whole time that Father had treated him like a cow watching a chicken, after having declared that he would provide nothing but the food owed to a son, Mother had been unable to sleep, worrying like both mother and father over him. When he quit before his third attempt at the university entrance exam, Mother, who rarely made a sound, not even a faint footfall in Father’s presence, turned on him for the first time, yelling her lungs out. What do you

expect? You're on him all the time like a cat on a mouse. He's bound to go against you any chance he gets. The life you've lived, it don't matter now. Just try and find a child as good as our Jae-man these days. What's wrong with you . . . picking on him for no good reason? All this fuss about the university thing . . . judges and prosecutors are the best, they're the best for you, in your mind. And so you can't stop riding him, trying to force him into law school when a fool can see he don't wanna go! From here on out, he can do whatever he wants, got that? Hey, Son, you hear me? From here on out, don't you pay your father no mind. In this world, there isn't no two folks alike, so all this do this don't do that forcing you to be the spitting image of him, this pig-headed insisting, I just don't get it. You're grown now. It's time you did as you pleased. Go to college, don't go to college . . . just don't let your father lead you around no more like a calf with a ring in its nose.

Unlike Father, who had graduated from a teaching college in the days when Korea was a Japanese colony, Mother could neither read nor write, but she had shot back at him with such piercing logic and intelligence that Father, who had a tendency to look down on her for her lack of education, fell silent as a mute. Still, despite the conviction in her voice that day, Mother began to suffer from a stomach ulcer soon after the son quit trying to pass the university entrance exam. Only after he'd landed his first job did she recover, immediately and completely, from the symptoms that no medication had been able to alleviate. She had been watching the precarious turns his life took, unable to do anything but wring her heart. Even these days, shortly before sunrise each morning, Mother still prepared a bowl of pure, clear water out on the sauce jar terrace in the backyard to pray for his safety and well-being. This was Mother's morning ritual. Sometimes, his heart almost rent asunder at the thought that such motherly devotion had

made it possible for him to have achieved anything at all in life, meager as it may be. Nevertheless, even Mother could not escape time and so became ever more querulous as her worries grew year by year. She had never expressed her concerns, not even when he had to take several leaves from the university, which he'd begun six years behind his friends, but she'd started calling him up early in the morning before breakfast whenever the forecasts predicated a shower to remind him not to forget his umbrella. Not a day passed without Mother's prattle: when snow was expected, she called to make sure he left his car home; each time she learned about a food said to benefit health, she called to encourage him to eat plenty of garlic or onions or whatever the pick of the day happened to be. He became so fed up with her that the moment he realized she would not pay the higher rate to call him on his cellular phone, he instructed his wife to lie and tell his mother that he had already left for work whenever their home phone rang in the morning. Ordinarily, the roles would have been reversed, his wife being more annoyed by her mother-in-law's daily calls than him, but she'd rebuked him. How much longer do you think your mother will be around? It's not like she's been this way her whole life, only in her old age, so why can't you just take this with more grace? After my mother passed away, my deepest regret was that I had never made the time to have an intimate talk with her. Do some good while she is still alive so that you don't beat your chest and repent later on. Although he had nodded in agreement, only his head thought she was right, for in his heart, he still felt oppressed and irritated. Where in the heart of Mother, who had lived almost eighty years quietly enduring everyone and everything, had this implacable desire to speak her mind been hiding, he wondered helplessly. Fearful that Mother was about to start spelling out the whole assortment of strange behaviors that Father had recently exhibited, a litany he had heard many times before over the phone,

he quickly cut her off.

“I’m hungry.”

“*Aigo*, look what I’m doing. How hungry and tired you must be after traveling such a long way Wait just a bit now. The wild greens are all prepared, so all I have to do is season them real quick.”

Mother limped with short, quick steps toward the kitchen. At such moments, Mother was exactly the way he remembered her. *Ai, my child, hungry are you, now wait just a bit*. Ever since he’d left home, Mother had always welcomed him this way. Everything else might change, but it seemed that even time could not alter Mother’s devotion to her children, and he felt a quiet relief. But this peace didn’t last long.

At first, he just sat there gazing intently upon the table she had set for him. Surely she had spent the morning in a bustle in anticipation of his visit, but all she had served were soybean paste stew cooked with thistle, three side dishes—aster greens, butterbur, and fatsia shoots, blanched and seasoned—and some sour-ripened *kimchi* from the previous winter. Certainly, they were all dishes that he liked. But as recently as last autumn, her table would have included at least three or four more offerings. The reduced number of side dishes stood as proof of Mother’s failing health. People say that beyond the age of seventy, one’s health is hard to predict from one day to the next even under the best conditions, and his heart sank, realizing that Mother had aged so much in two short seasons.

“*Ai*, what to do—nothing to reach your chopsticks out to, is there? I went out and got soybean sprouts and arc shell clams for you, but it took all the time I had to fix just these things here.”

Mother was at a loss, apologetic about the possibility that he hadn’t yet picked up

his spoon because there was nothing good to eat. His wife would, in similar circumstances, have reached for her spoon eagerly, saying, Oh, no, Mother, they're all my favorite dishes. She would have focused hard on the act of eating, trying her best to hide the embarrassment of having a meal prepared for her by her frail mother-in-law and sorrow for one growing so old. But he was not his wife. What was sitting on his heart instantly turned into what felt like needles on his tongue, and the inside of his mouth felt so dry that he could swallow no food at all. A tear might have trickled down his cheek if Father had not, at that moment, suddenly shouted.

"I've asked a million times, but still no bean curd!"

His near-deaf father's shout was so loud that if he had still been a boy, it would have sent him into convulsions.

"*Aigo*, you want bean curd again after what you had for lunch? Eat what you got for dinner, why don't you. First time Jae-man's visiting in a long while, so I should cook something he likes, shouldn't I, instead of cooking something that only you'd eat? You're no baby—can't you let just one little meal go by instead of shouting and roaring, making a big scene?"

He looked at Mother with shock in his eyes. Was this the mother who, with the exception of that one time when he gave up going to university, had never talked back to Father?

"When did I eat bean curd for lunch!"

"You're turning me inside out. Truly gone senile, have you. Now you can't even remember what you had for lunch?"

Mother talked back without bowing her head for what she'd said. She'd raised her voice as loud as Father's.

“Hell if I can’t remember! Fermented soybean paste stew, that’s what I had for lunch. You think I don’t know that? Making this fuss, calling a healthy old man like me senile!”

“Tell me then, was there bean curd in that stew or not?”

“It was only a tiny bit!”

“I cut up a whole block to put in, and you call that a little bit!”

“Did I ever ask for stew! I bought a whole plate of bean curd asking you to fry it and you never once served it fried!”

“I might just go crazy and lose my mind. That bean curd of yours makes me cringe! I put it in soybean paste stew, in fermented soybean paste stew, in spicy pollack stew! I cooked it for every meal, and now you want me to fry it?”

“Who told you to put bean curd into this and that? I asked you to fry it!”

“Ach! Is it no longer bean curd if it’s in the stew? It doesn’t matter what I put it in, you had your bean curd! What are you up to now, asking for fried bean curd?”

This mother attacking so fiercely word after word and this father fighting back all in a rage—these were not the parents that he had known. Mother had attended to Father’s every word, and Father may have had his self-righteous side, but had been devoted to his wife, a man willing to pick up the groceries for her after the arthritis in her legs had set in at an early age, something not many men in a position of authority such as vice-principal would do. But this very same couple was now sparring like a pair of ferocious fighting cocks. Mother’s eyes were now tearing up.

“I can hardly stand and have to prop myself up with my arms against the sink in order to manage cooking a meal, and you know well and good that my arms are all callused, so will it kill you to just eat what I put on the table? You think I’m still a

youthful sixteen-year-old? It's hard enough for me as it is."

He almost cried out to make them stop, but he held his peace and began to chomp into the food in front of him, which had been placed on the table instead of Father's fried bean curd. But the bitter shoots of the butterbur tasted like cardboard though they normally have whetted his appetite at the first bite even if he had no hunger.

"Who in the world asked you to make this and that! Just cut up some bean curd and add a few anchovies, what's so hard about that? What's so hard that you refuse to make it even once! Just once!"

At that, Father struck the table with his spoon. Only then did Mother leave the room, taking her rice bowl with her, pouting as if she still had things left to say. He and Father ate in silence, but Mother did not return. After ruining the meal with his demand for bean curd, Father dumped his rice into his soybean soup and slurped the whole thing down despite the absence of bean curd.

When he carried the floor table out to the kitchen, Mother was sitting on the threshold peeling garlic, her rice bowl left untouched by the empty sink as if in protest. She repeatedly wiped away tears with her sleeves, whether from the spicy garlic or emotions welling up within her, he could not tell. He stood there useless and at a loss for what to say yet unable to ignore his weeping mother, and finally mumbled a single sentence.

"You should eat something."

As if all she had been waiting for was the slightest nudge, Mother began pouring out her tale of woe.

"Ai, I just can't stand it. Your father's getting stranger every day. Complains about his food like a baby, won't wash himself, so how can I put up with him much longer?

Not enough hours for me in a day to look after him. Ten of me would not be enough. Does he think he's the only one getting old here and not me? Bossing me around like some servant girl."

That Mother was also getting stranger and that nothing could be done to stop either of them from getting old, he couldn't bring himself to say. No, the thought of saying it didn't even occur to him. To him, it was Mother's change that was far more disturbing than Father's. Until now she had been home itself, the embodiment of motherhood, which, without her, would be a mere abstraction to him. He firmly believed that Mother was the only one capable of sacrifice in this cold world of the living where even genes are seen as selfish, and who, for that very reason, was capable of saving somebody. And that Mother would embrace him with endless affection even if he turned out a failure. Not only for him, either. Mother had always been warm and accepting toward Father and his married sister as well. He suddenly remembered a phone call from his older sister a few days ago. *Ai*, Mother is getting strange. She announced that she won't be providing me with soybean paste and hot pepper paste, not anymore, and I gotta buy my own from the stores now. He responded sharply, rebuking her for expecting Mother to be at her beck and call forever. Typically, sister would have yelled right back, scolding him for his sharp tongue, but this time she simply said, in a listless voice, Yeah, yeah, I know, but somehow it didn't sound like Mother. After a long silence, she'd hung up. Only now did he understand Sister's reaction to Mother's announcement that it was time for her to start buying sauces for herself from the store. As Sister had said, this was not like Mother. For him, this mother who was weeping and lamenting, going on and on with no mind to her listener, might as well have been a complete stranger. He dearly missed the mother who had warmed his stiff frozen shoes in her bosom even while she

washed dishes with cold water in the dead of winter. He missed his mother, though she was sitting right there in front of him.

The following morning, Father woke him early. After tossing and turning the whole night, he had finally managed to fall asleep shortly after the blue twilight had started to seep in through the mulberry paper door. He was overcome by a surge of anger at Father for trying to order around his now nearly fifty-year-old son, at this unstoppable, unreasonable self-righteousness that withstood even Alzheimer's, but he got up without uttering a word of protest. He understood that Father must also be anxious about hearing the results of his MRI later that day. Having hit the road so early thanks to all the fuss made by Father, for whom punctuality was as important as life itself, they arrived at the hospital at 10 in the morning, a full sixty minutes ahead of their scheduled appointment. While they waited, Father stepped outside four or five times to smoke.

"Look, look at you coming and going like a mouse scurrying in and out of a vegetable jar, can't you sit still for just one hour? If you can't, who're you expecting to burden if it turns out you're going senile? You wanna end up like your sister, digging up frozen ground in the middle of winter if you can't think of anything else to keep you busy?"

"Who're you calling senile! If you're so smart, what do I need a doctor and nurse and whatever else for, you can do it all yourself."

They were arguing in the middle of the hospital waiting room, their voices raised, seemingly oblivious to the people around them, people who were staring at them out of irritation or curiosity. No, his parents cared nothing about that, and because they had been arguing continuously without a break, he was almost happy when the time for the appointment arrived, the same appointment he had wanted to avoid. The announcement

of the results, for which he had exhausted his monthly leave allowance and traveled such a long way, took less than three minutes.

“Quite a number of brain cells have died.”

The image of Father’s brain that the doctor was pointing to showed several dark spots, which made someone with no medical knowledge like himself suddenly shiver at the word *died*. He remembered watching a TV program once about Alzheimer’s. A pious daughter quits her job and leaves her high school senior son and her husband back in Seoul in order to care for her senile mother in the countryside. While his wife had watched this show with a keen interest, tears welling up in her eyes, he had barely been able to control an urge to change the channel. Once you reach the point where you can no longer control your own behavior, it’s time to end your life. Surely you will recognize yourself starting to act strange in the early stage, even in dementia, he’d said, after trying to restrain himself as long as he could. For a while his wife gazed at him with large, astonished eyes, then burst into laughter. I’m sorry but I was thinking about what your sister once said, that she finds it truly amazing how I manage married life with an android. She told me to pay close attention if you ever happened to need surgery, to check and see if your body is made up of machine parts instead of flesh and bones. Then, as if to assuage his discomfort, she’d added, Do you think that abandoning one’s own life would be so easy? People go on living even when life is so hard because it’s just as hard to die, because people struggle to survive whether they’re rich or poor, a success or a failure, because that’s what it is to be human. Even if he were to admit that his wife was completely right, he was not sure he could watch his father, such a solid, proud man, throw the life that he had achieved through barehanded effort onto the dung heap in his dementia.

“He’s already senile, are you saying?” Mother immediately asked. Father’s expression was stiff, as if he were wearing a mask.

“Well, the brain also gets old, so this is a natural part of growing older.”

“So then tell me, is he senile or not?”

He understood Mother’s impatience, but he was perplexed by her insistence on being given a clear, unambiguous diagnosis. Even if his father was indeed afflicted with Alzheimer’s, his preference would be to avoid a definitive and final pronouncement. He had so far been quite impressed by the doctor’s tactful and evasive approach. He prayed that the doctor would once again be deft enough to escape this mother’s sharp blade.

“One could say so.”

The doctor, now caught in Mother’s trap, chose to hastily continue his explanation before she could launch another attack.

“There are various drugs that can slow down the illness’s progress. I will prescribe some, which should be taken regularly. No drinking or smoking. One or two shots of rice wine shouldn’t be a problem, but not a single cigarette. You should read the newspaper, or anything else to stimulate the brain.”

Father combed through three different newspapers every day without skipping a syllable. If stimulating the mind were supposed to stave off the effects of Alzheimer’s, Father should not be suffering from these symptoms at all. Father had been a man who never let himself off easy, mentally or physically, a man who believed that one was not alive unless one was moving or growing. This man was now gazing blankly at the image of his own brain. Father’s face, covered with wrinkles of all lengths and depths, showed no expression. He was curious what Father could be thinking. Once, back when he was still struggling to measure up to Father’s expectations, he and Father had paid a

visit to Grandfather's tomb. After the ritual of offering wine to the dead, Father unexpectedly handed the wine cup over to him, only a high school student then, for a taste. Father stared without expression at the eroded mound of the tomb, on which a couple of self-sown acacia trees had sprouted up a span in height each. My father died when I was eight. Looking ahead I could see nothing but black. My mother could hardly cook after something went wrong giving birth to her youngest, and then there were my three younger siblings including one just starting to walk and my older sister, still unmarried. It wasn't like anybody spelled it out for me, but somehow I realized that these people were no one else's burden but mine, that I had to take Father's place, so no wonder I couldn't see what lay ahead. I blamed Father for dying so suddenly, leaving me with this burden. Even now, when I think back on that time, I feel resentment toward Father. But you know what's strange. All I saw in every direction was darkness, and somehow I feared nothing. The worst that could happen to me was dying, I thought, and that's how I've been thinking since I was eight. But thinking back now, it was Father who got me this far. At that time, Father had seemed like a mountain to him but one he could never climb, high and distant. Was Father again seeing all black wherever he looked now? He wanted to know what Father would pull forth now, faced with his own encroaching death, after having drawn upon his own will for life at the age of eight, when confronted with darkness. Mother and son stood up, noisily pushing their chairs back, but Father didn't budge from where he sat gazing at the image of his brain. Three loud hollers failed to get Father's attention, and only after he tapped Father on the shoulder did Father return. Father had appeared properly solemn while he was gazing at the picture, but after he turned to gaze up at his son, it became clear that Father's eyes were just as dim as before.

“We should go now.”

Like an obedient child, Father rose from his seat without resistance, but as soon as he had passed through the hospital door, he took out a cigarette and lit it.

“*Aigo!* Why don’t I just die right now? They tell us you are senile and that smoking is not acceptable, but the minute you’re out the door, you take a cigarette to your mouth! What kind of crooked mind you got?”

Despite Mother’s lambasting, Father betrayed no sign of putting the cigarette out. He watched Father inhale deeply then slowly exhale, savoring the flavor all the while, which in turn made him crave a cigarette, too.

“Go ahead, smoke then . . . do what you want, kill yourself or save yourself. If it was simple as you dying, why would I be making a damned fuss when you’ve sure as hell lived plenty long! What kind of burden are you going to make of yourself for your son after rejecting him your whole life for not living up to your expectations”

Mother pressed on, using language that she had never uttered her entire life. Unconcerned by the attention she was drawing from passers-by, Mother began to shed large teardrops.

“Quiet! Who’d be a burden to who! Quit fretting now, I’d bite my own tongue off and die before I’d go make myself a burden on him. Surely I’m going to die from your nagging long before senility kills me.”

Long after they had climbed into the backseat of his car, their war of words continued. Mother’s tears stopped only when they crossed over Solti Pass. When things suddenly got quiet, he stole a glance into the rearview mirror only to find that they had fallen asleep head to head, as though they had never argued. They were an elderly couple in their eighties, after all, and it must have exhausted them, rising so early and

traveling such a long way. The realization that his parents had become physically so old that they could not help but fall asleep even after one of them had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, a sentence perhaps worse than death, made his eyes grow wet without knowing why. Those tears were his first in a long while. Before he could even begin to feel self-conscious, the tears trickled down his cheeks. They tasted utterly salty on his lips. He was not crying because he felt distress over Father's condition but because he realized that time, heartless as a loan shark, had begun to collect payments even from him. Whatever his years with Father might have been like, he had been born to this father and had grown as a son under his wing. And just as he had fallen asleep whining in his parents' arms on long road trips as a child, Mother and Father were now asleep in his car, having surrendered to the exhaustion of the journey. As they had helped his life blossom, he should now watch over them, shelter them under his wing, until they let go of their grip on life, their debt to time, and leave for death. To give back all that was received, that was the callous law of life. He saw nothing but darkness ahead of him. But you know what's strange. All I saw in every direction was darkness, and somehow I feared nothing. Like Father at the age of eight, strangely, he was not afraid, either. As he emerged from a long tunnel, he noticed the forsythias and the azaleas, which had been in full bloom, were now wilting in the strengthening light of spring. As these flowers withered, spring would be ripening in the mountains, flaring to life in the most brilliant light of all the seasons.