



# CINEMA LESSONS

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Spring Short Story Contest Winner

**M**in-ji was waiting for her husband to come home, but the sun went down behind Kumjong Mountain and constellations of lights started sparkling below her high-rise window, and still she was alone. A quarter to midnight. He was late, but not any later than usual. A DVD of Yo-Yo Ma played on the flat screen television. Mr. Ma wore a tux and round glasses, sliding his bow over the strings of his cello and pursing his lips in sublime concentration. Min-ji stared out the window, where the television's reflection hovered over the city. Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. She knew it by heart. She hummed.

Song-il, her husband, worked at the English language newspaper in the city, the Korea Tribune. His English was passable, which was why he had the job, but not great, which was why he would never get promoted beyond assistant editor. But to prove how dedicated he was, he stayed out drinking with the other editors, as many nights a week as his body could handle, in case opportunity should arise some day. That was, after all, how business got done in Korea. Diligence: a framed calligraphy of the Chinese character hung on his office wall next to his diplomas. Min-ji had given it to him on their first wedding anniversary, so what did she expect? She had a diligent husband. And that was why he was late and she was alone.

As usual, a message from him arrived on her cell phone with a chiming ring tone: Stuck in Som-yon with boss, back by 2. In fact, she wasn't worrying about him at all. It was the cigarette that was bothering her. She pinched it between the thumb and finger of her left hand and watched the ember with a furrowed brow. "Cherry" was what they called it in English, according to Gordon. It was an expensive cigarette, from a pack of imported Export As she'd bought at a department store for three times the price of an ordinary pack of '88s. But wasn't that one of the things that Song-il was working for: luxury goods at Lotte World? She put it to her lips, inhaled, and blew a streamer of smoke into the window pane that glassed in the balcony. Then she dispersed the smoke with a flutter of her hand. Spots swam in her vision and her head felt like it had emptied out, leaving only a tingling cloud where her brains had been. A moment of held breath, and the feeling passed. That feeling, she realized, was why people couldn't stop smoking once they started. The thing tasted terrible, and the head rush was sickening—but there was something around the edges of it that whispered *more*. And that was

what bothered her. If she started smoking for real, how would she hide it from Song-il? She put her hand to the side of the window and slid it open a crack, letting the smoke unravel into the outside air. The ember—the cherry—glowed alive with the breath of the wind.

There was no one in the house to detect the smell—no kids, no dogs, no fish in bowls—and Song-il would reek of cigarettes himself when he came home, so maybe he wouldn't know. Fish are the last to notice the water. When she'd smoked it down to the filter, she flicked the butt into the void and watched it plummet, shooting star, fourteen floors down to scatter in sparks on the asphalt parking lot. She chewed her thumb for a few minutes, waiting for the sound of a key in the lock and watching the city lights. She concentrated on not blinking, keeping her forehead an inch from the glass. In silhouette, her shoulder-length hair almost looked like the schoolgirl bob she'd worn a decade ago, except that now her face was thinner. Or maybe "gaunt" was the word for the way her cheekbones protruded over dark hollows on either side of her mouth. She was thankful the dim window reflection didn't show as much detail as a mirror. Over her shoulder, Yo-Yo Ma shuddered under his cello, hovering in a blue reflected rectangle. She lit up again: there was no reason not to.



Eventually, she slipped on her nightgown and climbed under the covers of their king-size bed. With the remote she turned on the flat screen television and the DVD player, and watched a few minutes of *Apocalypse Now*, trying to follow along with the list of comprehension questions she'd copied down in her spiral notebook. Helicopters bombed a beach while soldiers rode surfboards through the waves, explosions going off all around. None of the characters said or did anything that made any sense. She turned it off and stowed the notebook in the bedside table, where she felt around for her tube of lubricant. Reaching under the silky hem of her nightgown, she applied it like toothpaste to her labia, then massaged it inside herself. Song-il would be lit up when he got back in another hour or two, bringing his hard-on home. The lubricant, if it hadn't all dried up by then, would help a little. Sometimes, she didn't even wake up.



Gordon smoked as if he wished he could do two or three cigarettes at the same time. He inhaled so deeply she could hear the tobacco smolder—tiny crackles. Min-ji had once seen a homeless man smoking two cigarettes at once, double-barreled, and now she suggested this to Gordon. “Maybe more bang for your buck,” she said with a shy grin.

Gordon barked out a laugh with a plume of smoke. “Shit, Min-ji! Where did you get that from?”

“A movie, of course. A stupid one, but I understood some of the jokes.”

He fixed her with a double-barreled finger-gun. “Come to the Tito, I’m telling you. You’ll get more of an education in two hours than a whole year’s worth of classroom lessons.”

Min-ji nodded and smiled politely. The Tito was a jazz bar in the university district where foreigners hung out, and, judging from Gordon’s tall tales, it was a pit of debauchery and depravity. A real-life movie. “Maybe someday,” she said.

“Whole lotta maybes with you.”

She wasn’t sure what that meant, but she could see by the glitter of his eyes that it wasn’t malicious. She grinned, lips pressed tight, dimples on display.

They had both already finished their coffees, but the waiter seemed to be keeping his distance. It was surely the English that was scaring him off, Gordon’s voice booming across the café where half the tables were occupied by young couples trying to touch foreheads over their cappuccinos. Picture windows looked over a narrow street, two stories down, where hundreds of black-haired heads bobbed and flowed, intermingled with slow-moving cars and weaving scooters. Neon signs in the geometrical slashes and curves of the Han-gul alphabet hung buzzing from the glass fronts of the buildings, casting the streetscape in a diffuse peachy glow. This color, filtered through the windows, gilded their faces, Min-ji and Gordon. Hers round and smooth, his fat and blotchy.

There was no getting around it: Gordon was abominably ugly. Acne-scarred cheeks and a twice-broken nose, with small black eyes like wet sores in a puffy face. Stringy hair pulled into a comma of a ponytail, and wispy bald on top. A gut like an overly pregnant woman. People stared at him wherever he went. Not only did he stand out for being a Westerner, but he didn’t look like anyone any Korean had ever imagined. He knew it, and it was his strength: his self-confidence was all the more astounding for it.

“Ajoshi! Kopi chuseyo!” he barked across the room. The waiter, an eighteen-year-old kid with a choppy hairdo, snapped his head up, stared open-mouthed for a moment, then grabbed the coffee pot off the burner and headed across the room on quick feet. They sat in silence until their cups were filled and the kid had scurried away. “Never seen a Korean move so fast,” muttered Gordon as he sipped his coffee, black.

“And I’m sure he’s never seen a Westerner bark Han-gul like a dog.” This time it was her turn for the glittery eyes.

Gordon narrowed his eyes at her, then grinned. “Touché.”

“Do you know what that word means?”

“Yeah. French for ‘chill, dude.’ So did you finish Apocalypse last night?”

She shook her head. “Song-il didn’t come back until four in the morning.”

Gordon threw himself back in his chair; the chair squealed under his weight. “So you can’t watch a movie if your husband’s not around? That should make it easier, Min-ji. If I had a wife, I’d want her out of the house as often as possible.”

She stayed on track. “I was nervous. I’m always nervous when he doesn’t come home.”

“You know what his deal is. He’s ‘working,’ right? At a ‘business meeting’ with the boys? ‘Diligence?’”

Min-ji nodded. Gordon had indicated all the quote marks with wiggling fingers, while his cigarette dangled between his lips. She was sorry she’d said anything about it now. But she had already decided that she would tell Gordon anything and everything. She’d seen priests in movies, and that was what people did with priests. And because the priests were utterly alone, and in the service of a higher good, they kept all the secrets. Gordon wasn’t a priest, but he was alone as far as Min-ji knew, and the higher good was the English he was tutoring her. She paid him by the hour, but it felt more like they were friends, going out for coffee and a chat three times a week. “I watched Yo-Yo Ma on DVD. I only ended up seeing about ten minutes of the movie.”

Gordon smirked, shaking his head side to side. “Yo-Yo Ma may be good—I’ll grant that he’s good at what he does. But can he teach you anything? Can you learn about life if you listen to him? Can you?” He leaned forward over the table, slapping his palm on the blond wood for emphasis. “No! I’ll answer for you, Min-ji: No, you can’t learn anything from Yo-Yo Ma. It’s just music. Now Bogart—you can learn from

Bogart. Just like you can learn from Truffaut, and Kubrick, and Cameron fucking Crowe. Didn’t you learn something from them?”

He was name-checking actors and directors from all the movies they’d seen. Once a week they watched a new one in a place called a video-bahng where you could pick out a movie and watch it in a closet-sized room stuffed with two easy chairs and a large television. Gordon, who knew the owners, always arranged to get ahold of the remote control. He paused, rewound, slow-forwarded and freeze-framed, all the while pushing Min-ji to make this or that connection: Do you remember where we saw this motif before? Why do you think the director wants us to notice this? What’s really going on in this scene? A diligent student, she wrote it all down in her spiral notebook. Afterwards, bloodshot and sun-struck, they emerged into the bright afternoon to search out a café and debrief over coffee. What had started six months ago as English conversation lessons had evolved into deep cinema studies. He chose the movies, because he was the tutor. Some they watched together, and others he assigned as homework. All of the movies had been good, so far. And he was right: she really did learn something from them. But it would be impossible to explain exactly what it was beyond a general attitude of anything goes. Anyone—from Charlie Chaplin to Humphrey Bogart to Jodie Foster—could do whatever they felt like. No one answered to a moral authority higher than him- or herself. She thought of all the cigarettes last night, the unwritten rule she’d broken: proper ladies don’t smoke. She’d smoked half a pack. Should she tell him about that? Or was that just too ridiculous? Why would he give a damn if she’d started smoking? After all, even a real priest didn’t need to hear every last detail of what went on in your private life.

In fact, she didn’t learn nearly as much from the movies as she learned directly from Gordon. Some of the movies (she didn’t tell him) she’d already seen (with Han-gul subtitles!) during her college days, ten years ago, before marrying Song-il, back when she still lived in her father’s house and wore her hair in braids. And sure, the movies taught her something, then and now, but in an abstract way that didn’t connect to her life in a Korean tower block. It was Gordon with his emphatic opinions—slamming his fist on the table as he explained why Clyde Barrow was a true modern—that made the abstract concrete. Gordon was a physical extension of the West,

like a nerve ending that grew out of Brooklyn and wrapped all the way around the world, to sit twitching across the table from her.

“It’s time to find a new café,” he said, putting down his cup and wiping the back of his hand across his lips. “This coffee is criminal. Someone should execute that punk.” He tossed his head in the direction of the waiter, who had his nose in a graphic novel at the cash register.

Min-ji reached over the table and put her hand on top of Gordon’s, pressing lightly. “Shhh. You’ll scare everyone with your voice.”

“Fuck ‘em! They deserve to be scared!”

“The coffee is the same everywhere, Gordon. Maybe no place has good coffee.”

She took her hand back. He stared at his own hand, where hers had been a moment before, and sighed. “Min-ji, don’t do that again. Now I’m going to have erotic fantasies about you for the next week. It’s going to be exhausting.”

She blushed. “I don’t mind.”

Gordon raised one eyebrow. “You would if you had any idea what my imagination is capable of.”



It surely hadn’t meant anything to Gordon, but saying that she didn’t mind struck Min-ji as just about the raciest thing she’d ever said. She might as well have ripped her blouse open and climbed onto the table in her pumps to do a bump-and-grind routine for him. Walking alone now through the packed streets under buzzing neon and through clouds of sizzling squid aroma, she felt a grin steal over her face. Music pumped at maximum volume from the open doors of a teeny-bopper fashion boutique and Min-ji chanted in her head in time to the throbbing beat: naughty, naughty, naughty, naughty! Maybe it was the movies, maybe it was the conversation lessons with Gordon, and maybe it was the fact that Song-il abandoned her to one solitary evening after another, but the result was that Min-ji really didn’t mind if Gordon was picturing her naked while he pleased himself in whatever seedy room he occupied. At least she was being sexy somewhere and for someone.

At home, alone again, she surfed the internet. It was true what Gordon had said: she was secretly glad when Song-il stayed out late. There was no one to tell her what to do, no need to put on any kind of act. Her cell chimed: At Kwang-an-li beach, back by 2 or 3. Don’t wait up. In all her life she’d never been alone in a room as much

as she'd been these last few months since her husband had taken the assistant editor job, and she was finally beginning to like it. She looked up the homepage for Export As and read all about her cigarettes while she smoked one, sitting right there at the desk in Song-il's study. By why sit at home alone? *Don't wait up.* The realization that she was free to put on a pair of high-heeled boots and walk right out the door dawned on her like the discovery of a hidden room in the apartment: how had she never noticed before?



Indeed, the coffee was the same everywhere, but some cafés were groovier than others. Min-ji's definition of groovy included low lighting, overstuffed chairs, and jazz or classical playing soft. Nearly every café in the university district met at least two of these criteria, but none seemed to meet them all. She peeked into one place after another, sometimes at street level and sometimes several floors up in one of the glass-sheened high rises, but the blasting Bon Jovi turned her around, or the sleek aluminum chairs, or the blaze of overhead light casting everything in a brassy gleam.

All the places in the university district had changed since her college days, so that when she rode the elevator up to the floor where her favorite café had once been—where she'd once leaned over a blond-wood tabletop nodding to Song-il's intense whispering, feeling his breath on her face—she found that the place was now a shoe boutique. It was like all the high rises and storefronts and cafés in the district were the colored pieces of a constantly scrambling Rubik's cube. If she poked around enough, made the right number and combination of twists, she would find what she was looking for.

When she came across the neon sign over the doorway, she understood that she'd found the place, even without consciously seeking it out: the Tito. Steps went down to a basement entrance where music softly throbbed and a purple glow seeped through the door's frosted glass. She hesitated, twirling a strand of hair around one finger, until two words came to her mind with a smile: Anything goes. At least she could be sure she wouldn't run into Song-il in this place.



A tiny spotlight cast a perfect circle of illumination on her table where she sat in the back corner of the bar. The main attraction in this spotlight was the water-beaded glass of Campari and soda she was turning delicately in her fingers. Every table around her boasted its own spotlight, a half-dozen miniature tabletop spectacles, but the real show going on was the collection of tables that had been dragged together at the front of the room, where a dozen Westerners sat with their arms thrown around each others' shoulders, punching each others' arms, clinking one another's bottles. They spoke in shouted English, and their laughter was like rapids in a river that was about to spill the banks. Min-ji watched and listened without making it obvious. Only two other Koreans were in the place, a quiet couple at another corner table, and within minutes they paid their tab and left.

But the Tito, she had to admit, fit the bill. Her chair was overstuffed and comfy, the music was shimmery with saxophones and brushed drums, and the light was so low it was hard to make out much of anything that wasn't directly under one of the mini tabletop spotlights. Large movie posters hung on the walls, but they were nothing more than silhouettes in the darkness. Behind the bar, a long-haired Korean man sat in front of his warmly illuminated bottle racks, reading the liner notes on his vinyl record sleeves and bobbing his head to the steady throb of the jazz that filled the room like smoke. Groovy, indeed.

Everyone who entered the bar elicited a welcoming whoop from the knot of Westerners, which steadily grew as more tables and chairs were pulled into the group. Min-ji took out her spiral notebook and went about reviewing her movie notes from the past few weeks. She compiled a list of vocabulary words she'd been jotting down from the subtitles—douchebag, gross, recidivism—and tried writing sentences for each of them. Gordon, she knew, would find these hilarious, and would probably tell her that she ought to be a poet. Had her English actually improved after these six months of chat and movies? Or had she only acquired a slightly fattened vocabulary of obscenities and a bunch of Hollywood trivia? It was hard to say. Maybe if she ever got the chance to speak with another Westerner besides Gordon—

“Holy crap!”

Voice like a bullwhip, like all the muscle in his corpulent body had gone to his throat. Min-ji looked up, and, blinded by the spotlight

over her head, saw only the lumpy shapes of the Westerners in their scrum. But she knew the voice, so she smiled. He came to her table, his gut preceding him, and ploofed down into the chair opposite her. His face, leaning into the spotlight, was blotchy with exertion and alcohol, beaded with sweat. “You’ve taken the plunge!” He held out a fist, and she gently knocked her knuckles to his.

“Hello, Gordon,” she said, sunny. “I’m just doing some homework.”

He ignored that. “You’re on the prowl! My God, Min-ji! My faith in the order of things is shaken to the core. Should I call a priest? Hold me, I’m scared!” Of course, his eyes were glittering.

“You’re crazy. I’m just having some free time.”

He scowled at her, serious. “You’re taking a plunge.”

His hand extended into the spotlight, palm up, and she looked at it as if it were a specimen of some strange creature laid out on an examining table. Then the fingers wiggled, she put her hand in his, and he pulled her along.



She didn't catch any of the names, but it was clear right away that she was going to have some admirers among Gordon's crowd. He introduced her to the whole mess of them with shouted names and a pointed finger, and a couple of the men—clean-cut, dimply, red-faced, bright-eyed—smiled at her with what looked like devilish grins. The women were cooler. Did they sense competition? Gordon fetched her a chair and pulled her into the group, and then hollered at the bartender for more beer. Soon she had a tall bottle of Cass in front of her. Her Campari and soda sat sweating at her old table next to her open notebook, abandoned. She sipped beer, licked her lips, and leaned in to hear the story that was being told against a current of laughter and jeers.

Something about an old woman carrying a bucket of fish heads on the subway, reeking. Such a sight was typical, Min-ji knew, especially at the outskirts of the city where some of the suburbs used to be isolated villages just a generation ago. The Westerners, though, found it hilarious and disgusting in equal measure, and tried to one-up each other with tales of appalling sights and sounds on the streets of Pusan: a truck driver smoking a cigarette while he connected the fuel hose to his gas tank; diapered toddlers playing on traffic medians; salarymen passed out in their three-piece suits on the sidewalks at 6 a.m.,

encrusted with vomit.

Before long, Min-ji noticed that not everybody was speaking English. A guy with dark curly hair spoke in rapid bursts of what may have been a Slavic language to a plump and pretty woman with golden skin. At the other end of the table, she heard a flicker of French—“J'en es marre! C'est pas possible!”—and just the sound of the words made her feel tingly. Before studying English, she'd majored in French—a sensible move for a girl looking to find a husband at the university. She'd spent a good chunk of her life memorizing conjugation patterns, then immersing herself in the novels of Balzac and Flaubert, although she'd never spoken to or even encountered an actual French person until just this moment. “Is he from Paris?” she asked Gordon, signaling the guy at the end of the table who wore a five-o'clock shadow and a scarf around his throat.

“Jean-Luc? No way. He's riff-raff from Montreal. Don't let him fool you.”

After just a few minutes, she was starting to see the individuality of these people. They didn't all look alike after all. Some looked clean-cut and all-American, but there were long-hairs too, and a guy who looked Caribbean, and a woman who could have been Arab and who spoke with a lovely English accent. A finger tapped her forearm and she turned to find the curly-haired guy grinning at her. “What does this mean?” he said, pushing a napkin across the table. A Chinese character had been scrawled on it in ballpoint pen with a shaky hand: a vertical line crossed by several horizontal strokes. It was one of the most common characters, one that every Korean knew. “Beautiful,” she said. “It means ‘beautiful.’”

The man smiled a dazzling smile. “I know,” he said.

Min-ji ticked her head to the side in puzzlement. “Then why did you ask me to translate it for you?”

“Because I wanted you to see yourself in a mirror.” His English was accented, sing-songy.

“What?”

Gordon put an arm around her shoulder and leaned forward to shout across the table, “Fuck off, Domenico! Go fuck your pet goat, you herpes-bag!”

Min-ji blinked and felt her face get hot. The guy kept on smiling, and held out his hand. Min-ji shook it tentatively. “Domenico,” he said. “You are truly beautiful. Fat man does not scare me, or own you.”

Gordon waved a fist at him. "You want this up your ass? Again?"

Min-ji's adrenaline was pumping. It was impossible to tell whether one or both of them was joking. The plump woman sitting with Domenico watched them all with a smirk on her face. Min-ji bit her lip and looked at the inexpertly scrawled character on the napkin. "It's funny," she said. "This is a very ugly version of the word 'beautiful.' Maybe it cancels the message, I think."

Now Domenico's grin faded, and he watched her with puppy-dog eyes. Gordon barked laughter, turning heads all around, and he slapped Min-ji on the back. She leaned closer to Domenico and handed him the napkin. "However," she said in a low voice, "the effort is innocent and touching. Maybe that makes it even more beautiful. You should give it to your girlfriend." She indicated with her eyes the plump girl. Domenico took the napkin, folded it, and slipped it into his shirt pocket. He didn't take his eyes off Min-ji. "She is no one's girlfriend. Whose girlfriend are you?"



The drinking went on and on. Chairs got rearranged as more people arrived and more tables got shoved into the cluster. The flirtation with Domenico was repeated three or four more times with other men, and each time Gordon imposed himself and shouted obscenities, and each time it all ended up being a joke. She didn't know whether she should feel flattered by all the attention, or insulted, or afraid. How serious was any of this? Koreans didn't act this way at all. With Koreans, it was all about ritual, and etiquette, and acting the way you were expected to act, even when everyone was sinking into drunkenness and disinhibition. With these people, it was like all the rules of civilized behavior had been trampled at the door. Or was that the ritual? Anything goes. Just like the movies, she thought, with a grin.

"Is that smile for me?"

It was Gordon, his voice sticky with drunkenness. She'd never seen him drunk before, but it was clear that he was swimming in it. He swayed in his chair. His eyes seemed to drift independently of one another.

"My smile is for everyone," she said.

"Hey!" he boomed. "You finally said a sentence that didn't include the word 'maybe.' Can I believe my ears? Buy this girl another beer! Lady, I mean. Another beer for the lady!"

She was already on her third, but soon enough someone set another Cass in front of her. She was starting to feel a little wobbly on her chair. A moment of lucidity caused her to check the time on her cell phone. Ten-thirty. Best to head home, to make sure she was there before Song-il got in. Then Gordon's meaty hand pressed on her shoulder. "Min-ji," he said, "it's party time. Get your shit."

"What?"

"You're coming with us. No one can be left behind. That's what they say in the Marine Corps. A real *choice mission*. You feel me?"

She shook her head. "No, maybe not."

"Oh shit, again with the maybes! You're regressing!"

"I don't understand."

He waved his hand at the cluster of Westerners. Many were standing, pulling on their coats, collecting their packs of cigarettes and slipping their beer bottles into inside pockets. "The party is moving, get it? Terminating phase one, initiating phase two. Let's go!"

"I should go home."

He showed her a dark look. He didn't say a word, just scowled at her as one eyebrow made a slow journey upward along his crinkling forehead.



She didn't know whose house it was, but it was obviously not inhabited by Koreans. Everyone walked around with their shoes on, tracking mud across what should have been a pristine floor. Everyone from the Tito was here, even the bartender, and at least a dozen other Westerners she'd never seen before. English was dominant, but not exclusive. Other languages bubbled in pockets, in corners, and Min-ji drifted around with her beer in hand, looking for the French speakers. She found them on the stairs, and lingered at the banister listening in on a conversation that contained very little identifiable vocabulary. Finally the guy Gordon had called Jean-Luc looked at her and said, "Getting all this down?"

Min-ji didn't know what that meant. She shrugged as all her remembered French fled her mind and left her mute.

Just as suddenly as he'd addressed her, he turned away and went on with his story, something involving onions, a radio station, and a stolen cello, as near as she could tell. She went

up the steps past the francophones and found herself on a rooftop terrace where people stood in clusters smoking and looking over a sparkling panorama of city lights. Kumjong Mountain loomed in darkness behind them. A surge of well-being filled her as the night air scoured her skin, cleared out her lungs. Someone handed her a bottle of something and she took a swig. Burning, lacerating. She uttered an obscenity in Korean, then said, "What was that?"

"Tequila." It was Domenico, grinning. He held out his hand, again, and she shook it, again. He was still with the plump girl, the girl who was nobody's girlfriend. He waved around the terrace and said, "Don't you get sick of all these white people?"

Min-ji shrugged and took another swig of tequila, bracing herself for the sting this time. "Actually," she said, "I get sick of Korean people."

Domenico and the woman both cackled. Then he said, "No, no way. I love Korea. I want to love every Korean I meet." He said this with exaggerated seriousness, and Min-ji handed the bottle back to him.

"That's gross," she said. "Every Korean you meet? That's gross."

The woman pressed forward, grabbing onto Min-ji's slender biceps and squeezing. She spoke in heavily accented English. "You are so beautiful."

Min-ji froze. No woman had ever said such a thing to her. "Okay. Thank you."

"I take your picture?" The woman held up an imaginary camera and wiggled her finger and made the sound of a snapping shutter. "Yes? I take your picture?"

Min-ji shrugged. She reached again for Domenico's tequila bottle, swigged, passed it back. The woman pulled a digital camera out of her purse and was already gazing into the island of light that came off the viewfinder onto her face, waving the lens in Min-ji's direction. She felt blood flowing into her cheeks, and she looked around self-consciously, waiting for the camera to click. Where was Gordon? Whose party was this? What time was it, anyway?

Ka-snack! went the camera. Min-ji swayed on her feet. Ka-snack! Ka-snack!

"Gorgeous!" said the woman. Domenico and his dimples watched. The woman showed Min-ji the viewfinder where her own image glowed on the screen, half-blurred but gorgeous. Gorgeous? "Look at your skin," the woman said. "Is perfect, your skin."



Some time later, a half-dozen people sat in a circle in a bedroom. A joint made its way around, following the bottle of tequila. Or another bottle, of something else. Min-ji had lost track. The woman was next to her, the woman with the camera, and her hand sometimes came to rest on Min-ji's knee. Domenico was on the other side of her, and he reached for Min-ji's hand and held it in his own. Gordon was on the other side of the circle, but he'd lost all territorial instinct. He smiled in her direction, but she couldn't be sure that he could actually see her. In fact, she couldn't be sure that she could actually see him. She drank, she smoked, she passed it on. The woman whispered in her ear, and she understood nothing. Finally, Min-ji said, "Excuse me, what language are you speaking?"

The woman looked surprised at the question. "Portuguese," she said. "We're from Brazil."

Min-ji said, "I have to go home."

"Me too. We're in a hotel band. In another six months, I go home."

"No, I mean right now."

The bottle arrived again, followed by the joint. Swig, puff, pass. Across the circle, Min-ji thought she caught a glimpse of Gordon kissing someone. It was another man, a guy with a black beard. (So why would he fantasize about women? Was he just insatiable? Or had that just been a trick, to hide the truth?) Her vision doubled, tripled, and she blinked. The room swayed. The woman put her hand on Min-ji's back and kept her from keeling over. "Shh," the woman whispered. "Pretend it's a dream."



Sunlight. A voice blaring over a loudspeaker: "Soy curd! Fresh soy curd! Approach the vendor of fresh soy curd and make your purchase!" The alarm on her phone was bubbling, and she killed it with a swipe of her thumb, then sat up with a start and discovered that her shoulders were bare. She wore only her black bra and her jeans. Her whole body was cold.

This had filtered through her dreams all night—shivering, teeth-chattering, reaching for a wool blanket, pulling it tight, but then finding no warmth because it was only a dream blanket, and the cold sank deeper. Looking around, she found the Brazilian woman lying next to her, naked and pale. Breasts pillowy and freckled. A sheet lay

rumpled at her waist, and Min-ji pulled it up to the woman's shoulders, gleaming in the sunlight.

Sunlight!

Panic shot up her spine. Her joints crackled as she got to her feet and looked around for her blouse. A half-dozen bodies lay scattered about the room. Domenico was completely naked, hairy-assed, lying face down on the carpet where a galaxy of coins had been scattered over his body. He breathed raggedly through open lips. Reflexively, Min-ji reached her hands into her pants and checked between her legs, feeling around for any foreign wetness. Nothing there. Then she spotted her blouse: a man she had never seen before was using it as a pillow. He lay on a pile of clothes near the door, and had drooled onto the silk fabric. She knelt next to him and very slowly pulled it out from under his whiskery cheek. These people were animals! Was this how they spent every night of their lives? It was only Tuesday morning!

The most shocking revelation, in fact, was that she was still wearing her shoes. She'd slept in them. Not even animals slept in shoes. She snuck out of the house and clicked her way down the steaming alleyway in the dawn where the soy vendor sat dozing in his pickup as his recorded sales pitch boomed over and over through stereo speakers.



She was about to hail a taxi when she recognized the cityscape of the avenue, and realized that she was only a couple of blocks from her building. She moved quickly, convincing herself that a brisk walk in heels would loosen up her joints and air out the sour miasma of hangover that was eating into her bones. But even as she rushed across the crosswalk she felt herself losing momentum.

Song-il. He would have been waiting up for her for hours by now, and the conclusions he would have come to would be catastrophic. In fact, he wouldn't be able to conceive of what had happened to his wife. He would already be convinced that she was dead, and when he discovered that she wasn't, he'd want to kill her. This morning would be the last morning of her marriage, and she'd be thrown out on the street.

And while the idea was terrifying, wasn't there also a tiny tingle of excitement down deep in her guts? *You're taking a plunge.*

At the bottom of the hill that lead up to her tower block, she stopped at the storefront

of a travel agency. Posters hung behind plate glass windows. The Eiffel Tower. Big Ben. The leaning tower of Pisa. She stood with her head an inch from the glass and stared at these places, and couldn't dredge up the imaginative power to believe that they actually existed. If she went inside (once the place opened) and bought a ticket, could she actually find herself standing in front of one of these grand places? It didn't seem possible. But what if?

What if she went to Paris, right at this moment? Completely free, untethered to anything in the world. People actually went there, after all, and stood in this plaza in the picture and felt the breeze off the river and gazed up at the amazing Eiffel Tower, then went and ate in French restaurants, and drank French wine, and had witty conversations in a galaxy of languages. Beautiful and dreamy and perfect. People did those things every day. Why not her?

And then, intermingled with the image of the poster behind the glass, her eyes resolved on her own reflection: haggard, uncombed, gaunt. But the voice of the Brazilian woman still rustled in her ear: *Is perfect, your skin.* Some people, somehow, found her beautiful, at least under the proper conditions of low light and alcohol and freedom and desire. Would she look like she belonged, standing in that plaza overlooking the Eiffel Tower, with so much genuine beauty all around? Could she slip into that scene as smoothly as she'd slipped into the scrum of Westerners last night? Had she found some kind of key?

Gordon would shoot a finger gun at her and shout, "Bingo!"

She studied herself in the window reflection. A little ember—a cherry—started glowing somewhere deep inside. A decision could be as simple as realizing that a choice existed.



Song-il would never miss a day of work, no matter how hungover he was, not even if he thought his wife was dead or kidnapped. She killed an hour sitting at a plastic bench in front of a convenience store, sipping an instant coffee and keeping her head down as people climbed the street on their way to the subway station. Her passport was in the drawer of her bedside table. The cash they'd been saving for their anniversary trip to Saipan was in a shoebox on the top shelf of the closet. Their Louis Vuitton luggage was in

the crawlspace above the hot water heater. Her shoes, her clothes, her cigarettes, her books of French poetry: it would all take five minutes to pack. Would her resolve last that long?

The clock turned to 7:00; Song-il would be gone. She got to her feet and climbed the street that sloped up and up toward the high rise that stood like a wall against the day.



In the elevator, she experienced a spell of lucidity, as if physically rising up from the fog of drunkenness that had suffocated her at ground level.

She could wait for him to return tonight, then throw herself at his feet and beg his forgiveness. She'd tell him everything he wanted to know, in utter truthfulness. It would be the end of her lessons with Gordon, but that sacrifice might at least allow her to save her marriage. She'd tell Song-il everything—except perhaps for the part about waking up next to a bare-breasted Brazilian woman. How to explain that? What had actually happened? Min-ji had no memory of it, except for those warmth-seeking dreams. Best to leave that part out. It simply didn't make sense.

She paused before turning the key in the front door. A tingle went through her gut. It was the same feeling she got in the movies, when she knew from the violiny soundtrack that the killer was about to leap from the shadows. It was fear, but it was also excitement. She was afraid for it to happen, and she wanted it to happen at the same time. How did movies do that? It was just like real life. She turned the key, and she stepped inside.



The apartment looked normal. No tossed pillows, no shattered dishes. She didn't know what she had expected, but she hadn't expected this. A jolt of alarm hit her when she saw Song-il's wingtips in the cubbyhole in the foyer. She stood for a moment, letting the front door softly click behind her. This was the part where the killer jumped out, with an orchestral strike. Every moment it didn't happen only thickened the tension.

She went down the hall. Would he jump out from the darkened bathroom with a kitchen knife? But no, not at all—in fact, wasn't that the sound of him snoring? She went into the

bedroom, where sunlight was just filtering through the vertical blinds, and she found him there on the bed: pants around his knees, tie still knotted around his collar, face pressed to the pillow and his mouth drooling there. One of his hands lay splayed across the bed, palm-down on the empty space where Min-ji's body should have been.

He'd slept through his own alarm clock. After all, she was always the one who shook him awake and got him out of bed. He was late for work now; his anger would be Jovian. She sat down on her side of the bed and slowly pulled out the drawer of her bedside table, grasping her passport with fingers that shook. Her heartbeat was a running animal in her chest. She was tucking the passport into the back pocket of her jeans when his hand wrapped around her wrist. She froze. He sat up, blinking, blind with hangover. "Min-ji?"

"Yes?"

"Are you getting up? I need an aspirin."

"Of course you do." She went to the bathroom. In the mirror she saw a housewife, in rumpled clothes, a little dark under the eyes but still believable as a loyal and loving mate. Still in character, acting in a way that made sense. She shook two capsules out of the medicine bottle and went back into the bedroom. "Get up, Song-il," she said, "you're late for work."

He hadn't even noticed she'd been gone. He'd be angry about her letting him sleep late, but he was angry all the time anyway. She no longer had a good reason to leave, except for that warm little ember of desire she'd been stoking. "Anything goes," she muttered to herself. And then this: *Am I anything?*