



TIN HOUSE

M A G A Z I N E

HAN GAHP

JUNG H. YUN

There was a mudslide, two villages away. A meat calf was lost, and four horses found.

“In a field,” the boy said. “All of them, see? Four wild horses, buried up to here.” He pressed his finger to his nose and held it there until she looked.

“And then what?” Mee asked.

“Then twelve men came. Twelve big men, and they tried to pull the stallion free, but he just kept sinking, so one of the men shot him. Shot the rest of them too.” He stared into his empty cup as if he’d forgotten something. “My parents would like you to come visit. They said we can celebrate the birthday you missed.”

Mee smiled, and the boy made an effort to smile back.

“It’s been a long time. Are they well?”

He shrugged. “The same, but that was some storm, wasn’t it? Did you notice how the rain, how it fell sideways? Like everything was turned around?”

Mee eased herself up from the table and carried her breakfast plate to the sink. “Eighteen days of rain,” she said. “I’ve never been inside for so long.” She

lifted the lid of the trash bin, then stopped, righting herself before the boy could see. "Tell your parents," she said, scraping her leftovers into a pot, "I'll come by soon."

"Today?"

"No, today I'm going to town. But tomorrow, maybe."

The boy stood up and pushed his chair neatly against the table. "I'll tell them tomorrow, then. You'll definitely come tomorrow."

He smiled again, wider this time, and she thought to call him "nephew" as he said goodbye, but he wasn't a nephew. Only a cousin of the multiplied sort, the kind with names too married and married over to remember well. She watched from the doorway as he ran down the hill, slipping twice in the swampy grass. A poor farmhand, she thought, but still a good, pleasant boy. Not like his brothers. Least like his parents, their manners so pinched and proud. She waited until he disappeared from view, leaving the village spread below with its yellow, wasted fields. Fields cut to hectares and half-hectares and halves and quarters of those. All of them now drowned.

Mee picked up her walking stick and hung the worn leather loop around her wrist. She taped a note to her postbox:

WENT TO TOWN.

So no one would worry.

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Firs and black pines hung limp in the heat. Sunlight pierced through their branches. Mee walked beneath the forest's ragged canopy, resting often in its shade. By noon, she reached the locked gates of the mine. Its hum had gone quiet, and she wondered when the road would be cleared so the men could return to work. Not soon, she thought. The storm had left its waste at every step. Split trees and branches, birds scorched by lightning, and suddenly butterflies, their wings pressed open by the rain. She had never seen so many. Large and small, opal and pearl, some eaten by insects and others left whole to dry. She walked over them and around them, studying their frail bodies in cracks of light.

"It's no use," a man called.

Mee looked up and saw an old man sitting against a tree. At his feet were dead

rabbits.

“Just step on them,” he said. “It’s faster that way.”

“Do you know why they’re here?”

The man held out a canteen and shook it at her. “Come and rest,” he said. “You’ll never make it past the next hill without some water.”

Mee folded her hands behind her back. The boy’s visit had distracted her; she carried only a walking stick and money pinned inside her pocket. “I don’t want to bother you,” she said.

The man waved her forward. “You’re not a bother. Come rest a while.” He cleared a place for her to sit and handed her the canteen. The water tasted warm and metallic, but she was grateful for a drink.

“I found these,” he said. He pulled three wild plums from a sack and gave her one. “The skins are too hard to eat, so you have to peel them.” He dug his nails under the skin, pulling away curled slivers of pink and throwing them to the grass. “They’re a little tough, but the juice is sweet.” He pushed the plum whole into his mouth.

Mee took a small bite and felt the scrape of pit against her teeth. “So many butterflies. Do you know where they came from?”

“Moths,” he said. “Silkworm moths.” He set one of the rabbits on his knee and tied a piece of twine to its neck. “My son was trying to breed them here. Almost had enough before the storm came and ripped the roof off his hatchery.” He tied the loose ends of the twine to a branch and lifted it, dangling the rabbit by its neck. “Makes them easier to carry,” he said. “I found three of them on the road, still fresh.”

Mee looked at the scrawny rabbit, its stomach bloated from rain. “Why is it we’ve never met before?” she asked.

“We only came two months ago. My son bought a piece of land, just up the road. You?”

“I live across that valley over there.”

“No, I meant do you have children?”

“Oh, yes. Yes. I have a daughter. And three grandsons too.”

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“Three! How lucky. Do they all live at home?”

Mee took another bite of her plum. She chewed it slowly. “They all live in America.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Are you the one? The one with the doctor in America?”

She nodded.

He set the branch down and the rabbit’s wet ear grazed her leg. “I’ve heard about you,” he said. “A doctor! Your daughter must be very rich. She must send you lots of money.”

Mee put the lid on the canteen and handed it back to the man. “You’ve been so kind,” she said, “but I have to see the postman before he closes. He’s very strict about closing on time.”

“Are you expecting something? Something from your daughter, maybe?”

She stood up, her legs heavy and stiff. “It was my birthday last week. My sixtieth.”

The man slapped his hand against his knee. “Your sixtieth! Your *han gahp* must have been big, the biggest ever. Could all of your relatives make it through the storm?”

“My daughter’s very busy. Besides, she always sends nice gifts, and this one I’m sure will be very big.” She brushed a leaf off her skirt. “I should go now. Thank you for the water.”

Mee stood up and walked back to the road, stepping gently over a bright white moth. She turned and caught the man watching her, his expression curious. He waved and she continued on, less careful of where she stepped, but careful still.

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Manners confused her. She no longer understood them, the way hers differed from theirs. The poorest saw no harm in prying. They considered it polite to comment on her wealth, to take interest in the details. It was the kind of talk that embarrassed her, though she couldn’t deny her good fortune. She needed nothing that she could think of. Her house was grand compared to her neighbors’. The roof was shingled with clay, not tin. She had hot water that ran through copper pipes, and a stove and refrigerator brought by truck from Seoul. There was too much food in her pantry, once-worn clothes in her closet, and the storekeeper always offered her credit though he knew she didn’t need it, though

he refused it to everyone else. Her daughter sent one million *won* at the end of each month, always without reminder, and always more than she could spend in her village, a dot of a place with nothing to do and few good things to buy. Only a small movie theater two kilometers away and a store that sold western-style dresses and hats that she had no place to wear. The balance of each month's check she put into a tin, then two tins and three tins and now eight tins stuffed with thousand and ten thousand notes. Thirty-two million *won* in all, nineteen years worth of time.

Mee stopped at the edge of the road and bent to her knees beside a stream. Rotting crabapples and plums floated along its slow current. She untied the scarf from her neck and stared at the red silk square, the strange curled design that her daughter said was so popular in America. The fabric was smooth against her fingers, prettier than anything she could buy for herself, prettier still because her daughter bought it. But the trouble these gifts caused. The dyed and woven clothes with labels that none of the village women could read, but always wanted to inspect. The heavy feather-filled coats that kept out the cold. The bolts of fabric sent by fancy postman for tablecloths too fine to use. Colors so bright that she was always seen against the tans and browns of her neighbors. She pushed the scarf into the water and wrung it tight, then wrapped the cool fabric around her neck.

"Hello again!"

She turned and saw the old man coming fast behind her, his branch strung with rabbits bouncing on his shoulder.

"I was hoping to find you, and so close to home." He pointed to a thicket of mulberry bushes. The faint outline of a house stood behind its ragged green leaves.

"Let me help you," he said. "If this gift is as big as you think, you won't be able to carry it back alone. Let me get my son to help. He can bring his wheelbarrow."

"That's very kind, but –"

"I insist. There's nothing he can do today. All of his moths are gone. Besides, no taxi will bring you home till this road is cleared. Please," he said, pushing her toward a muddy footpath. "I'll tell my son to join us. He'll be happy to help."

"I'll pay him," she said.

The man shook his head. "You don't need to do that. We're neighbors now."

He led her down the path toward the house, a small gray shed slapped together with concrete brick. Weeds and wild mushrooms grew in thick patches near the front steps.

“Come inside,” he said, setting his rabbits on the grass. “My son must be looking at his hatchery again. You can rest up in here while I get him.”

She followed him through the open door into a windowless room. On one side was a table, two chairs, an icebox and stove. On the other, bamboo sleeping mats with blankets stacked on top. Cookery lay about the floor collecting rainwater. And in the open closet, clothes folded on a shelf and a single wire hanger from which hung a suit.

“See that?” he asked. He pointed to the dark brown jacket, a cream-white tie draped over the shoulder. “My son gave me that for my *han gahp*, just like he should. We lived farther west then, but all my family came. Dozens of them, from everywhere. And my nieces cooked the best food. Roast pork and dumplings and three kinds of sweets. We had so much, we had to give it away the next day, even the beer and wine.” He ran his hand down the tie, brushing a dried spider from the fabric. “It made me wish I could have done more for my father when he turned sixty. My mother too. Their *han gahps* were nothing compared to mine.”

“I’m sure you did your best.”

He shrugged. “I tried, but still –” He dropped the tie and turned to her. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t talk like this.”

“Why?”

“Because you didn’t have a *han gahp* of your own.”

She took the sleeve of the jacket and rubbed the prickly wool between her fingers. “We should go now, I think.”

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Water dripped from the edge of the roof, splattering the steps with rust-colored spots. Mee stood in the doorway, waiting for the man to return with his son. It occurred to her that only the dumbest of men would raise silkworms in a place that rained six months of the year and snowed three more. Still, she would offer the son money. He would need it now to live. Her neighbors too, their soybeans and hay and barley all drowned. Even the smallest of their vegetable gardens carried off by the storm. Soon they would come to her door by the dozens. Or they

would send their children to invite her for meals or tea or wine. They would talk to her and feed her and refill her glass and compliment her good fortune, and they would make her ask if she could help them, which she always did. Interest-free, for as long as they needed it.

Mee shook her head. It was coming again, another season of debts, the life spans of which she dreaded because she knew that no one liked to owe. And no one liked the person to whom they owed. So her neighbors would avoid her for months at a time, saying nothing more than “good morning” and “good bye” until they repaid the five or ten thousand that allowed them to eat. Always with a minimum of conversation, always with money so worn, it could hardly be tendered again.

She imagined what the women would say after seeing the son with his wheelbarrow, following her home with some fancy new thing they could never afford. Their husbands would see too, walking back from their fields with shovels and picks slung over their shoulders, their eyes narrowed until she turned to face them. Mee wondered if it was unkind, parading

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herself in front of them like that, but her birthday had been spent alone. Not a single visitor came up her hill. Not even the postman, whose car was too old to make the trip well on the driest of roads. She spent the day thinking of her father's *han gahp*, how she and her siblings prepared for weeks in advance. She was pregnant then, and could only make wreaths while her sisters cooked and her brothers carted supplies. But they were long, thick wreaths, each flower sewn from six pieces of fabric, and when they hung above the banquet table, her mother said it looked like a real celebration, and all of the guests complimented her father for raising children who gave their thanks so well.

Mee looked at the suit hanging in the closet. She knew the man would be buried in it, as it was meant to be, just as her father was buried in the suit that she and her siblings gave to him. But this man would live longer than her father, who passed the year after his *han gahp*. People lived longer now.

She slipped out the door as the man returned with his son.

“Here he is,” the man said. “Strong as a horse. He can help you.”

The son introduced himself with a quick bow from his waist. “We should leave now,” he said, “if you expect to finish this before dark.”

Mee thanked him, but the son was gone, pushing his wheelbarrow over the footpath, cutting tracks through the mud.

“Was he unhappy to do this?” she whispered to the old man.

“Oh, no. He was glad to come. But he’s not much for talk. All he does is think of his moths.”

“They’re all gone? Not a single one left?”

“That’s the good news. He found some cocoons in the hatchery, a dozen of them at least.” He pointed to the sun. “If she stays out long enough, they might open, give him a few moths to breed for next season.”

Mee reached into her pocket. “You should let me pay him for his trouble. He should be home now.”

The man swung his arm under hers, lifting her sagging back as she walked. “I told you that wasn’t necessary. My son farmed for fifteen years before he decided to raise silk. And I farmed for fifty before him. It’s always something with farmers. Rain is the least of it.”

She looked at his fingers resting near her elbow, the way the tips pressed into her skin. She thought it was better than fine. “Then I’ll make you and your son dinner,” she said quietly. “Afterwards. You can come to my house and I’ll make you both dinner, if you like. I have this stove. Four rings to cook on. I can never use them all for myself.”

“See?” he nodded. “How good this turned out? We meet a new friend, we get to see that village we never have time to visit. And we’ll be hungry by the time this is done. So we have the storm to thank for this, don’t we?” He patted her arm and let go. “Why don’t you tell my son? We’ve never been asked to take a meal with anyone here. Tell him, please. He’ll be so excited.”

Mee quickened her step and caught up to the son several meters ahead. “Excuse me.”

The son looked at her, then back again at the road. “My father says you’re the one with the doctor in America.”

“Yes,” she said, winded. “I – “

“How did that happen?”

“She went to school there. University too.”

“But how?”

“I used what my husband left me, so she could study.” The wheelbarrow shot a stone at her knee. “Would you and your father like to have dinner at my home when we finish?”

“So why live here then? Why not move?”

“Because I grew up here. And my daughter, she says I might not like it in America, the way people do things.”

The son shook his head. “If I could leave, I would. Take my father with me. This place is for the pigs.”

“But he said you had good news. He said you found some cocoons to hatch for next season.”

The son leaned toward her. “My father,” he whispered, “likes to pretend. Likes to make good out of everything, even wet cocoons. My mother said it was his worst habit.”

“But the sun,” she said. “When you put them in the sun, maybe they’ll dry.”

“Dry? If only it was so easy. A drop of water on a cocoon, it’s like dipping them in oil. Kills them all just the same.” He stopped and picked a stone from his shoe. “I suppose I could eat afterwards.”

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Houses began to crowd each other along the road. Then shops appeared with colorful metal signs. Pharmacies and laundries and lunch counters serving noodle soups and cold barley tea. Men with bright red faces sat outside wine parlors playing cards while women swept dust and broken window glass from their homes.

Mee knocked on the postman’s door and he cracked it open slowly. The dog chained in the side alley tipped back its head and howled.

“Shut up, you!” the postman shouted. “I haven’t slept well in weeks,” he said. “That damn dog hasn’t stopped barking since the rain started. I have half a mind to –” He shook his head, opening the door wide. “I’m sorry. You didn’t come to hear me complain. You’ve come for your package.”

Mee left the man and his son on the street and walked into the small office. Boxes and bags of undelivered mail sat on every surface. She squeezed between waist-high stacks that teetered as she passed and stood idly in a corner.

“I’ll never catch up,” the postman said, searching through the shelves behind his desk. “I have no one to help me, and that dog won’t let me sleep, and my car

is filled with water – ” He smiled tightly. “I can’t stop myself today, can I? Nothing but complaints.”

Mee looked down at her mud-caked shoes. Usually, she let the postman tell her his troubles until he had none left to tell, but she could hardly think of him now. She wondered if she should make a soup for dinner, if she had enough salted shrimp for seasoning, if she should buy an extra head of cabbage to shred in the broth, if she should use her plain dishes or her fancy ones.

“Here it is,” the postman said. “I kept it in a special place so I could find it easy for you.”

He handed her a box wrapped in brown paper, stamped with bright seals from the places it came. It was smaller than she expected, but heavier than it looked. She removed the envelope taped to the box and found a card inside, white with a yellow cake on the cover. Her daughter signed it, adding that the gift was something useful, and her grandsons signed too with fat, cloudlike letters that slanted across the page. Staped to one side of the card was a familiar yellow check, drawn from the national bank, but written out in the amount of three million *won* instead of one. She picked up the box and tore the paper from one end. Beneath it was a picture of a telephone.

Mee’s breath caught in her chest, and the postman looked up from his mail.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

She ignored him, lifting the flap of the box to find a moss-colored telephone inside. The same as the picture.

“No. Nothing’s wrong. My daughter, she – outdid herself this time.”

“We should all be as lucky as you,” the postman said.

She thanked him as she made her way back to the entrance. The door clicked into place behind her and the lock turned quickly from within. The man and his son stared at the package under her arm as she joined them in the street.

“Is that the gift?” the man asked.

She nodded. “A telephone.”

The man tilted his head to one side.

“I live on a hill,” she said. “It costs a lot of money for them to run lines to a hill.” She took the check from her pocket and held it out to them. “She sent this too.”

The son’s eyes followed the string of numbers from left to right. His mouth opened slightly, then snapped shut.

“A telephone is a very good gift,” the man said quietly.

“It is. There’s not even one in our village yet, but when the lines are run, I can talk to my daughter all the time, and my neighbors – they can come to me if they want to use the phone.”

The son lowered his wheelbarrow. “So I came all this way for nothing?”

“Never mind, never mind,” the man said. “Be quiet now.”

Mee’s cheeks burned. “I’ll pay you,” she said, pulling out her money. “How much do you want?”

The man placed his hands over hers, squeezing them tightly. “Put that back now. We don’t need it, I told you – “

“Whatever you think is fair,” the son said.

“No, don’t do that. We don’t need your – “

Mee pressed the money into the son’s hand. “Here. Take it.”

He looked at the thick stack of bills, then at her. “What’s all this? I didn’t ask you for a loan.”

“It’s not a loan,” she said. “It’s for your time. Yours and your father’s.”

She turned to the old man, trying her best to smile. His expression stopped her cold. Mee knew the look on his face. Knew it better than anything, so she chose not to see. Instead, she lifted her eyes to the last of the day’s light, to the violet slowly overtaking the blue, and when the man said “good bye” and the wheelbarrow creaked across the road, Mee hardly noticed. She saw only the absence of clouds in the sky, promising a night still and clear. Clear as if the storm had never come.

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