

KANG HWAGIL

The Lake

Translated from Korean by Clare Richards

FIVE MINUTES LATER and I was already regretting going with him. I fell behind, uneasy. I hoped he wouldn't notice, that he'd carry on walking. But he stopped and turned around. It seemed he wouldn't move an inch until I was right beside him. His smile read *catch up, quick*. I told him to go ahead, that I'd follow.

"It's okay, Jinyoung-ssi. Let's walk together." His voice was gentle.

Minyoung once told me that his considerate gestures sometimes did nothing but stifle her. She's been in hospital for over three weeks now. In a coma.

I went to walk alongside him again. The moisture-ridden air began to mingle with the thick smell of grass, and I could tell the neighborhood was close by. On summer days like this, the odor was even more potent. As we made our way through the mist, an old apartment complex came into sight. The scene unfolded in an instant, as if summoned by a spell; as she would gaze over it, Minyoung used to say, "It feels like entering another world."

We liked this neighborhood.

"We're here," he said.

He walked toward the entrance to the complex. The place seemed familiar to him. The village sits by a lake, on the foothills outside Anjin City. I've lived here for twenty years now, since I was eleven. When I was young, I often went to the lake and would sometimes come across visitors to the area. They'd meander around the apartment complex before eventually finding their way to the water. It was much quicker to cut straight through, though I never told them this. Neither did the other residents—no one exposed our shared secret. It gave me a certain sense of superiority, having long known something others didn't. I would stride into the complex and hold my head high for them to see. Exactly like he was doing right now.

Pine trees lined both sides of the road; dense leaves veiled the sunlight. My temperature settled. I slid my hand down and clasped the

small pair of tweezers I'd placed in my pocket before leaving for work that morning. I'd no particular use for them—they'd just been sitting on my desk, and so I picked them up. A recent habit of mine. Big or small, holding a solid object put my mind at ease—as if its hardness was preparing me for something. It's a habit I'll probably keep. Because something terrible happened, something I'll never forget. Here, in this place.

It was a jogger that found Minyoung collapsed by the lake. The man had thought she was already dead. He said her ghostly pale skin looked like brittle seashell, her face like it might shatter. He'd been terrified—the idea he'd seen a corpse filled him with horror.

I'll never forget.

Right now, though, I felt okay and even thought of cracking a joke. "You know your way around better than I do." Like that.

But I said nothing—I knew it would mean little to him. Since he'd started dating Minyoung, he'd come here almost every day. And since the accident, he'd practically been living here. By now, he may well know the neighborhood better than me.

We reached the end of the road, outside the complex. I could see the stream. Again, he entered with familiar footing. I followed on behind. A twenty-minute walk along the stream led to a wooden bridge to the foothills—the lake was just across from there.

On sleepless nights, Minyoung and I would sneak out and go as far as the lake. We spent the early hours wandering the waterside as our skin swallowed up the moisture, growing soft and supple. We would stand side by side, swaying like aquatic plants. From time to time we'd catch sight of the listless woman beating her washing paddle at the lakeside. People referred to her using her daughter's name, Mija, and called her "Mija-ne." I did, too. The thought of disrespecting this old woman had weighed on my mind, but it wasn't long before I was calling her Mija-ne. Us here, Mija-ne over there, together passing the hours. We never once acknowledged her.

HE CALLED OVER to me.

"Jinyoung-ssi, can I ask you something?"

I turned my head and the stream's fishy odor surged over me. My face twisted at the powerful stench. He looked down at me with that same polite expression.

"The day before the accident. When you saw Minyoung."

“Yes?”

“Do you really not remember anything else from that day?”

I shook my head—I said there wasn’t anything else, that I’d already told him everything.

“Are you sure? Have another think.”

Though his voice maintained its gentleness, the words felt like an interrogation.

“If there was, I would’ve told you,” I replied. “We got some food, went for a cup of tea, and just caught up.”

Minyoung always said it was obvious when I lied.

“Did she say anything about me?”

“Not that I remember,” I said.

“She really said nothing?”

“Nothing.”

This wasn’t the first time he’d asked. The day before the accident, I’d met Minyoung for dinner. He’d asked several times what we’d talked about, whether Minyoung had been acting strangely, what mood she’d been in. It was guilt. He’d slept through the accident. Exhausted after a business trip to Seoul, he messaged Minyoung saying he’d text her in the morning, and the next day he woke up to a phone call from the police. He’d never got to talk to her—it was someone else who passed on Minyoung’s final conscious words.

“Left it at the lake. At the lake.”

No one knew what she was referring to. We had no choice but to look. Maybe it had to do with the accident. If we found it, we might be able to work out what’d happened. Minyoung’s family went to the lake every day. They had no idea what to look for, but still went through with a fine-toothed comb. They contacted the police and even hired a diver to search underwater. They found nothing. And so one by one he called up everyone Minyoung knew to ask about their last conversation with her. He thought he might find a clue about the thing at the lake.

It was me he questioned most often, again and again. After all, Minyoung and I had known each other for twenty years, sharing secrets here and there.

Though I’d been through every detail of what I discussed with her, he still persisted. Had I really told him everything, was there anything else I remembered? The questions were always the same.

“She didn’t seem off? You didn’t get any other sense from her?”

Each time I told him no, but it was never enough. He seemed to think I was hiding something.

People said I should forgive his persistence. The person he cared for most in the world had been hurt, without even a chance to say good-bye. I should help him uncover the truth. But I wanted to know the truth, too. I needed to know why my best friend had collapsed at the lake in the middle of the night. That was why I'd come today.

He'd asked me to accompany him to the lake several times before. You might notice something others wouldn't, he'd said. I refused. I didn't want to go to the lake.

Yesterday, he called me.

"I've found something, Jinyoung-ssi."

When I asked what it was, he hesitated, mumbling something about not being able to explain over the phone. Then, all of a sudden, he said, "A hammer—no. A hairclip, maybe." I asked what he was talking about. He let out a sigh. He couldn't explain; could I come to the lake and look myself? The others said it was nothing, but he thought it was worth checking out.

"Why don't you bring it, and I'll take a look?"

At my words, he sighed. "I can't."

The object was heavier than it seemed, he said. It'd be difficult to move—I'd understand when I saw for myself.

"So, can you come to the lake?"

I couldn't respond. He asked me to let him know if I changed my mind and hung up. He understood me, he said—it wasn't easy for him, either, to keep going back to where Minyoung had collapsed. True. But it wasn't just that; he made me uncomfortable.

I'd felt that way for a while. It was weird. People thought highly of him, and he always made a good impression. He saw Minyoung home every day, contacted her regularly, and always attended family events with her. Last winter, I saw him together with some friends. Seeing him amongst all those people, I realised what a catch he was. Not only was he polite and good-looking, he was funny, too—his presence transformed the atmosphere, and laughter spread out all around him. But then I noticed that Minyoung was hardly laughing at all. To be fair, she'd said she was tired before we met up that evening and had been struggling for a few days with a bad cold. When I suggested rescheduling, I heard her laugh faintly into the phone. He was busy, so it had to be today. It was frustrating, but I felt a little better when I saw him

taking care of her so well. Even as he talked with the others, he never took his eyes off Minyoung. He appeared to be continuously checking up on her in case she were tired. If she was thirsty, he immediately got her water, and he wrapped his coat around her if she looked cold. He even asked the staff to turn up the heating. Each time, our friends jeered with envy. Minyoung—ah, must be nice. Minyoung's so lucky. What a great guy. I'd no idea why he had to be made fun of like that, just for looking after his girlfriend, but I was relieved regardless.

He offered me a drink. I refused. He laughed and offered again. I said I didn't drink. But he was Minyoung's boyfriend, and so I declined him as gently and politely as possible. He burst out laughing.

"Looks like we've got another buzzkill in our midst."

He looked at Minyoung as he spoke. Minyoung had said she hardly ever drank with him—he didn't like drinking, apparently. But they didn't need alcohol to have a good time, she said. I then realized that what Minyoung told me had been the opposite of the truth, though she must've had a good reason for it. Before I could change the subject, one of our friends burst out laughing. "Minyoung doesn't drink?!"

"No. You know she's a lightweight." His reply was confident.

Our friend let out another chuckle. "Wow, she's certainly got you fooled."

For a second, his expression hardened.

That particular friend had just been feeling merry—he'd no bad intentions. He brought up the time Minyoung had gotten so drunk she'd passed out on the campus lawn. How she hadn't come to even when a couple of them piggybacked her to her room. And the time she danced on the table at a noraebang. I remembered that, too. Memories. Our other friends added their own pieces. They were all good people, of course, and didn't say anything to make Minyoung uncomfortable. Like about her ex-boyfriend, or guys who'd confessed their feelings after having one too many. Everyone was having a good time, and his hardened expression had long since disappeared—I wasn't sure whether it'd just been my imagination to begin with. He joked around with our friends and listened to their old stories about Minyoung. But when I turned to Minyoung, her face was blank. She was ghostly white.

"Minyoung—ah, what's wrong? Are you not feeling well?" I asked.

She said she was fine, but her face grew paler and paler. She looked nervous and genuinely unwell. Minyoung said to forget it, but I started

to worry. I stretched my arm over the seat next to me and tapped him on the back. He turned his head. I don't know, maybe it was just me, but his look was cold. Why are you getting in the way of a good time? It was just for a moment. But as soon as he saw Minyoung, he shot up from his chair.

That was how we ended things that night. He left early, saying he'd take Minyoung home. I stayed for another hour or so. Feeling a lingering discomfort, I called out our friend for exposing Minyoung's drinking habits. Why would you say that? Couldn't you tell it wasn't the time or place? He brushed it off as nothing. Minyoung's boyfriend didn't look like the type to make a big deal over his girlfriend's drinking, he said. Our other friends told me not to worry. That he seemed like a really decent guy. That Minyoung was happy.

"We don't know that," I muttered.

My friend sighed and shook his head. *Please*, have some faith in men, he said. I couldn't think of a reply. There was nothing I could say. I couldn't be certain about the situation—I'd simply gotten carried away by a hunch.

Ever since then, he'd always made me uncomfortable. Minyoung had definitely been assaulted. The issue was how she'd ended up at the lake, the police said. It wasn't clear if she'd been attacked at the scene or whether she'd been moved. Everyone she knew was questioned for alibi. He was questioned, too. CCTV footage showed his vehicle entering the car park at his accommodation a few minutes before the approximate time of the incident. It revealed him getting out of the car and taking the lift up to his flat. He cooperated actively in the investigation—if it meant catching the culprit, he said, he'd help out in whatever way he could. He surprised me. Though I knew meeting the police would be a simple matter of "questioning," I'd been terrified all the same. I heard he'd been unfazed even when they asked about the CCTV blind spot at the back entrance of the building. Then there was me, faltering even as I told them what I knew.

It was in the hospital that he—always so calm—got emotional. Minyoung had multiple injuries. Though it was unclear whether they were pre-existing or a result of the incident itself, the doctor had said there was no doubting they were recent. He grew enraged, calling them incompetent. I found it strange—what was important, I thought, wasn't *when* the injuries happened, but *why*. He paid extraordinary attention to whether or not we could know *when* they happened. I said nothing.

Everyone responds differently to these things. It felt like an insult to his grief.

He'd loved Minyoung so much—everyone said we needed to support him. But he wasn't the only one who cared about Minyoung. Talking to him was like staring into a deep, crimson scar; a sharp, throbbing pain pressing heavily on my body. Like discovering an unknown wound. That was why, in the end, there were some things I didn't say.

The day before the incident, Minyoung told me she was afraid.

HE STOPPED AND called once more.

“Jinyoung-ssi.”

He was looking down at me. Whenever he asked something, he would come close like this. He was over six feet tall, so I had to crane my neck to look at him. It was made immediately clear how much larger this person was than me. Broad-shouldered, muscular, and well-built—standing in front of him, I felt the air grow heavier. He looked down at me and spoke.

“Did Minyoung ever talk about me?”

I smiled—there was no good reason to get angry. He would probably push like this until he got the answer he wanted. Minyoung said once how meticulous he was. I teased her for that. You're trapped now, you're finished.

“I told you already. She said you were a good guy, that she felt comfortable around you.”

His tone was stiff. “You did say that.”

“That's it.”

He didn't speak; it was quiet again. If only he'd stay like this the whole way to the lake. I started to walk, but he asked another question.

“Did she ever talk about her friends, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“Girls are like that, aren't they? Say they're talking about a friend when it's really about themselves.”

He spoke as if he was a woman himself. I stared at him in silence—acting like he wanted to know about Minyoung when it was actually a sly interrogation into what she thought of *him* and what she'd said about *him*. Asking not about Minyoung but about himself—I felt like I couldn't trust him. He was convinced he had me fooled, I thought. If I were him—if an accident had put my girlfriend in hospital—I

wouldn't go round interrogating what she'd said about *me*.

"She never did that," I responded resolutely.

Minyoung hadn't been the type to share every detail of her personal life, I said, and she wasn't the "kind of person" to use someone else to tell her own story. I stressed the words "kind of person" to make it clear that he had no idea what Minyoung was really like. His face subtly contorted. He wasn't good at hiding his emotions, I realized.

I put my hand in my pocket. The small, rigid tweezers clenched tight inside my hand. I'd messaged him that morning, suggesting we go to the lake after work. I wanted to know what he was thinking. I wanted to see the object for myself. I wanted to know what was behind his questions. People said he was desperate, but it looked to me like fretting, like wanting to confirm something. Whether I knew, whether I might figure out why it'd happened. Sometimes it seemed he'd use whatever means possible to drag me to the lake. I hated feeling trapped by the thought that he was testing me, and feeling like I was holding on to this secret suspicion alone. I thought I'd better see for myself—I wanted to know what he'd say, how he'd act, the look on his face if we did find "something." Then I'll finally be released from this feeling. Surely.

I called home after work saying I was dropping by the lake. Mum tried to stop me—it was only when I said I was going with him that she relaxed.

"All right, I guess you'll be okay then."

It's not okay. Mum's not stupid. She just wants to believe I'll be okay.

THERE WAS NO doubt that Minyoung had been afraid.

At first I'd thought it was the bus. We were in a café.

When our coffee came out, Minyoung suddenly began to talk. "I've been feeling afraid lately."

"What?"

I'd been typing on my phone, my thoughts elsewhere. Minyoung's words caught me off guard. I looked up. I wanted to check if I'd heard right. But Minyoung didn't reply. She just kept picking up her iced coffee before gently setting it back down again. Water droplets forming on the outside of the glass moistened her fingertips. Minyoung's cardigan slipped off her shoulders, and she hitched it up from her forearms. It was weird to be wearing a cardigan on such a hot day (especially since she'd ordered an iced coffee), but I didn't pay much at-

tention. I was waiting for Minyoung to speak. She was honest but not good at expressing how she felt. When the atmosphere grew heavy, she'd go silent under the pressure. So I waited a while. I'd almost finished my coffee when Minyoung began to speak.

"I saw a weird man on the bus today."

Minyoung had been sitting three rows from the front. A girl with shoulder-length hair, who looked to be in middle school, sat ahead of her, and on the other side was a slim woman, skin glowing from the sun. The bus turned, and sunlight blazed down on Minyoung's seat. The schoolgirl tilted her head to avoid the glare. Her short hair rippled, and soft wrinkles formed on the white nape of her neck. It was that moment.

A man yelled from the seat behind.

"Ah, fuck!"

Minyoung didn't turn around. Neither did the schoolgirl, nor the woman. Their eyes stayed fixed ahead. The bus driver glanced in the rearview mirror and pretended not to have noticed. Minyoung averted her gaze from the mirror. It felt like the only thing to do. The woman and schoolgirl got off at the next stop; Minyoung and the man were the only passengers left. He kept cursing—his yelling hammered in Minyoung's ears. The driver said nothing. Probably didn't want to get involved. Minyoung thought about putting her earphones in, but it didn't seem wise not to be able to hear the man. She'd only been two stops away, but in the end Minyoung got off early. She pressed the stop button and waited, then left through the rear door as soon as the bus pulled up. Only then did she realize the man was sitting right by the back exit. She couldn't remember what he'd looked like. Even after the bus had gone she stood fixed for a while—head lowered, facing away, staring at the ground. As soon as the man started shouting, she'd whispered the same words over and over in her head.

Don't make eye contact. Don't make eye contact.

Don't.

Minyoung finished talking and stared at me in silence. I waited for her to continue while she hesitated, as if she couldn't get her words out. Then finally, carefully, she asked me something.

"Do you think I make a big deal out of nothing, too?"

I held Minyoung's gaze. "What are you talking about? Who said that?"

She shook her head. No one, she said.

“Minyoung-ah, what are you afraid of? The bus?” I asked again.

She looked at me, troubled, but then said it was nothing. I had no idea what she was talking about. I wondered whether I’d misheard—I waited for her to explain, but she said it wasn’t important, not to worry. It was then: Minyoung’s cardigan slipped off her shoulders. Her skinny arm met my eye, a round, purple bruise printed across it.

She didn’t know how she got it, she said. Must’ve accidentally knocked it on something.

“I don’t know. I think it was a mistake.”

Did she hurt herself by mistake, or was it a mistake getting hurt? Something was off.

She was trying to brush over it. Minyoung changed topics before I could ask any more.

“No news from you?”

“No, nothing.”

“Come on, you’re lying again.”

She laughed. I laughed too. It felt like the only thing to do. I didn’t ask her any more that day. I didn’t think it’d be long before we’d get another chance to talk.

I told this story to the police. Their blank faces revealed no clues as to the significance of what I was telling them. But there was something they wanted to confirm—what had Minyoung been afraid of? The man on the bus? They were looking for a definite answer. At first I said yes, and then I said no. Then I said I didn’t know. It was clear they didn’t believe me. But I was genuinely confused. The police said I’d been helpful, that they’d refer to what I’d said during their investigation. Later I heard that they’d inquired around the bus stop and questioned the driver. I don’t know what happened after that. I felt tormented by the thought that I hadn’t been of any help at all. I’d been so all over the place. If I’d had a better grasp on things, explained the situation more clearly, maybe things would have been different. But I still don’t know. What had the problem been? Where did it all go wrong? What about you? Minyoung-ah, what happened to you?

I glanced up at him. Now a far more menacing expression floated across his face. My heart began racing. Not wanting to walk with him, I quickened my step, and he fell behind. I soon realized my mistake. Should’ve let him walk ahead. Realizing I could no longer see him, my anxiety rose. I wanted to get away. The wooden bridge was up ahead. I was nearly running.

The moment I arrived at the bridge he snatched my arm from behind, and a deep, cold voice fell over me.

“Jinyoung-ssi. I keep calling you. Can’t you hear?”

I screamed and pushed him away. He squeezed my arm tighter, pressing his thumb down hard. A round, sharp pain shot through me. I screamed again. He released my arm, startled. He looked bewildered, as if my reaction was completely unexpected. I saw him take a quick check around. A chill went down my spine. There was no one to be seen.

“I’m sorry, Jinyoung-ssi,” he said, warmly.

He took a step back; he was retreating—as if *I* had threatened *him*. I was lost for words. He apologized again.

“I’m really sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

He said he hadn’t meant to hurt me. I’d been walking so quickly—he was just trying to catch up. He was acting as if he’d been hard done by.

“I called out so many times. Didn’t you hear?”

I’d ignored him and kept on walking, so he’d grabbed me without even thinking, he said. His words were natural, almost rehearsed. I hadn’t heard him call out and doubted whether he really had. He spoke again, sounding desperate, earnest. He said he was sorry, he was really sorry.

“It was a mistake. It won’t happen again.”

He appeared genuinely apologetic. I was so confused. Am I blaming him for what happened? If so, then I’m making a huge mistake. The instant a soft hollow started to sink its way into my heart, I snapped out of it. That day, when I’d asked about the bruise, Minyoung had said, “I think it was a mistake.”

Sure. Everyone makes mistakes. Without even thinking. Every day the woman had been here, feebly pounding her washing paddle into the early hours. Mija-ne always had an old scarf wrapped tight around her head. I often asked the grown-ups about the strange woman.

“Doesn’t Mija-ne have a washing machine? Why does she do it at the lake?”

For a while no one answered, but then Mum told me once in passing. She doesn’t like being at home. It didn’t take long to work out what she meant.

One time, when I was twelve, we went for an outdoor class at the lake. I saw Mija-ne again that day—she was crouching by the shallow

water, beating her washing paddle. The boys glanced sideways at her and sneered. Just as it began to feel like something was about to kick off, they tore off her headscarf and ran. It was then I witnessed what I'd only heard rumors of—her blotchy scalp was almost bare. Later, different rumors started. There was no hair for Mija-ne's husband to grab anymore, so he dragged her round the house by the scruff of the neck instead. That day, when she saw the bewildered woman by the lake, Minyoung burst into tears. She told on the boys, and they whined back to the teacher, "It was a mistake. A mistake. It just happened." They were let off.

One of the boys glared back at Minyoung.

"Oi, heard you're a sidepiece kid, too?" She didn't stop crying.

That happened. Here. I'll never forget.

"Were you like that to Minyoung, too?" I asked, sharp-tempered.

"Like what?" he asked, as if he'd no clue what I was talking about. My hands were shaking.

"Did you frighten her like this?"

He looked at me, stunned. There was no evidence of the expression that'd unsettled me moments before. A very familiar face. That good guy, that good person, who made Minyoung's friends jealous, relieved my mum's worries. That warm, kind person. Who'd loved someone, now terrified he might lose that same person.

"Did Minyoung say that?" he asked.

I glared at him. It was like he'd abandoned hope.

"She was scared of me? Minyoung said that?"

Meeting his self-assured gaze, I lost confidence again. I looked away.

"I don't know," I replied.

"Don't know," Minyoung used to say. I had the habit of saying it, too; of avoiding eye contact, of speaking evasively, unable to let on my true feelings. Minyoung knew this well. Yet I always told her I didn't know. The summer I turned twenty-four, the guy I'd been seeing grabbed me by the neck. Despite the purple bruise, I told her I didn't know.

"I wonder why. Don't know how I got it."

Last year the guy had started contacting me again. I didn't tell Minyoung that, either.

"Jinyoung-ssi. I know how weird I must look. I just really need to know."

He continued to talk. He needed to know what Minyoung had

thought of him. When he lay in bed at night, all he could think about was her, he said. The things he didn't do for her, the things he did to push her away—it tormented him. The pain of knowing he may never get to ask her himself.

He took a step toward me. I moved back.

“That’s why, Jinyoung-ssi. Please. Tell me anything you remember. Was Minyoung afraid of me? This is really important.”

I still didn't trust him but even now wondered whether I'd made a mistake. He continued.

“I know it's hard. I'm really grateful you came. All those things kept happening here. Of course you'd feel sensitive, I understand.”

I slid my hand into my pocket and clasped the tweezers. It was true. Deciding to come here hadn't been easy. Yeah, because something terrible happened. Something I'll never forget. The whole neighborhood was searching for what Minyoung left behind, but her mum had never asked anything of me. She thought I wouldn't want to go to the lake. She was right.

What happened here affected both me and my family. And everyone else in the neighborhood.

Last summer, my ex-boyfriend started messaging me, saying he wanted to apologize face to face. I ignored the messages, but he didn't relent. I refused, asking what point there was after all this time. Not long after, he contacted me again saying he was truly sorry, that he really wanted to see me. Those words got to me. If he apologized, I thought, then maybe this long festering hurt would fade away. What he'd done started to feel like one of those stupid mistakes people make when they're young. As the emotion seeped in, I felt a pang of guilt and began to think that maybe I'd been too harsh on him. I suggested we meet at the lake. Some people criticized me afterward for calling him there, but I don't talk to them anymore. He apologized. I didn't accept it right away. It wasn't something I could get over just like that. I asked him what exactly he'd done wrong. I wanted the precise words: I'm sorry I treated you so badly. Hearing that was important. Then he spoke. He hadn't realized I couldn't take a joke, he said. Only then did I realize he was drunk. My body instantly stiffened. I couldn't move. He smiled.

“You haven't changed a bit.” He struck my cheeks with the back of his hand.

“It's a joke. Can't you take a joke?”

I stood, motionless. Everything flashed white before me. I didn't move. Even when I collapsed on the ground, I kept still. A habit.

I squeezed the tweezers tight in my pocket. He said he understood—it's because of what I went through, that's why I can't trust him. Was that really true? I could still feel the pain in my arm. He was facing me with a pleading look. It felt like I was the one in the wrong.

"All right, then," he said, moving further from me.

He said he'd walk ahead and told me to follow. If I couldn't trust him, why not carry something as a weapon, a stick, whatever, he didn't mind. He was acting as if he'd do whatever it took to clear up my misunderstanding of him. Before I could respond, he was already walking ahead. Seeing his image from behind, I trod carefully forward. I'd come here for Minyoung, to find what she'd lost. I picked up a stick from the ground. Holding a solid, strong object in my hand, I felt instantly calmer. I clasped it with all my might. He didn't look back.

We crossed the bridge, and the mountain trail loomed. It was a slight uphill path from here. I looked at the sky that hung over his head. Between the trees seeped a white, hazy fog. A familiar smell rose, and I breathed in the damp evening air. I felt the ground begin to soften beneath my feet, and soon the lake came into view.

WE WENT TO the place Minyoung had been found. He'd been here so many times now, he said, he knew it like the back of his hand.

"It gets a lot of sunlight during the day. There are hardly any insects, and it doesn't smell too fishy either. It's the most pristine part of the lake."

He spoke as if he'd discovered something entirely new, but I already knew all this. This was where Mija-ne always used to do her washing, where Minyoung and I would sit together. Where I saw my ex-boyfriend. It was like he was assigning another meaning to the place. It was here, and not somewhere else, where Minyoung had been found. And where the object was, he said.

"What does it all mean, then?" I asked.

"That there's something different about this place," he replied, full of conviction.

Wrong. It was just a clearing near the water, no more, no less. Minyoung hadn't been anywhere special—it was somewhere she'd visited daily. But I didn't contradict him. It'd only be the start of yet another tiring conversation. Perhaps unsettled by my lack of response, he turned around. Seeing the stick in my hand, he let out a faint smile.

“You really did pick something up, after all.”

He seemed disappointed, yet at the same time amused. Maybe this place *was* special to him. The place Minyoung had been found. The place she'd been lying. The place she'd lost consciousness.

But it'd be the same for someone who'd trampled all over her. I clenched the stick tight again. Though this time my mind wouldn't settle. He surely knew full well I couldn't do a thing with this stick. I was aware, too.

Right. Just like that woman.

It had been at night. She was heading back after a beer with some friends. When she was nearly home, she sensed someone following her. A man. She walked faster. The man walked faster, too. Only a few steps from her block of flats, she ran. The lift was waiting on the ground floor. She pressed the open button, hitting “close” as soon as she was inside. The man dived into the lift. She was about to scream and typed 112 into her keypad. Her hand shook. The man spoke.

“Hey, can I get your phone number?”

She was completely his type, he said. And so he'd followed her from the bar. There'd been no opportunity to talk on the way, so he'd followed her as far as here. The woman shook her head.

“No? Am I not your type or something?”

The woman lived on the fifteenth floor—they were just coming up to the fifth. She was struggling to breathe. The man wasn't tall, but it looked like he worked out. Solid. She stammered out her phone number. The man grinned as he typed in the digits. He pressed the call button, and her phone rang.

“That's my number,” the man said.

She'd always heard so much about those stupid women. The women who open up without a second thought, the women who say yes far too easily, the women who get dragged into situations they can't control. She'd been cautioned far more about stupid women than about dangerous men. Don't look easy. You're cheapening yourself. They were on the thirteenth floor now. She gave a strained smile. It felt like the only thing to do.

“You're a friendly one, aren't you?” said the man.

The lift door opened. She rushed out. The man didn't follow, as if to show what a gentleman he was. “Take care.” He said to make sure to pick up when he called. She smiled again and lowered her head. The man was holding the open button. He seemed to be waiting to

see where she went. She kept smiling so he wouldn't feel rejected. Without taking her eyes off him for too long, she frantically hammered the doorbell over and over. She'd thought her family would be in. Inside the bell rang out nonstop. Ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong.

WE ARRIVED at the water.

"Where is it?" I asked.

He didn't reply. Instead, he looked around and muttered to himself, "Weird. It was right here . . ."

I took a step back from him. He told me to wait there while he looked, then ran on ahead. He really did seem like someone searching for a lost item. But something was off. Anyway, with him further away, I felt calmer. I took a deep breath in. The lake right before me. That place so familiar, just an arm's stretch away. The quiet, rippling water.

Plenty of people had already come and gone. Sometimes they'd find something, but never what Minyoung left behind. Every time they dredged up something different. There were so many objects. A necklace. Earring. Hair. A sodden letter. A thick tangled knot. A phone. Music box. Cat bones. Someone's clothes. All sorts of items. It was hard to believe they'd ever belonged to anyone. How many stories were kept within this lake? I'd felt confident we'd find something. But in reality, standing in front of the lake, I saw nothing. Minyoung was the only one who knew. I turned my head.

I saw him on the other side, up ahead. Something was off.

He was wading through the lake. I walked toward him. I started to run. He shouted out to me.

"It's here!"

"What is?"

Both his arms were in the water. He was trying to hoist something up.

"I don't think I can do it alone. It's jammed."

He was asking for help. I panicked. He was worked up, unable to make any sound judgment of the situation. I yelled at him to get out, saying I'd call for help. But he was determined to pull out the object and shoved his head underwater.

I called home. Then I called Minyoung's mum. I shouted down the phone that he'd found something, to come and help, quickly. Mean-

while he stretched his head back out of the water and took a long breath before going under again.

He didn't come back up. "Ehan-ssi?"

I kept calling him, but the water remained still. I agonized. What should I do? What's the best thing to do? I wanted to make the right judgment, to decide for myself. I was sick and tired of being pulled into these situations. But he was underwater. I took off my shoes and rolled up my trousers, carrying the wooden stick in my hand just in case. Drawing a deep breath, I went in.

The water soon reached my waist. It was summer, but the liquid was icy cold. A dirty, damp texture entwined my legs. Slippery rocks lined the waterbed, and I staggered with every step. A revolting stench embedded itself in my hair. I called out to him. Quiet.

The surface grew still, and at that moment he erupted out of the water. I screamed. He heaved in and out. This man twice my size stood drenched in front of me, a repulsive odor emanating from him. I wanted to go back.

"It's right below," he said.

"What?"

He said the object was right under my feet and told me to feel around for it. I said my arms weren't long enough, but he shook his head. He said it was much nearer the surface than it appeared.

"Hurry up and touch it."

I didn't want to. I shook my head and told him I'd already called people. That I'd get out and wait for them, and that he should get out too. He grabbed at the stick I was holding and without warning dragged it beneath the water. I was about to shout, asking what he thought he was doing, when I sensed the stick arrive at something hard. I lost my grip. I opened my palm and crouched over a little. There really was something there. Hard and solid, long and thin, lying at the bottom. I didn't know which end was which, but it was tapered, and slightly sharp. I felt like I knew what it was, but at the same time had no idea at all. It was evening. The whole area was dark, the cloudy lake growing deeper in color. Nothing but water. I couldn't work out what it was. I wanted to know, but I didn't want to go any deeper. My eyes met his.

"But, Jinyoung-ssi."

I kept feeling the object with my hand as I replied.

"Yes?"

“Did Minyoung really say she was afraid of me?”

That instant, a ripple shot across the surface. Slipping on the rocks, I fell under. The cold liquid embraced my whole body; my skin sucked in the moisture. I opened my eyes—I couldn’t see a thing. The jet-black world trampled all over me, the whole of me consumed by the cold, grimy water. I waved my arms around—my hand brushed over something. The object. Thin and solid, I held it tight. The hard texture stuck to my palm, and I felt completely serene.

So many things, all those countless memories of the lake, permeated my fingers. There was a girl. She’d been raped. Beaten. Stripped naked. Because the other person had wanted it. They’d wanted it, and so it didn’t matter that she never had. Blacked out the second she was taken into the ambulance. People said when the paramedics lifted her up, stones came tumbling out of her you-know-where. Of course, there were other stories too. How cold her body had been after lying alone, the whole night; how she’d just about managed to retain consciousness as her mind spun, murky; how she’d endured it, eyes wide open, yet when a hand stretched out to help, was gripped by fear and shook all over. Everyone took their turn telling these stories. But the sound those tiny pebbles made as they fell—this was the only one that persisted on people’s lips. She should’ve been more careful. Yeah, she should’ve. Right. Exactly, why go to the lake to begin with? Why come here?

Sour, stale water filled my mouth and burrowed into my ears. Icy liquid pressed heavy on my shoulders. I felt my temperature drop. My hair rippled and my skin bloated. Insects clung to my eyeballs. Why go to the lake? Why come here? What do you mean? You wanted it. That’s why you followed me here. No? Water choked down my throat, and I coughed into the coal-black water. I gripped tighter round the object. I clasped it firm and stretched my legs downward. My toes just about scraped the bottom, and I felt my shoulders rise above the surface. I pushed out my head.

Air coursed against my face. Spongy objects flowed out my throat, and a stagnant, fishy taste sat on my tongue. I breathed in and out. Lifting my head, I saw him. Clasped in his left hand was the wooden stick. He said something, but I couldn’t make it out. My ears were blocked; I could hear nothing but the sound of my own breathing. Long ago, Mija-ne had sat at the lake, gazing bewildered at the boys as they ran off with her headscarf. Minyoung began to cry. I’m scared. I’m scared.

I placed my hand on her back. Forget about them. It's nothing to do with you. We're not like her. The boys stared back at us. It was unclear who they were talking to.

“Oi, heard you're a sidepiece kid, too?”

The boy looked at me. I let my hand slip from Minyoung's shoulders. It felt like the only thing to do. Minyoung continued to cry.

He cut through the water toward me. A dark shadow shrouded my head. His body released the stench of the lake. Grasping beneath the water, I could feel the object's texture distinctly. It was so solid. At that moment, he spoke to me.

“Do you think I make a big deal out of nothing, too?”

I slowly met his gaze. Then I did what I had to. It felt like the only thing to do.

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