

BY THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *PLEASE LOOK AFTER MOM*

I WENT TO SEE MY FATHER

A Novel



KYUNG-SOOK SHIN

TRANSLATED BY ANTON HUR

I WENT TO SEE MY FATHER

ALSO BY KYUNG-SOOK SHIN

Violets

The Court Dancer

The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness

I'll Be Right There

Please Look After Mom

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ASTRA HOUSE  NEW YORK

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About the Author

About the Translator

Some time ago, when I told my father I would write about him, he replied: But what have I ever done with this life?

You've done so much, I said.

I've done nothing at all. He sighed. All I've done is live through it.

CHAPTER 1

IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE I'VE SEEN YOU

When my mother set out with my younger sister to be taken to a hospital, my father was left all alone in the old house in the city of J—.

If I hadn't heard from my sister that Father wept at the gate as Mother left home, I wouldn't have thought to go down to J— and stay with him. It had been over two years since I'd been there. My siblings used to take turns visiting our parents in J— on the weekends, cutting Father's hair or buying groceries, stocking their fridge with enough food to last a week—the filial duties they'd been fulfilling for years. Duties I'd been exempt from so far. In the group chat the youngest started, where he announced whose turn it was to go down to J— and on which weekend, I simply lurked in the background. After I lost my daughter, the relationships I'd depended on had either shattered or crumbled away. The first thing I did was minimize contact with my parents. I didn't want them to worry; they would instantly pick up on the sadness in my voice or the slightest shade of gloominess on my face. I had too much travel coming up, I would just keep telling them. I'd say that there was simply no way I could make it down to see them for a while. And now my protectively frozen heart was cracking at the news of Father's tears. *Ever since I left my hometown, Father has been calling me back*—is what I almost wrote just now, but that isn't quite right. Father has never asked me for anything. Whenever I heard from my mother or siblings that something was off with Father, I called him or got on a train to go and see him. Because if I didn't do that, my thoughts about him would grow to the point that I wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything else. After a sad silence at this news that Father had wept, I asked, *Why did he cry?* And my sister answered, *I don't know.* What with my asking why he cried and her replying she didn't know—we both sighed in unison. Mixed in with my silence was a wisp of this

thought: Why didn't you suggest Father come with you when you picked up Mother? But, unprompted, my sister answered: It only occurred to me to ask him to come when I realized he would be left all alone.

—Oh, unni. I feel like I've left a child behind on a riverbank ...

Her voice trailed off before she spoke again.

—When we were at the gate I asked, Father, will you come with us? And he said he wouldn't. Even as he was crying.

What could he have been feeling, watching my sister take my sick mother up to Seoul? Annoyed by the theatrics, Mother had reportedly said, Why are you crying? Am I going off to die? I'm coming back, aren't I? So why don't you finish up with your dental work while I'm gone? My sister initially thought she was consoling him, but Mother was in tears as well. The scene was so clear in my mind that, before I could stop myself, I sighed again. My little sister blurted out:

—You'd have thought I was ripping them apart for all of eternity.

Mother was to check into the hospital tomorrow. Even if I never went down to J— or hardly ever called my parents, I always knew what was going on because of the family group chat. Because my siblings and I were used to it now, discussing things that were happening to our parents. Including my little sister, who dropped off Mother at my eldest brother's house and called me on her way back home.

—But unni, they all do that, apparently.

—... What?

—The sister-in-law at eldest oppa's house said they all do that.

—They all do what?

—When I mentioned Father crying, she said all fathers did that and I shouldn't feel bad about it. She said she took her own mother to a hospital in Seoul when she got sick, and her father cried.

Our sister-in-law's father passed away two years ago.

—I guess all fathers are like that. She said I shouldn't take it too much to heart. I really shouldn't have called you, unni.

My sister liked to square away things that bothered her, but it didn't seem to be working very well in this case because her voice cracked when she said, *So don't think too much about it.*

—Father is getting dental work done?

She didn't answer my question. It was probably a silent admonishment for my recent lack of concern for my family. My youngest sibling had mentioned Father going to a dentist in the group chat. The

dentist in town evidently told him to bring a spouse or a child to escort him next time. Father ended up taking his sister's son who lived nearby. "His sister's son" makes our cousin sound like a child, but he's actually well past sixty. Father had wanted his dental treatments to be kept a secret even from Mother, but our cousin ended up calling and telling the youngest about it. Even as my other siblings went on about Father's treatments, I could only stay out of it and wonder, Would he be able to bear it? while feeling too disconcerted to participate. Since that discussion had happened a mere month ago and I'd forgotten already, there was nothing I could say in my defense about my neglect. My little sister, perhaps sensing how she'd struck a nerve, said, You were going through a lot back then, it's understandable that this stuff slipped your attention, and abruptly ended the call. *This stuff ...* My sister's words left a weight that pulled me down into my chair. After two hours of sitting in utter helplessness, I booked a train ticket to J—, packed up my laptop, and left a message in the group chat saying I was going to see Father. That I would stay with him while Mother was in the hospital. Perhaps surprised after my years of silence, the entire family merely read my messages yet made no reply. And as I waited for the taxi that would come and take me to Seoul Station, the new doorplate on which I had engraved my daughter's name caught my eye. I stretched out my hand and brushed my fingertips over her name and the blue salamander design I'd found in her sketchbooks and had cut into the bronze.

Father wept ... This wasn't the first time I'd heard those words.

After I graduated from middle school and left J—, Father was said to have wept for four days. When Mother came back from seeing me all the way up in Seoul, she saw that Father's eyes were swollen, and the swelling didn't go down for four days. He would weep as he dipped a gourd into makkeolli rice wine. Weep as he got onto his bicycle with the large rack on his way to the wholesaler in town for more cigarettes. This was back when Father ran a general store by the tracks at the edge of town. *Father had what ...?* The news that Father had wept after sending me off left me stunned. It was unimaginable; Mother had said it was the first she had seen him cry as well. *That little thing, that half-grown thing*, he reportedly kept saying, meaning me. When I heard about it, I joked that I had finished growing in middle school, and that 163 cm wasn't little at all.

This was the second store he had ever managed.

Who owned that store by the train tracks? About the time I was in second or third grade, Father took over that store and then gave it up, but then managed it again when I became a middle school student. Calling it a dry goods store might make you think of the supermarkets or convenience stores that are so common these days, but it wasn't anywhere near that size; it was what we used to call a "little spot," which was just a narrow, modest little space in a country village. The displays held an inventory of bubblegum, bread, caramel candies—things that were there mostly for display and could be inventoried in five minutes. Its real source of income was cigarettes. There was also a big earthen jar buried inside the store that stored makkeolli delivered from a rice winery, and it was always surrounded by the smell of fermented rice with a measuring gourd made of firwood nearby. Father would scoop up the wine in the gourd ladle and pour it into a kettle before handing it over to customers. The customers were mostly people who lived in the village or those who had to go farther in toward Jinsan-ri, Samsan-ri, or Cheonan, to get home. Around sunset, the people who had worked in the fields all day would come to Father's store and drink makkeolli, and during those hours, it was hard to tell who was the customer and who was the shopkeeper. Often there would be yut traditional board games late into the night and the men would bet on soju. A random memory I suddenly recall is of a bunch of long, black rubber bands hanging on the door of that store. The black strands spread like the branches of a willow tree. Whenever I had an errand from Mother or needed to get money from Father, I used to wind the bands around my hand and call out, Father! It wasn't easy asking him for money, which often led to me pulling at those bands for ages without saying anything. People occasionally bought them. On sunny days, the villagers would open the lids of their doenjang or gochujang earthenware jars, covering the mouths with linen. The bands were used to keep the linen from flying away in the wind. The store was that kind of place. It sold things someone might need immediately and spare them a trip to town, all sorts of country life accouterments displayed on shelves or inside glass cases. When I left J —, the store was where I went to say goodbye to Father. And just as always, I wound the rubber bands around my hand and called out, Father! But just then, the bus going to the train station pulled up right in front of the store. It was night; if I missed that bus, I would have to walk all the way to the station. And even if I could walk it, I would probably arrive after the last train had left. Anxious, I kept calling into the dark store,

Father! Father!

For all my life, whenever I've had to part with someone, I would hear an echo of my own voice from that time.

Whenever I think of what I left behind in that place, I remember my father standing there all alone as I finally shouted, Father, I have to go, and ran for the bus. The bus had stopped, Father was still inside the store, and I shouted, Father, I have to go now ... And there I was, climbing on board. Before the doors shut, I leaned out to look one more time at Father's store. Inside, I tried to open a window, but they were sealed shut. With one palm pressed against the windowpane, I stared out to where Father stood in the dim light. He had rushed out of the store, a slipper on one foot and a shoe on the other, standing stock-still, too upset to even wave goodbye as he stared after the bus that was taking me away from him. I had let go of the rubber bands so abruptly that they were still swaying next to his silhouette. The light coming from inside the store cast shadows and blotches on the dark expression on his face. The bus began to pull away before I had a chance to shout goodbye to him. I think about that moment from time to time. About how long he must've stood there after the bus had left. About what he must've felt staring down that dark road, long after the bus had disappeared. About how long he must've waited before going back inside the store. All throughout my city life, when I think of how he must've gone back into that run-down little shop and wept, my hand goes to my forehead, my heart calms down, and I feel a kind of patience and endurance in the face of most things I may be dealing with in the current moment. The old bench inside the shop where people sat to drink makkeolli, the gourd ladle that bobbed around in the jar, the beer bottles he kept cold in the summer in a barrel filled with water ... and inside the dark backroom of that store, his buk drum, his drumstick, and—

An almost black wooden chest with a lock.

Inside the chest was the money Father made from running the store. The 100 won bills with King Sejong's face, laid flat and stacked over each other, the king's face as flat as the bills. There were a couple of 500 won bills from time to time, and maybe even a 1,000 won note. And the coins. I first saw the faces of Admiral Yi Sun-sin and the philosopher Yi Hwang along with the armored geobukseon turtle ship on those coins. When I went to get spending money from him before school—for all those little

things children needed to buy—Father would mop the floor of the shop before asking how much I needed. Saying the amount made my face go red and my heart beat fast. Regardless of my blushing or my beating heart, Father put the coins in my hand. He never bade me to be careful with it or to study hard in school. If he was wiping things down, he would dry his hands on a towel, open the chest, take out the amount I needed, lock eyes with me as he put it in my hand, pat my head—and that was it. He made that wooden chest with his own hands when he first started working at that store in his thirties. It was just big enough to hold about five books. He was much younger than I am now. What was on his mind as he crafted its sides and hinges and lock? The chest, which I could sit on, aged beautifully as time passed. Admiring every detail including the neatly attached lock, I almost couldn't believe Father had created it himself. Once he passed over the store on to someone else, the chest just lay around the living room for a while. I was once surprised to find a dead bird in it—one of my older brothers had put it there. The chest must've been used by my siblings from time to time to store things. But it was generally thought of as a useless object, with one person moving it here and another moving it there. It was waiting to be made use of until it became mine one day. I put my crayons inside to claim it, or I'd put early windfall persimmons so they'd ripen faster, or I'd store dog-eared books borrowed from school. Sometimes, I'd put my diary in there after clasp the lock shut with a satisfying snap. When Father went back to running the store, the chest that had briefly been mine went back to being his cash chest again. It's occurred to me now that the two times he stepped in to run that store were times when my family needed money the most. When his six children entered middle and high school, one by one. When Father gave up the shop a second time, did the chest return with him as well? That would've been after I had left home. I never saw that chest after he quit the second time. The person who succeeded him would need someplace to store their money, so perhaps Father left it behind.

Some objects just disappear like that. Not thrown away, not taken out, not donated or destroyed, just lost in time at some point and then they slowly fade from our memory. Leaving behind an echo of *It was like that, it was like that back then ...*

Father was born in our house in J— in the early summer of 1933. He wasn't always the eldest son. He had three older brothers and two older

sisters—he was the sixth, in fact—but an epidemic one year took away his older brothers and he became the eldest son. Of a head family, no less. My grandfather, not rumored to be a great physician but a licensed doctor of Eastern medicine nevertheless, was so filled with fear from having lost three sons at once that he forbade my father from attending school. Keeping him at home, he taught him *The Four Books* and made him memorize sayings from *The Mirror that Lights the Soul*. Father can still recite the things he learned from my grandfather. *When one sleeps one does not sleep slanted, when one sits one does not sit uncentered, when one stands one does not lean on one's left foot ... The ears must listen not to bad tidings, the eyes must see not the faults of others, rotten wood cannot be sculpted, and a wall of rotten clay cannot be plastered ... One must not find oneself precious and others beneath oneself ... If it is not a good seat one must not sit in it, one's eyes must not turn to flashy colors ... Teach others, sprinkle water, sweep, be hospitable, know how to withdraw, love one's parents, raise one's teachers, keep close one's friends ...* Once he started to recite, it was like unraveling a spool of thread, and I would ask, How can you still recite all of this? And he would answer, Because my father taught me, and would pause in his recitation to say, I wish he'd sent me to school instead, briefly revealing his resentment toward his father. If my grandfather had not been cowed by the fear of disease and sent Father to school, would Father have lived a different life? Would he have been able to leave home one day? I tried to console Father by saying, If you had gone to school in those days, you probably would have had to change your name to a Japanese one. But Father did not go to school. He went out into the fields instead. He turned the loam and planted rice. When he was fourteen, there was another epidemic in the village. And my grandfather, who had prevented my father from going to school because of disease, caught the disease himself. If only he had not visited family then, Father often said when he talked about my grandfather. My grandfather's eldest uncle had caught the disease, and my grandfather himself came down with it after having gone to his home with medicinal herbs to treat him. My grandmother, who had nursed my grandfather, also became infected. That summer, Father lost both his parents in just two days.

Father was working in the fields on the day he lost his father at fourteen.

I was sharpening my plow at the Yeonjeong-ri field when Father suddenly appeared

before me and came wading into the rice paddy water, saying I shouldn't be using the plow like that. And he fixed the way I held it and he pressed my shoulder and said that in these times, we needed to learn how to properly handle the ox and plow if we wanted to survive. And after this advice, he waved his hand and suddenly disappeared. One moment he was saying I should take care of the ox, and the next, I blinked and he was gone. He was quarantined at home. I had barely seen his face there, and it was strange that he had come all the way down to the field. I had a pain in my heart about it. I put the plow down in the water and ran home, but Father had spurted blood from his nose, splattering the very ceiling and ... They said if you lived five days after getting that disease, you would get better. There were so many people who didn't last five days, got covered in straw mats, and then carried away on wagons. Father had just one more day to go, and we were already thinking he'd made it. We were hoping for time to pass. But on the fifth day, he went just like that. Father died, my mind went dark, I couldn't see a thing. What was I to do now? How am I to live? I cried out to the land and the sky, Why do you do this to me? But my eldest aunt hugged me and said she was not going anywhere, that she would live with me, that I should not fear or cry. I still hear her saying that to me to this day.

At the beginning of every semester I wrote "farmer" on the form where they asked for my father's occupation, but he didn't seem like a farmer to me; whether he was growing rice sprouts in the seedbeds or heading to the rice paddies with a shovel during droughts, there was something awkward about him. As a child I must've thought so because Father did not seem to really concentrate on farming as other fathers did. Not only did he manage a store but he also built stables for cows and hunted birds with a shotgun when there was no farming work to be done. Sometimes, he left home for entire winters saying he was going to get work. I have no idea if he managed to save up any money then, but he always returned when seeds needed planting in the seedbeds to be sprouted for rice. It could've simply been the case that farming wasn't enough to survive and he had to take on whatever work he could to pay our bills, but in my child's eye, all I could see was that he didn't really seem to be a farmer. Perhaps it was also because his face wasn't darkened by the sun but was rather pale. Or that, unlike the other strong-legged fathers who dug up wheelbarrow loads of sweet potatoes from mountain fields, my father was bedridden from time to time. Or that he sometimes wore a leather jacket, put pomade in his hair, and burned rubber on a motorcycle. These memory fragments of my father were impressed upon my mind as him not farming very well and his heart belonging elsewhere.

Father spent his entire life on that lot in J—, knocking down the house twice and rebuilding on the same spot. Any mention of the year 1933 gives me pause as Father was born in that year. That's how I learned that the Korean Language Society's announcement of the "Draft for Standardized

Korean Orthography” happened in 1933, too. It was right in the middle of the Japanese occupation. My heart swells—how extraordinary that people would publish such a document in times of violent oppression! But then comes the realization that simultaneous to this achievement were the clear-eyed, objective perspectives and the shunning of sentimentality by writers like Hemingway in America, which disconcerts me. But not only that. To think that Picasso, whose work still feels fresh to this day, had already realized much of his artistic vision by that time makes me fall into a void of helplessness. Some people are born into love and attention and support from their parents, live their lives in this world expressing everything they want to, and leaving behind their immortal names. Then others, like Father, are born in a completely ordinary farming house far from the then town of J—, in the middle of nowhere in southern Korea, prevented from setting foot in school and never leaving home except for survival itself, living a life of dust. Not to mention having his young daughter turn away from him for no apparent reason.

Whenever I think of Father, I always think of a certain bridge in my hometown of J—. More accurately, I think of when I was a middle school student and looked away from my father on that bridge.

Our home was about four kilometers from town. I walked the ten li distance to my elementary school on a road through clouds of dust and pebbles kicked up by my feet. Nowadays there’s a straight, paved road three kilometers long. J— is a city now, but at the time when I bumped into my father on that bridge, it was merely a town. The bridge connected the two major neighborhoods and was called Daeheung-ri. Who knows why it had such a name; I looked up the name’s origins one time, but I found nothing. The bridge was in Namsan-ri, not Daeheung-ri. J— didn’t even have a place called Daeheung-ri. The only information on the bridge was that it had been constructed during the Japanese occupation. I remember people saying, The bridges those Jap bastards built are the sturdiest. Homeless people lived in tents under it, and anyone passing by the bridge could see how they lived. They washed potatoes in the river, put pots on fires, defecated into the river, and when it was hot, took off their clothes and bathed there. We could see them in the fields when the harvest was over. They scavenged for potatoes that had been missed and rice stalks that had been dropped. When it was dark, they came out from underneath the bridge, sat around a fire on the riverbank, and sang songs.

You could smell the smoke while walking across the bridge. You couldn't see them in the winter when they would wear everything they could bear to wear, covering themselves in whatever they could find and never emerging from their tents. They rendered themselves invisible from the bridge. In the spring, a market for selling ducks and chicks would open on the riverbank, and they would finally come out to get some sun. One spring, I saw one of the women had a swollen belly, and eventually heard a baby's cries coming from under the bridge as I crossed it. Around the time I left J—, a public landscaping project left the space under the bridge paved flat. The homeless no longer lived there. Whenever I see city people on the news protesting about another forced relocation, I wonder about the people who had to leave. Where could they have moved to?

At first, the only bridge across J—'s long river was Daeheung-ri, but later on there were two more built upriver nearby the high school and two downriver in Yeonji-dong and by the train station. Despite the landscaping, the river still overflowed during heavy rainstorms and the bridge would look as if it were floating. Sometimes, the rough waters even threatened to overwhelm it. The bridges that were built later would often be submerged or collapse. People would say, The bridge has disconnected. Spring rains disconnected the bridges upriver and summer monsoons disconnected the ones downriver. Embarrassingly enough, only Daeheung-ri, built during the Japanese occupation, withstood any and all amount of rain. Some would praise it as the best little bridge in the city of J—, while others would remark snidely that it was clear evidence the Japanese had every intention of holding on to our land forever.

I ran into my father on that bridge.

The bridge connected the edge of town on this side to downtown on that side, and the middle school, fire station, crossroads market, administrative building, police station, and courthouse were on that side. The village I was born in was about four kilometers away from the outermost edge of town. The children of our village attended elementary school on the edge of town and most of us walked there. There were many paths to school; once you went past the twisting alleys leading from our front door, there was a bit of road you could either keep following or take a detour into a path by the Irrigation Association offices. When I didn't have much time, I would follow the road, but if I had a few minutes to

spare, I took the detour that led me to the Irrigation Association dyke route. Beneath the dyke were rice fields. In the spring, in the masses of weeds by the dyke road, morning glories would bloom with heaps of wild strawberries scattered in between. I would thrust my hand through the tangles of dew-laden morning glories to pick the fruit. Putting my bag down on the dyke, I reached so far down that my shirt rode up my back, and I'd stretch my hand toward the strawberries that were just beyond my grasp—which sometimes earned me a bleeding scratch or two from thorns—and manage to grasp a red berry, a joy I could taste only on the way to school. Some weren't ripe but looked like they could be the next morning, and those I'd pull closer toward the road and hide so other children could not spot them from the dyke, sometimes marking the spot with an extra tangle of morning glory vines. Once I got off the Irrigation Association road, my trousers would be heavy with dew and dust. On that up-and-down road was yet another detour that led through rice fields to the first road and a low hill and some burial mounds. The mounds were the midpoint between the school and the village—a place where children would stop to rest on their way home. Even while “resting,” the children could barely stay still as they chased or pushed or ran away from each other, climbing over the mounds and sliding down so often that the sod could not grow grass because it was constantly trampled. Most of the children were freed from this path once they entered middle school, which was deeper into town and better reached by bus or bicycle. And the only way to get downtown was, of course, across Daeheung-ri Bridge.

Which season was it? Father was neither wearing short sleeves nor thick layers, so it must've been past spring and early summer, or past summer and early fall. Was it a market day? There were many people on the bridge. It teemed with the crossing paths of those going downtown and those leaving it. For whatever reason, I was on my way downtown coming from this side while Father was coming from the other. At first I wasn't sure it was him until I stopped in my tracks, thinking, Wait, is that Father? I looked at the man coming toward me again. It was him. It's such a strange feeling to meet family outside the home in an unexpected place. Frozen still, I continued to stare at him. In his prime, Father was of an adequate build and taller than average height. He had fair skin that didn't look like a country person's complexion and a prominent nose that balanced out his facial features. Father, unlike other fathers in those days, never raised his voice. When he was with others, he spoke so seldomly

that it almost seemed as if he were alone. Despite this, he had many friends. My siblings would call his friends “ajeh”—the guys. Buksan ajeh, Daesung ajeh, Naechun ajeh, or Gomso ajeh. Whenever we ran into them, they treated us like they were our Father. If they were on bikes, they would let us hop on the back. If they bumped into us in front of a store, they would press treats into our hands. And when there was someone who didn’t know us, they’d mention my Father’s one-syllable name and announce that we were his children. In their voices was a kind of joy and trust that they were living in the same world as Father. But the man standing on that bridge seemed nothing like that; he seemed like a completely different person.

Sagging shoulders, covered by a shabby jacket and a crumpled shirt tucked into loose trousers ... His head hung down at first, deep in thought, and as he raised his head, our eyes almost met. I quickly turned my head the other way. I saw the flowing water and the sunlight dancing across its surface. The fact that I had just looked away from Father surprised me, and I was swallowed up in shame. I turned my head again and looked for him. Still lost in thought, Father was bumping against the shoulders of other pedestrians as he crossed over to the other side. His back was a sad sight to see as he disappeared into the crowd. How he seemed to shrink until he looked so small and pitiful. As if he were being left behind, unable to keep up with everyone else. Father’s posture remained slouched and low as he crossed that bridge. I followed him with my eyes as long as I could, standing on tiptoes to see over the crowd. He had a slight limp, as if the heel of one of his shoes had worn down more than the other. Then sunlight, people, noise, shadows, and strange blotches filled my field of vision. Father disappeared from view.

And as he did so, the thought that I had turned my eyes from my humble father planted guilt in my heart.

As the train announced that the next station was for J—, I could hear the words: Mommy, we’re here, spoken by my daughter in my ear. I closed my eyes and opened them again. It felt as if my daughter was tapping my shoulder. I closed the book in front of me. Despite wanting to read it, I was still on the exact page I had been on when we pulled out of Seoul Station. This train will arrive at J—, please make sure you have all your belongings with you when you disembark. Thank you. Listening to the announcement repeat itself, I took my bag down from the overhead

shelf when I almost fell backward. I heard my daughter's voice again: Be careful, mommy! A passing train worker took the bag down for me and placed it on its wheels. Trains are getting better and better these days. I always think this whenever I take one. This time around, when I had taken my coat off at Seoul Station to place it on the shelf, I'd noticed there were coat hooks by the train windows. They were not too big and not too small, neatly placed, just right. The announcements weren't as noisy as they used to be, either. Mindful of sleeping passengers, the voice is soft and almost lilting. Which was why Father, when traveling with Mother to Seoul to see their children, had once missed J— on their way back. I took my coat off of my new discovery and looked out the window as I put it on. How long has it been since I'd been in this station ... I tried counting but I couldn't remember. Nothing but old memories of J— flashed by my mind's eye. As the train entered J— Station, even those faint scenes were dispelled from my mind.

J— Station was no longer the modest stop where the turnstiles led directly to the platform. Conductors did not walk around with a hole puncher in hand, punching holes through the tickets that the passengers held out. Back then, you could pass through the turnstile as soon as your ticket was punched. And until the train arrived and left, the people seeing off the passengers stood by the turnstiles as the ones leaving looked back from the tracks or waved. J—'s spaces that remain in my mind are generally from the time before I left J— to live in Seoul. The courthouse, the Jaeil Bank branch, the firehouse, the elementary school on the outskirts, and the riverbanks under the bridges I crossed every day to get to the middle school downtown. In the spring, mung beans and boat orchids would sprout green leaves on the riverbank before blooming into yellow blossoms. Having left behind my parents and younger siblings in J—, I would return often until I passed forty. Because I had left before any wounds could form, it was always a place of innocent longing for me. Even after the youngest left J— for university, I continued to go back often. For a long time, "home" meant my parents' home in J—. It was the same for my siblings, and whenever we said things like we'd gone "home" or to "our house," it meant our parents' house. Even by the time J— was administratively elevated from township to city status, our home's village was still not even really part of a town, much less a city. The elementary school was four kilometers away by foot, the market where Mother bought food for jesa ancestral rites was four or five kilometers away, and my