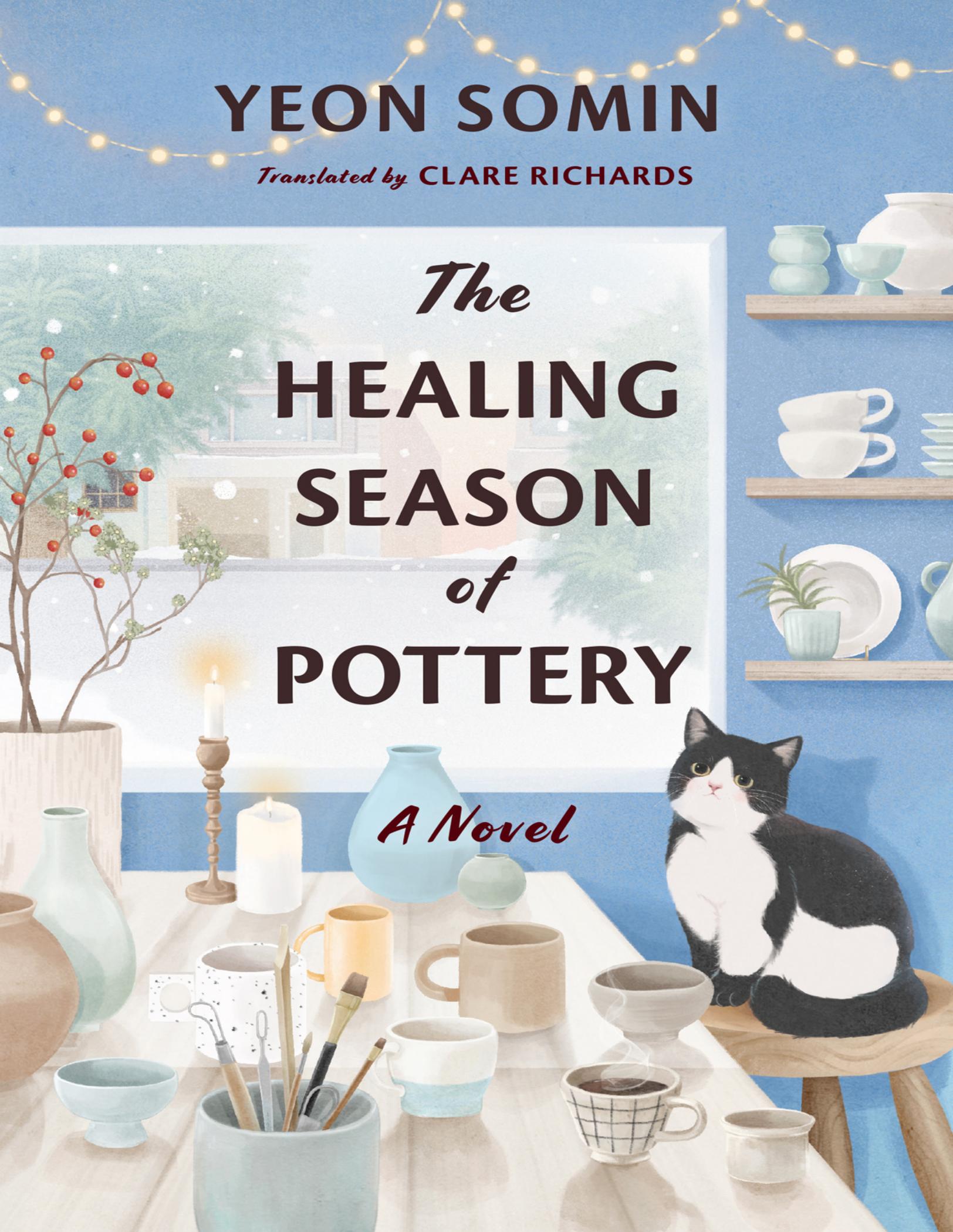


YEON SOMIN

*Translated by* CLARE RICHARDS

*The*  
**HEALING  
SEASON  
of  
POTTERY**

*A Novel*





*The*  
HEALING  
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POTTERY

공방의 계절 by 연소민

Yeon Somin

*Translated by Clare Richards*



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## What's Hotter than Summer?

LAST AUTUMN, JUNGMIN pricked herself on a thorn for the first time.

The moment stuck in her memory. Chestnut burrs were strewn all over the streets. Jungmin picked up a burr that was still intact, lucky enough to have dodged the soles of passersby. She brushed off the soil and opened up the shell. The inside was hollow, as if someone had run off with just the kernel. She scooped up a few more, when suddenly a needle dug into the flesh of her palm. In amongst the thorns, all alike, one lay in hiding: boiling with rage, it'd grown much sharper than the rest. Jungmin pushed down harder against the burr, wanting to punish her writer's hand for working with such indifference for so long. A drop of blood swelled on her skin. Next, a dull pain moved from her palm to her spine, right down to the tips of her toes.

From that day onward, Jungmin didn't set foot outside her flat. Only one season had passed since she'd first moved to Chestnut Burr Village.

SUMMER THAT YEAR, when Jungmin had first seen the flat, was unbearably hot. As the beads of sweat crept down her neck, traipsing round to viewings became even more exhausting. Fed up with having to move like this every two years, she felt no particular attraction—beyond practicalities—to whatever space she called home.

“Is this the last one for today?” Jungmin asked, her tone flat.

The real estate agent had dragged her here and everywhere across the district—making a big fuss about how “something good had come on the market”—but nothing had blown Jungmin away. Anywhere half-decent was

way out of her price range, and otherwise the location made for a nightmare commute into Seoul.

“Hang on a minute! Let me show you just one more. I’ve got a flat perfect for someone living alone. Last one, promise!”

“... All right. I’ll take a look.”

It was a battle of nerves waging between the agent, insistent on getting a deal done no matter what, and Jungmin, whose response was consistently indifferent. Jungmin had, however, vowed to herself that she would view every listing and make a decision today, without delaying until the weekend. For broadcast writers like herself, the boundary between weekdays and weekend was always blurred, making her time off on Saturdays and Sundays all the more precious.

As they turned into the alleyway that led to Chestnut Burr Village, out of nowhere the agent asked, “Do you like chestnuts?”

“Not especially.”

“Apparently those are all chestnut trees, and in autumn, the streets are beautiful, lined with open chestnut burrs. I’m told the women in the neighborhood go round collecting the kernels...”

Jungmin didn’t respond. Green clumps of leaves against brown trunks—trees in summer were all the same to her. Her eyes couldn’t distinguish the chestnut trees from any of the others.

Of all the blocks of flats, Residential Complex Four was the furthest up the hill. The agent rapidly ran out of words to say as they hiked the long slope, and the two walked in silence. Jungmin stopped in her tracks as soon as she laid eyes on the building. The paint was peeling off the outside, but the arched windows with their balconies (a real rarity) and painted-orange frames, set against the ivory walls, gave it a European air. The easy cheer of the orange matched the summer heat well. It was love at first sight.

One of the second-floor residents had lined their windowsill with tiny potted succulents. On one of the third-floor balconies, socks every color of the rainbow hung from a washing line, welcoming summer. Tiny yellow baby socks dangled alongside the big ones. Through the window of the next flat,

Jungmin could see a bookcase stuffed with thick volumes. Maybe a part-time lecturer lived there, busy teaching at universities all over the place. Jungmin could imagine day-to-day life in this building.

Flat 201. She gazed out of the window at where she'd been standing just a moment before. The light, balmy breeze wrapped itself around her long hair strand by strand. Though the building didn't have many floors, being on top of a hill gave it a clear view as far as the mountains that surrounded the neighborhood. This was the first time Jungmin had ever felt like placing an object by a window as decoration. She stayed silent, lost a while in her thoughts, before snapping back to reality.

Turning to the agent, who'd been trying to gauge her reaction, Jungmin said without a hint of hesitation, "I'll take it."

This place was somewhere Jungmin could stay for a long time and never tire of. Like a bicycle going at speed with no need to pedal, she felt like life would be a breeze from here on out. For the first time ever, she genuinely loved her "home."

But all it took was a single gust of wind for her grand dreams to come tumbling down. Suddenly, that "bicycle" was racing downhill, and life was accelerating so fast that Jungmin lost control.

This was last autumn, when the building's orange morphed to a dingy brick red. At the office, Jungmin had abruptly terminated her contract with the broadcaster, midway through production of the documentary she'd been working on. She practically hurled her entry pass at them when she returned it, and loudly packed her belongings, a deadpan look on her face, before storming out.

In truth, Jungmin couldn't remember much of what had happened during that time. It wasn't until a colleague told her about it a few months later that she was able to fully grasp the events of that day. They told her everything in detail, right down to the outfit she was wearing, but Jungmin was stunned to hear how she'd acted. She'd always been so passionate about her work. She couldn't believe she'd walked out of the TV station on her own two feet. In the passing of a single season, an inexplicable emotion, almost

like a curse, had sunk deep into her heart—this was the only fact she was sure of.

Now, Jungmin no longer made small talk with the housewife next door who loved adorning her home with plants. She didn't wonder how much the third-floor family's baby had grown. She didn't borrow novels from the bookworm graduate student next door. Jungmin found no happiness in the small and peaceful neighborhood where the color of the buildings changed according to the sunlight. The window with the view that'd reminded her of Europe, always putting a smile on her face, became nothing more than a tool for ventilation. That fine autumn, it was as if the aquamarine skies were about to come crashing down on her home. Once the November chill seeped in, she simply left the blinds shut, obscuring the autumn sky from view. When the air in the flat sank and everything around her grew unusually quiet, she could only guess that the snow had arrived. Then when the spring showers came, at this height, she felt she could almost reach out and touch the grimy sky. Jungmin spent her time in a straight line, without fluctuations or jolts, and the days blended into one. She'd become trapped at that phase of life called Thirty—perhaps it was because she'd given up all hope of escape, but she couldn't see that she'd reached a dead end. Her prediction that life in this flat would be straightforward had flown nicely wide of the mark.

THREE SEASONS WENT by with Jungmin mired in self-loathing. Then one summer morning, nine months after the thorn had pricked her right palm, she shot up from her chair and screamed. The words she blurted out contained no sensible resolutions or goals. They weren't even sentences to begin with. Nothing more than an "exclamation," devoid of fully formed words. But her cry was loaded with an immense pressure, something she needed to act on. In truth, this scream had been building since last spring. As her life as a recluse went on, she started to believe she might never be able to return to society and would die there alone. Hundreds of thousands

of won kept vanishing with the simple act of breathing. It was as if each month she was being charged just to carry on living. Living a life worthy of that sum was the only way to ensure her money wasn't going to waste.

The scream filled Jungmin's almost furniture-less one-bedroom flat. It was on hearing the echo that she realized how long it'd been since she'd used her voice. Once the sound hit the edges of the ceiling and faded away, she half-heartedly rinsed the stale taste from her mouth. Not even registering that it was summer, she put on long sleeves and trousers, and just like that, left the flat.

The August sunshine beat down with vigor. Jungmin staggered as the scorching rays struck the back of her head. It felt like she'd been locked up in a sterilized facility and lost her tolerance for sunlight. The sweat flowed nonstop. Clad in a long-sleeved black shirt and jeans that went past her ankles, she'd brought it on herself. Beneath her clothes, baggy from the weight she'd shed over the months, her bum and calves were squishy, as if they'd lost all function. What little muscle she'd once had seemed to have disappeared.

Jungmin had been outside less than thirty minutes when she decided to seek refuge in a café. There were a few franchises with brightly colored signs outside. It'd taken her great resolve to leave the flat, and while she was about it, she wanted good coffee. Not an extra-large coffee to keep her from falling asleep, but a coffee made with love and attention. Hoping another café might show itself, she cut through an alley. She caught sight of a shop without a sign, which looked to be a café. One wall was floor to ceiling glass, but you couldn't see inside because of the endless potted plants blocking the view. It looked like the witch's house from one of the Western fairytales she'd read as a child. Most of the plants were cacti, and all their spines were razor-sharp. She'd never noticed this shop before. Trying her best to see this as one more challenge, she went inside.

The moment she stepped through the door, she was overwhelmed by the smell of clay flooding her nose, as well as the display shelves packed with pottery. There were two women, both in clay-spattered aprons. One, who

looked to be in her twenties, was wrestling with clay on the pottery wheel. The other, somewhere in her mid-forties, was staring absent-mindedly out of the window, and looked sick and tired of life somehow.

“I’m sorry. I thought this was a café.”

Jungmin rushed to apologize, but seeing the pair entirely unflustered, she grew all the more flustered herself. It was almost as if her coming here had been planned.

“People do that all the time. You can’t see inside properly and the sign’s so small. Alas, this here’s a pottery workshop. I see you’re sweating a lot, though.” The woman in her forties, who appeared to be the owner, spoke without reserve.

“I came out for a stroll and ended up walking quite a bit.”

Embarrassed, Jungmin fanned herself with her hand. She lowered her head slightly to examine her clothes, but thankfully the sweat hadn’t seeped through.

“It’s hot outside, have a coffee. Can’t promise it’ll be as good as you’ll get in a proper café, but we have plenty of drip bags, or I can make you something sweet, too.”

The younger woman stopped the wheel. “We were just planning to have a coffee break anyway,” she said, before wiping her hands.

“Even so...”

Making a coffee for someone who’d stumbled in by mistake—was it kindness, or nosiness? Jungmin was wary.

“It’s fine. Sit.”

The younger woman hurried to pull out a chair from the back and smiled warmly. Jungmin felt suspicious of this unprovoked smile, but she didn’t dislike it. Maybe the pottery of blues and whites, much like those found in nature, had already stolen her heart. She found it fascinating that these hard ceramics made by human hands could resemble nature’s hues quite so closely. A few years before, at one of her hoobaes’ stubborn insistence, Jungmin had reluctantly taken part in an interview entitled “Ask a Top Women’s University Graduate about Her Career.” At the time, to the clichéd

question “Where do you find the inspiration for your writing?” Jungmin had given the equally clichéd response of “Nature.” It wasn’t a lie. Jungmin did get inspiration from nature. Especially things blue and vast like the sea.

If it wasn’t the mysterious blue that rippled across the ceramics’ surfaces, then maybe it was how endearing the younger woman’s pudgy hands had been as she pulled the chair out for her. No, more than anything else, the workshop owner had seemed genuinely delighted by Jungmin’s visit, and so she’d been unable to refuse. Only a moment before, the woman had been staring into space, like someone who’d been abandoned—now, her face was glowing. Though perturbed by the sudden change in her expression, for some reason it put Jungmin in a good mood. She sat down on the chair as if possessed by magic.

“Would you like it sweet? Black?”

“I’d love a black coffee.”

“Are you all right with a nutty taste? We’re all out of the acidic. We have a secret recipe for our coffee here, so it’ll taste good whatever your bean preference. Oh, and try it sweet next time. Sweet coffee is actually my speciality.”

Next time? Was she asking her to come back to the workshop again for coffee? Out of courtesy, Jungmin smiled and replied with a brief, “Will do.” The younger woman sitting beside her didn’t say much, and Jungmin liked that. She couldn’t stand conversations made up of vague attempts to suss the other person out.

Under the cool breeze of the air conditioner, Jungmin’s sweat soon dried up. The coffeepot—the only thing in the workshop making a noise—blew out steam with great enthusiasm as if to make its presence known. As the coffee was served, its aroma crawled in amidst the smell of clay that hung in the air. In an instant, the space filled with a scent that she couldn’t describe in words. That harmony between the smell of clay and coffee. It was an aroma she’d never imagined before, but it wasn’t bad. The physiological judgments of the nose—sweet, bitter, fishy—were preceded by an emotional judgment: “harmless.” For Jungmin, highly sensitive to smell, it wasn’t often she

trusted her emotions over her nose.

“I made it iced for you.”

One cup of hot coffee, two iced. The cups’ designs were similar to those on display—perhaps they’d made them themselves. The woman who’d been at the wheel downed the coffee like it was beer. Her battle with the clay had looked pretty arduous, though Jungmin had only caught a glimpse. Having expelled a significant proportion of her body’s water content through sweat, even the deep brown coffee looked refreshing. The coffee the owner had been so proud of was undeniably delicious. Though nothing special to look at, a distinct taste wrapped itself around Jungmin’s tongue. She breathed in the aroma, and she could tell the beans weren’t from a chain. Throughout her seven years in broadcasting, all-nighters had been the norm, so she was naturally well acquainted with the coffee giants. She calmly took another sip and thought hard, but nothing particular came to mind. After all, since quitting, Jungmin had done nothing but sleep for months on end, and so there’d been no need to drink coffee—it seemed her taste buds had dulled, too.

“It’s delicious. Really. May I ask where the beans are from?”

“Actually, I’m not sure myself. They’re ones I was gifted. I reckon they’re probably from Yirgacheffe...”

Jungmin wondered what the secret to the coffee’s taste was.

The owner watched Jungmin tilt her head and continued, “The reason our coffee tastes good, even when we make it with mediocre beans, is because of the cups. These are robust ceramics fired in a kiln at 1,250 degrees. If you serve coffee in a jade celadon cup, it tastes better. And the sweet coffee I mentioned earlier, you have to drink it out of glossy white porcelain. Maybe because it conjures up the image of sugar, but it’s more delicious that way.”

The younger woman weighed in to add credence to the “secret coffee recipe.” “I didn’t believe it at first either. I thought it was a placebo effect, like when Wonhyo-daesa drank dirty rainwater from a skull thinking it was a cup. But it’s oddly different. The flavor, rather than the taste. I majored in

chemistry, so I can't leave this kind of curiosity unsatisfied. I did a bit of research, and it seems that there's a chemical interaction that takes place between the surface of the ceramic and the components of the coffee. After all, they say pottery breathes, right?"

"That's fascinating."

As improbable as it may have seemed, the two women's words were strangely persuasive. *Maybe rather than beans, there really is a secret inside this vessel*, Jungmin thought, as she gripped the cup tight in two hands. Though it was of course full of ice, she was sure she could feel the 1,250-degree heat. She tried for the first time to picture a temperature higher than a thousand degrees. Instead of heat, a warmth traveled through the blood vessels in her palm right to her arteries. Unlike the instant refreshment of the air conditioner, it now felt like a warmth had burrowed deep into her bones, releasing her tension. A body melting hopelessly away. The cold can't overcome warmth. She'd think of this coffee again. To be precise, she'd think of the flavor rather than the taste, just like the younger woman had said.

"Is the pottery back there for sale by any chance?"

"Of course. Feel free to take a look. Mugs and teacups like these are on the left-hand side."

Unlike the extortionately priced ceramics in department stores you'd find arranged neatly one by one, these had rough appearances. They were crammed in shoulder-to-shoulder, some piled up in stacks. Jungmin was concerned they might get chipped, but the setting felt familiar, like an ordinary family's kitchen cupboard. When she looked at a pure white cup, it naturally brought to mind a caramel macchiato. A cup with a jade and white ombré pattern made her think of milky tea. There was one with a jet-black glaze, which made her want to go out right away and buy some Excellent Ice Cream to make affogato. This was probably all down to the effect of the cup's "image" that the owner had spoken of. Writer Jungmin was quick to acquire this kind of imaginative skill. One by one, she picked up the cups with care, held them in two hands and felt the heat fill her palms. She wondered about

the temperature inside the kiln, where these cups would have been until not long before. Just a moment ago she'd been sweating buckets, cursing summer. Her contradictory urge to look for something hotter than the weather was amusing.

"I'm a coffee lover myself. I had to pull all-nighters regularly because of my job. It'd be nice to have a cup like this."

"In that case, rather than buying, why not have a go at firing one yourself?"

The woman spoke in a similar tone and speed to when she'd suggested Jungmin stay for a coffee. She seemed to have mastered how to speak without making the other person uncomfortable.

"I'm useless with my hands. And terrible at anything to do with art. I won't be any good."

"Don't you worry about that. The lady next to you is one of our members, and she came in without any experience with craft whatsoever either. But now her work's good enough to sell at the Seoul Living Design Fair. If there's something you want to put in a container, that's a good enough reason to start."

*Something you want to put in a container.* Jungmin thought of the caramel macchiato, milk tea and affogato that'd come to mind just before. There were definitely other things she could put in a container, too. Warm and robust ceramics fired in a 1,250-degree kiln. Into these, surely, you could put even formless things with no smell nor weight.

"Do you live around here?" the owner slurped her coffee and asked.

"Yes. Chestnut Burr Village Complex Four. I've lived there a little over a year."

The woman's face lit up and her eyes widened. "That's really close to me. We've probably crossed paths a few times."

"We won't have done. I'm always at home." Jungmin smiled weakly.

"Me too. It actually hasn't been long since I was pulled out of my cave."

Jungmin bit down hard on her lip. *I'll pull you out of your cave.* A friend had said this to her a long time ago. *I'm doing this for you*—words that

would make anyone uncomfortable. While they professed to be the good-natured friend, to Jungmin it felt like a threat, that she needed to let that person in, even though she didn't have the slightest room to do so.

“But the cave isn't all that bad. Am I right?”

The woman's next words came unexpectedly. Without knowing why, Jungmin felt safe around her, and she nodded slowly, her hands still clasped around the cup.

SO THEY COULD decide on lesson dates, the workshop owner asked Jungmin about her schedule. Jungmin said she was off work most of the time. A nice way, of course, of saying she was unemployed. If you admitted you were jobless, people would then generally want to interrogate every last detail of the preceding events. Then, finally, they would act concerned and say, “Gosh, you really have been through a lot,” having reached the conclusion that Jungmin was either someone with an uncertain future, or otherwise incapable of adapting to society. The owner, however, was sparing with her words and simply said, “Nice to be in charge of your own time.” She didn't try and dig up her private matters, and so, Jungmin realized, there was no need to be nervous around her.

“How about Tuesdays and Thursdays, twice a week to begin with? For two weeks you'll do handbuilding with me, the goal being to get friendly with the clay. After that, we'll move one of the weekdays to the weekend, and put you in the Saturday class with the office workers. My name's Johee, and you can call me Seonsaengnim. This is Jihye-ssi, she's your workshop sunbae.”

Once she'd finished speaking, Johee ripped out the August page from the desk calendar. She then circled the days Jungmin would come, and handed her the sheet. It was thanks to this square piece of paper filled with numbers that Jungmin came to understand just how long a month could be.