

During a writers' conference last summer, I participated in a poetry recital that was a fundraising event for helping North Koreans. I assumed that the event was for poets only, but I was told that veterans from various fields, including me, were being asked to recite their favorite poems. I was taken aback by being referred to as a "veteran," but I guess no one is brazen enough to weasel out of helping our fellow countrymen in the North. I agreed to do it -- not so much out of obligation, actually, but because I had a poem I wanted to share. At that time, I was obsessed with Kim Yong-taek's poem called "That Girl's House." Kim Yong-taek is one of my favorite poets, but I wouldn't say that he is *the* favorite. Likewise, I don't know if "That Girl's House" is one of his best works among many. At any rate, the poem reads as follows:

The house where the leaves on a ginkgo tree turn yellow / The house I see before all others as the day becomes dusk / I remember it with fondness / I look upon it with affection / On my way home late at night I see / the house with a light, a glowing light in the dark forest /

Sitting underneath that light embroidering / is a girl with black hair falling on her shoulders / The house that spreads warmth to my hands /

A house with apricot blossoms / that bloom white like snow / and sprinkle their snowy petals over the wall / White apricot blossoms alight on her / as she carries water home / A petal lands inside her bucket / and stirs a wave / With that wave I yearn to drift there /

When the yellow ginkgo leaves fall to the ground / that girl / with her father / and an older brother / climb the roof / and spend all day laying down yellow tiles / A yellow house /

Through the door left open by chance I see the front yard / She paces back and forth / Something must have happened / Mumbled words that I can't quite understand / and a glimpse of the hem of her dress / I wish I could barge in there and get involved /

The house with golden sunlight reflecting in the yard / smoke rising from the chimney / persimmons ripening red in the backyard / and sparrows chirping / The house where snows fall/ Morning snow blows by the eaves and descend to the ground / Crouching down, that girl steps onto the upswept snow / to fetch *kimchi* in the back courtyard / She stops and exclaims, “Ah, falling snow is so pretty!” / Gazing at the snow-filled sky / she brushes off the snow on her eyelashes / and opens the lid of the *kimchi* urn / Fluffy puffs of white snow fall into the urn / Her back bends over the urn / and snow puffs land there, too / A house where white snow falls down white / I, too, like a cotton boll of snow, wish to land there / All night, all night for several days snow falls / Late at night when no one is around / only the glow from her room beckons me / Hushing my footsteps I cross the yard and on the earthen deck I stand / in front of her room staring at her snow-covered shoes / Shaking off the snow on my hair and my shoulders / Gently, inaudible even to the snowflakes / I long to call her gently, gently / That / girl's / house /

When was it? / On that day, delivering lunch to the field workers she ran into me / “Oh, my!” Coming to a standstill and widening her eyes in her surprise / Not at all hiding her pleasure in our chance encounter / Radiantly, like a heaping bowl of rice out in the field, / Oh, so radiantly she smiles, revealing a row of pearly teeth, / that / girl / Like a peony, / that / girl /

That house where that girl lived until the tender age of nineteen / the first house in the valley in the village above ours / The first house my eyes search out as I descend from the bus / on my way home / I walk by the house looking for her in vain / slowing down my pace until I am past that girl's house / Now, ah, now it no longer stands in this world / but still it exists in my heart / I close my eyes and see the house with white apricot blossoms blowing / snow falling, ah, the snow falling / for three full days / like cotton puffs / flurrying through the threadlike branches of the apricot tree / That girl's house / Anytime, and always, my heart races there first / That house / That / girl's / house / I dream, I dream / When. I. dream...

Reading this poem in *The Green Review* came as a complete shock to me because I was sure that the poem was about the story of Gop-dan and Man-deuk from my hometown. Jang Man-deuk, who is now well in his seventies, still had a penchant for literature as he did in his youth. He told me that up until recently, he still got woozy with excitement every year during the spring literature contest. Naturally, I assumed that he got more than woozy and had submitted his own writing. I assumed this because I know all about that kind of woozy excitement and how you can't suppress it. If it were some unknown poet's

name instead of the famous Kim Yong-taek's name in the byline, I would not have doubted for a moment that it was Jang Man-deuk's penname. I read the poem over and over. Vague images formed by the words gradually became vivid, like photographs being developed in a chemical bath. Forgotten memories from my past unveiled themselves one by one, even those of hidden, apprehensive beauty, and I sipped away a bottle of wine as overwhelming nostalgia and grief sank in.

Gop-dan was the youngest and the only daughter of a family with four big, strong sons. The hardworking farmer of a father and his dependable sons were always the first ones to thatch their roof in the fall. Although this was hardly a big job for five brawny men, Man-deuk was up on the roof before them prancing around in excitement. In our small village, Man-deuk was the only middle school student and thus exempt from menial labor, but he was always a willing volunteer to help Gop-dan's family who hardly needed it. One of Gop-dan's brothers was Man-deuk's friend. But all the townsfolk knew that Man-deuk was motivated not by his friend but by that girl, Gop-dan. Yes, when the elderly townsfolk saw Man-deuk on the roof strutting his stuff as smoke rose from the kitchen in preparation of a hot lunch, they shook their heads saying, "When you adore your bride, you bow down even to the pole in front of her house¹." As evidenced by such claims, the expectation of marriage between the two kids was a publicly acknowledged matter.

The relationship between the two of them was the object of envy among those of us who were younger. Our hearts fluttered when we gossiped about their romance. I suppose it wasn't impossible for two young people to be in love without the formal approval of their parents in a conservative rural village in the 1940s. Sometimes there were talks of couples carrying on secret romances or even illicit love affairs. Such gossip was scandalous enough to make the parents hang their heads in shame and plague the accused with lingering aftermath of stigma.

People referred to Gop-dan and Man-deuk's relationship as a "courtship" instead of a "flirtation" or a "love affair." And I'm sure they did this to differentiate their relationship from those other scandalous associations. Such differentiation by the villagers was a form of affection and yearning. Although men studied letters at the schoolhouse and women became barely literate by looking over the shoulders of male students, modern education was a distant dream for the villagers who lived at least eight kilometers away from the nearest town. But this dream was something that they wanted to afford to their children, if possible. I think they thought of romance in a similar way. They harbored an irresistible curiosity toward the newfangled ways of life enjoyed by educated city folks. Thus, Gop-dan and Man-deuk's relationship had the seal of approval not only from the younger generation but also from the officious older folks who

¹ An idiom that shows a man's appreciation of his wife's family when he loves her very much

criticized every little thing. That's because even before the two ever had any feelings for each other, it was the elderly who delighted in imagining, with their eyes half closed, the two of them together. Both Man-deuk and Gop-dan's families were independent farmers who owned neither too much nor too little land to yield them sufficient annual harvest. They also knew how to be generous to others who were less fortunate. Man-deuk had only older sisters and Gop-dan older brothers, so the two were the cherished favorites in their respective families. They say children valued in their own homes receive special attention and treatment from others as well. This was certainly true for the two of them.

Unlike other coarse, rustic rural children, Gop-dan had fair skin and long eyelashes. I had no fitting description for her long lashes until I read Kim Yong-Taek's poem. As he stated so eloquently, they were long enough for big snowflakes to rest upon. When that snow melted into dew and her moist lashes cast a shadow on her dark pupils, her tender expression was beautiful enough to make a statue fall in love. Man-deuk was so astute that he knew ten things from learning just one. And he, too, was as handsome as the jewel in the crown. The two of them were a rare sight to behold in these rural parts. If Man-deuk were a dragon out of a swamp, then Gop-dan was a lotus blossom in a bog. I don't know who said it first, but everyone unanimously agreed that the two made a handsome couple, that they were a match made in heaven. The two families were neither inadequate nor excessive for the other. Both sets of parents were simple and honest folks; they approved of their child's prospective partner, albeit chosen by others, and looked upon with affection their children's transformation into attractive, well-adjusted adults. Amidst the monotony of our simple lives, Gop-dan and Man-deuk were the pride and joy of our village. But anyone experienced in matchmaking knows this: One may feel compelled to bring together a couple seemingly so perfect, but more often than not, the individuals involved feel absolutely nothing for each other. For better or for worse, falling in love is beyond the scope of human intentions; it falls under the jurisdiction of the gods. When humans try to meddle in their affairs, they can play all kinds of tricks on well-meaning matchmakers and unsuspecting couples.

Man-deuk and Gop-dan, however, did not betray the villagers' hopes. This was apparent by Gop-dan's undue shyness toward Man-deuk. People gossiped endlessly about the time Gop-dan broke her water bucket. With just twenty households constituting the upper and the lower sections of our village, we only had one well amongst us. Transporting water was a chore reserved for women, and no self-respecting housewife used her hands to hold up the water bucket carried on the head. You didn't earn your stripes as a seasoned homemaker until you could walk confidently with both hands free, even turning your head left or right. Girls looked upon their mothers with awe while feeling the pressure that one day they must perform the same feat. Little girls were eager to try carrying a water bucket on top of their heads, and they practiced with a smaller-sized bucket called a *banguri*. Used more for play than for

function, many *banguris* got broken in the hands of their owners. In our village, it was a common practice to call a girl a *banguri* to mean a little squirt.

Gop-don was a cherished daughter and had two older sisters-in-law, so she did not have to fetch water. But she still owned a *banguri* because she was at an age when she had to try everything that her friends did. She was very much a beginner who could not take a single step without holding the *banguri* on her head with both hands. She was walking in this manner one day when she saw Man-deuk approaching. He was running toward her to help her, but shrieking "oh my goodness," she let go of her hands to lift up the shoulder straps of her dress. Of course, the *banguri* slipped off her head and shattered into pieces. She must have been fourteen or fifteen, with her bosom coming in like apricot seeds. In those days, it was customary for women to wear dresses held up by straps tightened just above the bosom. Above the dress, they wore a very short, cropped top with sleeves. With arms raised up, bare armpits showed and breasts jutted out. In our village, there was no shame among young women in revealing a little skin in this manner. It was not an unusual sight to see a child on a mother's back reach to the front, grab her breast, and nurse. Immodesty associated with female breasts is often culturally taught. In our town, a mother's bare breast was about as exciting as a rice bowl whereas baring a belly button was considered indecent exposure. Considering this, it was no small matter that a young girl like Gop-dan - it might be different for maidens of marriageable age - to conceal her bosom at the expense of breaking her *banguri*.

Man-deuk was the first in our village to go to a middle school in a nearby town. When he did, Gop-dan also nagged her father to enroll her in a branch elementary school two and a half miles away. This happened sometime after the *banguri* incident. Gop-dan's school was called the simplicity school², and it had no age limit. There were even young fathers among the male students. It was the same for the middle school. After graduating from elementary school, Man-deuk had stayed home for a few years to help his family with farming. His oldest sister who was married and lived in the city insisted on modern education for her younger siblings, so Man-deuk enrolled in middle school a few years behind other students.

The simplicity school was located on the way to town in a village called Ginaegol, the largest village in our surrounding area with fifty-plus households. Two hills and a creek had to be crossed to reach the school. Naturally, Man-deuk and Gop-dan walked to and from school together. There was nothing unusual in how they appeared to the others. Gop-dan always walked far behind Man-deuk, who

² Short-term education system during the Japanese rule in Korea; Emphasis was on Japanese language instruction and vocational skills to strengthen the labor force

took long, arm-swinging strides in front of her and then waited. Back then, it was considered proper even for married couples for the wife to walk a few steps behind the husband instead of walking side by side. Man-deuk had twice as far to walk than Gop-dan, and at times when he became impatient with her dawdling steps, he took off by himself.

Although the area had plentiful sources of water with small streams branching out everywhere like fishing nets, the brook running below the bridge in Ginaegol was especially beautiful. The water was not deep but the gulch was, with its steep walls speckled with myriad wild flowers that continually bloomed and withered from early spring to fall. Except for the shadow of wild flowers, the surface of the water was crystal clear with tiny waves that rose and broke playfully. Schools of fish swam below and white pebbles and grainy sand lined the bottom. That brook had a mud bridge. Two big logs were laid across the gulch, with braided ropes and tough vines forming the rungs between the two logs. A mound of mud was patted down below the logs to form a walkway as cozy and romantic as a path running through a forest. But when it rained a lot or the soil thawed out in spring, the bridge became a booby trap with slippery surface and hidden holes. For the most part, bridge crossers were inconvenienced only temporarily because someone always made repairs right away. The short but unpredictable intervals before the repairs and the periods of a long monsoon season were the problem. Girls especially were scared to cross the bridge that might be full of hollow pits. The deepest part of the water was only waist-deep, and it was actually safer to go down the gulch, take off the shoes, and waddle across the water. The boys had the manly job of walking ahead with long sticks in hand and cautioning the girls of the deep, treacherous parts. Man-deuk did not allow Gop-dan to cross the brook behind some boys, lifting her dress up to her navel and getting her long underpants wet. On the way to school and even on the way back, he somehow managed to meet her in time to help her cross the muddy, hole-ridden bridge. Oh, how Gop-dan fussed and yelped in distress and how Man-deuk indulged and patted her in reassurance! The bridge span was hardly a long one, but rumors abounded on how they constantly ended up in each other's arms while crossing it. The rumors were not vicious in nature. The elderly, behind the times in otherwise so many ways, considered the two young kids adorable, not indecent. Man-deuk and Gop-dan would surely marry someday, and their flirtations were regarded as natural and beautiful as a pair of birds rubbing their beaks together. So the villagers called the mud bridge a love bridge, and that, too, was without malice.

Man-deuk probably opened his eyes to literature as a middle school upper classman. He used to carry around a copy of the poetry book *The Dance of Agony* under his armpit instead of in his book bag. He looked very hip and intellectual walking around like that. Most of the village young men, even those who had never set foot inside a school, were literate in Chinese characters because the village school functioned almost as a mandatory education facility for young boys. Most of them could read the title *The*

Dance of Agony, but fully grasping its meaning was another matter. All they knew was that the letters were in traditional characters, but each character exuded an exotic and highly colorful feel. Wherever it came from, the phrase “high color” was very popular among the young people in our village during that time. Anything that seemed exotic or modern was referred to as “high color.”

Man-deuk was the one to create a Choonwon³ boom in our village. Choonwon's works, such as *The Earth*, *The Tragic Tale of King Danjong*, and *No Emotion*, circulated among the young people and were read until the pages became tattered. As the pages frayed, the impressionable eyes reading them twinkled like the stars. Soon, however, the Choonwon fans in our village became disappointed and confused by the rumors that he led the movement for surname change⁴ and gave speeches driving young men into battle fields. This rumor was started by none other than Man-deuk himself. It was not an exaggeration to say that he had the emotional pulse of his peers under his thumb to tighten or loosen as he pleased. The realities of village life were getting harsher every day during that time near the end of the Second World War. But the young people suffered more from the deprivation of the mind than the actual poverty and were therefore quite vulnerable to manipulation. The books popularized by Man-deuk naturally brought together like-minded youth to discuss literature and to rant about the current state of social affairs. Of course, the central figure in these gatherings was Man-deuk. Although he was a few years older than the other middle school students, he was still just a teenager. The gatherings served more to boost his ego than to help young activists protest oppression. During the meetings Man-deuk sometimes recited poetry, including his own, in a somber tone. Gop-dan was partial to one recitation that always moved her to tears. It was the last part of one of Imhwa⁵'s poems.

Smoke rises again today / higher than the clouds /
Several young men / whoever they may be /
Fill like the deepest lake / their wide, hopeful eyes /
With the ever shrinking sky /
Opening their arms / small though they may be /
Oh! / Wider than the sky above / My ocean!

When he came to the part, “Oh! Wider than the sky above,” Man-deuk's voice would become overcome with emotion. Gop-dan said listening to him made her fearful that she would lose him to the big, wide world one day.

³ The penname of Lee Gwangsoo, an influential writer of his time

⁴ Change to Japanese surnames forced upon Koreans during the occupation

⁵ A renowned poet and a literary critic

Gop-dan sometimes showed me the letters she received from Man-deuk. "I don't want them to go to waste ..."she'd add shyly because I hadn't asked to see them. Since love letters are usually meant for one pair of eyes only, it actually made no sense to say that they'd go to waste. Her showing me the letters meant that they didn't contain anything racy enough for someone else to read. It also meant that she wanted to show off parts of his writing that had impressed her. One thing I remember from one of the letters was that he had compared the bladder cherries⁶ growing under her fence as "dwarf guardsmen holding up red lanterns." Most of the houses in our village grew forsythia as hedge plants in the backyard. Underneath the forsythia grew wild bladder cherry plants. In spring and summer, they remained forgotten like inconspicuous weeds hiding under the bright canary-yellow forsythia blooms. One noticed them only after most of the thickets became withered and tawny. Then the ripened bladder cherries stood out prettier than the autumn foliage with their petite lanterns looking as cute as buttons. That was also the time when the flaming orange of the persimmon fruit upstaged the yellowing leaves, and the peppers in the fields changed color from plain green to ruby. Still, bladder cherries were mere weeds with no use other than a plaything for bored girls to chew in their mouths and pop. As with all the other houses in the village, our house had bladder cherries growing in abundance under the fence. So among all the ever so ordinary, widespread bladder cherries, only Gop-dan's were worthy of becoming dwarf guardsmen with lanterns. Could it be that Man-deuk wrote from experience? Yearning for his love, he may have tried once to burrow a hole under her fence only to be stopped by the dwarf guardsmen holding up red lanterns. How else could Gop-dan's bladder cherries become so special among so many ordinary ones?

In addition to bladder cherries, apricot trees grew profusely in our village, so much so that our village name in Chinese characters means the apricot village. Every home had one. In spring, apricot blossoms along with forsythia blooms transformed the whole neighborhood into a floral paradise. But the delectable-looking fruit were actually wild apricots with bitterly sour taste. Although some people saved the seeds to use in herbal remedies, no one, not even the children, ate the fruit. So they fell to the ground to rot in heaps. Our village was a beautiful place. When the apricot trees came into full bloom, milk vetches and violets covered the fields and knolls. Milk vetch blossoms spread evenly in wide rolls of plush carpet while violets scattered in random clusters. By the time rotting apricots seeped into the ground to nourish the soil, wild roses going down with one last fight filled secluded pathways with beauty that was as breathless and intense as the gleaming moonlight.

While reading *That Girl's House*, I recalled that the apricot trees in Gop-dan's house were, indeed, special among the many growing in our village. Just as her rooftop had the shiniest golden sheen

⁶ Ornamental perennial plant with orange papery covering encasing the fruit; Also called Chinese lantern plants

among the countless thatch roof houses. Just as her bladder cherries stood out from all the rest. Gop-dan's house was the first house in the upper division of the Apricot Village. The creek water flowing down from the hills wrapped around her house and fed into a fertile strip of rice paddy owned by Man-deuk's parents. The apricot tree in Gop-dan's yard was a big one, strong enough for her father to tie a swing for her and her friends. To Man-deuk, the shower of pearly white petals that fell from that tree and floated down the water must have seemed like love letters carrying bits of her love.

In the spring of 1945, did apricot trees, bladder cherries, violets, and milk vetches bloom? They must have, but somehow it just felt like to me that they didn't. I wondered if Gop-dan and Man-deuk's love came to an end before the flowers bloomed. As one of the older students at a four-year middle school, Man-deuk was drafted into the military immediately after graduation. He only had a few days before he had to report to duty, and the two families wanted to marry the kids in that time. It was not uncommon for young men to be hurried into marriage before entering military service so that they can at least start a family and carry on the family line. Man-deuk was, in fact, the only son in the family. Although *saju*⁷ letters have not been exchanged, the whole village knew that he and Gop-dan were as good as betrothed. But Man-deuk adamantly refused to get married. That was his way of loving her. He didn't care what anyone else thought, but he dragged her around trying to convince her of his way of loving. The chill of early spring had kept the last of the snow from thawing, but he must have talked to her under the muted moonlight until roosters crowed at the crack of dawn. Whether or not Gop-dan accepted his viewpoint is anyone's guess. Even if he hadn't dragged her around but had taken her to a place like a rice cake mill to spend the night instead, her parents and the villagers would have trusted him not to have laid an improper finger on her bosom. It was like that during those times. It may have been innocence or stupidity of the times, but such were the convictions we held firmly in our hearts.

A Japanese flag and another flag signaling the residence of a soldier summoned to war flapped ominously in the wind by the front door of Man-deuk's house. Drinking parties went on for days at the house but the authorities turned a blind eye to the bootlegged liquor. Ten days passed by in the blink of an eye and Man-deuk left. Convincing Gop-dan to wait for him until the day he returned alive and well should have been the easy part. She certainly had no intention of marrying anyone else and her parents were not the kind of people to force that on her. It would have taken time and effort, however, to explain why he wasn't going to marry her before leaving. As her name suggests, Gop-dan had a heart as soft as ripples of luxurious silk, but she was no pushover when it came to being dissuaded from the judgments she deemed to be correct. No one said anything out of respect for Man-deuk because the villagers

⁷ A letter containing exact time and date of birth sent to one's fiancée for the purpose of compatibility fortunetelling

considered him like their own son-in-law, but they knew he was going off to a place where his life was on the line. They thought it was very noble of him to spare Gop-dan the pain of widowhood in case something happened to him. Man-deuk and Gop-dan were the golden couple; they were like the village mascots whose happiness the villagers wanted to guard as if some misfortune would befall on them if the two became unhappy. And Man-deuk never offended the good will of those simple-hearted folks, his behavior in all matters good and honest in their eyes.

After Man-deuk left, other young men became conscript soldiers or workers one by one so that the only men left in the village were those past their prime or the elderly. In Gop-dan's family, except for the eldest brother caring for her parents and the third brother working at a factory in the city, the other two brothers were drafted into service. Thus, her house full of strong, young sons became almost an empty nest. The authorities took not only manpower but also food, leaving the once-bountiful village with worries of barley hill⁸ to be crossed. Strict food quotas forced parsimony on the generous people who on rainy days used to make enough fried pancakes to fill a wicker tray to share with their neighbors. Hard times did not end there, and the news worse than an epidemic began circulating. People had long known about comfort women⁹ because the town hall had put up public notices about how young women could be paid to work in Japan or the South Seas. Supposedly, they could earn enough money abroad to send home regularly. Not a single family, however, opted to send their daughter away, and no one dreamed that young girls would be forced into such a work force. Soon, rumor had it that town hall administrators and patrol officers were allotted quotas and had resorted to blackmailing families and abducting young girls. While people dithered in disbelief, a horrible incident occurred. Since it happened in the same town district, one couldn't just brush it off as a rumor. Authorities were searching for caches of food in the outskirts of town. One scared couple assumed that they came to take their daughter away and hid her in a haystack inside a barn. What they didn't know was that the quota enforcement officers routinely stuck their sharp-edged poles into possible hiding places for grains. The impaling of the haystack and the parents' screaming, "Please, don't!" were said to have occurred simultaneously. In one version of the story, the girl's flesh tore off with the pole and remained stuck to its tip; in another it was not flesh but her ruptured intestine. One story had her die at the scene but in another she was carried off in a cart to a hospital where it was not known whether she lived or bled to death. It was a ghastly incident with a huge ripple effect. Terror gripped the entire town district, with families with young daughters living in perpetual fear.

⁸ North Korean expression pertaining to depleting food sources until the next harvest

⁹ Women forced to serve as prostitutes for the Japanese military

Gop-dan's older brother who worked at a munitions factory came home one day with a middle-aged man who had gaiters over his calves and cleats nailed to the soles of his shoes. He was a surveying engineer at an important construction site in Sinuiju.¹⁰ Gop-dan's parents had recruited him as her husband after hearing the rumors of the horrific incident. The man had been married once before. His first wife was driven away after ten years for not bearing him any children. Instead of looking at Gop-dan's pretty face, he kept staring at her slim hips wondering out loud if she'll have trouble giving birth. Tilting his head in doubt, he didn't seem to be all that impressed with her. But Gop-dan's parents had no other eligible bachelors to choose from. And the aged groom-to-be was a capable man doing important work for the war effort and thus automatically exempt from military service. So without a second thought, Gop-dan's parents gave away their precious daughter to be his second wife.

There was no telling how Gop-dan felt in consenting to the marriage. They say the sight of blood can drive a normal person mad. The same can be said of bloodstained rumors. Gop-dan's parents weren't the only ones who lost their rationality. The whole village did. Village elders who delighted in Gop-dan and Man-deuk's puppy love were now of the opinion that the best they could do for her was not to offer her to the Japanese. Gop-dan's mother, especially, was a soft-hearted, delicate woman who couldn't even twist off a chicken neck to make a meal. The gory rumor must have shaken her to the core. I'm sure Gop-dan would have rather died than betray Man-deuk by marrying someone else. But she, too, was softhearted and incapable of ending her own life. All she could do was to become numb and lifeless, like someone drained of all human emotion. The marriage ceremony took place at Gop-dan's house. As she took leave with her new husband three days afterward, her face was expressionless and eerie like a corpse wearing makeup.

Thus, she left home for Sinuiju far, far away, and before she could make the first trip back to see her family, Korea was liberated from the Japanese rule. She left home at age nineteen and never returned to her home with the yellow thatch roof. Our village fell just below the 38th parallel¹¹ and the passage to Sinuiju way up north became indefinitely blocked. Man-deuk returned home alive. In the spring of the following year, he married Soon-Ae, a girl from the same village. She was a pleasant gal with a cute, round face but she was certainly no match for Gop-dan. On his wedding day, Man-deuk was hung upside down according to the tradition of breaking in the groom. The neighborhood young men, many hardened by military service, pounded the soles of his bare feet so hard that Man-deuk wept out loud. He, too, had become tough as nails in the battlefield, so was it really his friends' playful smacking that made him weep? He probably wanted to cry, to pour his heart out. At least that's what the villagers

¹⁰ A northwestern city in North Pyeong-An province

¹¹ Latitude 38N that was first used as a dividing line between North and South Korea

thought because they still wanted to decipher Man-deuk's every move in relation to Gop-dan. The celebrated romance between the two could not be forgotten quickly, and it must have not been easy for Soon Ae to be the new bride under those circumstances. Before the villagers could see how Man-deuk and Soon Ae got on as a married couple, they moved to Seoul. Man-deuk was the only son, but his older sister had found him a job and brought him into the city.

After the Korean War, the Military Demarcation Line that replaced the 38th parallel situated the Apricot Village in the North Korean territory. I hadn't kept in touch with Man-deuk and Soon Ae in previous years but my occasional visits to hometown had supplied me with the news of their wellbeing. That was no longer possible after the war. Once in a while I thought of them and figured that if they didn't die in the war they'd be living somewhere under the same Korean sky. These occasional remembrances soon gave way to a permanent amnesia. Life in Seoul was like that, where even among relatives wedding invitations or news of death were received with a greater sense of obligation than kinship. People with no immediate relevance were bound to be forgotten soon.

It has been less than ten years since I saw Man-deuk again in Seoul. My uncle, who is now deceased, had wanted me to accompany him to a hometown reunion. As often is the case with gatherings among displaced residents, the elderly made up the bulk of the attendees. The meeting was held annually, but for people like my uncle who were there for the first time, it took a long time to recognize one another. To make this effort easier the organizers divided the seating area into neighborhood districts, and from there the attendees themselves broke into smaller villages. The Apricot Village consisted only of my uncle, me and an unfamiliar older couple. My uncle was nearing eighty at the time and passed away the following year. Unable to set his foot on hometown soil, he had at least wanted to be near its people. His children treated this desire lightly, assuming that ridiculous demands came with old age. That's how I came to accompany him. The gentleman from the Apricot Village didn't seem to recognize my uncle either. I bowed to him politely to show respect for an elder from our hometown but didn't pay much attention who he said he was. If he hadn't approached me later with a business card, I may never have recognized him. The name on the card was Jang Man-deuk, a rep from some electronics company. Something stopped me and I took a closer look. Only then the younger version of himself that had been buried in my latent memory surfaced. He and I were never that close. Girls my age knew that he was Gop-dan's and so the proper thing for us to do was not to pay him any attention. I'm sure it was the same for Man-deuk. He was such a celebrity in our village, and celebrities can't be expected to recognize their fans. His face was still young and his body lean for his age. I told him that he looked just the same after all these years and then laughed in embarrassment. I was contradicting myself because I hadn't actually recognized him.

It was even harder to recognize Soon Ae. Back then, I was snobby about going to school and never socialized with older girls who stayed home to learn sewing and other domestic skills. I couldn't say with confidence that the woman standing next to Man-deuk was actually her. She came up to me first saying that I haven't changed a bit, so I assumed that it was her. Man-deuk and Soon Ae looked like a happy and affectionate couple. It seemed a shame to just go our separate ways so we exchanged phone numbers before parting. Surprisingly, Soon Ae called me often so we sometimes met for lunch or went shopping together. When we had gotten closer she confessed to me that her husband had never gotten over Gop-dan.

“Young friend, everyone tells me that I have it so good in life, but I'm like the apricot fruit from our village that looks delicious but tastes sour. I have no one but you to confide in. Who else would understand what I say? My husband makes a good living, never cheats on me, and is good with the kids. Others see him bending over backwards to please me. But no one knows the kind of mistress I have to put up with. Gop-dan is stuck on him like a leech, but I can't humiliate her in front of people or grab her by the hair and fight. It's absolutely maddening. I'm so glad that I ran into you because who'd understand my situation? Do you know that he still writes her love letters? He can't be, you say? That's what I thought at first. Oh, he justifies it by saying that he's writing poems, but I took a peek once when he wasn't looking. “Apricot blossoms alight on your shoulders,” or “apricot blooms come alive every year, but my beloved will never again return.” That kind of gibberish is not poetry but a love letter, am I right? And do you know what else? You should have seen him when we traveled to China last year. I was a fool to go along with him in the first place. After we went to see the Baekdu Mountain, we got on a Yalu River tour boat at a place called Dandong something or other. At one time during the tour, we got near North Korean land. The boat got so close and seeing North Korean children playing on shore made me feel emotional. In fact, all of the South Koreans onboard had solemn expressions on their faces while the Chinese continued to enjoy the ride unaffected. That much I can understand. But my husband, he lowered his head over the side of the boat and wept out loud. A silver-haired guy weeping and shaking all over. Moved to tears by the tragic division of our country, do you think? The land that we could see from there was Sinuiju. To be so near, so close to Gop-dan must have killed him. I wanted to push him overboard. Swim toward that wench, I wanted to tell him. There's more. There was a time when he wanted to immigrate to the States. He claimed that he wanted to raise the kids overseas when neither he nor I can speak a word of English. He had a good job here and we were doing just great, so what do you think his true intention was? I'm no dummy. I knew that you could go to North Korea with an American citizenship. I told him to go by himself and to have a good life with that wench. He looked at me like I

was a mental patient, but he ended up not going. He'd never give up the kids. I'm sure he couldn't have endured this miserable life if it weren't for them."

That was the gist of her story. True, she would have made no sense to anyone who didn't know the history behind Man-deuk and Gop-dan's days of youth and romance. But it was also true that her resentment was based on a repertoire of just a few incidents. She didn't have much evidence beyond those few incidents, and I was getting tired of listening to them over and over. Just when I was beginning to sympathize more with Man-deuk than her, I received the news of her death. She had been taking medication for several years due to high blood pressure, and one day she suddenly collapsed. Without regaining her consciousness, she died within three days. At the wake, I was stunned to see a funeral portrait of her in her late twenties. I suppose the trend nowadays is to use younger photographs at funerals because no one wants to stare at a wrinkly face. But with the seventy-year-old Man-deuk shedding tears before us, a portrait of his much younger wife seemed inappropriate. Her children must have sensed the guests' disapproval because they took pains to explain that she had requested that an old photograph not be used for the funeral. After her death, it turned out that she had left behind a portrait for this purpose. Before I knew it, I was mentally comparing the younger Soon Ae to Gop-dan. No comparison. Gop-dan possessed unusual beauty that increased with imagination over time, and the woman in the portrait had a youthful, but blatantly plain, face. I felt genuine pity for Soon Ae. She must have spent her whole life battling a formidable rival in love - one that never ages or errs.

I never had the occasion to see Man-deuk on my own after his wife's death. Two or three years after she passed away, I ran into him at a support group event for comfort women. I was surprised to find him there, and perhaps because I had been influenced by his late wife, I couldn't help but think that his presence there had something to do with Gop-dan. I looked for him after the event and ran after him like someone in hot pursuit of a criminal. He was walking away from the conference site with slumped shoulders and I called out to him. Omitting the usual pleasantries, I asked him abruptly if he remarried. He said no and added that he had no such intention in the future either.

Why? Is it because you can't ever forget Gop-dan? What made you come here? Are you still deeply bitter about what happened with comfort women? Because of one woman after all these years? That's really something. You think that if it weren't for the Japanese, you and Gop-dan could have lived happily ever after, don't you?

Instead of addressing my outburst, he walked ahead and led me to a coffee shop. At that age, he still had an air of invigorating charm, but I looked at him askance as if I had inherited Soon Ae's resentment. He spoke in a soft, low voice.

My wife only imagined that I never got over Gop-dan. I can't even remember her face to tell you the truth. If my wife hadn't persisted in reminding me all the time, I would have forgotten her name also. If I did miss Gop-dan, it's because of the vague, nostalgic longing for our youth that we all have. Is it so wrong to indulge occasionally in memories of our beautiful hometown? That's also why I cried on the tour boat. I couldn't believe that the land looming right before my eyes was really North Korea. From another country it seemed so close when it had seemed so far away from our own country. That's what moved me to tears, not the fact that the North Korean land was Sinuiju. Why did I come here today... Let's see. I'm not sure if I can explain it even to myself. Recently, I read an article in a Japanese magazine showing how the Japanese were trying to make light of the comfort women issue. Is there any evidence that the women were forced to perform such a service? Isn't Korea trying to exaggerate the number of recruits? That kind of thing. They showed no remorse or responsibility, and I couldn't stand it. Although Gop-dan's face is a vague image in my head, there is something that I feel unmistakably in my heart – the despair she must have felt in being married off like that. In honoring the sacrifices of the comfort women, I wanted to include those who have evaded conscription but suffered in other ways. Those who experienced it directly and those who were affected indirectly were all victims of imperialism. What price did some women pay to be exempt from such a fate? If someone jumps off a ten-story building to avoid an armed burglar, does that absolve the burglar of his crime? We can't forget, it's not humanly possible to forget, the atrocities against man and God that wiped out love and laughter from all corners of our land. Can you understand how I feel, how I want the sorrow of the escapees to be remembered along with the sufferings of the actual victims? Huge teardrops hung from the corners of Jan Man-deuk's eyes.