

Brown Tears

By Kang Yong-sook

No one seemed to know the details of their bizarre living situation. Most people simply referred to them as "the losers who live in that building." The two-story low-rise, dating back to the final days of Park Chung Hee's urban development putsch in the late 1970s, was covered with moss and rust that had worked its way into every last crevice. The building was like an abandoned temple in the heart of the city. A low cement wall striped with soot ran around the building, and scattered at its base were grubby little flowers that looked like remnants of a freak midsummer hail storm. People seemed to pass by that eyesore, only one block off the busy avenue, with disinterest. But when the skies were overcast they'd come by with their junk and force it into gaps in the wall that weren't obvious at first glance and then steal away.

Long after I'd inherited my mother's apartment, I found out the building wasn't included in the city's redevelopment plans. As new luxury buildings twenty or thirty stories high popped up in a row, our apartment was left where it stood, beyond the reach of the city planning authorities. How they leapfrogged over the building was a mystery to those of us who only had the power to vote in the elections that came around every four years.

All three of them lived on the second floor in the apartment down the hall from me on the far left, but there hadn't been the slightest hint of camaraderie based on our shared social status not to mention any actual communication between us. Of the three, the one who stood out most was the squat little Southeast Asian woman. Her skin was

dark as though it had been drenched in molasses, and her big brown eyes grew wide with surprise at the drop of a hat. She wore a loose fitting dress that regularly exposed too much cleavage. With her feet perpetually stuffed into those purple slippers of hers, she'd prop her chin on the clothesline and stare vacantly as the clouds passed by. At night she muttered to herself and hung around the apartment. That's all I knew of her.

An already odd living situation was made even odder by the two men. Some time ago I was walking past a beer bar in the neighborhood that was holding a grand opening celebration with a clown and a bunch of promotional models. The clown wore a cone-shaped hat and a polka-dotted costume with overlong sleeves and pant legs. He shook and shimmied his shoulders and handed out lollipops to the children passing by. The eyes that animated the round holes of the clown's mask weren't unfamiliar, but it wasn't until the following day that I recognized in a flash that the clown was the man I'd seen around the building. He had a face like a grasshopper. Stranger still was the short man who always wore the same hiking jacket and baseball cap. I'd never once heard him speak. To top it all off, there was always a heavy pine scent in the air around their apartment, that and an acrid, tea-like aroma of a foreign land. Again, that's about all I knew of my neighbors down the hall.

An elderly couple lived downstairs. They more or less acted as building managers, apparently having been deputized by the owner. The old woman spent her days bundled up in a wheelchair, her fallen, late autumn leaf of a face peering out from under a plaid blanket. While out gathering chestnuts, she'd been hit by lightning under a tree and was completely disabled now. The old man, her husband and caretaker, seemed constantly disgruntled, but you could tell he was devoted to his wife and treasured that run-down

building. Every day like clockwork he was up and out early, circling the yard with his wheelchair-bound wife. And early each morning the short man, who always wore the same baseball cap, would be hurrying back to their second-floor apartment coming from God knows where having done God knows what.

Around the time I inherited the apartment I broke up with the man I'd been seeing for five long years. I'd used his failure to show up for my mother's funeral as the explicit excuse, but it wasn't mere pretext; I was conventional enough that I couldn't forget he hadn't been there. Her body was being lowered into the rectangle they'd dug in the ground and the mourners were standing around as they packed the dirt, and all the while I was staring hard at the hill near the entrance. Several times I thought I saw someone in a black suit heading our way, but they all receded from view. What remained in the end was the little mound that would contain my mother forever. The guests at the burial made their way back over the hill where they caught the bus that would return them to their bustling everyday lives, and still there was no sign of him. That's when I looked at the burial mound and saw them clearly. The muddy faces of our stillborn children lying there beside my mother's corpse, clutching at and suckling their own umbilical cords instead of milk bottles.

Despite the firm, calm way I'd broken up with him, things began to go awry. At odd hours of the day, I would go hang out in his neighborhood. But no matter when, no matter how long I stuck around, we never had that coincidental bumping into each other couples are always having in the movies. Time passed and I started calling his place night after night. I'd just hold the receiver up to my ear without speaking. At first, it seemed like he felt sorry for me. He even showed me the courtesy of playing the role of wronged

ex-boyfriend. He would cry and carry on and claim that the breakup was tearing him to pieces. But, at some point, with the continuation of my unvaried tactics, he simply laid the handset of his phone on the floor and openly went about his business --eating his dinner, going to the bathroom, even watching TV.

Up to that point, a toothache was about the worst suffering I'd experienced. But the time had clearly come for heartbreak to trump toothache. My days began to fill with all sorts of half-crazed goings on. I took aspirin to treat the pain that felt as though every ounce of my life's blood was being sucked out through the hole in my heart. At night I would tuck the phone receiver between my legs and sob loudly. And sometimes I dissolved into laughter over how pathetic I was. Every time I spent a few hours like that, my skull throbbed and clumps of hair would fall out. Then somewhere along the way the pain turned into insomnia and I would wrap myself in the heavy, green, floor-length sweater my mother liked to wear, and I'd stand in front of the apartment building staring vacantly into the dawn blue sky like some broken witch who has failed to cast her spell.

After the first night the plantain lilies bloomed then hurriedly closed their petals come morning, the side effects of lost love went away, as if my heartache had been an act all along. That night, I was busy rummaging through the kitchen drawers searching for a knife I could use to cut my wrists when I'd noticed the Southeast Asian woman outside my kitchen window. She had crouched down to get closer to the lush foliage of the plantain lilies, and she had her face buried in the white flowers and she kept moving her head from side to side. Not caring what she was up to, I planted a kiss on the phone

receiver that I wanted to believe linked me to my lover, bit my lower lip and slashed at my wrist with the sharp blade.

I had pictured a pool of sticky wet blood on the ground beneath the back of my head but what actually hit me was the sound of a stringed instrument, like a violin or acoustic guitar, along with an odd, incessantly high-pitched tune. Shocked after my attempt at self-harm, I fainted, briefly, and then fell asleep, utterly exhausted. I'd left the window open and the air in the room had grown cold by the time I woke up. I found the telephone on the floor and pressed the receiver to my ear. Always made accessible to my lover as though it transmitted my own vital signs, the phone line seemed to have been cut off for a long time. To my surprise, the disturbance within me that came in the wake of heartbreak resolved itself in that instant.

I crossed the room to the side facing the busy avenue and threw open the window to hear the cars that raced through the darkness and the mazelike streets. From the room in the left-hand corner of the building, where the three oddballs lived, music was still wafting out, showing no sign that it would stop until morning. When I returned to the open the kitchen window, I noticed that the lily-shaped flowers had disappeared. Finally, I gathered my strength and rolled up the sleeve of my sweater to see the harm I'd done. On my left wrist I saw three thin, slanted lines, each less than a centimeter long. They were slightly clotted with blood, and would require nothing more than simple disinfecting. Not even close to life threatening. Apparently, it wasn't just anyone who could pull off a suicide in response to a failed romance. What I'd accomplished was nothing more than the usual human heartbreak following the loss of a loved one.

I couldn't exactly run off and join a team of researchers to immerse myself in developing solar-powered technologies, or buy myself a blank canvas and the art supplies needed to paint feverishly like some obsessed artist. But I needed a way to kill time. I found the answer one day as I was passing by a big poster plastered on the wall of a university building. It wouldn't really have mattered whether they were teaching the international language of Esperanto with its 28-letter alphabet, or the revered but long forgotten language of a Chinese minority that had disappeared a thousand years ago, or even sign language. It turned out to be English, the language I'd always thought most manageable, that I decided to throw myself into.

On the first day of classes after registration, I don't know what I was expecting in the way of an instructor, but it wasn't the tall, slender 32-year old Australian with short blond hair and blue, Siamese cat eyes. I guess I was a little surprised by the realization that there were all sorts of men out there in the world, men of all different nationalities walking around out there leading respectable, everyday lives.

"He's way too good-looking to be an English teacher. But I don't understand why these white men always look so much older than they actually are. Don't you think this guy does, too?" The women around me were whispering, and their interest confirmed my estimation of our instructor's outstandingly good looks. His name was Nathan. I marveled at the thought of someone being called Nathan. Even the sound of his name had a lovely ring. Sadly, though, after that first day I never again had the chance to be preoccupied by his looks. Out of the blue, I'd developed a severe stutter, and it quickly devolved into a kind of aphasia.

Three times a week, from ten a.m. until noon, I climbed the stairs to the third floor of the university's continuing education building like a participant in a sacred rite. "Did you have breakfast today?" "What did you do on the weekend?" "It's raining out. Did you bring your umbrella?" These trivialities opened the day's class for our lone male student, the five or six women who appeared to be in their forties, and me. The class composition probably reflected the fact that, at that hour of the day, only housewives and self-employed men who didn't have to adhere to a set schedule would be free to study the English language.

Nathan would write something on the board, and we'd copy it, Nathan would speak, and we'd repeat after him; Nathan would tell us to take a five-minute break, and we took that break, Nathan told us it was time to go home, and we'd go home. I was the model student who never missed a single class, but whenever Nathan called on me in his loud voice, my whole body stiffened like bamboo. "*Ppalli*, Holly, *ppalli*!" he'd say. When I heard him call out the only Korean phrase he knew, "*Ppalli*, *ppalli*. Quick, quick," I turned into wood and stuttered and found it hard to breathe. At the same time, I'd noticed the atmosphere in the classroom was growing strained. I found it incredibly difficult to articulate a simple "Good morning." To waste precious class time and get in the way of the other students' progress, and to think how I stumbled over the simplest answers in the most basic conversations --once again I froze, like a person with a hole in her heart.

I wasn't the only person who struggled, though. There was Mr. White, the lone male student. Every Monday morning, when Nathan asked us to talk about what we'd done over the weekend, the fifty-something Mr. White always said that he'd attended

church. When asked what he'd done after the church service, his answer was always the same; he'd had tea with the minister. Then when asked how the tea had been, he would inevitably repeat the same phrase; it tasted good. After a few weeks of this, Nathan dubbed him "Churchman," and Mr. White became even quieter. When Mr. White and I faltered, a classmate named Sally would come to our defense. She was a heavily made-up woman, who came to class uncharacteristically downcast from time to time. She spoke fairly good English and claimed her hobby was horseback riding. She would say to the others, "Hey everyone, we all learn at different rates. Let's not give Holly and our Churchman a hard time," and then toss off some quasi-philosophical remark about age or life she'd picked up somewhere. She'd go on and on explaining its meaning while Nathan fiddled with his cell phone. He nodded whenever Sally said anything.

On my way home after class, all the words that had eluded me would come to me and I found myself slapping my knee or shaking my head and grouching like someone who just realized she's been cheated. One of those days, in front of the building in the warmth of the sun, the old man was cutting his wife's hair with a pair of scissors. He glanced my way as I entered the building, and spoke a little louder, probably wanting me to overhear. He'd said, "I hear the losers on the second floor root around in neighborhood garbage bins at all hours of the night. They eat so well they're healthier than we are. Never mind ham and sausages -- do you know, honey, that they even fish out slightly spoiled vegetables? Look at that one at the door, look how dewy her skin is." I could tell that the old woman was sleeping because her head had slumped over onto her shoulder. I'm sure he knew I'd heard his words, but I neither cared nor wanted to know what those losers ate to say nothing about what the old couple ate, for that matter. What struck me as odd,

though, was the way he lumped me in with them, another one of the “losers who live on the second floor.”

One night, I felt a tremor run through the normally temple-like silence of the building. It felt like being a passenger in a small car, its wheels wobbling on gravel. The clinic directly across from the building, a structure which had been standing the previous day was being demolished, its iron beams left jutting into empty space like exposed nerve endings. There were a number of high voltage, incandescent bulbs hanging from the excavator itself, which had nearly torn down half of the three-story brick building. With a roar, it began to climb a pile of rubble to get into position to demolish the rest. That's when the old man, wearing striped pajamas reminiscent of the prisoners' garb in the movie "Papillon," planted himself in front of the construction site and barked, "You sons-of-bitches, what do you think you're doing disturbing my wife's sleep at this hour?" The Southeast Asian woman was out there whining, anxiously clinging to the waist of the tall down man as he tried to soothe her. Maybe she thought the excavator was going to tear down our building as well. No doubt the clinic was run down, but all that was left standing now was the apartment building.

Days passed with hardly any improvement. Never mind English, I could barely speak the words I already knew in my mother tongue. With the trouble I was having putting thoughts into words, everything began to fall apart. I was increasingly exhausted. Then one day about three weeks into the term, Nathan didn't show up until ten minutes before class, something that had never happened before. We were sitting around watching the door when Nathan rushed in. His eyes were bloodshot. "I'm so sorry, everyone. My grandmother in Australia had brain surgery and she's not doing very well. I have to go

home immediately. You'll get another instructor soon. I'm really sorry. Okay, I'm off to the airport now. Bye!" Handsome Nathan stood there for a moment, waving goodbye with tears in his eyes, and we felt so sorry for him we didn't know what to say. "How do you offer condolences in English?" "Do you think he'll be able to book a flight when he gets to the airport?" While we were looking for the right words, Nathan disappeared, and we lapsed into silence. Then all of a sudden we exploded in easy, rapid-fire Korean. "Wait a minute. Did he say it was his grandmother who died, or his mother?" "What? *Died*? He didn't say she *died*, did he?" "What about the new instructor? Did he say she's coming today or beginning with the next class?" "He said he'd be coming back to teach next week, right?" Everyone had his or her own understanding and it was utter chaos. As for me, I would have sworn that I'd heard him right when he said that his grandmother was on her deathbed, that class was cancelled today and that a new instructor would take his place until he returned. I wanted to explain everything to the other students, but the words wouldn't come out. Just then a level-headed student offered a suggestion. "What about that instructor from New Zealand next door? The one Nathan's friends with? How about one of us goes and asks him?" So the person who everyone thought was getting the top marks in our class went next door as our representative, only to find that she wasn't fluent enough to respond to the instructor's proposition that we join his class, let alone glean further details from him. In the end, she rounded us up and took us to join the composition class next door. The composition teacher was from New Zealand and had an incomprehensible accent. Luckily, he scribbled his instructions on the board, "Write down three things that make you sad and why." Then he yawned, exposing his red tongue.

At night I would take my textbooks out to the yard. Without a decent streetlight in sight, it was impossible to make out any of the letters, but that didn't stop me from keeping nose in the books and practicing all the words I knew using the most beautiful and accurate enunciation I could muster. One day I'd be able to speak to people again. Of course, what I read aloud wasn't lyric poetry or elegant prose, but text as dry as dust, phrases along the lines of "Cross the bridge, and then go through the tunnel. After you enter downtown, continue driving for about 10 minutes. When you see the blue bank, continue across the intersection. Make a turn onto the street behind the bank and you'll find the animal hospital you're looking for." Even with such bland expressions I tried to be as open-minded as I could. In my longing to speak again I could feel the saliva pooling in my mouth, the sweat rising on my scalp. Others might have called me a madwoman had they seen me, but I could easily point to another.

While I paced from one end of the building to the other repeating those phrases to myself, the Southeast Asian woman crouched down low in her voluminous dress, and stroked the leaves of the plantain lily, or stared into the sky with her chin resting on the clothesline. We were muttering in our own unintelligible tongues as we tailed each other in an inadvertent round of ring-around-the-rosy, and all night long we walked the grounds of our abandoned temple in the heart of the city. Until, at some point, I lost sight of the woman and I heard giggling. I moved towards the sound.

Construction had yet to begin on the newly vacant lot where the clinic had been, and plastic tarps hung overhead. Naked bulbs hung decoratively and lit up the site. With the green weeds forming sort of hedge around the rectangular site, it was a rather pleasing sight. Someone had even planted a little vegetable plot in the space where the parking lot

used to be, and the greens, hot peppers and palm-sized lettuce plants were now growing vigorously. In one corner of the lot someone had installed a rubber vat, large enough to accommodate a few adults and filled with water from a green garden hose. The space looked more like a green-carpeted stage than an empty lot awaiting imminent development. And on that stage the woman was dancing. She danced in circles with her hands on her hips, and made dramatic gyrating movements with her stomach and rear end. Meanwhile the clown man was immersed in a huge, black, water-filled barrel with only his head above water. The dancing woman would push his head down under the surface, then it would pop back up again. I found myself laughing as I watched them play and I thought they must be complete idiots. That's how the hours flowed and the night passed.

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There were a number of reports at that time of late-night muggings and beatings of women on their way home from the busy subway station in the southeast part of the city. Every night on TV they showed images of the women's mutilated corpses, only with their faces pixilated. Each time I heard one of those reports I couldn't help but spew invectives at the screen, not cognizant for a moment that I'd lost the ability to speak. My nocturnal English language drills and walks around the neighborhood all came to a halt as I holed up in my room listening to the music that came from the quarters of "the losers" or the faint sounds of a demolition crew tearing something else down somewhere in the city. When I finally fell asleep I dreamed of my mother. Large spools of thread hung from her neck, and with a needle in hand she said to me, "My mother died when I was three. I was so young I didn't realize she was dead, and I lifted her blouse and began to suckle her breast. But you wouldn't understand. You have a mother. Even after I was all

grown up, I cried all day long " Each night, the sounds of the demolition crew would draw closer, until around dawn when I would drift in and out of dreams in which I struggled, trying hard to mother my own mother.

One night in particular it was hot and extremely dry and I could hear the old man from the first floor shouting loud enough that I went down the stairs. Out in the yard I found the losers all in a tangle. At first glance I thought they were fighting, but a closer look made it clear that the clown man and the Southeast Asian woman were basically being beaten up by the baseball cap guy. As the blows fell on them, the pair rammed into the many stacks of buckets and beverage bottles left for recycling and the plastic garbage bags collected in the front yard. All the while the old man stood there pointing his finger and heaping abuse on them. The weird thing was, both the clown and the Southeast Asian woman were taking the beating without making a peep. Just then a bunch of drunks passing by spat in the direction of the building, whereupon the old man followed them into the street calling them a pack of good-for-nothing hoodlums.

There's no telling how long the beating might have gone on if not for the explosive sound coming from the old man's apartment. It was so loud I expected to find his wife dead and blasted to bits, but all I saw when I got there was the lid of their pressure cooker stuck to the floor. The old woman, meanwhile, was calmly picking rice from her blanket and tucking it, grain by grain, in her mouth. Apparently the old man had neglected to turn off their stove in his hurry to see what was happening outside the apartment.

Early one Sunday morning, the police came to our building and roused the baseball cap guy. They dragged him out of the apartment with his arms pinned behind

him. They said his face had been captured by several surveillance cameras near the subway station, and now he was a suspect in the recent assaults downtown. As the police car pulled away with him inside, the Southeast Asian woman flailed her arms about and sobbed.

As it turned out, someone had changed the lock on the door of the vacant second floor apartment with a heavy padlock. When the police broke down the door, they exposed a rather surreal world within. In the living room and bedroom there was an assortment of dilapidated furniture, some with doors practically off their hinges, all stuffed with items that were unmistakably feminine – handbags and shoes and scarves and cosmetics. I was seized by fear as my eyes took in the plastic bucket sink and the bamboo basket, all of which contained discarded IDs and credit cards. It was clear that whatever had been going on had been going on for a long time.

In all the confusion, I had my chance to get a look inside the apartment where the threesome lived. I could see two beds, one on each side of the living room, and instead of wallpaper, the walls and ceiling were covered with newsprint and pages from magazines. All around the room paper cobras had been hung from wires. The persistent strange odor whose source I'd never quite identified surged out of the apartment into my nostrils. That night I saw the guy with the baseball cap on television. The reporter said the guy claimed he'd done nothing but collect the odds and ends people discarded around the subway station. Reputable psychiatrists appeared on camera and gave behavioral analyses of his obsessive filching and hoarding, but I found it hard to follow what they were saying. The image of the guy with the brim of his baseball cap pulled down low quietly faded from the screen.

The days that followed were hot and dry, the sun unrelenting. The police came back, this time carrying their shovels. They began to dig around the building, evidently to unearth any corpses that might have been disposed of in the yard. Their digging meant the old couple from the first floor couldn't take their daily stroll, and the only way to get out of the building was to walk on a shaky plank. People from the neighborhood, who'd never shown any interest in the building before, appeared out of nowhere and always seemed to be hovering around out of curiosity. For a long while we had no rain.

In the end, nothing resembling a female corpse or mutilated body parts emerged from the ground. They dug up slippery worms as fat as your finger, empty ramen packages buried long ago but not even close to decomposed, a child's toy plastic kitchenware, a hunk of petrified tree root that had been trapped underground. Still not satisfied, the police brought in a team of sniffer dogs.

On my way home from class one day I saw the clown. He was out on the street selling umbrellas though there was no sign of rain. I looked around and spotted the Southeast Asian woman rooting through the dumpster behind a row of houses near our building. Now that I think about it, the baseball cap guy must've been the main breadwinner, more or less responsible for their livelihoods.

Nathan returned from Australia about that time and proposed that we hold a class potluck. On a clear day, we spread our buffet on a picnic bench at the university. Everyone contributed a dish and something to drink, and I brought a few sandwiches. We found more to talk about in English sitting around that table than in the classroom, with topics ranging from wine tasting to the varieties of wine to Western food culture in general. While the others engaged in animated conversation about their favorite foods

and how they were prepared or memories of the countries where they'd eaten those dishes, the image of the Southeast Asian woman's round body came to mind and I found myself unable to lift my head in the bright light that day.

Probably bound by protocol, Nathan started calling on us again, making sure that everyone took a turn speaking. My heart pounded as I kept my head down, taking dictation on what everyone else was saying. I could feel Nathan's eyes on me, "Holly, *ppalli ppalli!*" As always, my throat closed up and nothing would come out. First, the ever-confident and relaxed horseback enthusiast, Sally, and then Susan, the retired lady who'd been an elementary school teacher for many years, took aim at me. "Listen, Holly, writing everything down won't help. Practice, that's what you have to do. Practice!" There was a moment of awkward silence after Sally spoke. Then it was Susan's turn to give me her intimidating look, "Come now," she'd said. "Why do you insist on making an outcast of yourself? I just can't understand it. If you're going to be like this, why bother coming to class at all?" The rest of the class stopped eating and watched me with eyes that seemed to say, 'We sympathize, but maybe you could just say something to ease the tension.' Nathan must have felt bad about it, for he used the gentlest tone you can imagine when he said, "Holly, say whatever you feel like saying. Please don't be embarrassed. You can do it." His words gave me courage. I felt my lips quiver and my buttocks shift from side to side as though words were about to emerge. But the glare of the sun blinded me and kept me unable to speak. Nor could I eat, not even the food I'd brought. The party came to an end.

There was a patrol car from the ward office stationed in front of the building when I got home. The door to the Southeast Asian woman's second floor apartment was

open and several government officials were blocking the entry. The officials had with them two Southeast Asian men who stood over her, questioning her and prodding her on the shoulder in an effort to get her to say something. She was on the bed with her back to the men, curled up in a ball, like a heartbroken bear. The Southeast Asian men kept speaking to her in what sounded like one foreign language after another. I couldn't understand a word of it. The woman whined irritably, then moaned for a while, and went back to whining again. The damp odor of sweat mixed with stale peppermint candy emanated from the room, a smell that, for some reason, I didn't find altogether unpleasant. Twenty minutes or so passed like that before they left her alone and gathered in the hall. That's when I learned she was from Ceylon, or I should say, Sri Lanka.

A little later that evening I decided I would take the plastic bag full of sandwiches left over from the potluck as well as some steamed sweet potatoes and pay a visit to my neighbors for the first time ever. Signs of devastation due to the police search were still in evidence. I also noticed a suit hanging from a hook on the wall and the polka-dotted costume the clown had worn, which was both overly long and large. Apparently, the woman hadn't budged from where she lay on the bed. She was still facing the wall, still moaning. Then, she started to alternate between moaning and murmuring in a high-pitched tone. I found myself lifting the blankets and, as I prodded the bear, I noticed she was bathed in sweat and burning up. I searched their closet for a fresh change of clothes but couldn't find anything, so I ran down the hall to fetch a T-shirt and sweatpants. She seemed smaller as though her back and waist and round belly had shrunk. Each time I touched her skin, my hand came away soaked. I used a towel to dry her back, neck and chest, and began to change her clothes with difficulty.

The whole time she was like dead weight, simply lying there with her back to me, moaning and making no attempt to roll over. Her feet were as stiff as bamboo. Her toes and calves were the color of coffee. The only way I could change her properly was to pull her dress down towards her thighs, where it caught on her hips, hiked up over her buttocks, even with the zipper undone. I guess my hand must have brushed against her backside, because she jerked up in surprise, lifted her hips, and fell head first back down in a heap. She didn't scream. That's when I saw it – between the dark, naked cheeks of her buttocks, a cluster of hemorrhoids like swollen, poisonous winter cherries.

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With the help of officials and the local community, the Southeast Asian woman was operated on by the best proctologic surgeon in the country, or so I'd been told. It was incredible how many organizations and individuals came to her aid. I realized there are plenty of good people in this world. Up to the point that she was taken to the hospital, I stayed by her side through the pre-dawn hours until morning, when the car sent by someone official carried her away.

By turns I mopped the sweat that flowed down her neck and belly and wiped away the brown tears she shed while I fed her bits of sweet potato and sugar water and listened to her groans and incomprehensible murmuring. I nodded off from time to time and shortly before dawn even fell into a dreamless sleep. Nothing beats physical exhaustion for inducing deep sleep.

Two weeks passed before she was able to come home from the hospital. I was told that patients would typically be discharged after four days, but her condition was so severe that she could've died from shock due to those hemorrhoids. When she came back

to the building she brought them with her as a souvenir, those excised hemorrhoids like shucked shellfish in a milky glass bottle. As I caught sight of her thin face and pitiful figure, I had to recalibrate the scale of suffering. Heartbreak was harder to bear than a toothache, hemorrhoids more painful than heartbreak. That was the new order.

The night of her return, the clown breezed by carrying his unsold umbrellas and a stuffed green lizard balanced on his head. He opened the umbrellas in a rainbow of colors on the green, new-grown grass of the vacant lot and began to dance with her. He brought out some semi-sweet liquor he'd gotten from God knows where and we took turns sipping mouthfuls from the bottle and chattered away in a language the others couldn't possibly understand. Our laughter rang out in one corner of the city. Later that night, the woman fished some make-up from the depths of her purse and drew a heavy red dot right between my eyebrows. Then she turned her back to me, dropped her head towards her crotch and laughingly showed me her now perfectly normal anus. Her laugh was so innocent that part of me wished we were sisters. I almost wanted to pull out my identification card so we could compare birthdays and agree that whoever was older could be called Big Sister.

The plantain lilies bloomed in the darkness, then withdrew, and then bloomed again, and then one day in our building, as quiet as a temple, I heard a commotion coming from a group of men. It wasn't long before the old man from the first floor rapped on my door with some urgency. By the time I got to the lawn a small crowd had gathered and I heard someone say, "The building's *finally* going to be redeveloped! What fantastic news! I can die a happy man. The same day that foreign bitch on the second floor went back to wherever she came from. So? Isn't this great news?"

The hours passed uneventfully. English classes continued, and the new building on the vacant lot across the way began to take shape. Everywhere I went I carried with me a small blue coin purse that the Southeast Asian woman had left on my doorstep. Then one day in class, I finally opened my mouth and began to speak. Of course, this was only after Nathan had again reassured me: "Please don't be embarrassed, Holly."

"My friend lives in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a beautiful place, my friend told me that night." At my words my classmates urged, "What did she say? Tell us."

"I like to bathe with my little sister. We went to a festival where we circled the center of the city, carrying the Buddha's tooth on the back of an elephant. To get there from our village we took a cheap bus that belched exhaust. I fell in love with a man who did nothing but drum for ten days, and my sister fell in love with a man who danced by the light of a torch. If you could have seen the elephants bathing... That night we showed each other our bodies as we each thought of the man we loved. We were virgins but we didn't want to continue our lives as virgins. We kept murmuring *The man with the torch is coming through the door. I hear the drummer! He's coming!* But though we waited and waited, the men did not come. So we decided to show each other our virginity. This was after we'd had some very hot curry and honey. It didn't hurt that much.

"I don't know how I got here. I fell asleep after eating some candy that a stranger gave me. When I woke up I was in a strange place. Every night I dreamed a dream where I was looking back. Behind me was jungle everywhere and I heard elephants and drums. I stood there thinking I'll go to a place where I can't hear the drums. I'll give it a try. Then I ended up here. But I'm still standing there looking back at the jungle. Maybe I'll stand there forever. I was born in Sri Lanka."

By the time I'd finished saying what I had to say I was ready to pass out.

"My friend returned to Sri Lanka. She drew a heavy dot on my brow. Do you see the red dot? Can't you see it?"

All the students looked at me in surprise as though they were thinking, "What? Has her English been this good all along?" Nathan was the first to clap and smile, displaying his white teeth. Soon the students joined in calling out *Bravo*.

That night my mother came to me in my dreams. I dreamt I was licking at her lips like a puppy. I didn't want to wake up, but as always, there was some kind of ruckus in the building. The old man from downstairs was screaming at the top of his lungs. "Listen, everyone, listen. My wife can stand up, she can stand up!" In fact the old woman was standing there smiling, gripping the arm of her wheelchair with one hand. She was looking up at the night sky. The old man, with his mouth wide open, hopped around her. He wore a strange expression and I couldn't tell whether he was laughing or crying. Apparently a miracle was upon us.