

Mi-ae

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The first day she came to live in her friend Ju-hee's empty apartment, Mi-ae quickly unpacked and took her six-year-old daughter, Hae-min, to the senior citizens' center. She had seen a notice that every Wednesday, a book club meeting was held there for mothers and children. It also said that the club was for apartment residents. There was also a note asking people to call in advance, but Mi-ae ignored that.

It seemed obvious that, after she made a phone call and chatted about this and that, she would eventually be rejected, either because she didn't meet the standards or because she wasn't eligible.

The snow that had fallen a few days before lay crushed and gray all over the apartment complex. Since Ju-hee's rental apartment was located in a relatively remote part of the complex, she had the illusion that she was stuck in the same place no matter how far walked. On they went -past the playground, exercise equipment, tennis court, and the management office – until the neat building of the senior citizens' center came into view after they had stopped several times to allow Hae-min, who kept falling behind to touch the snow and ice, to catch up.

“Oh, have you come for our meeting?”

After opening the door of the center, Mi-ae arrived in front of a small meeting room just as four women and four children were getting ready to go back outside. Even though it was daytime, the room was dark, and the pungent smell of disinfectant permeated the air. Masks were covering most of their faces, but their embarrassment was obvious, as if this was the first time such a thing had happened. They glanced at each other, chose their words carefully, and whenever they made eye contact with Mi-ae, awkwardly tried to smile.

That gave Mi-ae a certain assurance. She sensed that these people wouldn't throw them out on the spot, guessed that they couldn't do it.

“We used to meet here, but due to COVID, we can't use it for a while. We were trying to decide what to do, if we should change the venue or something.”

The woman who spoke was small in stature, and, after rummaging through her bag, she handed her a leaflet about the club. It seemed that they were going to send her away for today.

“Oh, I see. My child has been begging me for days, so I came here on the spur of the moment. I guess I’ll have to contact you first next time before we come back.”

Mi-ae answered calmly and gently stroked Hae-min’s head, who was standing next to her.

“Mom! I know that book. Do you remember me telling you about it? There’s a trashcan ghost in it.”

Hae-min whispered, pointing to a large picture book held by a child in a fur hat. It was a whisper, but it was loud enough for everyone to hear. Mi-ae nodded without speaking, as if she remembered, and tried to make Hae-min turn round. Her young daughter was always fearless and stubborn, changing her mind dozens of times a day. At times like these, however, they were pretty much on the same wavelength.

“Oh my goodness, your hands are frozen red. Aren’t your hands cold?”

At that moment, the woman who had handed her the leaflet looked at Hae-min with a surprised expression, which made Mi-ae look down at her child’s red, frozen hands.

“Hae-min, I told you not to touch the icicles. Your hands are cold. Why are you still holding that one?”

Mi-ae brushed an almost completely melted icicle from Hae-min’s hands. Her child’s hands were as cold as ice.

“It was so pretty, just like a jewel. I wanted to give it to you.”

Hae-min stuck out her tongue and smiled, so that Mi-ae couldn’t help smiling along with her. At that moment, her worries that she might be considered a thoughtless mother who didn’t even bother to give her child gloves vanished completely.

“Since you’ve come all the way here, would you like a cup of tea? In any case, it’s too late today and there’s nowhere for us to go. So anyone who has time, why don’t you come to our place for a cup of tea?”

A woman who had been watching from the back made this suggestion in a soft voice, and it was only after following her to her home, apartment 708 in block 1207, that Mi-ae learned that her name was Song Seon-woo. The warm apartment was spick and span, and the snow-capped mountains in the distance could be seen through the balcony window.

“Mica!”

Although the dog, which had been waving its tail from the moment they came through the front door, mingled with the children and ran frantically here and there, the calm and quiet atmosphere inside the room was not disturbed. Jae-yeon's mother, Lee-chan's mother, and Gyu-min's mother. As she made formal conversation with the three other mothers, Mi-ae cautiously looked around the room while enjoying the tea and cookies that Seon-woo served. Hearing Seon-woo say that for the next few years she would focus only on raising her child, she made up her mind that she wouldn't call her "Ms. Seon-woo" or "Se-ah's Mom" like everyone else, but would call her "Seon-woo Eonni."

Within a week, Mi-ae had begun to call her just that, and by the time two weeks had passed, she had confessed that she had been divorced for a year and was raising Hae-min alone. Then she confided that within three months, which was as long as she could stay in her friend Ju-hee's apartment, she would have to find a decent job and get a place to move into. After this they occasionally exchanged text messages. At the end of three weeks, they had become so close that Seon-woo offered to look after Hae-min. In any case, because of the pandemic, it was impossible to send children to daycare centers, kindergartens, or childcare centers, which were often closed.

"Hae-min, listen to me. You must never fight with Se-ah. You're her *eonni*, aren't you? Older sisters should always give in and put up with everything. Do you know what I mean?"

On the day she first left Hae-min with Seon-woo, Mi-ae stopped her child in the cold corridor and stressed this point, over and over again. There was no time to lose, as Mi-ae had to find a job, find a house to move to, and find money to pay for this and that.

"Mom, don't worry. Se-ah is very nice. Aunty is very nice too!"

That was true. Although Mi-ae kept arriving later than promised to pick up Hae-min, Seon-woo never looked irritated. Rather, she said that she was happy that Se-ah, who had always been alone, had an older sister to play with, and sometimes, saying that as it was late, she would urge Mi-ae to stay for dinner.

Although she knew that it was merely out of consideration, and might be something of a formality, Mi-ae never refused. When Seon-woo invited her to stay for a little longer, she did so, and when she invited her to have dinner, they ate together with Seon-woo, Seon-woo's husband, and Se-ah. It wasn't that the three were always comfortable and easy to get on with. Five-year-old Se-ah constantly wanted to be the center of the adults' attention, while Seon-woo's husband kept asking Mi-ae and Hae-min questions. Even the dog Mica somehow seemed to think lightly of her and Hae-min, while Seon-woo, who kept constant watch over them, providing them with ample rice, side dishes, and soup, was somehow uncomfortable, too.

At some point, it became clear that Seon-woo and her husband not only sympathized with Hae-min and her situation, they actually pitied her. But when she considered the positive effects on Hae-min of the neatly-placed dishes beneath the lemon-hued lighting, the food made with love and care, Seon-woo and her family surrounding them, putting a little bit of everything in their mouths and chewing the food slowly, their innermost thoughts didn't really matter.

It was also true that the Seon-woo and her husband were helpful, knowing as they did the details of various policies, such as childcare allowance, independence allowance, housing benefits and subsidized "happy housing," New Deal jobs and public work, which were always a bit different every time she looked and could not be fully understood at once. Whenever she was talking with Seon-woo, it felt as if a small light came on in her dark mind and she could see a narrow road ahead. Seon-woo's head full of useful, valuable, and essential information was strange, surprising, and filled her with envy.

Anyway, it was clear that Seon-woo was a good person: even six-year-old Hae-min could feel that. Or, rather, there was no doubt that she was someone who had a lot of good things. The book club that Seon-woo had first suggested and had been going to for several months now, and the members, were different from the people Mi-ae had met so far.

"I also started donating yesterday. When I heard what Jae-yeon's Mom said last week, I was actually a little bit ashamed. I realized I was all talk, that I never put anything into practice. I felt ashamed in front of Lee-chan."

They were always trying to help those in need...

"Right. Sometimes, that truck's broadcast sounds really loud. There are people petitioning for it not to be allowed into the complex. But it doesn't come every day, and selling is their livelihood. How long does the truck spend here, after all? Isn't everyone overreacting?"

They kept trying to find out about the plight of people they didn't know.

Did you hear about them blocking the side road behind the apartment complex over there? They say it's for security, but there are people who are physically disabled, and what about the people in the neighborhood? They all go that way. We have to come forward and speak up. They claim it's about security and safety, but it's selfish, isn't it?

There were times when they boldly suggested that they should do something.

Sometimes an issue was taken very seriously, so that even Mi-ae, who was unaware of the situation, felt somber. There were times when she was amazed and quite touched by them, but what appeared more and more clearly in Mi-ae's eyes was their desire to become better people than they were now. Each had a desire to become a better person, had the

conviction that they would, and that they could afford to keep that conviction. Mi-ae was not unaware that that was the real reason for including her in the group.

“What kind of story does Se-ah want to tell Mr. Bear who lives in the North Pole?”

“What should we do if she wants to get rid of the plastic island? Maybe Hae-min knows a way?”

At the book club meetings, which lasted about two hours, Mi-ae was on the quiet side. In general, the questions that the mothers asked the children seemed to leave no choice, as the answers were fixed, and the replies the children gave were also suffocatingly correct, because they were covered in values that were right and good.

“It may not seem like a big deal right now, but it’s a really serious problem. In the end, it’s something our kids will have to deal with. We need to find something that we adults can do now.”

Whenever someone said something like that with conviction, she often felt an urge to be honest and contradict them. With no job, unable to find a house to move into in a few months’ time, and with no idea how much trouble she would have as the parent of a school-aged child in a few years, questions as to why she should worry about polar bears or whales swallowing pieces of plastic were always on the tip of her tongue..

“Yes. Of course.”

However, Mi-ae always kept her opinions at the level of lukewarm agreement. After all, she hadn’t come because she was interested in reading. More than anything else, she needed to get to know her neighbors in order to have someone to take care of her young daughter in an unfamiliar neighborhood. Mi-ae knew perfectly well that it was much more profitable for her to express her consent appropriately and to receive some of the daily necessities they generously distributed, rather than making people feel uncomfortable because she expressed her own opinions.

People gave Hae-min children’s books, coupons for online lessons, homemade cookies, even some cushions and stuffed animals. Sometimes they handed Mi-ae dry seaweed, frozen rice cakes, mini blankets, or cheap souvenirs. Sometimes there were things she really wanted to turn down, but Mi-ae accepted them all gratefully because she knew very well that otherwise she wouldn’t be able to expect anything more.

“Mom, the lid goes in a separate bin. We learnt about recycling, remember!”

“Mom, did you bring your shopping bag?”

“Mom, the reason they don’t eat pork isn’t because it’s a different country. It’s because of religion.”

When Hae-min suddenly spoke up to say such things, the things they had talked about at the book club that seemed to have nothing to do with her life became very concrete. Questions and answers that seemed overly correct. Stories that were, clearly right. Values that should be pursued if you were a good person. Things that should be done, but that not just anyone can do. She thought that maybe she and Hae-min could hope to dream of such things, at least once in their lifetime.

It looked similar to the shape of hope.

Ever since she had reached the conclusion that having high expectations in life often led to disaster, Mi-ae had struggled as much as possible to avoid hope. It didn't mean she didn't try. However, she tried not to forget to warn herself, from time to time, that her life had always required more effort than others, that her ability to inflate hope was unnecessarily developed, and that she might get caught under a snowball of hope and die.

Yet something that might be called hope was appearing again. No, Mi-ae wasn't unaware that there had never been a time in her life when she wasn't desperate for something like that.

"Maybe it wouldn't work out. It might not happen."

One Saturday afternoon two weeks later, Mi-ae cautioned herself as she headed to a nearby cafe. It was only after walking several times around the crowded space full of people wearing masks that she managed to find a seat at the end of a rectangular table that could seat six people. With a nervous look on her face, trying not to disturb the others, each of whom was preoccupied with something, Mi-ae carefully pulled out a chair and then sat down, perched on the very edge.

"Yu Mi-ae? Have you been waiting long?"

The man she knew as Manager Kwon arrived twenty minutes later than expected. The man who, every time they talked on the phone, had responded vaguely with, "Hang on," "Maybe," "Well," looked much younger in person. His features were clear, and his pink-toned forehead and plump cheeks were almost shining. Mi-ae thought that he might be three or four years younger than she was, and she muttered to herself, "What's he been eating to make his face glow like that?" as she straightened her back and sat upright.

"Yes, there's a lot of paperwork. Even if it's a small amount, it's still a loan, so we have to follow the procedures. Well then, shall we take a look?"

Manager Kwon brought a chair from another table, sat down next to Mi-ae, and began by spreading out on the table the documents he had prepared. With every move he made, his shirt exuded a subtle woody scent. Mi-ae sipped her by now-cold coffee as she listened to him.

He said it was a normal procedure, that there was nothing to worry about, as he turned over papers full of letters that were too small to read. Then Mi-ae handed him the documents she had prepared, including her resident registration certificate, a certified copy of her ID card, a copy of her bankbook, and a certificate of family relations.

“Let’s see. You said you’re divorced, right? So, who do you live with now? Are you with your parents? You have one older sister. Are you often in contact?”

The questions could be considered rude, depending on how she took them, but Mi-ae answered that after her father had passed away more than a decade ago, that her mother lived alone in her hometown, and that she occasionally communicated with her three-years-older sister, who lived in the suburbs. Then she said she was staying temporarily with her six-year-old daughter, Hae-min, in her friend’s home because she had housing issues, and she planned to move into a new home as soon as possible.

She didn’t say that it had been over two years since she last saw her mother and sister, and she didn’t want to see them in the future, either, and that if she had been in an amicable relationship with them, she wouldn’t be having this interrogation-like conversation in a crowded café to borrow a mere two million won. She also didn’t tell him that the boiler had broken down, so she had almost fled from her rented room that was virtually the same as being outdoors (Mi-ae really wanted to ask if such a place could be called a house, and what people thought of a landlord who would rent out such a house), and thanks to her friend, Ju-hee, who had gone down to the countryside, she was able to use her place for three months, and that she hadn’t thought about what would happen afterwards, couldn’t even begin to think about it.

“What about your ex-husband? Are you in touch?”

Manager Kwon asked as he lined up the corners of the documents.

“I’ve decided to consider him dead.”

Mi-ae answered.

He raised his head and looked Mi-ae in the eyes. The sounds of people’s speech, the music, and coffee machine noises became clearer, and the emotions expressed on his face were clearly visible. She smiled lightly, as if brushing over his common, simple, shallow feelings about her.

“It’s easier for both of us.”

“So, are the numbers written here correct?”

Director Kwon asked, turning over a sheet of paper, pointing to the phone numbers of her mother and sister. Mi-ae replied that they were, after rewriting the slightly unclear “eight”

and “nine” with the ballpoint pen she was holding. The woman opposite her, who was doing something on her laptop, kept peering at Mi-ae.

“Then why don’t you talk briefly with your mother and sister? It doesn’t have to be very long. All you have to do is simply say hello and hang up. We do need to check.”

She hadn’t expected him to make such a request, but Mi-ae tried to hide her embarrassment and smiled. She then glanced at the woman opposite her as she kept glancing their way. Her eyes clouded for a moment, as if there was a thin film over them, creating the illusion that the laptop, the woman, and the background beyond were swaying and leaning to one side.

Mi-ae opened her eyes wide and protested softly, as if trying to recover her sight, which seemed about to fail at any moment.

“If I call her at this hour, Mom will be surprised. She’s a very worried person. What time is it? My sister will be at work. It’ll be difficult for her to answer the phone. Her employee welfare is not that good. They always have their eye on her. The people there are very uptight.”

She tried refusing gently several times, but he didn’t seem willing to let it go. In the meantime, a few of the people who were sitting at the table got up, and others with a keen eye quickly took their place and sat down. Curious people’s eyes moved quickly between Mi-ae and the man and the white papers on the oak-colored table.

“It’s standard procedure, but I must insist. You need to make a phone call, even if for a moment. Even just one second.”

While Manager Kwon moved away to take a call, Mi-ae quickly unblocked her mom and sister and texted them. She wrote that she would be calling in a moment, just a short call. She could hardly write that she wanted to talk normally or that she didn’t want to fight. She just put a smiley emoticon at the end of the sentence.

As soon as Manager Kwon returned, Mi-ae called her sister first.

“Mi-ae? Is that you? Is it really Mi-ae?”

Her older sister answered her call as if she had been waiting, and she responded affectionately at first, asking about Mi-ae’s health and well-being. Mi-ae briefly made eye contact with Manager Kwon, who was sitting next to her, and spat out vague answers like “Yes,” “No,” “I don’t know,” “Really,” “Of course,” as naturally as possible. Her sister’s moods were largely unpredictable, and she never knew at what point a crack would appear and what would come pouring out of it. Mi-ae was always overwhelmed and frightened by her sister’s words and emotions pouring out through the broken, gaping crack.

“Mi-ae, it’s been such a long time since you called, and I really didn’t want to say this.”

And her sister’s voice, which had been calm, suddenly began to subside.

“Eonni, I always seem to call you when you’re at your busiest, don’t I? I seem to be taking too much of your time.”

Mi-ae tried to keep her sister from going on. But her sister’s words came pouring out as if she was determined. Once again, it was clear that she had cracked somewhere and the words she had been holding back were flowing out through the crack.

Her sister said she had quit her job a few months ago. Then, she said she hadn’t quit, but had practically been fired, and complained about the behavior of the chairman and the company that easily kicked out weak people like her, using the pandemic as a convenient excuse. Then her resentment shifted to her incompetent husband, leading to a lament about her own situation where she could not be comforted or helped by anyone. She then, suddenly, turned to her grievances about Mi-ae.

“You shouldn’t live like that. Who doesn’t have a hard life? It’s your family that you rely on and helps you out when you’re having a hard time. You only think about your own life. Have you ever thought about how I’m living?”

Her sister’s weeping voice seemed to pierce through the phone. She had no desire to let someone learn about her by overhearing this private and confidential phone call for the first time in his life. If Manager Kwon was listening, he might reconsider her loan. But more than anything, Mi-ae felt pathetic and ashamed of her sister and her own situation, still having to talk and listen to these things.

“Eonni, I can’t talk for long right now. I’ll call you later.”

Eventually, Mi-ae interrupted her and ended the call. With her mother, things were even worse. As soon as she answered the phone, her mother lamented that life was terrible, then she asked why she had called, and advised her again and again not to do something pointless, as if she sensed something. Her mother’s voice, indistinct and thin compared to two years before, which made Mi-ae feel guilty, grew more energetic as she enumerated the wrong choices she had made in the past, and recalled past events that Mi-ae never wanted to remember. By recalling the past, her mother regained her momentum.

“Are you okay, Mom? I hope you’re not sick?”

She tried to change the topic a few times, but her mother was not budging. Her second daughter, on whom she had pinned her remaining hopes, had clearly failed, and her despair that

she could no longer depend on this daughter seemed to have left her incapable of seeing or hearing anything. Mi-ae didn't want to be hurt again by the harsh words her mother uttered.

“What the hell? When I ask how you're doing, is it so difficult for you to ask how I am? Can't we have a normal conversation like that? Have I asked you to do something? It was just a call to say hello. Just to say hello. I'm fine, you're fine too. Why the hell is that so difficult?”

Mi-ae continued, staring straight at the people who were looking at her openly. She was going to try to assuage her mother somehow, but something in her heart that she had been holding back surged up, and felt increasingly unbearable. If the eyes of the people in the cafe looking at her had been friendly, if they had been just a little bit friendlier, she might have been able to suppress her rising emotions somehow.

“You're in the full flush of youth, in better shape than me, while I'm simply waiting for the day I die. How many years has it been that I've not had a phone call from you asking how I am? If you're so worried, you could send some cash. Don't just say you're worried.”

Her mother then went on.

“Seeing the way you treat me, it's obvious how your kid will treat you, it's obvious.”

The moment she heard those words, everyone in the cafe who was paying attention to her seemed cold-hearted, and she had a feeling that the feeble resolutions she had made in her heart were being mercilessly shaken again. Mi-ae hung up before her mother could say anything else and blocked her number again.

“Did you hear? That was my mom.”

Manager Kwon, who had watched Mi-ae making the phone calls, silently checked the rest of her documents, and said that within an hour of receiving Mi-ae's signature on the IOU and contract, 1.8 million won, deducting the interest, would be deposited in her account. He then explained that she had to repay 2.6 million won, the principal plus interest, within fifty days.

“Just one thing, because I don't know. I really don't know. What if I don't repay the money on time? Will you come and threaten me?”

Manager Kwon kept asking if she had any questions, over and over again, but when Mi-ae asked that one, he laughed before muttering his answer.

“Hey, we don't do that kind of thing these days. That would be illegal. We don't do anything illegal, so don't worry.”

Mi-ae did not ask what he might do legally. In effect, she had already heard the answer. In that case, he would call her mother and her older sister and reveal the details of her situation, and the humiliation would surely return to haunt her one day.

It would be terrible.

After leaving the café, Mi-ae put her hands in her coat pockets and started walking quickly. A cold wind touched her face, which was flushed with agitation. It was only then that she seemed to realize what she had done, and she began to panic. Mi-ae ended up standing in the corner of a building at the entrance of the apartment complex, where she smoked a cigarette and then walked around the grounds a few times to get rid of the smell of cigarette smoke from her clothes.

She seemed to be growing calmer, but her heart was becoming infinitely small, indescribably dark, and badly rattled at the slightest memory. She wasn't sure she could keep little Hae-min from sensing the anxiety that had hold of her. She went to sit on a bench in the near-empty playground, and paced around a sunny spot where pigeons had gathered.

She belatedly discovered that Seon-woo had called several times.

She was already inside the apartment complex and she could be there in five minutes, so Mi-ae turned and headed toward Seon-woo's place. Just as she was standing in front of the elevator her phone rang.

"Mi-ae, where are you? Are you with the kids?"

It was Seon-woo.

"Eonni, I'm on my way up now. I'm a bit late, aren't I?"

She had not understood Sun-woo's words properly. Just before the elevator doors closed, a delivery driver in a helmet rushed in and made a racket with plastic bags and his phone ringing.

"Aren't the children with you, Mi-ae? I thought you must have taken them out."

It was only after she opened the front door and saw Seon-woo's pale face that Mi-ae realized something had happened. Seon-woo said that she had gone to the community center for a while, and when she came back, there was no sign of the children. Since the dog Mica wasn't there either, she thought Mi-ae had taken the children, and she bit her lip as she stammered that she was about to go out because she couldn't get in touch with Mi-ae.

Seon-woo, always armed with a calm smile, now wore an expression that Mi-ae had never seen before. That terrified Mi-ae. Frightening fantasies struck her one after another, and her chest was pounding, but she responded calmly.

“Let’s go. Let’s go out and look for them. It’s only been a few minutes. The children must be somewhere nearby. How far could such small children go? Is there anywhere they might have gone? Someone who might have come?”

Even Mi-ae herself was surprised that she could maintain such calm.

“Children? I didn’t see any children.”

The security guard, who was warming himself in front of a glowing heater, put on his hat, asked for the children’s names and a rough description, and made a brief broadcast. While the security guard was making the broadcast, Seon-woo contacted the book club mothers, and Mi-ae ran to the management office because she thought they should inform the whole apartment complex.

Jae-yeon’s mother and Lee-chan’s mother came one after another. All four mothers, including Mi-ae and Seon-woo, started to run around the apartment complex shouting the children’s names, and in the meantime, the security guard who had checked the CCTV confirmed that the children had exited the building with Mica.

As she shouted Hae-min’s name, Mi-ae reflected that she shouldn’t have left Hae-min with Seon-woo, and if anything happened to Hae-min it would be her fault, and that would be the worst thing that could ever happen to her. Even so, she was doing her best not to make a negative impression on Seon-woo and the other mothers.

After a while, someone shouted that they had found the children. They were in a flower bed behind the apartment building opposite. When Mi-ae arrived, Hae-min, who was holding Mica, and Se-ah were surrounded by adults.

“Se-ah, why are you here? Do you realize how much I’ve been looking for you?”

Seon-woo, who had arrived before Mi-ae, pulled Se-ah to her as if snatching her away. After that, she hugged Se-ah tightly and began to cry. In comparison, Mi-ae and Hae-min’s reunion was so calm it seemed banal.

“Mom, I didn’t do it on purpose, so don’t be mad. I’m really sorry.”

Hae-min, who realized that the situation was serious, came up to her and whispered, while Mi-ae winked and hugged her child.

“Yes, don’t worry. It’s okay.”

Mi-ae thought that the commotion would end like that. She figured that in any case they had found the children safely, so they would listen to what the children wanted to say, point out things to watch out for in future, and tell them that they should be careful to make sure this never happened again.

“Se-ah, are you okay? Were you scared? Do you know how much your mother and I ran around looking for you?”

As Mi-ae approached to return the whining Mica, Seon-woo embraced Se-ah with one hand as if shielding her.

“Se-ah has never gone out alone. Nothing like this has ever happened while she was growing up.”

“You never know what kids will do.”

Someone said, as if trying to comfort her. But Seon-woo replied curtly, as if drawing a line.

“No. Seriously, Se-ah has never gone out of the house alone. Something like this has never happened before.”

The atmosphere, which had begun to thaw, froze again due to the sharpness in Seon-woo’s voice.

It seemed like a very long time, but it was all over in just thirty minutes. It had happened by chance, and it could happen at any time. However, after a brief nod of thanks, Seon-woo left with Se-ah and Mica.

“Mom, do you think Auntie is angry? Se-ah wanted to show Mica the snow, so we went out together. There’s still some snow left. But Mom, can’t I go to Se-ah’s house anymore?”

“No, Auntie was very upset. Tomorrow she’ll be fine.”

“Will Se-ah explain properly? What if Auntie thinks it’s all my fault?”

“She won’t. But that doesn’t mean you didn’t do anything wrong, though. Do you know what I mean?”

As she talked with Hae-min on the way back home, Mi-ae had really believed that’s the way things would happen. She felt that it needed time and that everything would be fine when time had passed. However, a week later, when she went to the book club with Hae-min, neither Seon-woo nor Se-ah were to be seen. They said Se-ah had suddenly caught a cold, that Seon-woo had urgent business, and after looking serious and beating about the bush, at the end of the meeting they informed her that Seon-woo would no longer be coming to the book club.

“Why?”

Mi-ae asked, looking back at Hae-min and the children, who were preoccupied with a box of cookies over on the other side. As the mothers looked at one another with embarrassment it was Lee-chan’s mother who finally spoke.

“Hae-min’s Mom, I mean, Mi-ae. Don’t get me wrong. Listen.”

Lee-chan's mother was so embarrassed as she spoke that she had a hard time even looking her in the eyes. Mi-ae waited for her to finish.

She was surprised to learn that Seon-woo had called Lee-chan's mother a few days before, blaming Hae-min for her carelessness and distraction, complaining about the way Mi-ae had often left Hae-min with her, and saying that she did not want to let Se-ah play with Hae-min anymore. But nothing was as shocking as hearing that Seon-woo would no longer be attending the book club.

"Why? Why isn't she coming?"

"Mi-ae, our group may be small but we have our principles. We have values to uphold. Se-ah's mother went so far as to tell Kyu-min's mother we shouldn't accept anyone who lives in the rental apartments. But we all think that's really not right. To be honest, I can't tell you how surprised I was. So we decided. We have to think the same way to do anything together, if we want this group to last for the long-term."

Finally, Mi-ae interrupted Lee-chan's mother.

"So you told her not to come any more? To Eonni? To Seon-woo?"

Gyu-min's mother, who was by her side, tried to say something, but she was not in the mood to hear anything more.

"Wait, why did you decide on your own? You didn't even ask me. What's wrong with Seon-woo saying that? She's entitled to. She was very upset that day. You want her to stop coming because she said those few words?"

"Mi-ae. I mean, Hae-min's Mom. Think it over. Se-ah's Mom..."

"All we needed to do was talk face to face. It's okay with me, I'm not upset, so why make the decision on your own? Without saying a word to me?"

"After all, Se-ah's mother refuses to take your calls, doesn't she? If talking was the answer, we wouldn't have done this. It's unpleasant enough for you as it is."

"No!"

Although she knew that the children, including Hae-min, were looking at her, Mi-ae added one more comment.

"Did you think I would be pleased if you pushed Seon-woo out? Did you think I would thank you? Did you think that would help me? Is it okay for you decide on your own? You don't even think of me as a member of this group, do you?"

After berating them, Mi-ae took Hae-min, who was sitting among the children, and left. She went straight to Seon-woo's place. If Seon-woo hadn't been answering her phone calls and text messages because of this book club, she was confident she could explain.

“Eonni, it’s me, Mi-ae. I heard about the book club. I really didn’t know. If I had known what those people said, I wouldn’t have kept silent. If I had been in your place, I would have been really upset and offended. Eonni, are you listening to me?”

Even though she rang the bell several times, the front door did not open. Only the sound of Mica’s deafening barking could be heard. Every time Hae-min, who had stayed standing in front of the elevator far away from her, stuck her head out to look at her, Mi-ae pretended to cover her ears with her hands. It meant she was not to listen.

“Eonni, are you listening? I don’t care what those people say. In fact, if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have started going to the book club. Of course, there were good things, too. I learned a lot. Still, it wouldn’t have been so good without you and Se-ah. Eonni, are you listening to me?”

Mi-ae wanted to find words that could somehow open the door, and the more she tried, the more certain she became that nothing she said would ever be able to open that tightly closed door. Still, she continued to speak. She didn’t even know what she was talking about. She only turned away when her mind, which had been swinging back and forth between expectation that the door would open and resignation that it would never open, was completely tilted to one side.

Two days later, on a Saturday afternoon, Mi-ae visited Seon-woo again. She had nowhere to leave her child, so Hae-min was with her.

“Eonni, I know. Hae-min is careless and talkative. It must have been hard for you to look after her. As you know, I was just too distracted. I’m so sorry. In fact, when I was pregnant with Hae-min, I barely did anything for Hae-min’s prenatal development. Just like now, I had no one to help me back then. Maybe that’s why Hae-min is a little scatter-brained. But really, no one has ever been as kind to me and Hae-min as you. Eonni, are you listening? I’m really grateful for everything.”

Mi-ae spoke looking at the closed door; she spoke leaning her back against the door; she spoke looking down through the railings. As she spoke, she wondered why she was doing this, and she felt sorry for and saddened by her own situation, having no choice but to cling on like this.

After a time, the front door opened and Seon-woo’s husband emerged. He politely asked her to go away. She started to blabber but he closed the door after repeating several times that it was awkward at present, looking troubled.

Three days later, Mi-ae visited Seon-woo again. This time too, she had Hae-min with her. It wasn’t just because she had no one to look after Hae-Min, no one to ask for advice, no

one to ask for help other than Seon-Woo. She wanted to see Seon-woo, at least once. She wanted to talk face to face, and she thought things would be fine then. That day, Seon-woo came to the door, wearing a mask, as if she had been waiting. Slowly and carefully, as if she had prepared a speech, she said that after that day she did not have the courage to face Mi-ae and Hae-min, that she had not realized that she had so many prejudices within herself.

Those were her words, but her voice left no room for any regret, shame or change. Although Hae-min, who was standing in front of the elevator, lifted her head and tried to greet her, Seon-woo did not once turn her head toward her.

“Eonni, why are you doing this? Why are you saying that? I understand everything. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Mi-ae tried to change Seon-woo’s mind somehow, but Seon-woo treated Mi-ae indifferently, as if she was a stranger, finally saying she was sorry, it was all because of her own deficiencies. After this, Seon-woo went back inside. Mi-ae knocked on the door a few more times, but to no avail.

Mi-ae thought it was ridiculous for her to say such things. She thought she was not being honest, she thought she was cowardly. She even thought that it was disgusting for her to pretend to be a good person until the very end. In truth, she was fed up with her own plight of not giving up even when she heard these words, of not being able to give up.

Mi-ae left the apartment building with Hae-min. It was quiet, even gloomy in the apartment complex where few people were coming and going. Hae-min, who was walking a few steps ahead, turned round and asked.

“Mom, are you going to cry? Are you about to cry?”

“No. Why?”

“Mom, you always cry after cursing.”

It seemed that Hae-min had been listening to Mi-ae’s wild words as she poured out her thoughts.

“Did you hear me? I’m sorry. I’ll keep it all inside me.”

Mi-ae sat down for a moment on a nearby playground bench. As her rage subsided, her worries rose again. She didn’t know who she could entrust Hae-min to in the future, whether she could leave her with anyone at all, how to find a job, pay back the money, and find a house without help, whether it was at all possible or not.

Hae-min, who was playing on a swing by herself on the other side, called out to Mi-ae in a loud voice. When Mi-ae looked up and responded, Hae-min shouted.

“Mom, should I write a card to Se-ah?”

She couldn't find any answer, but Hae-min added with an excited voice.

“I think it's easier to get through to Se-ah than her mom. Right?”

The cold, dry winter sunlight wrapped itself around the child. Embarrassment that she had revealed all her true feelings, even to her child, instantly provoked feelings of regret, upset, and despair. She told herself that she couldn't afford to be caught up in such unnecessary emotions, and she didn't want to be.

She got up from her seat as if she was pushing those things away and replied loudly.

“Really? Do you think you can write a card to Se-ah? Would you like to go to the shops with me to buy a card?”

“Okay. I'm going to get a really pretty one!”

Hae-min jumped off the swing and came running. Mi-ae adjusted Hae-min's face mask, which had dropped down to her chin, and took the child's hand. Or rather, it was the small but strong hand of the child that first seized Mi-ae's hand as tightly as it could.

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