

Watching Father

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Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé

Father was sitting in exactly the same position as when I left home that morning, bent forward on a stool, his gaze fixed on the television screen. He sat there, his head slightly bowed, as though the announcer was asking him a difficult question, and did not acknowledge my presence as I entered the living-room. Although he obviously did not understand a word of the news that the French announcer was reading in French, Father's position as he sat there intent on the screen seemed to be an excuse to avoid facing me. A long weekend was beginning.

A strange pang of regret parched my throat as I stared down with a kind of frown at the back of Father's head, that was entirely covered with white hair. The excited voice of a specialist analyzing the prospects for multilateral change in Romania after the revolution was issuing from the television. It was the voice of someone who had already repeated the same things very often and, having nothing new to say, was expressing ideas that had remained unchanged for several weeks. Although I had urged him repeatedly, still Father shunned the sofa and clung to the stool, and that set my already seething feelings ablaze.

Father had only arrived from mainland China a week before, yet I was already physically and emotionally exhausted. I kept tossing and turning until late at night, trying to recollect memories of the time before Father had disappeared Northward although that was ludicrous. No matter how precocious I had been, how could I remember something that had happened two months before I was born? But there were the stories about Father that Mother had told me from my earliest childhood, as well as the painful, bitter tales of the hardships Mother and the rest of the family had endured after Father's defection to the North, and I had developed a habit of imagining that they had all happened to me personally. Once I was old enough to be accustomed to my surroundings, and these vague tales were more firmly established in my mind as vivid realities, I grew oppressed by the burden of such vicarious experiences and felt that I had grown old too soon. Whether Father had vanished while I was still in the womb or after I was born made absolutely no difference at all. People who have undergone this kind of experience know that the more you try to hide such a Father, the more he intrudes between the folds of daily life. When I was being pessimistic, I tried to imitate Father and when I was being optimistic I ardently rejected him.

After Father's arrival, I searched for memories that might serve to warm my increasingly barren heart, tossing through sleepless nights as I went delving into the past. But as one set of sorrowful memories followed another, they only served to drive sleep even farther off. When I was very small, Mother used to make herself hoarse singing the praises of Father as a young man, but once her children began to grow up, she stopped mentioning him and the one faded family photograph was removed from its frame and ended up hidden at the bottom of Mother's old-fashioned chest. Finally, over the past ten years, we had slowly escaped from Father's ghost and belatedly set about living. Until the day when Father's letter from China enquiring about our family arrived at the home of the clan head down in the countryside.

It was not clear who the letter was addressed to and it only reached Mother, who was living in France, five months later, after making the rounds of the various branches of the family. It was just when I had decided with much difficulty to settle down here, having taken twice as long as other people to complete my degree after many hardships, helped by distant relatives on my mother's side, and found a place in a botanical research institute. My mother, who had always been concerned about her still unmarried youngest son, came to stay with me, too.

Once I had finished reading the letter, Mother looked blank for a while. Then as she struggled to overcome the shock, she stammered that if I and my brothers could discuss it and come to a decision, she would accept whatever we decided. Being the youngest, I rushed back to Seoul to consult my elder brothers. With some difficulty I got my brothers together; the letter, painfully signed with the three characters Yi Ha-un, Father's name, aroused not so much surprise or delight as a kind of embarrassment, as though it provided public proof of a crime that had long been concealed. That was the awkward reaction of people who had spent long years paying the harsh price of Father's defection to the North. There were divergent opinions; one was concerned that, although this first letter contained no precise indications as to Father's current situation, it was clear that he must have begun a new life long ago, so it might merely bring additional pain on both sides; another opinion was that he should be welcomed in order to fulfill Mother's wishes; yet another was that no matter what might happen later, an initial reply should be sent first. Not one of us mentioned it directly but judging by the expressions on faces, everyone was obviously nervous that Father's visit, like his defection, might get us into trouble.

My brothers were busy, though, and lazy when it came to solving problems, so the outcome was that they decided to leave the decision to Mother, and I left Seoul carrying that half-hearted result.

"You're not fit to be called our children . . . from now on this has nothing to do with you and your brothers; pretend it never happened."

When I transmitted the result of my consultation with my brothers, my Mother spoke those words firmly as she tucked the problematic letter into her purse and from then on I never heard her mention it. It was not just that she never mentioned it; she took to her bed, although previously she had been so healthy that people refused to believe she was nearly seventy. Perhaps because it had been her misfortune to undergo constant hardships, it seemed as if on reaching her present age her powers of resistance were exhausted. So for the first time in my life I wrote a letter beginning with the odd-sounding word "Father," on Mother's behalf. I enclosed a photo of us with the letter. Father's replies were well written and always brief. That was precisely two years five months ago.

Once the exchange of letters began, Mother showed signs of recovering her former health, although it was still in its early stages. She began to make plans in anticipation of Father's arrival as if she had recovered the firm hold on the life of her youthful days. There were endless plans about how they would visit their birthplaces together, be belatedly reconciled with the rest of the family, then finally quit the world, and so on. And after a long absence, the family photograph, that had meanwhile faded so much it was almost blank, reappeared in a corner of Mother's room.

On Father's part, however, the process underwent increasing delays, and less than seven months after the correspondence had begun, Mother's health had deteriorated to such an extent that I quickly accompanied her back to my oldest brother's home in Seoul, at her own request. Mother was unable to bear up any longer and finally she died.

Forgetting Mother's age, my brothers inwardly blamed Father's reappearance for her death. In the end, that inward feeling, expressed openly in the hours of grief after Mother's death, ended up transforming Father into an envoy of death, bringing disaster not only on Mother but on all of us too. In our sorrow at losing Mother we forgot about Father. Since I was living abroad, the formalities involved in inviting Father had been assigned to me on behalf of my eldest brother, and I once again began to write to him some three months after Mother's death, to which he made no reply for quite some time. Then my brothers in Seoul and I both received copies of a lengthy letter addressed to our already deceased mother in a moving style that might well be termed philosophical, promising that they would be reunited in the world beyond. It was the first long letter that Father had written. After that, for some strange reason, I began to write to Father much more regularly than when Mother was alive. But Father's replies were neither longer nor more frequent than before.

It was almost as though Father intended to emphasize the dreary, cramped feel of the apartment in which his son had been living alone, for he used to spend the whole of each day sitting on the stool without budging or speaking, almost as if he had taken root there. I, too, skillfully avoided with a strange kind of dread precisely those points that I ought to have touched on, apparently uncertain where or how to make a start, so that one whole week passed awkwardly in evasions. When he first arrived, I was taken in the daytime by my work in the research institute; in the evenings I made simple but boisterous international phone calls with my brothers in Seoul, and so time went by. For the first three or so days after Father arrived, everything went quite naturally. As if meeting some distant relative whom we had not seen for a long while but of whom there had been news from time to time, my brothers on the telephone and I during the evening hours casually asked Father about the events of the past: where he had worked, in what position, for how many years and months; when he had remarried; how many children they had; by what route he had entered China; what he had done there and how he was doing now . . . queries for a cv, things we already knew more or less, impertinent, pointless questions, no matter how you looked at them. Yet Father showed no signs of being bothered by the questions that came raining down even before he had recovered from the fatigue of the journey, and replied to each one slowly in a way that seemed to suggest he found it natural. With an attitude suggesting he was reporting the past of someone as he remembered it, Father replied that he had remarried as soon as he went North in order to eliminate suspicions caused by his being from the South—stressing that—and had given us two sisters, two brothers; he had spent his years in the North in charge of culture-related documents, and had decided to escape to China after long planning. After a slightly fraught silence he added that he had left their youngest child behind in the North because of a difficulty at the time of their escape, and was now living with the other three children. Finally, regarding his life in China, he seemed to have nothing to say beyond repeating, “I’m a farmer and a farmer’s life satisfies me.” Nothing in any of Father’s words indicated clearly his present situation, yet I felt a strange kind of fear that kept me from asking any further questions.

I said nothing at all about the lengthy years of difficulty we had undergone after Father’s defection Northward, and simply summed everything up in a report of my siblings’ current family lives and overall situation. About my eldest brother, who as a victim of our family’s many problems was still without a regular job and unable to achieve financial security, I simply said that he was preparing to launch his own business, adding an exaggerated account of my second brother’s future prospects as the director of a small company. Finally, reckoning that he might regard my own position as a research assistant in a foreign national research institute as most respectable, I prodded at Father’s feelings by adding that, after all, it was the trouble that I had suffered since childhood because of the label “defector’s son” that had made me decide to leave my country and live as an exile.

After that little explosion, I quickly regained my composure. As a matter of fact, once the simplest and most superficial facts of Father’s and our pasts had been exposed, I was at a loss as to what more I should say. Besides, Father displayed no particular curiosity about other topics, I had the impression he was deliberately refraining from asking about other relatives, let alone about Mother, and that unless I broached a topic, he never touched on a subject or initiated a conversation.

On the third day, I was missing Mother terribly. If she were still alive, what would the two of them be talking about? I had a feeling that now she was not here, a distance was arising between Father and me that would be difficult to overcome, and I began to chatter away in general terms without even knowing precisely what I was saying, about how Seoul was transformed into an international city, about how Korea had made a 180-degree turn-around, about the products “made in Korea” that were flooding overseas markets, and once I got going I found it very hard to stop. Father, far from correcting the false situation I had created, slowly described in simple terms the

customs of the Yanbian area or around Beijing as if he were talking about trips he had made. These were conversations that I found it hard to endure, as each one strove to avoid anything that might offend the other. On the fourth day, not knowing what I should talk about next, I took Father to a café in downtown Paris, as if I were entertaining an acquaintance dropping by on a tour, sat there in silence with a glass of beer in front of me, then brought him home. My own attitude had reached that point, and Father kept holding his tongue, too. By now the only thing I was waiting for was that my brothers would come and interrupt this impossible state of affairs. I still had another ten days to wait. It was all because Father had suddenly arrived, after bringing forward the date we had vaguely fixed previously.

With the passage of time, a feeling of concrete resentment began to take root within me, not toward the abstract Father of the past who had abandoned us and gone North alone, but the Father who had come back after starting to come close with the exchange of letters. And this feeling of resentment developed in a strange direction, forcing me to observe his every gesture with a severity devoid of the least margin of error.

My feelings as I stood alone in the airport only a week before, without Mother or brothers, holding a sign with his name written large, had gone beyond excitement to being wretched. Despite our requests, Father had failed to send us a recent photo of himself, so that even with Father's face in the family photo taken before I was even born, smaller than a red bean and faded till it was hard to recognize, and my repeated efforts to recall the detailed, impressionistic descriptions of Father that Mother used to provide, I was unable to compose even the simplest portrait of him. It was probably the first time in my life that I examined my face in the mirror so frequently, so piercingly, wondering if there was a likeness of Father there somewhere. That was because I remembered how my maternal grandmother used to say with a strangely twisted expression that, of all the children, I was most exactly like my Father.

Taking the day off, I arrived at the airport a full hour early, so that I was weary with waiting when, among the travelers, I noticed an old man emerging, wearing a padded coat over an old-fashioned suit; his face, that looked more pointed since his hair was cut short, was held erect, and in a flash I recognized Father, despite having no memory of him. Forgetting the stares of the crowd filling the airport to welcome people arriving, I immediately hurled myself into the arms of the Father I was seeing for the first time in my life, already an old man, and gave voice to a loud cry of lament. Deeply rooted anguish mixed with resentment undoubtedly formed part of my lament, but rather than arising from enthusiasm or emotions of instinctive filial affection on being united with my father, basically it came welling up out of my sorrow for Mother who had suddenly died just when the problems with the formalities of Father's visit, that had dragged on for over two years, had been solved and the reunion with the husband she had so much wanted to see was already in sight. Calling on the mother who, ever especially concerned for me from the moment I was born as effectively a posthumous child, had come to this foreign land whose language she could not speak or understand in order to care for me, her youngest child, in my current unmarried state, as though everything were somehow her fault, spending her last years in discomfort before finally dying, I tried ineffectually to writhe within the narrow confines of this desiccated old man's breast. No matter how I called out "Mother . . ." as I lay against Father's chest and rubbed my face, my feelings remained remote, rough and restless. As he opened wide his eyelids, that were drooping and wrinkled, tears flowed from Father's eyes too, the corners of which were beginning to be covered by a white film. They were the tears of misery that effaced the image of the legendary young Yi Ha-Un whose story Mother had related and hammered into our ears throughout our childhood, and I briefly fell into the illusion that it had been a deliberate choice on Mother's part to die rather than confront Father in his present state.

I stopped trying to persuade Father to move to the sofa or an armchair and started to leaf

through some documents I had brought home from the research institute. My petty dissatisfaction with Father, which kept threatening to explode no matter how much I strove to control it, was more burdensome than Father's silences. These were the fluctuations of intoxicated emotions seeking the least excuse to explode. On weekdays at least I could regulate my time, using work as an excuse, but now even the forlorn feelings came welling up that I had experienced when I first went baby-sitting in an otherwise empty house in my student days. On the television, the program was showing a conversation between the new prime minister of Romania, Petro Roman, and a woman announcer.

"Prime Minister, last month you were not prepared to reply when a journalist asked, 'After the revolution overthrowing the Communist dictatorship, are you still a Marxist?' How would you reply to the same question now, one month later?"

The personable, young Romanian prime minister put on a smile and was about to reply to the attractive announcer, who looked highly intelligent and ambitious, when Father pulled out his handkerchief, sniffed, then blew his nose so loudly that the room seemed to resound. After that he folded up the handkerchief again and sneezed so that his whole upper body shook. Then I noticed he was dabbing at his eyes with one corner of his handkerchief. I could not tell what his expression was, since I was sitting behind him, but I concluded that he was sitting so still because he was missing the family he had left behind in China, and that he might even be crying secretly.

Of course, they must be dear to you, the children that came with you across the death-line from North Korea, where you say you were closely watched, into China; how important can our family be? You only lived with us for a short while, eight or nine years at most, not long, especially considering how little time you spent at home. There's no telling how it might have been if the wife who had been waiting all her life had survived and welcomed you with floods of tears; I'm as good as a complete stranger to you, not even your eldest child, still unborn when we were parted, so how much affection if any could you feel for me? Besides, we are not even meeting in our homeland surrounded by the rest of the family and relatives; here we are, brought together in a remote corner of a land completely foreign to both of us As I handed Father a box of tissues, I furtively glanced at his eyes. But contrary to my expectations or imagination, although a white film was spreading across Father's left eye, he was watching the television program with a clear, bright gaze where there was no trace of tears or dejection. In his youth he had been talented in many ways, so I began to wonder whether Father might not be proficient enough in French to understand the program, given his overall record. But mainly I was looking for an excuse to put Father on the spot.

"This interview can you understand it?"

Father merely turned his head awkwardly, without moving his back, shot me a smile that doubled the number of wrinkles on his face, then returned his gaze to the screen.

"Shall I explain what it's about?"

This time Father picked up the tissue paper lying on his knees, sneezed loudly, and replied in a slightly hoarse voice.

"There would be no point in explaining in detail. I'm just watching it.

"Yet you seem to be so interested"

"There are so many unfamiliar things about it all, that's why I watch. The announcer looking up this way and that at the person she's interviewing is funny; that young revolutionary who's all the time smiling brightly is funny; and why is French so recklessly fast?"

Father spoke in a voice full of feeling, turning his smiling face toward me as if to show how fascinating it was. But this warmth manifesting itself in Father only served to irritate more my bad temper. It was something I myself could not fathom. Whenever I felt this kind of heated feeling welling up inside me, I would try to suppress it rationally, repeating to myself, "After all, he's come all this way just because I'm his son," but sometimes the harder I tried, the more the bad-tempered rage I felt on account of the effort would get tangled up and seek for an issue. My bad mood made

me see in Father's way of making an odd or irrelevant comment in warm tones a clever trick designed to turn the conversation away from some topic that might prove awkward.

Looking at the screen alongside Father, I added additional commentary in a deliberately exaggerated reciting style.

"Well, who would have thought that Romania, one of the world's cruelest regimes, would collapse so easily? They say it's because the dictatorship in Romania was so extreme, but it seems there's not a nation in Eastern Europe that's completely safe. Besides, there was no big explosion when it collapsed, it crumbled like a lifeless, rotten birds-nest."

While I spoke I was watching Father's expression. There was not the least change in it, he continued to watch the screen with a smile as though it was showing something amusing. I coldly added a final remark.

"You seem to find the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe rather amusing."

Inwardly what I wanted to say was nothing so tame, but rather some kind of protest, along the lines of, "Did you really wreck your life for something that was going to collapse so easily?" or, "Really, Father, which side are you on? Surely you're not still on their side?" The kind of doubt I could never put into words.

I had the impression that the side of his face I could see hardened briefly before he replied with the same smile as before.

"Amusing? It's something that's happening for the first time in my whole lifetime, so I suppose you might put it that way. As your body grows bigger, you have to wear clothes that fit."

I found that kind of reply, that made me look stupid, utterly repugnant. Father's attitude, like someone watching a total stranger's house burning, was stoking the flames inside me. If he had known it was all going to collapse so easily, why had he gone North, subjecting the rest of us to the painful, lifelong consequences, and why had he not settled there, buying those new clothes he talked about or having them made to measure; why had he then escaped to China, where he risked his skin for his whole lifetime, only to incur constant pain, rather than some other country? Was it not excessive to sacrifice himself for nothing more than a joke? These complaints of mine were awaiting an excuse to explode at any time, depending on Father's attitude.

Every time people on the television spoke about North Korea or China as exceptions when they were excitedly reporting the collapse of the regimes in Eastern Europe, I made increasingly exaggerated critical comments in the hope of provoking some kind of clear response from Father. But he would merely gaze at me with a quiet smile as I went raving on, so that I was obliged to interpret his lack of response as a deliberate refusal. The more Father's response was lukewarm, the higher the fever in my brain rose. I would ask him how he had spent the day, deliberately avoiding questions I could have asked directly, as if perhaps, while I was at work in the research institute, Father might have been somewhere in Paris secretly meeting people he ought not to meet. When he answered that he had taken a stroll round the neighborhood, watched the television, or read some of the Korean books in the bookcase, although I had no reason for considering that to be a lie, I was determined not to believe him. The moment I came through the front door, my eyes would unfailingly go automatically toward Father's shoes near the door or his coat hanging on the rack, trying to detect the slightest change. Two days previously, seized by a sudden feeling of uncertainty while I was at work, I phoned home no less than three times. But each time I called, the sound of Father's cautious voice caused me disappointment. Perhaps mistaking my frequent calls for mere courtesy, he never forgot to advise me in an emotional tone, "Don't worry about me and keep phoning; just focus on your job."

Whether or not he sensed what I was feeling inwardly, after Father had watched the television interview right to the end he slowly turned toward me as I sat there with teeth clenched to contain my seething exasperation, and pulled something that rustled from his pocket.

“Will you mail this for me?”

The address indicated that it was a letter to his family in Yanbian, eastern China. Well! How long has it been? Less than a week since he left, and he’s already writing? I recalled the exchange of letters after he had renewed contact with our family, when he only used to write once every two months at most. Perhaps he saw something in my expression, for Father added in a low voice, as if talking to himself:

“They don’t know I’m here. I only told them I was going to Beijing when I left. It was inconsiderate of me.”

I felt as though I had been harshly scolded. Yet even at that moment, not only did I not believe Father’s explanation, I felt tempted to open the letter and check what it said. I took the letter and hurried at once to the post office as if trying to avoid that temptation.

As soon as I was outside, I found I could breathe more freely. That afternoon the weather on the outskirts of Paris was warmer than usual for winter and as I walked ahead in the sunlight I was trembling, unable to control my feelings, filled as I was with pointless nostalgia for a happiness that had vanished long before, that I would never be able to experience again. The smile in our late Mother’s eyes when she was feeling proud of her children. Or an image trapped and slowly fading away somewhere deep inside my memory, of blankly bright autumn sunlight shining down into the yard of a desolate small-town police station where I was waiting while Mother went in to register a change of address. The day I finally graduated from university after so many difficulties, with Mother smiling shyly, wearing her youngest son’s academic cap somewhere in the campus, the winter weather warm like today. Abandoning my steps to this flood of memories, very sweet and immensely bitter at the same time, that had often come to me since Mother died, I looked vacantly at the street around me, that seemed as desolate as ever, though I walked down it every day. Ah, if only Mother had still been alive, the reunion with Father would not have been so awkward Recalling once again the hardness I had felt as I buried my face in the skinny chest of the weary old man at the airport, I effaced the images that had until then been filling my head. I went into the post office, feeling as though I had escaped from the dark shadow of fate only to be drawn back into it again as I drew my next breath.

Wanting to return home as late as possible, I ordered a strong Scotch in a nearby café and read the local newspaper that was lying on the table, from the minor news to the job ads. But the moment I put the paper down, I found that I could not in the least recall what I had been reading. From the start my thoughts had been wandering elsewhere, and though the outlines were now very vague, there was a face that kept appearing then disappearing in my mind. It was the youthful face of a man in his early thirties making a speech to a crowd of people packed into some kind of auditorium. It was followed by the picture of a slightly-built woman sitting in a corner near the exit with a little boy six or seven years old who was gazing inquisitively up at the man on the rostrum. It was the imagined face of Father as I had composed it on the basis of the stories I had heard over and over again from Mother and my eldest brother. It was a face, adorned and expanded with admirable features times without number, that had filled me with pride in my childhood. The story dates from a time before I entered Mother’s womb, when my eldest brother was turning seven, about one year before Father vanished. Odd to say, the young man of my imagination had an elegant moustache; he was wearing a black topcoat of traditional style and poured out passionate words toward the crowd, his gentle yet forceful gaze filled with power. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, this same young man, dressed in the armor you see in paintings and wearing a helmet, would go galloping on horseback over the hills behind the home of Father’s eldest brother in the countryside. What is more, the very same face would intrude into my troubled childhood dreams, disguised as a North Korean spy on a Southward mission tapping lightly at the window of the house where my family was sleeping. These images, as time passed and the imagination faded, had been capable of seriously

disturbing me. Still, these surrealistic pictures, rising in this way from some strange place after so many years, had never come as roughly as on that day. As a strange uneasiness seized me, I wiped those images clean away. In their place, the by now familiar image of Father's weary, wrinkled face slowly emerged, procuring me a slight sense of relief, but on the other hand provoking strong feelings of revolt accompanied by anger. It was always the same. My feelings toward Father were as fickle as the boiling red-bean gruel cooked at the winter solstice. I am not a heavy drinker and as I heedlessly emptied my fifth glass, I felt an intense, crimson blaze of emotion rise into my cheeks, an indistinguishable blend of rage and sorrow. That then spread beyond its limits, making the rims of my eyes sting until at last tears began to pour from them like a glass overflowing. How could I be acting so pathetically at my age? The thought that I was being pathetic, far from calming my feelings, increased them until I felt ready to pick a fight with anyone and I quickly left before my emotional turmoil crossed the danger line.

Unfortunately, the danger line gave way at the sight of Father.

"Father, for goodness sake, sit on a more comfortable chair. I can't stand seeing you look so uncomfortable!"

Arriving home, I opened the front door and shouted angrily as soon as I saw Father sitting bolt upright on the stool, holding the botany book I had left open on the table. At that Father slowly turned his upper body to look at me as if shocked. I was equally shocked at my loud voice. I quickly added an explanation.

"How can I feel comfortable when I see you sitting all day long on that high stool I usually put a vase of flowers on?"

"I'm not doing it to make you feel uncomfortable but because my back was damaged long ago, and it's got worse with age; this kind of chair suits it best."

Once he had replied with an apologetic air, Father turned back to his former position and took up the illustrated flora again. Come to think of it, since his arrival not one of my brothers had asked in concerned tones about our aged Father's state of health. The intensity of our feelings of disaster associated with the man we called Father meant that we had taken his health for granted; his reappearance had not only served to revive the disasters of the past, it seemed to have served as proof that Father was, beyond any doubt, in perfect health. If Father, now four years past seventy, had arrived looking like a lively young man, none of us would have been surprised. I gazed at Father, who suddenly seemed to look older than before, with an eerie feeling. Then I recalled how, after Father had gone North and people were searching for news of him in every direction, the last report anyone had heard was that he had been seriously injured. Likewise, once we were designated as a suspect family subject to regular supervision by the police because of Father's defection, Mother rarely experienced anything more hurtful than the visits three or four times each month by an investigator demanding to know what she had heard from Father. At the same time, she took those demands as a proof that Father must still be alive, and if no-one came by for more than a month she said that made her even more anxious, so it does not take long to imagine what state Mother's nerves were in at that time. Right up until her death, ignoring her own health problems, and suddenly remembering the old days, Mother used to worry whether that old injury might still be troubling him. I seemed to hear quite vividly in my mind Mother's voice asking Father about it. Yet my voice emerged curtly:

"That injury to your back . . . when did it happen?"

"Injury?"

Father retorted, observing me as though examining my still flushed face.

"I remember how Mother used to tell me that the last news she heard, not long after you disappeared, was that you had been seriously injured."

Father remained silent for a moment, and his expression grew slightly bitter. But that did not last and, sure enough, it was soon replaced by the usual smile, which never seemed to my eyes to be anything but stupid or devious, whereas I wanted something definite.

“Injured? That suggests some kind of glorious, heroic wound; my back problem has nothing to do with such things.”

“You mean that what Mother heard was a false report?”

I had lost the original thread of our conversation and was challenging Father as if trying to distinguish right from wrong.

“Well, I don’t really know what it was she heard; in those days there was hardly anyone who didn’t get wounded slightly from time to time, surely?”

Father invariably replied in that manner. Both this and that. I was determined not to let him off the hook.

“Someone who knew the family of our aunt in Susaek said she had seen you with her own eyes being treated in a field hospital at the time of the January 1951 retreat.

“Who’s that, your aunt in Susaek?”

Father was putting up a smokescreen, as usual when he did not want to say something. I remembered my eldest brother saying that for a time after she heard the news, Mother was so worried that she had gone several times to visit the home of our aunt in Susaek in order to hear the exact details from the person at the origin of the report, a five-mile journey, making my eldest brother walk while she carried the baby on her back, and I began to feel like a victim, as if Mother’s devotion had been my own devotion. Who could possibly make up for all that wasted pain, and how? I muttered that question to myself in somewhat tragic tones, and at once the answer became obvious. Of course, it was Father alone who was at the origin of everything, and the question of how was likewise Father’s problem alone. But there was no indication on Father’s part of any such thoughts. I just could not understand why Father had made the journey all this way, especially now that Mother was no longer here. If he had wanted to come, it would surely have been possible to welcome him in the Seoul home of his eldest son, though it might have taken a little longer and required some circumspection. Yet although he knew that Mother had died, Father had chosen to come to me, following the initial plan. Surely the way Father had not told his family in China where he was going when he left home served to indicate the importance it held for him. In our conversations over the past few days, too, regarding what work he had been doing or how he was living in China, had Father not always avoided answering directly with the ambiguous replies he was so good at? Clearly, there was nothing I could expect or be excited about. I only needed to put up with him for a month and he would be off back to China, after all. A kind of lethargy, that had frequently taken hold of me in my youth, was once again developing inside of me. It would be truly dreadful if the plague-like disease I had mastered, withstood and rejected with such difficulty until I was at last free of it, reawakened with Father’s arrival. I said nothing and was just standing up when Father murmured something, then called out my name in a warm voice. His gaze was all the time fixed on the small book of flora he was holding open on his knees. Perhaps I was somehow moved by the tone of his voice, for my nose began to prick as it had in the café a short time before, and I hesitantly turned round. But Father’s question had no connection whatever with my emotional reaction. Holding the book open at a page with the drawing of a wild plant, he asked in delighted tones;

“Isn’t this a lady’s thumb?”

If it had been an ordinary, everyday situation it would have ended with laughter, but helped by the alcohol it was taking a dramatic turn. I cast off the exaggeratedly respectful, courteous attitude and tone of speech that I had been using almost unthinkingly toward Father since his arrival and replied frivolously:

“Father, what on earth are you up to? Have you nothing better to say to me? Or do you so dislike talking? Why do you keep changing the subject?”

“Why, is it wrong to ask someone with a doctorate in botany the name of a plant? Ha ha, I thought you knew everything about everything.”

Ignoring my attitude, Father spoke as if he really felt boastful, even puffing out his chest. I retorted bluntly with heavy sarcasm:

“Of course! How could a poor wretch like me who has wasted ten years of his life on weeds be a fit companion for someone like you whose whole life has been devoted to a lofty goal?”

Once the floodgates were open, I felt intense relief. Moreover, all that had so far remained unclear clicked into place in a flash as plain truth, justifying my anger. The choice of plant physiology as my major area of study on the basis of some kind of fellow-feeling when I was already approaching forty, a confirmed bachelor fed up with aimless wandering; the escapist, self-destructive decision to choose a clearly precarious life overseas, doomed to spend my life rotting as an undistinguished researcher, rather than the scholar I had once dreamed of being . . . what I was calling the plain truth was nothing other than the fact that I reckoned it was Father’s ghost who had been the cause of my wretched situation from start to finish. This unexpected truth, as if awakening me with a start, came pouring from my lips, accompanied by a harsh expression. And that was not all. As I sought ways of bringing the situation home to Father with more aggressivity, more logic, I became the spokesman for my brothers and our deceased mother, exposing the inmost recesses of memories of things I had not myself suffered directly. Yet while I did so, it was as if some scrap of reason remained in operation, for though I plunged Father in right up to the neck, I refrained from calling into doubt or directly attacking his ideology. In doing so, I was acting less out of a sense of respect toward him than from a fear that my doubts might turn out to be founded.

Father was listening to my abusive words without any particular expression of shock, his eyes closed. That absence of response angered me more, so I concluded with one decisive phrase:

“If only you had not reappeared, Mother might have lived another ten years. Do you realize that not one of us in the family has survived intact, we are all haunted by your ghost?”

Before I could finish, Father called me by my name and turned to face me. His voice had completely changed.

“Ch’ang-yŏn, look at me. You’ve said enough for now. We still have time, you can bring things out gradually, can’t you? I have things to say to you, too. Didn’t I come here so that we could get rid of that ghost? I’ve been thinking for a long time that I should exorcize my ghost, supposing that it’s alive in you, before it gets any later. But on the other hand, I’ve been hoping that those were groundless fears, the product of my ageing brain, and for a long time that enabled me to live a relatively peaceful farming life.”

Father was silent for a while. I was looking straight at him with a slightly derisive air, panting lightly. I felt an urge rising inside me to go running out of the room and so deprive Father of the chance to explain whatever there was to explain. But before I could come to a decision, Father spoke again, as if he could see through me like seeing through clear water:

“You have the right not to listen to what I am saying. But even if you leave the room now, I shall go on talking as though you were here. And if you feel inclined to hear your Father’s monologue, I want you to keep looking straight at me, holding your head high.”

Leaving the room then would have been nothing more than a cowardly flight. I raised my head defiantly and looked Father straight in the eye. Strangely, in contrast to the resolute voice of just before, Father’s face betrayed no expression at all. Unmarked by the events he had been through in the past, offering no clue to his real age, far removed from the alternations of such emotions as hatred or affection, his expressionless expression was demanding that I should remain detached as if I were seeing the black-and-white photograph of a stranger. This wordless exchange

of gazes between Father and me lasted some time.

Abruptly that characteristic smile began to spread across his face again.

“I’m unsure how to begin, so I’ll just start somewhere. After such a long time, there is nothing to be denied, and nothing to boast about. You’ve never seen me before, and now, as you say, I have belatedly come into your life like a ghost, so you naturally feel dissatisfied with this father of yours. In your mind you probably can’t choose between two kinds of idea. One, caused by the grudge you bear me, would be a wish that I would fall on my knees before you and your mother, though she is no longer alive, and beg forgiveness in tears; the other might be a hope that I would exorcise the past by having become someone with an important position whom everyone looks up to, someone coinciding with one aspect of the ghost alive in your minds.”

At that point Father’s words were interrupted by a fit of harsh coughs and sneezing. Shaking his head to and fro, he sneezed three or four times in succession. Needless to say, Father had misunderstood my attitude. Yet strange to say, I felt that his failure to understand was fortunate. Indeed, there had been a warmth about Father’s voice that had served to cool my anger. Father’s coughing went on for quite a while. That reminded me of something Mother had said. She recounted how Father’s chronic asthma, that used to recur every winter, had seized him on their wedding night, of all times, and he had only recovered after eating an entire boxful of pears. I was puzzled why the story of Father and the pears, which Mother often used to tell, had not once come to my mind although I had often noticed Father coughing badly since his arrival.

“Yet as you can see, I am not weeping and begging you to forgive my past errors, and naturally I have not a single medal adorning my long life, I have achieved nothing of the kind, so to your eyes I must look . . . I have come as an old fellow dragging out a poor life. I don’t know what you think, but I consider that I have never done anything for which I ought to kneel and ask forgiveness of anyone. It’s not that I cannot imagine the humiliations you three brothers and your mother had to endure after I went North. I have nothing to say about that. But by now you’re old enough to know what the world’s like, let’s say that I hope you are not so foolish as to hold me personally responsible for those humiliations. Obviously I am not talking of the economic and psychological humiliation of growing up without a father. Your Mother who is no longer with us knew, I went North with her consent, following my resolve, like many others in the same situation, promising to come back and fetch you. How could I not feel anxious about everything, how could my heart not be aching for my two little sons, as I left my wife behind in her last month of pregnancy? But what else could I do since, then as now, in my eyes an aimless, empty life was the greatest shame? And I know full well how hard it is to forgive a person who proclaims that there is nothing to be forgiven.”

Father’s words were increasingly taking a direction I could never have imagined. My suspicion of him, that had vanished briefly, began to return. While I waited those nearly three years, I had imagined over and over again all the possible attitudes Father might adopt toward me, yet the kind of things Father was telling me now were so utterly unexpected that not only could I not react, but as I understood the end of what he said I experienced intense confusion. In one way he seemed to be insulting our family who had been haunted by his ghost all their lives; in another sense it was not like that, but his words were so perplexing that I did not know how to take them. The only thing that emerged clearly—and to me it seemed very unfair—was Father’s dignity. Perhaps because of that thought, I even had the impression that the strange glow I had often glimpsed on Father’s face in my imagination seemed now to be visible on his old, wrinkled face.

“Let me repeat once more that it was never my intention in coming to beg for forgiveness. I do not know what you think, but surely that was half accomplished when you sent your first letter to a father you had never once seen? I assume that the remaining half will come gradually with time and our combined efforts. My intentions lay elsewhere. I have no way of knowing under what shape

I am alive inside each of you, but if it is as you said just now and I have been haunting your lives as a ghost, then I reckon that there is a world of difference between that ghost of mine and the reality. In saying that, I hope you do not end up thinking that I planned such a long journey in my old age merely to establish a correct image of myself as an individual before I die. The image I have to establish has nothing very laudable about it. This fellow you call your father is nothing but a bumpkin who has spent twenty years engaged in farming and I am perfectly content with the position I have managed to reach in the course of a life that has known many twists and turns. I wanted to show myself to you exactly as I really am”

Finally Father stood up from the stool and going to the window stood looking up at the gradually darkening winter sky with his hands behind his back.

“The weather is warm for winter, it looks as though it might snow”

Of course, Father’s old refrain about the weather failed to touch me. The suspicion that had been dogging me for several days past seemed to be verified by what Father had said and yet, at the same time, not verified. I wondered whether to take the opportunity, now that Father had begun to talk openly, of asking him directly. At the same time, I could not understand why I was so unable to free myself of my stubborn suspicions regarding Father. I recalled all the facts which had served to reassure me so far, as if trying to convince myself. Above all, was not the way he had risked death to take my little half-siblings and flee from North Korea into China a clear proof of what people called a change of heart? But then, as always, remembering that only reassured me for a brief moment before another thought popped into my mind. It remained true that Father had never once expressed any sort of direct, forthright criticism of the North he had fled from, unlike most other people in his situation. But then I reflected that we had never really spoken at any length about it, and that I had not once asked about North Korea with any real curiosity. Surely everyone who lives in South Korea has definite knowledge about the North? Especially people from families that have suffered like ours. I remembered how I had deliberately poured out with mounting ardor all I knew about North Korea to Father during supper the day after his arrival. Even if he had any opinions, he would probably have refrained from expressing the slightest comment, let alone any dissent, in the face of such self-assured knowledge. Once again seized by intense confusion, I gazed bitterly at Father’s back, that was bent from farming. I felt a little more secure. Even supposing it were true, what could an old man of seventy-four do . . . especially one claiming to be a mere bumpkin?

Absorbed in these mean-spirited calculations, I was still contemplating Father’s back when he suddenly turned to face me. He looked down at me in silence, with such a piercing gaze that I had the impression I had received an electric shock. It was the first quiet, deep look I had ever received from him. The rims of his eyes were flushed red but his eyes were dry as usual. Is this an expression of Father’s love for me? I wondered in bewilderment, never once having experienced a father’s love.

“I must lie down and rest my back for a while. Call me in about half an hour.”

Father headed slowly toward the bedroom that Mother had used. I felt a hard lump rising in my throat.

“Father!”

Seized by an incomprehensible emotion, I shouted out wildly. But I could find nothing more to say. Father’s obviously weary face was looking at me. I quickly concealed my rising feelings and simply asked in a kind of growl:

“Father, why on earth did you escape to China where you were bound to suffer? You might have headed for Japan or America, somewhere far off”

Father stayed standing there looking slightly confused, his head to one side as if he could not catch my meaning. Then he spoke, nodding slowly as if to say that he grasped some part of what I was thinking.

“When the path leads uphill, people walk on in expectation that a road leading downward to a refreshing spring will eventually appear. But there are uphill paths that have no downward turnings, no matter how far you go. Some people know that, yet still keep walking upward; some don’t know and keep on looking for a downward path; some turn and go back down; some hack out a downward path for themselves; some get angry and blame others . . . there are all sorts of people walking up the hill. Which kind do you reckon I am?”

“There must be a variety of different roads; is there a reason for choosing the upward road?”

“You wonder why . . . yet if there were a constantly level road, would that really make you glad? . . . Even if such a road existed, I reckon you would soon be fed up with it.”

Father went into the room, leaving me no time to add anything in reply. Besides, I was too weary to work out the meaning of Father’s words, that sounded like some kind of Zen riddle.

How long did I stay lying there? Father’s shabby traveling-bag, that was lying in a corner of the living room, struck my eyes as they were on the point of closing. Without thinking what I was doing, I sprang up, approached the door of the room where Father was sleeping, and listened. Apart from my racing pulse I could hear nothing. After my breathing had calmed a little, I could hear the sound of gentle snoring coming from the room. I went stealthily to my room, carrying the bag, shut the door, and started to ransack Father’s traveling bag. I was trembling to the very tips of my fingers.

I had no real idea of what I was looking for as I fumbled between the layers of clothing, all my attention focused in my fingertips as I took care not to disturb the things filling the bag. A thickly padded, faded overcoat took up half the space in the bag, then there was a suit, so threadbare that the lapels were shiny, two thin woolen sweaters, four well-ironed shirts, underwear showing signs of having being darned in places, and some pairs of socks filling the rest of the bag. At last I discovered something hard wrapped in a plastic bag at the very bottom. My heart was beating violently, as if I was engaged in some kind of burglary.

In the plastic bag, however, there was nothing but a book and a bottle containing a liquid that looked like kaoliang liquor, wrapped in a towel. I quickly opened the black-bound book. Bringing into play my knowledge of Chinese characters, I scanned the pages but far from being the book of revolutionary ideology or collection of sayings I had anticipated, it was nothing but a guide-book to France. Once again I searched among the folded clothes, with no success. I could not find so much as a single piece of paper of any significance. As I leafed through the book’s pages full of Chinese characters again, something dropped out. I jumped, taken aback. It was a photograph that had fallen gently to the floor. It was identical with the photo that Mother had cherished so dearly as her treasure, only the details in Father’s copy had remained much clearer. Under the large tree in front of the home of Father’s eldest brother in the country, which was vivid in my mind’s eye, the members of the Yi family were standing, formally arranged in three rows. At the left-hand side of the second row, slightly blurred, the faces of Father and Mother could be seen. With my eldest brother some four years old and my younger brother still a babe-in-arms. I was not visible, of course. One by one I peered at the faces of the adults, most of whom were dead by now, as if I was seeing the photo for the first time and almost as though I was being absorbed into it. But there was no reason to expect that the picture, that I had examined dozens of times, would belatedly tell me what I wanted to know.

I did not think to put the bag in order, but for some strange reason kept staring dumbly at Father’s treasure, which had simply grown old, and which reminded me of my youth spent in poverty. The odd effect of Father’s gaze shortly before shot through me once again. At that I shook off the kind of daze I had been in and shuddered at what I had just done. Before my eyes passed in a flash the faces of those detectives charged with neighborhood supervision, one just like another, who had come visiting our home once or twice every time our family moved, scrutinizing the

interior with frosty distrust and threatening glares, all now gloating as if to say, “Didn’t we tell you?” Last in the line of faces, the true face of the ghost, finally unmasked, stood there looking sad. Alas, that wretched investigator’s face was none other than my own. Incapable of meddling further with Father’s bag, I contemplated at length my two hands, that had committed such a shameful deed, as if confronting two uncontrollable monsters.

I opened my eyes feeling extremely hungry and cold. It was past nine, and judging by the pale light outside it must be morning. I leaped up and looked around. The place where Father’s bag had stood was empty and the door was half-open. But I had no memory of having put the bag back in its place the previous evening, nor of how I had fallen asleep. Whereas my head ached splittingly, my body and heart felt surprisingly light. I opened the door wide, as if Father might have disappeared with the bag.

Father was sitting as ever on the stool, reading the guide-book I was already acquainted with. It looked as though he had prepared and eaten breakfast, to say nothing of last night’s supper, on his own. Father examined my face as he spoke.

“So the liquor tasted good? I made it myself and brought enough for us to share a glass each once your brothers arrive; if I’d known you were going to like it so much I’d have brought another bottle.”

“I’m sorry, Father.”

I spoke sincerely, thinking less of the bottle of liquor than of how I had searched his bag. But Father showed no expression, simply screwing up his eyes as he added:

“Sorry, you say . . . but you must be quite a drinker to have sensed there was a bottle of liquor inside my bag. Your stomach must be feeling sore, do you want to taste the soup I’ve prepared?”

I was certainly feeling parched, I was already heading for the dining room in search of a bowl of water at least. I had no choice but to surrender and sit hunched at the breakfast table Father had prepared.

“I feel like visiting Paris a bit, would you like to come along too? You won’t have any time during the week, I mean.”

“Where will you visit?”

Father opened a page he had marked in the guide-book. I could understand little of the Chinese the book was written in, but judging by the map and the word “cemetery” that I recognized, it seemed to be describing the Père Lachaise Cemetery.

“But there are so many famous sites; why start with a cemetery?”

I kept silent, though. I could vaguely guess why Father wanted to go there. Père Lachaise was not just any cemetery; it was renowned for the sculptures adorning the tombs of the famous, and for its scenery; once in my student days I had gone there with some friends and the memory of my blistered feet after walking round its forty hectares meant that it was a place I studiously avoided if at all possible when showing visiting acquaintances around Paris. I assumed that what Father wanted to see would not be the tombs of artists such as Chopin, Apollinaire or Delacroix.

“I’m really here to see you, son, but I ought at least to see that before I leave, surely?”

So, completely unexpectedly, I went out with Father.

Sightseeing may be good as such, it was winter and that morning was not only cloudy, the temperature had suddenly dropped as if it had deliberately been waiting for the two of us to make an outing; as a result, no matter how famous the Père Lachaise Cemetery might be, there was scarcely a soul in sight. As we went in, we were greeted by an icy wind striking us. In order to avoid having to go wandering round the vast labyrinth shivering, I opened the map I had bought at the entrance and asked Father:

“If we’re going to visit everything it’ll take several hours; do you want to see it all, or . . .?”

Seeming bewildered, less by the sculptures in every kind of style adorning the tombs than by the sheer size of the cemetery, Father paused and gazed around at the serried ranks of graves in all directions, his face already half frozen with the cold.

“See everything? Let’s cut across and go straight there.”

“Go where?”

Reacting to the way his tone seemed to imply that the answer was obvious, I asked him deliberately.

“Talk about silly questions . . . if someone like me wants to come here, where else could there be?”

Father spoke more freely. His “someone like me” echoed in my ears and produced a strong shock. Without another word, I set off eastwards from the main gate toward the Communards’ Wall at the far end. It had become a kind of sacred shrine that people from Communist countries never failed to visit if they were in Paris. Father pulled up the collar of his cotton-padded overcoat a bit further, and did not forget to admire the weird and wonderful statues along the way. I failed to give even the minimal commentary I usually provided for acquaintances visiting Paris, absorbed as I was in working out the hidden meaning of Father’s “someone like me.” It was an utterly vague phrase that proved nothing. But I did not turn on Father or ask him what he meant as if hoping to find additional fault. The damp winter wind of Paris struck to the very bone.

“So many tombs, and all so well decorated. Is it far?”

Either because walking on gravel in such dreary cold was proving difficult or because I had been silent for too long, Father spoke.

“It’s not far now.”

I replied absent-mindedly. A scene had come into my mind with eerie clarity from some ten years back, when I had visited here with friends one summer. We were three students from Korea, including myself, all studying in France, who had come to the cemetery following directions in a guide-book, and because of what was written there we had walked to the unadorned wall which was an historic site because, in the last days of the Paris Commune, the Communards who had been caught hiding nearby were massacred and buried there. I do not know if the other students remember the unmarked wall, with only a single neatly placed wreath, but the melancholy, solitary memory reviving in my mind was something very different.

We were sitting on the lawn before the wall after having had our photo taken when three Asians wearing black trousers and white shirts, all with short hair, all looking similar, came and stood in front of the wall. One who looked a little older addressed the others in Korean.

“This is the historic spot where during the French Commune 147 great revolutionary martyrs were cruelly massacred after fighting to the end; look well, comrades.”

Instead of being glad on hearing our native tongue spoken in an unexpected place, each of us instinctively drew in his legs, that we had stretched out as we rested in the shade. We stared at these people, who were speaking our language with a peculiar accent using special words, as if we were seeing strange animals. We had only recently begun our studies abroad and these were the first North Koreans we had ever seen close at hand. I have no idea what kind of thoughts passed through the minds of the other students sitting beside me, but not one of us even thought of speaking in their presence, and we cautiously observed one another’s reactions with expressions that were a mixture of defensiveness and curiosity.

The reason why that awkward scene came into my memory so clearly now was because at that time I had been thinking of Father. Yet not only were I and my friends incapable of ever considering speaking to or approaching those men, oddly enough we crouched lower on account of our racing hearts, held our breath, and watched them. Despite the awkward sense of distance, provoked by two conflicting emotions, wishing on the one hand that they would quickly finish their

explanations and leave, and on the other that they would stay talking a little longer, on their faces I had perceived like a hallucination my father in his youth, of whom I had no memory.

I forgot completely about pulling up the collar of my jacket against the intruding wind and could not tear my eyes from Father's rather bent back as he walked on ahead of me with rapid steps, not at all like those of an old man in his seventies. I was seized by an emotional illusion, as though ever since I had thought of Father on that awkward summer's day here some ten years before, I had always lived in the expectation that one day I might really be able to meet my father, and hastened to catch up with him. Perhaps he was really feeling cold, for Father turned towards me a face that was crimson from the wind and repeated his question:

“This is a really strong wind. Is it still far?”

In order to shelter him from another gust of wind that was arriving from the far end of the path, I put my arm round Father's shoulders as I replied:

“We're nearly there now, Father.”