

Guide to Seoul Cave

By Kim Mi-wol

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Introduction

Guides to Pathless Places: The Fiction of Kim Mi-wol

by Lee Kwang-ho (Literary critic)

How can “I” live in this cave called Seoul? How can I overcome my fear of confinement and of losing my way? The short story “Guide to Seoul Cave” is a good example of the way such questions serve as the starting-point for Kim Mi-wol’s fiction.

“Guide to Seoul Cave” was the story that gave its title to her first collection of short stories, which Kim Mi-wol (born in 1977) published in 2007. It deals with the isolation of modern individuals, cut off as they are from society at large. Her first full-length novel, “The Eighth Room,” published in 2010, focusses with humor and warmth on the development and frustrations of young adults living in today’s world, in that problematic space known as “room”.

The individuals figuring in Kim Mi-wol’s fiction are narrowly confined beings. Yet these are not the same individuals as those of the 1990s, who were depicted as withdrawn into themselves, remote from the mundane sphere. To replace communication with others, these contemporary individuals establish relations with objects in odd ways, experience different lives inside themselves, create a kind of virtual paradise for themselves. As a result, what is depicted in Kim Mi-wol’s fiction is not an inner restoration of identity but rather “new individuals” living in a world of private virtual paradises.

Kim Mi-wol’s work suggests an obsession with private paradises; yet at the same time it shows that they are not necessarily an escape from reality. In that sense, the spaces representing such paradises are not large-scale, Utopia-style paradises; rather, they are minimal private domains. In a paradoxical sense, they can be termed “minimal paradises.” A minimal paradise is the private paradise established by a generation that has been frustrated of any possibility of attaining a truly collective Utopia by social relations with others. This virtual paradise is a space concealed within everyday realities, yet at the same time it is not located outside the systems of violence and falsehood that operate within everyday realities. It is neither a symbol of communal happiness nor a space of utter dystopia. Instead, it is a space located within ordinary time, inhabited by the individual’s memories and physical body, an exterior world interior to memory and reality. That still falls within the possible meanings of “paradise” because it comprises a minimal possibility of achieving personal wishes, yet does not lie outside of the ‘here

and now' that are inhabited by body and memory.

The short story "Guide to Seoul Cave" illustrates clearly the starting-point of Kim Mi-wol's fiction. A 'cave' is introduced, another kind of virtual space. A social misfit, whom we only slowly identify as female, is living in Room 203 of the Seoul Gosiwon study-rooms. The Gosiwon consists of a series of tiny rooms with restricted space, "in which more than forty people must each be lying in a hook-shaped position." Early on in the story it is characterized as a "chaos," and at times its dark corridors seem like an "unexplored cave." The place where the first-person narrator "I" works is an artificial cave; 'my' task is to serve as guide in Seoul Cave Exploration Center, leading groups of primary-school students through a rough imitation of a cave, dressed up in spelunking equipment. The structures of the Gosiwon's cave and this Seoul Cave where she works are very similar.

Breathless and having difficulties digesting, the narrator's symptoms are linked to a double set of memories. One involves a glimpse of a woman lying dead on a seaside beach holding a little dead girl in her arms; the other is an experience of panic at "what could only be termed total darkness" after losing the way while exploring a real cave as a university student. But beneath those two memories is the image of her own mother, who we finally learn died trying to rescue a little girl she thought was her daughter but was actually someone else's child. The pharmacist's assistant who sells her medicine for her indigestion lives in the room next to hers, and every evening emits groans "thick with mayonnaise"; in the course of a short encounter with her, "I" learns something of her truth. Unlike what others imagine, she spends her evenings watching videos figuring a man who looks like somebody she remembers. Finally, accused of stealing medicine and sacked from the pharmacy, she disappears from the Gosiwon. With rooms close together, only separated by thin partitions, still the Gosiwon is a space closed to communication with others.

How is this "I" going to survive in the cave called Seoul? How to escape from dread of confinement and losing the way? The artificial cave is structured in such a way that entrance and exit are the same, starting point and destination are identical. The way into and out of the Gosiwon is likewise composed of a single glass door. In which case, is escape from such a space ever possible? At the very end of the story, "I" is faced with a question: "What should one do if the red and green lights in a traffic signal are both off?" That is an echo of the question near the start of the story: "If you're standing at a crosswalk where the red and green lights are both showing, what are you supposed to do?" Of course, the answer is either "1) You don't cross over or 2) You just cross over," one or the other. No matter what, there is no other option than "to cross or not to cross." Such is the structure of the cave called Seoul.

In a space where the exit is the entrance, the word "way" can have no meaning. Because ultimately only one way exists. Then in an enclosed space like this there can be no sense in seeking a way, and the role of a guide as a "person who shows the way" is bound to be a lie. Therefore the job of "I" as a guide in Seoul Cave Exploration Center is a deception. In the scenes depicting the emptiness of the very idea of seeking a way, the story expresses in a cool, collected manner the critical situation facing those who live in the cave called Seoul. A cave is always a symbol of narrowness, enclosure, constriction, but in this story, by a superposition of the images "virtual world" and "today's Seoul," it is transformed into an image of pathless modernity.

As she depicts the "rooms" of the new generation of young adults, confined and

frustrated with respect to society, Kim Mi-wol portrays the minimal paradise of today's isolated individuals. That minimal paradise is not a place that comforts them in their loneliness; rather it is a place that enables them to embrace the fact that solitude is inescapable. She shows that their loneliness is not a mere attitude but life's reality and at the same time she creates a truly meaningful, existential esthetic of youth. Not so much suggesting that humanity means a resolute will fighting against unhappiness, she rather depicts an individual's struggle to ensure a minimum of inner autonomy by means of detachment and indifference. Here the individual is not a strong subject confronting the world freely, but someone able to establish a minimal space of autonomy. Thus Kim Mi-wol's work shows in a strikingly beautiful manner a kind of "active passivity" that becomes another kind of existential esthetic, found in contemporary fiction.

Guide to Seoul Cave

By Kim Mi-wol

If you open the window in room 203 of Seoul Gosiwon, where I live, you can look down at the Traffic Light Pharmacy. There's a crosswalk between the Gosiwon and the pharmacy. The crosswalk has no traffic signals. In the evening, when the pharmacy's signboard is lit up, pedestrians need to be careful, because the traffic light on the signboard is so bright and vivid it might be mistaken for a real one. Luckily, the red light and the green light on the signboard are always both lit up together. If you're standing at a crosswalk where the red and green lights are both lit up, what are you supposed to do? Sometimes I ask myself the question, as I look down at the pharmacy's illuminated sign. Of course, the answer is always either 1) you just cross, or 2) you don't cross. Even a kid can come up with an answer. And once you've managed to find that answer, what next? The pharmacy shuts at about 9:10 pm. The woman generally arrives in room 204 at 9:20. There's no way I can tell when she goes out to open the pharmacy. All I can assume is that it's later than 8:30 am, which is the time when I leave the gosiwon to go to work.

A cry, "Please, don't!" comes from the next room. A woman's voice, thick as if someone is pouring mayonnaise down her throat, pierces the plywood partition and strikes my ear. That's Room 204. She's off again. She manages to enjoy sex in that tiny room. In the process she sobs and weeps, or sometimes she laughs loudly. Anyway, it makes no difference. If you're bothered by such things you can't live in this gosiwon. The building's system of wooden partitions that far from being soundproof, only offer ever better communication as the day goes by, only exists for people who are used to nothing but surround-sound systems. I pulled out the camp bed, stored flat against the wall. Arms and legs pressed to my body, I lay in a bent hook shape. I wonder when the last time was that I lay with arms and legs spread wide. The moment I arranged myself on the mattress, a close fit for even one person, the groaning from 204 penetrating my ears grew more excited. It was a voice full of energy, very different from when she handed out indigestion cures in the pharmacy. Take one three times a day after meals. In

the pharmacy, the woman's voice had no appeal. So I had never been able to show I knew her: Why, you live in room 204, don't you? Wow, she's really good at sex. I could hear the comments from the middle-aged guy in 202, next door to me. You couldn't help hearing 204, she had such a resonant voice. The man in room 202 always reminded me of the manager's words. When I first moved in, the manager asked: You're a student, aren't you? It's total chaos here. If you want to study, you'd be better off somewhere else. I shut my eyes. I could not help focusing all my attention in my ears. The man was breathless from his exertions. Suppose he dies? I thought, and my heart began to pound harder. As the sound of the man's panting died away, the girl cried out breathlessly as she climaxed. Hey, is she in a threesome? She has no time to catch her breath. If she goes on living like this without getting married she may end up going crazy and die. Just as I was thinking that, a brazen laugh rang out. I was exaggerating, clearly.

I like this gosiwon, located at the entrance to a market, with its atmosphere of latent chaos. Room 203 is at the far end of the second-floor corridor. Windowless, the corridor is dark even at midday. During the ten seconds it takes to walk from the hall to my room, I pretend to be walking through a deserted, unexplored cave. The room barely covers three square meters. Standing in the very center, if I take two steps forward, backward, or sideways, I bump into the wall. At the start of my life in the gosiwon, every time I woke I had the impression that the room had grown a little smaller again and would tremble with anxiety. When I saw the tenants of neighboring rooms leave before the end of their first month, I used to wonder whether I ought not to leave too but now, after being here four months, this tiny room and dark corridor have come to feel as familiar as my workplace. The woman seems to be lasting surprisingly well, too. Come to think of it, it's been a full month since she moved into room 204. Why would she live in a place like this? Come to think of it, why do they call this kind of place "study rooms"? In reality, where we live is no different from a flophouse. I keep worrying about that woman, partly because she's the new druggist in my regular pharmacy and she's my new next-door neighbor, but mainly because I have nothing else to do once I leave work. The drama seems to be over. Beyond the plywood wall room 204 grows quiet.

Hong had her head bent beneath the ticket-booth desk and was concentrating on something. On inspection, I saw she was doing her fingernails. She was brushing at the front of her skirt with the hand that was not holding the file, from time to time raising her left shoulder. The telephone receiver was wedged between her left shoulder and her chin. Yes, of course. Famous Korean caves have rare bats, blind shrimps, millipedes... Oh, you know that. So since there's an expert guide providing precise explanations, it's a perfect experience center for children. What? Ah, you need not worry. Among all the caves in the world, this is the only one where mobiles work perfectly throughout.

Whenever I heard her talk, her voice always sounded kind. She used the proper grammatical styles and endings so that the phrases flowed smoothly. Anyone who paid attention to her smooth and skillful eloquence was immediately convinced beyond any doubt that Hong took great care over her conversations. Sometimes, even I was confused. I could clearly see her doing her nails, texting on her mobile or using curling tongs on her hair while speaking on the phone. She stood up, in case some nail-clippings had not fallen clear. She nervously stamped one high-heeled foot after the

other. Yet all the while the tone of her voice did not waver in the slightest. That's right, it's an artificial cave. Natural caves are too far away, aren't they? In remote provinces, down in Chungcheong-do, Gangwon-do, Jeju-do. It's too much trouble, taking children all that way. Besides, nowadays caves have been so commercialized by tourism that they've been seriously damaged. The lights installed for visitors mean that moss is growing inside the caves, the walls are turning black, while the humidity has fallen enormously. It's to avoid that kind of problem, yet still allow people to pursue study and exploration of the ecology of caves, that this Seoul Cave Exploration Center has been created.

Go, go! Once the call was over, Hong waved her hands in triumph. All the while, I was standing here. If I stood all day long guarding the entrance to the cave, it was not I who made me aware that I was standing here, it was Hong. From time to time she would speak to me from the ticket booth as I stood in front of the low cave entrance that was hardly higher than I was. At such moments, her expression suggested she was looking at a stick. A stick inserted vertically into a monster's maw as it gaped to devour its prey, so that it could not shut. If I bent my body or hung my head, the stick would give way and the monster would devour me in a gulp. Since I was worried about that, I asked Hong to talk. To warn me that I must not lose my mind, that I might be gobbled up if ever I dozed. As we passed the idle hours in those kinds of pointless fantasies, the morning would suddenly be over.

Once the afternoon comes, visitors trickle in. Most of the visitors to the exploration center are primary school kids. Nineteen out of twenty come to do the homework assignment they kept postponing during school vacation. It's already the end of February, they must be desperate. I led four boys with no accompanying adult into the cave. The inside of the cave, with thirty-two lights on, was dark and dank. About ten yards inside, the first stalagmite appeared. It was a fake stalagmite, made of plaster molded on the cement floor, the surface painted and varnished. Wow! It's a stalagmite! Isn't that amazing! Naturally, those kinds of wondering cries did not emerge from the children's lips. It was my job to voice such words. Goodness, here's a stalagmite! Do you know how it's made? The kids looked back. After cautiously whispering together, one of them stepped forward: What's that round your waist? Another added: Wow, it looks like a diaper! The safety belt protecting my pelvis and thighs always awakens the children's curiosity. It's called spelunking gear. The kids' eyes open wide. The pearly-red, one-piece caving suit with top and pants combined, the rubber boots reaching my knees, the rope and carabiners hanging from my belt, the plastic helmet with its built-in lamp, drive the kids wild. The manager's intuition had been spot on. It might be pointlessly uncomfortable, but there had been a very good reason why he obliged me to wear spelunking clothes. You might say that he wanted to make up for the shoddy insufficiency of the fake cave by the guide's flashy gear. It's a fact that the kids show far more interest in my attire than in the cave. Are you really a spelunker? Then why are you in a fake cave? That's how they interrogate me. Well, I'm not complaining. If you quibble about every little thing you can never do your job.

Next I started to lead the way forward, past the fake stalactites and stalagmites, the flowstones and cave coral. Thanks to the skill of the builders, those lumps of plaster look like real cave products. But of course here there are no mindless tourists trying to carry them off as there are in real caves. Once past the largest feature in the cave, the great stone pillar, there was a glass case displaying guano, trilobites, subterranean

millipedes, fossils of springtails, etc. Exclaiming loudly, the kids crowded round the display case. Look here, now. Guano is bats' excrement. It provides the creatures living in the cave with precious nourishment. That's why a lot of other creatures live in caves where bats live. While I am explaining about the fossils, the kids set off again ahead of me. I cut short my remarks before I'm half-way through and hurry after them. It's always the same.

There was nobody in the kitchen. I filled a mug with cold water from the water cooler. The herbal indigestion medicine the woman had given me was in the form of pellets. Just as I sat down at the table, a notice stuck to the wall above the sink caught my eye. Free rice provided. Utensils supplied. Make way for others when crowded. But the gosiwon students' communal kitchen was always deserted. Maybe they dropped in to drink water. Mostly the students ate out. The rice provided without soup or side dishes, the peeling frying pan and the few dented saucepans, all the cooking utensils were just so many unnecessary options provided for the tenants. I poured twenty or so of the pellets into the palm of my hand. How was I going to get all those down? Just as I was about to swallow the medicine with a mouthful of water, I carelessly let the water go down the wrong way and choked. Suddenly the woman was standing right in front of me, though I had not heard her approaching. A prolonged fit of coughing erupted. My throat was sore and burning as though all the blood in my body had gone flooding there. Clutching my throat, I coughed on and on painfully. The medicine had all fallen onto the floor. The woman quickly handed me the mug of water. She was holding an empty plastic bottle; presumably she had come intending to fetch some water. Are you alright? I looked her straight in the eyes. The pupils were large and deep, they seemed good eyes. Aren't you, aren't you the woman in the Traffic Light Pharmacy? The coughing that had calmed down began again. In that situation I should not have spoken. The woman stayed bending forward, still offering me the mug, as she stared hard at me for two or three seconds. You sold me this medicine, you know. Don't you remember?

I would never have imagined that the woman would suggest going to her room. But I did not refuse her suggestion that she should give me some new medicine since it was her fault that I had not been able to take mine. She had a lot of things in her room. Not only was there a small 45-liter fridge, there was also a VTR on the desk. What was unusual were the small medicine bottles lying about beside a video cassette. There were white pills in transparent glass bottles. It really looked like a pharmacist's room. Diazepam, Melode, Barujepam, Unizepam, Valium. I read aloud the names written with a felt pen on the outside of each bottle. You go on studying about medicines even after you come home from work? She replied without so much as glancing at the bottles: They're remedies I take. She explained that her position was that of pharmacist's assistant. Not assistant pharmacist, but a pharmacist's assistant. She corrected me three times as we talked. She was a salesperson employed on a temporary basis by the real pharmacist who was busy with on his own business. We sat facing each other on the bed drinking beer. Perhaps she was lonely. She was a lot more talkative than I had imagined. Aren't you afraid, working in such a place? It must be dark. She showed great interest when I said that I worked as a cave guide. Nah, what is there to be afraid of? I'm not afraid of anything. I sipped again at the can of beer. They say all kinds of people live in a gosiwon; aren't you afraid? Hong had once asked me. The waning moon was visible through the window behind her head. There was a faint rim of light around the edge of

the moon. In the past something really frightening happened to me, so since then everything seems dull. I had said the same thing to Hong.

“It was when I was very small. On a beach, I went to play in the water, and then I saw something I shall never forget so long as I live. A woman’s corpse was lying on the sand. Her body was bloated. Her arm was the size of an ordinary man’s thigh. And that arm was holding a little girl. Or rather, more exactly, hmm, the woman’s arm was inserted into the child’s one-piece swimsuit, emerging at the groin. It looked as though she had adopted that position to avoid losing the child in the water. The child’s swimsuit was bright scarlet. It was just like mine, with triple frill decorating the chest. The child was only so high.”

Really? You must have felt ever so sad. Hong had replied, shaking her head from side to side as she stretched her neck. The woman, who kept sipping her beer without a word, had been leaning toward me but now she straightened up.

“That child, did the thought strike you that she was like you?”

I lowered my eyes. Four empty beer cans lay scattered round my feet. There was a wind blowing. The surf was raging high, the sand was being blown up to eye level. When I pushed in between the legs of the chattering crowd, at first I could not recognize the face of the corpse lying on the sand.

“No, I mean to say, what must she have felt? When she pushed her arm into the swimsuit to save that child in the water, I mean, what did she feel? That’s what I’m thinking.”

I did not tell her that every time that thought arose, my chest tightened until it hurt to breathe and I had to take medicine for indigestion. The woman nodded. She had been nodding regularly for so long that I wondered if she hadn’t closed her eyes and dozed off. But just as I was about to lay a hand on her shoulder, she lifted her head. Her flushed face was wearing a smile. I experienced something frightening when I was small, too. I can’t get to sleep if I think about it. If sleeping pills don’t work, I watch fun movies. She picked up the remote. Want to see?

In the video, which I watched sitting less than a meter away from the screen, a band of tough guys figured, wearing trench coats, good with guns, like in a Hong Kong film noir. But on the screen instead of guns they waved their sex. The men only exercised authority over women’s bellies. There was almost no dialogue, yet the movie’s plot came across clearly. To summarize, ten men had sex with a woman, then the five with the best scores by her grading, then three, and finally just one. The climax of this absurd storyline came in the last scene. At the end of those fierce preliminaries, when one man emerged as the winner, the woman plunged a knife into his heart. Males who threaten women with their outstanding sexual skills must die, the woman screamed in heroic tones. It was such a ridiculous conclusion that I felt like snorting in fury. Then the woman beside me suddenly started to laugh loudly. It was the same laugh I had heard from time to time through the plywood wall on nights when I could not get to sleep. Her finger was pointing at the naked body of the male with the greatest reproductive ability writhing on the floor, covered in blood.

“That guy... he looked just the same, for fuck’s sake!”

The woman crushed the empty beer can she was holding. Denting an aluminum can is not very hard, but I somehow had a feeling that she would have been capable of breaking a beer bottle with her grip. She kept on laughing. Laughing and speaking at the same time, she kept repeating the same words. Just the same, he looked just the same.

To hear what she was saying more clearly, I moved closer beside her. But she leaned back against the wall and shut her eyes. Seeing she was apparently half asleep, I could not ask her who the man on the screen had looked like. The final credits were scrolling up the screen. I turned off the player. As I pulled out the plug, I saw that there was a whole pile of videos stacked behind the desk. Leaving the light on, I left room 204.

Water was leaking through the roof of the cave again. When is someone going to clean it all up? It started to rain yesterday evening, so it must have been leaking all night long. All through the morning, Hong kept complaining, pouting her lips. Since I was wearing my caving suit and could not go outside, she was obliged to go upstairs to the restaurant and the janitor's office. The place where the water was leaking was directly beneath the terrace of the restaurant on the first floor of the building. I had never been inside the restaurant, that was located directly above the exploration center, but seen from outside, the terrace looked delightful: flowers blooming in every season, a cage holding a pair of lovebirds, a cute red mailbox, all in harmony like a picture postcard. If you imagine a cross-section with the building cut open vertically, just above the cave flowers were blooming and birds were chirping. I wish I could work in such an elegant place. It's tragic that I have to squander my youth in this gloomy cave. Whenever she was about to eat the lunch she had ordered in, Hong used to lament about the restaurant as though she was saying a kind of grace. Ouf, no luck! Hong fiercely pushed the door open and came in. Those people, I mean to say, they said they had still not done the waterproofing. I was wringing out the rag I had been using to wipe water from the cave floor. Water had leaked in at the same spot some time before. On that occasion the owner of the restaurant had promised to apply a waterproof coating to the terrace floor immediately. So what did he say they were going to do? Hong's eyes with their purple eye-shadow fluttered. He said they would do it this very day, but how can I believe that? It was past noon before the cave floor, onto which water had been dripping all night long, was more or less clean.

We only had three visitors. With a limestone cave, the tunnel created by underground water or rain seeping through the ground is gradually enlarged and shaped. The infiltrating water dissolves the limestone and leaves a variety of deposits on the roof, walls and floor of the cave. The stalactite you see here is a typical example of that. The noise from the turning ventilation fan was exceptionally loud. The child who had come with his parents kept squirming during the tour. Because of the more than usual humidity, the surface of the cave's corals and flowstones gleamed slickly. The glass of the showcase was steamed over. But this is where we came in before. Is that all? The child complained as he left the cave. I stroked the kid's head. The cave goes round in a circle, that's why. You won't forget to write up your field-trip once you get home, will you?

The cave's entrance and exit were the same. The cave was circular. I suppose they built it round because it would have been a waste to construct the cave straight in such a limited space, but it sometimes left visitors disappointed. They seemed to be expecting that after passing through the cave they would come out somewhere new, somewhere different from where they had gone in. Maybe on account of the bad weather, there were still no visitors as closing time approached. Yet Hong looked busy as she sat in the ticket booth. Her eyes were fixed on the display of her mobile and she was excitedly pressing the buttons with her thumbs. She had once told me that while she

was playing games she felt happy because it was like being in another world. Another world? That had been true for me once. I had believed that somewhere there must exist a completely new world that I had so far never experienced. On account of that conviction, when I was a student I joined the Caving Club. But after making a single descent into a cave I resigned from the club without any regrets. While the older members were surveying the main cave, I had entered a side cave. Formed by running water, the side cave was short but the walls of the dead end felt extremely weird and gloomy. It seemed amazing that any living creature could exist in such a place. I pressed the switch of my hand-held flashlight. What would it feel like to be living in a cave? I turned off my head lantern too. Immediately, absolute darkness, what could only be termed total darkness came rushing in on all sides. It was equally dark whether my eyes were open or shut. It felt as though some of the cave's eyeless, many-legged creatures were stealthily crawling up my body. Wonder turned to dread. In my haste to turn the flashlight back on I dropped it. Perhaps because I was flustered, my hand was unable to find the switch on my head lantern. I glanced behind me. I could see nothing. I could not make out the way I had come. Which way should I go? In those few seconds, I suddenly recalled the woman I had seen on the beach. What had she been thinking out there in the water? By the time she realized that the child floundering in the water, whom she had taken for her daughter and gone dashing toward, was a stranger, there was no going back and in that dark water what had she been thinking? For what reason had she so desperately thrust her arm into the swimsuit of a child completely unrelated to her?

I was suffocating. My stomach felt heavy. The lemonade I had put in the fridge of the ticket booth was exactly cold enough. It tasted a bit sour but it smelled wonderful, of real squeezed lemons. Here's the new digestive tonic I promised. It was the day after we had drunk beer together. Tonics give you flatulence. You shouldn't take indigestion cures habitually; try this. Inside the plastic bottle the woman in room 204 took from her miniature fridge bubbles were rising. It's something I made. If sodium bicarbonate mixes with citric acid, it produces carbon dioxide. Add some non-sugar sweetener and lemon and you get premium-class lemonade. No more need for digestive tonics. The woman no longer seemed like a pharmacist's assistant but an assistant pharmacist, or indeed a real pharmacist, as she spoke. When I returned to my place after drinking the lemonade, Hong was looking at me anxiously, her arms propped on the desk. Obviously there are grounds for wonder when a stick moves about drinking lemonade. Go, go! I waved at Hong. The moment I saw the entrance sign in front of the cave, with the exit sign just beside it, I felt relaxed. The fact that starting point and destination are the same always reassures me.

I took a stroll through the cave on my own. The pail I had put down to catch the water was more than half full. I crouched in front of the pail. The water was falling at a rate of exactly one drop every three seconds. Each time a drop fell, I burped. It was really first-class lemonade. I used to dream of becoming a pharmacist or a doctor, she said. I wanted to study the effects of heredity. I wanted to study the diseases for which no cure is possible on account of heredity. But she explained that on account of heredity she had not been able to become a pharmacist or a doctor. I'm color blind, red blind, I can't distinguish between red and green. That means I have to be careful at traffic lights. When people start to cross, I think, ah, the light must be green, and I follow them across. If people are standing waiting, I think, ah, the light must be red, and I stand there with

them. She laughed as she spoke, but her voice lacked conviction, just like when she explained the correct dose of indigestion pills.

One off-target drop of water fell on the back of my hand. I moved the pail a little in my direction. What dreams had I nourished as a child? I could remember none. The speed at which the drops were falling was increasing. Nowadays my dream is just to live an ordinary life, not losing my way, to live a quiet life, experiencing only foreseeable events. The drips began to fall continuously without any pause. The water had nearly filled the pail to the top. But if I could go back into the past and dream, I would go back to that day. I would become a seaside life saver. I would go swimming toward that child wearing a swimsuit just like mine and the woman clutching her. The drips finally became a steady stream. The bucket overflowed and streams of water spread over the cave floor. The rapidly rising water had by now reached my chest but I was not afraid. I swung my arms slowly. Further out, the woman was floundering, embracing the child. The child's swimsuit was exactly the same pearly red as my caving suit. I stretched out a hand toward the woman. Ma, I'm here! That child isn't your daughter, it's me, me! The woman was pushing her arm under the unknown child's swimsuit. Ma, I tell you I'm here! The woman only moved further away as I tried in vain to touch her. The water reached my head. It was hopeless. The child is walking along the shoreline. On and on, the beach has no end. Realizing that she has reached a point far from where her mother is, the child retraces her steps, weeping. It's already late evening by the time she reaches the place where a crowd has gathered. She peers between them. Her mother, her body swollen, the unfamiliar child in her grasp, the child's swimsuit just like her own. Water was flowing from nose and ears and mouth. I could not breathe. If only I had not lost my way on the beach, if only my mother had not gone wandering off looking for me, if only she had not noticed a child wearing a swimsuit just like mine fallen into the water... that would never have happened. Mother, I'm sorry... The boss just phoned. He says to quit for the day. Hong's voice came faintly from outside the cave.

The clothesline and drying racks on the roof were already occupied by other people's washing. One red tee shirt on the line was flapping like a victory pennant. As for victory, it certainly was a victory. The gosiwon held forty-eight rooms distributed over five floors, and there were just two washing machines, three drying racks. If you wanted to gain possession of a washing machine and drying rack in the evening, you really had to fight for them. Clutching a basin full of wet washing I went back down the stairs. The manager was pinning up a notice on the board in front of the second-floor lobby. On account of the cost of heating, from next month we are obliged to raise rental charges. For a room with a window, two hundred thousand won. For a room without a window, one hundred eighty thousand won. Fuck that! I looked behind me. The middle-aged man from room 202 who liked poking his nose into everything had appeared at some point and was standing behind me. Look, why add twenty thousand to the cost of a room with a window? If they're going to raise the prices, they all ought to be increased by the same amount, surely? The manager greeted Room 202 respectfully. It's because rooms on the window side are more popular. More popular, my foot... you should make that ten thousand less! But Sir, why say that when you live on the windowless side? Aren't you forgetting that now you're living in a cheaper room? Listening to the two men squabbling with half an ear, I opened my door.

Starting with the hangers on the wall, the nails driven into the window-frame, the back of the chair, the corners of the desk, I draped the whole room with damp clothes. On account of the washing, the air in the room grew humid. I had a feeling that if I shut my eyes and stretched a hand over my head I would be able to touch a stalactite hanging from somewhere. By the time I had roughly tidied up the room it was past nine. Nine twenty. The woman will have come over the crossing a moment before. Nine twenty-one. Now she will have pushed open the glass door forming the gosiwon's only entrance and exit and be climbing up the stairs. In a moment I shall hear the sound of her slippers coming along the low-ceilinged, narrow, badly-lit corridor. Nine twenty-three. Now the door of room 204 will open. Nine twenty-five. But no sound came from outside the door. That's odd. She's never been more than three minutes late coming in. I opened the window. The Traffic Light Pharmacy's lights were already off. Where had she gone?

The previous evening, I had heard that begging voice thick with mayonnaise: Please, don't, they'll hear next door. Since the movies had little in the way of dialogue, I could repeat it all by heart. Now's our chance. Hmm, that's a lie. Why are you saying that? I had only to open my mouth and without fail the same words emerged as from the actor's lips. Imitating a silent film narrator was quite fun in its way too. I'm going. I said, I'm leaving. Hey, hang on, what's this? I was hearing this dialogue for the first time. It doesn't sound like adlibbing. I put my ear to the wall. I said, I'm leaving. I'm going. The low voice repeating the words was definitely the woman's. Was she phoning someone? As if mocking my conjecture, she laughed loudly. I'm going to kill... Just before I tore my ear from the wall, that was clearly what she said.

The crossing looked bleak, with almost no pedestrians or cars in sight. Had she really left? Had she gone to kill someone? I stuck my head out of the window and surveyed the building from top to bottom. Of the eighteen windows on the street side, nine had lights burning. Wrapped in silence, the building was like a huge loaf of bread pierced by holes made by carbon dioxide. Could anyone sleep snugly and quietly buried inside there? I shut the window and lay down, but sleep did not come easily. The midnight gosiwon, in which more than forty people must each be lying in hook shapes, was still and lonely. I looked up at the ceiling. It might have been a water leak or a stain of rat's piss, a dark pattern shaped like an arrow was pointing out of the window. The girl had still not come back. From time to time a car's headlights skimmed over the arrow as it passed.

The owner phoned to tell me that the exploration center would stay closed for a couple of days, starting the following day. I did not understand. The restaurant was only repairing the waterproofing on the terrace, why should the center close? That's not what it is, Hong whispered. She chattered on about how she had heard somewhere that the restaurant was planning to buy the basement and turn it into a parking lot. It's true. They say that our boss wants to sell and is negotiating an agreement with the restaurant. That's why we're staying shut. Just remember how he told us to go home early. Hong was looking more lively than at any time since she had joined the company. I'll be able to work there. Have you seen what the waitresses wear? Their name tags are lit up. Unable to resist Hong's insistence, I agreed to eat supper with her at the restaurant. Soup, steak, salad, with sherbet for dessert, the food was luxurious but I could not concentrate on eating. In place of stalactites, chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and in

the middle, in place of the showcase with black fossils, brightly colored bouquets were arranged. The ceiling was too high, the room excessively bright, while waitresses with lights shining in their name tags kept coming and going ceaselessly through various doors. The terrace was visible behind where Hong was sitting. Below it, water had been leaking for the past two days. A lovebird kicked at its perch and flew up. The bird flew up to the ceiling of its cage then down to the floor. It did not seem to realize that birds don't sing, they cry. Is there anything you need? A young man wearing a formal suit was bending respectfully over our table. Have you waterproofed the terrace? I beg your pardon? The young man replied politely. Have – you – water – proofed – the – terrace? As Hong pronounced the words clearly, separating each syllable from the next, the muscles in her face twitched in harmony. Her exaggeratedly startled expression suited the place very well, I thought absently as we left the restaurant.

The woman was not in the pharmacy. The owner was on the phone. He immediately pushed about the boxes of tonic and handed me a bottle of digestive medicine without asking anything. I delicately drank the tonic as though it were some kind of nectar, and as I strolled out, crossed the road and entered the gosiwon, the pharmacist had still not finished talking on the phone. The woman did not return to the pharmacy. It had been three days now that I had not seen her. I knocked at the door of room 204. There was no response. She was not in the kitchen, the washing machine room, or on the roof. The clothes pole in the center of the roof was swaying although there was no wind. Perhaps it was having a hard time holding up the weight of the laundry hanging on the line. I seized the pole and righted it. Where could she have gone? I leaned on the guard rail and looked down. The crossing without traffic lights was plainly visible. I had the feeling that she was going to cross over and enter the gosiwon at any moment. My stomach felt as bloated as ever. I longed to drink some of her premium-class lemonade.

The manager was just emerging into the corridor with Room 202. I get it. All I need to do is pay more, right? With his words, Room 202 was grumbling, while his mouth was laughing. It was as I had expected. The door to room 204 was not locked. With nothing but the bed and desk in it, the room felt deserted. I'm going. I'm leaving. I recalled the woman's low voice. Had she really been preparing to leave?

"Hey, the woman who lived in 204, has she moved out?"

The manager had gone out into the hall after finishing with Room 202 and his eyes glinted behind his frameless glasses.

"You mean the woman who used to sell tonics in that pharmacy across the street? She was caught stealing; how could she do such a thing?"

He replied without breaking his stride. And Miss, I'm going to be living there from this evening. Room 202 left his cheerful voice trailing behind him as he followed the manager down to the ground floor.

"I kicked her out the day before yesterday. I know the pharmacist a little; he said she'd filched a pile of sleeping pills. She had them hidden in her room; maybe she wanted to kill herself or something. She nearly made herself into a corpse here in the gosiwon. He said he had employed her because he thought she was sensible, but she went half crazy. When he accused her of taking the medicine, she wept, then laughed, then swore at him, everything. I never heard the like. How could she?"

Instead of going straight into the office he sat down on the sofa in the lounge. As he turned on the television with the remote, he pretended to wipe some non-existent

sweat from his brow with the back of a hand.

“I’ve had a really hard time on account of her. I’m worn out.”

Had he eaten a boiled python as a pick-me-up somewhere? He said he was worn out but the words he spat out one by one were overflowing with an energy I had never before seen. She isn’t a woman selling tonics, she’s a pharmacist’s assistant. The sleeping pills were for her to take whenever she couldn’t sleep. She didn’t mean to kill herself. I had to set the record straight.

“Every evening she used to bring in weirdos and make so much noise I got complaints from the neighboring rooms. It doesn’t matter how eager you are, there’s a time and place for that kind of thing, not in a gosiwon...”

That’s not true. She was watching videos. It was a movie figuring a man who resembled somebody. I said nothing. What broke the silence in the lounge was the voice of the weather forecaster. It looks as though it is going to rain hard and temperatures will fall across the whole country tomorrow from early morning until the evening. In the first half of next month the continental high pressure zone will expand south a couple of times but the National Weather Service does not expect there to be any of the usual severe cold spells.

I emerged from the gosiwon. The moment I turned away from the door, an icy wind came blowing and lashed against my bare face. I felt as though my hair was being pulled out and my ears were about to fall off. I shrugged my shoulders and thrust both hands into my armpits. I walked along rehearsing all the curses I knew. Since I did not know very many, I was obliged to keep repeating the same curses. I soon felt bored. I had come outside but I had nowhere to go. I felt sick. An acid taste came rising into my throat. I would have to drink another bottle of digestive tonic. Now I had somewhere to go but it did not make me feel happy. I looked at my wristwatch. Eight fifty. I quickened my pace. But once I reached the crossing I came to a halt. On the other side of the street, the pharmacy’s signboard was already turned off. How could that be? It’s not closing time yet. I looked down at my right and left feet, one on the curb, the other still on the sidewalk. Suddenly a question I had never faced before came to mind. What should one do if the red and green lights in a traffic signal are both off? Either 1) You don’t cross, or 2) You just cross ... I looked up. I was thinking that it would be good to have someone who could tell me the right answer, show me the way.