

New York Bakery

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1

I have decided to write this story using a pencil. I have no idea why I came to that decision. I just felt that I ought to. Come to think of it, it's been a very long time since I last wrote a story with a pencil.

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I am starting this story with something that happened long ago. I still have no way of knowing exactly when the New York Bakery first opened. It was already there when I was born. As a child, I once asked my mother:

“Mom, when did you first start up the shop?”

That was when I was in primary school, my nose always running in winter, my sleeves shiny.

“I began long before you were born.”

As mother spoke, she was watching the television and her knitting needles at almost the same time, sitting beside the stove in the New York Bakery. At that time, our elder brother was growing very fast. After Chuseok festival through the autumn into early winter there were less customers and mother would sit on a cushion beside the stove, unraveling an almost unworn sweater and knitting a new one. From the moment mother began to knit the sweater, we all started to look forward eagerly to the Christmas rush

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Either mother did not know exactly, or she told me and because I was too young, I forgot, it seems. Once a little more time had elapsed I was no longer curious about such things. I was too absorbed by my own problems. Since the New York Bakery had been there before I was born, it was easy to think that it would still be there after I died, too. But of course, life is not like that.

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On further reflection as I write, I recalled how mother said she felt sorry that she very often used to leave my new-born sister lying alone in the small space at the back while she kept the store. That space had not been there when I was born.

“Where was that room then?”

I was either thawing my frozen feet by the stove or running in and out of the bakery door as I asked that.

“It was a separate room until we put the aquarium there. In those days we had no house so everyone slept and ate in that one room. Ha ha ha.”

Luckily, by the time I was born, we had a house of our own. So apart from me, all my older siblings had been born at the New York Bakery. Like red-bean buns or cream cakes. I might not be the ugly duckling, but still, the fact of there being that difference between me and the others left me with no good feelings. My elder sister was born in 1965,

which meant that the New York Bakery had opened some time prior to 1965. That was the time when it was decided to send our soldiers to fight in Vietnam, when Syngman Rhee died abroad, when the Korea-Japanese agreement was signed amidst opposition from students. All those things happened before I was born. The New York Bakery had been there since all those years ago. I was not born in the New York Bakery, but still people called me the youngest son of the New York Bakery.

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If I happen to meet people from our home town in Seoul, still now they sometimes talk of the New York Bakery. They are all people who were born before me. If I say it was on the station square, they mostly remember.

“Why, when I was in high school, we often held blind dates there . . .”

I have the impression that a poet I once met in a crowded Insa-dong bar said that to me. I was very drunk that day. I think I replied:

“Now there’s no longer a bakery there.”

That is what I always tell people from back home who remember the New York Bakery. But there is almost nobody who is surprised or shocked to hear that. If it’s the place where someone used to have blind dates when she was a high-school girl, and she hears that it no longer exists, surely that ought to be enough to make her feel surprised or shocked? Sometimes, having said that and being struck by such thoughts, I disconcert people by heatedly talking on and on about home, wearing a foolish expression. Talking with people from home, I get completely carried away.

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I remember all the shops, now gone, that used to be in the street where the New York Bakery was. And I remember all the people who left the neighborhood together with the shops. There are things that this being called myself acquired from what I learned in that street and others from what I learned outside that street. Naturally, I learned far more in the street. Inside me, the world of the shopkeepers I saw as a child remains vivid. The metal or illuminated sign that each of them hung up is as clear as if I had seen it yesterday. That street no longer exists in today’s world. The streets in my home town now are not the same as the ones I once inhabited. In some ways I am just like a displaced person. My old home, with its shops for wallpaper and linoleum, hardware, lumber, shoes, Chinese restaurant, jewellery, pawnshop, tailor’s, grogshop, name-tags, cafe supplies, employment, scales, lodging house, scribes, has vanished for ever. Development has demolished all those little shops. It’s very sad. There are those who say that when you are dying you are given a chance to review your life from start to finish; if that is true, I want to walk down that street of my childhood once again, slowly and carefully, at length, even if it means shortening the time allotted to the rest of my life. Only it looks as though other people’s ideas are very different from mine. I have never asked directly, but none of them seem to feel a longing to go back and visit the New York Bakery as they are dying, merely because it was the place where they held blind dates in their schooldays. To them, it’s obvious, but to me such people seem a bit heartless.

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I may not know when the New York Bakery first opened, I know when it closed. Like so many of the shops that had existed in my home-town’s street long before I was born, the New York Bakery was unable to adapt to changing circumstances and closed down in August 1995. Anyway, life being as it is, I should not think pessimistically about it, I urged

myself repeatedly. Things that came into the world before one generally vanish from the world before one. It's something natural that happens naturally in the natural world. The way the New York Bakery disappeared for ever from the world is just the same.

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But is that really so? Once you vanish, that's it?

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I still have a copy of the *New Gimcheon Newspaper* dated May 26, 1994. It contains an article that begins: "It has belatedly been revealed that Kim Yeon-su (aged 24), a native of Gimcheon, has been recognized as both a poet and a novelist." I have worked as a journalist, so I know just how smart a beginning that is. It is as though somehow a fascinating career lies concealed within it. Yet the article gives no information as to why the fact of my literary initiation had only been revealed "belatedly." It was simply something that was transmitted "belatedly." The person who transmitted the fact "belatedly" was my father. My father marked the following line in the article with a yellow highlight: "The writer Kim Yeon-su, whose home is the New York Bakery by the station square police box." Father occasionally used to send me envelopes containing such newspaper cuttings highlighted in yellow. Once, on opening one envelope, a cutting from the *Joseon Ilbo* emerged. At that time I had never given an interview or written anything for the *Joseon Ilbo*. Unfolding it, I saw it was an article about the Korean-Japanese writer Yu Miri, who had been awarded the Akutagawa Prize. Father had highlighted in red the name Yu Miri and the title of the column, written by Hong Sa-jung, "Literary quality produced by errancy and despair." In the accompanying letter, Father had first written, "I believe in you. Press ahead full of hope. Surely, life must be like that," then between the "be" and "like," he had inserted a 'V' sign and added "something." Every time I read the letter, I see father adding that "something" to "be like that" as though he was not satisfied. It was only after my own baby was born that I understood what a lofty gesture that had been.

[Translator's Note: The letter was written in Korean, of course, and what was inserted was an insignificant syllable 'neu' in the interrogative suffix, a minor stylistic tweaking without any effect on the meaning of the phrase. This is untranslatable.]

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The interview was held in the dark space behind the aquarium in the New York Bakery. That was where my new-born sister had been left to cry on her own, and where the poet I met in Insadong used to have blind dates. It was a space for people who for some reason wanted to eat their cake in secret, out of sight. Nowadays bakeries do not need such space, but in those days it was common. Sitting there, I talked at length with the man sent from the *New Gimcheon Newspaper*. He praised me to the stars, saying how perfectly wonderful the Modernist technique of my first published story was. Perfectly wonderful? Maybe he had not read it. Sitting before the man, who looked to be twenty years older than I was, I corrected him with a dismissive gesture as though I was crushing garlic, "Not Modernist, Postmodernist." He noted down what I said. Between us some red-bean buns, cream cakes and muffins that mother had selected were lying on a silver tray. They were my favorites.

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Later I regretted over and over again what had happened. It was not what life was like. It

was not about sitting opposite a man twenty years older than myself in a corner of the New York Bakery as it gradually collapsed into its own shadow, correcting him with, “Not Modernist, Postmodernist.” Coming to realize that there were things crumbling everywhere just as I was growing was life’s essence. The time it took for a child to grow up and become an adult was enough. During that time, no matter how solid, no matter how strong or heavy things may be, they all shatter, rust, scatter. At such times, black or red fragments would die and fall away inside me, like rust flaking from a sheet of iron. Tiny gleams of light would glimmer one last time then vanish for ever into the darkness inside me like sandbanks being washed away by the incoming waves. Just in the short period during which I was born and grew up. Not realizing that, going on unthinkingly like an idiot about “Not Modernist, Postmodernist”, it was only natural for me to wonder on receiving the newspaper how he could use the expression “the writer whose home is the New York Bakery by the station square police box.” But if that is not true, who am I? Now I live in Gyeonggi province and the New York Bakery no longer exists, so if I meet somebody and want to introduce myself, I say, “I am so-and-so and I write novels.” But in my home town I am still known as “the youngest son of the New York Bakery on the station square.” Nowadays, the fact that I am still defined by those tiny gleams of light, those fragments that have died and fallen away without a trace, is simply amazing. To say that something cannot be seen is not to say that it has vanished.

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Then and now, whenever people learn that I was the youngest son of the New York Bakery, their response is always the same: “You must have eaten huge amounts of cake!” Every time I saw those envious expressions, it was like denying that I was the son and heir of a plutocrat. When we were children, cake and bread held that high a status. Accordingly, my status as the youngest son in a bakery was as high as the status I enjoy today as a novelist. And naturally, in the course of my life I have eaten more bread and cakes than other people. I used to eat them almost every day. Thinking of that, I realize that, in reality, it is not possible to eat expensive things like pastries, hamburgers, roll-cakes on a daily basis. There are only a few kinds that you can eat every day. It is only things like red-bean buns, cream cakes, muffins, soft rice-cakes, doughnuts, white bread, a bakery’s basic products, that you never tire of. Probably a child from a Chinese restaurant who loves eating simple *jajangmyeon* and *jjamppong* noodles more than anything else might understand what I mean. If just before I die I am allowed to go walking along my childhood street, I shall be holding red-bean buns, cream cakes, muffins, soft rice-cakes, doughnuts, white bread.

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Not that I was allowed to eat all that I wanted from the very beginning. There was even a time when I stole from the New York Bakery. Listening to what people say, it’s about the same as a bus conductor saying he scrounged a free ride, something not very significant, even if you include it when you make your confession. Still, a fact is a fact. When mother was not looking, I grabbed something and ran off. I had a friend at the pharmacists’ who was kind to me and I wanted to give him some cake. It was before I started primary school, mother must have been in her forties. In those days I was not allowed to eat bread and cake whenever I liked. So that the title “the youngest son of the New York Bakery” signified nothing.

“Even though it was not going into some stranger’s mouth but your own son’s, still you would not let him eat?”

I once asked my mother, after the New York Bakery had vanished for ever. “In those

days, every penny counted,” she replied. In her youth, mother would sell even the bread her youngest son might have eaten, resolutely turning it into money.

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Besides, those were the days when I used to eat *girebbashi*, as it is known in Japanese. The equivalent word in Korean would mean ‘scraps’ or ‘fragments.’ If dough is spread over a large iron tray covered with newspaper, then baked for a while in a gas oven, the tray emerges covered with a layer of sponge cake. In the old days, the kitchen where the baker worked wearing a white gown was stifling because of the oven. In the kitchen there was an electric fan wider across than I could stretch, but in summer it merely sent out a hot breeze. The baker used to listen to the morning broadcast on a red transistor radio to which a large battery was fixed with black tape as he drew the steaming sponge cakes from the oven and carried them outside. On the surface of the well-baked sponge cake a naturally produced geometrical pattern would gleam, looking as though a coating had been applied. It was impossible to consider the dough before it went into the oven and the sponge that emerged from after being cooked as the same substance. How many times did I watch the sponge being baked? Five hundred times? A thousand? Yet every time I watched, it was like a miracle. If people are capable of such things, it ought to be possible for me to go into the oven as the youngest son of the New York Bakery and emerge as the son of a New York businessman. Just as that kind of foolish imagining was intensifying, after the sponge cake lying outside had cooled sufficiently, the baker would seize the newspaper and draw the cake off the iron tray then cut it into sections suitable for wrapping, using a baker’s knife that was tremendously long although it had no sharp edge. First of all, on top and bottom, left and right, he would trim off any parts that were scorched and hard. *Girebbashi* referred to those bits of trimmed-off cake. They were cut off for appearance’s sake, but since they were identical with the sponge sold in the shop they could not simply be discarded. At the same time, they did not look good enough to be given to strangers. As a result, the *girebbashi* became the share of us children. The taste of those *girebbashi*, a mixture of eggs and flour, still remains vivid on the tip of my tongue. I never tired of red-bean buns, cream cakes, muffins, soft rice-cakes, doughnuts, or white bread, but I did finally grow weary of *girebbashi*. As a result, once we children stopped showing any interest in *girebbashi*, they were given to the family puppy just before they went stale. For a while the puppy ate them eagerly, but soon it too refused to give the *girebbashi* a second glance. Even dogs end up learning. Life is like that, after all. Excess cloy the appetite.

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Once some friends came to play and noticed the *girebbashi* in the dog’s feeding bowl.

“Hey, what’s that?” they asked, wide-eyed.

“We call it *girebbashi*.” I replied calmly, never having thought of *girebbashi* as cake.

“Ain’t that sponge cake?”

“That ain’t sponge cake, that’s what we call *girebbashi*. They’re scraps from sponge cake.”

“But they’re scraps of sponge cake.”

A few days later, a rumor began to make the rounds at school, to the effect that in a certain person’s house even the dog ate sponge cake. Still now, if I meet primary school classmates, they talk about that. And still now, I insist that it was not sponge cake but what we called *girebbashi*. And still my friends remember it as sponge cake. My friends reminisce about how even the dog in the New York Bakery got to eat sponge cake. I start to feel as though it shows what a time of abundance has come to an end.

2

Once past thirty, it is natural that everyone starts to wonder just what kind of light has so far been left inside them, and they cannot help feeling curious about where the light that has entered them came from. If you want to know what kind of a person you are, you need to know what was the source of the light that at least once shone on you. At least once. Even a light that shone back then, like *girebbashi* did not receive a second glance from anyone. Even a light that cannot now be found anywhere in the world.

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To some extent it was glimmers of light that satisfied me most. The carbide lamps of the vendors who thronged Peace Market near the station at the approach of the autumn Chuseok festival with the orange glow from the 60-watt bulbs strung up along the street where every store was piled with goods; then as Christmas drew near, the sparkling colored lights flooding every shop window, or the sidelights and the red glimmer of the brakelights of the empty taxis drawn up in front of the station, or the equally red glow of the cigarettes being smoked by the taxidriviers as they waited, counting the minutes before the homebound train arrived. Those flickering things. When a few of those lights come on in my memory, they naturally produce a happy heart. Those lights that crowded the dark night-time streets in front of the station were heart-warming. Because they told us we were passing through the high season. The color television sets in the window of the Geumseong store turned toward the evening street, showing people queuing on the plaza in front of Seoul Station, or people in the Guro Industrial Park waving at homewardbound buses leaving nose-to-tail. Combination gift-sets piled up like mountains in front of stores, roughly wrapped in sheets of gaudy paper distributed free by confectionary companies and breweries in anticipation of peak sales, Gyeongju rice wine, for example, or Baekhwa Subok. Light bulbs shining on the plastic coverings of sample gift sets being scrutinized closely by flushed-faced homecomers who had left behind with their empty homes the weary expressions associated with life in large cities such as Seoul or Ulsan, Daejeon or Daegu. The haggard faces of the station employees who, for the special festive season traffic, had erected beside the entrance to the waiting room a temporary timetable made of planks that was bigger than a store's shopwindow. All those sights continue to shine in my heart. Still today, when I recall those times, from somewhere inside me light shines, flying lightly up.

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There are other memories. In the storage loft there were square chests made of cardboard designed to hold old clothes. There were two of them, and one contained the box of Christmas decorations. When Christmas approached, we would take that box of decorations out of the chest. It was full of expensive trinkets father had obtained from the American army's PX store. The colored balls were of real crystal glass, the gold and silver stars were quite exquisite. Once father had brought out the small fir tree that he usually cultivated on the second floor of our house, we children would gather round and, after first girding it with colored lights, we would hang up the decorations shaped like colored canes, red shoes, and glittering, varigated garlands. Once the Christmas tree was fully decorated, we would hang up the remaining garlands in the shop and suspend the Christmas balls. The garlands drooping near the stove used to swing on their own in the rising heat, reminding us of the episode when young Stephenson discovered the principle of the steam

engine. After sticking cotton wool bought at the pharmacist's along the windows to look like snow, hanging a "Merry Christmas" sign on the door, and a wreath of holly leaves made of cloth artfully adorned with paper and silverfoil, Christmas preparations were complete. The New York Bakery fully arrayed in its Christmas finery was like sponge cake emerging from the oven. When you opened the door and stepped inside, everything was sparkling so brightly that you were dazed. Mother and we children, the tables and the aquarium, the cakes on display, each and all were glowing. When Christmas Eve arrived and someone would come in to buy a cake every ten minutes, the glow was only natural. At other times, we used to sell three or four, at most five or six, in a whole day, so it was tremendous. Mother had prepared more than three hundred cakes, but she seemed not to want to give people the impression that she still had a lot left to sell. She would keep just a small number of display in the shop, and we would bring more down from upstairs as those were sold. As she shouted, "Bring down five of number 5 and three of number 4," mother's voice was brimming with strength. Once the peak period was past, money was bound to be tight, she just had to be strong.

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In the letter he had sent me, it looked as though father had been intending to write, "Surely, life must be something like that." I still do not know what difference there is between "be something like that" and "be like that." I do not know if I shall know when the time comes for me to write letters to my children to encourage them. Perhaps by that time I shall have understood why children grow up into adults, why all the lights in the world recede sparkling into the distance, why everything is only everlasting in memory. If later I have children; if those children become adults. By the time that short period of time has passed, I will probably have come to know the difference between "be something like that" and "be like that." So from now on, I will talk about what happened once the short-lived prime of the New York Bakery was over. About the process by which the light from the New York Bakery penetrated into my heart, as I moved from being a child to being a youth whose status as a writer had belatedly been revealed.

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"Now, which should we buy?"

As he spoke, father showed us a bakery showcase catalogue. The laminated pages of the catalogue were printed with photos of various sleek bakery showcases. Until then, mother had been using a showcase made of wood. Not only did the incandescent lights not make the contents look attractive, the sliding door had worn so that it emitted a screech every time it was opened or shut. There being no refrigerating system, on hot summer days mother had to keep the cakes in the refrigerator, while even the mice could easily force open the badly closing doors. It was so bad that any of the showcases in the catalogue looked good.

"This one's alright, that one's good"

Father probably already had his eye on the model he would buy after inquiring about the prices and the utilisation. But we children together scrutinized closely the newest showcases, gleaming with gold and silver light. The cases figuring in the catalogue were all really wonderful. Not only were they refrigerated, there was no longer any need to insert and pull out a plug that emitted sparks at the least error since you could simply press a switch to turn on a bright light, while the frame being made of metal there was no doubt but that the mice, accustomed as they were to the wooden showcase, would be reduced to drooling over their whiskers and staring helplessly, unless they embarked on a new round

of body-building. Father decided to buy a streamlined, slightly sloping display case for cakes and a dignified case for bread that gave the impression of being made of wood. At the same time, he decided to change the tables and chairs, exchanged the old hand-operated ice-shaver for a machine-driven one, and bought a machine for slicing bread. Those were the days when the Fifth Republic was on its last legs, and even in that small town society was in confusion, establishing a local government and so on.

So far as I know, the New York Bakery encountered opportunities for change on three occasions. The first came soon after Park Chung Hee died. From then on, even people who had previously thought of 'bread and cake' as only high-class stuff started to eat it as something ordinary. The generation that had considered frugality and savings as virtues passed away, the generation that considered consumption a virtue arrived, with new words such as "leisure-sports" and "my car." All the gleams of light now inside my heart come from that heyday of the New York Bakery. At New Year, we sold roll-cakes and cakes for presents; in February, chocolates for Valentine's Day; in March, packs of sweets for White Day; from June onward, shaved ice; at Chuseok in autumn once again roll-cakes and cakes for presents; at university entrance exam time, sticky rice-cake; at the winter solstice, sweet red-bean gruel; at Christmas, cakes. Mother never missed one of the special occasions.

The second opportunity came as the Fifth Republic was ending. The New York Bakery's share in peak business began to decline. Customers started to prefer bakeries with a more modern interior design, and look for new varieties of produce coming down from Seoul, such as baguettes, pizza, vegetable bread. Our baker spent hours pouring over recipes in "The Bakery Monthly" and learned from other bakers in the town or in Daegu, then produced a new menu with pizza, vegetable bread, chestnut bread, corn bread, etc. But he could never make proper baguettes. He followed the instructions in the recipe, but they lacked the baguette's characteristic crunchiness and tough consistency so in the end he gave up trying. Still, on the whole the New York Bakery was ready and able to meet the second opportunity sincerely.

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Only the New York Bakery was unable to rise to the second challenge as well as to the first. It was not because we could not produce baguettes, and not because special days disappeared. It was because mother, who had always been in charge, was diagnosed with uterine cancer and was admitted to hospital. I heard nothing from anyone in our family about the chances of the operation succeeding. I have no memory from those days of why that was. Did I erase the memory myself? Or did I reckon it was nothing serious enough to consign to memory? I assume that I simply went to and from between school and home. My older sister kept the shop, father had gone down to the hospital in Daegu where mother was waiting to be operated. On holidays I sometimes used to keep the shop in place of my sister. Since I did not always know the prices, I used to sell according to my fancy. Whenever I did not feel like selling something, I used to send the customer away, saying, 'Come back and buy when mother's here.' Yet I really had no idea whether mother would ever come back or not. Mother had always kept the New York Bakery on her own. I could not imagine what meaning the New York Bakery might have without her. Despite the new display cases and equipment, the New York Bakery grew dreary as though it was on the verge of collapse. Whenever I used to think I was running correctly down the very center, a hunch would tell me that between good and bad things I would fall on the bad side. Memory is really different from rushing on toward good things. Very different.

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So it will be best to talk about life using only memories. What I recall of what happened is the radio broadcast I heard in the taxi I took with my aunts on arriving at Daegu station. Men and women chattering on endlessly in a joking way, filling time in the afternoon, it was that kind of program. I also remember Daegu place names, such as Dongseong Street, Seomun Market. I think my aunts were talking about family affairs. I'm not sure. Perhaps they said nothing at all. I just kept listening to the crackling radio as I stared out at the unfamiliar Daegu city center. Even now, if I am in a taxi on a quiet afternoon with the radio pouring out a comic broadcast and passing through some unfamiliar neighborhood, that day comes to mind. I feel as though I am in a tunnel passing from this reality toward another reality. Reaching the hospital, I found mother lying in her bed with a pallid face. I drank the soda that my aunts gave me, I forget what kind it was, then left the sickroom and walked up and down in the corridor. The hospital corridors were painted beige, which looked nearly brown in shadowy parts. At the end of the corridor there was a wooden door leading out into the yard. The hospital had been built even longer ago than the New York Bakery. For a while I stood staring at the trees and various kinds of plants growing in the yard. I cannot remember at all whether I stood in the sunshine, whether a wind was blowing. All I recall is that I felt grateful for the fact that I was able to look at the trees and plants just as before. So mother came through a dangerous moment all alone. Just as she came through peak seasons such as Chuseok and Christmas.

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So it was that I was able to go on being the youngest son of the New York Bakery.

3

Until just a few years ago, I used to make my own shaved ice deserts. When it comes to bread, I can make do with what I buy in bakeries, but I absolutely refuse to buy shaved ice. Because the life of a dish of shaved ice lies in the red-bean topping, and nowadays there is not a single store where they make their own red-bean gruel. The most delicious shaved ice consists of delicately shaved ice topped with nothing but a layer of red-bean gruel. The first taste is that of red beans, the second the taste given by an ice-shaving machine with a blade that is capable of shaving ice so that it's just like snow. When summer came, I used to sell so many dishes of shaved ice in the shop. The record-breaking day came during the summer vacation of 1994. Which was the year when the fact that I had become a recognized poet and novelist was "belatedly" learned in my home town. That year the summer must have been exceptionally hot. Day by day the number of servings of shaved ice we sold went up until one day, when we added everything up, it turned out that we had sold 134 bowls. Learning that, I was so excited. I longed to go and boast of it to mother straight away, but that summer too, mother was in hospital, a kind of yearly event. I memorized the number, intending to boast of it when she came out. 134 bowls, a truly magnificent figure.

"My, you did sell a lot."

Mother tittered as she lay there, when I told her the figure on going to visit the hospital a few days later.

"Surely it must be the most we have ever sold in a single day?"

"I've sold more than that."

"How many bowls did you sell?"

“Back in the old days, I used to sell so many. With the shaved ice I sold during the summer I was able to send you all to school and buy your clothes as well, so just think how many I must have sold.”

I was sitting on the bed used by the caregiver and watching the falling drops of the intravenous drip.

“Mom, it’s time you gave up the shop.”

“You haven’t graduated yet; if I give up the shop, where will we find the tuition fees?”

“I can earn it by writing.”

“Why, do you think it’s such an easy thing to earn money? I earned the tuition for your brother and sister, so I’ll take care of yours too. Then you can earn your own living after that.”

Mother was laughing as she spoke. After the operation, mother would burst out laughing at the least excuse. Will mother be upset if I say that, among all that I received from her, the most outstanding thing was not my university tuition but her laughter. The result was that I was obliged to accept my tuition fees from mother until I graduated. After that, she really did stop giving me money. Once I had graduated, for one whole year I wrote a huge quantity, and the money I earned was less than the New York Bakery earned in just a few ordinary days, let alone at peak seasons. I was suddenly seized with dread.

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One last chance I am aware of befell the New York Bakery. Even when President Kim Yong-sam advocated globalization, there was no way of knowing what it was all about; it was only when branches of bakeries operated by big companies, such as Paris Croissant and Crown Bakery, appeared in our small town that we realized what it meant. Even I have to admit that compared to the produce sold by such stores, the things produced by the New York Bakery were poor stuff. One by one, the bakeries that had started business together with the New York Bakery all turned into branches of Paris Croissant and Crown Bakery, or switched to other lines of business. While the New York Bakery stayed put in the 1980s. It was no longer capable of any further change. The New York Bakery had earned the money needed while we three children were growing up, then the cost of mother’s operations, hospital stays, medicine, then it reached the end of that kind of life. Every few days, mother used to put the stale products she had failed to sell into black bags and threw them out with the trash. In the old days, she used to refuse to give bread to her youngest son, and would not even throw away the *girebbashi*, everything had to be eaten. Seeing her now, I felt terrible. But wasn’t life like that? Mother’s pride limited itself to ensuring that people would not notice that she was throwing away the bread and cakes she could not sell by wrapping them in tightly tied plastic bags. Only homeless cats would smell it out, tear the sacks open and rummage through them, and by the time the trash cart passed at dawn, packs of bread and cake would be littering the road in front of the store, so that nobody could fail to notice them.

Yet still mother never said that she was going to close the shop. She simply told me in conversational tones how many bowls of shaved ice she had sold in such a summer, how many cakes she had sold one Christmas season, how much worry she had from this or that baking assistant, things like that. But with the passage of time, even mother seemed to recognize that the New York Bakery she had opened had had its time. What did she feel like as she recognized that? I cannot begin to imagine it.

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The year I graduated from college, one day as I was desperately trying to earn some

money a phone call came from home. I learned that the New York Bakery had been sold. The person taking it over was going to turn it into a 24-hour rice-and-soup restaurant targeting the railway passengers. I said it was good news. I had not been there when the New York Bakery first opened; I was equally not able to witness the scene as its doors closed for the last time. I tried to imagine the New York Bakery transformed into a rice-and-soup restaurant. I could not really imagine it. At the thought that now there was no New York Bakery left in the world, I began to feel rather melancholy. But I did not take it too seriously. That was because at that moment I had plenty of my own problems to worry about. A little later, the family moved house from in front of the station to the outskirts of the town. When I go back home now, it feels like a place I never lived in. Nowadays, when I get off the train I take a taxi and head for the apartment complex newly built where rice fields used to spread before. I never once returned to the place previously occupied by the New York Bakery since it was turned into a 24-hour rice-and-soup restaurant.

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One day I was struck by the thought that all that remained for the rest of my life in this world was pain. Because for the rest of my life, the people I knew would die, the streets I knew would change, the things I treasured would vanish. I had never had such thoughts before, I was suddenly seized by a kind of fear. At the same time, I realized that I was increasingly often taking out the gleams of light that I treasured within me. Like a child constantly lifting the lid of a jar of sweets, I kept hastening back into the past, longing for those clear gleams of light. At the very heart of those gleams of light that gradually grow brighter in my memory, the New York Bakery still exists. I cannot begin to tell what a help it was that I had the New York Bakery from the time I was born, while I was growing up and becoming an adult. And now I seem to be living on the memories created by the New York Bakery. It was amazing to realize that something that no longer existed in this world was keeping me alive. Then I realized that all that I had left for the rest of my life in this world was not pain. I understood that I could long remain as a source of comfort for someone even after I no longer existed. I realized that in life time has no meaning, that visible things are not all there is, that things I believed had vanished from this world continued to exist unchanged inside me. Then I had a child. I became able to accept “sensibly” that my child would go on living in the world for a long time after I had disappeared.

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One year at Chuseok, or perhaps it was New Year, I was on my way back home after drinking a lot with old friends in my hometown. It was very late. Suddenly I recalled the 24-hour rice-and-soup restaurant. After hesitating for a while, I decided to go there. As you emerge from Gimcheon station, the New York Bakery used to lie on the left-hand side of the square. There was a glazed show-window to either side, and in the middle a glass door. To the right of the door, a cake made of plastic was always on display, while to the left lay the kitchen. In the afternoon, the sunlight came shining slantwise and the blind had to be lowered. When I was keeping the shop, around four o'clock I used to undo the cord and lower the green blind. If you pushed the door open and went in, to the left stood the display-case for cakes, installed in the late 1980s when it was the newest model; to the right was the open-style display case for bread. To one side was a freezer for icecream with a lid that opened upwards, while opposite the entrance was a fairly large display stand where larger items such as loaves of bread, rollcakes, chestnut bread, pizzas, as well as bags of sweets, were arranged. Making your way round that, you found tables 1 to 9. Tables 8 and 9 were behind the aquarium, out of sight when you first came in. On a shelf

high up on the wall directly opposite the entrance was placed a color television bought in the year when color broadcasts first began. Mother always sat to one side of table 1, that was piled with boxes for cakes and plastic wrappings; by day she faced the door, in the evenings she watched the television. Such was the image of the New York Bakery that had remained fixed for ever in my heart. Entering the 24-hour rice-and-soup restaurant, I sat more or less where in the old days table number 2 would have been and waited to be served. The television was still standing on the old shelf, the pattern on the floor was the same, as was the imitation wood showcase. Everywhere I looked, I could see my family. In that place I had been a little child, a primary-school kid, an anxiety-ridden high-school student, a self-assured rookie writer, and a university student setting new records for selling shaved ice. With that, I found it impossible to hold up my head and look around any longer. Soon the food was served and I began to eat, still keeping my head bowed. The soup was hot. I paid the bill, opened the door and went out. The street-lights in front of the station seemed to be shining globes.

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There is no need for a great number of lights as we live our lives. Just a few will do. That's what life's like, surely?