

“How is Your Summer?”

Korean short story by: 김애란

Joon called, asking to see me. It had been 2 years. I told him that I had something to do today. He asked, as if he were someone else, “What time?” I told him that I had to go to my hometown. I aimlessly fiddled with my phone before adding that it was for a friend’s funeral. “Ah...” He paused. “Then how about in the afternoon?”

I started digging through my drawers and ended up organizing my clothes. It was only June, but it was so humid outside. I dumped out the storage box that was above my desk. All the dust that had gathered since last year flew up in clusters. I took out all the clothes from my drawers too. I intended to put my winter clothes in the storage box and fill the drawers with my summer clothes. My clothes were all different sizes. It’s because my weight frequently yo-yos. The difference between when I was my skinniest and now is 20 kilos. About half a year ago, I quit the second job I ever had and rapidly gained weight. For awhile, I spent my days lying on the floor and staring at my laptop. I piled the snacks next to me and surfed the net or watched American TV shows. Joon must’ve heard the news about me from someone and called me. Else, there’d be no way he would call me during the day on a weekday and ask for a favor. Since I had been getting tired of heavy clothes, I excitedly rummaged through my summer clothes. I had bought a lot of clothes last year. By season, by trend, by mood. I had money to spare back then and had re-discovered the joys of dressing nicely. Despite knowing that buying new clothes led to meeting up with people, which led to drinking, then mistakes, and then regret. This pattern gave me a sense of relief that I was not straying too far from social propriety. I also liked how my body looked back then.

I was only heavier than now during my last year of high school. One day, while I was devouring a whole loaf of unsliced bread, my father suddenly shouted while watching TV.

“Stop eating fatty!”

Since we were a family of rare conversation, we all looked at him with bewildered expressions. My father was known to be a gentle and well-mannered person. Before and after that incident, I haven’t really had a conversation with him. So in my life, “stop eating fatty” became the only serious thing he has ever said to me. On the other hand, my mom was someone who, whatever I ate, cheered for me. A woman who even now brags to our relatives during the holidays that her daughter doesn’t even drink water when she wakes up and eats sticky rice cakes first. Whether I’m 48 kilos or 70 kilos, she is a mom who tells me that I look great the way I do now. I always had a calm attitude toward my parents’ reactions. Up until that point, I too had thought that it was just baby fat.

My summer clothes weren’t as pretty as I had imagined. Strange, since I had excitedly bought them as soon as I had laid eyes on them. Why is it that trends go out of fashion so quickly. While only a short period of time had passed, I felt that the crumpled heap of clothes were a reflection of my poor taste and felt depressed. I wondered at the feeling of pride I had last year as I went around in those clothes. Anyway, I had to find clothes to wear to the funeral. Debating between pants and a skirt, I picked a black A-line skirt that reached my knees. Fortunately, I found a blouse in the same color and thought that the outfit wasn’t bad for in-between the seasons and offering condolences. But I did have more than enough black clothes.

Joon was the first person who took me to a baseball game. The person who introduced me to what Hongdae's indie culture was and how the trendiness of the small theaters in Daehangno ("*college street*") put me in a great mood. He was the friendly, popular guy in any group. I've never seen anyone as ideal as Joon. He was a person that I wanted to respect, keep company, and if it was okay, sleep with. Someone who may engage in fickle sexual activities, but says that while others love freedom, he likes submission. That kind of someone that you just want to close your eyes and follow. At that time, I had a baseless prejudice against men. I thought there were only two types of men in the world: kind but boring men, and fun but bad men. Even though I later found out that the world wasn't flat like that. Even though I was late in realizing that it wasn't a kind or bad person I liked, but a man who understood the complexity and unevenness of human beings. At that time, I thought Joon was the only one of the opposite sex that could be both kind and fun. And because he was older, I thought guys my age were all idiots and took pride in being a female college student who was too mature for her age.

I met Joon at a welcoming party for freshmen. In the midst of too many people and the stuffy air, I was feeling flustered. Of course, the lush green campus and the ripe spring night was enough to make my heart flutter. Even now I believe that there is love potion mixed in phytoncide, the substance that trees release as a defense mechanism. Otherwise, all those young people wouldn't be all aglow at the same time and acting foolish at the start of the new semester. The energy that young people exuded during mating season was coy and awkward and at the same time, explicit and fresh. I liked that I was greeting my 20's in a new city. I found people's philosophies, the look in their eyes, the way they talked, and even their countenance appealing. But at that age, as if it was naturally so, I was immersed in a kind of depression that I enjoyed, and even wished for someone to take notice of it. This was the reason why on the day of the welcoming party, I slipped away from the crowd that was gathered on the lawn. By not being there, I wanted to let people know that I was there. Having left the gathering, instead of going home, I lingered on the Humanities floor. Even though I was annoyed at the feeling of self-indulgence, I wanted someone to find me as if they had found Waldo and enthusiastically draw a circle on my forehead. But there, in the dark entrance to the Humanities department, was Joon. A long, faint silhouette at the end of the curved corridor. I wasn't sure if he was there to go to the restroom or check his locker. The important thing was that Joon recognized me.

"You're Miyoung, right? Seo Miyoung?"

"What? Yes."

I was shocked that Joon knew my name. At the same time, I began to feel uneasy. I wondered if I stood out because I was fat or because during the game of truth earlier, I had said a really messy joke that failed big time.

"I heard that you're from Unsan. I remembered because that's my father's hometown, too."

"Ah, I see."

"Why are you alone?"

"Ah, I, just, I was thinking about something."

I don't know if it was because of my sorry excuse or because I was blinking excessively, but Joon chuckled softly.

"I looked for you because you were gone. See you later."

After stooping slightly to nod, I walked in the opposite direction he was going. I didn't have a specific destination, but felt the need to do that. After walking a few steps towards the party, Joon turned around and said,

"Hey kid, hold your head up when you walk."