
Opening Extract from...

Please Look After Mother

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Nobody Knows

IT'S BEEN ONE WEEK SINCE Mother went missing.

The family is gathered at your eldest brother Hyong-chol's house, bouncing ideas off each other. You decide to make flyers and hand them out where Mother was last seen. The first thing to do, everyone agrees, is to draft a flyer. Of course, a flyer is an old-fashioned response to a crisis like this. But there are few things a missing person's family can do, and the missing person is none other than your mother. All you can do is file a missing-person report, search the area, ask passers-by if they have seen anyone who looks like her. Your younger brother, who owns an online clothing store, says he posted something about your mother's disappearance, describing where she

went missing; he uploaded her picture and asked people to contact the family if they'd seen her. You want to go and look for her in places where you think she might be, but you know how she is: she can't go anywhere by herself in this city. Hyong-chol designates you to write up the flyer, since you write for a living. You blush, as if you were caught doing something you shouldn't. You aren't sure how helpful your words will be in finding Mother.

When you write 24 July 1938 as Mother's birth date, your father corrects you, saying that she was born in 1936. Official records show that she was born in 1938, but apparently she was born in 1936. This is the first time you've heard this. Your father says everyone did that, back in the day. Because many children didn't survive their first three months, people raised them for a few years before making it official. When you're about to rewrite 38 as 36, Hyong-chol says you have to write 1938, because that's the official date. You don't think you need to be so precise when you're only making homemade flyers and it isn't like you're at a government office. But you obediently leave 38, wondering if 24 July is even Mother's real birthday.

A few years ago, your mother said, 'We don't have to celebrate my birthday separately.' Father's birthday is one month before Mother's. You and your siblings always went to your parents' house in Chongup for birthdays and other celebrations. All together, there were twenty-

two people in the immediate family. Mother liked it when all of her children and grandchildren gathered and bustled about the house. A few days before everyone came down, she would make fresh kimchi, go to the market to buy beef, and stock up on extra toothpaste and toothbrushes. She pressed sesame oil and roasted and ground sesame and perilla seeds, so she could present her children with a jar of each as they left. As she waited for the family to arrive, your mother would be visibly animated, her words and her gestures revealing her pride when she talked to neighbours or acquaintances. In the shed, Mother kept glass bottles of every size filled with plum or wild-strawberry juice, which she made seasonally. Mother's jars were filled to the brim with tiny fermented fish or anchovy paste or fermented clams that she was planning to send to the family in the city. When she heard that onions were good for one's health, she made onion juice, and before winter came, she made pumpkin juice infused with liquorice. Your mother's house was like a factory; she prepared sauces and fermented bean paste and hulled rice, producing things for the family year round. At some point, the children's trips to Chongup became less frequent, and Mother and Father started to come to Seoul more often. And then you began to celebrate each of their birthdays by going out for dinner. That was easier. Then Mother even suggested, 'Let's celebrate my birthday on your father's.' She said it would be a burden to celebrate their birthdays separately, since both happen during the hot summer, when there

are also two ancestral rites only two days apart. At first the family refused to do that, even when Mother insisted on it, and if she baulked at coming to the city, a few of you went home to celebrate with her. Then you all started to give Mother her birthday gift on Father's birthday. Eventually, quietly, Mother's actual birthday was bypassed. Mother, who liked to buy socks for everyone in the family, had in her dresser a growing collection of socks that her children didn't take.

NAME: Park So-nyo
DATE OF BIRTH: 24 July 1938 (69 years old)
APPEARANCE: Short, salt-and-pepper permed hair, prominent cheekbones, last seen wearing a sky-blue shirt, a white jacket and a beige pleated skirt.
LAST SEEN: Seoul Station subway

Nobody can decide which picture of Mother you should use. Everyone agrees it should be the most recent picture, but nobody has a recent picture of her. You remember that at some point Mother started to hate getting her picture taken. She would sneak away even for family portraits. The most recent photograph of Mother is a family picture taken at Father's seventieth-birthday party. Mother looked nice in a pale-blue *hanbok*, with her hair done at a salon, and she was even wearing red lipstick. Your younger brother thinks your mother looks so different in this picture from the way she did right before she went missing. He doesn't think people would identify her

as the same person, even if her image is isolated and enlarged. He reports that when he posted this picture of her, people responded by saying, 'Your mother is pretty, and she doesn't seem like the kind of person who would get lost.' You all decide to see if anyone has another picture of Mother. Hyong-chol tells you to write something more on the flyer. When you stare at him, he tells you to think of better sentences, to tug on the reader's heartstrings. Words that would tug on the reader's heartstrings? When you write, *Please help us find our mother*, he says it's too plain. When you write, *Our mother is missing*, he says that *mother* is too formal, and tells you to write *mum. When you write, Our mum is missing*, he decides it's too childish. When you write, *Please contact us if you see this person*, he barks, 'What kind of writer are you?' You can't think of a single sentence that would satisfy Hyong-chol.

Your second-eldest brother says, 'You'll tug on people's heartstrings if you write that there will be a reward.'

When you write, *We will reward you generously*, your sister-in-law says you can't write like that: people take notice only if you write a specific amount.

'So how much should I say?'

'One million won?'

'That's not enough.'

'Three million won?'

'I think that's too little, too.'

'Then five million won.'

Nobody complains about five million won. You write,

We will reward you with five million won, and put in a full stop. Your second-eldest brother says you should write it as *Reward: 5 million won*. Your younger brother tells you to put *5 million won* in a bigger font. Everyone agrees to email you a better picture of Mother if they find something. You're in charge of adding more to the flyer and making copies, and your younger brother volunteers to pick them up and distribute them to everyone in the family. When you suggest, 'We can hire someone to give out flyers,' Hyong-chol says, 'We're the ones who need to do that. We'll give them out on our own if we have some free time during the week, and all together over the weekend.'

You grumble, 'How will we ever find Mother at that rate?'

'We're already doing everything we can,' Hyong-chol retorts.

'What do you mean, we're doing everything we can?'

'We put ads in the newspaper.'

'So doing everything we can is buying ad space?'

'Then what do you want to do? Should we all quit work tomorrow and just roam around the city? If we could find Mother like that, I'd do it.'

You stop arguing with Hyong-chol, because you realise that you're pushing him to take care of everything, as you always do. Leaving Father at Hyong-chol's house, you all head home. If you don't leave then, you will continue to argue. You've been doing that for the past week. You'd meet to discuss how to find Mother, and one of you

would unexpectedly dig up the different ways someone else had wronged her in the past. The things that had been suppressed, that had been carefully avoided moment by moment, became bloated, and finally you all yelled and smoked and banged out the door in a rage.

When you first heard Mother had gone missing, you angrily asked why nobody from your large family went to pick her and Father up at Seoul Station.

'And where were you?'

Me? You clammed up. You didn't find out about Mother's disappearance until she'd been gone four days. You all blamed each other for Mother going missing, and you all felt wounded.

Leaving Hyong-chol's house, you take the underground home but get off at Seoul Station, which is where Mother vanished. So many people go by, brushing your shoulders, as you make your way to the spot where Mother was last seen. You look down at your watch. Three o'clock. The same time Mother was left behind. People shove past you as you stand on the platform where Mother was wrenched from Father's grasp. Not a single person apologises to you. People would have pushed by like that as your mother stood there, not knowing what to do.

How far back does one's memory of someone go? Your memory of Mother?

Since you heard about Mother's disappearance, you haven't been able to focus on a single thought, besieged by long-forgotten memories unexpectedly popping up.

And the regret that always trailed each memory. Years ago, a few days before you left your hometown for the big city, Mother took you to a clothing shop at the market. You chose a plain dress, but she picked one with frills on the straps and hem. 'What about this one?'

'No,' you said, pushing it away.

'Why not? Try it on.' Mother, young back then, opened her eyes wide, uncomprehending. The frilly dress was worlds away from the dirty towel that was always wrapped around Mother's head, which, like other farming women, she wore to soak up the sweat on her brow as she worked.

'It's childish.'

'Is it?' Mother said, but she held the dress up and kept examining it, as if she didn't want to walk away. 'I would try it on if I were you.'

Feeling bad that you'd called it childish, you said, 'This isn't even your style.'

Mother said, 'No, I like these kinds of clothes, it's just that I've never been able to wear them.'

I should have tried on that dress. You bend your legs and squat on the spot where Mother might have done the same. A few days after you insisted on buying the plain dress, you arrived at this very station with Mother. Holding your hand tightly, she strode through the sea of people in a way that would intimidate even the authoritative buildings looking on from above, and headed across the square to wait for Hyong-chol under the clock tower. How could someone like that be missing? As the headlights of the train enter the station, people rush forward,

glancing at you sitting on the ground, perhaps irritated that you're in the way.

As your mother's hand got pulled away from Father's, you were in China. You were with your fellow writers at the Beijing Book Fair. You were flipping through a Chinese translation of your book at a booth when your mother got lost in Seoul Station.

'Father, why didn't you take a cab instead? This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't taken the underground!'

Father said he was thinking, Why take a taxi when the train station is connected to the subway station? There are moments one revisits after something happens, especially after something bad happens. Moments in which one thinks, I shouldn't have done that. When Father told your siblings that he and Mother could get to Hyongchol's house by themselves, why did your siblings let them do that, unlike all the other times? When your parents came to visit, someone always went to Seoul Station or to the Express Bus Terminal to pick them up. What made Father, who always rode in a family member's car or a taxi when he came to the city, decide to take the underground on that particular day? Mother and Father rushed towards the train that had just arrived. Father got on, and when he looked behind him, Mother wasn't there. Of all days, it was a busy Saturday afternoon. Mother was pulled away from Father in the crowd, and the train left as she tried to get her bearings. Father was

holding Mother's bag. So, when Mother was left alone in the station with nothing, you were leaving the book fair, heading towards Tiananmen Square. It was your third time in Beijing, but you hadn't yet set foot in Tiananmen Square, had only gazed at it from inside a bus or a car. The student who was guiding your group offered to take you there before going to dinner, and your group decided it was a good idea. What would your mother have been doing by herself in Seoul Station as you got out of the cab in front of the Forbidden City? Your group walked into the Forbidden City but came right back out. That landmark was only partially open, because it was under construction, and it was almost closing time. The entire city of Beijing was under construction, to prepare for the Olympic Games the following year. You remembered the scene in *The Last Emperor* where the elderly Puyi returns to the Forbidden City, his childhood home, and shows a young tourist a box he had hidden in the throne. When he opens the lid of the box, his pet cricket from his youth is inside, still alive. When you were about to head over to Tiananmen Square, was your mother standing in the middle of the crowd, lost, being jostled? Was she waiting for someone to come and get her? The road between the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square was under construction, too. You could see the square, but you could get only there through a convoluted maze. As you watched the kites floating in the sky in Tiananmen Square, your mother might have collapsed in the passageway in despair, calling

out your name. As you watched the steel gates of Tiananmen Square open and a squadron of police march forth, legs raised high, to lower the red national flag with five stars, your mother might have been wandering through the maze inside Seoul Station. You know this to be true, because that's what the people who were in the station at that time told you. They said they saw an old woman walking very slowly, sometimes sitting on the floor or standing vacantly by the escalators. Some saw an old woman sitting in the station for a long time, then getting on an arriving train. A few hours after your mother disappeared, you and your group took a taxi through the night-time city to bright, bustling Snack Street and, huddled under red lights, tasted 56-proof Chinese liquor and ate piping-hot crab sautéed in chilli oil.

Father got off at the next stop and went back to Seoul Station, but Mother wasn't there any more.

'How could she get so lost just because she didn't get on the same car? There are signs all over the place. Mother knows how to make a simple phone call. She could have called from a phone booth.' Your sister-in-law insisted that something had to have happened to your mother, that it didn't make sense that she couldn't find her own son's house just because she failed to get on the same train as Father. Something had happened to Mother. That was the view of someone who wanted to think of Mother as the old mother.

When you said, 'Mother can get lost, you know,' your sister-in-law widened her eyes in surprise. 'You know how Mother is these days,' you explained, and your sister-in-law made a face, as if she had no idea what you were talking about. But your family knew what Mother was like these days. And knew that you might not be able to find her.

When was it you realised that Mother didn't know how to read?

You wrote your first letter when you jotted down what Mother dictated to send to Hyong-chol, soon after he moved to the city. Hyong-chol graduated from high school in the small village you were all born in, studied at home for the civil-service exam for a year, and went to the city for his first assignment. It was the first parting between Mother and one of her children. Back then, your family didn't have a phone, and the only way to communicate was through letters. Hyong-chol sent her letters written in large type. Your mother always intuitively knew when Hyong-chol's letters would arrive. The postman came around eleven in the morning with a large bag hanging from his bicycle. On the days when Hyong-chol's letters arrived, Mother would come in from the fields, or from the stream where she would be doing the laundry, to receive the letter personally from the postman.

Then she waited for you to come home from school, led you to the back porch and took out Hyong-chol's letter. 'Read it out loud,' she would tell you.

Hyong-chol's letters always started with *Dearest Mother*. As if he were following a textbook on how to write letters, Hyong-chol asked after the family and said he was doing well. He wrote that he took his laundry to Father's cousin's wife once a week, and that she washed it for him, as Mother had asked her to do. He reported that he was eating well, that he had found a place to sleep as he had started staying overnight at work, and asked her not to worry about him. Hyong-chol also wrote that he felt he could do anything in the city, and that there were many things he wanted to do. He even revealed his ambition to become a success and give Mother a better life. Twenty-year-old Hyong-chol gallantly added, *So, Mother, do not worry about me, and please take care of your health*. When you peeped over the letter at Mother, you would see her staring at the taro stalks in the back yard, or at the ledge of tall clay jars filled with sauces. Your mother's ears would be cocked like a rabbit's, trying not to miss a single word. After you finished reading the letter, your mother instructed you to write down what she would tell you. Mother's first words were 'Dear Hyong-chol'. You wrote down, *Dear Hyong-chol*. Mother didn't tell you to put a full stop after it, but you did. When she said, 'Hyong-chol!' you wrote down, *Hyong-chol!* When Mother paused after calling his name, as if she'd forgotten what she wanted to say, you tucked strands

of your bob behind your ear and waited attentively for your mother to continue, ballpoint pen in hand, staring down at the stationery. When she said, 'The weather's turned cold,' you wrote, *The weather has turned cold*. Mother always followed 'Dear Hyong-chol' with something about the weather: 'There are flowers now that it's spring.' 'It's summer, so the paddy bed is starting to dry and crack.' 'It's harvest season, and there are beans overflowing on the paddy banks.' Mother spoke in your regional dialect unless it was to dictate a letter to Hyong-chol. 'Don't worry about anything at home, and please take care of yourself. That is the only thing your mother wishes from you.' Mother's letters always swelled with a current of emotion: 'I am sorry that I can't be of any help to you.' As you carefully wrote down Mother's words, she would shed a fat tear. The last words from your mother were always the same: 'Make sure you eat all your meals. Mother.'

As the third of five children, you witnessed Mother's sorrow and pain and worry when each of your older brothers left home. Every morning at dawn after Hyong-chol left, Mother would clean the surface of the glazed clay sauce jars on the ledge in the back yard. Because the well was in the front yard, it was cumbersome to bring water to the back, but she washed each and every jar. She took off all the lids and wiped them clean, inside and out, until they shone. Your mother sang quietly. 'If there were no sea between you

and me there wouldn't be this painful goodbye . . .' Her hands busily dipping the rag in cold water and lifting it out and wringing it and rubbing the jars, Mother sang, 'I hope you won't leave me one day.' If you called to her at that moment, she would turn around with tears welling in her big guileless eyes.

Mother's love for Hyong-chol was such that she used to make a bowl of ramen only for him, when he came home after remaining at school till late at night to study. Later, when you brought that up sometimes, your boyfriend, Yu-bin, would reply, 'It's just ramen – what's the big deal?'

'What do you mean, what's the big deal? Ramen was the best thing back then! It was something you ate in secret so you wouldn't have to share it!' Even though you explained its significance, he, a city boy, seemed to think it was nothing.

When this new delicacy called ramen entered your lives, it overwhelmed every dish Mother had ever made. Mother would buy ramen and hide it in an empty jar in the row of clay jars, wanting to save it for Hyong-chol. But even late at night, the smell of boiling ramen would nudge you and your siblings awake. When Mother said, sternly, 'You all go back to bed,' you would all look at Hyong-chol, who was about to eat. Feeling sorry, he would offer each of you a mouthful. Mother would remark, 'How is it that you all come so quickly when it has to do with food?' and fill the pot with water, make another ramen, and divide it among you and your siblings.

You would be so pleased, each holding a bowl filled with more soup than noodles.

After Hyong-chol had left for the city, when Mother reached the clay jar she used to hide the ramen in she would call out, 'Hyong-chol!' and sink down, her legs giving way. You would slip the rag from Mother's grasp, lift her arm up, and drape it around your shoulder. Your mother would break out in sobs, unable to control her overflowing feelings for her firstborn.

When Mother sank into sorrow after your brothers left, the only things you could do for her were to read your brothers' letters out loud, and to slip her responses into the postbox on the way to school. Even then, you had no idea that she had never once set foot in the world of letters. Why did it never occur to you that Mother didn't know how to read or write, even when she relied on you as a child, even after you read her the letters and wrote replies for her? You took her request as just another chore, similar to heading out to the garden to pick some mallow or going to buy some paraffin. Mother must not have given that task to anyone else after you left home, because you never received a letter from her. Was it because you didn't write to her? It was probably because of the phone. Around the time you left for the city, a public phone was installed in the village headman's house. It was the first phone in your birthplace, a small farming community where, once in a while, a train would clatter along tracks that stretched between the village and the vast fields. Every morning, the villagers heard the

headman testing the mike then announcing that so and so should come over to answer a call from Seoul. Your brothers started to call the public phone. After the phone was installed, people who had family in other cities paid attention to the microphone, even from paddies or fields, wondering who was being sought.

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Either a mother and daughter know each other very well, or they are strangers.

Until last autumn, you thought you knew your mother well – what she liked, what you had to do to appease her when she was angry, what she wanted to hear. If someone asked you what Mother was doing, you could answer in ten seconds: she's probably drying ferns; since it's Sunday, she must be at church. But last autumn, your belief that you knew her was shattered. You went for a visit without announcing it beforehand, and you discovered that you had become a guest. Mother was continually embarrassed about the messy yard or the dirty blankets. At one point, she grabbed a towel from the floor and hung it up, and when food dropped on the table, she picked it up quickly. She took a look at what she had in the fridge, and even though you tried to stop her, she went to the market. If you are with family, you needn't feel embarrassed about leaving the table uncleared after a meal and going to do something else. You realised you'd become a stranger as

you watched Mother try to conceal her messy everyday life.

Maybe you'd become a guest even before then, when you moved to the city. After you left home, your mother never scolded you. Before, Mother would reprimand you harshly if you did something even remotely wrong. From when you were young, Mother always addressed you as 'you, girl'. Usually she said that to you and your sister when she wanted to differentiate between her daughters and sons, but your mother also called you 'you, girl' when she demanded that you correct your habits, disapproving of your way of eating fruit, your walk, your clothes and your style of speech. But sometimes she would become worried and look closely into your face. She studied you with a concerned expression when she needed your help to pull flat the corners of starched blanket covers, or when she had you put kindling in the old-fashioned kitchen furnace to cook rice. One cold winter day, you and your mother were at the well, cleaning the skate that would be used for the ancestral rites at New Year's, when she said, 'You have to work hard in school so that you can move into a better world.' Did you understand her words then? When Mother scolded you freely, you more frequently called her Mother. The word 'mother' is familiar and it hides a plea: *Please look after me. Please stop yelling at me and stroke my head; please be on my side, whether I'm right or wrong*. You never stopped calling her Mother. Even now, when Mother's missing. When you call out

'Mother' you want to believe that she's healthy. That Mother is strong. That Mother isn't fazed by anything. That Mother is the person you want to call whenever you despair about something in this city.

Last autumn, you didn't tell her that you were coming down, but it wasn't to free your mother from preparing for your arrival. You were in Pohang at the time. Your parents' house was far from Pohang, where you arrived on an early-morning flight. Even when you got up at dawn and washed your hair and left for the airport, you didn't know that you were going to go see Mother in Chongup. It was farther and more difficult to go to Chongup from Pohang than from Seoul. It wasn't something you'd expected to do.

When you got to your parents' house, the gate was open. The front door was open, too. You had a lunch date with Yu-bin back in the city the next day, so you were going to return home on the night train. Even though you were born there, the village had become an unfamiliar place. The only things left from your childhood were the three nettle trees, now mature, near the stream. When you went to your parents' house, you took the small path towards the nettle-lined stream instead of the big road. If you kept going that way, it would lead you straight to the back gate of your childhood home. A long time ago, there was a communal well right outside the back gate. The well was filled in when modern plumbing was installed in every house, but you stood on that spot before

entering the house. You tapped the sturdy cement with your foot precisely where that abundant well used to be. You were overwhelmed with nostalgia. What would the well be doing in the darkness under the street, the well that had supplied water to all the people in the alley and still sloshed about? You weren't there when the well was filled in. One day you went back for a visit and the well was gone, just a cement road where it had been. Probably because you didn't see the well being filled with your own eyes, you couldn't stop imagining that the well was still there, brimming with water, under the cement.

You stood above the well for a while, then went through the gate, calling, 'Mother!' But she didn't answer. The setting autumn sunlight filled the yard of the house, which faced west. You went into the house to look for her, but she wasn't in the living room or in the bedroom. The house was a mess. A water bottle stood open on the table, and a cup was perched on the edge of the sink. A basket of rags was overturned on the floor mat in the living room, and on the sofa was a dirty shirt with its sleeves flung apart, as if Father had just taken it off. The late-afternoon sun was illuminating the empty space. 'Mother!' Even though you knew nobody was there, you called one more time, 'Mother!' You walked out the front door and, in the side yard, discovered Mother lying on the wooden platform in the doorless shed. 'Mother!' you called, but there was no reply. You put on your shoes and walked towards the shed. From there you could look over the yard. A long time ago, Mother had brewed malt in

the shed. It was a useful space, especially after it was expanded into the adjacent pigsty. She piled old, unused kitchen supplies on the shelves she had mounted on a wall, and underneath there were glass jars of things she had pickled and preserved. It was Mother who had moved the wooden platform into the shed. After the old house was torn down and a Western-style house was built, she would sit on the platform to do kitchen work that she couldn't easily do in the modern kitchen inside. She would grind red peppers in the mortar to make kimchi, sift through beanstalks to find beans and shuck them, make red-pepper paste, salt cabbage for winter kimchi, or dry fermented soybean cakes.

The kennel next to the shed was vacant, the dog chain lying on the ground. You realised that you hadn't heard the dog when you walked into the house. Looking around for him, you approached Mother, but she didn't move. She must have been cutting courgettes to dry in the sun. A chopping board, a knife and courgettes were pushed to the side, and small slices of courgettes were cradled in a worn bamboo basket. At first you wondered, was Mother sleeping? Recalling that she wasn't one to take naps, you peered into her face. Mother had a hand clutching her head, and she was struggling with all her might. Her lips were parted, and she was frowning so intently that her face was gnarled with deep wrinkles.

'Mother!'

She didn't open her eyes.

'Mother! Mother!'