

# MRS. SHIM

I am sharpening a knife. When I slide it into my electric sharpener and press the button, water flows from a tray, soaking the dull blade. The machine runs. Sparks fly off like flakes of dandruff. The honed edge, a sharp steel blue, seems to thrash under the fluorescent lights like a silver cutlassfish.

Flesh is tougher than a knife. Even a chef's knife used to slice into the tenderest of tenderloins will dull after a few days, causing a stinging pain in the wielder's wrist. The edged metal speaks to me. *I want to rest*, it says. But we still have a long way to go. The carving knife I'm whetting belonged to Mr. Lim of Majang-dong, who had used it to slice open the bellies of livestock for thirty-two years. It was two-thirds of a finger long and, at a glance, could look like an awl. He hadn't gotten rid of it, this knife that had stabbed him eight times in the upper leg, severed a main artery and left a deep scar on the inside of his thigh that looked like a giant snake had raked over his skin. Like a man who valued honor above all and had boldly set off down the path of revenge, every day at dawn Mr. Lim honed that worn carving knife with a look of sheer determination. Only after

the blade was so dull it could have been one of the blades in a shaving razor would he toss the knife into the recycling bin. Until then, the carving knife would never escape this rank, gamy hell.

With the knife fully sharpened, I waited for the butcher shop's owner to clock in. But by the time the mart opened and customers clutching leaflets and pushing carts were milling around inside, she still hadn't shown up. The day before, she'd sold a necklace containing more than seventy-five grams of pure gold to the jeweler on the second floor. It was obvious where she was headed to—the Cuckoo House. I sometimes got phone calls asking me to bring some seed money over there to get a game going, which was how I knew about the gambling den. The Cuckoo House always smelled of cigarette smoke and the sour tang of tangsuyuk. There, the owner would chew on pieces of fried pork that had gone cold over games of hwatu. So many thousand won bills stuck to the sweaty backs of her thighs. "Eunok, didn't you hear? The butcher shop unni got hauled out in handcuffs yesterday." This was coming from the bakery owner who sometimes dropped by the Cuckoo House with the butcher shop owner. "She was finally on a winning streak when I guess the police stormed in. I heard she has to clear out the shop today. What'll you do now?"

The butcher shop owner often pretended she'd given in to her husband's pestering and quit gambling, but as soon as he lowered his guard, she was back to messaging the bakery owner, and the two of them would disappear somewhere together. She'd always return smelling faintly of cigarette smoke and tangsuyuk. It seemed like the bakery owner had made it out of yesterday's mess in one piece. I, on the other hand, wasn't as lucky.

"I don't know. What *will* I do now?"

The shop shutting down meant I was now out of a job.

I took off my apron, chained up the handles on the deep freezer

doors, and returned the keys. I wrapped the three knives I had brought with me to the job nice and tight in newspaper and tucked them into a nylon shopping bag. If I had to find a silver lining in all this, it would be that yesterday had been payday. I opened the cash drawer and took out enough for that day's transportation. I hated the thought of losing even a single cent. I wrote in a note to the owner:

*This is Shim Eunok,  
I'm taking out 2,000 won for today's transportation  
costs. I hope you get out soon so we can meet up around  
the Lunar New Year.*

\* \* \*

I am Shim Eunok. An ajumma who turned fifty-one this year. A widow. Unemployed. And a mother.

I have a son, my dearest Jinseob, who's getting ready to return to university now that he's finished his military service, and a daughter, Jina, who gets good grades and is solid as a stone. It's been five years since my husband took his own life. He'd been suffering from diabetes since he was thirty-four. Still, he would rather die than eat brown rice. He started out on an oral medication but was taking high-dose insulin shots around the end of his life at age fifty-three. As his illness worsened, he had to have his pinkie toes amputated one after the other, and he lost his eyesight to macular degeneration. Surprisingly, he managed to hide the fact that he'd gone blind for nearly a year. It couldn't have been easy to go on living in the world off memory alone, but he spoke and acted no differently than he had when he still had his vision. Then one day he suddenly got in the car and drove off the main road, slamming into a new pub and killing himself in the crash. There was no way to know for sure that he'd gotten behind the wheel with the intention of ending his life. But

the police ruled his death a suicide, meaning our family couldn't collect a cent of insurance money and had to sell off our own butcher shop to pay the pub for damages.

My son was in middle school when my husband died. As soon as he started university, he left it for the military, and from then on Jina started studying like crazy. There was no other word to describe the intensity with which she threw herself into her studies. She spent all day solving problems, comparing answers, erasing, and repeating. Her little mouth was constantly moving as she memorized English words, and she converted the lyrics of a song called "100 Great Figures Who Brought Light to Korea" into timelines that she carved into her brain. I found work as a planner at the insurance company that hadn't done a thing to help our family, but without anyone to dependably sell to, even that didn't improve our situation. After rolling around from place to place like a dry little barleycorn, I finally found work at the butcher's corner in the mart.

I folded the two thousand won nice and neat and tucked it into my wallet. Seeing as I was now unemployed, I decided to walk. Shielding my eyes from the scorching sunlight with my hands, I passed the bus stop. I picked up a newsletter full of classified job ads. The trash collector must've already passed through, as there was only one copy of the newsletter left. Sometimes I wondered if the trash collectors and newsletter distributors had some sort of agreement going. To leave behind at least one so that jobless folks like me could find it, and so that we could all continue to coexist without ever seeing each other's faces.

I didn't feel like heading home. I was too scared to face the bills stuffing the mailbox full. I chased off a dozing pigeon and sat down on a bench, brought the newsletter up to my face and pushed my glasses up to read. The "Help Wanted" section was jam-packed with listings. Jobs waiting tables, prepping side dishes, *looking for some-*

*one as dependable as an older brother to help out*—Bora, recruitment for loan workers, mass recruitment for telemarketers Well, when it came to waiting tables, the owners not only preferred Korean Chinese servers who would work for cheap, but also rarely wanted workers older than themselves. As for the job cooking side dishes, I considered applying, but the location was too far away. I didn't have the heart to give the Bora woman a call and ask whether she could use an older sister instead. And I had no idea what loan work entailed, but I noted the age limit for that and the telemarketing job, which asked for applicants aged fifty or younger.

Seeking housewives 40 and older to work,  
3 mil per month guaranteed, 500%  
confidentiality bonus, Smile.

I was suspicious, having never heard of a place that would pay women over forty such a large salary, but it was the name of the company listed at the end that drew my attention. *Smile*. It was the nickname Mr. Lim of Majang-dong had given me when I was first learning to handle knives. When I made a mistake, when I sliced my hand, when I dismantled a six-hundred-kilogram cow by myself—I smiled through it all. In general, I was the kind of person who smiled when I ought to have cried.

I took out my cell phone. My bill was overdue, so I couldn't use the phone as much more than a watch. It was a quarter to noon—only a few minutes until lunch. I counted the coins in my pocket and found a payphone. Slowly, I dialed the eight digits of the number listed in the ad and waited. After five rings, I was about to hang up, figuring no one would answer, when someone finally picked up.

“Hello, you've reached Smile.”

It was the cheery voice of a young man.

“I’m calling about your Help Wanted ad. Is there anything I need to prepare to apply?”

I could faintly hear the young man shouting to someone, the sound muffled by what must have been his hand over the receiver. “Boss, did we take out an ad? Should I just tell this person to come on down?”

Then he was back. “No need to prepare anything. Just come by. If you head towards the police station near the intersection with all the ginkgo trees, you’ll see a gray five-story building. We’re on the third floor. Room 301.”

Before I could respond, he hung up. I’d heard greetings being exchanged in the background before the line went dead. The intersection with all the ginkgo trees—that was a twenty-minute walk from my house at my pace and the perfect distance to consider the trek as exercise. Not knowing whether my ratty clothes would cut it for an interview, I stopped to look in the display window of a women’s apparel store. My reflection in the glass showed me to be a textbook example of a country woman who’d just ventured up to Seoul from the boondocks. My green blouse with its worn seams, my lightweight “refrigerator” pants. My nylon shopping bag with the mart’s name crudely printed on the front. I was none too pleased to see that my hair, which I’d just had permed last week, was too curly. I smoothed down the especially stubborn coils on the crown of my head and then went into the nearest stationery shop. Even though the man on the phone had said to just come by it wasn’t good manners to show up with nothing, not even a résumé, in hand. I bought a template and an envelope for three hundred won, borrowed a pen, and sat outside the shop under one of the outdoor parasols and wrote out my résumé by hand.

All I had for the Educational Background section was: Graduated from Yebong Middle School.

And for Work Experience: Ran the Saeng Saeng Butcher Shop, 2002–2013.

I considered adding some of my part-time jobs, but I wasn't sure whether to count how I'd floated from odd job to odd job like duckweed in a pond as work experience. In the end, my résumé came out to two lines. I thought about filling in the empty space with some of the brush pen drawings of orchids and bamboo that I used to do for fun in my school days, but I stopped myself, afraid that such doodles might be mistaken for a sign of dementia.

I bought a castella and some milk at the supermarket and, once I'd finished eating, slowly began my walk. With my hunger satiated, a sense of confidence I had never felt before had room to grow inside me. What work could possibly be harder than slicing open a huge animal's stomach? I tucked in my chin, determined. With every step I took, I could hear the knives in my shopping bag clanging against each other. I'd worried that if people heard them, I might draw suspicion, but everyone around me just kept right on. I gripped my shopping bag handle tight and decided not to worry so much about my surroundings. I was an ajumma, after all. Not a poor little girl or a young woman seeking opportunity or a cast-off old lady. The only person who was going to help me was me.

A little before one o'clock, I stood outside the gray five-story building. An old security guard was nodding off when he saw me and saluted. I had never seen him before in my life, but he looked at me with fondness and swallowed a knowing laugh. It was better than mistaking me for a peddler and chasing me off, but I couldn't help but wonder whether he was also the sort of person who smiled when he wanted to cry.

I got on the elevator, but it didn't service the second and third floors. I pressed the button for the fourth floor, then waited. I looked in the mirror behind me and saw that white psoriasis was

spreading at the corners of my mouth. I wet my finger with spit and wiped at it.

The building had two offices facing each other on each floor and thus felt cramped and filthy. Pebbles of gum and dried globs of spit had congealed and stuck to the stairs, and cigarette butts and dust bunnies rolled around like bales of hay. I did all kinds of gymnastics to dodge them as I went down to the third floor, where I found Room 301 right off the landing.

smile private detective agency, read the sign. A private detective agency—weren't they the same as those so-called errand centers? In movies and dramas, these were places that went digging into people's pasts and relied on muscle to carry out their unsavory business. Not only did I feel like I'd wasted the three hundred won to write that résumé, but I also got the feeling that I'd signed my weak knees up for much more than they could handle. What reason exactly did a private detective agency have for hiring an ajumma like me? I was inclined to turn back and had even taken a step towards the stairs again when I heard a voice call out from behind me.

"Ajumma, starting tomorrow, throw in another yogurt and probiotic drink."

The door to the Smile Private Detective Agency office stood open and a man holding out an empty jjamppong bowl was shouting at the back of my head. He sounded like the young man who'd answered my call earlier.

"Oh, I—it's me, the one who called . . . I came by for the job interview."

Why on earth did those words spring out of me? I could have just kept my back turned and pretended not to have heard. No need to reveal that I wasn't the yogurt ajumma.

"Oh, right, from earlier. Please, come in."

He dipped his head in greeting, looking embarrassed. Faint

orange stains from the jjamppong broth colored the corners of his shy mouth. As he'd instructed, I stepped into the office. The fusty smell of poor ventilation mingled with the smell of food. Instead of curtains, the windows were tinted black. I took in the decor—four desks and a leather sofa.

“The boss stepped out for a moment to brush his teeth. Would you like some coffee?”

I nodded, and the young man guided me to the sofa and disappeared. I would have expected big men to be sitting around playing hwatu or guzzling alcohol during the day at a place like this, but it was quite different from what I'd imagined. Each desk had a computer, and even though it was messy, the thick stacks of documents and plastic file folders made the space look like an ordinary office. Seeing as the young man had that close-cropped chestnut haircut and spoke in such a friendly tone, he didn't seem to be a gangster. I tucked the shopping bag behind me and began to look around the office, wide-eyed like a child. I heard footsteps approaching from the hallway. Then the door opened, and a short, middle-aged man in a light mix-and-match suit walked in. He was plump in the face and all around, and while he seemed magnanimous at first, looking past his glasses and into his eyes, he struck me instead as being cold.

“Boss, she says she's here for an interview.”

The young guy returned with two cups of coffee on a tray, passing by the older guy to set the tray down in front of me. The coffee wasn't in paper cups but sturdy mugs. The older guy dabbed at the wet corners of his mouth with a handkerchief. He picked up one of the mugs, and I saw that his knuckles were prettier than mine. Maybe a private detective agency wasn't as menacing a place as I'd imagined.

“A pleasure to meet you. My name is Park Taesang.”

Mr. Park reached out for a handshake. I couldn't ignore his pale, slim hand and saw no choice but to awkwardly clasp it in my own.

“I’m Shim Eunok,” I said, handing him my résumé.

Mr. Park blinked his heavy-lidded, deep-set eyes and scanned the paper. One minute, two minutes. He spent an awfully long time studying a résumé that only had two lines. Thinking he might be readying to lash out at me for submitting such a poor excuse for a résumé so shamelessly, my thoughts spiraled like the ridges on a walnut kernel.

“So you ran a butcher shop.” At long last, he set the résumé down on the table.

For some reason, instead of replying, I feigned a smile. I could see the unassuming look on my face in the round mirror behind Mr. Park. The freckles dusting my cheeks like sesame seeds seemed to give away the fact that I was dirt-poor and rather dull.

“You must know how to handle knives and other things rather well.”

I nodded slowly. I wasn’t as good as Mr. Lim of Majang-dong, but I could slice and dice and was confident in my meat-cutting skills.

“Hey, Joongi, we still have the plastic knife from when we cut the cake, right? Would you bring it here?”

So the young guy’s name was Joongi. He went over to the sink and seemed to be rummaging through a drawer for something when he pulled out a white plastic bread knife and handed it to Mr. Park.

“If it’s no trouble, would you mind holding this? Imagine you’re cutting into a cow’s ribs. Though, of course, I’m sure it would be better if we had a real knife.”

“Ah . . . actually, I have some!”

Even as I was wondering what on earth knives had to do with anything, I opened the shopping bag behind me and pulled out one of the big chef’s knives. With the blade still sheathed, I imagined there was a commercial-grade cutting board in front of me and

began sawing into the air, the tip of the knife pointed down slightly as though slicing into a ruddy, well-aged rack of beef.

“Raise the tip a little more. No, bring your arm up a bit. Yes, yes. That’s right.”

Mr. Park seemed entranced. I closed my eyes. In the thick darkness behind my lids, I tore tufts of fur from a huge black beast. Then I peeled back its pink flesh, the pungent odor of blood briefly grazing my nose before vanishing. The blade cut through the meat, pushed it aside, and dug right into the next piece. It was exciting, swinging the knife back and forth to a rhythm and beat. It gave me such strange pleasure to think that there was an audience willing to watch in awe as I did the work I’d always done on my own.

“That’s enough. You may have a seat.”

My eyes snapped open, and I was back in that unfamiliar office. I returned the knife, now clammy with sweat, to the shopping bag.

Mr. Park’s face was flushed red. “Thank you for honoring my request. It can’t have been easy, considering we’ve only just met.”

He explained that, at first, the Help Wanted ad I’d seen in the newsletter was meant to recruit investigative researchers. There had been many applicants, but they were all housewives with no interest in running background checks on others, only concerned with earning some money to cover the costs of their own extramarital affairs.

“I’ll make you an offer, point-blank. I’d like you to become a killer. Doesn’t everybody have one person they hate enough to kill? If you decide to accept, Mrs. Shim, you’d be able to help so many wronged people by fulfilling their most desperate wishes.”

The moment that strange word, *killer*, had sprung from his lips, I felt my underwear dampen as my bladder failed me for the first time in a while. My legs were trembling so much I didn’t think I could stand. A killer. I couldn’t believe such a job existed in real life.

I knew he was serious. What his offer meant—what the people in this place must do—began to sink in, and I was fearful.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that. My lips are sealed, so don’t you worry. I’m really, really good at keeping secrets.”

I grabbed the shopping bag with quivering hands. I was scared that if I hesitated for even a moment, I’d become the next target for these people whose job it was to kill. I still had two kids to raise. I had to go home, turn off all the lights, draw the curtains, lie flat on my stomach and wait with bated breath. There was no way they would leave me alone, not when I knew the truth about them, what they did.

“Mrs. Shim?”

Mr. Park called out from behind me, stopping me in my tracks. The courteous “Mrs.” he used to address me didn’t seem so sweet anymore. Now and then, some of the employees from the mart’s headquarters called me that. *Mrs. Shim, I’ve told you so many times to make sure no water spills on the floor. Or, Mrs. Shim, no matter how badly you have to go, you should use the restroom at lunchtime.* In my world, *Mrs.* was even worse than *ajumma*.

“As I said before, we would like to offer you the position, Mrs. Shim. We need some new blood around here.”

My feet were stuck to the floor. A single tear—or was it a drop of cold sweat?—dripped on to my shoe, leaving a lone speckle. Mr. Park’s tone when he said the word *Mrs.* was unlike the tone of those full-timers from headquarters, which had always felt admonishing and pointed. When I turned to him, Mr. Park was holding out a gold bar. I hadn’t expected this little office to be home to high-value gold. Then again, in a world where paid killers existed, was a bit of gold really so hard to imagine?

“If you trade this in for cash, it’s worth a little under seventy million won. There are two more of them in this safe. Handle this job well, and I’ll give you one of these as your cut of the pay.”

Seventy million won. To earn that amount I would have had to work nearly ten hours a day every day for three years and not spend a cent. With that money, I could say goodbye to the days of not being able to pay the monthly rent—I could even *buy* a new apartment for my family. I could send my Jinseob back to university, pay off all the bills and taxes I had been putting off, and hire tutors for Jina. A seventy million won blessing—this was money that could make everyone happy if only I didn't have this petty sense of pride that was driven by guilt.

“You'll really give me that gold?”

Mr. Park nodded.

I imagined my children, whom I'd barely managed to raise on my part-time earnings, going to lackluster universities and working for lackluster companies, roaming around from one city to the next and growing old as part-timers like me.

“Then I'll become a murderer,” I said. “For seventy million won.”

Mr. Park laughed. The young man next to him chuckled awkwardly.

“Mrs. Shim, we prefer the term *problem-solver*.”

I followed their leads and let out an uneasy chuckle. Birds of a feather and all that.

“Then we'll consider you hired. It'd be best to just use the knives you're most familiar with. As for your uniform, wear what's comfortable, just like you are now. Tomorrow morning at seven a.m. we'll come to pick you up at the address you listed on your résumé. We're thinking of having an all-day offsite training session. Oh, and there's a small per diem for taking part.”

Mr. Park opened the safe and stuffed several fifty thousand won bills into an envelope. I didn't even have time to think about declining it before he was shoving the envelope into my shopping bag. The knives clanged quietly. It felt like the money weighed as much as

a human life. On my way out, I acknowledged the security guard's sly smile and salute with a nod, then turned away from him with as blank an expression as I could manage.

The sun was still blazing. As soon as I opened the door to my apartment, I fell to my knees. As the sun began to set, I didn't even bother changing out of my clothes and went to lie down on the floor. I could hear the faint sound of the evening news coming from the television—it rang in my ears like tinnitus.

A little after ten o'clock, Jina came home. Her face was pinched with exhaustion.

"Mum, dinner."

Without a word, I wiped down and set the kitchen table. Maybe it was because I hadn't fed her enough back when she was still growing, but Jina's shoulders were really narrow. I felt bad seeing the bone, smaller than a walnut, that protruded from the back of her neck.

"Jina-ya, I don't think I'll be home tomorrow night. Will you be all right?"

Jina ate without lifting her eyes from her vocabulary book. "Why?"

I put some fish meat on her spoon. "It'll be busy at the mart."

"No matter how busy it is, a mart is a mart—why would you have to spend the night? Are you seeing someone?"

Jina was a clever girl. The mart closed at eleven, which meant it wasn't a great excuse for needing to stay out overnight.

"Seeing someone?" I scoffed. "That's ridiculous! I got another part-time job, that's why. Serving food at a funeral hall. I'll iron three blouses and hang them up in your closet for you, so make sure you wear a clean one when you go out."

Relieved that I'd thought up a decent excuse, I watched Jina's expression for any signs of doubt. She nodded. Right then, Jinseob came in and took a seat at the table.

“Mum, I’m going straight to bed, so just half a bowl for me, please.”

“They’re working you hard, huh?”

Jinseob had started working part-time doing late-night deliveries and staffing a convenience store to pay for university. He looked rough.

“I’m tired from getting up so early.”

Jinseob took after his father, with his amiable eyes, slender build, and picky appetite. At the dinner table, his chopsticks kept finding the same one or two side dishes and nothing else.

“If it’s too hard on you, quit. I’ll work something out.”

“There’s still time left to re-enroll, so don’t worry. When I get paid, I’ll handle it.”

The corners of Jinseob’s mouth were rough and chapped. His hair, which went from sweat-soaked to dry to sweat-soaked again and again, hadn’t been cut in so long that it completely covered the nape of his neck. My eyes stung from the smell of his pain relief patches.

Once the kids were asleep, I packed my bag. One old training outfit, absorbent underwear for incontinence, socks, a wide long-toothed comb, a skincare sampler, toothpaste and a toothbrush, some hardtack biscuits for when I was craving a snack, a glasses cloth, a cell phone charger, my cholesterol medicine, and the list went on. While I normally passed out the moment my head hit the pillow, that night I only managed to drift off briefly right around the time Jinseob was heading to work. I saw Jina off to school and checked the gas valve several times before finally leaving. I was standing outside the apartment holding my bag when an idling silver sedan gave a short honk of its horn.

“Oh goodness, were you waiting long?”

I had come out at seven o’clock on the dot, but they also seemed to have rushed over.

“We just got here, too.”

Mr. Park was in the driver’s seat. In the backseat, the young guy from yesterday was lying down, completely knocked out. I stowed my bag underneath the dashboard and climbed into the passenger seat. It was my first time in a car since my husband had died. With the ease of a veteran driver, Mr. Park brought us out of the city. He kept to a single lane and didn’t slam on the horn or try to pass anyone. All throughout the smooth ride, I wondered whether maybe a long time ago Mr. Park, like my husband, might have gotten into a horrible accident. Maybe he had survived by some miracle and now lived his life in this firm, unyielding way to prove something.

At some point, we pulled up to the spacious yard of a vacation home in Yangpyeong.

“Mrs. Shim, you can get out here. I’ll bring in your bag.”

Though they were a lot younger than me, I was uncomfortable with the fact that I would be sharing a house with men. But they treated me like their mother or a much older sister, with a familiarity to their actions and words.

Once he unloaded the bags, Mr. Park grabbed a cushion the size of a person from the trunk and propped it up against the wall inside. He showed me how to slice its belly in a single stroke.

“Mrs. Shim, a person is different from a cow or a pig. You might think only ignorant guys with gangster backgrounds become killers, but that’s not true at all. A killer is a doctor minus the license. When I was first learning to wield a knife, I started by studying anatomy. You already have the basics down, so I’m a bit more comfortable starting you out with this.”

Judging from his build, Mr. Park looked like he would be a bit slow in his actions, but he caught his breath and fashioned his face into an expression of pure calm before nimbly grabbing the knife and, in the blink of an eye, tearing a slit in the big cushion’s belly.

The well-honed blade easily tore through the polyester material. It was like dipping a hand in water, like soap bubbles floating away on the wind. The cushion remained standing for a moment. But as soon as Mr. Park turned around and disappeared into the kitchen, it fell forward, white cotton spilling everywhere. Joongi told me that Mr. Park's skills were so refined that he'd even gotten recruitment offers from Japan.

"This is different from Sabaki."

Sabaki was what we butchers used to call the act of deboning. Mr. Park's skills were of a different nature than Mr. Lim of Majang-dong's. Dismantling a dead animal according to its usefulness was nothing more than following a formula like a skilled factory worker. Depending on the situation, I might switch knives, and if I hit a wall, I might work together with a junior assistant to remove the fascia around the muscles or organs and scrape out the tendons. But as a killer, I would be alone from start to end. I couldn't swap knives midway through or bring in colleagues for backup if I found myself shorthanded.

I watched in awe and fear. As if he'd picked up on it, Mr. Park flashed me a smile.

"I bought some groceries, so let's eat before we continue."

We cooked our meal together. Joongi washed the rice, and Mr. Park blanched the soybean sprouts. I boiled doenjang broth with spinach leaves and seasoned the sprouts with just a dash of salt. I made kimchi stew with pork shoulder, seasoned some big chunks of onion and cucumber, then stir-fried some beef brisket with mung bean sprouts. With three spoons reaching in for more and more of the kimchi stew, the pot was emptied in a flash. Since none of us drank or smoked, we downed five bottles of orange juice while listening to Mr. Park's rambling tales of heroism.

That night, I had a dream I was standing in the butcher shop

without a knife, at a loss for what to do as customers teemed around me. Three kilos of front hock, twelve hundred grams of ground meat, five kilos of boneless ribs. I had to sell the meat, but I couldn't, and as I stood there, flustered, the door to the shop quietly opened and in walked my dead husband. He didn't look emaciated like he had in his later years, but was instead his young, healthy self. He bore a striking resemblance to Jinseob as he elbowed past the other people in the shop and made his way to me. Dazed, I reached out my hand to him. I wanted to call him by his old nickname, Jina appa, but the words wouldn't leave my mouth. He smiled gently as though he already knew what I wanted to say, then reached into his jacket pocket and handed me something. It was a tiny knife, no longer than a segment of my finger, so small it wouldn't have been able to slice into a chocolate pie, let alone meat. I accepted the knife, and even in my dreams, I shouted cruel accusations at him. The knife grew bigger then, and suddenly it was the length of two finger segments. I shouted at him again. This time, the knife grew as tall as my palm. Thinking that now it might be large enough to slice meat, I was going to scream at him again when my husband said: *Eumok. Let's slice some fruit with that instead. I hate the smell of meat. What will the kids learn seeing you do this? Let's stop with the knives.*

I bolted up in bed, a seething rage welling up inside me. My husband was picking a fight with me, looking down on me for trying to make a living when he'd never once in his life helped me to do so. I didn't deserve to hear him blaming me for how I was raising my children when he'd shirked all responsibility and abandoned me for the other side. Him telling me not to do something made me want to do it all the more.

I spent the entire training session learning from Mr. Park how to stab people, how to sneak up on them, how to tell a person I should kill from a person I shouldn't. I diligently took notes in the memo pad

I'd gotten when I worked at the life insurance company. I made slight, subtle changes to the terms as I wrote: *client* became *customer*, *target* became *meat*, *murders* became *cuts*, *murders-for-hire* became *sales*, and *investigative research* became *purchases*. I had to be careful to avoid any unfortunate incidents that might draw suspicion or tip off my kids.

\* \* \*