

심여사는킬러

# MRS SHIM IS A KILLER



KANG JIYOUNG

*Translated by Paige Morris*

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

*(in order of appearance)*

### SHIM EUNOK (MRS SHIM)

Middle-aged butcher's widow with two children,  
now turned contract killer

### THE BOSS

Smile Detective Agency CEO with a soft heart,  
a hard past and a fondness for poetry

### THE SHAMAN

Neighbourhood fortune-teller

### THE SECRET AGENT

Infiltrator of the Smile Detective Agency  
and frequent beauty-salon customer

### THE NEIGHBOUR

Paranoid old lady with dementia, looked after by Mrs Shim

### THE KILLER

Young woman with a creative use for chopsticks,  
found abandoned at a bus stop

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#### THE CONFIDANT

Young man with a personal hold over the boss

#### THE DAUGHTER

Mrs Shim's beloved teenager, keen to get to college

#### THE RIVAL

CEO of the Happy Detective Agency,  
with a dark past and a darker heart

#### THE MATCHMAKER

Dealer in children's souls from the afterlife. For a fee.

#### THE WIFE

Married to the Happy Detective Agency CEO,  
and desperate for a child

#### THE TEACHER

Supposedly in the education profession. Brought up on movies

#### THE SON

Mrs Shim's other child, looking for part-time work to fund  
a return to school after finishing military service

#### THE CLIENT

Hires the detective agency. Believes in the power of steel,  
since 'guns, knives and money never betrayed anybody'

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# PART ONE

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# 1

## Shim Eunok

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 honour above all and had boldly set off down the path of revenge, every day at dawn Mr Lim honed

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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, gamey 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 jeweller 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

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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 pay day. I opened the cash drawer and took out enough for that day's transportation. I hated the thought of losing even a single cent. 'This is Shim Eunok,' I wrote in a note to the owner. '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,

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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

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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 someone 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.

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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 dialled 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.

'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 gingko trees, you'll see a grey five-storey 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 gingko 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

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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

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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 grey five-storey 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 centres? In movies and dramas, these were places that went digging into people's pasts and relied on muscle to carry out their unsavoury 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

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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 yoghurt 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 yoghurt ajumma.

‘Oh, right, from earlier. Please, come in.’

He dipped his head in greeting. Faint orange stains from the jjamppong broth coloured 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

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didn't seem to be a gangster. I tucked the shopping bag behind me and began to look around the office. 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 spiralled like the ridges on a walnut kernel.

'So you ran a butcher shop.'

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

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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. 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 odour of blood briefly grazing my nose before vanishing. The blade cut through the meat, pushed it aside, and dug right into the next

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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 honouring 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.'

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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 any more. 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

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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 lacklustre universities and working for lacklustre 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 off-site 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

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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.'

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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-enrol, 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

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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. 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

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become killers, but that's not true at all. A killer is a doctor minus the licence. 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 short-handed.

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

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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 choco-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

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husband said: *Eunok. 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.

My first client was a man with one eye. He was in his early sixties and wore a ring with a huge amber stone on a thick gold chain around his neck. As soon as he came into the office, he told Joongi to fetch him some green tea instead of coffee and a pack of Esse Change cigarettes. He ignored me and sat down on the sofa, spreading his legs wide. The eye he still had was cloudy, just like my husband's had been.

Mr Park remained standing and introduced me. 'This is Mrs Shim Eunok. She'll be handling your case.'

The one-eyed man looked disappointed to learn that the

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killer he was hiring was not only a woman but also a sluggish old ajumma at that. Just then, Joongi returned with the bottle of green tea and the cigarettes.

‘But why waste this young one’s talents and hire *her* of all people?’ the one-eyed man murmured, gesturing at Joongi and lighting a cigarette. Joongi hurried to turn on the air purifier.

‘Please entrust this task to her this once,’ said Mr Park. ‘With the Smile Agency’s life on the line, we’ll find a smooth solution to your problem.’

The one-eyed man sipped his tea, then shook his head.

‘This is the sort of thing there’s no going back from. If she were to slip up, who would end up in jail?’

Mr Park took out a sheet of paper and wrote something on it, then handed it to the one-eyed man.

‘Look,’ said Mr Park. ‘We pride ourselves on being the best at keeping secrets. Joongi – that kid isn’t ready to kill anyone yet. Mrs Shim has been in the field for a long time. She’s a real pro. Mrs Shim, grab a knife, would you?’

I stood and grabbed one of the knives on the table. Just as Mr Park had taught me, I raised the knife slightly and found my balance, getting lower as though I were about to stab a person right between the ribs.

‘Most importantly, Mrs Shim won’t stand out to anyone. She’ll be able to slip in undetected. I mean, how is a man supposed to kill a jjimjilbang owner, a woman who spends the whole day in the women’s bathing areas?’

He had a point. The one-eyed man had ordered the hit on a woman who owned a bathhouse. She was apparently his ex-wife. They’d lived together under the same roof for thirty-three years, but now she was getting ready to emigrate with her new

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husband and was encouraging their son to slowly eat away at the one-eyed man's fortune. I couldn't honestly say that this alone was an offence punishable by death, but it was hard for me to turn down my first-ever client.

The man closed his eye, thick brows knit in concentration. Suddenly, he made an OK sign and stood up.

'Well, as long as justice is served, I guess it makes no difference whether an ajumma is the one serving it. Let's do this.'

The rest of us let out sighs of relief.

After the one-eyed man was gone and we could all breathe easy again, I asked, 'What was that paper you gave him earlier?'

Joongi hurried over to me and whispered, 'It's what we call a suicide pledge. It's a promise that if we're ever found out, all of our company's employees will take our own lives on the spot . . . as a way to destroy evidence.'

My eyes went wide, and I turned to Mr Park. He'd been staring blankly out the window for a while, watching as the one-eyed man disappeared.

'That gold bar includes a life insurance bonus,' Mr Park said. 'If anything goes wrong, it will be sent to your children.'

'You're telling me this *now*?' I shouted, swallowing the tears that were threatening to spill over. 'I would never take my own life and leave my children behind!'

'Only company executives and full-time staff are included in the pledge. You're a freelancer, Mrs Shim. We couldn't possibly include a suicide pledge in your contract when you don't even receive employment insurance benefits.'

With that, Mr Park squeezed some paste on to his toothbrush and headed to the bathroom.

This was the first time I had ever benefited from being a

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contract worker. I avoided Joongi's eyes – the eyes of a full-time employee – and went to hide in the office pantry.

I got straight to work. Every day I dropped by the jjimjilbang run by the one-eyed man's ex-wife. The place was described as a jjimjilbang, but it was more on the scale of a hot springs resort. There was an outdoor swimming pool on the rooftop, a room where it snowed, an amethyst sauna room, a germanium hot bath, and several other kinds of baths and saunas, a dozen areas in total, each the size of a sports field. I recognized the woman sitting behind the counter for the women's baths right away. Her face matched the one in the photo the one-eyed man had shown me. She was Yoon Heeja, the ex-wife.

'Oh goodness, I'd thought your brows were tattooed on, but I don't think they are?' I said, approaching the counter. 'Those are real million-dollar eyebrows you've got there.'

The plump woman, who was doing her nails, looked delighted at the compliment.

'This is actually semi-permanent makeup, but no one ever seems to notice. Why don't you give it a try? The unni over there doing threading learned how to do it properly over in Nonhyeon-dong.'

Studying her own brows in a hand mirror, Yoon Heeja smiled, satisfied. I praised her almond-shaped nails, the taut skin on her neck, and her amazing business acumen, then bemoaned my own lowly circumstances and shabby appearance. Heeja's eyes lit up with a sense of superiority.

'I should get going now,' I said then. 'It's around the time my daughter gets home from school. I'd like to try that permanent makeup or whatever it's called, too. Please introduce me when I come by tomorrow, would you?'

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After chatting up Heeja, who seemed disappointed to see me go, I left the jjimjilbang. The next day, Heeja took my hand and led me grudgingly over to have my eyeliner tattooed on, and afterwards, she gave me some pumpkin sikhye to drink on the house. We chatted endlessly about Hyun Bin and Gang Dong-won, BTS and Na Hoon-a – all the sexiest men of this generation. Then we went into the amethyst sauna room and napped. The day after, I scrubbed her back for her, and the day after that, I lugged over some of the mul kimchi I had made at home for her to try. After about a month, Heeja started calling me her younger sister.

‘Unni, do you ever have a day off?’ I asked her.

I needed to seize on a moment when Heeja was alone, but she never seemed to rest.

‘I take exactly one day off a year,’ she said.

‘When is that?’

Rubbing yoghurt on her face, she grinned. ‘Tomorrow.’

‘What’s happening tomorrow that you’d close up shop when business is booming?’

‘It’s my birthday. I’m going to call up my family and friends and throw a little party on the rooftop. You want to come?’

At last, D-Day was nigh.

‘Sounds like a day for only your closest friends – is it really OK if I’m there?’

‘Of course – you’re my BFF nowadays. Come by and have fun. We’ll even get the grill going.’

I waved goodbye to Heeja with a warm smile and left the jjimjilbang. A cold sweat shone on my forehead, and my legs were trembling too much for me to take the subway. I caught a cab to the office and held myself together until I stepped inside,

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at which point all the tension suddenly left my body and I collapsed into my seat.

‘Mrs Shim, what’s wrong?’ Mr Park rushed over to help.

Only after I’d had a sip of water and Joongi had given my arms and legs a massage did I finally manage to speak and tell them of my worries.

‘Stay calm,’ Mr Park assured me. ‘As long as everything goes according to plan, you’ll be fine.’

The plan he mapped out went as follows: I would attend Heeja’s birthday party and act natural. Afterwards, as the guests began to trickle out, I would pretend I was leaving, too, but instead hide in the empty jjimjilbang. Once Heeja was alone or headed to the bathroom, I would come out of hiding. Then, using the knife I would have at the ready, I would stab her. On the off chance that there were witnesses or that she didn’t die immediately and managed to scream for help, I was to call Mr Park right away. He said he would handle things from there.

When I got home, I didn’t dare look my kids in the eyes and made an excuse about body aches to head to bed early. I dreamed I was dodging knives flying at me from all directions. In the morning when I woke up, I had the strange, unsettling feeling that the dream had been a premonition, and my hands trembled non-stop as I brewed myself some coffee.

‘Mum, I feel like you’ve been going to the bathhouse every day lately. You even got your eyeliner tattooed on. Very suspicious.’

Jina had been on break since a few days earlier, but she still went to her campus every day. I was thinking I should buy her some ribeye once I sold off that gold bar, dissolving my anxiety in the hot coffee water.

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‘I started working at the jjimjilbang, that’s why. I’ll be home a little late today.’

I found the old ivory two-piece dress I had worn for each of my kids’ graduations. Then on second thought – what if blood splattered on me? – I changed into a black sundress and slipped my newly sharpened knife into a fake alligator-skin handbag.

When I got on the town shuttle bus headed for the jjimjilbang, the driver, a familiar face by now, greeted me with a nod. I gave him a light nod in return, then found a seat and turned to stare out the window. Mr Park was driving in his car alongside the bus. The reminder that I wasn’t alone quieted my nerves.

When I got to the jjimjilbang rooftop, a crowd of people were cutting up grilled meat. I approached Heeja and stuffed an envelope containing one hundred thousand won into her pocket.

‘What’s this for?’ Heeja said. ‘You didn’t have to bring anything.’

‘I didn’t know what you’d like, and anyway, it’s no more than the price of a cheap bottle of essence.’

Heeja made a big show of proudly waving the envelope around. Just then a greasy-looking man in his forties appeared from out of nowhere and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

‘Say hello, honey,’ Heeja urged him. ‘This is Shim Eunok – she’s one of my regulars. We even share a hometown. She’s a lovely lady.’

The man nodded at me flatly and said hello.

‘This is my husband. He may look like a player, but he runs an IT company in the Philippines. Seems like he’s making quite a bit of dough these days.’

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