

Before Sleeping

It was dark, but there were stragglers from a parade of bright lights inside his eyes. He opened them. He was lying on his back in the darkness now, and above him he saw the pale shape of the paper globe on the ceiling. The light bulb inside was switched off; there was only the city luminescence from the other side of the balcony doors.

“I sleep,” she said.

She was pressed against him so that her warmth was part of his beneath the blanket.

“You’re going to sleep?”

“I sleep.”

“You are asleep?”

“Ung,” she said, which meant “yes” he thought. “I sleep the whole time.”

“You were asleep the whole time?”

“Ung.”

“No, you weren’t. You definitely weren’t asleep.”

She laughed in the rigid, hissing way that was her mischievous laugh. She had three different laughs and one more that might have been laughing or might have been crying, which she used when she was relieved.

“I sleep,” she repeated in a bright voice.

He should have put new sheets on the bed that morning. He had known she was coming tonight. He should have put new sheets on in any case; he couldn’t remember when he’d changed them last. This was the set he didn’t like: they were thin, and you could see the mattress label through them if you knew where to look. His friend had slept on them when he’d spent the night and shared the bed. And there had been nights since then when the heat had been too high, and he’d covered them in sweat. He wouldn’t have worn a shirt that had been slept in as much as these sheets.

“Do you see?” she said.

But they didn’t smell or make him itch. She probably hadn’t even noticed. Or maybe she had and she didn’t say anything; or maybe she had and she liked it. He would change them tomorrow in any case. Sheets were so good when they were washed and then dried out in the air. And he wouldn’t even have to do that tomorrow because he’d already done it, and they were in his dresser just waiting.

“What?” he asked, hearing the indistinct echo of her words.

“I didn’t say.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Ask questions.”

“You want me to ask you questions?”

“Ung.”

“What kind of questions?” he asked.

“What kind of questions,” she repeated.

“What kind of questions do you want me to ask you?”

“Any question.”

“Do you have a cat?”

“No,” she replied. He could tell from her voice that she was smiling.

“Do you have a dog?”

“No.”

“Do you have any pets?”

“Pets.”

“Pets are cats, dogs, fish...”

“No. No pet,” she answered.

“Where do you live?”

“Geodhori.” That was the name of the city she came from.

“No,” he said. “Where do you live? Do you live in an apartment?”

“Ung, apartment.”

“How many rooms?”

“One room.”

“One room with a kitchen?”

“Ung.”

“The kitchen is in the same room?”

“Ung.”

“And the bathroom?”

“Bathroom?”

“Is the bathroom in the same room?”

“Ung, same room.”

“The bathroom is in the same room?” he asked sceptically.

“Beolong hadch mi cleung gi,” she said in her language.

“I don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Eun beun galbo mi karoji mal gi,” she said. Her voice said she didn’t care that he couldn’t understand.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay?”

“I have no idea what you said.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Do you have parties in your apartment?”

“Ung.”

“With how many people?”

“How many.”

“How many people come to your parties?”

“Five people.”

“Friends?” he asked.

“Five friends.”

“Do you dance at your parties?”

“No. I don’t dance,” she said seriously.

“Then what do you do? Drink?”

“Yes, drink.”

“Drink what?”

“Beer. I like beer,” she said and then produced the mischievous laugh.

He imitated her.

“Shht,” she said.

His flatmate made a sound out in the hall. He was going to the kitchen or returning from it or going out or getting something from the cabinet. Did his flatmate read books? He didn’t think so. Oh, yes, he read books. But he read them on an electronic reader; that was right.

“It’s okay. We can make noise,” he told her.

“Shht,” she said again. He could see the outline of her finger on her lips in the faint city glow. She was smiling behind it.

“You already made a lot of noise.”

She laughed. He put his hands to his face and rubbed his eyes. His hands smelled like the inside of a body.

“I’m going to wash my hands.”

“Ung.”

He got up and went to the bathroom. He left the lights off; he didn’t want to strain his pupils. They were sensitive pupils he’d decided when he was young and got a concussion from falling off the porch swing onto the concrete. They’d told him his pupils were different sizes because of it, and that he couldn’t sleep until they were the same size again. But they had never gone back to the same size. In the darkness, he couldn’t find the soap, so he rubbed his hands together under the water again and then gave up. The towel didn’t smell very good.

When he came back into his room, she was standing at the balcony doors. He came up behind her and put his cold hands on her shoulders. She shivered and made a whining sound that didn’t annoy him.

“I am seeing,” she said.

“You are looking,” he corrected her.

“You are looking,” she repeated.

“No, *you* are looking.”

“No, *you* are looking,” she repeated.

“Whatever,” he said.

“Ri eun beulon jok paljo ha,” she said.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay?” she asked in mock surprise.

“I have no idea what you said.”

He went back to the bed and got under the blankets. She followed him.

“What were you looking at?” he asked.

“The church.”

“The cathedral?”

“The cathedral?” she asked.

“It’s not a church. It’s a cathedral,” he said.

“Cathedral.”

“Do you like the cathedral?”

“Yes. Very much.”

“Me too. I like the way they light it up at night,” he said.

“But I hate Christian.”

“You hate Christianity?”

“Ung.”

“Me too.”

“You too?” she asked brightly.

“Of course,” he said. “There are a lot of bad ideas in Christianity.”

“I hate Christian,” she said again.

She had taken the train to his place very late that night. It was much later now, but it had already been very late when she came. Her phone didn’t work here, so he had told her exactly how to get to his place and when the tram would come and what the door code was. And five minutes after the tram was supposed to have come, he went down to the street to meet her. She was at the end of the block walking very slowly toward him.

He walked to her, and when she recognized him as he passed under the streetlight, she stopped. She was carrying her laptop under her arm, out of its case, which she also carried under her arm, hugging both of them tightly. Her bag hung from her other arm, not her shoulder. And in that hand, she held an empty plastic cup, which was crushed. A few remaining drops shone from inside.

He hugged her, and she laughed but might have cried because it was that sound she made when she was relieved.

“Are you okay?” he asked. He took the cup and laptop and laptop case from her.

She didn’t answer but pressed against him and stamped her feet quietly.

“It’s okay,” he said.

With his arm around her, they walked slowly down the street to his door.

“I like these street lights,” he told her because she was walking very slowly. “They aren’t on poles. Where I’m from, streetlights are on poles. But these are strung up above the street on wires. And when there’s wind at night, the lights sway, and the shadows sway with them, and everything rocks like on a boat. I lost my balance one time and fell against a car.”

At his door, she said, “I very scared.”

“Why are you scared?” he asked softly.

“I walk. And behind someone walk.”

She acted out the scene with her hands, holding both hands upside down and waving two fingers back and forth to indicate people walking.

“A person was following you?”

“I very scared.”

“Did he do anything?”

“No,” she said.

“Don’t worry. It was nothing,” he said softly. “It’s very safe here.”

“Ung,” she replied.

“And you can’t be the only one allowed to walk down the street at night.”

“But I drunk,” she said. She had been at a party with other people from her country.

“You’re not that drunk.”

“Gi kalb weong do ongbuk kha,” she said.

“I don’t know what that means,” he said.

“Do ongbuk li leung gi,” she said.

“You aren’t that drunk,” he said.

“Not drunk,” she said.

He rolled over and smelled her there beside him in the bed. She didn’t smell like flowers or perfume or laundry detergent, but she smelled clear, like clean air. She was an open window beside him in that stuffy room, and he could smell the cool night air through her. It had rained earlier, but the rain had stopped when it got dark. Now it was very late, and through her the smell of the night was clear.

Would he write in his dream journal in the morning? What if he woke up and it was dark, would he turn on the light and write? He was supposed to be diligent about writing in his dream journal because it was going to help him remember his dreams and then help him realize he was dreaming when he was dreaming. But he imagined waking up with her holding him; he imagined disentangling himself and sitting up and banging around until he found the switch to the reading lamp. And then he imagined searching for his pen and his journal which weren’t on the bed like they usually were, because she was there instead. He didn’t want to have to do any of that. He just wanted to stay there with her when he woke up. He decided he would try very hard to remember his dream so he could write it down after she left.

“Goodnight,” he said to her.

“Goodnight,” she whispered slowly.

Would he have trouble breathing like he did sometimes before sleeping? Would he sit up gasping? Would that scare her? It would scare him. He breathed deeply and felt her against him. Her warmth was part of his beneath the blanket. He breathed deeply again. Had it been too soon after the last breath? He could not remember. He could only remember her warmth. And so he took up the old garden shovel and began digging a moat around them in the mattress to keep the warmth from getting away.