

Short Story

4300 words

The Secret Drawer

By

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Choe is coming. Choe is his last name. You don't call a grown man by his first name in Korea, even if he is your lover. 'Only if I could tidy up this place...!' Her stroke last winter has paralyzed the right side of her body. 'Tut, tut... how could you call this a life?' Gawha clucks her tongue. She pulls herself up against the headboard and covers up with a towel the unsightly catheter bag hanging off the edge of her bed.

At least, she can wipe her face and neck with wet tissues. She applies some lipstick and blush with her left hand, which lifts her spirits. She calls him Choe *Seubang*. *Seubang* is a title for a husband or lover. He is seven years younger and calls her *Nubu* meaning "older sister."

Her house is at the dead end of an alley in a quiet residential area of Daegu, a southern city. She used to live in the master suite and rent out the small bedroom near the front gate, but she had to switch rooms, renting out the master suite to help pay for her medical bills. For her 75th birthday early this year, Choe expanded the small room for her, adding a shower with handicapped railings.

She leans against the headboard of the bed he designed for her. On the left side of the headboard is a shelf with a drawer below that conceals a secret drawer inside.

Gawha hears the gate open and sees Choe through the windows. He drops in whenever possible. His bronze face is deeply wrinkled, his hair salt and pepper. He looks thin. Has he become old too? At 68, he is still working in the home-construction business, with his body hardened from outdoor work. Opening the side door to the room, he brings in fresh outside air with him.

Smiling broadly he teases her, "It's spring, *Nubu*. You should go outside."

“I’ve been counting on you to take me out.”

“Get better soon! I will take you around like the old days. Remember? I used to show you off back then. You looked like a twenty-year old when you were in your forties. You looked like thirties in your fifties.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“By the way, I brought your daughter’s Seoul address and phone number.”

“Showing up like this, disabled?”

“That’s why you should call her. She should know that you are ill. Follow the natural laws of life. Be like any other mother and daughter.”

“Our life has hardly been ordinary. There is a reason, something I didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me.”

“It goes back to the time when you and I lived in Gyungshan, raising chickens.”

One morning twenty years ago, Gawha traveled to Daegu, an hour away by bus. That chilly March morning, she went to the neighborhood where her daughter Sunnie lived. Hiding in an alley across from her house, she watched the gate. It was not the first time that she came here. She would observe Sunnie coming out of the gate, sometimes dressed up or in a casual sweater with a tote bag, perhaps going to the market.

Standing in the alley, she heard the radio from the house behind the wall. The newscaster was talking about the Olympic Games. The entire country was excited about the ongoing 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. The hopeful Olympic song composed for this event was played everywhere. Listening to the music, she felt her heart swell with new hope. ‘Today I am going to talk to her.’

Gawha wasn’t sure if Sunnie would want to see her. A lifetime ago, she had to tear the crying child away from her waist. She remembered how the seven-year-old had stomped on the ground and wailed, seeing her mother leave. Once she was placed in the new household, the poor thing wouldn’t dare wail like that, Gawha thought brokenheartedly.

She was awoken from her reverie by the creak of the wooden gate. Sunnie appeared, carrying a clear plastic bag with a towel and a bar of soap inside. She must be going to a public bathhouse. Gawha remembered a picture of herself taken when she was young, wearing a traditional *hanbok* dress. The resemblance was astounding. She remembered how the young women at the

whorehouse used to cluck their tongues, “Tut, tut, you are too gorgeous to be a whore in a small-town tavern.”

Sunnie walked toward the main street and turned left, and Gawha followed her as throngs of people passed by. Sunnie turned another left and eventually entered a bathhouse called Blue River.

After waiting outside for a few minutes, Gawha ducked inside and paid for a towel and soap. When she entered the women’s changing room, Sunnie had already undressed and was passing through the large double doors. Through the glass doors, Gawha could see several women bathing in the rising steam.

The morning sunlight spilled through the high windows of the bathhouse illuminated Sunnie’s milky skin. As she looked at her daughter’s lithe body, memories of her younger days flooded back.

In 1952, Gawha was nineteen. Her mother ran a roadside tavern at the entrance of Fox Run, a village nestled in a valley. A gigantic elm tree with toothy leaves stood at the mouth of the village like a gatekeeper, draping its branches over the roof of the tavern, where mother and daughter lived. Kim Heeju, who was 33, lived in an imposing black tile-roof house in the middle of the village with his parents, wife, and three children. He frequented the roadside alehouse to see Gawha.

Her mother would warn her, “I am exposed to all sorts of men in this business, but I want you to have a different life. Don’t become a plaything for Heeju or any other men. A young man from a fine family won’t marry a tavern-keeper’s daughter. I will arrange a match with a well-to-do widower for you.” Gawha was disgusted by the thought of an old widower touching her.

One night in early summer, as Gawha was trying to fall asleep under a mosquito net, she heard a pebble being thrown into the front yard – a signal that Heeju was waiting outside. Mother was snoring after a long day at the tavern. Gawha quietly dressed and slipped out of their room. The moon was high overhead, and dogs barked from the village.

A tall figure emerged at the low gate and gestured for her to come out. As she closed the gate behind her, he grabbed her hand. “Let’s take a walk.” They strolled along a path that cut through rice paddies. The moon shone on the endless rice fields as rice stalks swayed in the breeze. A chorus of frogs croaked. The air was alive with the sounds and smells of a summer night.

They reached an embankment, where the path turned into a slippery sandy slope that led to the river. Holding her waist, he guided her down. “All day long I thought about you. I’d better jump into the water to cool this fire inside me.”

They ran across the sandy strip before the river. Throwing their clothes on the pebbles, they jumped into the river. The mermaid and merman slowly swam upstream toward a reservoir that water to irrigate the rice fields. The warm night air and sounds of water emboldened her. ‘I feel so free in the dark,’ she thought.

Suddenly something bit her toe. “A fish just bit me!” she yelled.

Heeju’s head popped out of the water with a splash. “The fish must have thought you’re tasty, too.”

“Oh, it was you. You snake in the grass!”

“Now you know what I am.”

She hit his chest in protest, but he merely enveloped her in his arms, bit her earlobe, and licked her neck. Moonlight illuminated their naked bodies showing above the surface of the water. Stroking her shoulders, he said, “I don’t think there is any fairy fairer than you are.”

With her cheek against his broad chest, she whispered, “It’s such a beautiful night, and it’s so wonderful to be with you, but I know the people are gossiping about us.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I will take care of you. Your happiness is all I care about.”

He carried her out of the water, placed his shirt on the sand and laid her on it. Burying his head between her breasts, he groaned, “I cannot live without you.”

He entered her with force, and she received him with equal eagerness. Their bodies undulated under moonlights as their moans resonated on the deserted beach.

The Korean War had passed through Fox Run two years earlier, leaving burned houses and bullet holes everywhere. The war was dragging on as the frontline was still inching up and down the 38th Parallel. Villagers knew that communist soldiers had been buried in a mass grave behind the hamlet.

Heedless of the nation’s crisis, their affair continued through the summer and into the fall. Nature marched on, the brushstrokes of magnificent autumn colors announcing the fall. The leaves of the elm tree turned into brilliant burnt orange, draping over the roof of the tavern.

Early one morning Gawha began brushing her teeth with salt at the outdoor faucet. Suddenly she felt nauseated. She bolted to the drainage ditch and retched. Her heart sank; she had been afraid of this happening all summer.

Mother came out and exclaimed in a hushed voice, “Heavens, Girl! See what happened! What are we to do now? That bastard ruined my precious girl.” With tears running down her face, Mother fell to her knees.

The fall passed while Gawha’s morning sickness continued. The next spring, Sunnie was born.

As Mother’s hushed cry was still ringing in her ears, Gawha undressed. She passed through the glass doors and into the steaming bath. She easily made out Sunnie among the naked women. Her hair wrapped in a white towel, Sunnie reclined in the main hot tub with her eyes closed.

After soaking herself, Sunnie climbed out of the hot tub and walked past Gawha, whose eyes flashed over her straight, strong body. ‘Ah! That scar!’ she cried out to herself. Sunnie had a scar on her buttocks that was not visible when she sat down.

Sunnie sat nearby on the tile-bench that formed a ring around the hot tub. Gawha asked, mustering up her courage, “Young lady, would you like me to scrub your back?”

“That would be great. I can do the same for you.”

Gawha scrubbed her back with a soapy washcloth first and then rinsed the foam off the washcloth and scrubbed with it. ‘My darling, when you were little, I used to give you a bath in the warmth of the kitchen fire...’

After rinsing her shoulder and back, Gawha said, “Young lady, will you stand up a minute? I will scrub your bottoms.”

Sunnie hesitated at first and then quietly rose. Sunbeams lit her body, streaming in through the high windows. Gawha began to scrub the scar with the towel.

“Isn’t that ugly?”

“It looks much better now. I mean... I mean, it must’ve happened a long time ago?”

“When I was little... Remember it only vaguely.”

How well Gawha remembered that summer day! After Mother's death, she began running the tavern herself, serving her customers appetizers with *makgeolli*, a native rice beer she made herself by fermenting a mixture of boiled rice, wheat leaven, and water.

One hot summer day, when the tavern was quiet, she did the laundry in the front yard while little Sunnie played with their puppy called Furry. Gawha boiled white clothes and sheets in soapy water, removed the large aluminum basin from the fire and placed it on the ground. While backing away from Furry licking her face, Sunnie tripped and sat down on the steaming washes. The burn took weeks to heal.

Heeju's assurance to take care of her turned out to be an empty promise. Inside his strong body was a lax will to follow through, and he had no wealth of his own other than the land he would someday inherit. Jealous of her male customers, whose advances Gawha had to put up with, he would come to the bar at night, sometimes becoming drunk and disorderly. During the day, his jealous wife would run in and throw things at Gawha.

Next spring, Gawha had to propose to his wife that she would leave the village, if Sunnie be properly raised in her father's family. She sold the tavern in a hurry to keep it secret from Heeju. Leaving the inconsolable child behind, Gawha left the woman some money for Sunnie's education from the sale of the tavern. Leaving her child had been the hardest thing Gawha had ever done.

Thinking of those days, Gawha said, "Young lady, now please sit down on this stool again? I'm not quite finished."

Sunnie sat down in front of the older woman. Gawha went over Sunnie's back again, producing tiny gray rolls of dead skin with the washcloth. When these were rinsed off, the polished skin glowed.

"Ma'am, you are the best scrubber I've ever had. It was so relaxing! Now it's my turn."

Gawha met her eyes with a smile and sat down on the stool in front of Sunnie, who began to scrub.

"What soft skin you have! Your skin is as smooth as a baby's!"

When Gawha came to the end of her money, she had to work as a prostitute. Her clients would admire, "What velvety skin you have!" Before long, she was able to get out of that cesspool.

Reprimanding herself for thinking about such a sordid time, Gawha shook her head, determined to think only pleasant things. She glanced back, smiling at Sunnie's flushed face and perspiring forehead as she was intent on scrubbing. Her earnest face was lovely. She wished this moment would last forever but felt sorry for Sunnie, who took the task so seriously.

"Thank you, young lady, that's enough."

Sunnie rinsed Gawha's back, washed the washcloth clean with soap, and wrung it hard before giving it back.

Sunnie said, "Have we met somewhere? Your face looks familiar."

"Really? Why don't we have lunch together? I think it was our karma to meet and help each other today."

"Sure. It's one o'clock now. I have some time before my kids come home from school."

They went to a Chinese restaurant nearby.

Sunnie asked, "Where do you live?"

"I live in Gyung-san, We have a chicken farm."

"How many chickens do you have?"

"About 300. If you lived nearby, I would give you some eggs."

Their order, *jajangmyeon*, a noodle dish in black bean sauce, garnished with crisp cucumber strips was brought to them. No sooner than Sunnie said, "Good appetite, Ma'am," she started eating her dish with relish.

"How old are your children?"

"My son is ten, and my daughter is eight."

"What does your husband do for a living?"

"He works for the city. He just got promoted to branch chief."

Without meaning to, Gawha breathed a sigh of relief and murmured, "Thank you, Buddha. Thank you, Goddess of Mercy!"

Sunnie stopped munching and stared at her. "What did you say?"

Gawha reached across the table and took Sunnie's hand. "Look at me closely. I am your *Eumma*."

Sunnie's face became ashen. She shook off Gawha's hand and said coldly, "A real mother doesn't abandon her child when she was only seven."

“I left you because I wanted you to have the chance to grow up in a respectable family, marry a decent man, and have children. Those are something I never had.”

“I know what you did after you left me. My half-siblings used to call me a whore’s daughter.”

“I’m sorry that you experienced so much pain.”

“I wanted to find out whether you were still alive. I asked around and learned that you were living with a much younger man. It’s a nice set-up for you, but at your age, you are robbing him of a chance to be a father.”

“Sunnie, I’ve finally found my happiness. What right do you have to say that?”

“My in-laws don’t know about my illegitimate birth. You want to see my children? You want to be called *Halmoni*? Don’t even dream about that. Don’t screw up my life by showing up again.”

Sunnie ran out of the restaurant.

With warm lights in his eyes, Choe says, “Now that I think of it, I remember that day. You collapsed as soon as you walked into the house. Then you didn’t get out of the bed for days.”

“Sunnie said I was robbing you of a chance to be a father. Even before I was told, I had been feeling guilty about that. When you and I first met, you were only thirty-three. We were happy and in love. But before we knew it, you were forty-eight. I realized that Sunnie was right. It was time for you to start living your life”

“You straightened me out of my troubled youth. You helped me get the apprenticeship. Thanks to you, I’ve had a good job.”

“You are a gifted carpenter. How much I love this bed frame you made.” She strokes the smooth wood of the headboard.

“No woman fulfilled me the way you did. I never had any concerns over our years together. Then one day you introduced me to a younger woman, insisting that she was better for me.”

“Now you have a fine son, and I am happy for you.”

“He wants to go to a college in Seoul. It would be easier for me if he goes to a local college.”

“I’ve meant to tell you something. I want to sell this house. Find an agent for me.”

“I’ll see what I can do. But for now, let’s go outside first. You need exercise. Don’t forget what your doctor said. You may have another stroke if you stay in bed all the time. You have a hereditary tendency.”

“Mother died in her fifties, but I’m still alive in my seventies. How much do you think we can get for this house?”

“The real estate market is soft now. Maybe 300 million *won*¹?”

“Let’s sell it. I will subtract what I need and divide the remainder by three. I want to contribute to my grandchildren’s weddings and your son’s college education.”

“Okay, we will. It’s time for you to go outside. I am thankful that you can still move around.” With his arms around her, he leads her outside, saying, “I have something to show you.”

The brick wall below her window is ablaze with the lemon-yellow hue of the forsythias. “Ah, the forsythias!” she exclaims.

He pruned the bushes into round shapes last fall. With leaves that haven’t sprouted yet, the dense blossoms are like yellow clouds.

“I might’ve missed these if it weren’t for you!”

“See, good things happen to you when you listen to me. Please call your daughter tonight.”

“She could’ve called me if she wanted to. I want my grandchildren to marry into good families. I don’t want my past to taint their prospects. Wait until I die. Then tell her about my gift. Focus on selling the house. You know where I keep the deed. You have the power of attorney in case anything happens to me. Let’s go inside now.”

For her dinner, he microwaves a package of instant rice and a pouch of soup. Minutes later, he places her dinner on a tray in front of her. She drinks some soup and pretends to eat rice. “Go home now. Have dinner with your family.”

“I’ll wait until you’ve finished your dinner.”

“I can’t eat while you stand there, staring at me.”

“Okay, the nurse is coming tomorrow. Sunnie’s phone number is here just in case you change your mind. Your after-dinner pills are over here.”

After he left, she hides the rice in tissues, so that neither he nor the nurse would see. She throws the ball into the trashcan and does the same with the pills, which include high blood pressure medications, an anticoagulant to prevent blood clots, and an antidepressant. The nurse explained that elderly patients are often prescribed with antidepressants to boost their mood. “Who asked for such a thing? To elevate your mood, you take medicine?” Gawha was indignant about that.

¹ Approximately \$300,000

She looks outside as dusk settles in the yard. She feels the urge for a bowel movement and needs help, but she would never ask Choe for help with that. Because of her constipation, it would've taken hours anyway.

She dreads the night. 'There's no reason to drag out this misery and indignity. This has to end. I am sure I can accomplish that. Even a strong man will die, if he doesn't eat.'

She reaches for the notepad with Sunnie's phone number. 'Now that she is fifty-five, would she be generous enough to turn her bitterness into kindness toward her mother?'

The wall clock shows 3:00 a.m. She cannot sleep, so she sits up against the headboard. She opens the secret drawer and pulls out a square envelope, written "To Sunnie" on the front. Inside the envelope is a photograph of Sunnie when she was one hundred days old and her young parents. Usually one hundredth day after a baby's birth is observed with a big gathering, but that was not the case for little Sunnie because of the circumstances of her birth. Gawha had proposed to Heeju the three of them go to a studio in town to have their picture taken. Remembering the happy outing on that summer day, Gawha smiles and looks at the photograph, one of the few belongings that she was able to take when she left the village. It is the only baby picture for Sunnie, and she would treasure it.

Next, she pulls out the deed, the yellowing documents with red stamps proving her ownership of the house. She worked at all kinds of jobs to buy the property – owning the house has been a lifetime project. There are also her will and the power of attorney that enables Choe sell the house in case anything happens to her. Wondering how many more times she will look at these items, she returns them into the drawer and shuts it. She picks up the notepad with Sunnie's number and looks down at it.

Choe thinks he knows everything about her, but he doesn't know that she has stopped taking food and medicines. If she had any hopes, she would eat. She isn't doing much good for either Sunnie or Choe, to whom she is just a burden. He doesn't understand the depth of her sorrow and hopelessness because of that.

Spasms wreck her right leg. She clenches the headboard and waits for them to subside. She feels dizzy and faint, her head beginning to throb. She looks up at the wall clock, but it appears that there are several wall clocks up there, their pendulums swinging back and forth. She thinks

of Choe, sweating profusely, but she refuses to call him at home, even in that dire situation. She calls the nurse instead.

Gawha spent five days in the hospital. With six patients to a room, it was noisy all the time, and the light was left on all night. The doctor said blood clots had again blocked her blood flow to the brain, which resulted in the paralysis of her vocal cords. ‘Why didn’t they let me die?’ she thought. ‘I shouldn’t have called the nurse in the first place.’ She begged Choe to take her home, where the forsythias were blooming, so he brought her home this morning. He carried her from his truck to her room and placed her on the bed.

“Ah..., my bed.... so.... comfort....”

“You will feel better soon.”

Thirty minutes after she came home, his cell phone rings. He asks, “Where are you? ... That’s great. You are almost here. Follow your navigator. You have a perfect timing. Your mother has just come home.”

Gawha asks, “Who...?”

“Guess who she is?”

“Driv...ing...?”

“Your daughter is coming to see you. She left Seoul at five o’clock this morning.”

Gawha suddenly pulls herself up into a sitting position.

“*Nubu*, you’ve come alive! I called your daughter without your permission. Sorry about that, but I thought she should know about you. As soon as I told her you were gravely ill, she said she’d come to see you. She seems to be a decisive person.”

“Violet...blouse!” Gawha points at the closet.

Genteelly dressed, she watches the gate. She sits up straight.

He gives her the morning pills. “The doctor changed your medications.”

‘I’m finally seeing my daughter, but I have this speech problem. While she’s here, I shouldn’t have another stroke,’ she reasons and obediently swallows the pills.

“These are your afternoon pills.” He places them on the shelf of the headboard.

“Okay. Let’s have... lunch... three... *Jajangmyeon*...her favorite.”

“My goodness, you want to eat! The difference a daughter can make! I will order *Jajangmyeon* for you, but I will leave, so mother and daughter can have some private time.”

The doorbell rings. Choe runs out to the front yard and swings the wooden gate wide open. Through the windows, Gawha sees her daughter greeting him. Sunnie is wearing an olive green wool jacket and beige slacks. Her brown ankle-boots gleam in the morning sun. Her makeup is becoming, and she has the quietly confident air of a middle-aged woman.

‘Thank you, Buddha. Thank you, Goddess of Mercy!’

(The end)