

Chapter One: The First Person

By Ana Kim

Translated by Jina Kim

To: Ms. Q
Writing Instructor for the Therapy Program
Joyful Learning Center, Noeul Children's Home

From: 8th grade Class 1 Gwangji Gu

Title: Introduction Letter

I was born on the streets. I'm sure you are aware that the phrase "born on the streets" is a metaphor.

You asked me to first send an introduction letter. You asked me to write without conventional restrictions. You reassured me there was no need to write an answer to the prompt "Reason for Applying" as *unnis* in their twenties do when submitting their standardized introduction letter for employment. You said those reasons were mostly based on lies anyway. You also said that not too long before you came to Korea, you worked a part-time job editing or writing others' introduction letters. But now, instead of working for money, you said you wanted to focus fully on volunteering. You said you received a revelation: to find the most unfortunate children, to impart knowledge upon them. Then, these children will work together to find truth.

What does it feel like to know your purpose?

You said writing can be salvation and that's why you're starting a writing class for a few of the students of P-Town. Middle schoolers, to be exact. Before I lay out and explain the paths of my life, I would like to ask you a question. May I still apply for the writing class, despite not being Catholic?

Ms. Q, I have turned fifteen this year and I have a great memory. To describe how great my memory is, I must tell you that I can remember back to when I was two years old. One memory from then is extra clear and still fresh.

Sometimes I dream of that day, and it makes me stutter.

When I was two, I was sitting at a railway platform. No, I was sitting in a stroller that someone abandoned at a railway platform. One man approached me. This man was the first man I have ever laid eyes on as well as the first man I would ever call Father.

I had only been alive for 20 months but a sense of the man's danger did not escape me. This man—Father—pushed the stroller out, and, in that moment, I was born again. Even Father appointed that day as my birthday. September 3rd, 2010. This was my birthday. I recall the man taking me outside of the station and, in front of a 20 month old baby, smoking cigarette after cigarette. If I remember correctly, the box was colored gold—Marlboro Lights. A terrible stench.

Father was a thief.

The reason he stole me was simple. Pity. Only pity. He didn't feel pity for me—he wanted to use pity to sell stolen items.

Father, the fedora-wearing man who stole me in a stroller, was a distinctly different person from a thief. As for me, I may only be fifteen but I've figured something out. Ms. Q, you said your calling came to you as you were praying, gripping a rosary blessed by The Pope in the Vatican. You said sparks were flying around the rosary.

'Go forth to a small and isolated town in South Korea. Gather the children and teach them truth. Then they will come together and find their own truth.'

I learned that as long as one is human, everyone, with no exceptions, has a divine calling. In your case, this epiphany came to you through religion. In my case, I'm not sure yet. Anyways, my father received a calling as well. My father was the kind of person who, when passing through an industrial area in a blue truck on the outskirts of Gyeonggi-do, knew everything.

"Oh, that factory will be empty today. The one next to it is closed from tomorrow."

Father would open the driver's seat window, stretch his arms out towards the factories, and open his hand, as if his open palm was trying to acquire all there was to know about the area. Somehow, then, he would know.

"This factory mostly does cash transactions."

"The factory in front of that mountain is almost bankrupt."

"You see the factory we just passed? A freighter with inventory is scheduled to arrive from China next week."

"This factory looks like it's screwed."

You might wonder—"Maybe your father possesses superior intelligence. Or maybe he was born a genius. Gwangji?" Not even close. Father was dyslexic with a stutter. Please don't confuse my statements as discriminatory. I am simply sharing my father's diagnosis. He was a man that had a hard time reading and a hard time speaking. He had a major handicap in trying to function in his day-to-day life. At the same time, he was a bad person, his exceptional skill not to be underestimated.

I started keeping him company in that blue truck the year after Father kidnapped me.

The man I called Father did not have the brains to install a toddler carseat in the passenger seat. I sat in my carseat in my unchanged soiled diaper, my bottom so raw it felt like it would burst. The man I called Father would leave me in an unheated, chilled truck and head to an empty factory. I was forced to swallow the cold air that always had a tinge of mercury. I was freezing. I was always sick.

The man I called Father left me in the truck and went to the front of the factory. He was especially adept at picking locks with a clip or a string. His ten fingers were a swiss knife. For factories with surveillance cameras, he targeted the inventory out in the yard. Come to think of it, factory managers have too much faith in their neighbors, stacking pricey inventory out on the factory's front yard. Often, it was hidden under ash-gray tarp, but anyone could see that it was inventory.

Father usually went to the detergent factories. After all, there's no one in the world that doesn't need detergent. The man I called Father muttered shamelessly, as he moved the stockpiled Pigeon detergent boxes to the truck bed.

"My daughter better grow up fast so she can start moving boxes with me."

Once we've secured the stolen goods, we would return to our place in P-Town. The man I called Father stood in front of a mirror covered in a hazy layer of dust and used a small pair of scissors to carefully trim his nosehairs. He wore his ugly brown fedora and even sprayed a bottle of luxury cologne he had stolen from the first floor of the department store. It was Chanel. What's more luxurious than Chanel? Father adorned his hideous face and headed out somewhere in the truck again. I stayed alone in the room, underground and in the stagnant air. There was no food. There was no water. Feces overflowed from my diaper.

When I became five and started walking, I officially became Father's accomplice. In places other than the factory, of course.

He would put me in the truck and we would head to Seoul. The town we lived in, P-Town, was about an hour drive to Seoul. Yeouido, Mapo, Gangnam were all Father's new business territories because these areas had a lot of company buildings.

There was a huge gold building near Mapo station on Line 5. This building housed hundreds of companies—computer companies, advertising companies, food companies. Father, holding me with one hand and with the other, two containers of Pigeon in a non-woven bag, entered the building. (The Pigeon detergent was stolen from a factory in P-Town.) I knew from how tightly he gripped the detergent. I thought to myself, Father cared about the Pigeon detergent more than me.

The man I called Father started ringing office doorbells from the second floor. Usually young, beautiful, and healthy women would answer with a friendly but guarded face, and they often flinched at the wretched sight of Father. He was pathetic and sickly. The women would typically try to close the door, when my dad would turn ever so slightly, revealing the secret weapon that I was—too young, adorable, and frail. You now understand why I mentioned pity earlier, right?

As a baby, I had ivory skin and full eyebrows. Yellow-brown snot was stuck to my nostril from no one wiping my nose. There were even dry scabs here and there. Because we were always in the freezing underground room, my cheeks were stained red with pink spider veins. My clothes were clearly hand-me-down quality. There was not one woman that could turn us away after seeing my chubby, pink fingers holding Father's hand. Then my father would say the punchline.

"Do you, by any chance, need detergent?"

The women would carefully open the office doors and that was all they had to do. Father always closed the deal.

What he called a unit price list was just a piece of A4-sized paper with numbers scribbled in a Sharpie. This is how the man I called Father sold out Pigeon. From the second to the fifteenth floor. There wasn't an office in that building that didn't buy Pigeon from Father. When I grew older, Father told me it was game over when he entered through the door with me in his arms. We sold all the stolen Pigeon because of me, my pitiful face. We were rich. No, Father was rich.

Instead of returning to P-Town and using that money to pay rent, he would do a very unoriginal thing. What could it be? He would go to a place that had the words 'Little Baduk' written in large letters on the door. It was a gambling room in a building that was draped in dark vinyl wrap, its contents a secret to the outside. Yes, it's true. Father lost all his money there. He had to steal detergent again. He had to sell them. He had to carry me around.

Father carried me until I became seven. Later on, I grew too tall and my legs dangled. Once I became seven, Father could no longer carry me. Pigeon detergent would no longer sell. Father's prophetic gift, as it happens, became dull. His sharp touch of clairvoyance was overused on 바둑이 games. Before long, I also became an elementary school student. Obviously, I had no friends.

Despite the lack of care from the man I called Father, I grew very tall. On the other hand, my father, unable to pay his debts, lost finger after finger. For every finger he lost, I grew taller.

130 centimeters, 153 centimeters, 161 centimeters. For an eight-year-old, I was pretty tall. Though, I didn't grow after that.

Due to my height, I could pass as a grown-up. I was as smooth of a talker as a grown-up was too.

From the moment I entered elementary school, the delinquent middle schoolers next door paid me to purchase and deliver cigarettes and alcohol. Come to think of it, since I was a child, I revealed my appearance and something was given in return. My appearance felt as protective as steel and my face felt like currency. Absolutely undefeated, my face could buy everything from detergent, cigarettes, Hennessy Paradis, Jim Beam, Johnny Walker, Ballantine's, to *Chamisul*. I was walking money. And to my advantage, I figured out how to give those middle schoolers exactly what they wanted.

"Hey, I bet you're feeling Jim Beam more than soju today, right? You want that?"

"Do you want me to get you Parliaments instead of Camel Lights today?"

Do you know what the key to getting on the good side of rebellious teens is? It's to butter them up. At the core, they're control freaks that just want to taste a bit of power. So, if you kiss their ass and tell them what they want to hear, you can become the best errand girl. I was a very competent errand girl. That's life.

I got more comfortable, and at a certain point, Father became smaller, like a balloon losing air. He had only three fingers left. Young muscular men—the kind that sported gang tattoos—continued to pound on our door everyday looking for the debt he amassed from his gambling. The man I called Father became so small that his size was comparable to my toddler self that barely fit in the passenger seat of his blue truck. Cowardly as he was, he would drag his small body to the wardrobe for me to deal with the young men. I opened the metal gate and welcomed the thugs. They came in with their enormous trap muscles and brawny movements and looked around the filthy house. Then, I would lie to them that my father abandoned me. Politely. Gently. And in tears.

"Can't I come with you to find my father?"

The thug, a thick finger in his nose, responded.

"Why?"

"He stole my money and ran away. The money I earned from running errands."

"Child."

"Please take me with you."

The thugs would pretend to take a phone call and slowly draw back. I could see the dark screen as clear as day, and yet, they answered the phone. Once they left, I closed the front door and walked to the front of the wardrobe. I opened the wardrobe door wide and told Father in a loud voice that the men were gone. He would be lying face down, shuddering. Yes, seeing his utter submission to fear

reminded me of something. In the city, there is a vendor on the streets that sells roast chicken from a truck. Father was just like that roast chicken, that shrunk and shriveled, shoulders drooped and ambition disappeared. I could not feel pity for Father. I think I've exhausted the emotion of pity before I even entered elementary school. What I had left was rage and violence.

I appointed a time for every day.

I set an alarm for 8:30 in the evening. 8:30 was perfect. Every evening, Father slept on a very small blanket. The alarm rang at 8:30 sharp and upon hearing the sound, I began to kick Father. For around 10 minutes, everyday, with the hopes he would die. Everyday.

To be honest, I still have those dreams. Dreams that I am kicking Father. In my dreams, for every kick, I spit out a sentence.

"Who are my real parents."

"Who is my real mother."

"Who is my real father."

"Where do I come from."

When I became eleven, Father was as tiny as I was when I was three. I was rich enough from being an errand girl to support myself and I no longer paid Father any attention. I simply laid him in a hidden corner of the house on a blanket and left him there. To live or to die. Did I care? Before he said these fated words, I didn't. The words were these.

"Daughter, let's sell items from our truck like the old days. It's your father's wish."

It's human nature to want to re-live one's glory days, especially in times of depression. Around this time, I fell in love with books. I dominated all writing contests. Not school-wide writing contests. Nation-wide writing contests. I was the novel-writing errand girl.

One of my favorite novelists was obviously Vladimir Nabokov. There was something intriguing about his writing style. It was full of yearning. A heartbreaking amount of yearning and nostalgia. I'm only fifteen-years-old, writing this letter, so I can only describe Nabokov's style using plain words like yearning and nostalgia. It's deplorable and sad, but I'm sure I will make more appropriate word choices with the help of your writing class.

What does this Russian novelist yearn for so badly anyway? Could it be Sebastian Knight's life or memories of travels with Dolores? I feel a certain magnetic force from his words, Ms. Q. How should I describe it... Something strong and inevitable. Oh, speak to me, memories. I spent the last summer break before I turned thirteen on a trip I and the man I called Father have taken before. Thanks to Nabokov's nostalgic style, I found an opportunity to tour around Seoul with Father. I guess you could say that Nabokov is also the reason I met Mr. Jeffrey Yang.

The moment my thirteen-year-old self met Mr. Jeffrey Yang was a turning point in my short life.

I was starting to look around Seoul, carrying my shriveled up Father like an infant. I didn't have a driver's license, nor did I know how to drive, so we headed to Gangbyun Station on a red intercity bus. I was confused about where to go on the Line 2 subway. Did we have to go to Mapo? Where were we supposed to go? The man I called Father had no intention of snooping through factories, stealing Pigeon detergent. When I become a legal adult, I know I'd be able to commit illegal crimes. I didn't

want to do that then, though, because I didn't want to be someone like Father. At least, before I became an adult.

I sat on a priority seat, carrying Father. No elderly yelled at me to get up from the seat. Comfort over scolding would be more appropriate for a child carrying her 30 centimeter long father. The elderly must have seen this because they handed me silver breath freshener pills and acacia-flavored gum. Father shed the spirited personality of his glory-filled thief days, and chewed on the silver pills politely instead.

However, the child of this small fucking thief was full of complaints. The reason was because even after a full round of Seoul, profit was not as easily made as before. Gwangji, think. Of the times we lugged Pigeon detergent up the stairs of the gold building in Mapo. We made 2.5 million won in a day once. Haha. So what? Why do grown-ups desire the return of their glory days so badly? This thought lingered even when I saw the full-page ad for Mr. Jeffrey Yang's autobiography on the wall of a train compartment.

In my opinion, writing an autobiography is a privilege of those with dynamic pasts. For instance, when I grow up, I'm not going to waste my time writing an autobiography. So, in that sense, I was envious of Mr. Yang's privilege. I had to get my hands on it. I carried Father with me and got off at Samsung Station.

'Jeffrey Yang Reminisces on His Glory'

On the entire way to Kyobo Book Store, unending ads in vinyl film for Mr. Yang's autobiography were plastered on the walls. The book cover was gold. In the ads, they were portrayed with gold cellophane for dramatic eye-catching purposes. The material reflected light against the smooth COEX floor, and it glared into my eyes. I walked closer to the ads and ripped a small piece that was already peeling off. I felt like I was keeping close the greatness of a finance mogul that lived an opulent life before retiring and establishing a foundation for Korea's children in need.

How nice would it have been if that piece of cellophane could somehow transfer Jeffrey Yang's success to me.

I walked away from the ads to the store. To all directions, little shops were lined up, selling flamingo, olive, and dolphin-colored cute jellies and candies, waffles with salted caramel, and gold foamed espresso drinks. All creation seemed to exist here and it was paradise. I wondered what it would feel like to have ads for one's autobiography displayed in this sort of place. As a writer, as a person, I was envious of Mr. Yang.

Finally, I arrived at COEX's bookstore. The familiar gold glint I was admiring greeted me at the bookstore entrance. I started rubbing the hidden piece of cellophane. Father was complaining that he was hungry but I couldn't even hear that type of noise because at that moment, I saw, right at the entrance, Mr. Jeffrey Yang's autobiography exhibited like an ancient artifact. A pile of books were stacked into a pyramid formation and to each side of the pyramid, gold cellophane unfolded like wings of flame.

I grabbed one book, with Father sleeping in my arms. I went deeper into the store where no one was around. I was alone in the Korean Literature section. I laid the man I called Father on the floor and opened Mr. Yang's autobiography to the first page.

Surprising fact number one.

Mr. Jeffrey Yang, like me, was born on the streets. Holding the book in my hands, my palms were sweating. The paper became wet and thin.

Surprising fact number two.

Mr. Jeffrey Yang, born on the streets, grew up, like me, in the P-Town children's home. (Learning this, I felt electrified again. He's from P-Town, just like me!) He was admitted into Seoul University as a finance major on a scholarship and by sophomore year, he was working as an intern at one bank financial group. And a fateful encounter occurs.

During his time as an intern, he met the CEO of the leading Korean luxury lingerie company X at a dinner. The CEO of company X immediately recognized Mr. Yang's sharpness and he became a young Mr. Yang's mentor. Mr. Yang, reminiscing on this incident, called it the luckiest thing to happen in his life.

As I was reading this part, I admired Mr. Yang's modesty. As much as luck must have played a part, would the CEO of company X have given him a chance if Mr. Yang didn't have such extraordinary ability? I had only known Mr. Jeffrey Yang as the gentleman that recently came out on a food variety program. I knew he was famous and wealthy but I didn't know how he had lived his life. I attempted to read on when Father woke up.

"Gwangji, did you make us a lot of money today?"

I put down the book and looked at him. Eye goop was peppered along his eyes and dried drool reached all the way to his cheekbones. Rage bubbled inside of me. I was reading something potentially life-changing and the man I called Father—no, the thief that stole a small child—had the audacity to ask if I had made a lot of money for us.

I committed my first theft that day.

I stood up, carrying Father, and tucked the book next to my side. If I could walk out of the bookstore as innocently as possible, I could read the rest of the book. However, destiny is vicious and I was foolish. As soon as I took a step out of the entrance, the anti-theft alarms were triggered. Security guards in suits and the employees came up to me, saying errors happen, but protocol required them to conduct a luggage check.

Father must have been shocked by the alarm because his mouth closed up like a clam. The employees found Mr. Yang's autobiography on my side. They looked as though they were suffering a headache because of me, the child-like petty thief. The man I called Father started laughing, convulsively shrieking.

"Stupid Gwangji is finally a thief, just like her old man."

His laughter became louder. He pointed his thick, dull finger at me, snickering at his daughter's newfound criminal status, as fate would have it. I started crying. Hahaha. Bahaha. The man I called Father fell over cackling. I spoke in tears.

"I just wanted to finish this book."

The first destined encounter.

An employee took my hand and headed to the office. The security guard was redirecting the bystanders that were swarming around me. Devastated, I followed the employee. The hand that was holding mine was warm and soft. She sat me down in a chair and waited until I was calm. Father hushed and I wiped my tears when the employee asked me why I did what I did.

“I just wanted to finish the book.”

“Is that really the reason?”

I nodded my head and blurted out another thought. I felt like I had to for some reason.

“Please lend me some money. I have no way to go back home.”

She took the book away and instead, placed ten 1000 won bills in my hand. As Father and I left the bookstore and walked down to Samsung station, he muttered to himself. Gwangji got 10 thousand won. Born and picked up from the streets. My own daughter made 10 thousand won.

“Shut up.”

I screamed at the man I called Father.

The second destined encounter.

The next day, Mr. Jeffrey Yang contacted me. Not through the phone, but through the school. It was less of contacting and more of someone finding me. After lunch, my teacher called me. He repeated my name as if he had just then realized that I was a part of his roster. Gwangji, so this is Gwangji, he continuously muttered. I followed my teacher to the teacher’s lounge, where I found a man in a fancy suit. Since that day, I think I’ve seen this man twice. The first time was when he picked me up in a limousine on the day I was set to head for the dorms at the ‘Happy Children’ Welfare Foundation. The second time...well, I’ll talk about that later.

That second time is too strange for me to be able to put in words in my introduction letter. I think I would need your help, Ms. Q. I did write a piece describing my dreams, so please read it during dream composition time.

I’ll return to my retelling of the past. I was in awe of the man’s shining suit. Even though it was black, its gloss reflected a blue light. A pin on his necktie sparkled in a way I had never seen before, like seeing an illustrated obsidian crystal in real life. His glasses had a clear frame and his teeth were even clearer than his frames, so white it was almost blue. He was one of Mr. Jeffrey Yang’s secretaries. He approached me in the teacher’s lounge.

Even his polished dress shoes were—what’s the best way to describe—luxurious. It wasn’t the noise that screeched out when thin sneaker soles created friction with the floor (if you know, you know). It was a sturdy but nimble sound. Hm, if I could make a musical analogy, I would say the sound belonged to a major scale. Chin down, I was overcome by the sound. To someone whom poverty, lack, and deficiency was a standard, this man’s extravagance seemed like it would be difficult to get used to. Bravely, I lifted my head and looked at him.

“I heard you wanted to read Mr. Yang’s autobiography so badly that you shoplifted it.”

I nodded.

“What about Mr. Yang were you curious about?”

To be honest, I knew. Every teacher, every student in there for academic guidance, every secretary in that room was listening to my conversation. I wasn’t used to this silence. I was used to daily disinterest and overwhelming noise, not attention and silence.

“I learned that Mr. Yang is from P-Town.”

I answered. He cocked his head towards me.

“Knowing he’s from the same town as me inspired me to be as successful as Mr. Yang. Since entering elementary school, I’ve been reading a lot. Books have always given me truth and solutions.”

Silence.

“I believed Mr. Yang’s autobiography would provide me with direction”

Revelation.

The story I wanted to tell the secretary must have been divine revelation.

“We have decided to sponsor you and your passion for books. We would like for you to be able to read as much as you want.”

The secretary spoke. I didn’t know what he meant exactly, but I nodded my head anyway. Only once I got home did I understand the man’s implied intention. There was a lengthy car parked out front. I immediately felt so much fear that I nearly lost control of my bladder. Usually the thugs that came to threaten Father to pay them back drove nice cars. Although, this car was nicer than any car I had seen before. The blue-light that the secretary emitted on his suit was even brighter on the long car that awaited. Shocked, I went downstairs.

One man was standing awkwardly, slouching, in the living room. He was so tall that he looked like someone folded him inside. I realized for the first time that the ceiling height that was so suitable for me could be a discomfort for someone else. The tall man had salt and pepper hair. I recall thinking his sideburns must have been dyed completely silver. He bent over as if he was trying to check something. The man asked if I was Gwangji. Father sat quietly on the couch. I was worried he would act out.

“You must be the cute rebel that tried to steal my book.”

It was hard to see the speaker’s face because of the light, but his silver sideburns caught the light like a fishing hook. I gathered the courage to look up at this man. The wrinkles around his eyes, nose, and lips looked like parentheses. They were indicators that let everyone know he was an important person.

Yes, This person was Mr. Jeffrey Yang. Anyone could see that he was important. A person whose presence was an unwavering pressure. A person who could not be trifled with. I’m sure the CEO of company X felt the same benevolent intimidation. An inexplicable pull. I felt instinctually that I should not let this man go. He must have read my mind because he spoke to me.

“I see that you’re living next to the welfare foundation. You and I have deep ties.”

Since I was young, whenever I looked out the small window, probably not even the size of a block of wood, I would see how towering Mr. Yang’s welfare foundation building was. In that moment, I saw my life flash before my eyes like a panorama—a scene of being kidnapped when I was two by the man I called Father, a scene of wandering around in the truck with stolen Pigeon detergent, a scene of petty theft fueled by the desire to read a book. The thirteen-year-old me, in the short moment, had the epiphany that maybe everything that I endured, all the unnecessarily painful struggles, was all a rehearsal for meeting Mr. Jeffrey Yang.

He approached me and held both of my hands. He was wearing the softest pair of leather gloves. When he grabbed my hands, I heard the leather twist—a chilling sound that only accentuated Mr. Yang’s authority. As awe-inspiring as he was, I could not figure out what he wanted from me. My ignorant brain. Should I apologize? How? Politely? I blubbered through tears.

“Mr. Yang, I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry about stealing.”

“No, Gwangi. You are extraordinary.”

He grabbed my hands more firmly. He had a strong grip. The sound of the twisting leather was loud too. I felt him using his nails to tickle my palm. For a second, I was confused. Did I not do wrong?

“There is such a thing as good theft and bad theft. What you did—the noble pursuit of truth? That’s white theft.”

Mr. Yang stroked my hair and said to the man I called Father.

“This child is very special. She needs a better environment.”

Father said with a sigh, not to Mr. Jeffrey Yang, but to me.

“Gwangji, I don’t think I can handle you any longer either.”

This was a second birth for me. I entered the dorms of the alternative school affiliated with Mr. Yang’s foundation. Of course, I dropped out of elementary school and I was not going to enter middle school.

Mr. Yang’s Happy Children Welfare Foundation, shortened to HCW, had two campuses, including private educational institutes and dormitories, in the Mapo and Songpa neighborhoods. Among the students that attended these campuses, those with particularly bright paths ahead of them were selected to live at the dorms on an island next to Ulleung Island. This was Mr. Yang’s private island and it was purely for poor and at-risk children. Jeffrey Yang, having been one of those struggling children from small and forgotten P-Town, apparently wanted to dedicate his post-retirement life to child welfare.

The island that only the elite of HCW could go--the island that only the chosen few could ever step foot on--could be reached by boat. Truthfully, I couldn’t tell you how many kids were on that island. I was alone on the boat. It was a special boat meant only for me. A top quality boat with a glimmer of a soda-like color. Even the engine sounded expensive. It was just me and the captain on that boat. On top of that, the captain didn’t talk much.

“What’s the name of the island?”

I asked the captain. He didn’t answer.

You could find anything on that island. A restaurant, a theater, a grocery store, a convenience store, an arcade, a sauna, massage room, gym, sports center, pool, concert hall, ballroom, hospital...This is the extent to which I remember. One class had a population of 5 students but I don’t know how many classes there were because there was almost no interaction with other students. We all took classes in different places and it was the same with meals and leisure time. They were just classmates by name. There was no opportunity to socialize with others, except for P.E. and meal time.

There were practically no rules on the island. Gwangji, don’t do that. Gwangji, that’s not right, we don’t do that. No one said those words here. The only rules they had were not to associate with classmates and not to be curious about who was in different classes. Apparently Mr. Jeffrey Yang, in a high-minded manner, intended for us to focus on our studies.

It wasn’t hard. Every kid on the island was chasing success, a bright future. Not memories with friends.

Memories can be made after we get rich, right?

All the students were taking private lessons, and each one got a whole room to themselves. The mattresses were fluffy and since there were two pillows, I could adjust the height. Oh, the food! I miss

the meals the most. The three meals on the island were full of fantastical foods that I had never experienced in my life.

Ratatouille, rib eye, drumsticks with cheese, maze soba, grilled dumplings, tornado potatoes. When we had lobster with melted butter, the sizzling bright red shell made me tear up. How can an aroma this pleasant exist? Were others casually smelling this on the daily?

I wondered if I, who carried my shrunken father around Samsung station, could eat the same lobster that mukbang YouTubers eat, if I had the right to even hold one of those juicy claws. One kid next to me actually cried. He wiped his tears with the back of his hand and swore, with his hands clasped together as if in prayer, that he would always be grateful to Mr. Jeffrey Yang, that he was ready to devote everything he had to Mr. Yang.

King crab and cheetos dust covered chicken.

Tonkotsu ramen, seaweed with tuna sashimi.

Pepperoni pizza, *jokbal* and cold salad. *Tteokgalbi*.

The old reliable lime Coke Zero. Vin Chaud on chilly days.

I felt a certain power that food gives—an authority that unique scents give. If I had continued to live with Father, would I have been able to eat this type of food? He knew Chanel colognes, but had he ever eaten from this unique world of food? Had he ever even thought about buying me this type of food?

On the island, they took care of students' health as well. Every morning and evening, they gave us a plate with vitamins and Pocari-Sweat. I looked at the plate's label on the back. It was expensive. Whenever I took the vitamins delivered on that precious dish and laid down, I fell asleep immediately. The sound of my snoring echoed as soon as 9PM hit. It wasn't like the insomniac days at the underground room in P-Town. I slept well, deeply, in fact.

I dreamed a lot too.

As a special admissions student in literature, I was preparing to apply to an arts high school. HCW was already designated as alternative education, so applying to high school admissions was no problem at all. Plus, there was zero tuition and the best teachers in their respective fields came to the island to teach me. Famous people from TV or YouTube and Instagram were invited to teach or lecture. I'm not able to confirm this, but I also heard politicians would come and go as well. Guest lectures would happen lavishly every Saturday in the ballroom. Each lecturer was different per class.

The first lecture I ever attended was given by the CEO of company X. The 5 people in my class, Mr. Jeffrey Yang, and the CEO all in the grand ballroom. There were up to 3 chandeliers and the huge windows all over the place were covered by a thick curtain with a soft texture. For each round table, there were two students. We heard that our guest loves Mexican food. The buffet was incredible. Special foods that I couldn't even pronounce were in rectangular silver containers. The teachers were drinking beer. The underaged children drank Pocari-Sweat. Actually, in reality, there were a few that drank beer. The CEO said it was okay to drink if grown-ups were present. One of the students who drank was me.

Frankly, the students didn't have much to say to each other. We didn't know each other well. We didn't even know each other's celebrity crushes or which classmate was a literature student or a student athlete. We didn't talk. Instead of paying any attention to each other, the students talked to the

teachers. The teachers often had private meetings with the students in counseling rooms to give career advice. I, too, had several conversations with Mr. Jeffrey Yang in the counseling room. Mr. Yang always guided students in, never without the soft leather gloves on both hands.

He advised that if I was going to pursue a notoriously unlucrative profession as literature, I should be well-versed in economic concepts. I was so nervous, listening to his suggestions, that I chugged the beer I was offered.

He asked me if I knew how many artists' demise was due to their ignorance about money and the way the world goes around. I suppressed my nerves and shyly nodded. I was beyond nervous, being in a room alone with a teacher I respected. I was on an emotional rollercoaster. Intense joy and excitement spurted and then dissipated in no time. I suddenly wanted to laugh. My shoulders curled up from holding in my laughter and Mr. Yang gave me a warm hug. He filled my cup to the brim with beer, reassuring me that it was okay to drink with an adult. I drank and drank.

And then, I had a dream. A strange one. I couldn't tell if I was dreaming in the presence of Mr. Yang or if after our meeting, I returned to my room. All I remember is writhing in fear from a nightmare. Once I opened my eyes, however, I was back in my dorm.

I won't write the contents of my dream here. After all, the reason I signed up for your writing class is because of this dream. I was reading the pamphlet for the children's home after school extracurricular activities, when this class caught my eye. 3 session class: Dream Journaling.

Ms. Q, I had this nightmare everyday during my stay on the island. I'm not the type of person that dreams often, so this phenomenon has always been a question for me. Don't nightmares occur when one is in an unstable time of their lives? I couldn't be happier on that island. My mind was in chaos from the disparity between dream and reality. On top of that, I was dreaming about something that I've never thought about before.

To clarify, the dreams that I've had so far were based on the world that I knew. But the nightmares on the island took place somewhere that I've never even thought of. I was even dreaming about something that I had never dealt with before. It was unpleasant and uncomfortable. I tried to avoid sleeping. I would pull all-nighters, playing the watermelon game on the Nintendo. I was always sleep-deprived. I couldn't concentrate on coding and I increasingly clung onto Mr. Yang. He gifted me a burner phone.

"This phone is for communication between you and me, no one else."

This is what Mr. Jeffrey Yang said to me. I couldn't help checking that jet black Motorola, placed slightly on my desk. It didn't matter whether I was in class, studying, or reading. When will he call me? When will he text me? Is he busy in Seoul? Every break that I had, I would search up Mr. Jeffrey Yang on Naver. I obsessed over what his schedule looked like. When I heard the sound of a boat engine on the dock, I craned my neck out the window to see who was getting off.

Sometimes, I saw hallucinations. Of Mr. Yang getting off the boat in an ivory colored suit. He had large paper bags in both hands. On those bags were department store brand logos that I had never seen before. I had to avoid my nightmares, so I only slept an hour a day. I was so tired that as soon as I laid on my bed, I fell asleep immediately. But with sleep came the nightmares. So, I kept away from my bed as much as possible and waited for Mr. Yang.

The time I spent with him wasn't particularly special. We usually chatted in his bedroom. I deliciously drank the beer that Mr. Yang himself would pour in for me and listened to him talk. He had a lot of interest in photography. He took pictures of me..... Now that I think about it, we didn't do much other than take pictures. Once, I told him that I was jealous of the kids that took videos on a Canon camcorder and posted it on Instagram. The next week, Mr. Yang bought me a used Canon camcorder.

"Gwangji, did you know that a used camcorder is more valuable than a new one?"

"Why is that?"

"Because it contains the feeling of the era it was made."

I had no idea what he meant. He removed the lens cover of the camcorder and started taking shots here and there. When he was snapping away, I didn't do anything.

Not a single thing.

But in reality, it wasn't nothing. That's how I feel when I think about it now. I'm not sure what I mean but it wasn't nothing. I want to think that it was nothing, but it wasn't nothing. He shot me on the camcorder and asked me to pose. That was all I did. I couldn't even properly pose the way it was requested, but Mr. Yang never got angry about it. Though my poses were always a disaster, he even always brought me a small gift back from Seoul.

Even when I never told him that I wanted xyz. Fountain pens and ink from a luxury brand I'd never even heard of, notebooks and leather watches, an iPad and AirPods, a Macbook and a Calvin Klein bra. Maybe because he made me extremely nervous, I could hardly contain my emotions and never found the chance to express my gratitude.

Mr. Jeffrey Yang was like a father to me. To me, tired and exhausted, he was forever my father. If he had found me as a toddler instead of *that* man, if, instead of selling stolen Pigeon with *that* man, he had found and saved me, maybe my life would have been different. What if, what if—this phrase haunted me.

If Mr. Yang was my father, where would I have been? Mapo or some other neighborhood? He promised me that once I go to college, we would visit Spain's Camino de Santiago every vacation.

We would visit Dresden, Edinburgh, and Salzburg too.

And Berlin. And London.

I think Mr. Yang and I met once every weekend. I wanted to make the most of the time we spent together. However, maybe I was constantly nervous or really sleepy on the days of our meetings; I never remembered what he and I did together. I guess I have a low tolerance for alcohol. I don't remember anything after drinking. It wasn't like I was sleeping, but it wasn't exactly like I was awake either. It was a strange state to be in. All I know is that after Mr. Yang left, all that remained was the strangeness like a heat. Back when I lived in the underground room in P-Town, a stray cat came into the house and lay on a floor cushion for a bit. When I touched the floor cushion after the cat left, it was warm.

I was worried I came off as rude to Mr. Yang during my dream-like states. I always sent him a text the day after our meetings that I was sorry.

"Mr. Yang, I just want to make sure—did I offend you yesterday? I haven't been sleeping lately. My judgment isn't too great. I apologize."

He always told me not to worry about it.

“Why do I always feel loopy when I’m with you?”

I responded. His answers were always as follows.

“You must be very nervous when you spend time with me.”

After I had been having these private sessions with Mr. Yang for around a month, I started feeling sick. I was in pain somewhere, but I couldn’t exactly tell where the pain was coming from. It was a pain like no other. Have you ever experienced it, Ms. Q? When your body is itchy but you don’t know where? This was how I felt. I knew I was feeling pain somewhere, but, for the life of me, I didn’t know where. I got relief patches from the nurse’s office, but I didn’t even have a sense of where to place them.

An unlocated pain. I would sometimes raise a finger in bed and poke an area, to see if that was it. I hoped that if I designated that as the area the pain was coming from and gently stroked it, I would feel better. On top of this, I was barely getting any sleep, so if I fell asleep for even a second, I would have episodes of sleepwalking. In my dreams. I was always walking along the sea. When I woke up, my full body was in the ocean, trying to stay afloat.

The more moments I had like this, I awaited Mr. Jeffrey Yang. Maybe all this pain that I had been enduring was all necessary in order to meet my second father. Like in a movie, or a comic book, or the Bible.....

I’m not sure I, of all people, can talk about the Bible.

Martyrs are always experiencing the worst sort of pain. Ms. Q, I think I considered myself a martyr. I had to be in pain. I had to be lacking sleep. If all of this struggling was so that I could meet my admirable second father, I had to hurt. If it meant receiving Mr. Yang’s warmth and gifts, I had to endure any and all pain.

I tried not to reveal how ill I was. Whining about my illness would be the worst reaction to Mr. Yang’s kindness. Patience. Endurance. These were my tasks.

At some point, however, I couldn’t control my bowels. My anus was where the pain was coming from. I finally found out. The other four students in my class were also girls. One of the few group classes I had at HCW island was P.E. We were doing squats together when it happened. I inhaled the lobster lunch that day, and after I finished one, I returned back to the cafeteria to ask for another half lobster. I should have known. Overeating always brings diarrhea. That’s why this happened. The smell and everything.

I shat my pants.

Since that day, I kept my head down. The shame of being unable to control how much I eat was pulling me away from my studies too. The sleepwalking worsened. In my dreams, I always made the wrong decision, and because of it, I wound up shaking from fear. Even though there was nothing to be scared of, I lived in terror everyday. Have you ever observed a shut carbonated drink? If you open the cap slowly, the carbonation rises to the neck of the bottle. You’re supposed to wait to open the bottle completely. I was like that. I possessed the anxiety of a bottle of sparkling water with a half-opened cap.

My body released the stress in an unpleasant way. Through shit.

Eventually, I was expelled from the program. I couldn't accept it and reached out to Mr. Yang, but he never responded. I texted him everyday but I couldn't get a text back. I was shocked and everything felt like a dream.

After spending a year "abroad" at the island, I returned to P-Town. I took a boat and landed on the mainland. The secretary dropped me off at the grocery store in P-Town. My legs nearly buckled as I got out of the car. It was hard to walk. My whole body ached. There were scrapes all over me that I couldn't explain. Bruises and shit too. The secretary said one thing before he left. It still rings heavily in my head.

"Lesve everything that happened on the island as a dream—as a third-rate film. You know, those trashy movies always ends with the main character saying, 'It was all just a dream.'"

I was born again, for the third time. My body was throbbing. My underwear had shit all over. I was already fifteen. I couldn't sleep. When I didn't sleep, my throat stayed in a perpetual state of itchiness, as if a cold was coming on. It was dry, as if I had drank poison with pieces of glass in it.

Barbeque, Yeol Ramyun with green onion oil, tacos, aglio oglio, açai bowls, salmon salads, all the foods that were my happiness and joy, the foods that could have been my future, the mesmerizing aromas...

To: Ms. Q
Writing Instructor for the Therapy Program
Joyful Learning Center, Noeul Children's Home

From: Aurora Kim

Title: (No Title)

Attached File: Aurora.txt

I was born August 1st, 2010 in a greenhouse. My mother was Phùng and my father was XX. They were illegal immigrant laborers, so apparently, they didn't want to go to an obstetrician. To this day, I still don't know the name of my father.

When my mother gave birth to me, she saw a vision of a richly colored aurora inside the greenhouse. That's why she named me Aurora. In the greenhouse, my parents placed me in a sturdy box that they used to put harvested strawberries in. They didn't have a blanket so they warmed me with a few layers of folded tarp. They walked to Noeul Children's Home, rang the bell, and left me at the doorstep. I had a yellow post-it stuck to my forehead. One word—AURORA—was written on it. This is what the children's home teachers told me. Anyways, they all called me Aurora. I took the director's last name and became Aurora Kim. I'm under his family registry as well.

I'm always grateful to the children's home director.

When I was eight, by chance, I ran into my birth mother. This woman was in and out of jail due to charges of habitual marijuana use. She was even on the 8 o' Clock News. The assistant director asked me if I wanted to be introduced to her, but I refused. I remarked that I was born within the fog of marijuana smoke and the assistant director just laughed. She had told me not to watch the news or search my mother up, but I did. I couldn't tell what she looked like, if she was really my mother, because she had towels on her hands and a hood over her head. A limping woman whose face was covered in darkness.

The children's home was nice. They not only sheltered me since I was a child but they also took me back after I briefly left.

Since I was young, I have loved to dance. Once I started going to school, I always danced at the school talent shows. I didn't have any dancer friends. There were some kids huddled together that were preparing to become kpop idol trainees, but I was always alone. On a long and wide stage, I was always alone. I took up very little space.

You're a lone wolf.

My homeroom teacher commented once.

Why are you always a lone wolf?

He asked me.

Why? Everyone knows why. All it takes to know is to look at the color of my skin. Kids at the children's home ask me if there's something wrong with my face and if I'm sick. What language do you speak? Are you Korean? What color is your passport? When Vietnam and Korea are playing against each other at the World Cup, who are you rooting for? Is it Viet Cong?

School trips were pretty much the same. I took any opportunity I could to be on stage. Why is that ○○○ bitch such an attention seeker? This is what the other kids would say to me. The only reactions I have ever gotten on stage were teasing and whispering, never applause. Every time I passed by, I got whispers. And looks. ○○○ was a word that I'd never heard of before. I was curious what word was being used to curse at me, but a part of me also knew knowing would hurt more.

I carried a tail of whispers. Like a truck that splashes water driving over a puddle, wherever I was, I left a trail of dirty words. Dancing was my only relief.

Sometimes, I would dance on camera in the front yard of the children's home and post it on YouTube. I desired to become a great dancer. And I was doing everything that could be done. I practiced everyday for at least 3 hours and for an added boost, I slept while listening to a sound frequency for success. I needed to keep moving. Luckily, the children's home had an afterschool program at the youth center that included a zumba dance class. I honed my skills at that zumba dance class with all the *ajummas*. They all encouraged my dancing, impressed by my flexibility and artistry. They said I would become famous.

I kept posting my dance videos on YouTube until I was thirteen years old. When I was in the 6th grade, an entertainment company emailed me asking if I was interested in competing in a KPop idol reality competition show hosted by YouTube. I didn't have anyone to ask if the email was legitimate, so I showed the assistant director. She said that she wasn't sure and that she would ask the director. If the director didn't know, she said she would ask her daughter. Her daughter looked it up

and confirmed it was, in fact, a real company. I told the assistant director that I wanted to compete in the show and she emailed the company for me.

Everything was completely legitimate. It was a program that was being hosted in partnership with a cable network called KNet. To be honest, I thought, since my only training was aerobics or zumba classes, I would get eliminated pretty early on, but I actually made it to the debut group. Papers said my last name was Kim, but on the internet, people called me Nguyen. I had never heard that word before, so I looked it up. Nguyen.

Turns out, it was one of the most common last names in Vietnam—like Kim in Korea. Nguyen and Kim weren't so different. I didn't even know I was Vietnamese. I wondered, in the whispers that were persistently following me around, might there have been an iteration of Nguyen? The word that I tried hard not to be curious about—○○○. It was Nguyen. My stomach tickled. A strange feeling. I should have stayed away from the internet. I shouldn't even have been on social media.

Ultimately, the reality competition show did not progress the way I wanted it to. I've always had boyish hair since I was a child. Because of this, in one episode, the people started questioning my gender. The reason I had such short hair was because it's comfortable to dance in, but this became an issue. I'm tall (173 centimeters) and this also became an issue. They even started questioning my age, claiming I didn't look like I was thirteen. They said I had too much to say for someone who didn't even look Korean. I was just happy to be dancing and to have been chosen for the debut group, but this kind of chatter was circulating the internet. The program director asked if I could bring a copy of my birth certificate, so the children's home assistant director got one printed.

The program director thought that I needed to address what was being said on the internet, and to just be honest, when I was speaking about it in an interview. The day before the shoot, the assistant director called, warning me not to look up the news again. The last time she gave me that warning was the time I saw my birth mother on the news, which made me feel unpleasant, so this time, I did not search anything up. The program director had said the shoot that day was going to be a special about me; I would be doing a lot of interviews. I spoke honestly. I was born in Korea and I taught myself how to dance. I was asked to show my birth certificate, so I did, and that was the extent of it for the day.

The program director seemed to emphasize that they would make sure to air that episode. I didn't know why he said it in that way. The episode went online, but I couldn't watch it because my phone was pinging endlessly from Instagram notifications. I wondered if I had done something wrong, but the assistant director repeated not to go on the internet. I made it clear that I wanted to continue competing on the program, but the program director and the other members of the debut group thought it would be best if I dropped out. Since it seemed like the public hated me, I dropped out.

When I returned from P-Town, I suddenly had nothing to do. During this time, I heard that someone I knew since elementary school was admitted into Mr. Jeffrey Yang's welfare foundation. Everyone in P-Town knew who Mr. Yang was. He made a lot of donations to Noeul Children's Home—the only home I'd ever known. Plus, his welfare center towered over all the other buildings in the middle of the city.

On the first floor of the building is a cafe. From the second floor, there is a library, multi-media room, a theater, and a shopping center. Many people come to this building in the summers or winters

if they have nowhere else to hang out at. I was one of those people. To be honest, I don't know what Mr. Yang did to get rich. People say he featured in some restaurant management reality show and made a hard-to-pronounce pasta dish with *bulgogi* in it. That pasta went viral instantly and Mr. Yang became famous too. That was all I knew. He was on YouTube and he was in a lot of commercials, so I thought he was a celebrity. All the townspeople knew of him because he talked about P-Town frequently.

He was vocal about how P-Town needed advancement and he boasted about how he used his personal funds to build the welfare center. Once, he even spoke with a politician about how P-Town needs a train or subway system that connects to Paju. He visited Noeul Children's Home around that time and hosted a seminar about the operations of the welfare foundation.

The assistant director of the children's home suggested I go to the private academy run by Mr. Yang's welfare foundation as it was registered as an alternative school. I wouldn't need to enter middle school. She advised me to take coding classes and get a certificate, even major in this field in college. I no longer felt like dancing, so I agreed. When Mr. Yang was in town, the assistant director urged me to have an interview with him. His first words to me were, "No offense, but are you a boy or a girl?" He said after that gender hardly matters nowadays and that my androgynousness was a charm.

Mr. Yang gave me a scholarship, so I was admitted to the dorms on the island, not the dorms in Songpa. It was the spring I turned fourteen. The island was next to Ulleong Island but I'm not sure of the name. It was only accessible by boat. I didn't know how many classes there were nor did I know the names of my five classmates. I had heard there were kids in other classes, but I rarely saw them. Like tutoring, classes were one on one private sessions.

Coding was difficult, so I asked my teacher if I could practice dancing on my own in the auditorium during my breaks. It was allowed. Every Saturday on the island, there was a big lecture. At the lecture, Mr. Jeffrey would stress to us that he only brought brilliant students to the island, to be proud of being there. The politician that was making a train from P-Town to Paju with Mr. Yang was there too.

One day, Mr. Yang introduced the politician to me, saying that he was well-connected. I told them about what happened on the YouTube reality competition show and the politician said he could have haters easily taken care of. I was told that if I got on the politician's good side, I wouldn't have to go through the tedious process of debut groups and whatnot. I would go straight to debut instead. He said first and foremost, he had to know some personal information about me.

Mr. Jeffrey Yang was a kind of person I had never experienced before. I don't even know how to begin to describe him. He didn't blink. I couldn't believe it. He stared at me silently for about a minute? Maybe two? He did not blink. Even in warm weather, he was always wearing those expensive-looking leather gloves on both hands. He clasped his hands together and looked at me. I motionlessly listened to the sound of leather rubbing against leather. We sat there for a minute when Mr. Yang asked me a question. His tone was a little scary.

Name?

Aurora Kim

Are you from a mixed race family?

He asked me these questions. Mixed race? I didn't like that phrase. I don't know why. I don't. Mr. Yang's eyes did not water, despite not blinking. If it were me, I would have been crying already.

I'm not sure.

I'm asking if your father's Korean while your mother's from a different country.

They're both foreigners.

Then where are you from?

Korea.

You seem to not understand. I'm asking you 'which' country you're from. The Phillipines? Vietnam? What country do you think you're from?

I think I'm Korean, am I not?

I repeated that I was born in Korea. Though, Mr. Yang did not look like he understood. He squinted his eyes at me. I couldn't tell if that face was good or bad. He was a really confusing person. I had never been with a grown-up like him. I didn't know if he was a good grown-up or a bad grown-up. I hung my head, discouraged. He put one large palm on the crown of my head and didn't say a word. The smell of leather was pleasant. When he finally spoke, this is what he said.

You are a special child. It's in your destiny to thrive at HCW Island and become someone great. I feel it. And...

He said that he would invite and introduce me to a politician that could help me debut as a singer during my time there. When he said those words, I realized.

Mr. Jeffrey Yang is a good grown-up.