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Blooms of Mold

by Ha Seong-nan

Translated by Janet Hong

From the fifth floor, the playground looks like a small pond because of all the rain that has collected there. The heavy downpour from two days before has created muddy puddles that refuse to dry up. There are pools of rainwater everywhere—under the opposite end of the seesaw that the woman straddles, even under the monkey bars that the child hangs from.

The woman is shelling beans. Every time the shells are twisted open, speckled kidney beans peep out, nestled neatly in a row. The smell of tender greens is strong on her fingers. If a bean pops out of the shell onto the sand, the woman reaches to pick it up, raising her bottom in the air. Her end of the seesaw rises up to find its balance point.

The child's entire weight hangs from his right hand that is gripping the monkey bar. He is catching his breath before swinging from the third bar to the fourth. If he wants to land safely on dry ground without getting his feet wet, he has no choice but to go all the way across. His pants are slipping down and his shirt, pulled out by his right arm, rides up to reveal a blinding patch of ivory skin.

The woman is sitting with her back toward the man. From his vantage point all he can see is her hunched frame and her plastic container on the sand. Soon the container is brimming with beans.

So are you planning to cook rice with beans tonight? The man tosses the question in her direction but she doesn't respond. His voice doesn't reach her. *How can anyone ever forget that taste? Nothing beats the way it crunches between your teeth. Could I have some?* Standing by the balcony window, the man keeps smacking his lips. He can imagine it all—everything from the texture of the downy fuzz that covers the shells down to the very fibers that get stuck in your thumbnails from snapping open the beans. Luckily the woman still hasn't noticed the man who's been watching her all this while. She is entirely absorbed in snapping beans. She is deep in concentration, like a student solving a math problem. The child still hasn't crossed the monkey bars. With his teeth clenched, he continues to hang onto the bar.

The man takes out a little notepad from his back pocket. It is completely bent from having been pressed against his rear end. Bits of food have dried between the pages; they stick together when he tries to turn them.

Bean shells, seesaw, monkey bars, boy, puddles.

The man writes down a few words that will help him recall the woman. Later, the shells she chucks will become the only clue in identifying her garbage bag from all the others. The man doesn't know what suite she lives in. Luckily there's only one apartment building, but with ninety families living inside.

On the news that morning, the weather person gave the forecast in a yellow raincoat while holding up a yellow umbrella. A low pressure system was moving in and continuing to develop across the western coast and all of Kyōnggi Province. Scattered spring showers were expected all week. The forecaster remembered to add that this early summer heat wave in April was the result of El Niño. If the heat and humidity continue, the man's work will become more difficult.

The man wakes to the sound of a woman shrieking. It's a little past two in the morning. Glass shatters and crashes to the ground. Frantic footsteps echo throughout the apartment. The woman—a

young woman's voice—keeps screaming at the top of her lungs, but he can't make out her words. The man's wardrobe and stereo system are placed against the wall; this wall is all that separates his room from suite 507. The man gets up from his bed, walks over to the wardrobe and puts his ear to it. The front door of 507 opens and crashes into a wall. Whoever got shoved out the front door slips and falls with a dull thud as a pot lid is thrown out into the hallway. It rattles noisily until it eventually stops.

Don't you ever come near me again! The woman yells. The door slams and the bolt turns sharply.

The man tiptoes towards the front door and looks out the peephole. The dark corridor looks as gloomy as a cavern. Soon it will be time for the newspaper boy to come charging in with the morning paper. After the woman's door has been shut for at least half an hour, footsteps finally start to descend the stairs. It sounds like the person's shoes are not on properly. They sound like clogs. The man waits until the footsteps have gone down the stairs and out into the parking lot.

When the man steps into his storage closet a bit less than twenty square feet, his shoulders get wedged between the walls. The sickening smell hits him full force; the humidity was already making his garbage rot. He takes a plastic bucket down from the shelf. Having put on rubber gloves, he creeps quietly down the stairs with the bucket. To avoid attracting attention, he purposely doesn't turn on the light in the landing. Even in the dark the stairs are familiar. The L-shaped stairway has a total of seventy-two steps; eight steps and then a landing. It continues in this pattern all the way down. He knows these stairs like the back of his hand—so well that he doesn't need to test his footing. The second step going down from the third to the second floor is higher than the others. At first this step caused him a lot of trouble. He even sprained his ankle once but now when he comes to this spot, he automatically adjusts his footing.

Large rubber trash bins the size of tiny bathtubs line the flowerbed outside the apartment building. Shadows fall across the

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maple leaves that light from the streetlamps doesn't reach. There's no one in sight. The man pushes off the trash lid and steps up on the ledge of the flowerbed to look into the bin. There's hardly anything inside. The bin comes almost up to his chest, so he has to bend all the way down to reach for the trash bag. The liquid from the garbage bag has collected at the bottom of the rubber bin; the smell turns his stomach. There is only one bag in the bin since the garbage truck from the district office had just collected the garbage that morning. The man's bucket barely holds twenty liters. In the beginning he had carried the garbage up to his suite without using the bucket. The next day on his way to work he discovered that the liquid had leaked from the garbage and there was a trail leading up the stairs and ending at his front door. The garbage bag is heavy. Even though he lifts up the bag with care, putrid stuff drips onto his slippers.

It's a good thing that he didn't get rid of the small bathtub when he renovated his bathroom. When he first moved into this run-down, fifteen-year-old apartment, he repapered the walls, redid the floors and replaced the sink. The porcelain tub and toilet were full of chips and cracks. Even the navy blue tiles were chipped; there wasn't a single piece of tile left intact. There was mildew between the cracks and there were tiles that had fallen off completely. One night after he washed his face and pulled the stopper to drain the water from the sink, the dirty water that should have drained down the pipe poured onto his feet. There was a leak in the water pipe. While the plumber replaced the sink with a lightweight plastic basin that wouldn't get dirty so easily, he advised the man to get rid of the bathtub. The plumber kept pestering him: why did he insist on keeping a bathtub in this tiny bathroom, now that more and more people were opting for showers these days? However, the man ignored the plumber's advice and kept the tub. But that night after the plumber went home the man regretted his decision. The bathtub was so tiny that even though he was average height, water would slosh around his hips and overflow whenever he took a bath. The tub was so short that soaking his whole body in hot water was

out of the question. If he tried to soak his shoulders, he had to stick his feet out of the tub and place them on the taps. If he tried to soak his legs, he had to hang his rear end out of the tub. Before the man started this whole business, the bathtub was a real headache, just as the plumber warned.

He puts the garbage bag he carried up to his suite into the bathtub. The garbage is already starting to give off a different smell. When summer comes he won't be able to continue this work anymore. Even though he washed and disinfected everything with bleach and sprayed the room with lemon-scented air freshener, his 525-square-foot apartment still reeks of soggy fish that wasn't dried properly. Garbage spews out of a rip in the overstuffed bag. The bag is knotted tightly. He tries to untie the stubborn knot, bending all the way into the tub. He straightens out and massages his sore back. *Whoever tied this damn knot sure did a good job.* Taking off his rubber gloves, he tries to undo the knot with his bare fingers but it still doesn't untie. He can't blame somebody for tying a garbage bag so tightly that it doesn't easily come undone. People never think that the garbage they throw out might be opened by someone. He used to think the same way until he started this work.

The waste management program that required everyone to use standard plastic garbage bags started on January 1, 1995. The man was in bed all day after a drinking binge the night before. The doorbell rang. He wasn't expecting anyone. After a few seconds, the doorbell rang again. He looked through the peephole, but it was an old building, and the lens was so cloudy that he was forced to open the front door. The women who identified themselves as members of the apartment council crowded in front of his door. There were over ten of them. Those who couldn't fit into the narrow space spilled out into the stairway that led down to the fourth floor.

An older woman with age spots blooming on her face nudged a young woman beside her, causing the younger one to blurt out, *Are you by any chance learning acupuncture?*

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It was only then that he recalled the unopened box he had placed on top of his wardrobe. After purchasing the box of acupuncture tools and manual from a pushy salesman who had come to his office, he hadn't opened it even once. How was it possible that these strangers knew about his acupuncture set? The young woman stood staring at him, her gaze unflinching. He did receive a monthly newsletter from the acupuncture association. . . .

Have you been snooping through my mail? The man flared up in anger.

We've finally found the culprit! the women shouted in unison. *See? I told you it'd pay off sooner or later. We haven't seen him before, though.* The women started to whisper amongst themselves.

Pushing aside the young woman, the one with the age spots stepped up. *So they say it's the guilty dog that barks the loudest. I guess we're looking at one right now.*

A heavy garbage bag was passed from person to person up the stairs until it reached Age Spots. Once she received it, Age Spots threw the bag at the man's feet. It burst open. Through the rip, he saw patches of the phrase "Market delivery available" written in red. At once he realized that it was his garbage—the garbage he'd thrown out two days before. There was no doubt about it.

Do you know how much trouble we had to go through to find you? We had to comb through every piece of trash like we were picking out lice. They are right about persistence being rewarded in the end because we finally came across this garbage bag. Age Spots held up an envelope and shook it in front of the man's nose. The words *Acupuncture Association* were written on the envelope in Chinese characters. In the bottom right-hand corner the man's name and address were neatly typed. The envelope was dirty, as if flecks of kimchi had been stuck all over it. *Pretending you didn't know that you had to use proper garbage bags isn't going to get you out of this.*

Then a shout came from down the stairs. *It's because of people like you that this country has come to such a state.*

Enraged, Age Spots spoke with a trembling voice. *Ever since I*

crossed the Taedong River with my father, I've been through all kinds of hell, but never, in my whole life, have I dug through someone else's trash. She then let out a deep sigh.

The man vaguely recalled hearing about the waste management program.

Don't let this happen again.

One by one, the women filed down the stairs.

The young woman, having fallen behind, started to follow the rest of the group down, but stopped and turned to look at the man. *You live alone, right? Try to understand. It's not just once or twice that something like this has happened. I mean, how much can garbage bags cost that people are dumping their garbage secretly at night? Even garbage trucks refuse to collect something like this.*

Age Spots shouted from a few stairs down. *What are you doing? Hurry up and come down. We have to go through the other bags.*

The young woman spoke as she went down the stairs. *The fine is a hundred thousand wŏn. We're going to let it go just this once. That lady has arthritis. If you make her climb five flights of stairs again, you're really going to be in for it.*

Garbage continued to spew steadily from the rip. A trail of putrid discharge had leaked from the bag, dotting up the stairs all the way to the man's front door. He put on rubber gloves in order to pick up the garbage strewn about his front entrance. Rice covered with green mold and rotten potatoes crumbled in his hands as he picked them up. The smell made him gag repeatedly. Although it was definitely his own garbage, it seemed alien to him. As he picked up the trash, he discovered crumpled-up letters. They were already somewhat flattened out. It was clear that the women had already gotten to them. As he pictured them sniggering while they passed around his letters, anger surged through him. Even his own handwriting seemed alien.

“. . . The man you are planning to marry is not right for you. I knew him long before you knew him. I have often witnessed a hidden side to him that you are not aware of. However you haven't

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taken my advice and have now gone ahead and decided on the wedding date. Today at work I saw you two standing side by side, handing out wedding invitations around the office. Why can't you see him for who he is? Is it like what you say—that love is blind? It's not too late. I love you more than life itself . . .”

There wasn't a single letter that was finished. Completely drunk, the man had written letter after letter until early morning. In the end he couldn't send any of them. As soon as he picked up the garbage bag, a *soju* bottle cap fell out of a tear and bounced off the ground. The noodles he had boiled to have with his *soju* had gone straight into the trash untouched; they were swollen and stuck to another unfinished letter.

The knot in the garbage bag finally loosens. As soon as the bag is untied, a fistful of trash spills out into the tub. Strands of hair are tangled up in dust and cigarette butts. The man brings a folding chair, sets it up in front of the tub and sits down. He puts on his rubber gloves again and begins to pore over every piece of trash. He recently replaced the fluorescent lights in the bathroom with a 100-watt bulb. It's blinding. The length of the hair is easily over twenty centimeters. Pulling the strands taut, the man holds them under the light and slowly examines them. He picks up a cigarette butt burned right down to the filter. On the tip of the filter are teeth marks. Looking at the garbage spread out in the tub, he crosses his legs and opens his notepad on his knees.

April 23. OB Lager bottle cap, Pulmuone bean sprouts, Shin Ramen, Coca-Cola, Chamnamu Soju . . .

The man's notepad is crammed with writing. The list looks like a series of items to be searched for in an *I Spy* picture riddle book. He works more earnestly than a watch repairman removing a part from a broken watch with his tweezers. Looking through every single thing meticulously, he stops occasionally to scrawl something in his book. Kool menthol cigarettes. His writing is barely legible; he's holding the pen by its end so he doesn't get his notepad dirty. Two

instant noodle containers are stacked together. It's instant udon, the kind that comes with all-in-one soup mix and freeze-dried shrimp. Ottogi Vermont Curry. He also finds the peels from the potatoes and onions that would have been used in the curry.

When he dumps out a twenty-liter garbage bag, the tub fills up halfway. The slimy cabbage leaves and potato peels slip through the fingers of his rubber gloves. Foods rich in protein smell the worst. The foul stench of fish heads, entrails, and chicken bones is unbearable. A pink rubber glove surfaces with a chicken bone stuck to it. It's a right-handed rubber glove with the words "Mommy's Helping Hand" impressed on the wrist. The man flips through the pages of his notepad and finds the page that has a record of a left-handed rubber glove he had fished out a couple of days ago. March 23. Cheiljedang Beat laundry detergent (750 g), Kool cigarettes, Coca-Cola, Nongshim Big Bowl Noodle (shrimp flavor), Mommy's Helping Hand rubber glove (pink, left hand). The brand and even the color are the same. When everything fits like this, there's no question about it. The garbage is from the same household.

She enjoys drinking OB Lager and Coke, smokes Kool cigarettes, and likes to eat shrimp-flavored instant noodles. She is also left-handed and has long hair, but it might not even be a woman. It could be a long-haired man. Making some inferences is easy. Since things like diapers, chocolate, and candy wrappers haven't turned up, it's safe to assume there's no child in the household at present.

From last winter to now the man has gone through over a hundred garbage bags. While rummaging through them, he gradually learned the different tastes and lifestyles of the ninety families living in the building, although what he learned doesn't amount to much. Two kinds of people live in these cramped 525-square-foot suites: young married couples and single people like himself; and elderly couples who have married off all their children and sold their big house. It's always the younger people who get sucked into buying the newest products advertised on TV. They are more open to trying new things. Without any hesitation, they buy

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things with flashy packaging and beverages like punch made with exotic tropical fruits. They are the ones who also buy items that are quite expensive, considering their quantity or size. There were times when he compiled statistics from the data he gathered. The women in this building use a higher grade of dishwashing soap with aloe that is gentle on the hands, and perhaps it's because many of them are career women on the go that they use two-in-one shampoo and conditioners. They also tend to use sanitary napkins with wings.

With his gloved hands, the man sweeps the garbage strewn about the tub back into the bag. There is less garbage now that the liquid has drained. After he reties the bag, he carries it back down to the ground floor and puts it into the trash bin. He takes his cigarettes out of his pocket and sticks one in his mouth. Only if he could have looked through *her* garbage, he could have discovered what she was really like. If so, he could have learned of her weakness for the color cobalt and that she was attracted to articulate men who dressed neatly.

She quit her job when she got married. To see her one last time, the man went to the newlyweds' housewarming party, even though he didn't feel like it. Sporting an apron and her hair in a ponytail, she squeezed in beside him as if it was the most natural thing to do.

As drinks started to flow, someone questioned her. *Miss Kim, no, I guess we have to call you Mrs. Park now, how did you end up falling for Mr. Park?*

Giggling, she replied that it was because of the cobalt-colored dress shirt he was wearing.

Park, two years his junior, had graduated from the same university. Park didn't change a bit, even after marrying. He still holds the same position in the accounts department. The man, however, moved up fast and now sits right behind Park, at a much-coveted location that provides him with a view of the whole office. Every time he looks up and sees Park's shirt, stiff as if it were starched, and his suit, neat and wrinkle-free, he remembers her long, white fingers hitting the keyboard. He'd hear Park entertaining

their co-workers with stories by the vending machine.

Damn, she's always buying me cobalt-colored shirts. Now, I shudder if I even hear the word "cobalt."

He even caught Park coming out of a restaurant with a new member of the female staff. Even now, the woman has no idea what kind of man she has married.

As he is going up to his apartment, he bumps into the paper boy who is rushing down the stairs after having delivered the morning paper. The boy pinches his nose in disgust as he moves away. In the dim fluorescent light he eyes the man's gloved hands curiously. He is also wearing a red rubber glove on his free hand. You can get a rash from constantly rubbing the inside of your wrist against the metal mail slot when you slip your hand in and out. To prevent this, milkmen and newspaper boys have started to wear rubber gloves. With his long legs the boy bounds down the corridor. Even though the man uses a lot of bleach to rinse his bathtub and tiled floor, he can't seem to rid his apartment of the smell of garbage. The sensor lights that the boy had triggered switch off one by one as the timer runs down. It's already past four in the morning.

When the doorbell rings he's in the middle of trying to put together the torn-up pieces of a bill that he had spread out on the floor. He found them in the garbage the night before. The bill, now held together by tape, is still missing some pieces. There are even times when he finds bills that haven't been crumpled. He's lucky if they aren't soaked with liquid from the garbage, but even if they are covered with food scraps, he doesn't mind. If he irons a bill after a quick rinse under the tap, there isn't a whole lot of trouble in making out the print. However, whenever they are ripped to shreds like this, he has to piece everything together like a child's jigsaw puzzle. The name starts to emerge with painful slowness. Kim, _____hoon. The doorbell rings as he's looking for the missing piece on the floor.

It seems that whoever rang the bell is leaning against the front door. When he tries to push the door open he can sense the

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heaviness of the person behind it. The door doesn't budge at all. Whoever it is—probably a man, guessing from the weight—must be propping himself up. Only after several attempts to shove open the door does the person on the other side seem to feel it shudder. Still, he takes a while to step away. It's a complete stranger, so drunk that he has no control over his own body. He's holding a large bouquet of flowers in one hand. His dress shirt, pulled out of his pants, hangs loosely over his thick legs like a tablecloth.

Don't worry.

The massive bear-like body falls on the man as if to pin him down. To prevent himself from being knocked over, he braces himself and fights the dead weight with all his strength. Even a wild guess tells him that this fellow is easily over a hundred kilograms. The man struggles like a monkey caught by a giant bear. The stranger looks down at him and mumbles again.

Don't worry. His foul breath hits the man directly in the face. The stranger keeps mumbling unintelligibly, continuing to crush him.

When the man plays the words over in his mind, it seems that the stranger is saying "I'm sorry." Barely managing to open his eyes that start to roll wildly in different directions, making him look cross-eyed, the fellow tries to gaze down at the man. Suddenly he sees that the man is wearing an undershirt instead of a proper shirt. His eyes flash with anger.

What? Who the hell are you? What are you doing here? With that, the fellow forces his way into the apartment.

The man pushes back, trying to resist him. *Hey, what do you think you're doing? Do you even know what time it is right now? You have the wrong house!* He doesn't stand a chance against this giant.

What did you say? I can find this place even with my eyes closed. Where is she? Hey! I know you're in there. Stop hiding and come out now! The fellow stops shouting and suddenly steps back. He starts to retch uncontrollably. Vomit hits the floor and splatters all over the man's dress shoes that are sitting in the entrance. *Isn't this 507? Sam Kwang Apartment, suite 507?*

As the fellow gradually sobers up, he becomes more coherent. The light in the stairwell has been broken for a long time. Whoever lived in suite 507 before probably hit it with his furniture when he was moving out. The man could see the filament inside the cracked bulb. The doorbells for 507 and 508 are right beside each other and in the dark it seems that the fellow meant to press 507, but pressed the bell for 508 instead.

Goddamn, I'm really sorry. Looking from the man to the mess he created, the fellow stumbles toward the stairs and flops down on the ground.

The vomit gives off a sour, acidic smell. While the man pours water on the ground and sweeps away the vomit, the fellow walks over to 507 and presses the doorbell. It's empty. For the last couple of days the man hasn't sensed any sign of life coming from the suite. If someone was inside, it would have been impossible to ignore all this commotion. The fellow continues to push the bell. Electronic cuckoo sounds chirp from inside the suite. When the door doesn't open, the fellow shouts and pounds on the door with a humongous fist like a boxing glove.

I said I was sorry! Please open the door!

Kim ____hoon. Even though he searches every corner of the floor, he can't find the missing piece. It probably got thrown out in another bag. He found these pieces of the bill in the bag with the kidney bean shells. He ruffles through the pages of his notepad. Bean shells, seesaw, monkey bars, boy, puddles. Inside the garbage bag, there are plastic candy packages that crinkle and a fistful of chicken bones. This woman must be very diligent; someone who doesn't mind preparing foods that require a lot of time and effort. He also finds an old toothbrush with the bristles harshly flattened.

The doorbell rings again. It's the same fellow. He shoves the bouquet of flowers into the man's chest. It's a bouquet of roses. *Could you give these to the woman next door for me? It's her birthday today.* Bumping into the wall, he staggers down the stairs. The man counts the red roses. There are thirty in all.

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For a few days now a pair of yellow socks has been hanging on the clothesline out on the balcony of 507. The heels and toes have dark stains that even soap couldn't remove. It's been three days since the incident with the drunkard, but the man still hasn't run into the woman. There's no sign of life next door. On his way home he circles the building on purpose, using the path out back. Standing by the wall, he looks up at 507. The balcony glass is shattered, all except for a few pieces that are still dangling. Their suites, 507 and 508, are the only ones with the lights off. People have been staying late at work. Once tax season passes they should be able to get off at the regular time.

The roses that he hung by the window have started to wither, the black spreading in from the edges as the petals curl. A single wall is all that separates 507 from 508. The man starts to move everything away from this wall to the opposite side. Half the morning goes by as he takes his wardrobe apart, moves it over to the other side, and then reassembles it. He drags his bed over to where his wardrobe used to be. The wall is twenty centimeters thick at most. He runs his palm over it. He lies down on his side facing the wall and puts his ear next to it. Whenever he hears the smallest sound, his senses sharpen. Besides himself, there are only two people who would come up to the fifth floor—the woman or that fellow. If he leaves his room door open, he can hear everything, even the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. But to his disappointment, the footsteps always stop before coming up all the way. Just like dandelion spores suddenly blown in by the wind, curiosity had already started to sprout within him. He thinks he catches the sound of a key being inserted into a keyhole and the bolt sliding back into the door frame. That instant, the cover of the mail slot on his front door snaps open and a red rubber glove shoves in the morning paper.

From the bus stop he takes the long way and uses the back path again. He looks up at the balcony of 507. It's only after he sees the bare clothesline minus the yellow socks that he realizes the woman

is finally back. But when he rushes up, he doesn't hear a sound from her suite. Because of her, he has temporarily stopped his garbage work. Worried about the stench that might escape, he always worked with the bathroom door shut. But the sealed-up bathroom became an echo chamber, amplifying every drop of water that fell from the tap. It was impossible to hear any noises coming from outside.

So after an early dinner, he waits for the woman to come back for the day. On the bed, he stretches out on his side so he's facing the wall. He lies so close to the wall that his groin touches it. Afraid that the woman would slip past him again, he even resists nature's call. However, the pressure in his bladder forces him to get up from the bed. Coming out of the bathroom, he discovers a maggot squirming on the floor. Summer is coming, but it's still too early for maggots. He had mopped every corner of the suite with bleach several times. Writhing gently, the maggot moves toward something. He picks it up with a tissue and flushes it down the toilet.

He finds another maggot in a crack in the bedroom's threshold. The man crawls from the room to the kitchen, looking everywhere. He crawls toward the window where he hung the bouquet. He discovers a continuous stream of maggots crawling along the edge of the wall. Those that can't cling to the wall end up falling off; hitting the floor, they curl up into balls. A horde of maggots is writhing inside the cellophane that the roses are wrapped in. He opens the balcony door and hurls the bouquet out into the back lot overgrown with weeds.

In the morning while he's shaving, he senses that there is someone outside the front door. He runs into his bedroom, then dashes to the front door while trying to whip on his pants. He ends up taking longer to put on his pants since he's in too much of a hurry. He has to meet her. He needs to tell her about the fellow, he needs to tell her about the roses. He thrusts open the front door, but the corridor is already empty. The clicking of heels from the bottom of the stairs is fading. Urgently he leans over the railing and looks down the stairwell at the identical railings that zigzag all the

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way down to the first floor. Between the railings he sees something flash by and then vanish. It's as if a yellow butterfly suddenly took flight. Is the yellow he just glimpsed from the yellow socks that hung on her clothesline? He looks down at his own feet and realizes he forgot to put on his shoes. When did she come home? He stayed up waiting until 3 o'clock in the morning. During that time, he didn't hear any footsteps come up to the fifth floor. Maybe she never left the house in the first place, but was cooped up inside all this time.

Only a trace of her perfume lingers in the empty stairwell. It's not the perfume called Poison that was once so popular with the female staff at his workplace. It's a light, sharp scent. He inhales deeply, making his lungs expand like balloons. What kind of woman is she? It is then that he realizes he wants to get to know her.

When he lifts the stainless steel cover of the mail slot he discovers another flap inside. Shoving open the flap, he can see the front entrance of 507 through a rectangular opening the size of a postcard. His cheek, flattened on the cement floor, feels icy. He can see a pair of vinyl indoor slippers placed neatly in the entrance. They are mustard-colored with crudely embroidered flowers on the instep. Slipping his hand into the slot, he gropes around for the slippers. He can't reach them. Because he has to reach for them by feel, it's all the more difficult. He only has about ten minutes to spare before he has to leave for work. He works his arm further and further in until he realizes that he's in up to his armpit, causing the flap to pinch his skin. It's a slow process; he has to take his arm out repeatedly, look inside to estimate the distance, and then put it back in again. After some thought, he fashions a metal clothes hanger into a long hook like a fishing rod, and slips it into the mail slot. He hooks the slipper and pulls it toward him. Finally the slipper is in his hand.

The one-size-fits-all slipper is completely worn out. Judging by the flattened faux-fur insole where her heel rubbed, the woman has small feet. The vinyl on the instep is peeling off and its color has turned. Although it looks mustard yellow, it seems to have once been

a bright yellow. He hides the slipper in the back of his closet. *Damn, late again.* He purses his lips and then heaves a sigh. To his surprise, he finds himself whistling a cheerful melody. *What? Me, whistling?* He skips down the stairs and runs all the way to the bus stop.

Half a month passes. Having resumed his work now that the woman had returned, he continues to lug garbage bags up to the fifth floor. The garbage truck empties the garbage bin every other day. If he skips even one day, he may never find her garbage. On the fifteenth day he finds the other slipper in one of the garbage bags. An indoor slipper embroidered with flowers. Her garbage bag is nearly empty. It's tied loosely so the knot comes undone easily. For half a month she probably turned her home upside down, trying to find the other slipper. Today she finally threw out the lone slipper, certain by now that its match won't ever turn up. There are purple fruit stains on the embroidery. He takes out the other slipper from his closet and places them side by side. The difference in their color is big enough to notice. Bits of cotton and sponge stick out through the worn parts of the vinyl sole. He opens up the bag and lifts up the contents. Used tea bags, thick orange peels, Diet Coke cans. All diet foods. He lifts up a plastic package that's tightly rolled up. It's an empty package of fabric softener, mimosa scent. Even though there are slippery grains of spoiled rice stuck to the package, he still catches a refreshing scent in the midst of the rotten stink. It's the same scent from the corridor. At the very bottom of the garbage bag is a three-tiered, fresh cream cake, untouched and gone bad. Grape stains cover the patches where the milky cream has rubbed off. A fluffy layer of mold is already blossoming on the top layer. There is a red outline on the cream where the cherry was. It looks like she picked out only the cherry, pineapple, and tangerine from the cake. He unfolds every little piece of paper, even an aspirin wrapper. One Mugunghwa (Rose of Sharon) train ticket to Gurye. In his mind he sees her from behind as she climbs Mount Jiri. The yellow socks that she's wearing get stained with dirt that won't come out. A seven-digit number scrawled on a slip of paper—maybe a phone number?

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*Blooms
of Mold:
Ha Seong-
nan*

He also finds a past due notice for a pager. Once he has wiped off the cream, her name and pager number show up. Choi Jiae. 012-343-7890.

He stands in the middle of a large grocery store, holding a yellow plastic shopping basket. In it, he has placed a mimosa-scented fabric softener and jumbo container of bleach with a handle like a rum jug. A thick layer of dust covers the shelves that hold the products people don't tend to buy. In front of the cosmetics counter an employee is wearing thick makeup, her face painted on like a mannequin's. She latches onto passing customers to hand them questionnaires as she repeats the same thing over and over again.

We're promoting our new product. You will receive a free gift just by filling out this short survey.

Every year, a company launches dozens of new products. Even at his company, the staff working in new product development are anxious to come up with a hit product like Nongshim's Shrimp Crackers. In order to develop a new product that guarantees consumer satisfaction, thousands of surveys are distributed throughout the whole country. He has a thorough knowledge of his neighbors' different tastes and their patterns of consumption. Once he read in a book that there is a sociological discipline called "garbology," which examines the waste of residents in an area in order to learn about their actual behavior. Looking through a garbage dump is a more reliable way of getting sure answers than a vague survey. Garbage never lies. The real answer to a picture riddle? Garbage. This is what the man thinks about as he wanders down the aisles in the supermarket.

The fellow is sitting on a step on the fifth floor staircase. Because his huge body is blocking the way, the man has to wait on the landing for the fellow to move aside. Having felt someone approach, the fellow looks up, his eyes bloodshot, and recognizes the man at once. He sticks out his chunky hand in greeting. The man could feel the fellow's strength from his grip. There is a large cake box placed on the step where he was just sitting.

I'm sorry. I couldn't give her the flowers. I mean, I couldn't even meet her.

Yes, she went on a trip.

Then I guess you saw her?

Grimacing, the fellow rubs his face savagely as if washing it. *No, I heard through a friend.* He catches the man glancing at the box on the stair. *Oh, this here . . .* He lifts up the box and hands it to him. *I'm sorry to keep bothering you like this, but could you give this to her? Since she just came back from a trip, she shouldn't be going anywhere. At least, not for a while anyway.*

The man has no choice but to receive the box with just one hand because he is carrying his groceries in the other. The fellow's bloodshot eyes widen when the box slips a little.

Hey, you should be careful. If the box shakes, you'll squash the cake. At the words "you'll squash the cake," the fellow's broad face squishes up.

Is it a fresh cream cake? With fruit, like cherries or pineapple on top?

She's crazy about fresh cream cake. I'm a huge fan of fresh cream myself, the fellow snickers. *You think we'll ever be able to have some cake together?* He mumbles as if he's talking to himself.

After nodding goodbye to the man, the fellow starts to make his way down the stairs. The cake is heavy. While the man is opening the front door, he hears the fellow exclaim from the third floor. He must have tripped on that higher step.

Excuse me, the man calls down the stairwell.

The fellow's broad face looks up at him from a couple of levels below. The man is about to say, "You know, about her . . .," but stops himself. The fellow has no clue that she doesn't like fresh cream cake. That could even be the cause of their breakup. But how could he let him know the truth without giving him the wrong idea? If he tells him that he looks through other people's garbage, the fellow will think that he's absolutely crazy. If he says that she told him herself, the fellow will become suspicious of their relationship.

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Blooms
of Mold:
Ha Seong-
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What if something comes up? The fellow stares up blankly at his face. *Just in case. I mean, what if I don't get to see her like last time . . .* He lets his words trail off.

The fellow smiles brightly, revealing yellow teeth. *Then why don't you just go ahead and eat it?* His laughter grows distant.

The woman is on a diet right now. She doesn't hate the man; she just hates his body that weighs close to 100 kilograms. She's simply sick of having to eat the fresh cream cake that he's crazy about and she's sick of his mistaken belief that she shares his love for fresh cream cake—this is the cause of their breakup. If only the fellow had dug through her garbage, who knows? They might still be together.

Inside his fridge, the cake is slowly spoiling. He still hasn't run into her. They have just missed each other every time. Whenever he scrambles out after her, she is already gone, leaving behind only a trace of mimosa-scented fabric softener in the air. He opens up his address book. Choi Jiae. 012-343-7890.

Did somebody page me? The girl on the other end speaks in a dull voice while chewing gum.

Well, I'm supposed to give you a cake, but you're just impossible to run into.

She blows a bubble. The gum pops and sticks to her lips. *What are you talking about?* She uses her tongue to unstick the gum and starts to chew again.

I'm the man who lives next door to you, Miss Choi.

All of a sudden, the girl gets angry. *Oh my God, seriously, I've had enough. For a while there, a man kept calling, leaving weird messages and now this! You know what? I'm not, what's her name, Choi Jiae. I've had this number for over a month now.*

The front door of 507 is wide open. He takes the cake out of the fridge and rushes into 507. A middle-aged couple is repapering the walls. With all the furniture taken out, the suite looks bigger than he imagined. The smell of glue stings his nostrils. The man with pasted paper in hand climbs up a ladder and looks down toward the entrance.

Can I help you? Do you want your walls repapered? We offer very good prices. The missus smiles as she holds a brush dripping with paste.

The man steps out from the entrance as two workmen carrying a large sheet of glass come up the stairs. They go out to the balcony and remove the broken pane and start to put in the new glass.

The fellow is in the back lot searching for something. He raises his crimson face when the man gestures at him. He's out of breath. The man steps into the yard. Overgrown weeds come up to his knees.

I'm sorry. I ended up eating the cake. It took a whole week to finish it.

In the fellow's hand is a broken branch.

She moved out. But I guess you already knew that?

The fellow nods while he keeps beating the overgrown weeds with the branch.

Then what are you doing here?

Last summer, we went on a trip to Cheju Island. Jiae likes the ocean. The fellow's eyes look vacant, as if he's reminiscing.

It's not the ocean that Choi Jiae likes, it's the mountains.

Fixing his gaze off into the distance, the fellow keeps mumbling. *We bought a tolharubang there. You know the Cheju souvenir? The dwarf-like stone statue with holes punched in it like a pumice stone? That night when we got into a fight, Jiae went crazy and just chucked it out the window. It should have fallen somewhere over here. I've looked everywhere, but I can't find it.*

The man and the fellow are standing in the back lot. It's not easy to find a little statue in a thicket of weeds.

Then let's look again from opposite ends. The man looks around for a stick.

Are you sure you're not busy?

Picking up a branch, he answers as he walks over to the other end of the yard. *Time is the only thing I've got.*

He examines the ground as he beats at the grass with his stick.

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When he glances up he sees the fellow using his sleeve to wipe the sweat pouring down his red face. It's a sweltering day. At noon the temperature hits about 28 degrees Celsius. *Tonight it's going to be the last time. I'm going to do it just once more and I'm calling it quits.* He takes off his tie and shoves it in his suit pocket. He unbuttons the top button of his dress shirt that's choking him. *There's really no other way of knowing. That's because the truth is rotting away somewhere in the garbage.* Savagely, the man starts to beat at the grass.