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Go Well and Come Back

WHEN THE URN FILLED with his ashes arrived in a cardboard box labeled UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE—as if it were no different than any other parcel—Jae Hoon’s youngest sister wrapped it in a sheet of white silk and placed it on the floor next to the tea table. On the tea table itself were offerings of persimmons stacked in a pyramid, bunches of grapes, a half-peeled Chinese pear, and squares of rice cakes. Sticks of incense smoked and burned. Behind the offerings was Jae Hoon’s portrait, which Eric had taken, coincidentally, almost a year to the day prior to the funeral. He’d had the photograph matted and framed (a gift to Jae Hoon’s sisters), and they in turn set it in a much larger frame of white chrysanthemums, the stems of which were affixed to a Styrofoam backing. A black ribbon was festooned to the top.

“He looks just like our father,” was what both of Jae Hoon’s sisters had said when they first saw the portrait, as if they had only just noticed the similarity; something about the solemn black-and-white image that made it suddenly obvious. Although they knew that Eric had taken the photograph, what they did not know was the series of nudes that Jae Hoon had also posed for: photos Jae Hoon had wanted to give Bruce, his partner in the United States.

The night before the funeral, Ji Yeon, the sister Jae Hoon was closest to, asked Eric if there was anyone else he thought they should call. She was holding Jae Hoon’s old handphone, looking at it uncertainly, as if it were a contraption she did not know how to operate. It was Jae Hoon’s foreign friends that she was referring to, but because she did not speak English, she handed Eric the handphone Jae Hoon had not needed to bring to the U.S.

When they had been together Eric had never looked through the list of names and numbers in Jae Hoon’s phone, and doing so now gave him a slightly guilty feeling: this was information he was not meant to see,

and although he once would have been curious to know who these other foreigners were and what Jae Hoon's relationship to them had been, he had always respected his privacy: not every little secret and transgression, he figured, needed to be brought to light. Jae Hoon, he imagined, if he were watching him right now, would be grinning sheepishly, his face flushed.

There were about a dozen or so Western names programmed into the phone, which didn't surprise him. At the top was Eric's name, separate from the others because it was the only non-Korean one written in Hangeul. The others were in Roman letters, names typical of Eric's generation: Brian, Mark, Steve, Mike. Jon was a name that seemed to stand out. Spelt that way the name had always seemed odd to him, as if something were missing, and he wondered if Jae Hoon had misspelled it. If these names could talk, Eric caught himself thinking, knowing of course that they very easily could.

Apart from his own, Bruce was the only name he recognized. He had never met Bruce, but spoke to him on the phone many times in the days shortly before and after Jae Hoon's death: conversations detailing the progress of the illness (Jae Hoon was deliberately vague about it, pointlessly optimistic), whether he would be able to make it back to Korea or not, what needed to be prepared upon his arrival at the airport (a wheelchair, oxygen, at one point Bruce even suggested a waiting ambulance), and then, when the return flight was no longer possible, whether to have the body flown back or cremated.

Jae Hoon and Eric had broken up long before all of this had happened, although how many years exactly he couldn't remember. Two maybe? Three? It was a slow and sometimes rocky fizzling out, followed by a decision they came to mutually. Although they still considered themselves friends afterwards (they occasionally spoke on the phone or got together for dinner, sometimes emailing each other when Jae Hoon was in the U.S.), there was always a guarded distance between them, full of secrets and petty jealousies. It was this crisis in his health, however, that seemed to have the effect of pulling them together again, in a way: Eric spoke Korean well enough that he was needed to act as interpreter between Bruce in the U.S. and Jae Hoon's sisters in Korea, almost making him feel as if they had never split up. It was Eric who had to break the news to Jae Hoon's sisters, once to tell them that he was sick (Jae Hoon had kept it hidden from them, not wanting to upset them) and once again when he passed away.

In Korean, Eric said he didn't know who they were, and snapped the phone closed, unsure if he were making a mistake or not. But those would have been awkward calls, he thought, not knowing how deep or how casual Jae Hoon's relationships with these men had been; besides, he secretly did

not wish to share his grief with people who were strangers to him, people he considered having played only minor roles in Jae Hoon's life.

Ji Yeon looked at him skeptically, but, feeling she had no other choice, laid the phone in a dresser drawer alongside the clothes Jae Hoon had left behind and closed it shut.



It was nearly a month after the funeral when Eric received the email. The sender wasn't one he recognized and at first he mistook it for spam that had slipped into his inbox. He had nearly deleted it, but when he saw that the subject heading read PAINTINGS, he had a suspicion what it might be about and decided to open it. It was brief and to the point. *I have the paintings, was how it started. Thought you might like them back. Call me if you do.*

It was hard to tell from the brevity of the message whether its tone was friendly or not. In the signature it read Foreign Disclosure Specialist, Yongsan Main Garrison, Seoul, followed by several phone and fax numbers. When he looked at the name, he recognized it as one he'd seen in Jae Hoon's handphone, settling the question he had wondered before: the man's name had not been spelt in error after all.



It was mid-August and although the rainy season was officially over, a typhoon was approaching the peninsula from the south, bringing with it heavy rain. The rain was falling hard now and Eric carried the umbrella with both hands, low over his head. In his sandals, he waded straight through the puddles that had formed on the sidewalk: neither his feet nor his shoes would have been any drier had he chosen to walk around them or not. It was probably not the best day to retrieve the paintings, and if the rain kept up Eric worried that he wouldn't be able to get them home safely. He might have to come back for them another day, he thought.

In spite of the rain, the café was crowded. He immediately picked Jon out. There were several other Western men sitting at the small round tables, but many of them were paired with young Korean women, and those who weren't did not give the impression of waiting for someone. An older man was what he knew to expect, but the thinning grey hair and the full grey beard were what surprised him. Although he was sitting, the man gave the impression of being quite tall. He folded the English-language newspaper

he was reading when he saw Eric in the door and waved him over to his table.

“You’re Army?” Eric asked when he sat down, not meaning to sound incredulous, but not caring either. Heavy drops of water fell onto his shorts, causing large dark spots to bleed into the fabric as he snapped the umbrella closed and laid it on the floor. His right shoulder, too, he now realized, was soaked to the skin.

“Why? Don’t I look it?” the older man said, feigning surprise, his voice a rich baritone sounding of the American Midwest. “I’m a civilian employed by the U.S. Army,” he clarified.

Eric nodded, not particularly interested in hearing the older man’s story. He wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. He didn’t want to make chitchat; he just wanted to take the paintings and head back home.

“I didn’t think it would be a good idea to drag them here,” Jon said, as if sensing Eric’s thoughts, and nodded in the direction of the window and the loud and pounding rain beyond it. “Thought maybe we could have a coffee first,” Jon said after a waiter had come to the table and Eric ordered an iced coffee. “Thought maybe we could get to know each other a little better, then see if it lets up.”

Get to know each other a little better. Eric wondered if it was a line the older man often used. He wondered, too, if that was what he’d said the first time he met Jae Hoon. He saw it clearly: Jae Hoon and Jon meeting online, the two of them chatting for hours, trading pics, hooking up the web cam, then the older man suggesting a meeting to *get to know each other a little better*. This was essentially Jae Hoon’s story of how he’d met Bruce, when Bruce had spent a year in Seoul working for an American multinational.

“I got your email address from Bruce,” Jon said.

Eric looked down and studied his own hands. The iced coffee came. Out of habit he picked up the glass and started to lean it toward the older man’s, as if about to make a toast, then quickly drew it back and set it down again.

“I thought about calling you,” Eric said. “I mean before the funeral. I remember seeing your name in his handphone.”

“I would have liked that,” Jon said, and he folded his hands under his chin. He had thick fingers and long tufts of black and grey hair sprouted from them, like weeds. He gave the impression of coolly observing Eric, studying him like something caught in a net or a trap.

For a moment Eric wondered if he had made a mistake by not calling the older man when he’d had the chance. But he also knew how odd it would have seemed if he had: what would his sisters have thought if they had found out that Jae Hoon had a *friend* his father’s age? Eric, at least,

was only a couple years older than Jae Hoon and had known him and his sisters for ten years already. This man's presence at the funeral would have drawn even more suspicion, if it weren't there already.

"I just didn't recognize any of the names," Eric added. "I didn't know who to call, who not to. It just seemed better not to call anyone at all."

"I probably could have told you who they were," Jon replied, and he smiled in such a way that was at once both warm and false.

At a neighbouring table a young woman bent over a textbook was getting English lessons from a young Western man. "I *go*, you *go*, he, she, it...?" he was saying, coaxing her into giving the right answer.

"Goes!" she said, finally getting the gist of his clue, and something seemed to sparkle between them.

"I knew Jay was sick," Jon said.

Eric winced. *Jay*. The name sounded so strange, almost foreign. It was as if they had been talking about someone else the whole time but hadn't realized it until now.

"Jay emailed me when he found out."

That's how the news came to Eric as well, through a series of emails from Atlanta, where Jae Hoon lived with Bruce, another man at least twenty years older than him. In one email Jae Hoon complained of having such abdominal pain that he couldn't sleep at night and needed to go to the doctor. Eric had never heard Jae Hoon complain about any physical ailment before and it seemed strange that he chose to do so now, in an email. Ordinarily, he kept those sorts of things to himself, as he did with most everything else: bottled up, sealed shut, endured. Visits to the doctor he considered a waste of time and money. Everything would go away eventually, he had said, if left to heal on its own. That he'd even mention it in an email seemed alarming. Days later, Jae Hoon wrote that the doctors thought he might have hepatitis, but then the next day another email came.

They say my stomach, my kidney and lung had attacked. So have to biopsy next week. They believe that I have cancer. Well, well... That's OK. I'm sorry to send this to you. But I wanna share this thing with someone who know me.

Someone who know me? That was the first thing that ran through Eric's mind. I *know*, you *know*, he, she it...?

He didn't write back right away. He needed some time to think about it. He wondered, too, if Jae Hoon might have been covering something up, if it really wasn't something else, knowing what he was like. But later on, when other people raised the same question, he reproached them angrily for

thinking in terms of stereotypes, yet in the back of his mind the question was there, too. *Well, well*, he'd written, typically phlegmatic. *That's OK*.

"I'm OK," Jae Hoon said over the phone (Eric had decided to call him instead), sounding cheerful, almost light-hearted. "Everybody die sometime." That, too, sounded so typical of him, Eric thought. That was in May. Eight weeks later he was dead.

"I tried calling him," Jon said, "when I hadn't heard anything in a while."

Outside a large truck rumbled by, loudly blaring its horn at a small vehicle in front.

"I'm sorry I didn't get in touch with you," Eric repeated, even though he didn't mean it. He looked at Jon and searched his face more closely than he had until then. He could see what it was that Jae Hoon might have been attracted to: the clear blue eyes, his fatherly-like presence, his maturity. He easily saw Jae Hoon nuzzling up to this man, fascinated with the grey hairs of his face, his chest and fingers. The image came to him easily and clearly. He turned away and looked out the window.

"Do, did, done. Eat, ate, eaten," the girl at the neighbouring table was saying. "Fly, flew, flown. Ride, rode, ride-en."

"*Ridden*," the man gently corrected, and smiled at her.

Eric watched the rain continue to hammer down. There was a long silence between the two men and the awkward moment forced Eric to say something. "Did you know him a long time?"

"Nine years," Jon said, and his eyes searched Eric's for reaction.

The coffee that Eric had been drinking roiled in his stomach then. Had he said two or even three years it might not have mattered. But nine was a number he never would have guessed.

"Are you surprised?"

Eric watched the traffic pass, the cars sending curtains of water onto the sidewalk if they drove too close to the drain that was now clogged and overflowing. He thought of getting up and walking out, but he didn't and he remained seated.

"We met in a bathhouse," Jon said, which didn't surprise Eric. He knew Jae Hoon went there; they both did. It was a filthy place. The water in the hot tubs was neither hot nor clean; the stiff towels that hung on a line to dry smelled rank the moment they came into contact with water. Mold festered in the corners of the sauna. But occasionally, on a Saturday afternoon, while Jae Hoon was at work and Eric, not having anything pressing to do, would think of the dark sleeping rooms illuminated by a single red light bulb screwed into the ceiling and of the men who silently glided in

and out of the dark rooms, loosely covering themselves with a hand towel, and he would be drawn there, unable to get there fast enough.

Nearly right from the beginning they had established rules for this sort of thing: phone numbers were not to be exchanged and follow-up encounters were prohibited. There were other rules, too, unspoken ones in which Eric had drawn certain lines and boundaries regarding other codes of conduct, the more specific details as to what was acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, but he was unable to articulate what they were: to bring them up would be to make plainly real something that neither one of them really wanted to openly discuss, and Eric hoped that Jae Hoon would act similarly. In the end, though, none of this mattered, because Eric, too, eventually broke every one of these rules. But that wasn't until much later, when it was clear the direction in which things were heading. Jae Hoon, he now knew, never abided by them in the first place.

"We talked about having a relationship then," Jon continued, and went on to tell him how Jae Hoon could talk to him about everything, that he was able to be completely honest with Jon in a way that he couldn't with anyone else, not even with Eric or with Bruce. He said that Jae Hoon was always very proud of Eric, and here too Eric winced: words a father might use to describe his son, rather than of one man speaking of another. "He was always showing me the photos you'd taken," Jon said. "I always knew whenever you posted something new online."

Jon went on in this way, talking about Jae Hoon as if he were a subject he knew infinitely more about, as if *he* were the real expert and Eric were some unskilled amateur. He said other things, too, that surprised Eric with his depth of knowledge, things that were deeply intimate and private and it embarrassed him now to hear them said out loud and by a stranger. Eric envied the older man: what he'd had with Jae Hoon, the intimacy and friendship, the honesty that they shared that was so different from their own, and the roles he had played as friend, partner, counselor.

"He hated living alone," Jon said. "Afterwards."

"That was not an easy time for him."

Eric remembered visiting Jae Hoon in his *oktapbang* one winter morning, the tiny and cold room he rented that was more like a tin-sided shed tacked onto the roof of a building. There were the unwashed bowls and chopsticks that sat piled up in the sink, the cheap aluminum pot sitting unwashed on the countertop and the crumpled-up *ramyeon* packages in the garbage. He remembered the plastic containers of *kimchi* and *kongnameul* that sat outside because he didn't own a refrigerator, nor had enough money to buy one, and the portable gas burner that he had instead of a proper stove. There was the surprise of seeing an overflowing ashtray (a habit he

forgot Jae Hoon even indulged in since that, too, was something he did in secret), the empty beer bottles, the dirty incense burner piled high with ash, the ring around the toilet bowl, the cheap and translucent plastic bathroom slippers.

And then there were the paintings that had once hung in their apartment, appearing so large in that poky room, and so out of place amid the filth and the trash. Carefully rolled in thick cardboard tubes, Jae Hoon had brought them back from a trip to China, a field trip the cooking school he worked for had sponsored. There were three altogether: a gift meant for the two of them and the apartment that they had just moved into at the time. They were signed and original works, simple and brightly colourful two-dimensional depictions of typical Chinese scenes. But when they broke up, Eric had not expected Jae Hoon to take them with him and was surprised when he did. The result left large pale rectangles on the walls that remained that way for a long time before Eric finally got around to having some photographs enlarged and framed.

“I remember sometimes taking him out to eat on base,” Jon said, “just to get something healthy in him.”

“He didn’t take care of himself back then.”

“Jay always needed someone who would take care of him.”

“He was always looking for a father figure.”

“What we don’t have in our relationships as children,” Jon said, “we try to make up for in our relationships as adults.” It sounded as though he were quoting someone. “He hated his father,” he said, looking squarely at Eric. “You don’t know how much Jay hated his father.”

Eric thought he knew this quite well, but hearing Jon say it like that made him realize that he didn’t know the stories that lay beyond the fact. Jon, it seemed, likely did. “It was a good thing he met Bruce,” Eric said in response.

“Bruce knew how to take care of him.”

“Did you see all those photos of the two of them in Mexico? And of the house they lived in?”

“He said he loved Bruce’s kitchen and all the cooking they did together.”

And a question occurred to Eric, one he’d often thought of. He asked, “Do you think he *really* loved him?”

Jon took a long time to reply. He looked at the couple studying English, as if the answer somehow lay with them, and seemed to mull it over. “I think Bruce loved him more than he loved Bruce,” he said matter-of-factly. “But it’s always like that between couples. There’s always one who loves the

other more. Don't you think?" He waited for Eric to respond to this and when he didn't, he said, "I think he loved the idea of being loved."

What he said confirmed what Eric had also thought. He had asked Jae Hoon the same question the last time he saw him, nights before his scheduled departure for the United States, when he already had the cancer, only no one knew it then. But instead of answering yes or no, Jae Hoon had said, "He's very kind," as if that were all he needed. It made him think of something else Jae Hoon had said, years earlier, during an argument that would eventually lead to their decision to call it quits. "You know *why* I always go that dirty place?" he'd shouted. "You know *why*?" When Eric shook his head, he said, "I'm looking for rich guy."

Eric didn't believe it. It's a lie, he thought, a provocation. But he was reminded of it when Jae Hoon said "He's very kind," and again when Eric opened the emailed attachments containing photos of the house he and Bruce lived in, the dinner parties they hosted, and of the trips they went on together.

"But you know," Jon said and he picked up his iced coffee and drained the glass, the ice cubes clinking loudly when he set it back down. "I also think he always loved you most."



The rain had eased up by the time they left the café. And from there it was a short walk to the apartment Jon rented in Hangangjin, a neighbourhood where many foreigners and diplomats lived, and one Eric had seldom visited.

A young Korean man opened the door. "Hi, I'm Dennis," he said in an accent that sounded like he had spent a year or two in America. He wore a shiny black T-shirt that stretched tight across his torso and arms. He held open the door for them to come in.

"You're back early," Jon said.

"I just got in now," Dennis replied.

Eric took a seat in the living room. On an end table next to the sofa was a photograph of a bearded man Eric's age and a snapshot of an infant tucked into the corner of the frame. He picked it up and examined it.

"Busy today?" Jon called from the kitchen where Eric could hear him dropping ice cubes into glasses.

"It was totally dead," Dennis said from the other end of the apartment. "Oh, and Carl called just now. I told him you'll call him back."

Jon came out from the kitchen holding two glasses of water, their surfaces beaded in moisture.

“That’s my son,” Jon said when he saw Eric holding the photograph.

“You have children?”

“*And* grandchildren.” Jon placed the drinks down and picked up one of several remote controls that lay on the coffee table and aimed it at the air conditioner that towered in the corner of the room. It beeped loudly several times and almost immediately Eric felt a cool breath whirl past his legs. The apartment was bright and airy and looked newly renovated. The furniture, too, was new and modern and black. He noticed the large and sleek television and home entertainment system, the artwork from across Asia that hung on the walls, the brightly polished stainless steel appliances visible on the kitchen counter. It wasn’t at all the way Eric lived, preferring instead to buy furniture and appliances second-hand or snatching up items found discarded in the street.

“Jay loved to hear about my kids and grandkids,” Jon said. “He always thought that was amazing somehow.”

Eric said nothing. He placed the photograph back where it was. It astonished him to hear of this side of Jae Hoon that he’d never known. Was all of this familiar to Jae Hoon too? he wondered. Which remote was which? Where were the glasses and towels kept? What lay in the drawers? Was he familiar with where all the pots and pans were? Had he cooked elaborate meals here as well?

From another room, he could hear water running, then the pop of a showerhead.

“They’re over here,” Jon said.

Leaning against a wall and loosely covered over in bubble wrap were the paintings, like lost treasures from another era discovered in the home of a thief. Eric pulled away the long sheet of bubble wrap that hid them. It had been a long time since he’d laid eyes on them and the feeling he had was like running into a very old and dear friend. He gazed at them one at a time: peasants and donkeys on a violet background, a blue and white snow-covered Great Wall, children playing in a countryside painted red.

He felt an overwhelming sadness then. The paintings seemed more real to him than the urn that had been delivered in the mail. The urn had meant nothing to him, even if it had contained Jae Hoon’s ashes. But it was when he touched the paintings again that the truth of his friend never coming back suddenly became real.

“This is what he brought back for me,” Jon said then, pointing up at a gold and silver coiled dragon on a navy blue background that hung on the wall. Eric had noticed it when he first sat down, but had not drawn the

connection. That there had been a fourth painting was something he never would have guessed. It was by far the nicest of them all, he thought.

“When Jay came back from China he asked me to pick, so I chose this one.”

The privilege of first choice, Eric thought. Yet another secret uncovered. He lay the bubble wrap over the paintings again and straightened himself up.

“I knew you’d want them back.” Jon smiled warmly. “I know how much they mean to you.”

Before Jae Hoon left for the United States, he had asked Eric if he wanted to have the paintings again, but at the time he had said no, not knowing why he’d done so. It had taken them both aback, saying no like that. In refusing what had once been theirs, he wanted in some ineffable way to hurt him in return. I’m OK not to have any reminders of you, was what his refusal had meant. He understood that now.

The sound of the shower running in the bathroom stopped and a moment later Dennis appeared wearing a towel around his waist, his hair wet and dripping. Beads of water glistened on the smooth skin of his chest and back. He smiled shyly as he slunk past into the bedroom, embarrassed to be seen wearing nothing more than a towel. Eric had the sense that it was almost as though a ghost had appeared in the room or was experiencing a *déjà vu*: somehow, what he was seeing, who he was with, where he was standing gave him the impression of something reenacted, like in a dark dream in which he felt inexplicably shut out from something, the feeling stronger than the image it contained. When he looked at Jon, he saw his lips curl into a smile, as if it pleased him that Eric had seen what he had, like having been able to boast without the need to say a word, as if he were really saying, *This, too, is something that you’ll never know.*



It was dark when the taxi pulled up and Eric and Jon carefully laid the paintings into the back seat. The rain had stopped for now, but it was the water from the telephone lines and the tree branches that dripped on them now. They had carefully wrapped the paintings in bubble wrap and once again in garbage bags as an extra precaution.

“Thank you,” Eric said, and he shook Jon’s thick hand, realizing now how the older man towered above him, a big, heavy body supported by spindly legs. Jon held an umbrella over the open car door, even though there was no real need for it. Dennis, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt now, stood on the landing on the second floor and waved. Then Eric got in the

cab and it slowly pulled away. As they drove down the hill, he turned to look through the rear window and waved one last time. He hoped never to see either of them again.

Even though the rain had stopped, the wipers intermittently drew two arcs across the windshield, wiping away the spray from other passing vehicles. Eric ran his hand over the edge of the thick plastic that wrapped the paintings, and here and there he pressed down on it, listening to the pop of the bubbles, not completely aware he was doing so. *There's always one who loves the other more.* Was that how it had been then? Was that how it was now? What he'd felt for him had not vanished. It had changed over time, became less possessive, but it had never really gone. Harm, too, had never been the intention. He knew that, even though harm had been the outcome. Forgiveness was possible because time had already passed and would continue to do so, lessening the blow of what had come about today. A different set of emotions might have played out had the timing been different. It was the friend, the one who was still alive, who would be more difficult to forgive, if at all.

"*Chal gatah-wah,*" Eric had said, thinking back again to that last night, then later wondered if it had been the right expression to use. It was a phrase that could be translated in any number of ways: return safely; have a good trip; *bon voyage*. Go well and come back. That would be its literal translation, even though Jae Hoon had no intention of returning.

That night they had gone out for dinner, then walked around a busy neighbourhood packed with young people, music thumping from every shop, bar and restaurant, and for the first time allowed themselves a freedom in their conversation they had not known in years. They talked about the bar where they had first met, and which no longer existed, and the trips they'd taken to some of the islands around the country. Eric said that he hoped Bruce would like the photos he'd taken, and Jae Hoon replied that of course he would. Jae Hoon talked about having recently gone to see a palm reader and that she had foretold he would know three loves in his life. Hearing this, Eric had assumed that the third was one that was yet to come, that this love lay somewhere in the distant future. He had no idea that it was a reference to the past.

With Eric's point-and-shoot, they snapped pictures of each other, then one of them together, Eric holding the camera away at arm's length. The background, when they checked the screen, was a magical blur of lights and movement, their faces bright, crisp and rich with detail.

When the bus pulled up to the curb and it was time to say goodbye, Eric drew Jae Hoon to him and held him briefly. It was awkward then: the embrace not as long as Eric would have liked, nor as tight. They did not

kiss. He knew Jae Hoon's dislike for open affection in public. "This is Korea," was how Jae Hoon had justified it in the past: the attention it would draw, the suspicion. But maybe it was the suddenness of the gesture, Eric thought, that allowed Jae Hoon to give in this one time, that and the fact that they were just friends now, and knowing, too, that it would be a long time before they'd see each other again.