

## Part2 of <Hong's death>

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Hyun answered the door. In the living room, the coffee table was covered with beer cans, sweet and spicy fried chicken, and a cup of bloated noodles. Ahn walked to the sofa, took off his black suit jacket, and was gingerly seating himself when Hyun offered him a fresh can of beer. He did not really feel like a beer but Hyun was hearing nothing of it, so Ahn took the can and cracked it open. The television was on to a news story about a series of killings. Ahn had heard about the killings, as had everyone in the city. It had been all over the media for weeks, the hottest subject of conversation in offices, restaurants, any place where people gathered. Everyone wanted a piece of the fear that they could be killed at any moment by the group of unknown killers. The killers' method was deceptively simple. They would corner their target, male or female, and beat them to death with two-by-two sticks and lead pipes. Slavering, relentless, crushing flesh and bone and guts to a pulp until the victim drew their last breath. All the killings have been group assaults by five or six burly males, motive unknown. A number of criminologists have raised the opinion that the suspects are recreational killers to judge from the brutal and unprofessional nature of their handiwork. This is Choi for YTN News...

Like a pack of dogs, Hyun muttered as he switched the television off. Ahn grimaced, remembering the dogs from his nightmare. Didn't you say on the phone that you wanted to talk about something? Hyun asked. D-d-did I? Ahn stuttered, surprised by his own confusion. He had spent the entire day at the office trying to decide whether to go to the wake or not, and had called Hyun at the last minute hoping that he knew something about Hong. Why was it so hard to bring up the question he had come specifically to ask? Why did his tongue trip over the words ineffectually, unable to form a single sentence? Ahn gave up. It was not as if any answer Hyun gave him could solve the problem that had been gnawing away at his mind all day. Either he would be left questioning his own memory if Hyun remembered something he did not, or the woman's identity would remain a mystery if Hyun knew nothing. Neither situation appealed to Ahn. Have you gone stupid or something? Here, have some food if you haven't eaten, Hyun grunted, handing him a pair of unused chopsticks. Ahn accepted the chopsticks but hesitated from

digging in. Hyun was already working on a piece of chicken, smearing the red sauce around his mouth in the process. Ahn felt what little appetite he had leaving him. Hyun had gained weight noticeably since his divorce last spring. He was so out of shape it begged the question of how he could possibly rescue people who jumped or fell into the Han River with that massive paunch. Or rather, it was a wonder that they made wetsuits that fit him at all. Hyun worked for the Han River Rescue Brigade.

You look tired, did you have an emergency? Ahn asked perfunctorily. Last night, Hyun answered shortly. I thought it was getting too cold for that sort of thing, but I guess it's not. No, people jump all the time. Why did the person last night want to die? How would I know? Hyun snapped, slamming his unfinished piece of chicken down on the coffee table. Ahn flushed as if he had been yelled at just for doing his job, which happened often. He got cursed on the phone every day for reminding debtors that they were late. Maybe they got a call from you, Hyun said with a sneer. It was gone in a flash, but Ahn did not miss it. I'm not some k-k-kind of crook, I'm not a loan shark. I'm a p-p-perfectly legal..... I know, I know. You're overreacting again, Hyun interrupted, plaster an inane grin on his face. Ahn did not smile. He wanted to know. Did Hyun know about the incident, had he known all this time, and if he did why was he torturing him in such a pitifully transparent way?

A year ago a famous actor had jumped into the Han River, riddled by poverty and credit card debt after a failed business venture. By the time the rescue brigade fished the body out of the murky depths it was nothing but a bloated corpse. Ahn had never asked Hyun if he had been one of the rescuers. Nor had Ahn ever revealed that he had been in charge of collecting the actor's debt. And so it was meaningless to protest that his actions were perfectly legal, that he had been merely carrying out instructions as an employee, and that the actor had not taken responsibility of his debt for whatever reason. He could also say that to feel guilt is meaningless, as nobody acts out of spite or vengeance within the system and therefore cannot be blamed for committing a crime, but what was the point of that? Ahn had no desire to bring up the incident after all that time, nor did he look forward to Hyun's reaction. Relenting upon Ahn's discomfort, Hyun shuffled over to the sofa, sat next to Ahn, and began to recount what had happened the previous night.

A woman in her forties had jumped from Mapo Bridge after an hour of weeping and wailing over her sorry fate. Hyun and another rescuer were already there, waiting in their wetsuits on an electric boat. They strapped on their oxygen tanks and plunged into the water the moment the woman jumped. It is easy to admire a river from above, but from the inside the water is dark and dirty and the current races overpoweringly. Tons of waste are dumped into the water every day, and God knows how many souls. Television dramas or programs showing couples whispering sweet nothings and serenading each other against the backdrop of the river, lights of the bridge glimmering against the surface of the water in soft focus, made Hyun want to puke. Anyway, the middle-aged woman held on to the rescuers for dear life, as did most people that jumped into the river. Gone was the woman who had been making an extremely vocal case for everyone to please just let her die. It would have been marginally easier to rescue her had she lost consciousness, but she did not even close her eyes, clutching Hyun's body with mindless strength. Like some kind of monster, Hyun thought. There was no doubt that her intentions

were equally sincere either way. She had jumped into the black depths to kill herself, and she had been ready to put her rescuer's life at risk to save herself. Of the two outcomes it was impossible for Hyun to guess which she truly preferred. Hyun did not understand, nor did he want to understand, why anyone would choose to die so conspicuously, jumping into the Han River, when there were plenty of ways to die unnoticed and undisturbed. Sometimes he imagined holding the jumper's head and pushing it under the water. No, make that all the time. Forcing that fantasy out of his mind, he dragged the woman out of the water and onto the boat, exerting himself to the point that he felt all the energy in his body draining away as he always did. She sat for a moment, stunned, and then began sobbing inconsolably. Why? Ahn asked. Because why did we have to go and rescue her, that's why, Hyun replied, the tension gone out of his voice.

Hyun picked up his can of beer again, looking considerably more relaxed after finishing his story. Neither of them spoke. In the silence, Hyun downed his beer in one gulp and turned his eyes on Ahn. Hyun's face looked empty. It could have been a round hole gaping in the earth without form and void. Hong is dead, Ahn blurted. He felt his voice rippling as if he had spoken into a bottomless pit. Who? Hong, you know Hong. She was in the hiking club. Don't you remember her? Ahn pressed accusingly. Ooh, Hyun exhaled, an expression of recognition finally lighting up his face. What happened? I don't know. I just got a call this morning from her brother. Do you remember what department she was? Pharmacy? Hyun asked, causing Ahn to narrow his eyes. As far as Ahn's memory went, he did not recall any pharmacy student in their hiking club. You know, Hong, she was a year behind us, always laughing at the stupid jokes we made, Hyun elaborated, and Ahn decided to toss him a bait. You mean the one who was afraid of knives? Yes! Do you remember when we went hiking in Bukhansan, or was it Dobongsan. Anyway somebody asked her to peel an apple, and she started to do it but her hands were shaking so badly she cut herself and bled over everything. Hyun warmed up to his story, and Ahn struggled to keep himself from bursting out into hollow laughter. It was Ahn who was afraid of knives and had cut himself on that particular occasion. Resisting the urge to point out that they had actually been hiking in Gwanaksan, Ahn said instead, I remember that she had nice feet. Her heels were so smooth and pink. Were they? Oh yes, she wasn't much of a looker but she had great legs and ankles. She drove the boys wild when she wore short skirts in the summer. I didn't think you'd remember *that*, Hyun said, grinning lecherously as if a scantily-dressed female had appeared at that very moment. Ahn was confused. Could it be that Hyun's memory was intact, and that part of his was missing? Perhaps there really had been a Hong that resembled him like a twin, and his notions of sexual attractiveness were tied to her. Once the doubts began he felt a strange tickling sensation all over his body, as if Hong had crept into his head and was tiptoeing around the debris of his half-formed memories. No, it was as if he could see her with his own eyes. She was barefoot and everything was blurred about her except the pink skin of her heels. The closer Ahn tried to approach, the further she walked away, never looking back. She was walking towards a vanishing point and the next thing he knew, she was gone. The horizontal distance between them flipped itself into a vertical depth, and Ahn found himself standing on the brink of a cliff. He could make out nothing in the cracks of his memories, only darkness. Reeling from a vertigo that felt closer to fear, Ahn raised his head slowly. Hyun was yawning hugely,

exposing the pitch-black depths of his throat. If he reached deep into that throat, Ahn thought, his hand would touch not the innards and bones of a human being but the most horrifying, wretched memories known to man, sealed in a cold sack. The hair rose on the back of Ahn's neck. He did not recognize that man. Was that lump of fat really the Hyun he thought he knew? Ahn regretted asking Hyun about Hong, regretted visiting him at all, until it struck him that even such regret was pointless.

Ahn collected his jacket and bag and got up from the sofa. His only thought was to go to the wake, where there would be a portrait of the deceased, to see for himself. It was already past eight so he would have to move quickly if he wanted to be home by midnight, the time he usually went to bed. Oh, you're leaving? Hyun asked, getting up belatedly. I have to go to the wake. Would...you like to come, too? Me? I wasn't close to Hong and nobody called me. Hyun made the predictable excuses, scratching the back of his flat head. Ahn just nodded and trudged to the entrance. Why don't you take Min, if you don't feel like going by yourself? Hyun asked behind his back. Min was best friends with Hong, so I'm sure she's going. Min? Yes, she runs a pharmacy down the road, at the intersection in front of the subway station. You know, she's just as dowdy as she was in school. I went to that pharmacy by chance, to buy some aspirin, and there was no mistake that it was her. Still likes to talk your ear off, too. She kept me there for an hour, can you believe it, the first time I've seen her in ten years! Ahn wondered who Min was, but did not ask. There was nothing more he wanted to ask Hyun. He walked out of the foyer and was tying his shoelaces when Hyun's voice slashed through the air. By the way, you should watch out. Ahn turned around but the sensor light in the foyer had already gone out, obscuring Hyun's expression. You saw the news, too. Seoul isn't safe these days. Don't be going around by yourself. Pack of dogs..... Ahn murmured. What? You mean them? They really are like a pack of dogs, aren't they, Hyun said absentmindedly. Ahn scrutinized the other man's face as if he were looking in a mirror. The sensor light went on. Under the orange glow, Hyun's face looked deathly afraid. The sensor light went off again and Ahn reached out, as if to make sure that Hyun was really there. Before he knew it, however, the door had swung shut with a metallic click.

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Do I know Hong? Let's see... Oh, you mean Hong!

Yes, I went to university with her. And high school. But I think you're mistaken about one thing. Hong wasn't a pharmacy student, she was a chemistry student. And I never signed up for a hiking club. I can't stand hiking myself. Come to think of it, Hong always liked the mountains. There was a pretty big hill behind our high school and she used to climb it when she had something on her mind. By herself, mind you. She's always been reckless like that. But I never knew she belonged to a hiking club. I guess it's only natural, we completely fell out of touch after a certain incident. What happened? Well, the truth is... It feels a bit silly to speak of it now, after more than ten years. Looking back, it wasn't even such a big deal.

So, it must have been... I think it was winter vacation of our first year. Hong called me, saying that she was immigrating to Canada all of a sudden. I was devastated, I tell you. I even gave her some cash as a going-away present, all the money I could spare changed into dollars. I cried like a baby because I thought it was the last time I would ever see her. And you know what, the next semester I saw her on campus, at the cafeteria. She didn't see me, but I saw her. I saw her quite often after that, on campus. I wasn't even angry, just completely blown away. Can you imagine going to those lengths to break up with one of your friends? The whole thing was so immature I just let it go. I never understood what I did to her that was so wrong. Still don't. Anyway, after that I never contacted Hong again, and I pretended not to see her when we crossed paths. Until we graduated. And after that, too. How do I know Hyun? Hyun was the TA for my swimming class. Whaaat? Hyun told you that Hong and I were best friends? Well, I guess Hyun didn't know anything about what happened between us, so it's understandable that he was mistaken. I was the one who introduced him to Hong, after all. He saw me talking to Hong on campus one day, this was before we stopped being friends, of course. He begged me to invite him for a drink with Hong. He was so persistent, even though I told him Hong had a boyfriend.

Isn't it funny, though. I've been thinking about Hong all day today..... It must've been because of this article I read. It's right here, look. This man, the human rights lawyer who opened his own practice in district J, he used to be Hong's boyfriend. Everybody knew them even in high school. They were the perfect couple—looks, brains, money, you name it. So of course they were famous and everybody was jealous of them.

But anyway, why are you asking all these questions about Hong? Are you with the police? Or a private investigator? Is Hong involved in a scam or something? It isn't adultery, is it? What? She..... She's dead? Oh my goodness, how..... What do you mean, Hong had a phobia of sharp objects? What on earth are you going on about! Oh, I'm sorry, it's been such a shock..... Please, don't mind me. You know, Hong was always in such good health. I never saw her sick. Sound of body, sound of mind, that was Hong.

I think I'll sit down for a bit.

Do you think that he knows? That man wouldn't blink an eye to hear that Hong was dead. Hong and I had our differences, but I still heard about her from other friends. I know all about what he did to Hong, that bastard. The stories I've heard, they don't bear repeating. Human rights lawyer, what a joke. Try hypocrite scum instead!

A picture of Hong? No, I'm not the sentimental kind, especially with our history. About the wake, let me see, I...don't think I can make it. This is all so sudden, I'm not ready at all. And I don't think Hong wants me, I mean, would have wanted me to be there. Could you make a donation for me, instead? Here, and if you could find an envelope for it, oh, thank you.

May I ask you something, I've been wondering since you came in, are you quite all right? No, it's just that you look so pale and clammy. I bet you could use something to calm down. Would you like to try one of these pills? It's something I take for anxiety sometimes, it really helps to calm the mind. Being a pharmacist has its perks. I don't need a prescription for any of these. Of course, I have to be careful about it, but still. Oh come on, you won't try one? I'm telling you, you don't know what you're missing..... I guess you're not really a pill person. If you were,

you'd know that some pills are like a person. A very precise, discreet person who keeps their mouth shut, who comforts you without making a big fuss about it. Like a true friend. But I'm keeping you here with all this chitchat. Yes, of course, you must be going. Before the wake is over. Right, a wake is all night. How silly of me, haha. Oh, and be careful on the streets at night.

You know how it is in Seoul these days.

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Out of the pharmacy, Ahn looked back after a few steps. Min was gazing down at the pill she had wanted to give Ahn, holding it on the palm of her hand. She happened to raise her head when Ahn was looking at her and their eyes met in mid-air. Ahn inclined his head in greeting, but she continued to stare at him without any recognition that she had seen the gesture, even after tossing back the pill she had been holding on her palm. Ahn gave her a dry smile that she did answer, her lips curling up in an unnatural-looking way. The two held their cold, bitter smiles for a moment. Perhaps because of the pill she had just taken, Min's eyes looked out of focus, like an empty boat rocking in the water. As if she knew that she suffered from an anxiety that could not be cured by any pill. Ahn was forcibly reminded of the small, round pill he had taken that morning. Perhaps it was not Hong but Min that resembled him, Ahn thought. If that were true, they had been smiling so contemptuously not at each other but their own reflections in the pharmacy's shop front. Ahn turned away, his face expressionless. He walked away, hailed a cab, and did not look back.

In the cab Ahn asked the driver to go to district J, not K. The wake would be all night long, as Min had reminded him, so he still had time to make a short stop at district J to see Hong's ex-boyfriend. And if the ex was a lawyer as Min said, he may well have saved a picture of Hong. Ahn felt his heart racing as the taxi sped along to his destination.

Out of the cab, he searched for directions to the lawyer's office using his phone's map application. Less than five minutes on the way, Ahn realized that he no longer needed to look at his phone. The lawyer's office was located a mere three blocks away from the neuropsychiatrist's office that he visited every two weeks. Summoning up an image of his doctor and his office had an instantly calming effect, and made him wonder what his doctor was up to. He was sure that if he were to go see him, saying that he had been in the area and thought he'd drop by, the doctor would give him a warm welcome. Perhaps they might even go out for a drink and share an intimate conversation, like old friends. The light was still on in his office. Ahn loped to the building where the office was located, a pleased smile on his face, before a second thought gave him pause. Come to think of it, he had never seen his doctor outside of office hours, and the only thing he knew about him was his profession. It was not inconceivable that he might have a drink with his doctor in a setting outside his office, but it would probably be awkward and not fun at all. Ahn turned back and quickened his step. He told himself that he would see his doctor in a couple of days, anyway, so there was no reason to feel rushed.

The lawyer's office was on the ninth floor of an impressively modern building. Ahn got off the elevator at the ninth floor and immediately recognized the lawyer leaving his office. Excuse me..... he trailed off, as the lawyer passed him, and the other man slowly turned back. Yes? Pardon me, but do you work here as a lawyer? Yes, I do. Is this about a consulting? I'm afraid I'm in a rush now, could you come back again tomorrow? Oh, no, it's not that..... The lawyer looked at Ahn quizzically as he struggled to find the right words to bring up the matter of Hong. The good thing was that the lawyer was also wearing a black suit. There was a chance, however unlikely, that he was going to the wake as well. Ahn decided to take the plunge. I wanted to ask, do you know Hong? She studied chemistry at Y University. Excuse me? Yes, I know Hong, but who are you? I heard from one of Hong's friends that you were close to Hong. The lawyer took a step closer. Ahn shrank to see how the lawyer's face had suddenly become guarded, but it was too late to back away. Who are you? What do you want with my wife? Your.....wife? Hong is y-your wife now? Yes, how many times do you need to ask? You still haven't told me who you are. D-do you mean that Hong is.....a-alive? What? The lawyer fixed a hostile gaze on Ahn, raking him from head to toe. My wife is none of your business, who the hell do you think you are asking questions like that? The lawyer was truly angry now, and Ahn faced him nervously, taking a huge gulp. He should really watch his stammer. The lawyer was going to think he was soft in the head if he tripped up again, and he would be forced to leave with no more information than he had now. Actually, this morning I heard that Hong had passed away. I had a phone call saying that she used to be in the hiking club at Y University, or something like that, you see, the person said he was Hong's brother, he said that..... Look, you've made a mistake. Hiking club, indeed. My wife was in the volunteer club, with me. We met there. Then, you weren't together in high school? I keep telling you, you've got the wrong person! Go somewhere else if you want to find your Hong that died. I am going to meet my wife, who is very much alive. The lawyer turned abruptly and stomped away. Ahn hurried after him. Excuse me! What is it now? Could you show me a picture of your wife, if you have one? Or if you don't, do you mind if I come with you now? I won't take your time, I just need to see your wife's face. What? I, I just don't understand what's going on with this situation..... The lawyer suddenly grasped Ahn by the collar and slammed him against the wall. I don't care about your situation. Tell me who sent you. Who is it? The police? The prosecutor's office? Did they send you to get a picture because they heard that Kang, the lawyer, was hitting his wife? Answer me! The lawyer's voice was raised so loud that it rang throughout the empty hallway and his face was flushed with rage, but Ahn felt as if he were gazing up at him from under water, vision clouded and ears plugged. If the man was speaking the truth, Ahn thought, I must be a lie. But if the other man was lying, I must be a lie. Wasn't it funny that even if the other man was lying, I can never be true, only an illusion? Ahn took the lawyer's wrists in his hands and threw them off with all his strength. Startled by Ahn's reaction, the lawyer hastily backed away. He could be heard breathing heavily, as if it was not Ahn that was sunken in a pool whose clouded surface reflected only lies and illusions, but the lawyer. Ahn felt an indescribable sense of fatigue settling in. The long corridor that he was standing in, no, all the streets he had been walking that day, felt like they belonged to a maze. He felt as if he had been chasing a thread of lies that he thought would lead to the exit, only to find out that it pointed to no exit. It tired him to think that in

somebody else's maze, he too was already dead or had never existed at all. For Ahn, the only real Hong was the one he had come to know that day. Let me tell you about Hong, Ahn began calmly, fixing a level gaze on the lawyer. Hong was a year behind me in school. She laughed at my stupid jokes, and she was so scared of knives she couldn't even peel an apple. She liked mountains since she was in high school and she went out with a future lawyer that broke her heart. And she died, yesterday night. Finishing his speech, Ahn straightened his collar and walked leisurely towards the elevator. A stream of abuse followed him, mostly words like *sue* and *lawsuit*, as the doors opened and closed. Die, you crazy motherfucker! The lawyer hurled his last insult. For the first time since hearing about Hong's death, Ahn felt sorry for her.

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Outside the building that housed the lawyer's office, a cold gust of wind came rushing at him, chopping through the thick darkness. On his way to the main road, Ahn stopped dead in his tracks and twisted his head to the side. What he saw gripped him so completely his eyes began to water from the effort of not looking away.

His doctor was walking toward an expensive black sedan, clicking his key remote, while a schoolgirl in uniform trailed after him. She walked in exaggeratedly small, slow steps, perhaps hampered by her too-tight skirt. The doctor waited impatiently before he threw his arm around her shoulders and guided her to the passenger seat. Short and of slight build, the doctor did not make a very convincing guardian—he looked more like a spirit that had attached itself to the girl. A malevolent one, at that. The girl opened the door of the passenger seat and was lowering herself into the seat when the doctor caressed her bottom roughly, to which she reacted with an idiotic giggle. Suddenly the doctor slammed the door of the passenger seat for no apparent reason, cutting off the sound of the girl's childish laughter. Stupid bitch. The doctor's words crystallized instantly in the early winter atmosphere and flew towards Ahn on an icy gust, slapping against his cheek. There was no pain but Ahn could not stop himself from letting out a small gasp. The sound finally alerted the doctor to Ahn's presence, causing him to stop on his way to the driver's seat. Ahn would have liked to believe the other man's expression registered panic, or at least shame, but there was nothing to back up his belief in the darkness. It was a darkness that suffered the uncertainty of not knowing, but also offered the convenience of ignorance, reminding him of his first meeting with the doctor. The doctor had wanted to get to the bottom of Ahn's depression and insomnia, but Ahn had no desire to talk and only wanted a prescription. I don't know what happened, but I am sure that it was not entirely your fault, the doctor had said dispassionately, writing the prescription Ahn had asked for. It was a standard enough piece of advice for someone in his profession, but Ahn had burst into tears and wept for a long time, holding his face in his hands. He went for regular sessions after that, giving up his plan to rely on medication to tide him over for the time being. He had never been late for a session.

Just then a truck appeared, its front lights illuminating Ahn's and the doctor's faces as it passed by. In the absence of darkness, Ahn felt his throat close in on itself painfully. When had he seen that expression on his

doctor's face before? Why was it so familiar, that sardonic smile that suggested his deed was nothing compared to killing a man? Sensing that something was amiss, the schoolgirl rolled down her window and glanced from Ahn to the doctor. The doctor got into the car without ever saying a word to Ahn. The sedan came to life and zoomed off to someplace, and in a few seconds even its taillights had disappeared. Two days, Ahn muttered to himself. In two days, I will be able to speak of all of this to you.

Ahn walked to the main road, flagged down a taxi, and sunk into the back seat. He was tired. It was already nearly eleven o'clock at night. He told the driver to take him to S Hospital in district K and dozed off.