

Paul Griffiths  
7A Eliot St  
Somerville, MA 02143  
[anotherpg@yahoo.com](mailto:anotherpg@yahoo.com)  
781.475.0787 cell

6,250 words

## ❧ ADMISSIONS ❧

On the second leg of the flight from Seoul, Jin-Soon decided to order a beer. He had finished all the coming week's schoolwork during a layover in Seattle, as his mother made him promise not to miss any assignments, and within twenty minutes of the red-eye being in the air, the drink cart came clanking down the aisle. He didn't enjoy beer; he had only tasted it once, by accident, at a wedding when he was ten years old, but Jin thought if he enrolled in an American college, he should develop a taste for it. When the stewardess handed him a napkin and a small bag of pretzels, Jin felt giddy, as if there were bubbles in his stomach. "*One beer, please,*" he said, trying to sound casual.

The stewardess crouched low. The flight had been delayed for two hours and she looked tired. "*How old are you again?*" She had helped Jin with a customs form.

He whispered, "*Eighteen.*"

The stewardess pursed her lips. In the dim overhead light, Jin could make out a patina of tiny wrinkles around her eyes. She must have been his mother's age, although with all the make-up, she appeared much prettier. "*This isn't an international flight anymore.*" The stewardess spoke clearly enough to make sure Jin understood. "*I can only give you one.*"

Jin nodded; the seat next to him was empty and most of the other passengers were preparing for sleep. He didn't want to get her in trouble. He could be discreet.

The stewardess pulled open a plastic drawer and studied its contents. "*Budweiser okay?*"

"*Yes. Thank you.*" Jin handed over a crisp twenty-dollar bill. The stewardess wore a sweet perfume, which his mother never did, and the scent reminded him of lychee ice cream. Already, Jin discovered, he liked American women.

Hours later, Jin woke up with a start. Someone had lifted a window shade; light streamed into the hull of the plane. He made out the features of the seat in front of him, the grey plastic of overhead bins, the nozzle of air bearing down on him – it took a minute to realize where he was. Jin blinked, trying to get some moisture back into his eyes, and noticed the can of beer was gone. He had let it sit, untouched, in the divot of his tray table through the night. It had been replaced with a container of orange juice and the four dollars he'd paid to the stewardess.

Coming down the escalator in Boston, Jin scanned the crowd. He didn't see his uncle. They had changed planes once more in New York, which meant another delay, and it was almost noon, much later than scheduled. Jin was struck by a sudden panic that he had been forgotten about. His visit to the United States was for college interviews; Harvard and Carnegie Mellon had scholarships for Korean internationals. His uncle, Choo-ang, had offered to take him to both schools. His mother had given him money to pay for food and transportation. She told her son not to be a burden to Choo-ang; she wanted to appear well off to her brother, even though they were not. Jin hoped he could stretch the cash to last the whole trip. Stepping onto the carpeted

floor of the baggage claim, he realized that if his uncle didn't show, he would have to make all the decisions.

Fatigue was beginning to set in; his backpack felt stuffed with rocks. Should he rent a car? How far was Cambridge by taxi? Where would he sleep? Jin began to walk more quickly now, worried the Americans could sense his confusion, and he wanted to get out of the crowd before anyone noticed. He'd heard stories, after all, and kept his hands close to his body until he spied Choo-ang standing against the far wall, holding an unlit cigarette between his fingers.

"Uncle!" Jin cried. He pushed his way through a long line of people waiting for their bags.

Choo-ang lifted up his sunglasses and set them atop his balding head. "What took you so long?"

"I'm sorry, Uncle." Jin was breathless. "My flight was delayed."

"You look fat," Choo-ang said. He poked Jin in the gut. "Little Sister has been feeding you too well. She wants to keep all the ladies off you." Then he gave Jin a bony hug. "So, you have a girlfriend?"

Jin blushed. "No girlfriend yet. I'm too busy studying."

"Well, I will try and fix that." Choo-ang patted the boy on the back of the neck. "Five years is too long. Listen to my accent. How bad is it? I work for Americans. I only speak Korean on the weekends, a hobby. You forget – you'll see – faster than you think."

"Your Korean is perfect, Uncle."

"Stop with all your 'uncles.' We don't need formality." He looked Jin over. "What's this? Is this all your luggage?"

Jin had his backpack and a small carry-on. He shrugged. "I travel light."

His uncle laughed. “Listen to you. Big man, international explorer. Your voice is ten notes deeper than I remember.” He picked up Jin’s suitcase.

Dangling from the rearview mirror of Choo-ang’s car was a pinecone-shaped air freshener. The car had the bitter odor of tobacco and also, vaguely, the scent of pine. Dark stains had been ground into the carpet, even though the car appeared to have been recently cleaned. Jin pushed the seat back. “I am excited to see your house, Uncle.” Jin’s mother had packed a gift, three jars of pickling spice she was convinced Choo-ang couldn’t get in America. “Where is *Low-ell*?”

“No, no, no. *Lowell*. Say it all at once.” His uncle rolled down the window to hand over his ticket. “But we’re not going there. My house is too far away for us to enjoy ourselves. I found a nice hotel near the university. So close, you will walk to your interview.” He reached into his wallet. “Trust me. It will give you much more the flavor of college life.”

Jin closed his eyes. Before leaving, his mother had pressed him with a secret list of questions: does Uncle have a woman? Is he cleaning up after himself? Is business as good as he says it is? When Choo-ang lived in Korea, he had worked as a tailor for a fancy department store, but mother wanted to know about his job in the States. If Jin came to study in the US, she would want to come and she hoped Choo-ang would be her sponsor. She told Jin to snoop around his uncle’s house and find bank records, tax receipts – anything related to money. Staying in a hotel, Jin realized, meant this information would be harder to come by.

Choo-ang merged the car into traffic. “Such a long flight. You must be tired.”

“A little,” Jin said. The feeling of sunlight confused his body; he guessed this was jet lag.

“Ah, see? I knew it. How about this? We’ll check in, take a nap, have a light lunch. You’ll feel better, don’t worry.”

Jin rode the elevator to the top floor of the hotel. The carpet in the hallway was so thick, his feet didn’t make a sound. “Watch this,” his uncle said, sliding a plastic card into the door to open it. Jin stepped inside to a sitting room with a leather chair and a table covered in circular tiles. The fixtures in the bathroom, off to his right, appeared covered in gold. He understood why his uncle had selected this place; all the furniture seemed fancy.

“It’s beautiful,” Jin said.

Choo-ang stepped in behind him. “Yes, it’s quite a place.” He flicked on the lights and walked towards the curtains on the far side but stopped short. “What is this?” Choo-ang pulled off his jacket and threw it on the floor. “An outrage! They think they can take me for a fool?”

“Uncle, what’s wrong?” Jin shut the door behind them.

Choo-ang pointed to the bed in the center of the room. “Is it because I’m a foreigner, they think I won’t complain?” He kicked the trashcan so hard, his shoe left a dent. “Stupid Americans. I made a reservation for two beds!”

“Maybe it’s larger than normal,” Jin said. The bed certainly seemed bigger than any one he had slept in.

“No, no. This won’t do at all!” Choo-ang went to the telephone. “I know just how they operate, so don’t get too comfortable. They try and switch you around when you’re not paying attention. We may have to go elsewhere.” He began to punch numbers into the keypad.

Jin didn't want to upset his uncle any more than he needed to, but what would one night matter? Tomorrow they had to drive to Pennsylvania. He was tired; all he wanted to do was sleep. "This bed would suit me fine," he said. "But I understand if we need to leave."

Choo-ang raised an eyebrow. "It's your trip, Nephew. I want you to be as comfortable as possible."

"It's fine. Really, please." Jin nodded. "Don't make such a fuss for me."

Choo-ang put his hand over the receiver. "It does have a nice view."

From their room, Jin could see a few twisty, cobblestone streets and the spire of a church in Harvard Yard. "Yes, please, Uncle. Don't trouble yourself. Let's stay here." On the bed sat a pile of chocolates. Jin unwrapped one and put it in his mouth.

Choo-ang set the phone down. He tapped his finger against his lips. "There's a pool in the hotel. Are you up for a swim? It would get your blood moving." He flipped open a suitcase.

Jin took a second chocolate. His mother had made him promise to call as soon as he landed, but with all the delays, he was hours late. "I need to speak with Mother," he said.

Choo-ang unzipped his pants and began to pull them off. "After midnight there. You sure Little Sister is still awake?"

"Not really." Jin closed his eyes. "But I need to call."

"Maybe you should take a nap," Choo-ang said. "We can get a telephone card for you later. Too expensive from the room."

Jin looked up. Choo-ang had a bathing suit in one hand; his shirttail covered the top of his bare legs. "Don't worry. This is your vacation. You can't worry on vacation." He stepped into his suit. "Enjoy yourself. I'll be back soon enough."

But Jin couldn't sleep. All the traveling had wound him up too much, so he went into the large bathroom and washed his face. In the mirror, he could see why his uncle had called him fat. Beneath Jin's chin hung a small pocket of flesh. He hadn't been keeping up in sports; there were more important things to consider, like college. Jin rubbed his neck hard. Maybe he could go on a diet. Americans were always on diets.

Jin wandered back into the main room. It was the middle of the night, Seoul time, but outside the sun was shining. No wonder he felt so mixed up; he ate another chocolate. He would have to wait to talk to his mother for a few more hours. Jin flopped down on the enormous bed. He clicked on the television and when he went to return the remote control to the nightstand, he noticed Choo-ang had left his wallet out.

A news show chattered away on TV. Jin could understand English much better than he could speak it. He looked back at his uncle's wallet. If he went through it, he might be able to get some information. Then, when he called, even if his mother was upset, Jin could have something to report.

His uncle carried little cash but he had four credit cards. Jin couldn't find anything personal, no notes or paychecks, but then, in a plastic sleeve tucked into the side pocket, Jin came upon a photo of himself. It had been taken for his sophomore year portrait. Jin flipped it over. On the reverse side, in his mother's hand, was written: Jin-Soon Kim, age 15.

Jin put it back and closed the wallet. Here he was, the only picture in his uncle's wallet, and he was spying on the man. How sad his uncle was, how lonely! Jin was glad not to have discovered anything. Now, he wouldn't have to lie to his mother when she pumped him for information.

Jin fell asleep again. He had read through the room-service menu and the book of local attractions, both of which sat open on the bed with him. Choo-ang walked in, whistling.

Jin unfolded the pillow beneath his head. “Did you enjoy yourself, Uncle?”

“I did. Very much so.” He walked into the bathroom. “I’m still not sure if this place is worth the three hundred dollars a night, but the swim helped.”

“What?” Jin said, with a little laugh. He did the math: the figure, converted to Korean *won*, equaled three hundred fifty thousand, almost twice as expensive as the nicest hotel in Seoul. Surely, his uncle was joking.

Choo-ang came back dressed in a towel. “Didn’t you see the prices?” He pointed to a sign fixed on the back of the door. “They have to post them, by law. They’re in every American hotel room.”

Jin looked at the sign. The rate, for one night, was as much cash as he had on him.

“Nephew, what’s wrong? Did you not expect to pay?”

“I don’t know.” Jin felt sick to his stomach. How could he be so stupid? Of course someone had to pay for the room! Why did he assume his uncle would do it, because he lived here? Jin tried to remain calm. “Perhaps, Uncle, there is a less expensive hotel.”

Choo-ang shook his head. “We could have left earlier. It’s too late now. Is this a problem, Nephew?”

“No.” Jin unzipped his pack and took out the credit card his mother had given him.

“Will they accept this?”

Choo-ang frowned. “I’m not sure. Listen, I’ll take care of it. You’re my guest, after all.” He ran a hand through his thinning hair. “How about this? There’s a restaurant in the hotel. You buy dinner tonight, we’ll call it even. Let’s dress up and we can walk around.”



“Thank you, Uncle. Thank you. You are too kind.” Jin put on his jacket and slipped the rest of the chocolates in his pocket.

Choo-ang was right; the hotel was situated right outside the University. After having tea, they wandered into a clothing store flooded by students. His uncle complained about the lousy craftsmanship, then asked, “Aren’t you going to buy something?”

“I don’t think so.” Jin was still worrying about the hotel bill.

Choo-ang lifted a Harvard t-shirt off the rack. “Look, don’t be such a baby. You can’t get this back home.” He removed the hanger. “What? Is it the money again? Do you need me to buy it for you?”

Jin’s face went flush with shame. With Choo-ang was already paying for room, he didn’t want to seem cheap. “No, Uncle, not at all. I don’t think it’s my size.”

“Well, let’s try it on.” Choo-ang rolled the t-shirt up into a ball and pulled the neck down over Jin’s head.

Jin looked in the mirror. “It feels a little tight.”

“That’s only because you have another shirt on.” Choo-ang smoothed the fabric out over Jin’s chest. “No, no. It’s the right size. You should get it. Maybe wear it underneath your suit to the interview.” He laughed. “Okay, I’m funnier when you’ve had some rest.”

They bought the t-shirt, then a calling card, and freshly squeezed juice. Jin paid for everything. He felt so badly about the hotel mix-up, what else could he do? He decided to ask his mother for more money when he spoke to her. She had never been to the US; she didn’t understand how easy it was to spend money here.

On the way back to the hotel, Choo-ang stopped in front of a jewelry store window. “Look at that,” he said, pointing to a silver watch. It was six o’clock, almost time for dinner.

Jin pressed his face against the glass. “Do you like it, Uncle?”

“Oh yes. Very much.” Choo-ang took a step back to admire the display. “I’ve been looking for just the right model. You know how fussy I am.” He sighed. “Oh, let’s go. Mine works well enough already.”

Jin could see there was a price tag attached but couldn’t make out the exact amount. “We could go in.”

His uncle shook his head. “Souvenirs are for young boys. Look, by my own watch I can tell the restaurant is ready for us.”

Jin fingered the credit card in his wallet. The pickling spices felt like a childish gift now. An embarrassment. What did his mother know? Choo-ang was from a different world; he was an American. If she wanted a sponsor so badly, what would be the price of a watch? “I insist,” Jin said, opening the glass door.

“Well, if you insist.” Choo-ang following him inside.

Jin had never tasted wine quite like the bottle Choo-ang ordered. The restaurant was full and bustling with people, much like the tourist establishments he had seen in downtown Seoul. It was almost morning there. His mother would be up, getting dressed in her starched nurse’s uniform, but Jin didn’t want to think about her.

“What job would you like,” Choo-ang said, “if you came to live here?”

Jin thumped the table. “None!” The wine made him a little looser, a little more free with his tongue. “I would stay long enough to evade military service, that’s for sure.”

His uncle laughed. “You could always work for me. How good are you with stitching? Let me see.”

Jin reached across the table and showed Choo-ang his fingers.

“Good,” his uncle said, “you got those from the right side of the family.” He rubbed Jin’s knuckles. “Nice. Solid.”

“Thank you, Uncle.” Jin wiped his hands on his napkin. He reached out and took another sip from the enormous glass.

Choo-ang sat up higher in his seat. “This is too nice a gift.” He took off the new watch. “You should return it. I don’t want to upset Little Sister.”

“Uncle! Why would you say such a thing?”

“You seemed bothered, just now.”

“Nonsense. It’s a gift.” Jin waved him off. “I am not used to such rich food, Uncle. I think it’s good for me.” The waiter came over with the check.

Choo-ang gripped his belly. “My bladder. Don’t get old. It does terrible things to the body.” He stood up and scanned the room. “I’ll be back.”

Jin looked at the bill. With drink and jetlag and the currency differences, the final total made little sense. He might still need his cash for tomorrow so he took out his mother’s credit card and placed it on the table.

After dinner, the wine seemed to hit Choo-ang hard. He put his arm around Jin on the elevator ride, singing a Korean torch song. Back in the room, Jin rushed to pee, then returned to find Choo-ang leaning against the television, holding onto his belt with both hands. “Nephew!

Come over here and help.” Choo-ang tugged. “It appears stuck. Perhaps I’ve had too much.” He giggled.

Jin walked over. “Let’s see.” He reached to turn on the lamp.

“No!” Choo-ang said. “Please. I think I *have* had too much to drink. Light would hurt my eyes.”

Jin examined his uncle’s belt. It had been pulled one notch too tight; the metal clasp was wedged behind the ring. “You’re so skinny,” Jin said, poking Choo-ang in the gut. “That’s the problem.” He grabbed one end and yanked it free.

Choo-ang rested both hands on Jin’s shoulder. His uncle’s mouth was half-open, as if he were deep in thought.

“Better?” Jin asked.

Choo-ang nodded. “You have your mother’s eyes.”

“Thank you.” Jin shifted his weight; his uncle was leaning on him.

Choo-ang encircled the boy’s cheek with a finger, then leaned down and kissed him.

“Give that to Little Sister next time you see her.” He fell back onto the bed.

Jin’s hands were shaking. What was wrong with his uncle? This had to be more than wine. Jin waited until Choo-ang began to snore lightly, then went into the bathroom and shut the door behind him. Jin hadn’t taken a bath in two days. The tub was large enough to hold him, but he turned on the shower and got in quickly.

Jin unwrapped the hotel soap and scrubbed at his cheek. The soap smelled like Yeouido Park, when it’s spring and the flower beds are in full bloom. He could still feel his uncle’s lips, sticky and dry at the same time, and rubbed harder.

The bathroom door clicked open. Jin felt the cold air rush in. He stepped back so the water ran against the tiled wall and tried to keep his voice even. “Are you okay, Uncle?”

Choo-ang walked to the toilet. “What are you up to?” His voice sounded groggy.

“Nothing,” said Jin. “Taking a shower.”

“What a good idea,” his uncle said. Jin heard him lift the toilet seat. “But you should have asked me first.”

“I’ll be done in a minute.” Jin rinsed his face as quickly as he could.

“Come on,” Choo-ang said. “Don’t they still ration water back home?”

Jin used the washcloth to cover his privates. He could see Choo-ang’s face distorted through the clear, plastic shower curtain. “No, Uncle. They do not.”

“See, you don’t know anything. Here in America, they give you barely enough hot water and they charge by what you use.” Choo-ang pulled off his t-shirt. “Look you’re already wasting more money. Don’t be a foolish boy watching me. I’ll be in a moment.”

Jin turned off the water. “I’m done, really.”

His uncle slid open the shower curtain and stepped into the tub. Jin kept his eyes forward. Choo-ang reached around and turned on the shower. “You didn’t get your back. We don’t want Harvard to think Koreans don’t know how to clean properly.” He rubbed Jin’s neck with the soap. “See? Much better.” He stood so close, Jin could smell the chlorine on him from the afternoon’s swim.

Choo-ang’s soapy hand grazed the back of Jin’s thigh and Jin leapt from the bath. “All yours!” he said, pulling the bathroom door shut behind him. Without a towel to dry off with, Jin dressed in his dirty clothes and crawled between the covers and neatly tucked sheets. His heart was beating so fast. Jin thought about calling his mother or the front desk or maybe even his best

friend, Tae-Woo. But what would he say to them? He covered his mouth with a pillow and began to cry. He had nowhere else to sleep tonight.

Jin closed his eyes, to keep from getting too dizzy, and an odd memory came to him of being eight years old, at a pool party. This was when his father was still alive and Jin had climbed to the top of the high dive for the first time to impress him. Jin had walked out past the guardrails, to the rough edge of the board. The sun played on the reflection of the water so strongly, he had to shield his eyes. Jin could see his father fanning his mother with the newspaper. He could see the birthday boy eating the last piece of desert. He could see a pair of elderly swimmers leave a crooked wake down the lap-lane.

“Hey,” the next kid in line yelled. “Jump off already.”

Jin liked being up so high. He watched the slow drift of the clouds. The chemicals in the pool dried on his skin, giving it a papery feel, and the wind began to kick up. Jin folded his arms over his chest to keep warm.

“Hurry up!” the kid said, climbing up the last step. Jin could feel the board nod from the added weight and suddenly, Jin slipped off. He fell to the left, towards the shallow end, much faster than he had expected. Jin broke through the surface of the water and saw the curved side of the pool hurtling towards him until his face smacked against gritty tile. Coming up for air, Jin’s cheek burned. The lifeguard rushed to the concrete lip of the pool to help him up the ladder but Jin didn’t – he couldn’t – cry out for help.

Jin heard the shower click off.

His uncle came into the room, wearing only a towel. “See? There was hardly any hot water left for me. It’s a good thing I got in when I did.” He took the towel from his waist and began to dry off his hair. Jin peeked, just to make sure Choo-ang’s penis was still soft and Choo-

ang caught him looking. “You know what I like best about you, Nephew? Even as a boy, I could tell, we’re a lot alike. We have something in common.”

Jin was quiet. “I don’t know what, Uncle.”

Choo-ang sat on the edge of the bed. “I think you do.” He folded the towel in half, then in half again, and placed it on the chair. “I have missed you for so long.” His uncle’s voice quavered, as if he might cry.

“No,” Jin said. He didn’t really understand, but he wanted his uncle to stop speaking.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” Choo-ang pulled back the sheets. “It’s cold. Why did you leave the air conditioning on?”

Jin locked his ankles together.

Choo-ang touched his lips to Jin’s forehead. The kiss was delicate and sweet, the way Jin imagined a woman’s might be. His own mother didn’t believe in showing affection. She felt it made a person weak.

“Stop it!” Jin yelled.

“Don’t worry. Worry isn’t allowed on vacation.”

“Leave me alone!” Jin could feel hot tears form at the edge of his eyes.

Choo-ang reached under the covers.

Jin pulled away. “I said no!” His body tensed and without thinking, he leaned back and slammed his fist squarely into Choo-ang’s eye. Jin had never hit anyone before. He didn’t know what to do next. He kept his fist up, as if he might use it again.

His uncle covered the eye. “You oaf! You worthless worm! See what you’ve done. I might have to go to the hospital, now. They’re expensive here. Are you going to pay for that, if I lose sight in this eye?”

Jin was confused. Hadn't Choo-ang been trying something, just a moment before? Jin knew he was in the right. His body was still shot through with adrenaline.

“Answer me, you ingrate.” Choo-ang touched his socket and winced. “You really hurt me.”

Jin couldn't speak. He didn't know what to say and he feared, if even one word came out, he would start to weep.

Choo-ang pulled the covers up and turned over. “You have no right to disrespect me like this. Wait until your mother finds out. Won't she be upset to hear about this. You'll never get any more help from me.”

That heavy, sick feeling returned. Jin fretted: had he made a mistake? After all, his uncle didn't do anything so terrible to him. But maybe he would have, if things had gone on longer. Jin didn't know. He watched Choo-ang's breath rise and fall until his uncle seemed to be asleep. He needed to talk to his mother, she could sort it all out. After all, Choo-ang was her brother; she knew him best.

Jin snuck into the bathroom. He sat in the bathtub and turned on the shower full-blast. He let the water pour over him and cried; steam began to fog up the mirrors again. But now, after what seemed like only a few minutes, the water turned cold.

“Wake up!” Choo-ang yelled.

Jin had slept with his head underneath the sink. He used a dirty towel for a pillow. His uncle stood in the doorway with his hands on his hips. His left eye appeared swollen and purple.

“What kind of unappreciative boy are you?” Choo-ang snapped. “I pay for a bed, you don't even sleep in it.” His uncle kicked him in the side. “Move. I'm going to brush my teeth.”



Jin sat up. “What time is it?” he asked. His interview was at ten a.m.

Choo-ang rinsed and spit. “Later than you think.”

Jin went into the bedroom and got his clothes. He waited for his uncle to shut the door before getting dressed. He stayed a few feet away, just in case. Then he went to the toilet himself. By the time he came out, breakfast had arrived. Choo-ang had parked himself in the leather chair.

“What are we eating?” Jin asked, trying to make peace.

Choo-ang chewed noisily. “I didn’t order you anything. I thought you might be hung-over. That’s the only way I can explain your contemptible actions last night. Clearly, I shouldn’t have shared my wine. You’re just too immature.”

Jin nodded. He had two pieces of chocolate left.

Choo-ang narrowed his eyes. “You know, you’re so stupid. I can’t believe any American college would be considering you. Just shows you how far they’ve gone down hill.” He stuffed a piece of buttered toast into his mouth. “I shouldn’t even take you. We should just skip the whole thing, now that I see what a stupid boy you are.”

“No. Please.” Jin swallowed. “I’m sorry, Uncle. I was out of line last night.”

“You were indeed.” Choo-ang swirled a teaspoon of sugar into his coffee. “You are lucky to have someone as kind as I am showing you around. And how do you show your gratitude? I swear, if I told your mother what you did to me, she would throw you out. She would beg for my forgiveness. She would offer me your ticket home sooner than see such a disgraceful son again.” He looked out the window. “I expect, for the rest of the trip, you’ll keep in line.”

“Of course,” Jin said. “Absolutely.”

Choo-ang took a long sip from his mug. “I’m glad you apologized, Nephew. I was beginning to get the wrong idea about you.”

The admissions officer, who introduced herself as Ms. Lewis, spoke Korean fluently. Jin was pleased; he didn’t have the energy for a long conversation in English. In the waiting room, there had been coffee and donuts. Jin had eaten three and was still hungry.

“Did you enjoy the tour?” Ms. Lewis asked. She crossed her legs.

“I did,” Jin said. “Thank you very much.” His voice sounded hollow and false in his ears, as if he were speaking through a mask. “Your campus is very beautiful.” Jin sat back in his chair. Twenty feet away, on the other side of the window, Choo-ang was having a smoke on the quad. He leaned his weight on the chain meant to keep people off the grass.

Ms. Lewis pointed him out. “Is that your father? I didn’t get to meet him. I suppose he could come in too, if that would make you more comfortable.”

“No!” Jin said.

Ms. Lewis tilted her head. Jin could tell, from this reaction, he’d spoken too forcefully. “What I meant,” he said, “is that he’s not my father.”

“He’s not?”

“No.” Jin smiled. “He’s my uncle. He lives here in the US. I am prepared for your questions, whenever you wish to begin.”

“I see.” Ms. Lewis had a small clipboard to take notes on. She rested it on her knee. “Is everything going all right with your trip? Just between us.”

Jin smiled. “It’s fine. Should I start? I am looking forward to college, not just for the intellectual freedom but for the sense of personal fulfillment it will bring.” He reached up. A tear had slipped to his chin.

“What is going on, honestly? Look, you’re safe here.” She patted Jin’s wrist and he jumped up from the chair.

He tried to control himself. How could he tell her what an idiot he’d been? All of it – the money, the hotel room, the snooping for his mother. There was no way she could help, anyway. He willed himself not to speak; it would only hurt his chances of getting in. Jin felt so full of shame, he hid his face in the elbow of his jacket and began to cry.

“Jin-Soon,” said Ms. Lewis, “please tell me what’s wrong.” She handed him a tissue.

Out the window, Choo-ang flicked ash onto the sidewalk. Jin told her how they were supposed to drive to Pennsylvania tonight and he didn’t know what was going to happen. He was scared, because of the night before in the shower. He tried to explain it as fairly as possible, but Choo-ang came out sounding more horrible than Jin had intended.

Ms. Lewis nodded with sympathy. But how could she understand? Jin was confused and he’d lived through it.

“That man out there,” she said, “he’s your uncle?”

“Yes.” Jin pulled on the boxes of tissues.

Ms. Lewis stood up and put the clipboard in her empty seat. “Jin, I need to call some people, to help me deal with this situation. Can I have your permission to talk about this?”

“I am not sure.” Jin balled up another tissue. “I suppose so.”

She placed a telephone call, covering the mouthpiece with her hand. Jin watched his uncle reach into his pocket for another cigarette. Choo-ang waved; he must have seen Jin staring.

“We can go somewhere else.” Ms. Lewis pulled one side of the curtain shut. “The situation is under control.”

Jin didn’t know what to expect. He watched two security guards come out of the adjacent building and advance on his uncle. Choo-ang stepped closer to the window; he stopped waving. Jin heard him shout, “What is going on?”

One guard stepped in front of Choo-ang and hiked up his pants. The other folded his arms across his chest.

“Come out right now!” Choo-ang yelled.

“It’s going to be okay,” Ms. Lewis said. But Jin knew it wouldn’t. He was just watching now, to see how things would turn out.

Choo-ang pushed past the guards and ran to the window. He punched the glass so hard it shook its frame. “You faggot!” he yelled. “You queer boy! I’ll tell your mother about you. She won’t trust you, do you understand?”

“I didn’t want this,” Jin told Ms. Lewis quietly. The two guards pinned Choo-ang’s arms behind his back. A small crowd had formed around the walkway, which made Jin feel even more ashamed of what he’d done. Choo-ang began to yell in English now: “*Let me go! Let me go!*”

Ms. Lewis came up behind Jin. She placed her hand on the back of his chair. “I’m glad you told me. You’re safe now. You’re going to be fine.”

Choo-ang struggled down to the pavement. Jin knew his mother would never believe him; she loved her brother too much and it was Jin who squandered away all that money. He understood there was no other option but to come to America now. Jin looked up at Ms. Lewis, fought back his tears and said, in his most careful English, *“I hope this situation will have no negative impact when considering my application for admission to your fine institution.”*

Ms. Lewis paid for Jin’s lunch. He stayed around her office for the afternoon until he could speak to his mother. Choo-ang had been escorted off the campus. Jin had to figure out what to do. He didn’t explain everything about Choo-ang to his mother, He tried to cover for his uncle, saying that he had become very sick. Jin wasn’t sure if his mother believed him, but even so, she cancelled his appointment at Carnegie Mellon.

Ms. Lewis found Jin a place to stay with a sophomore named Philip who promised to take Jin to his first college party. When the party was cancelled, they went to another dorm room and drank warm beer from cans until 2am. There was no place to sit except for the bed, so Jin leaned against the while Philip and his friend discussed a lecture they had attended that day.

The next morning Jin woke up late. He rushed to pack his things. By the time he got the airport, he had to pee very badly. He handed over his ticket, collected his boarding pass, and ran down to the gate. Jin ducked into the closest bathroom. There was a long string of urinals – eight in a row, two rows deep – yet all of them were full. Jin waited. He was upset at himself for not telling his mother the whole truth. Even if he got into Harvard, she wouldn’t let him go now. Jin rubbed his side and waited for an opening in front of him. One man, dressed in a business suit, reminded him of Choo-ang. Perhaps it was the clothing, or perhaps just the way he

carried himself. He watched the man zip up his pants. No, it was in the way he stood – cocky and vulnerable at the same time.

“What are you looking at?” the man said, realizing Jin was watching him.

Jin turned away, flustered. He took a paper towel from the dispenser and pretended to blow his nose. The man hovered for a moment. Does he see something? Jin wondered. Am I different? Feel the weight of the man’s eyes, Jin threw the towel into the trash and walked out.

On his way to find another bathroom, Jin meandered through a few passenger lines to make sure the man wasn’t following him. Over the loudspeaker, a woman’s voice announced they were boarding his flight. There wasn’t enough time, he decided; he had to hurry back to the gate.

The stewardess who took his pass smiled at him. Jin hoped no one would sit next to him again. He knew he could hold it until he was in the air, alone, in the restroom. Jin rubbed his eyes, waiting behind the line of people queuing to board. He wanted to yell at them to move along.