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YEONNAM-DONG'S
SMILEY
LAUNDROMAT

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Translated from the Korean by Shanna Tan



MACLEHOSE PRESS
QUERCUS · LONDON

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Take Care of the Tomato Plant

Jindol was whimpering. Old Jang had had him ever since his wife passed away, and the white Jindo dog was already turning nine. Because Jindol would only do his business in the garden or out on a walk, Old Jang usually kept the door to the garden slightly ajar, but today a strong late-spring gust had slammed it shut. For hours, Jindol paced back and forth at the door. Unable to hold it in anymore, he trotted to the closest thing to grass in the house – Old Jang’s thick green blanket on the living-room floor.

Old Jang, who had dozed off while watching TV, remained oblivious. However, as the wetness spread he stirred awake.

“Aigoo, why is it so cold?”

He opened his eyes, only to see Jindol’s dewy eyes staring back at him. Feeling guilty, he got up immediately.

"Whoops. The wind must've got the door . . . I know you didn't mean to pee here. Don't worry, we'll just toss it in the wash and it'll be good as new . . ." Jindol perked up slightly at his comforting words. His tail gave a little wag as he nuzzled Old Jang's knee. Old Jang carried the heavy blanket to the ancient washing machine and pressed the faded power button. When nothing happened, he jabbed at it once more before selecting the setting for blankets.

It was late at night, but Old Jang didn't have to worry about disturbing his neighbours. He lived alone in a white two-storey detached house with a spacious, well-manicured garden behind a tall gate. When he'd moved here forty years ago, Yeonnam-dong was a quiet low-rise residential neighbourhood, but as Hongdae turned into a hot spot for the young crowd, the buzz gradually spilt over to the adjacent areas. Most of his neighbours had chosen to move out before remodelling their houses into retail spaces and leasing them to cafés and restaurants. Over time, Old Jang's house, with its blue metal gate, became a rare sight in the neighbourhood, one of the few remaining buildings that were still lived in.

With three rooms on the first floor and another three on the second, it was far too big for one person and his dog. After his wife's passing, Old Jang had considered moving out, but he couldn't bear to leave behind their precious memories. From the magnolia, jujube, persimmon and mulberry trees lining the

garden to the potted garden balsams, roses and cherry tomatoes, his wife's touch lingered in every corner of the property. Old Jang was turning eighty, and it was getting harder to tidy the house and tend the garden by himself. Still, he persevered, knowing that his wife in heaven would be pleased.

Old Jang gulped down a cup of water and reached for the TV remote, thinking to wake himself up a little by watching the news. The washing machine rattled and spun and drained out the water before the melody came on to announce that it was done. Grunting, Old Jang pulled out the damp blanket, edging sideways to avoid stepping on Jindol, and draped it across the clothesline in the garden. It was still dark outside, but sunrise came early at this time of the year. He decided to leave the blanket out, thinking that it would probably be dry by the afternoon. Now that the blanket was washed and hung up, Jindol finally relaxed. He trotted to the persimmon tree, did his business, and kicked soil over it.

"Feeling better?"

Jindol tottered back to his owner, tail wagging hard as he woofed in response.

"Shh! People are still sleeping."

Old Jang put a finger to his lips and Jindol quietened.

"Aigoo, our Jindolie is such a good boy," Old Jang cooed. "It's cold. Come on, let's get back inside!"

*

In the afternoon, the seniors' centre was always bustling with activity. Now that the neighbourhood was known for its young crowd, it was rare to see a gathering of elderly citizens anywhere else in the area.

"Dr Jang, my knees have been bothering me." Madame Hong said, sipping the instant coffee she'd brought from home in a plastic bottle. "It used to hurt only when I walk, but these days, it prickles even when I'm sitting or lying down. Is there anything I can take to make it better?"

"What would a mere pharmacist know? You should get it checked out at the hospital!" Old Woo, who had somehow marked Old Jang as his rival, interjected.

"They'd probably get me to do all sorts of scans and tests at the hospital. I don't want to waste an entire day there. Dr Jang, what's your advice?"

Old Jang cleared his throat, ignoring Old Woo's rude remark.

"There could be several causes. Maybe it's age catching up, or it might be the cartilage wearing down—"

"Doctor? Doctor *who*?" Old Woo scoffed. "Did you forget how he had to shut down that pharmacy of his after the scandal?" He was alluding to the incident last year where Old Jang misread a prescription and gave the wrong dosage of pills to a patient. After that, he'd chosen to close the pharmacy at Sinchon station that he'd run for more than fifty years.

Old Jang coughed.

"I'll text you later."

"*Someone* still thinks he's a pharmacist," Old Woo sneered, casting an aggrieved glance at Madame Hong.

"Old Woo! You're hurting Dr Jang's feelings. We should be looking out for each other now that we're in our twilight years . . ."

"Madame Hong, you're hurting *my* feelings. So I'm Old Woo, but he's *Doctor*? Are you looking down on me?"

Madame Hong turned to Old Jang, tugging lightly at his sleeve. "Dr Jang, let's go. Jindol's waiting for you outside."

At the sight of Madame Hong, Jindol strained against his leash, wagging his tail in joy.

"Jindol, you poor thing. Sorry you couldn't come in because of that obstinate old man. Look, I brought you a snack."

Opening a red bag she had crocheted herself, Madame Hong took out a pack of beef-flavoured chew sticks.

"Ah, you shouldn't have gone to the trouble. Jindol's a lucky boy."

"Don't take Old Woo's words to heart. He was an outcast in his last seniors' centre and he hasn't changed one bit. All he does is go around picking fights!"

"I'll text you some supplements to take for your knees."

"Aigoo, I'd appreciate that, Dr Jang."

"Not at all. It's good to know I'm not completely useless yet. Are you going to pick up your grandson now?"

"Yes, I should get going."

Old Jang waved his hand, signalling they should go together. "I can take this boy on a walk around the school."

"Oh, no. I'm not going all the way to the gate . . ."

"But isn't that where you pick him up?"

Madam Hong hesitated, rubbing her left ring finger, which was severed at the knuckle.

In a quiet voice, she confessed. "My grandson tells me not to wait near the school. I suppose he doesn't want his friends finding out that his grandma is missing a finger . . . I lost it in an accident with the sewing machine when I had to work myself to the bone to raise his father. Oh well, what can I do? I can't let my grandson be teased because of me."

Madam Hong smiled bitterly as she caressed the stump. She tried to make light of the situation by joking about how her life's dream had been to wear a wedding ring, but Old Jang could tell that she'd suffered over the years. Pursing his lips, he nodded.

Old Jang and Jindol headed for the park. Although Yeonnam-dong wasn't as crowded in the afternoon as it was at night, the streets were still busy. It was spring, but the weather was already warming up. Old Jang spotted a couple of people

in t-shirts. Crossing the road, he couldn't help but notice a young woman emerging from a laundromat with an armful of clothes. Everyone else was wearing headphones or scrolling their phones, but this young lady was grinning from ear to ear, as if she'd just had a moment of enlightenment. Curious, he went to take a closer look at the shop.

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The name had been painted with care. Above the sign, yellow lights lit up the letters in a warm glow. A large window stretched from the ceiling to waist height, allowing a clear view of the interior, and the ivory-coloured bricks down to the pavement gave the shop a cosy, inviting look. Sunlight filtered in through the glass, touching the industrial washing machines inside. Next to the window, there was a wooden table with a coffee machine, and by the wall stood a small but well-stocked bookshelf.

"Looks like a library or a café. What a lovely place. What do you think, Jindol?"

Jindol wagged his tail enthusiastically.

When Old Jang returned home, the first thing he did was feel the blanket on the clothesline. It was still a little damp, but he was sure it would dry soon enough. The problem was the smell. Either Jindol's pee was too pungent, or the old washing machine wasn't working properly anymore. Old Jang's brows creased at the stench.

"I don't have a spare one for tonight . . ."

Oblivious to his owner's predicament, Jindol stretched out in front of the potted tomato plants, basking in the sunshine. Just then, the doorbell buzzed.

Old Jang opened the gate to find his son and daughter-in-law waiting. His daughter-in-law was holding a department store paper bag, the tail of a dried pollack fillet poking out at the top.

"Come in, you must be tired from the journey."

"Not at all. We drove," his son said, flourishing his car key with its logo of a rearing black horse.

They had come to hold a simple jesa ceremony for Old Jang's wife. Because she'd died in a traffic accident, they didn't have a proper portrait to use as a memorial photo. In the end, they had to make do with a passport photo she'd had taken twenty years ago in her fifties, when she had looked much more youthful.

The couple had to pick up their son from the English cram school later, so they finished the ceremony before eight. The incense smoke had yet to dissipate, but his son and daughter-in-law were already clearing away the offerings.

"I haven't seen Suchan for a long time . . ." Old Jang said wistfully.

"It wasn't that long ago," his son replied. "He came during Seollal."

When she was done washing the dishes, his daughter-in-law emerged from the kitchen with a tray and sat down next to Old Jang to peel some pears.

"It isn't that lonely with Jindol around, right? You can also head to the seniors' centre in the day and get some sun."

"Yes, Jindol's a blessing. We like exploring the neighbourhood. Quite a few interesting shops have sprung up in the area."

"Interesting shops?"

"Just today, we saw a laundromat that feels like a café. You can make a cup of coffee and read books there. Youngsters these days sure love their coffee. There are cafés everywhere. But caffeine can be addictive, a better alternative is bamboo or green tea . . . You should try to drink less coffee at the hospital. Switch to tea instead."

"Father-in-law, don't worry. He knows how to take care of his health."

"Dad, since we're on this topic . . ."

His son swallowed hard.

"This . . . um, house . . ."

"That's enough."

"You haven't heard me out yet!"

"It's obvious, isn't it? Still the same old spiel about getting me to turn it into a shop and rent it out while I move to a small apartment!"

"Please, calm down. Listen. Even her sister – you know, the