

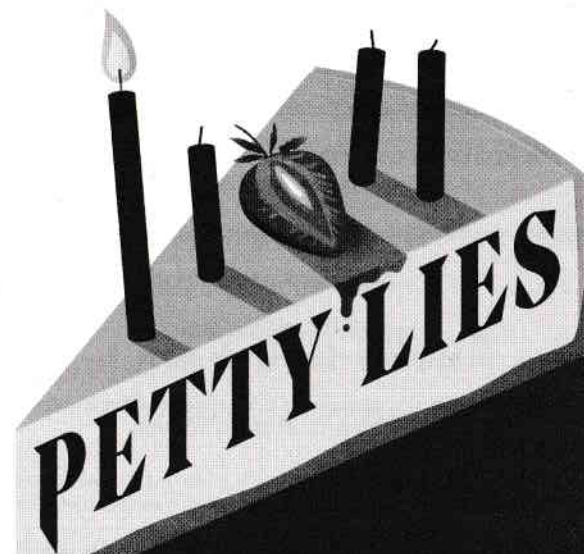
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The Silence of the Swan

Dalwhinnie Hotel



PETTY LIES

SULMI BAK

Translated by Sarah Lyo

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RAVEN BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

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First published in 2025 in the US by Mulholland Books, an imprint of Little,
Brown and Company, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.
First published in Great Britain 2025

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English translation by Sarah Lyo

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-9459-1; eBook: 978-1-5266-9732-5

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Taylor Navis
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A



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1.
I AM A BAD TUTOR
[MIRA'S LETTER]

Hello, Yujae's mother.

I expect you're wondering why I've suddenly written you
a letter. Before I give my reasons, I'd like you to know that
four-fifths of this letter had already been written by the time I
started tutoring your son.

You may need to pay attention from now on as you read my
letter, as I'm about to discuss events that happened one year ago.

Yes, I know.

Why now bring up the far-distant past? you're thinking.
But since those events matter more to me than anything else,
so much so that I remember them as clearly as if they happened
yesterday, I hope you'll read this letter to the end.

Do you remember the incident last year, when the mutilated body of a dog, a black dachshund, was discovered in front of the public restroom in the park?

From now on, I'll call the dog "Bell."

A year ago, a barely five-year-old Bell slipped out through the front door, which his owner had propped open to let in some fresh air, and was wandering about in the streets. I assume you know about the territorial nature of dogs. Unlike cats, who attempt to defend their domain, dogs have a strong instinct to widen theirs. It's for this reason that they urinate on roadside trees and utility poles. And more so than any other animal, dogs have an irrepressible curiosity. Surely, it's only natural that an animal like that would want to know what the world outside looked like and whether they might find new friends.

After leaving the house, Bell scampered off without a backward glance. In his excitement, he'd even have forgotten to mark his territory against every utility pole in sight. Much later, a thought would have struck him: My mother will be looking for me—have I traveled too far from home? And then the dog would have grown more and more frightened.

What's your take on this, Ms. Moon? Suppose your child has lost his way. Imagine that your child, scarcely five years of age, is wandering about in the streets. In the space of an instant, wouldn't his curiosity about that unfamiliar world transform into fear? It might happen to anyone, not just

children. Left stranded in a strange place, adults are just as likely to go mad with terror—and in some extreme cases, even to the point of harming themselves.

And yet, perhaps because dogs are such loyal creatures, Bell would have known his owner would be upset if anything awful were to happen to him, and he'd have tried to find a way back home by any means possible.

But that night, Bell was discovered as a corpse. His cervical vertebrae had been completely shattered.

Did you know that the bones of the neck are not easily broken?

Attached directly to the rest of the spine, the cervical vertebrae are closely linked to one's rate of survival, which means they're one of the most intricate and vital parts of the body. That's why they don't easily fracture, as a rule. But the same bones will also splinter like wooden chopsticks if someone twisted them with all the force in their arms. Even if you were lucky enough to survive such an attack, you'd end up becoming disabled.

Did Bell not have even that little bit of luck?

Since the cervical vertebrae won't fracture unless brute force is applied, fractured cervical vertebrae can mean only one thing. That's murder. Without one last embrace from his owner, the poor dog had been murdered near his home.

How on earth had things come to this point?

Whose fault was it? Bell's for having run outside, unable

to suppress his instincts? Or was it his owner's for failing to be more attentive? You might say both were at fault.

But everyone's bound to make a mistake. Every living creature makes mistakes. Even monkeys sometimes fall out of trees.

The worst kind of act isn't done out of ignorance; it's an act that is committed knowingly.

You should never turn a blind eye to a willful act. Yet what are things like in reality? The courts permit sexual offenders with recidivism rates of up to 100 percent to reenter society; schools keep quiet to cover up bullying incidents; and cases of animal cruelty are ruled simple negligence. That's because society is always on the side of the powerful. It is society that favors adults over children, men over women, the wealthy over the poor, humans over animals, and the able-bodied over disabled persons.

Do you know about the Somang incident, by any chance?

On the eighteenth of August in 2011, two assailants stoned a suspected three-year-old dog on a construction site in the middle of the public square of Gwanghwamun. For forty minutes they threw rocks at the dog, which they'd cornered beside a container, because they thought it was barking too loudly. For that reason alone, they'd tried to kill a dog unable to put up a fight. The dog managed to cling to life but suffered a ruptured right eye, damage to the brain, and fractures in her front legs and paws. Her condition was so critical that no one

would have thought it strange if she'd died on the spot. It was a miracle that Somang was still alive, people said. But how did the court sentence the two assailants? All they received were light fines of one million won and five hundred thousand won, respectively.

Was it because they only had the intent to kill and didn't go so far as to kill?

Or was the dog undervalued because it was a stray?

Then how would you explain the Eunbi incident in June 2010, which resulted in a mere two-hundred-thousand-won fine? The cat—who was brutally murdered by a female neighbor—plainly had an owner. It had been wandering around, having simply lost its way, like Bell. Instead of returning the cat to its owner, however, the attacker tortured it in confinement with ruthless and unrelenting violence before tossing it off a high-rise building. When the incident became widely known, the assailant—rather than reflect on her crimes—went after the cat's owner to assault and threaten him.

How about the following cases?

In a fit of rage after a fight with his wife, a man flung a cat and her litter of kittens to their death from the seventeenth floor of an apartment building and was handed a fifty-thousand-won fine; another man, who burned the eyes of at least eight puppies with a lighter, made them swallow razors, and subjected them to all sorts of atrocities, was fined a hundred thousand won. The courts imposed a sum that was

little more than the price of a bottle of liquor for murdering and torturing animals. What do you think of such occurrences, Ms. Moon?

I don't believe in the law. In the end, it will always give way before men, before money, and before humans.

Unfortunately, Bell's owner was a forty-year-old woman, and poor. Meanwhile, the suspect who'd murdered Bell—who likely lived in the same neighborhood—was male. The greatest disadvantage of all was that while the victim was an animal, the assailant was human. For the injured party, entrusting the matter to the law was bound to be a losing game. The woman therefore decided not to leave it to the court. She judged it was best not to do so, even for the dead dog's sake. After receiving an apology from the suspect, she planned to forget the whole incident.

Did the woman know who the suspect was from the start? Of course not. At least, not until he turned up of his own accord.

One Sunday evening, the suspect came to see her. When she laid eyes on him, the woman was stunned. It was the same child who'd contacted her after discovering the dog's body. The boy probably told her something like this:

"I'm very sorry. It was I who killed your dog. I was riding along on my bike when I hit the dog in passing without realizing it. I thought it was just a garbage bag at first. But when I realized it was a dog, my only thought was to run

away. At my age, everyone makes that kind of mistake. On the outside, they act brave, but inside, they're all just cowards. I'll accept any punishment you decide to give me."

Even as he apologized to a woman who could have been his mother, the boy didn't appear at all nervous. He seemed to her—unusually for kids these days—conscientious and resolute. The woman felt tender concern. The thought of the dead Bell made her tremble, but the suspect was close to her son in age, and when she saw how, in remorse, he'd sought her out personally, her loathing dissipated. Instead, she worried for the boy and consoled him.

"I understand. Now, off you go home. Everything will be all right."

Isn't this terribly unfair?

It was the boy who'd committed a crime, and yet he was the one being consoled. Then, who was going to console the woman? Who was going to console Bell, who had shuddered in fear before being ruthlessly murdered?

Now, I wonder—did the boy truly feel remorse for his crime?

In fact, did he even realize that he'd committed a crime?

I believe the boy must pay a price. That's what I thought then, and my feelings haven't changed since. I don't trust everything he said, either. Hit by a bicycle? If that's really what happened, the dog's cervical vertebrae wouldn't have fractured that badly. And that would mean the boy was lying—since,

judging by the state of Bell's body when it was discovered, it was clear that someone had deliberately killed the dog. Even if what the boy claimed was true, further injury must have been inflicted afterward.

From his earlier encounter with her as a witness, the boy would have learned that the victim's family was a vulnerable middle-aged woman. He'd also have found out from their conversation somehow that she had a teenage son. This woman, his clever mind must have decided, will certainly forgive a boy her son's age.

Yes, he guessed correctly.

She didn't report him to the police.

He's a gifted and intelligent boy. He's bright enough not to have missed out on the top rank in his class for all three years of middle school. I heard he even competed in the International Mathematical Olympiad as a member of the national team. I've seen the prizes and certificates in his bedroom. It baffles me that such a brilliant child could have come from a household like yours.

The reason why the boy confessed must have been extremely straightforward.

I would guess he was bored. Most would call that spiteful and ill-natured.

The cruel and selfish psychology of wanting to see someone suffer. It's not hard to observe among boys his age. It's also their way of relieving stress.

But he wasn't able to anticipate what the woman did next.

Five days later, in hopes of putting an end to the boy's distress, the woman decided to speak to his parents. She thought they would be able to help him work through whatever turmoil and guilt he must be feeling inside. Yet when she went to see you, what did you say to her, Ms. Moon? Surely you haven't forgotten already? Speaking loudly so that everyone in the neighborhood could hear you, you said:

"Do you know just how clever my son is? And you're saying he killed a dog—oh, please. I know people like you very well; have us in your sights, did you, so you could fleece someone rich? Well, you failed. I'm sorry, but I'm not a pushover, to fall for your tricks. Oh, wait—I know who you are. You sell fish in the alley out front, don't you? And you have a son with an intellectual disability, right? You know what they say, sometimes kids like that can't suppress their urges; so for all we know, it could have been your own intellectually disabled son who killed Bell, or whatever the hell its name is, don't you think so? Do you have solid proof your son didn't do it? Why are you making that face? Like I'm a bad person. What, did I say something wrong? You talk about my son like he's some kind of lowlife that goes around slaughtering dogs, and you're looking at me like your son couldn't have done it. Listen to me carefully. My son will go far in life. He's going to be a mathematician representing his country. If a false rumor like this one, or worse, so much as spreads in the neighborhood and

makes problems for his future, then your family won't make it out in one piece, either—remember that. You think I won't be able to do it? And I'm warning you, you'd better keep a tight leash on your son. Don't you know that kids like him commit crimes wherever they go? If you don't watch your mouth, I might make sure your son goes to jail. No, would a hospital be better? Just the fact we live in the same area as people like you and your son creeps me out and makes me feel sick. Even hearing you speak my son's name is like having sewage dumped on my body. How dare you try to blame my son for something your son did."

What do you think? Is it coming back to you now?

Surely you haven't forgotten, either, what became of that mother and son after that day?

Two days later, the woman left the gas on and died in her home beside her son. Remember how I once told you that my mother and younger brother lost their lives in an accident? Well, yes, that's the truth. Are you getting the picture now? You might wonder how someone could die for such a petty reason. But the story changes if the person had already attempted suicide. Every day, as she looked after my brother, my mother grew more and more exhausted. By the time my brother turned thirteen, she could no longer find in herself the strength to carry on and had started to entertain thoughts she should never have had. Holding on to my brother's hand, my mother leapt in front of an oncoming truck. If the driver had been looking

elsewhere, or if he'd been a novice at driving, they might well have died that very same day. This traffic accident was long ago, my mother's first attempt at suicide. It's an accident that has nothing to do with you or your son.

Having come this far, I hope you aren't feeling anything remotely like guilt. If you are, I'd like you to ignore it completely. That way, wouldn't it be easier for me to maintain my hatred toward you?

For several months, I struggled with my guilt.

Why hadn't I been able to stay by my family's side? Had it really been necessary for me to room at my friend's place near the university? Wouldn't I have been able to prevent their deaths if I'd been with them?

Above all, my heart was heavy with the memory of what I'd said to my mother the day before the accident. She'd called me after hearing your vicious words, but instead of comforting her as a daughter should, I'd said to her, "Well, why did you do such a stupid thing? See what comes of caring too much about other people's business, when you could have just reported it to the police. Why did you put yourself through that?" Even in my grief, I resented her for deciding to kill herself and leave behind a scarcely college-age daughter.

But that was only for a fleeting moment, because right away I thought: