

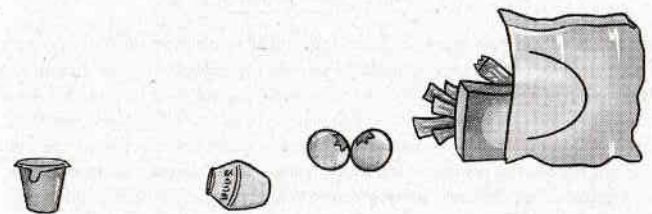
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THE
**Second
Chance**
CONVENIENCE STORE

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Translated from the Korean by Janet Hong



PAN BOOKS

The Ultimate Feast Lunch Box

The train was passing Pyeongtaek when Mrs. Yeom Yeong-sook realized the little bag that should have been in her overnight case was missing. She was supposed to be in Busan today, but how could she go without her wallet? The problem was that she couldn't remember where she'd lost it. More than anything, it was her forgetfulness that upset her. She broke out in a cold sweat, frantically retracing her steps in her mind.

She'd still had it when she bought her KTX train ticket at Seoul Station. How else would she have paid for the ticket without getting her credit card from her wallet, which she always kept in her little bag? After that, she'd sat in the waiting room in front of the TV screen for half an hour, watching the twenty-four-hour news channel. On the train, she'd dozed off while clutching her overnight bag, and when she woke up, everything had been exactly as it was. It was only at that moment, as she was retrieving her cell phone, that she realized her little bag was gone. At the thought that all her important items were inside—wallet, bank book, and notebook—she could hardly breathe. Urging the gears in her head to keep up

with the racing train, she revisited her memories, trying to rewind the day.

When she kept shaking her leg and mumbling to herself, the middle-aged man sitting next to her cleared his throat loudly. However, it wasn't him but her cell phone ringing from inside her bag that broke through her panic. The ringtone was an ABBA song, but she couldn't recall the title. Was it "Chiquitita" or "Dancing Queen"? *Oh, Junhui, maybe your granny does have dementia after all.* Only when she'd pulled out her phone with shaking hands did the title finally come to her: "Thank You for the Music." Right then on her call screen, she saw an unfamiliar number with an 02 Seoul area code. She took a deep breath and answered.

"Hello?"

No one spoke on the other end, but she could tell by the background noise that the caller was in a public area.

"Excuse me, but who's this?" she asked.

"Is th-this . . . Yeom . . . Yeom-sook?"

She struggled to understand his hoarse mumble. If a bear were to emerge from a cave after a long winter sleep and speak, she imagined it would sound like this.

"Yes, speaking."

"Your . . . w-wallet."

"Oh, yes! You found it? Where are you right now?"

"Seoul . . ."

"Where in Seoul? Are you at Seoul Station, by any chance?"

"Yes . . . S-s-seoul Station."

She heaved a sigh of relief and cleared her throat.

"Thank you for calling. I'm on the train right now, but I'll get off at the next stop and head right back. Can you hold on to it for me or leave it with someone? I'll be sure to compensate you as soon as I get there."

"I'll stay here . . . Got nowhere to go."

"I see. Where should I meet you?"

"Wh-where you take . . . the airport express . . . by GS Convenience . . ."

"Thank you. I'll be there as soon as possible."

"No need . . . to rush."

"All right. Thank you."

When she hung up, she felt a little funny. His slurred, raspy voice suggested he'd been drinking. She wondered if he might be one of the unhoused men who hung out near the station, especially given what he'd said about having "nowhere to go." The fact that he was calling from an 02 number—likely a pay phone—also seemed to confirm he had no cell phone of his own. Suddenly she felt nervous. Although he was returning her wallet, she couldn't shake the feeling that he might want more than the reward she was offering. Still, she reminded herself, it was doubtful someone who would go out of his way to return her wallet would harm her. Giving him the 40,000 won in her wallet as a thank-you would be more than enough. Just then, Cheonan Station was announced as the next stop, where she could switch to return to Seoul Station. Mrs. Yeom placed her phone back in her overnight case and stood up.

As her return train passed Suwon, her phone rang again. She checked the caller ID, chanting the lyrics of "Thank You for the Music" under her breath, as if warding off dementia. It was the same 02 number. She answered, trying to ignore her unease.

"I . . ." he began in his defeated voice.

"Yes, go on," she urged. She heard herself using the same stern tone from managing students years earlier.

"Ma'am . . . I'm h-hungry . . . A lunch box . . . from the store . . . Is it okay?"

Her heart warmed instantly. Her suspicion melted away at the words *ma'am* and *lunch box*.

"Sure, get yourself a meal. And why don't you get a beverage, too, since you must be thirsty."

"Th-thank you."

Shortly after she hung up, a notification for a card charge appeared on her phone. It had happened very quickly. He must have been standing at the store counter when he'd called. His hunger solidified her belief that he was indeed homeless. Reviewing the charge, she noted the details: GS CHAN HO PARK THE ACE LUNCH BOX 4,900 WON.

So, he didn't splurge on a beverage. At least he has some restraint.

She had considered asking someone to accompany her for safety but decided against it. At seventy, despite showing symptoms of dementia, she still had faith in herself. Throughout her teaching career, she had never been timid, handling all kinds of students with confidence right up until the day she retired. She would trust herself now too.

At *Seoul Station* she immediately located the escalator leading down to the airport express trains. As soon as she descended, she saw a GS Convenience to her right and a man hunched over by the entrance, his face buried in a lunch box. She grew nervous as each step brought him more clearly into view. He had a mop of long, matted hair and wore a thin windbreaker and cotton trousers so dirty she couldn't tell if they were beige or brown. There he was, gingerly picking up a cocktail sausage with chopsticks and putting it into his mouth. She was right. He was homeless. Steeling herself, she walked toward him.

As she approached, three men appeared suddenly and rushed toward him. Mrs. Yeom was so shocked she stopped in her tracks. The

men pounced on him, pinning him to the ground, trying to snatch something from his hands. She looked around frantically, but those passing by merely cast brief glances, indifferent to a scuffle among homeless people.

The man dropped his food and curled up to protect himself, but the others choked him and forced his arm up, wresting away what he'd been holding. Mrs. Yeom, who had been watching anxiously, caught a glimpse of the object. It was her pink bag!

The three attackers kicked the man several times before starting to flee. Mrs. Yeom's hands and legs trembled so violently that she collapsed to the ground. Just then, the man got up and lunged at the one holding the bag, launching a counterattack.

The man shouted, wrapping his arms around the thief's legs and knocking him down. As soon as he smashed the thief to the ground and yanked the bag out of his hands, the other two jumped on him. In that moment, fury overtook Mrs. Yeom. She sprang up and charged at them, yelling, "You bastards! Let go of that this instant!"

They froze at her sudden appearance. She raised her overnight bag and brought it down on the first thief's head. When he yelped in pain, the other two started backing away.

"Thieves! They're stealing my wallet! Stop them!"

At Mrs. Yeom's shrieks, people finally began to pay attention. They stopped to stare, and the thieves ran off. Only the lunch-box man remained on the ground, curled up in fetal position, clutching the bag. She approached him.

"Are you okay?"

He lifted his head to gaze up at her. With blood and snot running from his nose, eyes swelling from punches, and a mouth hidden beneath a scraggly beard, he resembled a caveman returning injured from a hunt. He slowly sat up, seeming to realize only then that his attackers were gone. She fished out a handkerchief and crouched in

front of him. A musty stench hit her nostrils. Holding her breath, she offered him the handkerchief, but he shook his head and wiped his nose with his jacket sleeve. She worried he would get blood and snot on her pink bag, then grew frustrated at her own shallowness.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

He nodded, examining her carefully. Under his scrutiny, she felt nervous, as if she'd done something wrong. She wanted to leave as quickly as possible. It was time to retrieve her bag and be on her way.

"Thank you. For keeping it safe," she said.

He plucked the bag out from under his arm and held it out to her. But just as she reached for it, he pulled it back. He studied her carefully as he opened the zipper.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"You sure . . . you're the owner?"

"Of course I am. That's why I'm here. Don't you remember talking to me on the phone?"

Her mood was on the verge of souring at his absurd suspicion. Without saying another word, he dug inside, found her wallet, and took out her ID.

"Your n-name . . . and birthday."

"You think I'm lying right now?"

"I have to . . . m-make sure . . . I have a . . . responsibility . . . to return it."

"Why don't you check my picture? It's right there on the ID."

He blinked his puffy eyes, glancing from her to the ID. "It d-doesn't . . . look like you."

Stunned, she clicked her tongue, not even angry.

"The picture is . . . too old," he added.

It was an old picture all right, but her face should have been easily recognizable to anyone, which meant that there was something wrong with the man's vision. Or that she'd aged beyond recognition.

"So w-what's your . . . birthday?"

She heaved a short sigh and exaggerated each syllable. "July twenty-fifth, 1952. Happy?"

"Good, good . . . I've got to m-make sure, don't I?"

Looking at her as if he wanted her to agree, he slipped the ID back into her wallet, the wallet into the bag, and handed the bag to her. As the chaos finally settled, gratitude swept over her. He had kept her valuables safe, even while being assaulted by those thieves, and had even verified her identity to ensure she was the rightful owner. It was clear he took his responsibility seriously.

The man rose to his feet with a groan. She also stood and fished out 40,000 won.

"Here," she said, holding out the bills. When he didn't reach for the money, she insisted. "Take it."

Instead, he thrust his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a crumpled ball of tissue. He wiped his bloody nose with it, then turned and started walking away. She stared after him for a long time, the bills still in her outstretched hand. He tottered to the front of the store where he'd been eating earlier and squatted on his heels. She followed him.

He was mumbling to himself, gazing at the contents of the lunch box scattered on the ground. She heard him groan. Eventually, she bent down and tapped his back. When he turned, she softened her expression, the same one she'd always used to console timid students.

"Hey, mister, can you come with me for a bit?"

As soon as they stepped out onto the street, the man shrank back, more comfortable in the safety of the station. She gestured to him, urging him forward, and finally got him to leave Seoul Station. They walked in silence along the streets of Garwol-dong. He followed, staying a few paces behind, as she shuffled toward Cheongpa-dong. She wondered why she'd asked him to come with her.

She wanted to repay him somehow, this man who had refused his rightful reward, for keeping her bag safe and for doing the right thing despite his circumstances. More than anything, as a lifelong Christian, she wanted to be a Good Samaritan to this man, just as he'd been to her.

Fifteen minutes later, they left the drab streets around Seoul Station, and a large, ornate church came into view. Students from the nearby women's college, dressed in jeans and jackets, walked past them giggling, while a long line stretched in front of a fast-food joint that had blown up after being featured on TV. Mrs. Yeom looked back to find the man glancing about in bewilderment. Some people avoided them, keeping a wide berth. She felt both anxious and curious about what the passersby might be thinking. After all, Cheongpa-dong was her neighborhood and also where her business was located. She had a reputation to keep up.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Yeom led the man toward Sookmyung Women's University, past two side streets, and arrived at a three-way intersection. The convenience store at the intersection was her business, where she could offer him a new lunch box. She opened the door and gestured for him to come inside. He hesitated and then followed her in.

"Hello! Ah, you're back already?"

Sihyeon, one of her part-time employees, put down her cell phone and greeted Mrs. Yeom with a smile. Smiling back, Mrs. Yeom noticed the girl's face stiffen.

"It's okay. He's a customer."

Sihyeon peered at the man, narrowing her eyes. The girl still had much to learn. Mrs. Yeom guided him by the arm toward the lunch box cooler. He followed without a word.

"Pick one. Anything you'd like."

He looked at her in confusion, but remained silent.

"This is my store, so don't feel bad. Just pick one."

"Then . . . uh . . . huh?"

"What's wrong? Don't you like any of them?"

"But there's no . . . Chan Ho P-Park lunch boxes."

"This isn't GS Convenience. Only GS sells those. We have plenty of tasty lunch boxes too."

"But . . . Chan Ho Park ones . . . are the best."

Baffled by his fixation on a competitor's product, she picked up the largest lunch box from the cooler and handed it to him.

"Try this. The Ultimate Feast. It comes with a lot of banchan."

Holding the lunch box, he carefully counted the number of sides. *That's twelve items, you rascal. A royal spread!* she said in her head, as she watched him study the contents. Once he finished his inspection, he looked up, bowed deeply to her, and then headed outside to the green plastic patio table, as if it were reserved just for him.

The patio table soon became his private spot. Mrs. Yeom watched him open the lunch box lid as if handling a precious object, carefully break apart the disposable chopsticks, and shovel some rice into his mouth. She went back inside to fetch a cup of doenjang soup, setting it on the counter. Quick as usual, Sihyeon scanned the bar code without question. Mrs. Yeom poured hot water into the cup, got a spoon, and headed back outside.

"Here. It's better with soup."

He glanced from her face to the doenjang soup she placed on the table. Before she could hand him the spoon, he raised the cup to his lips and drank nearly half, seemingly unfazed by the scalding liquid. Nodding in satisfaction, he resumed eating.

Mrs. Yeom sat across from him, watching him eat. He reminded her of a bear with a jar of honey. It was probably difficult for a

homeless person to eat three meals a day, so how did this man manage to be so big?

"Easy there, slow down. No one's going to steal your food."

He looked up at Mrs. Yeom, grease from the stir-fried kimchi smeared across his mouth. His eyes, no longer guarded, appeared meek.

"It's... good." He glanced at the lid. "It really is... the u-u-ultimate..."

Instead of finishing his sentence, he bowed to her once more and took another sip of soup. He seemed much calmer now that his stomach was full. Mrs. Yeom felt a strange sense of satisfaction watching him eat. She noticed a quiet dignity in his struggle to pick up the last few pieces of fish cake.

"From now on, come here when you're hungry. You can have a lunch box anytime."

He looked wide-eyed at her, his chopsticks frozen in midair.

"I'll let the employees know. You don't have to pay for it."

"The e-expired ones?"

"No, the new ones. Why would you eat something that's expired?"

"The workers... they eat expired ones... I don't m-mind."

"Nobody eats expired food here, not the workers, and not you. Have the fresh ones. I'll make sure everyone knows."

He considered it for a long moment, then bowed again without responding and went back to picking up the fish cake. Only then did Mrs. Yeom remember to hand him the spoon she was holding. He stared at it for a few seconds, as if unsure what it was for. Finally, he used the spoon to scrape together the remaining pieces, the muscle memory returning like the act of riding a bike, and, with contentment, brought the spoon to his mouth. After polishing off the lunch box, he looked up at Mrs. Yeom.

"That was good... th-thank you."

"I should be the one thanking you for keeping my bag and wallet safe."

"They stole it, y-you know... There were two of them."

"Two of them?"

"So I gave them a b-beating and got it... The pink bag with your w-wallet..."

"You mean you got my bag from those thieves? Just to return it to me?"

He nodded and sipped the water she'd brought him. "I can h-handle two... but three's h-hard... I'll t-teach them a lesson n-next time," he said, gritting his teeth.

She cringed at the sight of the chili pepper flakes stuck between his yellow teeth, but more than that, she was impressed with his bravery.

He finished his water and glanced around. "Wh-where are we?"

"Oh, we're in Cheongpa-dong, Green Hills."

"Green Hills... It's nice here."

A corner of his mouth turned up in a smile under his thick beard. He picked up the empty containers and got to his feet. With practiced ease, he tossed them into the recycling bin, then stood before her again, pulling a wad of tissue from his jacket to wipe his mouth. After bowing deeply from the waist, he left.

She watched him walk back in the direction of Seoul Station, like an office worker heading home after a long day. As soon as she stepped back inside the store, Sihyeon fired off question after question, with eyes full of curiosity. Mrs. Yeom recounted everything, from the moment on the train when she realized her bag was missing to now. Throughout the story, Sihyeon interjected with astonishment and concern.

"He's an interesting character—a man of principle. It's hard to believe he's homeless."

"I don't know, Boss. He looked like just another homeless person to me... Did you check to see if anything's missing?"

She opened the pink bag. Everything was in place. She smiled at Sihyeon, as if to say "I told you so." Suddenly, she took out her ID and held it up to the girl's face.

"Be honest. Do I look different to you?"

"No. Except for a bit of white hair, you haven't aged at all."

Mrs. Yeom peered closely at her photo. "He's right."

"Pardon me?"

"Yup, he's a man of principle all right." She laughed. "And you're too nice."

She told Sihyeon to give him a lunch box if he came to the store and to inform the rest of the staff to do the same. Although Sihyeon didn't look too pleased, she began typing the boss's instructions into the group chat. Mrs. Yeom glanced around the store with satisfaction, but her heart sank when she realized she couldn't recall any of the customers who had come in while she was dealing with the man. The thought that she might indeed have dementia left a bitter taste in her mouth. Nevertheless, she had received kindness and given it in return. She decided to consider it a decent day.

Sihyeon cleared her throat politely. "But Mrs. Yeom, aren't you supposed to go to Busan?"

"Aigo, what am I thinking?" Her cousin's funeral!

The day was far from over. She still needed to get to Busan, even if it meant arriving late at night. After the funeral, she planned to stay a few extra days, since she was already making the trip. She stuffed the pink bag safely back into her overnight case and headed for Seoul Station once more.

After spending five days in Busan, Mrs. Yeom returned home, stopped by Always Convenience, and found Sihyeon ringing up drinks for a couple. Sihyeon greeted Mrs. Yeom with a glance and came out from behind the counter after the customers left.

"Boss, that man's been coming here every day. He hasn't skipped a day."

"Who are you talking about? The homeless man?"

"Yeah, he comes at the same time every day. He eats a lunch box and then leaves."

"So he doesn't come during the other shifts?"

"No, just during mine."

"Maybe he likes you."

Sihyeon looked appalled and narrowed her eyes. Mrs. Yeom laughed and took the girl's indignation in stride.

"He always shows up at eight p.m., right when we're supposed to throw out the expired food."

"What? I told you to give him a fresh one."

"I tried. I offered him a new one, but he insists on eating the expired ones."

"But I promised him a new one . . . If he eats expired food, that makes me a liar."

"It's tough, Boss. He parks himself in front of the counter, mumbling and stinking up the whole place. One time, a customer walked in, saw him, and walked right back out. What am I supposed to do? Giving him what he wants is the fastest way to get him to leave. Plus, I have to air out the store every time."

"Whew. Okay."

"He comes at eight on purpose. I don't know how he figured it out, but he knows when we toss the expired food."

"I knew it. He's a man of principle."

"I got worried yesterday when he was late. Thought maybe he was sick or something."

Seeing Sihyeon bite her lip in worry, Mrs. Yeom chuckled again. "Sihyeon, you're too soft. How will you get through life?"

"That's funny, coming from you," Sihyeon rebutted. "Who came