


**LBRIS**

We know  
books

**BORA CHUNG**

TRANSLATED BY ANTON HUR

**THE  
MIDNIGHT  
TIMETABLE**

 dialogue  
books

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We know  
books

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## You Can't Come in Here

**“Y**ou can’t come in here.”

That’s what the man who stood behind the parking lot door said to Sook when she opened it.

The man looked utterly nondescript. A nondescript build. A nondescript dark suit. A voice and manner of speaking that was all very nondescript. The kind of person she would’ve immediately forgotten if she’d passed him on the street. But she hadn’t passed him on the street, she’d been stopped by him at the Institute’s basement-level parking lot.

“It’s not that he had no characteristics whatsoever. You could say his being exceedingly nondescript was a characteristic.”

Sook said this much later on. She also mentioned that the overhead lights in the parking lot happened to hit the man’s ID tag at just the right angle, so the glare obscured the text. Was *that* a characteristic?

Sook did not, at the time, think too deeply about the nondescript nature of the man. That's just the nature of the nondescript, you see.

Instead, she asked him, "Why can't I come in? Is something going on?"

Sook had been working at the Institute for some time now. She always came down the stairs to the underground parking lot after the evening's work and took her car home. The parking lot exit was a little creepy to begin with, but this was the first time someone had actively stopped her from going on her way. It unsettled her and made her nervous.

"You have to go up a floor," said the mysterious man in an even tone, not answering Sook's question.

"But I need to get to my car."

Sook had assumed the man, who was obviously some employee or other, hadn't realized she drove to work. He must've thought she'd meant to leave by the ground-floor entrance of the Institute building. But that exit led to the empty fields that surrounded the center, and there was no public transportation nearby. Sook hardly lived within walking distance from work; there was no way she could go home without her car, which was currently parked in the basement level.

"You have to go up a floor," the man repeated.

Sook took a moment to think about it and decided

to give up, as the man clearly was not concerned with giving her an explanation. No one bothered to explain things to "the cleaning lady." Sook knew this all too well from years of experience, not just as a "cleaning lady" but as a "lady" in general. She let go of the doorknob and went back up the stairs. Her plan was to go up a floor, walk to the other end of the building, and take the elevator down the other side.

As she made her way up, the parking lot door she had left open behind her closed on its own. She was on the second step when it slammed shut, and the sound echoed through the stairwell and sent an involuntary shiver down her spine. Sook quickly made her way up the stairs and opened the door to the lobby.

Instead, she came out into the parking lot.

Her hand still on the doorknob, she stared disbelievingly around her. Here was her car, the old white hunk of junk she had come to work in that morning.

But the research center building only had one basement level. She turned around. Behind her was the same stairwell she had walked up and down for the past nine years. Her movement retriggered the light sensors and they blinked on. Sook stared hard behind her into the stairwell.

There were no stairs going down.

This was the story a sunbae at the center told me when I asked her if she had heard anything strange from the people on the night watch shift. I had

just started to work at the Institute, and she was in charge of showing me the ropes, mostly because her shift ended as mine started. I would come up to the employees' lounge and find her there, sitting in front of a steaming mug of tea, always in the same seat at the big table.

"Sook unni had worked here the longest," my sunbae said. "She told me that story herself right after she quit."

"She quit because of that?"

"No. She quit because of her kids."

A very ordinary reason. Sook had raised three children alone. Her third child had had some kind of medical condition since birth. The life insurance payout after her husband's car accident had been depleted fairly rapidly, with all the third child's hospital fees, examinations, and medicine, as well as the added inconvenience of the four surviving family members requiring constant nourishment and a roof over their heads. Sook had to work at a restaurant by day and took on watch duties at the Institute by night. She managed to send her first and second child to good universities and to save enough money for her third child's operation. Sook quit the Institute when she moved to a city that had those good universities and hospital.

"She said her life's dream was to sleep under the same roof with her kids every night," said my sunbae.

"Good for her," I said. This Sook was not someone I knew personally, but it moved me to think of a parent who had raised three children alone finally achieving her life's dream.

"I'm sure that unni had other things happen to her that she didn't tell me about," said my sunbae. "Because I saw that flashy thing myself."

"*You* saw something?" I said, but I immediately regretted my faux pas. "I'm sorry."

My sunbae grinned. "Believe me, I was also very surprised that I did. I didn't know what it meant to actually see something until that moment."

What my sunbae had seen was a whitish blur. A blur that would grow more intense or fainter and larger and smaller and then disappear.

"I saw it going up the stairs."

"So what did you do?" I was hanging onto her every word.

"I just turned around and went back down." She might as well have shrugged. "What else could I do?"

I was a little disappointed. But my sunbae became serious.

"You can't react when that happens to you. Don't try to touch it or anything. Never say things like, 'Is anyone there?' The moment you acknowledge its existence, it'll come into creation right inside your mind and grow. You'll be drawn in, then consumed."

"How do you know that?" I exclaimed. "Do

you have a special third eye because you're blind, or something?"

My sunbae grinned again. I was mortified and wanted to sink into the floor, right through to the Institute's "nonexistent" second basement. "I'm so sorry, that's not—"

"I think I can work at the Institute precisely because I can't see," she mused. "Some sighted people don't last for more than three days here. They make up stuff that doesn't exist, they see things and hear things. And those things become real and haunt them. When they never existed in the first place."

My sunbae went back to her story about the "flashy" thing. She was going up the steps when that large blob appeared before her. Having been blind since birth, my sunbae had never seen an object, any object, in her life. She couldn't immediately comprehend that she was seeing for the first time. It was surprising, but not painful or dreadful at first, which was why she took a moment to consider it before dismissing it for the time being. She could always think more about this experience when she got back to her room to sleep.

Having decided this, she was going up the staircase when she suddenly lost count of the steps. Eight steps from the bottom, and then the landing, and

then eight more steps in the next flight. But how many steps left from the top? Had she gone up four just now? Five?

As she pondered this, the whitish object she was seeing became larger, the white more intense. This was shocking to experience for the first time. And terrifying.

My sunbae did not have her white cane with her. After she had gotten used to the internal layout of the Institute, or the layout of the parts we were allowed to go into at least, she rarely brought her cane with her. This was the first time she had ever regretted leaving her room without her cane.

She began to walk backward. Never had she walked down a flight of steps backward before. She had to bend over and touch the stairs as she almost crawled down. There was no one else in the building and no one else would be in the building until the morning. My sunbae was alone. She did not even carry her phone with her on night watch rounds. If she fell down these stairs, that would be the end of her.

She had gone down two or three steps when she immediately became confused. Her hands had touched two stairs, but her feet felt like they'd gone down three. Or had she gone down three with her

feet but only counted two with her hands? The blob that had shrunken was becoming larger and whiter again.

My sunbae gave up counting steps. She went down the stairs as quickly as possible.

Her feet touched the landing. Her knees bumped up on flat ground. So did her hands. My sunbae touched her knees and feet. She made sure that her feet and hands were done with being on different stairs and that she was safe on solid ground. She felt around for the wall to support her so she could get up.

Her hand touched something, not something solid. A person's hand. The hand was warm and soft—and pale, she somehow knew—and had thin fingers with a firm grip that enclosed my sunbae's hand. My sunbae whipped her hand away, but before she could scream, the hand was no longer there. When she felt around her once more, she could only feel the hard wall.

"And then what happened?" I could hardly breathe at that point.

"I went back upstairs and went to sleep," she said simply.

I was disappointed. "That's it?"

My sunbae told me that she had stood for a while, leaning on the wall. Then, having calmed down, she began to go up the steps. Knowing that she would only get confused again if she used her hands to touch

the steps, she climbed them upright while she felt along the wall, as she usually did.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

Before the last, eighth step, my sunbae hesitated. She feared that a warm hand would grab hers again, or a whitish, large blob would appear before her unseeing eyes.

Right next to her ear, someone whispered:

—*Go up a step.*

My sunbae tore up the steps with all her might. She ran down a corridor in a panic until she crashed against a wall. She had to stop then. She felt around that wall and found the door to her dorm room. She ran inside, slammed the door shut, and threw herself on the bed.

My sunbae murmured, "But when I went back outside later and touched the wall, there was nothing there. It was just the hard wall."

I didn't understand. "What do you mean? All walls are hard. Or did you feel some kind of padded wall?" The Institute was a research center, not a psychiatric hospital. There were no padded walls here. At least, all the walls I had seen in the building were regular.

My sunbae hesitated before saying, "When I slammed into it, it was soft."

We were silent for a moment.

"Then . . . he actually exists."

“Who exists?” asked my sunbae. She knew what I was talking about but was insisting I spell it out.

“You didn’t make up someone that doesn’t exist, you saw him and heard his voice and . . . collided into him.”

“But I must never admit that,” she said quietly. “I have to pretend that he’s not there, pretend I don’t know. That’s the only way we can keep working here.”

That’s when my sunbae told me about the other person who had worked here after the unni had quit.

Chan was a queer man who was being treated for hallucinations. These were the two facts about him that Chan told my sunbae on his first day of work. Chan had learned he was queer at a very young age. His family, meanwhile, were religious fanatics. The religion they zealously adhered to had strict rules governing the manner in which people should exist, and they liked to perpetuate discrimination and hate according to these arbitrary tenets. Chan, torn between the way he was born and the religious tenets that condemned him, discussed his dilemma with a leader of his religion. This leader violated every ethical and legal principle in the books by swiftly conveying the contents of this discussion to Chan’s parents. Chan’s parents, on the leader’s recommendation, used their authority over this minor to force their child to

go to “ex-gay” conditioning. But sexual orientation not being a disease, and a person becoming conditioned to “ex” their sexuality also not being a feasible proposition, the treatment served only to torture him rather than to change him.

Chan experienced all sorts of violence and violations of human rights in the conditioning facility. He sustained a permanent physical injury and post-traumatic stress syndrome on top of that. But these conditions exempted him from the military, and he became fairly adept at ignoring the hallucinations, which is why Chan didn’t consider it to be an altogether bad thing.

“But that is absolutely an altogether bad thing,” my sunbae had said to him. “Have you thought of suing them or reporting them?”

“I don’t want to even think about them or have to be involved with them again in any way,” Chan replied.

My sunbae understood. So she simply explained to him what the job involved.

“Please turn your phone off during work, and don’t carry it around with you if possible. If there’s an accident or a situation you really can’t handle, use one of the red emergency phones on the walls.”

Chan took his phone out of his pocket and switched it off. As he put the phone back in his pocket,

he asked, "Are you guys worried about . . . confidential research being leaked?"

"No. It's just that ghosts like communication devices."

Chan didn't answer. My sunbae, who was unable to see his expression, continued to explain.

"Even with the phones off, you might still get a call. While you're working here, and even when you're off duty, you shouldn't be answering phone calls when you're alone and in a dark place."

My sunbae had given me the same instructions when I started. She couldn't see my expression either then, but I'm sure she was enjoying my reaction regardless.

"On your rounds, you only have to check if all the room doors are locked. And if you hear a sound, don't ever look back." She had paused here. "I said, don't ever look back."

I had almost jumped out of my skin because I was looking back. My sunbae smiled.

Chan, however, had been calm when she'd told him this. "Did you think I was looking back?" he asked. "Because I wasn't."

Chan was trained in such things. There were many kinds of hallucinations, such as the seeing of things that didn't exist, or hearing voices that weren't really there, the kind of hallucinations in movies. Less

commonly known hallucinations, however, included smelling nonexistent smells or feeling nonexistent textures.

The human body is our fundamental method of existing in and relating to this world we live in. Chan's body, however, used every sense it had to fool him. And it was Chan's belief that his body was his burden to endure in this life, that he had to endure this burden because he was a wrong and broken person, and there was no solution for it nor escape from it. In truth, Chan's beliefs had been forcibly conditioned in him. And whenever his despair and confusion got to be too much to bear, he sought the help of Gak.

Gak was someone who had at one time been a part of the same religion that Chan had been a part of. Gak's family had also taken an uncritical stance of the religion they followed. After Gak cut ties with his family, the religious group condemned him as a personification of evil who had no path to salvation because he had chosen the filthy life of a sinner, casting aside his own family. When Chan's family abused Chan, they sometimes compared him to Gak, saying they were of the same ilk, which was why Gak's name was seared into Chan's memory.

It was Gak who took Chan to a real psychiatric hospital. There, Chan discovered actual salvation. That there was a name for the sustained chaos he