

This Too Shall Pass

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Sun Oke arrived a little after five pm and started to set up. It was a cold and bright sunny day, very typical for mid-winter in Seoul. Snowfall had been predicted for last night and early morning but it had never materialized. Now the sun was slipping below the low-slung buildings across the stream. Sun Oke was the owner operator of a pojangmacha often called a tent bar. It was a nighttime business that served cheap liquor and snacks to the neighborhood revelers. She had been running it in this same location for what, thirty years?

At age sixty-four, she had seen the neighborhood change from a light industrial working class district to the bustling middle class area of high-rise apartment buildings, private academies, and upscale shopping outlets. The stream, a branch that emptied into the Great Han somewhere, although she had never seen where, remained largely, like herself, unchanged.

She had used the small money she had received when her husband died to buy the bar location and the equipment. It had never been much of a living but it kept her going. Expenses were always on the rise but not so the income.

Seven days a week, she set up between four and six in the evening. Tonight she was running a little late. Still she took a moment to watch the sun dip out of sight. She would see it come up again in the morning as she had done so many times. Her only real sensual pleasure in life was to watch the sunset and rise, the moon and stars gracing the night sky, and most of all the regular change of seasons. She knew that the wind was gonna pick up as soon as it was full dark. It would be bitter cold before morning and she had brought an extra can of kerosene for her three space heaters. Now days she liked the cold winter nights more than the hot muggy summer. Somehow huddling close to the glowing space heater seemed to keep the world outside the tent and her overwhelming loneliness at bay.

First, she untied and unwrapped the blue tarps that made up the tent. After setting out the plastic stools, she strategically arranged the space heaters. Once she had checked the fuel levels and topped off one that was only half-full, she closed the tent flaps and knew it would be toasty and welcoming to the evening's customers. In the beginning, the bar had been lit by kerosene lanterns and she still kept three in reserve. Eight years ago, she had bought a small Honda generator to power a string of lights. Now she fired up the machine and the overhead lights immediately produced a cheery glow. The deep fat fryer, grill and burners were all hooked up to the big propane tank behind the tent. It had been filled three nights ago so she opened the valve and lit all the burners and began heating the cooking oil in the fryer. From the five-liter water containers she filled the large pots on the two burners and began to boil the water. Early evening customers were often partial to ramen. After setting out the rolls of toilet paper, boxed matches and toothpicks on the counter and tables, she started the food preparation.

Chop chop, dice dice

At six fifteen the beer guy with her regular nightly order, six cases of Hite and four cases of Cass showed up. An additional four boxes of soju and six makali would do till tomorrow. Sun Oke reached deep into the pocket of her padded ajumma pants that she wore over slacks and two layers of long johns to produce a thick roll of bills. She peeled off 150,000 won in ten thousand won notes and paid the delivery guy. She kept such accounts in her head and was reassured that it was current. In the past, during lean times, she had fallen behind. The distribution company had always carried her but the tension of owing money was something she hated.

Before seven, Kim Jung Ho flipped up the tent flap and strolled in. He was dressed for his night's labor in a heavy down vest over high tech mountain clothes and shoes. On his gray head was a visored cap with ear flaps worn loosely flapping. He drove a taxi for one of the big fleets on the all night shift.

"Ya, ajuma, ready to make some real money?"

"Did you eat yet"? She responded.

The late fifties driver thought he was Sun Oke's boyfriend. She didn't think so.

"Friday night and I'm gonna put some miles on tonight. Don't know how soon I'll get back this way. Need anything before I take off?" He asked as he fired up a cigarette.

"Eggs, I need eggs. Been running around looking all afternoon."

The current spate of bird flu in the country had resulted in the slaughtering of mountains of chickens and there was a severe shortage of eggs.

"If you get over near Garak market see if they got eggs."

"How many you want?"

"Get all you can haul. What I can't use I'll unload at the bakery."

"We'll see what they got."

The driver stopped by every night before he started his shift and Sun Oke's place was always his last stop. Sun Oke didn't encourage his romantic delusions but she didn't chase him off either. Human contact, even friends, were a basic need.

Thirty years earlier, when Sun Oke was in the bloom of young widowhood, there had been no shortage of male attention, even the occasional suitor. She was always careful to keep her guard up. Working the drinking establishment brought her into contact with the wolf-on-the-prowl element nightly. She had for some time harbored secret thoughts of being swept off her feet by Mr. Right but the dream slowly died. Nowadays she only lived for the routine of earning her daily bread and the unfolding of the changing seasons.

"Well, I better be on my way. I'll swing by with those eggs later. Take care and be sure to eat something."

Sun Oke looked up from her chopping as he ducked out but said nothing. Nothing was required. If he ever failed to turn up, she would be worried.

As the driver stepped out, the first customers of the night stepped in. Three youngish ladies, mid-twenties to mid-thirties, entered and plopped down on the stools around the table nearest to the space heater in the corner. They were about as different from Sun Oke and her not-boyfriend as could be. They were dressed for a night out. Two were leggy, one a bit round, with super short skirts and tall leather boots. The tallest had long bleached blonde hair and the other two were strawberry blonde and mousy brown respectively. Sun Oke wondered how they could run around in those short skirts; how about their lady-parts? Aren't they icy? Anyway, there is no accounting for fashion. They had been in about this same time the last three evenings. Sun Oke knew they would hang out, work on their makeup, and then catch a taxi together to their workplace.

"Emo," the chubby one called, "Ramen, soju!"

They were using the trendy address used by young folks that literally meant 'mother's sister'. Most working women preferred it to the more common ajuma.

"Suki ya, what's that bag you got? It looks fake," the chubby girl taunted the girl digging in her Gucci handbag for some needed item of makeup.

"What the hell would you know. With that face, you haven't gotten more than a twenty thousand won tip in years."

"I'll tell you what I know, I took home a million won last night and Mr. Choi will be in again tonight."

"That old dried up radish, what did you have to do to shake that kind of cash lose? Last time I sat with him and his perverted friends they insisted me and another girl put on a show for them. Even then, Mr. Choi couldn't cut the mustard."

"How about your Mr. Pak? What did he bring you back from Macau?" the chubby blonde enquired .

All the while, the three girls talked business they busied themselves putting on their game faces. Suki, the owner of the real, or knock-off Gucci handbag, who could tell for sure, dumped the bag's contents on the table in her frantic search for an essential lip-gloss, eyeliner, or some such. A compact and a twelve pack of day-glow condoms rolled onto the floor.

"Not to worry about that. He will be in tonight and he said he has a surprise for me," Suki shot back as she scooped her stuff off the floor.

They continued to banter back and forth, finish off their war paint, and smoke Marlboro reds. They paused their pregame ritual when Sun Oke placed three steaming bowls of noodles on the table. They greedily slurped the noodles with chopsticks in one hand while holding chemically cured tresses out of harm's way with the other. All three women ate without a cross word, punctuating the meal with mouth fulls of kimchi, daikon radish and shots of soju.

Before the ladies were finished, Mrs. Bae appeared. She was also a regular. Just like the bar girls she was a businesswoman. Although her business was done primarily at night, it was different from the younger women. She ran an ill soo route. Ill soo meant 'daily' and she visited her clients daily and collected the interest owed on the sums of money she had lent out. In fact, she was a loan shark. The tools of her trade were a cell phone and a well-thumbed black book where she recorded transactions.

She eyed the three customers as she walked in. She had noticed them the night before and had given each a business card. Bar girls were some of her best customers, and some of her worst. A working girl in her prime, with a reasonably good figure, face, and attitude, could earn a lot of money night after night. Thing was, the prime passed quickly. At a certain age, the income began to slide. That was when a lot of girls took out loans to bridge the gap in their accustomed life style. Of course, setbacks were only temporary. As long as they were still trying, they could stay current in their daily payments. At some point, it became increasingly tough to make the payments. Then they were a pain in the ass.

Mrs. Bae had a good eye for talent and these three looked like they were still good earners. And who knows, as unlikely as it was, one of them may beat the odds and hit the jackpot with a rich guy. Better to play the lottery the shark thought; odds were better. She smiled her crooked shark grin at them and wished them a good meal. They each smiled back, greeted her, and remembered where they had put her card, just in case.

"Onni, have you eaten" she called out to Sun Oke with the traditional greeting for the time of day.

"Sure and you?"

Mrs. Bae was of an indeterminate age, between thirty-five and fifty-five, and was referred to by most as ajuma. As any businessman, Mrs. Bae spent about two hours each evening organizing her night's campaign. She carefully went over her accounts and plotted out where to catch up with each client and when. As can be expected of those who owe money, the clients weren't always easy to find. Some were downright elusive. It took some skill and experience to run them all down each night. She would have made a fine homicide detective. She made a lot of phone calls and encouraged those who were foolish enough not to have caller ID to stay put and be where they should be. Like any other business, 80% of her clients paid up every day. It was the other 20% that required her special skills.

She never used explicit threats of violence to collect. She did use guilt, shame, and every arm twisting technique that was embedded in the Korean culture. In the end, everybody knew that they paid what they owed. Of course, she occasionally had to write off skip-outs and suicides.

Sun Oke had been watching her conduct her business for years. There was no chance that she would ever touch any of the shark's money. Tonight Mrs. Bae spent ten minutes working one of her difficult cases on the phone.

"So where have you been? I haven't seen you in three days. You know you have an obligation."

After listening for a bit, she interrupted.

"Yes, everyone has problems. What you have to remember is that your reputation is at stake. Are you an honest person or not? Let me know."

Another few minutes listening, "Look miss, I'm real sympathetic to your problem but that doesn't change anything. I thought you were an honest person. Imagine what your parents must think of you. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? I just don't understand what has gotten into you. Do your kids know you are the kind of person that casually shirks a duty. How terrible for them. You need to make this right." Ajuma was just getting warmed up.

Now her voice began rising and taking on an ice-cold timber, "No more ok? I don't need to hear anymore. You need to get right today."

Without listening hardly at all she cut back in, "Now you are going to feel better after you get this right. I've seen others go down this same path and it never ends up good. You can't go on living with yourself in such a shameful way. You only have two choices. Do your duty or deal with your shameful life. What are you going to do?"

Now she listened again.

"That's not going to work. You have no more time. You are three days behind and you can't get even another day. You get the money tonight. No more shame. No more excuses. I'm waiting for your call and I hope you make the right decision."

"Ah well, that should do it. She'll come around." pleased with herself, she thought Sun Ok would be too.

But Sun Oke was not impressed by her callous cruelty. She had heard her conduct her affairs on an almost nightly basis and tonight, as usual, made no comment. After all, business was business. Still she hoped the client would come up with what she owed and didn't end up floating face down in the Han River.

The ladies of the evening hastily gathered their things, paid their bill, and decamped to Gangnam. In trouped a group of what appeared to be university students. Two boys and three girls, fresh faced and engaged in an animated conversation, they called out,

"Emo, makali and something good to eat."

"How about some of those small octopus?" one of the co-eds suggested.

She was tall, wore the standard issue blue jeans with a down vest over her dark blue hoodie. Her hair was dark brown, shoulder length, and stunningly framed her animated, natural face. Such a beauty, thought Sun Oke. She thought of her own daughter who also possessed such natural, pure good looks. She immediately caught herself and shifted to another train of thought. It wouldn't do to go there tonight.

"Oh no, Jiyong, that's disgusting. Besides that's a soju side dish. How about seafood pancakes? They will go well with makali and I've had them here before." Soobin countered.

Sun Oke didn't recall seeing this young woman before. She was short and a little pudgy. Baby fat hadn't completely burned off yet. She was dressed in a sweater and skirt with dark leggings. Her boots reminded the older woman of combat boots. More trending fashion. Her face glowed with the enthusiasm of youth.

"We can order both. This is a special occasion." said Jin Ho, the older looking of the two boys.

"Does the professor know how to find this place?" Soonbin asked.

"Of course" Jiyong assured her. "It was his suggestion."

Sun Oke put three green bottles of makali, a kind of Korean rice wine that is favored by students at the nearby university, and took their order. As the proprietor got busy whipping up the side dishes, the young people shared out the drink in the traditional brass bowls, carefully pouring for each other.

"What time will he arrive?" Jin Ho wanted to know.

"He said 8:30 but he is very busy of course. He will be here." It was already almost nine and Jiyong wanted to reassure them that she had done her job extending the invitation. The professor, of course, had a soft spot for Jiyong and they all knew it.

After several bowls of the wine, they returned to the conversation that was interrupted when they had

arrived. The main topic was the current political crisis that was engulfing the nation. Since the previous October, the affair involving the president, her personal staff, and the ruling party had grown from a small time bribery case and influence buying scandal into a firestorm that threatened to bring down the president. For weeks folks had been gathering downtown in their hundreds of thousands and almost a million demanding the besieged head of state step down. News reports went on and on revealing one thing after another including shamanistic rituals in the Blue House, undue influence in state affairs by a shady childhood confidant of the president, shake downs of major conglomerates for millions in the name of the president, nepotism, cronyism as well as favors traded for the enrichment of those close to the chief executive. Many folks were deeply chagrined, embarrassed, and ashamed. The legal and legislative branches had lagged behind but now had swung into action impeaching the president and conducting far ranging investigations.

Of course the university students were up in arms. In some way it was the time of their lives.

"Oh, I'm just so ashamed. How could our president conduct herself in such away?" Jiyoung exclaimed for about the fifth time that evening

"The bastards, we can't rest until the whole mess is overturned!" shouted Jin Ho. He was a fine arts student and saw himself as somewhat of a radical. They had already plowed through six bottles of makali and the more he drank the more vocal he became.

"Oppa, how often do you go down to the plaza to demonstrate?" Soobin had a crush on the older boy and used the common address, Oppa, that girls used for a brother, a friend, or a boyfriend.

"I go as often as I can and stay until the last dog is hung. What, I guess I've been six times."

They had all been to the big demonstrations at least once and like most of their friends, some had been two or three times. It was an exhilarating feeling to be in a big crowd demanding action. For many, like Jin Ho, it was fast becoming a defining point in their young lives. This is how kids get radicalized.

It was getting a little rowdy for the loan shark to conduct business and she told Sun Oke to put the one beer on her tab and she departed on her nightly rounds. By now the wind had picked up and when she lifted the tent flap a gust of cold blew in and rattled the hanging lights.

Shortly thereafter, the VIP arrived. He stepped in and all stood up. Not a tall man but he entered with an air of confidence and smiled warmly. Hard to tell his age unless you had read the book jacket bio on one of his bestsellers. He was wearing a long overcoat over an earth tone Korean suit in the modern style. If there had been a place of honor at the round table he would have taken it. Instead he sat down on the stool closest to where Jiyoung was standing and pushed back the gray fedora on his head.

"Good to see you all. Have you been waiting long?"

Although Sun Oke didn't know him by name, she knew him by reputation. He was a professor of Korean Literature at the nearby university, was a famous author, and had been into her place several times before. A customer had informed her previously that he was known as the voice of the Korean everyman. He had come up from lowly circumstances but was now a great literary success. She did know he liked to drink in the company of pretty young women. Who didn't?

Of course, the students were overly deferential to the august professor. It was the way of Korean culture. As for himself, the great man took it in stride since it surely was his due.

"Won't you have a cup of wine with us Professor?" Jiyoung asked.

Like the others she was thrilled to be in such a person's presence. Sun Oke had placed an antique looking pot with a handle and spout on the table and Jin Ho poured half a bottle of the rice wine into it. He then handed it to Jiyoung to do the honors. She poured for the VIP first and then for each of the others in turn.

"Gom Bae!" they all shouted as they raised their bowls to drink the toast.

"Ah, makali; the taste of the countryside. Although it doesn't always agree with me, I sometimes take a bowl for sentimental reasons. And the seafood pancakes, a perfect side dish for makali. The professor smiled warmly and basked in the adoring gaze of the students.

This time Jin Ho poured and they all drank again from the bowls of milky white liquid. The guest reached with his steel chopsticks, picked up a squid leg embedded in a chunk of pancake, dipped it in the small ceramic bowl of soy sauce and popped it in his mouth.

"I'd like to sample those small octopus, maybe they are good." he smiled again at Jiyoung.

"Of course, and you may like to have a glass of soju since it's a good match with the octopus," Jin Ho enthusiastically agreed.

He immediately jumped up and went to Sun Oke to place the order. As they waited for the second course the professor went around the table and chatted with each of them, asking them about their families, majors and school life. When the soju arrived, the young people continued to pour for each other and the guest.

Sun Oke had removed the live octopus from a cooler and prepared to serve it. As she worked, she kept an eye on her customers. The kids were positively glowing from a combination of the alcohol and the excitement of hosting their teacher. It made her feel nostalgic for her school days when the future was bright and it seemed that all good things were only just out of reach. When was it that she had settled for this mundane existence. It was surely before she had gotten married. She had already settled by then.

The professor was a natural teacher and drew them into his world just as if they were sitting in a classroom listening to a lecture. He began to hold forth on his view of Korea and the world.

"You guys need to know that the most important event in modern history was the meeting of East and West. When the European powers arrived, the circumstances of that meeting has greatly impacted the history of East Asia ever since. The main East Asian nations are China, Japan, and Korea. Each of these nations were in a long downward spiral when the outsiders suddenly showed up. China was huge and had been a great civilization for a very long time but it was in decline politically, economically, and socially when they encountered the west. It was a lopsided meeting. The industrialized west was able to dominate China in a shameful way.

The same could be said about Japan and our beloved Korea. The west arrived with their ocean going ships, guns, and cannon. More important they had technology, political ideology and new religions. They were sure they were superior to us. The ways the three countries reacted to the onslaught were different but the results were much the same." the students were spellbound and hung on his every word.

"The Taiping and Boxer uprisings in China, the Dan Hak rebellion in Korea and the Meiji Revolution in Japan were all in response to the imperialism from the west, as well as the simultaneous crumbling of the old dynasties and power structures in the east. Our modern history, including World War 2, the division of this peninsula into north and south, the rise of and the victory of the Communist Party of China, are all results of this same dynamic."

Now he seemed to pause for confirmation that his audience was taking it all in. During the lecture, four more customers had entered looking for drink and camaraderie. A western guy dressed in jeans, a stocking cap, and a down jacket took a seat at the counter and ordered soju. It wasn't that unusual, a major university being located only three blocks away, for the occasional foreigner to wander in alone to drink. Sun Oke thought he had been in before but she wasn't sure, most foreigners looking pretty much alike. He spoke a few words of broken Korean to the landlady and seemed to be interested in the academic performance.

Three middle-aged ladies also came in on the guys heels. They wore heavy coats over nurse's uniforms and looked to be already tipsy.

"In conclusion, I urge you to pay attention to the flow of our history. In it you will find the solution to the future." He smiled warmly, drank another shot of the liquor and asked if they understood.

By this time, the multitude of liquid refreshments was taking its toll. The students were getting a little bolder and one of the boys was clearly three sheets to the wind. The others were on their way. The older man seemed to hold his liquor well. The only obvious result was an increasingly red face.

"Well, do you have any questions you want to ask?"

"Oh teacher, when you first began writing, how did you overcome your fear and loneliness? Jiyoungh wanted to know. By now she was beginning to slur her words.

The author laughed, "I became a writer for three reasons. First, I wanted to be a writer," he ticked off the reasons on his right hand, "Next, I was sure that if I worked hard at it, I could be good. And finally, I thought that if I failed at it, I wouldn't have any regrets."

The husky lad, might have been a weight lifter, dressed in a dark green turtleneck, jeans, and a leather jacket had a question too, "Teacher, which party do you support?"

The muscle guy was listing seriously to one side and the others were concerned he might embarrass

everyone by actually falling off his stool.

Unconcerned, the novelist talked to him as if he was talking to a reporter, "Many years ago the police detained me and asked me if I was a communist. At that time the government used anti-communism as a hammer to strike their enemies. I told them not to worry about it. All ideologies pass away. They were satisfied with my answer. This is my advice to you, don't get caught by ideology, all ideology passes away."

Jin Ho asked the next question, "Your novels are so long. Can you tell us why?"

"Sure, the history of our nation is long and filled with deep sorrow, and regret. There are many such stories to tell and I want to tell those stories. It's a lot to write about.

By this time the table and even the surrounding floor was strewn with empty bottles and empty plates. Nonplussed, the professor continued to talk and drink; the others were obligated to match him shot for shot. At the right moment a car pulled out front and sounded the horn.

Rising, the VIP said, "It's been a delightful evening but now I must go. I have another appointment and my driver is here."

They all rose with him and walked him to his car. Before leaving, the BMW window rolled down and the professor beckoned to Jiyoung. He handed her his card and told her that if she called him, he would be happy to take a look at her poems in his office. Overwhelmed, the co-ed couldn't say a thing and only nodded with tears streaming down her cheeks.

After the car made the turn at the end of the block they trooped back inside for a nightcap.

In the meantime, there was a little other hanky-panky going on inside. Sun Oke had noticed the three hospital workers were more than a little interested in the guy at the counter. As they drank soju and chatted among themselves, they each made furtive glances at the solitary drinker. He returned the interest broadly smiling at the table several times. At one point he boldly stood up, walked over to the three ladies with a bottle, and poured them each a shot. He had all the correct moves and the buzz they were all feeling overcame the hesitation from any perceived language barrier. Of course, after draining their cups, In Hee returned the courtesy and they all drank again. As it turns out, the guy had some Korean language skills and Sunny had lived in the states for three years so also had a few conversational skills. They were in business. He took a seat at the table and ordered more refreshments. East meets west, thought Sun Oke.

When her phone chirped, Sun Oke reached again into her pocket and fished out an old flip phone. Lots of folks had urged her to get a smart phone. She always figured she didn't need a phone that was smarter than she was. When she flipped the handset open she saw that it was almost one in the morning. She pushed the button and took the call.

"Ajuma, it's me. I'm on a run to Cham Shil and I'll swing by the market on the way back."

"Good" she replied tersely.

"How's it going? Busy night?"

"Yeah, tell you later. Let me get back to it."

She looked out at the crowd and did a quick ballpark estimate on the night's receipts. Anyway, the night was far from over and the early morning hours were usually the most hectic. By now every seat in the place was occupied and she would have to hustle to keep up.

Two guys were at the counter and had already been deep in their cups by the time they showed up. As they discussed some financial affair, their voices became increasingly louder. The students were still at their table and with their guest gone, they no longer had to restrain their behavior. They were drunk. As they prepared to depart, they each stood up, dropping bags, gloves, and scarves on the floor and when the weight lifter squatted to recover something, he stumbled and knocked over the table covered with bottles, glasses and plates. The commotion only added to the noise. Par for the course Sun Oke knew.

Before 2 am, the hospital workers had paid their tab and, with the American guy in tow, headed off for the (singing room) noraebang. On autopilot now, Sun Oke kept up with the orders, dishing out bowls of noodles, plates of sliced fruit, octopus, and steamed scrambled eggs. She wondered if the taxi driver would come through. She would be out of eggs before this night was over. With four tables and the counter full of thirsty folks, she thought she might have cut the makali order a little short. No worry. There was plenty of beer and soju.

Around three am she took a moment to step outside and survey the night scene. She was now entering the home stretch and she needed some air. The wind was still gusting but she was sure it would lay down before dawn. The sidewalks were not yet deserted and traffic down the block still hummed. The night sky called out for her attention and she didn't disappoint. As usual, the deep dark cold speckled with star light buoyed her soul. She once again felt the vastness of the universe and how small her troubles were. She felt like she could almost rise up and soar into the cathedral of the natural world. She had once been a church goer before the circumstances of life had disillusioned her. Nowadays she took time each night to worship and was always grateful.

Back inside business continued. Water was again boiling for the kal gook soo noodles. Sun Oke knew the wants of her customers, usually before they did, and noodles were just the ticket for folks who would drift-in over the next two hours to put the finishing touch on their nights, good, bad, and ugly. The American guy returned together with the small cute hospital aid. They were both staggering and clinging to each other. More soju and bowls of noodles to keep the party going. Sun Oke smiled at them and wondered where this adventure would end up. She always rooted for the unlikely and far fetched romantic endeavors. Such affairs, no matter how optimistically begun, usually are doomed by too much alcohol. There was no counting the amount of bad behavior she had witnessed due to alcohol. Unfortunately, she was on a first name basis with all the local police officers. They came to her place on calls two or three times a month.

A little later, the American guy, as a gentleman should, paid the tab, and poured his new friend into a taxi with only a kiss on the cheek. Sun Oke watched from inside and approved. Now, it was starting to thin out. Jung Ho arrived at a quarter to five with seven flats of the elusive eggs.

"Well, I got something for you. Take a look at these. They say they came all the way from America."

"Put them on the counter. That's all you got? I'll use them all on one busy night."

She was relieved but wasn't going to give up too much.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Don't worry, it's on me. I had a real good night."

"Oh no, what's the damage?" She didn't like to owe anyone money and she surely didn't take things for free. Free things often cost a lot more in the end.

They negotiated back and forth for a bit and settled on a price that they could both live with.

"Anyway, look at these things. They are white," he was actually amazed; homegrown eggs were always brown. Sun Oke took a good look and raised her eyebrows.

"Let's see," she said, selecting one and deftly cracking it into a bowl. They both peered into the bowl.

"Same same on the inside. They are bigger too." Sun Oke was satisfied. She thought that all things from America were bigger but the same on the inside. She thought about the tall American guy with the big hands and the small Korean woman who had hit it off tonight. Hm.....

The place was now almost empty. Two sharp dressed, thuggish looking guys sat smoking and talking. One of the guys that had been arguing with his friend over money earlier now slumped at the counter with his head cradled in his arms. Time for him to go.

Sun Oke wasn't one to say thank you for a favor but she had her ways. She selected three large white eggs, cracked them into a bowl, added a little milk and a pad of butter, and put it into the microwave to steam. When it was ready, she put it on a tray with a bottle of soju, a spoon and a dish of kimchi. With two shot glasses she carried it to the table where Jung Ho sat smoking.

"Have some breakfast brother. You did a good job tonight."

The driver smiled and dug in. He worked cheap. In his own mind he thought he was making progress. Sun Oke almost never drank. It held no attraction for her anymore. On occasion she took a sip to make a point. Tonight she opened the bottle and poured Jung Ho a glass using two hands. He in turn poured her glass. She drank it without sitting down and went back to work. No point in getting carried away.

After the two gangsters had departed and the other guy had been firmly encouraged to take his leave, Sun Oke began the nightly ritual of cleaning up. Without a word, Jung Ho joined in. He knew the ritual as well as Sun Oke did but never quite measured up to her exacting standards, but he tried his best. Enduring her rebukes on a nightly basis was part of his routine. By the dawn's early light, they were finished.

Finally it was time for the coffee. Sun Oke broke out the imported Maxwell House mix. It was heavily laced with both sugar and the white powdered creamer. It was probably pure poison but Sun Oke figured that two small cups a day wasn't going to catch up to her very soon. As they sipped their cups, the sky lightened little by little. By the time they were finished it was full light.

"Let's go," said Jung Ho. He was tired.

"Yup, let's go."

It took less than ten minutes to extinguish the heaters, turn off the generator, tightly wrap, and tie the tarps. All done.

Jung Ho left first. Once his cab pulled away she watched the sun rise up inch by inch. She thought about the night, giving no particular importance to any one happening. It was all in a night's work. Today was a new day and life would go on. Once again she thought yes, and this too shall pass just as each night and each day passes. She turned and began to trudge towards the bus stop.