9. Young-ja's Heyday

It was quite by chance that I met Young-ja again, which was something I certainly never dreamed of. It was after I had come back from the army and had found a job in a public bathhouse.

When I came back from the army I had to try and find a job by myself. But finally I landed the job of 'dirt-scrubber' in a public bathhouse. Actually all I learned to do in the army was kill people. I did in fact kill many people in Vietnam. Once I even burned seven Vietcong to death with a flame-thrower: they had been hiding in an underground tunnel. And I got the distinguished Order of Merit. But the Order of Merit did not guarantee me a job.

When I received the medal and was feeling triumphant about it, I even considered throwing in my lot with the army. But I could not give up so easily the dream I had had when I was young. Since I was a child I had ingratiated myself as a fawning apprentice welder, but my dream was always to get a really decent job such as working in a splendid cabaret bar in Mukyo-dong and wearing a bow tie, or working as a cutter in a well-known tailor's shop in Myong-dong. After I came back from the army I did in fact try to get a job in these kinds of places. But I did not have the money necessary to secure for myself the job of waiter, and I had become too old to be an assistant in a tailor's shop.

So I had no choice but to settle for the shameful job of 'dirt-scrubber' in a public bathhouse. However, when you think it over, it was indeed a remunerative job.

So, I felt that, if I worked hard, I might even become the owner of a tailor's shop, let alone do some trivial job, such as being a waiter in a bar or a cutter. My former company commander, who was obsessed with making money, had set up the shabbily built public bathhouse in the new residential area, where the excavators were still levelling the top of a hill to make land for building houses. And he had won himself a reputation for bravery in Vietnam. So it was not surprising that someone like me should end up scrubbing dirt off customers in such a place.
Anyway, after I had got the job at the public bathhouse, I became a little better off. So I went out to look around for Chang-sook, the girl I used to go with before I went into the army, and then, unexpectedly, I met Young-ja.

Before I went into the army I had ingratiated myself as a fawning apprentice welder at an ironworks, which was on Cheonggyecheon 2-ga. And Young-ja was the housemaid of the owner’s family at that time. As may be guessed, I liked her in those days. I liked to run errands eagerly from the ironworks to the owner’s house just to see her again. Whenever I ran an errand, Young-ja opened the gate for me and gave vent to her bad temper. But I will not dwell on that anymore here. In fact I had behaved badly towards her. Once, when she had opened the gate for me, I touched her ample bosom surreptitiously. Since then I wanted to treat Young-ja as a pet, but she was untamably fierce towards me. So, gnashing my teeth, I promised myself that I would definitely get on top of her and hold her down. Some day, when I went to the owner’s house on an errand, but only if there was nobody else there except Young-ja taking a nap, and all alone in the house, then I would not fail to get on top of her. If she became pregnant, she would have no choice but to become my wife. But I could not realise such a plan. And I had to go into the army.

By the way, it was in the prostitute area known as ‘588’, which was located in a part of Cheongnyangni, that I met Young-ja again.

I mentioned that I had met Young-ja by chance, while I was looking around to find Chang-sook. But, to be honest, I cannot say for sure that I had gone out only to look for Chang-sook. The one thing that had not changed between that previous time and then was my strong desire and that thing between my legs used to stand up frequently in my pants, like a pole erecting a tent. So that, to tell the truth, I could think of nothing else but appealing the guy somehow. When I was burning with such desire I had to quench the fire urgently, and put the matter with Chang-sook and that kind of thing out of my mind. What is more there were more than a few prostitute quarters in the whole area of Seoul. So it was certainly impossible for me to find out where Chang-sook was holed up and what her situation was. It was as good as looking for a needle in a haystack. So I had to make a pilgrimage in vain around all the prostitute quarters in various parts of Seoul.

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There was a considerable debt, which I owed to Chang-sook. In fact it had been accumulated over five years. I had thought I would be able to pay it back in crisp dollar notes, when I joined the army and if I had the chance to go to Vietnam. But it turned out to be a stupid idea.

Apart from the problem of getting some crisp dollar notes, I was also very lucky to have come back safe and not to have sacrificed one of my arms or something for the sake of a war between two other countries. The reason why I wanted to find Chang-sook was, of course, not just to pay back the debt. Nor was it just because I was shameless enough to consider charging her service up to my account. At one time I had considered setting up home with Chang-sook (actually the two of us had even made a plan to save up money to rent a room). This might well be considered a good enough excuse for trying to find Chang-sook. Like every client, who had the chance of having a good time with Chang-sook, I also can never forget her amiable nature and her technique in bed. In Vietnam I just followed my inclinations and had a lot of experience with international prostitutes, but, compared with Chang-sook, they may have been expensive, but they did not amount to anything.

Since I had got the job in the public bathhouse, which was a little degrading but remunerative, I had become a little better off. So it was natural that I should look around to try and find Chang-sook.

But, whenever I went into the alleys with their seductive lights everywhere and where there were girls wearing sexy make-up hanging around, who brushed up against passers-by with their bodies, and winked coquettishly, it usually made my mouth water above all. When I encountered one girl who winked at me and approached me as if she was about to pounce on me, I just managed to utter a few words of what I wanted to say: “Hey, you don’t know where a girl called Son Chang-sook lives, do you?”

But in that situation my plan of finding Chang-sook and all that was completely thwarted, and I even started to stutter with impatience: “Hey, so don’t you know where the… the girl called Son Chang-sook is living?”

Repeating the same question over again fanatically, like someone who was insane, I could not stop myself from walking after her in an unsteady fashion.

I searched all over, from the night streets of Youngdeungpo to a part of Cheongnyangni in this way. Then, unexpectedly I met
but from that moment on the intention of finding Chang-sook went completely out of my mind.

The girl’s room was full of the overwhelming scent of cheap cosmetics. I felt as though my sense of smell had suddenly come alive again after having been dead all day long, dominated by the fishy smell of water and the disinfectant ‘Hicron.’ In Vietnam I had suffered from the reek of gunpowder and rotting dead bodies. And, of course, what I missed in those days was also the smell of a girl’s room full of scent. After entering a girl’s room and smelling that scent, my sense of smell finally came alive again, after having been dulled, and this helped me to relax.

As usual the scent of cheap cosmetics in the girl’s room made a certain part of the lower half of my body feel tense.

Leaving the fan on I did it with the girl and was completely satisfied. As I did it urgently like a starving animal, I was not concerned about the girl’s orgasm.

Slapping me on my naked back, the girl said with some exaggeration, “Oh, it was so disappointing.” Having laid myself on my belly on one side of the blanket, I calmed down my heaving breathing.

“Don’t say that yet. I can still do it well at least five or more times, so…”

The girl said bluntly: “Don’t make me laugh. Do you want to kill me?”

“Why not? In Vietnam I killed seven people all by myself.”

Becoming animated the girl asked: “D’you mean Vietnamese women?”

I replied gravely: “No, they were Vietcong.”

“It seems to me that all the men who’ve been to Vietnam boast that they killed people there.”

Getting up the girl said, “Do you mind if I leave you for a minute?”

She started to pick up the clothes she had taken off and cast aside and put them back on.

Snatching at the crotch of her trousers I said firmly, “Yes, I do.”

From my experience, when such a girl leaves the room while doing her job, it is usually to deceive you. Generally she sets herself up with another client in another room.

I spoke to her again in an angry voice: “Yes, I do. Sit down.”
She said in a beseeching tone: "I don’t mean for that kind of thing. I just want to see someone for a moment."

Reproachfully I spat out a response: "You want to see someone? I guess it’s some other man."

And then she replied in an angry voice: "How dare you say that! What kind of girl do you think I am? I may do this kind of thing, but I also have my principles and am faithful for one night."

She sat down forcefully with a gesture of vexation. At such moments, as a man, I should give in to a woman. I smiled in an awkward way and said, "OK, then."

But the girl shook the upper part of her body and, in a voice still full of anger, said, "No, I’ll give up the idea."

Taking her by the hand I put on a false, gentle voice: "So, who do you want to see?"

She still seemed to be angry, and pouting her lips, she said, "If I tell you the person’s name, you think you’ll know who it is?"

I could not think of anything to say, like a child who has just been made to feel ashamed. Then we did not say anything for some time. With me still holding her wrist the girl seemed to be thinking about something. I felt somewhat overwhelmed by her manner.

As the night wore on the typical noise of the red light district outside started to quieten down. The only sound to be heard was that of railway engines, like live, fierce animals, from the sidings of the nearby station.

After a while the girl raised her voice as though she had suddenly thought of something: "Why don’t we bring in another girl and all have a good time together? What do you think? Isn’t it a great idea?" I was stunned with surprise at the girl’s sudden suggestion. I had never heard of or imagined having it with two girls at the same time. I was dumbfounded but excited and said, in a strange voice: "Is that kind of thing possible?"

"If you pay a little more money the two of us can give you a really good time. She’s a very close friend of mine. And she’s the person I wanted to see just now. The poor girl probably couldn’t get any client again tonight either..." She said this in a voice, which did not seem to be full of false pity but heartfelt. For no special reason I felt like a making a joke. So I said, "Huh, it seems you love this friend of yours very much."

The girl rebutted me, saying, "That’s not funny! Why do you talk in such a cynical way? If you like the idea, why don’t you say it straight out? I don’t like your lukewarm manner."

Then, without waiting for me to agree, she shouted outside: "Madam, Madam! Would you please go to Nylon’s and bring Youngja here?"

To be honest, I did not have the courage to turn down her proposal. And, on the other hand, my pocket was full, so I felt like doing such a strange thing at least once. But, pouting deliberately, I said, "Hey, who told you to call her? Huh, you want to spoil everything for me?"

The girl spoke quickly as though trying to shut me up: "I know you don’t completely dislike the idea. If you carry on like this you’ll ruin the whole situation. We’ll make it up to you by giving you a great time. It’s usual for people to be generous to beggars on the street. So, do you think a war’s going to break out just because a man, who likes a bit on the side, gives a little bit of help to a poor girl?"

I spoke to her in a sarcastic way again: "But why would a person with no broken limbs want to get help from other people? It’s disgusting..."

"What do you mean ‘disgusting’? If she had perfect limbs, why on earth would she need help from other people?"

My mind suddenly became very alert, and I asked her hurriedly: "So, you mean she’s de... deformed?"

Then, putting me down with the tone of her words, she said: "Yes, she is. She’s only got one arm."

I was deeply shocked by this. And all of a sudden I had goose pimples all over my body.

"What? What did you say? It sounds horrible."

I almost screamed out, "Impossible. I don’t fancy doing it. Stop the whole thing right now."

A prostitute with one arm? It was really enough to make you split your sides laughing. In some sword-fighting films there are some scenes with a one-armed swordsman, which are very exciting to the audience. But coming across a one-armed girl in a prostitute quarter is like encountering a natural disaster. Pushing the girl with my feet I said hurriedly: "Hey, I don’t want to have a nightmare. Go out quickly, and stop her coming in."

"You boasted you killed as many as seven people in Vietnam. But how come you are shocked at such a thing? Just see her first. She’s really pretty..."
By that time the sound of somebody outside the room could be heard. A voice, which seemed a little hoarse and which was familiar to me, like someone I knew, said: "Sister, it’s me. Is it OK for me to come in?"

The girl answered, "Yeah, come on in," and opened the sliding door a little with the tip of her foot. The girl outside put her fingers into the gap, caught hold of the frame of the door and pushed it carefully open. Then she came in, moving her feet sideways like a crab. And she said vaguely: "Excuse me."

It was Young-ja, the very girl who had worked at the house of the owner of the ironworks.

I could really never have dreamed that I would meet Young-ja again by chance in such a place. I was so surprised I almost fainted. When Young-ja caught sight of me she became as stiff as a piece of wood with an expression of astonishment on her face.

She had become generally thinner than before. Her resilient, fresh-looking skin looked faded and her prominent ample bosom had sunk down. But still the distinct outlines of her face with its firm profile remained unchanged as in a picture.

After a while I spoke, and my mouth felt dry and awkward: "What are you doing here?"

But it was a stupid question. Having forgotten about the empty sleeve, which was swaying to and fro, she grabbed the tip of it with her undamaged arm, as she squatted down and turned around. Then suddenly she started sobbing. Several strands of hair had fallen down from behind her ears over her flushed cheeks and gave her a ghostly appearance. And in fact Young-ja’s sobbing touched my heart. I also became rather unhappy and lowered my head.

The other girl certainly sensed something. Standing up in an awkward manner she said, as though she could not believe what was happening: "It’s incredible. It’s just like an old melodrama. You two, why don’t you get up to date on each other’s life stories?"

Then Young-ja also stood up and in an aggressive tone of voice said: "Sister, I want to go with you."

"Oh no, Young-ja. It seems he’s your former boyfriend. So why are you behaving in this ridiculous way?"

Young-ja said in a spiteful voice: "Boyfriend? Him, my boyfriend? Don’t be ridiculous."

The girl said: "You seem to feel very bitter about him. So, Mister, what you going to do about it? Why don’t you stop her?"

Then the girl went out. I hesitated for a while about whether I should stop Young-ja or let her go. Finally I made up my mind to stop her, got up abruptly and blocked her way. To my embarrassment I was completely naked. Turning her face away, she stepped to the side.

I grabbed Young-ja by the wrist of her undamaged arm and made her sit down by pulling it, saying: "What happened to your arm?"

But Young-ja said in a very cold voice: "Cut out this useless talk, will you? If you really want to have a good time with me, you should pay in advance ...

Then she tried very hard to pull her wrist away from my grasp. I strengthened my grip, and, twisting her wrist, said hurriedly: "All right, I’ll have a good time with you. Don’t go."

Then Young-ja said in a voice, which was a little less tense: "Please let go. It’s hurting. The only wrist I have will be broken."

I slowly loosened my grip on Young-ja’s wrist.

"OK. Then don’t run away."

Suddenly Young-ja burst out laughing loudly. Then she stopped and said, hiccuping as she spoke: "Where in the world would you find a girl crazy enough to desert a client willing to pay for her services?"

I opened my mouth in surprise at her words. I realised clearly that she was no longer that same Young-ja of the old days, who used to be the housemaid of the owner of the ironworks. This put me into a rage. I said in a complaining voice: "Don’t speak like that anymore!"

She burst out laughing again. But I felt there was something strange about her laughter. She stopped laughing abruptly and, tugging at the end of her empty sleeve, she held it in front of me and said, with a horrible expression on her face: "Don’t be stupid! Can’t you see this?"

Astonished yet again I stepped back and sat down and said hurriedly as I did so: "What happened? What on earth happened to your arm? Uh?"

Young-ja said angrily: "Why don’t you drop this boring subject? I mean it. You piss me off."

But I could not stop talking about it: "I have even fought in a war, but you can see my limbs are not damaged in any way. So what on earth happened to you?"
“Ah fuck! I said I don’t want to talk about it. Why do you keep on getting on my nerves? If you want to have a good time with me, then let’s do it now. If not, then I’ll go.”

“OK.”

I jumped up hastily to my feet like a rabbit chased by beaters. I took several bank notes out of a pocket of my trousers, which were hanging on the wall. I threw them at her crossly, because I was angry with myself for being flustered. The paper money just flew around like falling leaves.

Then Young-ja picked them up hurriedly like a starving person scooping up rice to put into their mouth. And I started to feel strongly an agreeable sensation of cruelty, as I had when killing. I said in an aggressive voice: “I’ve paid for you with my money. So, take your clothes off. And I mean: take them all off.”

With no concern for my feelings she roused herself and said: “OK. You should have behaved like this from the start.”

Then she removed her clothes with her one hand in a way which seemed very inconvenient, but which was very skilful. I looked down at her naked body with a complex feeling like I had had when looking down at the dead bodies of people I had killed. But when I saw the shoulder from which the arm had been cut off, I started breathing heavily.

Hiding her naked body by slipping down beneath the dirty bedcover she seemed to be putting on a deliberately cheerful voice: “Oh, I’m so shy. Please don’t keep watching me like that.”

It was a big mistake of mine not to have mounted Young-ja while she was still a housemaid for the family of the owner of the ironworks.

Mr Kim, who was a worker at the ironworks, had said: “Hey, boy, if you really want her, why don’t you just lay her for a start. I mean: put a stop to just thinking about her.”

Of course, I also wanted to do it, but I did not get a chance. But I doubt very much whether I would have gone through with it even if I had had such a chance. I wonder if I could have possessed a girl who was free and whom I did not have to pay for, a girl who did not at least put it on the scale like Chang-sook. Once we made a surprise attack on a village, near a swamp, which was covered with tropical plants. All that remained in the village, after we had occupied it, were girls and women. The staff sergeant pulled at my ear and whispered: “It’s a good chance.”

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The girls and women in the village did not hesitate to open their thighs when my fellow soldiers demanded it of them. Even then I paid an ugly girl unnecessarily, who was trembling with fear, by giving her my box of emergency rations. She had a thin neck. And she resisted me, shaking her neck, which was withered and twisted like the stem of a weed. I might have enjoyed it if I had been so rough and ignorant that I could not understand the girl’s sad resistance. Actually I could only control my extremely painful desire with great difficulty, as it was in a hurry to penetrate that part of her. But I satisfied myself with my aggressively erect thing without putting it in her.

I was foolish enough to imagine I would have pain in thrusting it deeply into Young-ja. However, to my disappointment, that part of Young-ja had become loose and smooth like an old bracelet.

When we had finished doing it, Young-ja spoke in a way, which hinted at more than just playfulness: “I know I can’t even ask you to come to me often. I realize that even this job is not easy to do without one arm. But if men like you visit me often, I think I can manage to get along somehow... I am really heavily in debt. So, I’m asking this favour of you. I think there is no other way for me in this situation but to ask some men like you in this way.”

Young-ja’s words touched me very deeply.

This was the way that I met Young-ja again by chance. But since meeting her again I completely forgot about the idea of looking for Chang-sook. And instead I visited Young-ja often. Even if Young-ja had not asked me for the favour in such a touching way, I would certainly have visited her just as often. And I know that this is a praiseworthy aspect of my personality.

When the real hot weather season began, business at the public bathhouse became slack. Consequently my income also became meagre. Now it was becoming difficult to settle my account with Young-ja satisfactorily. One day she spoke to me jokingly about it: “So, today, please scrub the dirt off my body instead. Nothing is free in this world.”

So without complaining, I scrubbed the dirt off Young-ja’s body on the cement floor at the back of the kitchen. While I was doing this I realised how very inconvenient it would be for Young-ja to bathe herself with one arm. I felt pity for her, and even felt happy to scrub the dirt off her body.
I exclaimed, "Hey, look at this dirt!"
Young-ja said giggling: "You're scraping off my skin! It hurts."
I said in a genial voice: "This is nothing."
Raising her voice Young-ja said, as though she had just thought of an unusual story: "I heard that, in some public bathhouses, women scrub the dirt off the male customers. Is it true? A client told me. And then, you know, the bastard referred to me. He said, 'You've got only one arm, so you're no good for even that job, you know.' I heard that that job pays good money. Is it true?"

For no special reason I said angrily: "How should I know about that kind of thing?"

Without noticing that I was hurt, Young-ja said in a dreamy, regretful voice: "I wish I had accumulated a sizeable amount of money by doing even such a job as that, while my arm was undamaged."

It seemed that Young-ja had no regular clients at all. What crazy guys would visit regularly a one-armed prostitute? If they knew that Young-ja would be there, they would not go near the place for fear of having nightmares about her.

It is not necessary to mention the fact that the prostitution business is also affected by the summer season, so that the economic situation of the area was in a bad way. The only thing the prostitutes could do, even those with sound bodies, was sit around on the pyeongsang along the side of the alley and play a traditional card game, or ward off the swarms of mosquitoes flying around them. Occasionally, when a likely man came looking around in the alley, the girls would throw their cards down and pounce on him. But Young-ja could not join in such things. Even if she pounced on a man, with her sleeve flapping, it was obvious she would have been rejected straight away.

As usual Young-ja had no other choice but to shut herself up in her dark room and wait for 'Madam Nylon' to catch a man for her. 'Madam Nylon' was the manageress of Young-ja's establishment, who also went out pimping. She had a pockmarked face just like rough textured nylon, and was fierce and determined. So that everybody in her neighbourhood knew the determined 'Madam Nylon.' However, the depressed economic situation in midsummer was so bad, that business was very slack, and even the famous 'Madam Nylon' could do nothing about it. So I could be with Young-ja almost every night. On the days when I earned 200 won in the public bathhouse during the daytime, I took the 200 won and presented it to Young-ja, and also on the days when I got 500 won I did the same. So, on the days when I earned nothing, she also did not earn anything.

Occasionally when 'Madam Nylon' caught a man and brought him to Young-ja, she behaved very aggressively. She pushed the man into Young-ja's room, and hung about outside the room, spying on what was going on inside. She did this just in case the man found out that Young-ja had only one arm, and got angry. Then the sound of arguing could usually be heard between them. At such times the determined 'Madam Nylon' never missed the opportunity to rebuke the man in an aggressive tone of voice: "You're here to have a woman, aren't you? So, what do you need her arms for? Her hole is enough, isn't it? If she had both arms, what would you do with them? Do you want to make soup with them? Don’t be so stupid!"

Then usually the men, who had started arguing, felt intimidated and became quiet.

It was really very fortunate that I had the sudden idea of making an artificial arm for Young-ja. It was one of those days when the midsummer heat, which had been filling the alley to the point of making everything almost seem to fester and burst, started to weaken in the morning and evening time. I forget now what made me suddenly think of such a marvellous idea. But it seemed to me that there was no reason why even someone like me should not have an idea of such genius.

If Young-ja put an artificial arm in her sleeve and touted to clients in the dark alley, who on earth would notice it? She could put a glove on the hand part or thrust it into her pocket. Then the elbow could be bent at an impressive angle like that of a fashion model. Imagining Young-ja like that made me laugh until I cried.

First, I found a leg of a broken chair, about the thickness of her forearm, in the boiler and storage room of the public bathhouse. I cut it to the length of Young-ja’s undamaged right arm and then cut it again into three pieces. For the hand part I carved the small piece of wood elaborately into the shape of a hand. To make the elbow joint I fixed a hinge so that it could be folded only in one direction. And to make the wrist I connected arm and hand by fixing an eyehook on each part, so that the hand could move both backwards and forwards and right and left. Then I wound a
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to our eyes. It made 'Madam Nylon,' and some women from the neighbourhood, who were playing cards together in the main room, peep into our room. When they discovered what we were doing, they were bewildered. Turning round, 'Madam Nylon' talked to herself in a special way she had: "Crazy things. Is it such a great invention? Why are they behaving in such a crazy way?"

But Young-ja's uniquely made artificial arm proved to be a great invention indeed. From that very night Young-ja started to go out into the alley without hesitation, and she succeeded in luring some blind fools, thanks to her strange wooden arm. That night I forgot to go to work in the bathhouse and instead watched Young-ja's every movement in the alley. She gave a brilliant performance.

If she had not been a one-armed prostitute, Young-ja was good-looking enough as a prostitute, for men to be attracted by her. Men who came to the alley with some secret desire had a different way of looking and walking, however much they tried to pretend otherwise. Young-ja recognised such men and pounced on them first. Following such a man with her quick, short steps, and thrusting her face close to his chin, she said in a seductive voice: "How about having a good time with me?" And, in order to make a greater effect, she added some extra remark, such as "I'll make it really fantastic for you" or "I'll give you a special discount," depending on their appearance. I watched her from some distance, hidden in the shadows of the alley, with the palms of my hands sweating, like a boy watching the performance of a tightrope walker. But Young-ja never fell off the rope. It seemed as though her whole body were full of this extraordinary talent, which had been bottled up inside her.

That night I watched Young-ja anxiously as she changed her clients three times. For some reason I could not hear any sound of argument from her room about her damaged arm. I guessed that, in the cases of some drunken or stupid men, she deceived them by distracting them with her body. But in the case of someone who was a bit fussy about it, she might have known what to say on discovering the wooden arm thrust into the dress. And with a man who was very fussy about it, she would have begged him: "Don't you have any sympathy for the likes of me?" Then he would have had no choice but to treat her like a beggar on the street and give her money. Imagining what these men would do even made me feel like applauding Young-ja.

bandage around the arm, adjusting the thickness to correspond to the thick and thin parts of the arm.

While I was making this thing in the public bathhouse, the cleaning boy Park and the man in charge of the boiler, Mr. Chun, seemed to think it was very strange. Mr. Chun even called me "Crazy bastard!" But I could not say anything to make them understand.

I took the thing I had made to Young-ja. At first even Young-ja looked at it in bewilderment. I took her one-piece dress down from the wall and inserted the thing into the sleeve, tied it with string at the shoulder and sewed it up with needle and thread. Then Young-ja almost split her sides laughing.

And she said triumphantly: "With this I can go out and stand in the alley. All of them, yeah, all the bastards will be completely deceived!"

With one hand Young-ja lifted up the dress, with its sleeve containing the wooden arm dangling down, and, looking at it, she laughed boisterously again. When I saw Young-ja looking so happy, it made me also happy. Unable to conceal the mixture of happiness and shyness which I felt, I said, "You just have to use your brains."

Young-ja said: "How could you think of such an unusual idea like this? I must be a real blockhead. I'll go out to the alley straight away. I'm sure someone will be attracted by the bait."

And as Young-ja spoke she pulled on the dress at the same time with a confident movement. I took hold of the wooden arm dangling from her shoulder. Then I bent it at the elbow at an impressive angle for her and thrust the hand into the pocket at the waist.

I said: "But you shouldn't be too ambitious yet. It's still light."

"Alright. Then when it gets dark I'll go out and see. How do I look, eh, how do I look?"

As she spoke Young-ja tried to strike a delightful pose as if she had become a real fashion model.

To encourage her I said in a loud, confident voice: "Mm, OK! You look great."

Actually Young-ja's movement was somehow awkward, but it looked much better than when there was just the long sleeve dangling down. Some stupid guys would be easily deceived before they noticed it. Now I was so relieved that I burst out laughing. And clinging to me, Young-ja also started to laugh boisterously again. We tumbled onto the floor and laughed so much that tears came
Since then Young-ja became a slave to work. There was nothing which she was incapable of achieving by such efforts. She had a habit of saying, while grinding her teeth with determination: "I'm going to make a lot of money. From now on I'll concentrate on making money."

She said that she had been born in a poor farming family in the countryside. They called it a farming family, but all they possessed were two patches of field. They skipped meals more often than they had them. The only reason for her coming to Seoul as a housemaid was to get a chance to have a full meal. But there was nothing harder to put up with than a housemaid's job. She explained that she did not mean by this that the work in the kitchen was hard, but what she had to endure at night.

"When I was working at the home of the ironworks owner, you also did it. I mean, how could you dare to put your hand secretly on my bosom?" Young-ja started her story in this way. She laughed loudly and added that all males, regardless of age, even children and old men, were thoughtless.

"Oh, being a housemaid was a really disgusting job. It seemed they treated a housemaid as no better than a chamber pot. You know, one bastard tried to get on top of me when he had the chance, and another time another bastard tried it. One night the owner pounced on me, and then the next night his son, who was still wet behind the ears, went crazy... It really drove me mad."

Then Young-ja said that she had worked in four houses as a housemaid, but the situation was always the same. She had worked at a boarding house for university students for a while, but the so-called educated people were worse, like a group of animals. So she quit the job of housemaid. And she said with a deep sigh of grief, that it was her fate, but that if she had known in advance that she would finally have to earn her living by using her body, then she definitely would not have landed herself with the job of bus conductress but would have come directly here. Her confession came out smoothly and easily now without her getting angry: while she was working as a conductress she had fallen off a crowded bus and had put one of her arms right under the front wheel of a speeding three-wheeled car.

Young-ja stressed again: "If I had come directly to this district, I could have done well with two undamaged arms and not lagged behind the others." She said this as though assuring me that there was no other job that would be so profitable for a person like her, who had nothing but her body, if one of her arms were not damaged. She said in a plaintive voice, that she would not feel envy about having other things, if she could have left her pimp, rented a room, paid for a dressing table, record player and an electric fan in monthly instalments, arranged the room in a charming way and had about fifty or so reasonable regular clients.

Then, for no apparent reason, she said angrily: "If I had come into this business straight away, like Chun-ja, I would have been as well off as her."

Chun-ja was the girl I had met the day I met Young-ja again. After Young-ja had lost one arm she had had no choice but to come to Chun-ja. But, with what seemed like regret, Young-ja said that, if she had known she would fall down like that, she would have joined up with Chun-ja from when they had first arrived in Seoul. The members of Chun-ja's family in the countryside had come to forget what hunger was. But the funny thing was that they thought Chun-ja was working as a typist or something similar. Anyway, even if they had got wind of what the truth was, what could they have done about it? You have to take the rough with the smooth. Young-ja giggled when she told this story.

She finished her story, grinding her teeth, with the general comment, "But, from now on, it's my turn."

However, one night, when I had finished work late in the bathhouse and went to see Young-ja, she was quarrelling with a man, surrounded by onlookers. Young-ja was grabbing him by the collar with the hand of her undamaged arm. No, it would be more correct to say that she was dangling from him rather than grabbing him by the collar. I watched them dumbfounded from amongst the onlookers for some time. The big, shabby man, who looked like a manual labourer, tried to shake Young-ja off, who clung to him doggedly.

The expression of the man, at a loss, and full of shame and regret, was revealed clearly by the light from the doors, which had been opened in the makeshift wooden-panel houses. Then Chun-ja turned up from somewhere and started poking her nose into things. She said in a reproachful and dominant tone, "You're not just standing around watching it all, are you?" Then, thrusting her way through the crowd, she shouted: "Hey, Young-ja, what's the problem? What the hell did this old goat do to you?"
Young-ja replied breathlessly: "The bastard just helped himself and tried to run away."

Chun-ja rushed to the man and, shaking her fist at him accusingly, said: "You just helped yourself and tried to run away? Then you shamelessly hit a weak girl. Don't forget where you are!"

The cheeky voice of a prostitute was heard from among the onlookers: "Yeah, where is he? Where? He's in the area round 588 of course."

The voice of a girl from Gyeongsang-do province replied:15 "Ee, you're right, lass. This is the 588 republic, which is of the prostitutes, by the prostitutes and for the prostitutes."

Each one of the girls standing round said something as though cheering at a sports match:

"Hey, One-Arm, why don't you just bite him hard."

"You shouldn't let him get away with it. At least break off his fing in the middle."

The man was staggering and seemed to be drunk. Chun-ja pulled Young-ja away from the man and, in her place, grabbed hold of him by the front of his shirt and said: "A bastard like you should learn a lesson. We're taking you to the police office."

Chun-ja tried to pull the man away, but with her feeble strength she could not move him at all, because he was so heavy. The man had now got over his embarrassment and said in a complaining voice: "Who on earth are you? You've got nothing to do with this."

As he said this, the man shook Chun-ja off with a violent gesture. She fell back, brushed off like a helpless insect.

The man started to walk away, saying in a slurred voice: "Oh, my luck is really against me."

I do not myself understand why I stepped forward towards him at that moment. This lead to me having to go to gaol, which would not have been my original fate.

Pulling him round by putting my hand on the man's shoulder, I said to him: "Hey, Mister, when you've had it with a girl you should pay for it, shouldn't you?"

The man looked startled by my threatening tone. And in a frightened voice he said, "I didn't have it with her. I realised unexpectedly that I'd had the bad luck to pick up a one-armed girl, so I just came out of the room."

All the people watching burst out laughing. And amongst the laughter Young-ja's confident voice could be heard:

"You son of a bitch! What you did gave you enough satisfaction, didn't it? Do you remember how shamelessly you groped me, and the mad things you did to me?"

Then, hanging on to me, the man pleaded for sympathy from me: "Look, Mister, please listen to me. I was deceived by her, yeah, completely deceived. I'm a day labourer on a construction site. I haven't had a proper meal in several days, to save money. I mean I saved money by substituting instant noodles for rice, just dreaming of having it in a really fantastic way. But my luck was against me, and I was unexpectedly lured by a one-armed girl. I was completely deceived by her. Please, Mister, understand my situation."

"Shut up!"

It was not really justified but I had a fit of anger and gave him a high kick on a vulnerable spot.17 Immediately he fell down and writhed on the ground. I rushed to him and said to him in a threatening manner: "You said you had been saving up some money for several days. Get it out, all of it."

Then the man crawled around on the ground, trembling like an insect that has lost its wings, and mumbled to himself, screaming occasionally, "Th... Th... Thief! He... Help me!"

"You, bastard."

I gave him a stylish kick on the lower jaw.

At that moment two night watchmen thrust their way through the onlookers and appeared in front of me. Their faces were familiar to me. The man, who had fallen on the ground, grabbed hold of one of the watchmen by the ankle and cried out: "Please save me."

One of the night watchmen said to me: "I knew you would cause some kind of trouble like this some time. Come along with us to the police office." I had no choice but to follow the night watchman. The other one, whom the man had grabbed by the ankle, was bringing the man at some distance behind us, supporting him under one shoulder.

The number of onlookers had become much larger and they trooped along at our heels. Chun-ja had caught up with us before I realised it and was pleading with the watchman who was taking me: "Mr. Kim, please give him a chance. It's that bastard who did wrong."

9. Young-ja's Heyday
It seemed that Chun-ja and the night watchman were slightly acquainted. Then I felt ashamed. Looking back at Chun-ja I shouted, "Stop it! Don't do that kind of thing!"

It was three months later before I met Young-ja again. I had been sent to the Public Prosecutor's Office accused of assault, because five of the poor guy’s teeth had been broken by my stylish kicking. However, the young public prosecutor, who had charged me, took into special consideration the fact that I was a hero who had returned from Vietnam, having achieved some brilliant victories, and he decided not to prosecute. My former company commander, who was the owner of the public bathhouse, had taken a lot of trouble to get me free. He said later that he had emphasized to the young prosecutor many times that I had been a model soldier in Vietnam.

When I was released from gaol I went straight to Young-ja. While I was locked up, she came to see me several times. On one of the occasions Chun-ja was with her. Whenever she came to visit me she would explain triumphantly how prosperous her business was, thanks to the wooden arm. And she would finish what she was saying with, “Once I’ve saved up money to rent a room, I’ll wash my hands of this job and set up a home.” But I could not work out who she would set up home with. I wondered whether she might have developed an intimate relationship with a man, while I was locked up. So I asked her sullenly, “Who with?” However, Young-ja smiled dismissively. When she behaved like that I put her into such a rage, that I felt like shadowing her and punishing her severely, as soon as I was set free.

When I went to see Young-ja she was taking a nap. I woke her up by kicking her. She half-opened her eyes, and I immediately slapped her on the cheek, saying, “Who’s the bastard you said you were going to set up home with?”

Being slapped on the face was like a bolt of lightning to Young-ja, and she looked at me with a dumbfounded expression on her face. Then I spoke again in an aggressive way: "Who is the bastard? Come on, tell me!"

Now Young-ja was fully awake. She said angrily: "Why did you slap me?"

9. Young-ja’s Heyday

I started to kick her again and said: "You bitch! You admitted yourself you’re guilty. Who’s the bastard you said you’d set up home with?"

Avoiding my aggressive kicking by curling her body up just like a hedgehog, Young-ja bawled out, "Why are you kicking me for no reason? You know it yourself, I don’t have to tell you. You know it yourself."

I stopped kicking her and said: "I don’t believe it! When did I ever say, I would set up home with you?"

Then, in a voice bursting with anger, but seeming to be giving up hope, Young-ja said: "You see! It’s you that’s irresponsible, and then you torment me for no reason. I think you deserve being taken away by the police. I’m sorry they let you go..."

Now I was able to resolve the misunderstanding I had had about Young-ja, while I was locked up. But I spoke again in a sarcastic way: "All right, I’ll go to gaol again for you and stay there till you can find a man to set up home with..."

With a sigh Young-ja said indignantly: "Why do you keep taking it the wrong way like that?"

I beamed at Young-ja. She did not miss her chance and threw herself bodily at my chest so hard that I gasped with a ‘huh’ sound. I patted her on the back. Affecting a childish manner, and even shedding a few tears, she said: “Oh, please don’t go in there again. You know, while you were in there, I had all kinds of thoughts. So, please don’t go in there again, huh?"

By about the middle of the autumn, and before I had realized it, I started to be known in the 588 area as Young-ja’s husband. It was not very awful for me, but it was not a very good address to hear people mentioning. But considering that I had just a fawning role in the world, scrubbing the dirt from customers’ crotches in the public bathhouse, even the position of a prostitute’s husband was too good for me. Whenever Young-ja argued with a client, I settled it by coaxing or threatening him in a cunning way. But I did not cause any more trouble, which would have meant I should be treated generously, in consideration of the fact that I was a returned Vietnam hero. This was clear evidence that I was not a really stupid person. Young-ja diligently saved up her money and put it in trust with ‘Madam Nylon.’ She had set herself the goal of two hundred thousand won, and she would boost her morale every day by checking what proportion of her goal she had achieved. So,
we got through the midsummer and autumn period without any special problems.

But, as the winter came on, the police suddenly started to exercise strict control over the area. According to the rumour we heard, it was the policy of the Local Government Authority to clear away all the brothels in the area. They were going to clear them away completely, just as our company had cleared away the remains of the Vietcong in an area to be subjugated. It was a so-called ‘bull-dozer strategy.’

In fact the police control became much more severe than before. This kind of thing had happened several times before, but this time the atmosphere was completely different. Warning signs were put up at the entrances to the alleys. On the rather wide boards painted white solemn words of warning were written in minute letters as small as perilla seeds, stating that any visits for the purposes of pleasure and prostitution in the area were definitely prohibited. At the entrance to every alley policemen stood on guard with truncheons. Several days later a leaflet landed in each brothel with a request from the authority concerned for help in carrying out their policy of rooting out all prostitution. And a formal warning in the name of the mayor of Seoul also landed in the brothels, notifying everybody that they would be demolishing the illegally built buildings. The prostitutes dashed obsessively this way and that, trying to find some loophole through which they could escape. But all the entrances to the alleys were completely blocked by policemen with truncheons, so that the prostitutes were caught like rats in a trap. A disturbing rumour had spread around that hundreds of soldiers would be ordered into the area to clear away all the prostitutes completely two or three days later, or even that very night.

Though I was not a prostitute, it had become very inconvenient for me to get through the entrances to the alleys. My face was already known to several policemen, because of its bad associations. So I could not see Young-ja for several days. And during one restless night, when I went to see her, she had gone out somewhere. It was obvious that she was also restless. In her room she had laid out carelessly two bundles of clothing, which seemed to have been packed some time before.

In order to rescue Young-ja from the area, I looked around and considered some detailed plans. One of my plans was to jump over the cement-bricked wall facing the department store, and to mingle with the passers-by. To do this we would have to climb up onto the roofs of the houses near the cement-bricked wall. This would certainly be too difficult for Young-ja, because she had only one arm.

The other method I thought of was to raise the manhole cover where the alleys crossed and then go down into the sewer. But there was one serious problem with this method, and that was that I did not know where we would come out.

That night I could not meet Young-ja until getting on for midnight. Then I found out that she had a much more marvellous escape plan than mine. She had had her hair cut short like a man’s, had got hold of a man’s suit, which fitted her quite well, and looked smart, when she wore it. I was stunned by the fact that she was also wearing an impressive necktie on the shirt. I looked at her in amazement with my mouth open. When Young-ja noticed me she said hastily, in a fussy tone of voice: “Where have you been till now? Come on, come and help me to escape. We must get out of here before the curfew.”

Linking her undamaged arm in mine, Young-ja started to walk ahead of me. Before I had time to think things over, I was being dragged away by her. But before we had gone a distance of more than a few steps, we encountered the prostitute ‘Gyeongsang-do,’ who used to live in the same brothel as Young-ja. She said: “Eee, Young-ja, is it thee? Don’t try such a right silly thing like that, lass. All the lassies that tried getting out by dressing up like you, they’ve all been caught, you know.”

Young-ja asked: “Chun-ja, too?”

“Of course, don’t you understand? You’re lucky you bumped into me any road. Come along wi’ me. I’ve got a good idea. Hey lad, you just go outside the area now and wait for us in front of department store.”

I asked her hastily: “What are you going to do, then?”

‘Gyeongsang-do’ explained triumphantly: “We’ll climb up to roof n’ go over wall. Just wait and see.”

I nodded, thinking that she had had the same idea as I had. ‘Gyeongsang-do’ ran away, pulling Young-ja with her, before I realised it. I supposed that if they went over the cement-bricked wall from the roof, the spot would definitely be right next to the part of the department store near the wall. I came out of one of the
entrances to the alleys, which were being guarded by the policemen in shifts twenty-four hours a day, and waited at the spot at which 'Gyeongsando' and Young-ja would come over by climbing up to the roof. Near the cement-bricked wall a policeman on guard was walking up and down, just like a sentry. I thought to myself that it was just like in a war.

After a while the silhouettes of two people appeared moving on the roof. The two people, with their silhouettes cast distinctly against the sky, brightened by the electric lights, were coming nearer to the cement-bricked wall. Anxiously I gave my attention to the silhouettes of the two people. They climbed over the roofs just like alley cats. Each time they came over the roof of one house onto that of another, the silhouettes rose and fell like ships on the waves. But things went wrong when there was just one more roof left to go. Something rolled down from the roof and a thumping sound of a sauce jar or something being broken was heard. The policeman who was walking by on guard noticed some objects moving on the roof. He hailed one of his colleagues, and they climbed up onto the cement-bricked wall and went up quickly onto the roof. On the roof it was like a scene from a farce, with a lot of chasing and being chased. But the roofs of the humble houses made of wooden boards seemed to be too weak to support the bulky policemen. At the moment when one of the two policemen was catching one of the girls, the roof collapsed onto the ground with a crashing sound. And the girl who fell down with the two policemen was 'Gyeongsang-do.' As she had mentioned, it had probably been lucky for Young-ja. While all the noise was going on, Young-ja saw her chance, jumped over the cement-bricked wall and ran away. Without needing to think about it I also ran as hard as I could in the direction Young-ja had run. From behind someone could be heard shouting "Catch that guy!" but all the way there was no sign of any policeman following me. Young-ja and I walked along the dark rear side of the department store, and turning the corner we reached the bus stop crowded with people. It was just before midnight. Breathing heavily we managed to catch a seat-bus, which was just about to leave. We had nowhere to go. Finally we had no choice but to sponge on the owner of my workplace, the public bathhouse.

It was about half a month after that, that Young-ja died. She was burned to death in the mysterious fire that occurred that winter in the prostitute area of Cheongnyangni. Unfortunately Young-ja went to the area that night in order to get the money back, which she had left in trust with the vile 'Madam Nylor.' I had arranged for her to earn her keep in the bathhouse by having her do some trivial errands, despite the ironical glances of the other workers. But it seemed that Young-ja used to sneak out of the bathhouse without letting me know, and visit that area. Once or twice we argued about it, but she was still obstinate. Her idea was to get the money back by whatever means possible and rent a room, in order to set up home with me. Once when she came back from visiting that area she explained what the situation was like: "There's nothing there. The houses looked like those from which everybody had been carried out after dying of typhoid fever. They said that the 'Nylon' woman was also taken away by the police. But I guess that's probably a lie. She's certainly trying to avoid me. But where on earth did they all go to, anyway?"

It was around nine o'clock that night when I heard from Mr. Chun, who was listening to the radio in the changing room, that there was a fire in that area. I stopped in the middle of scrubbing dirt off a client and ran out of the bathroom to look for Young-ja. Of course she was not there. I hurried off anxiously to where the fire was. There were flames bursting out of the houses made of wooden boards and rising up high in the sky. I pushed my way through the onlookers and ran close to the flames. The fire engines could do no more than prevent the flames spreading onto the opposite side of the street. The gushing water was just hitting the walls of the department store and the hotel and cooling them rather than striking at the actual flames.

However, there was nothing I could do about the fire. What else could I do apart from stand in the front row of the onlookers and just watch it, my face reddened by the heat of the fire. I could not imagine, even at the time, that Young-ja might be burned to death in the fire.

When day broke I saw three dead bodies, which had been dragged out of the ashes onto the street. I heard that altogether four people had been burned to death by the fire. Somebody said that one of them had actually been rescued and taken off to the nearby hospital, but that she had finally died there. And he added that she was that woman 'Nylon,' and that the fire had started suddenly in her house.
The three dead bodies were burned completely black just like those of the Vietcong burned to death by flame-throwers. Through burst blisters here and there grilled crimson flesh was exposed. It was not so difficult to tell Young-ja’s body from the other two, because hers had only one arm. So that even though it was impossible to identify the burnt corpse, one of them was definitely Young-ja’s, because of the arm. I squatted down next to her dead body. I stopped myself from crying by clenching my teeth.

“You fool! Who made you jump into the flames? Who?”

But it seemed as though Young-ja was saying to me jokingly: “I started the fire myself.”

At that moment I also felt like burning some place down.

10. Looking for Father

The adults were deliberating about something, looking at me occasionally with sidelong glances.

I knew what they were discussing, but I just continued sitting on the edge of the maru, with my head hanging down, and did not say anything. They were talking about something related to me, but I did not have any opinion about it myself.

It was the third day since the adults had been out looking for my father, and that morning one of them raised the new question of whether to take me with them or not.

“A child probably has keener eyesight,” said one of my uncles. It was the younger one, my mother’s brother, and he wanted to take me with them. But my mother did not say anything, and just dried her tears on one of her breast-ties. She was probably wondering how they could take such a young thing like me to such a dangerous area. And the other one of my uncles, the older one, who was my mother’s brother-in-law and had grey hair, seemed to agree with my mother’s opinion. My older uncle just kept nodding his head to himself, with a clear expression of pity in his face.

The discussion went on in this vague way, and in the end it was decided that I should go with them that morning, just as my younger uncle had suggested. I thought I understood why the adults wanted to take me with them for no apparent reason. It was because they were in such low spirits. The adults had been wandering around for the previous two days, but they had not been able to find my father, and, by the third day, they had become really exhausted. So they wanted me to go with them to give them new hope and to revitalise them. And there was no way for me to avoid agreeing to their suggestion. We left our house rather early in the morning, but by the time we reached the actual place, the September sun, which had been hanging quite low in the sky, had come up almost directly over our heads, so far was it from our house to that place.