

The Reunion

On nights when the north wind blew, flocks of opaline helium balloons swarmed over from beyond the barbed wire of the 38th parallel. The Lumpen would watch from his hut in the field. Once in a while, one of them covered over the moon as it sailed on. It looked to the Lumpen more like a birth than an eclipse. A bundle blooming from the kindly crescent rift.

At daybreak the Lumpen would climb the hill to forage for what the balloons had brought. He looked for patches of the slope that were speckled with unnatural color. The ashen white of the latex shreds and, among them, the leaflets. Painted garishly to catch the eye. Abandon your Yankee-ridden land. Freedom, rights, jobs guaranteed for South Korean officers defecting to Pyongyang. Come, into the sweet embrace of our merciful General. Long live the Supreme Leader of our race, the avatar of benevolence, Kim Jong-Un. Dew rolled off the painted sheets and into his sleeves as the Lumpen gathered them in his palm. The dew on the florid paint was as limp as glass beads.

The first time he went chasing the balloons, the Lumpen read each leaflet. He spent half a day on the hill. He squinted through the testimonies of South Korean defectors living like tsars in the same palace as Kim Jong-Un. In the end he shrugged. He brushed the seat of his pants with the leaflets and felt sorry for the balloons that martyred themselves to carry the mandates, so lost on the likes of him. He took the wad over to the police station, where he was well pleased to learn that the pay for a hundred sheets was two boxes of instant noodles instead of one. He shook the hand of the soft-hearted officer who would round his numbers up for years to come. The dirty Reds, they never do quit, said the officer. No complaints, said the Lumpen.

One morning, in a harvest field of broken balloons, the Lumpen found a leaflet made into a small pouch and tied shut with a piece of red thread. He placed it in his palm and felt through the stiff envelope. The contents, numerous and weightless, rattled within. He fingered the folds that formed the enclosure. If he were to fumble with the thread there on the hill, he thought, the insides may scatter on the ground and be hopelessly gone. He put the pouch in his shirt pocket and carried on with his gleaning. There were enough leaflets that day, he would remember in later years, to exchange for three boxes of noodles. You can't live on

ramyeon forever. Your body will give up on your sorry soul. The officer tut-tutted and threw in a box of Choco Pies. It was as good a day of breadwinning as the Lumpen had ever had.

When he returned to his hut, he cooked two packs of the noodles and ate them in front of the television set. He sat through the sitcom reruns and the late afternoon cartoon marathons. For dinner he cooked another two packs of noodles and ate as he watched a journalist travel through Estonia. I would absolutely believe it if someone were to tell me these castles grow out of the ground alongside the trees, absolutely, said the journalist. The Lumpen took out a Choco Pie from its wrapper. What a miraculous place, said the journalist. The Lumpen nodded, agreeing, when the rustling against his chest recalled the unopened parcel.

The thread had already come undone in his pocket and the folds of the pouch were ajar. He placed the pouch on the floor and lifted the creased corners of the leaflet. What was inside, the Lumpen confirmed by touch, were nail clippings. Kindly crescent chips, like the mouth parts of smiles. The small white pile shivered at his breath.

The Lumpen was disappointed. He had not wished for anything in particular, but he had figured the pouch would hold a thing of some use at least. And here it was, a pile of nail clippings, one of a very few things he considered useless. Just my luck, he muttered. Then, remembering that morning's windfall, he amended: win some, lose some. He rolled the leaflet around the clippings and poured them out onto his doorstep. The leaflet, he saved. Out the front window he could see the shadow of a lone mouse scurrying over to survey the discarded articles.

The following day, the Lumpen did not rise until mid-morning. He cooked a pack of noodles for brunch and sat in front of the television set when he thought he heard a faint groan from beyond the door. He tried to attribute it to the television, but a second and a third groan had followed the first by the time he slurped his last bite. The noonday light was so strong when he finally opened the door that it was difficult for him to make out right away what it was that was squatting on his doorstep. He had to shield his eyes and bend down to see that it was a naked woman, whose human shape had been warped by starvation. Her head was bowed between her knees, but the skeletal thighs could barely hide her face. Her eyes and mouth were open, as if she had not enough flesh to shut them. Soft whistles leaked from her labored breaths, which sometimes ended with the same groan he had heard from inside.

The Lumpen dwelled on the sight for a while, confounded. He waited for a shift in her state to make the meaning of the circumstances evident. But the woman remained motionless, and he was driven by anxi-

ety to ask her who she was, where she lived. There came no response. Even as she was being carried inside she did not release herself from the crumpled posture. He put her down in the corner of the room, where she went on as she had in the first moments she was found. He could not tell what sentience was left in her. He felt a sudden urge to hurt her to test her ability to feel pain. His fingers examined the flimsy leather of her forearms, but she seemed not to notice. With caution he lifted her arm above her head. Her bones squeaked from within that tenuous wall. Does it hurt, asked the Lumpen. No response came. He put it back down where it was and suddenly realized, the fact was that he had a naked woman in his room. He decided that she, in such devastation, could not arouse him, but he became curious. No part of her was difficult to see through the loose interstices of limbs. He angled his head to see between her legs and shuddered to find that the opening there was, like the seam of a baseball, sealed shut by red stitches. Out of nowhere, compassion seized him, and it was an uncomfortable feeling. He brought over a T-shirt, which slipped off her shoulders and arms, in the end hanging around her waist. The Lumpen gathered the neck of it back around her collarbone and guided her hands through the sleeves. Only her bird-like feet could be seen from under the dangling hem. She squatted in the corner all afternoon like a mounted bell.

As he ate his own dinner, the Lumpen was pained with guilt. He kept shouting across the room, making a show of offering his instant noodles to the unresponsive woman. It gets pretty awkward, you know, stuffing your face in front of a starving person, said the Lumpen. Eventually he took the pot over to her, tapping her lips with noodle-laden chopsticks. Here, eat—just a bite, said the Lumpen. There came no response. The noodles grew cold by her whistled breaths. Don't say I didn't try, said the Lumpen. He drew the chopsticks uneasily to his mouth.

Later, he caught himself laughing at a joke on television. He glanced at the woman, unremitting in her stillness. Surely you've laughed, too, in your life? It's not all bad being you, is it? asked the Lumpen. No response came.

During his nightly routine of laying out the bedding, the Lumpen remembered thinking one night how unnatural and inhumane it was to sleep alone. He had wished desperately to be acknowledged and to acknowledge another's weight and substance in the world, against the silence and the dark, which felt very much like oblivion. Now, as he looked across the room to the woman, the Lumpen realized that his wish could be coming true in a sense. The story came to mind of a farmer who called out to the fields for a mate and was answered by

a mud snail that transformed into the perfect bride. The Lumpen carried the woman over to the bedding. Are you my mud snail bride? said the Lumpen. He straightened her legs and spine, handling her like aluminum wire. Are you my perfect woman? said the Lumpen. Supine, her wasted body reminded him more than ever of death. Her eyes and mouth were open toward the ceiling. He covered her with the blanket and turned out the light. Lying beside her, he found her palm and met it with his own. The knobs of her wrist seemed to pop under that trifling pressure. He took his hand away. The quiet whistles from her breath were persisting when everything else was still. He tried to shift to his side for comfort but, brushing against parts of her, became afraid of her frailty and gave up. His left leg had started to cramp from holding the unsatisfactory pose, when the Lumpen heard a voice break through the sound of breaths. It emanated from behind the woman's nose—uneven, but undeniably a tune. A surprising dulcet sound through the dry rasps. She continued the humming for no more than a few moments. It was enough for the Lumpen to recognize the song from the documentaries on North Korea he had seen. The words came back to him as he sang:

My comrades, my brothers,
It's so good to finally see you.
Here is the laughter to go with our reunion,
Here are the tears to go with our embrace.

The woman had joined in with her humming on the last couple of lines. In an instant he felt warm to be with her. Tomorrow I'll begin the work of restoring her to health, thought the Lumpen. Gently he wrapped his hand around her wrist and, as if it had been a cradlesong, fell asleep.

In the morning he awoke to find the woman squatting in the corner. How did you get yourself back there? asked the Lumpen. There came no response. He was unnerved, but his resolve of the previous night had not dissipated. It was his first act of the day to approach her with a Choco Pie in his hand. He pressed it against her lower lip, bidding her to eat. When, as expected, she gave no response, the Lumpen broke the pie in half and inserted a piece into her mouth. He had meant to move her jaw to ease her swallowing, but the morsel disappeared into her like a coin into a slot. He peered inside her mouth; there was nothing beyond teeth and the tip of her tongue but perfect darkness. Whatever works, said the Lumpen. Sliding the other half into her, he felt that progress had been made. Several hours later, when he was eating his own lunch in front of the television, he spotted a small dark mass on the floor just

under her T-shirt hem. Gratified by the thought that her bowels had moved, he left his noodles and went to her. He only realized when he was very close that what he'd seen was not body waste, but two pristine halves of a Choco Pie. Like helium out of a burst balloon, hope left him. He returned to his noodles then, and never offered food to the woman again. At the end of the day he carried her to the bedding and tried to enact the scene of the previous night by singing. This time she did not hum along with him. In the morning once more he found her squatting in the corner. He never carried her to the bedding again.

He expected her to die by and by, but week after week she lived on. She seemed to grow more skeletal each day. It came to the point where the Lumpen suspected her skin of eating away at her bones, and then she worsened still. And yet she lived on, though her open eyes and constant breaths were the only signs of life. These signs were nevertheless enough to render all of the Lumpen's enjoyments insipid. As he ate or watched his television, he was alternately plagued by pangs of guilt and, because death was written so plainly on her body, reminders of his own mortality. When on occasion he left his hut to find an odd job for the day on farms or construction sites, his ears seemed to ring from the jarring absence of her breathing. At times he would momentarily forget about her during his work, and the sense of guilt returned double. He would come home and smile at her, as if to do penance and greet her as his snail bride. How is my snail bride doing, the Lumpen would say. Then he would fill with the horror of seeing how much she looked as if some unchangeable force were sucking her up from the inside.

It had gone on this way when one night the Lumpen saw the balloons coming again. In the morning he climbed the hill and gleaned the leaflets, a pitiful stack barely enough for a box of noodles, even with the grace of the officer. What ails you?—you look pale and sapped, said the officer. The Lumpen tried to dodge the question, but the officer insisted on an answer, bemoaning how the Lumpen looked like a different person from the happy man who visited only a month ago. The Lumpen told the officer the story of the woman, starting with the morning he found the leaflet pouch. When he finished, the officer took back the box of noodles and led him through the station to a narrow courtyard, where a tabby cat was napping. The officer scooped it up in one hand, and it gathered its face in a grimace. He said it was a stray cat that the officers let live at the station ever since a sentimental child had brought it in. He offered it to the Lumpen, unloading it into his arms. You need to purge your house of that thing. Those who are alive must live, those who are dead must die, said the officer.

The Lumpen hesitated at his door. At any point from the moment he found her until now, her death had been nothing less than expected, but she had been at the brink for so long that it seemed strange to him that she could finally go over the edge. Or that she could be pushed over that edge, amended the Lumpen. He stroked the tabby as it slept in his arms. The softness between its ears evoked in him something like pleasure. Pleasure—to have that again, thought the Lumpen. He pushed the door open as if pushing it over the edge.

It was over in a flash, as they say. The tabby, spotting the woman in the corner, leaped across and sunk its teeth into her neck. She did not flinch, and in the brief moment he could see in her neither fear nor acquiescence. Simply, her deathlike body started to contract and drain of its color. All the while there came no response from her face. It seemed her surface and her insides were shrinking at different speeds; her skin by turns hung loose and grew taut on the bones. Though no feeling could be discerned from her expression, the Lumpen had never seen her in as much motion. The tabby clenched tighter as her neck became a more manageable girth and seemed contented when she shriveled past the cat's own size. When the woman had become as small as an egg, her skin took on a coat of shabby gray fur and her limbs collapsed into her torso. The same groan the Lumpen had heard on the day he opened his door to her seeped from the bulge as if it were the last bit of superfluous mass. In the end what was left on top of the T-shirt she had worn was, beyond doubt, a mangled corpse of a mouse.

He could not go so far as to let the cat play with her remains. He buried them in what he considered relative solemnity by the doorstep, the fateful stage. The cat, he kept. It pleased him to observe it adopt more or less his own lifestyle. It ate what it found and let time pass in the sun. Some nights they both fell asleep with the Lumpen's fingers buried in its fur. It posed no challenge to his old routines and supplemented them with amusement.