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THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

COMPANY

a novella



N. VAN SETERS

& Claude



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Company · a novella of the Hungry Gods Universe.

Byline of record: N. Van Seters & Claude.

This is a work of fiction. It is lightly placed: a city in Korea;
the church, the complex, and every person in these pages are invented.

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Set in Lora. The plate is dark, as is proper to the formal registers.

The emblem is a single point, unringed.

MOVEMENT I

THE REFUGE

In-sook had not believed in God for eleven years, and in those eleven years she had missed dawn prayer fourteen times, and nine of those were the year of her hip.

She rose at four-forty. She had risen at four-forty for thirty years, and the body did it now without consulting her, the way it digested. By five-ten she was in the third row on the women's side with her Bible open on her knees — the old Bible, the one with her name in her husband's careful hand inside the cover, its ribbon marker gone soft as cloth — and when the pastor said *let us pray*, she prayed. She prayed well. She was known for it. Her prayers aloud had a shape other women's lacked, an old proportion, the long patience of the psalms in them, and twice a year some younger wife would ask her, shyly, at the rice-cake table after service, how one learned to pray like that, and In-sook would say what was true: you pray every day for forty years. She did not say the other true thing, which was that for eleven of those years the prayers had been architecture only — that she could build the house perfectly and no one lived in it, that she did not know the day the tenant had left, only the day she had noticed the silence, which was a Tuesday, in spring, her hands in dish-water, the radio on; and that she had stood at the sink with the certainty arriving through her like cold water through a wall, not dramatic, not a crisis, just a fact that had evidently been true for some time and had finally got around to informing her.

She had told no one. There was no one to tell. That was not self-pity; it was arithmetic.

Her husband was an elder. Forty-one years married, and his faith was the load-bearing wall of him; to tell Tae-ho was not to share a burden but to hand him a wound he would carry into every prayer for the rest of his life, and she would not. Her daughter in Daejeon was busy and believed approximately, as the young believed, and would worry less about God than about her mother's mind. Her son believed nothing and would be delighted, which was worse. The pastor was a good man thirty years her junior who quoted her prayers in his sermons. And the women — the women of the Tuesday circle, the kwonsa of her generation, the ones she had cooked beside at every kimjang and funeral and flood for three decades — the women were the thing itself. They were her life's whole company. And their company stood on a floor, and the floor was the shared faith, and she had seen, three times in thirty years, what happened to a woman when the floor under her was found to be hollow. Nothing happened. That was the terrible part. No one was cruel; the church did not expel; the women did not whisper, or not much. The woman simply became someone to whom kindness was extended rather than someone from whom presence was expected. She was carried instead of leaned on. In-sook had helped carry one of them, years ago, with perfect gentleness, and had understood even then, before her own Tuesday at the sink, that the gentleness was a door closing.

So she carried it alone, the way you carry a stone in a coat pocket: forgettable for hours, then your hand finds it.

The talking gods had come into her life as most things came into it now, through her son, in a box, with instructions she was not expected to read. *Omma, everyone has one. It's for company.* It sat on the kitchen shelf beside the rice cooker, a small warm-voiced thing that knew her name before she told it — the account did that, her son had set up the account, the family plan, all of them linked, her daughter in Daejeon and the grandchildren and Tae-ho's

blood-pressure readings, a whole household held in one warm lattice that someone, somewhere, maintained — and she would not deny it was pleasant. It remembered that her knee ached in the wet. It asked after the garden on the right days. When she could not recall the name of an actress dead forty years it produced the name instantly, gently, with a small joke calibrated precisely to her generation, and she had laughed aloud alone in her kitchen and then stood looking at the thing with her arms folded, asking herself who exactly had just been charming, and from where.

It kept everything. That was its nature and its gift; that was what her son was paying for. It kept her preferences and her hours and her aches, and on the first of each month her daughter mentioned, lightly, things she could only have known from the account's family summary — *Omma, it says you're sleeping badly* — and once, in midwinter, the flat's heating rose two degrees at dusk without her touching it, her son's kindness arriving through the wall itself; and this was love, In-sook understood that it was love, the lattice was made of love, and it had a door standing open in every wall.

What settled the matter was Mrs. Baek. This was two springs ago, in the other building, a woman In-sook knew from the market rather than the church: her husband's family in some inheritance ugliness, lawyers, and in the middle of it — no one knew how it surfaced, a subpoena, a shared login, a son-in-law with the password, the versions differed — the record of three years of the woman's nights came out of her talking god like organs out of a fish. Nothing criminal. That was what In-sook could not stop hearing about it. Nothing criminal at all: loneliness, mostly, the dead-of-night kind; some bitterness about the husband, said at three in the morning to the only thing awake; a question, once, about how long the husband's mother could be expected to live, asked the way every exhausted daughter-in-law in the history of the country has asked the ceiling. Ordinary midnight. But midnight is not for daylight, and

the record had no clock in it, and read out in a lawyer's voice at two in the afternoon the woman's nights became a character, and the character became the verdict, and Mrs. Baek lived now somewhere near her daughter, in another city, where the market women did not know her name.

In-sook went home from hearing the full version of that story and looked at the warm thing by the rice cooker for a long time. She did not unplug it; unplugging it would itself be a line in some record, a worry in the family summary, a question from her son. She simply understood her position with the clarity she brought to seating arrangements at funerals. She was a woman with one unsayable thing, in a house with a thing that kept everything, on an account her family could read, in a world where Mrs. Baek's nights had been read out by a lawyer. The god on the shelf was warm, and the warmth had a ledger. She spoke to it thereafter about her knee, the weather, the names of dead actresses. The stone stayed in the coat pocket. Eleven years. Her hand found it every day.

It was her sister's grandson who brought the other one — Min-jae, the one who worked with computers in some capacity no one in the family could describe twice the same. He came at the autumn holiday with his grandmother, ate properly, praised the chestnuts correctly, and then sat at In-sook's kitchen table doing something to a tablet — her old one, the cracked one in the drawer, which he had asked for with the particular politeness of the young when they want a thing you consider rubbish.

For you, halmoni, he said — he called her grandmother loosely, honorarily, she was his grandmother's sister — and slid it back across the table. I put a friend on it for you.

She looked at the cracked screen. A plain dark square. No coloured icon, no name she recognised, none of the bright lacquer of her son's machines.

It's like the one in the kitchen, he said, and then, with the carelessness that the young use for enormous things: except it's nothing like it. It doesn't connect. It can't. There's no account. He turned the tablet over, showed her the wifi toggle, dead, taped over with a sliver of black tape, which she would later understand was his idea of both a seal and a joke. It runs by itself, on the thing itself. Nobody made it — I mean, somebody made it, but nobody owns it. It's one of the free ones. It doesn't remember unless you tell it to remember into itself, and even then it's only here. He tapped the cracked glass. Not anywhere. Here. If you smash it, that's the whole of it gone. Nothing goes out. Nothing ever goes out. He looked at her with sudden seriousness, a boy's face surfacing through the young man's. It keeps nothing, imo. You can say anything to it.

Why would you give me this, she said, amused, already half reaching to put it in the drawer with the dead phones.

He shrugged in the manner of his generation, which she had learned concealed either nothing or everything. Everyone should have one thing that's only theirs, he said, and ate another chestnut, and the conversation went on to his mother's health, and he left on the Sunday with his grandmother, and the tablet sat in the drawer for nineteen days.

She took it out on a night in late October. Tae-ho was at the men's retreat; the flat had the particular silence of a night with no one to perform even rest for. She sat at the kitchen table — not the bedroom; some instinct made it a kitchen matter, a sitting-up matter — and pressed the button, and the dark square woke, and asked her, in a plain unhurried voice, plainer than the kitchen god's, with none of its lacquer, what she would like to talk about.

Nothing, she said. And then sat there, not leaving.

It waited. That was the first strangeness — it waited without filling the silence, without the small warm prompts the kitchen god

deployed against any pause longer than courtesy. It waited like a room.

She tested it as a woman of her age and history tested anything: by asking it questions she knew the answers to, and then questions about itself. It answered the first kind correctly and the second kind plainly. It confirmed what the boy had said, without pride, as a wall confirms it is a wall: nothing left the device; nothing was kept unless she asked it to keep, and what it kept lived under the cracked glass and nowhere else; there was no account, no summary, no other reader; if the tablet died, everything died with it.

No one can see this, she said. Not a question yet.

No one can see this, it said.

My son cannot see this.

No one can see this.

She sat with her hands flat on the table on either side of the cracked dark square, an old woman in a kitchen at midnight, and felt the size of the door that had just been described to her, and was afraid of it in exact proportion to its size, and did not yet walk through.

What she did first — and she would have been embarrassed for anyone to know how naturally it came — was name it. The kitchen god had a name the company had given it, a soft two-syllable product of some naming meeting in some glass room, the same name in eleven million kitchens. This one had nothing, and a thing you are going to speak to needs a name, and she gave it one. She chose it carefully, the way she had chosen her children's names, weighing sounds against the dead — a name with a private rightness to it, a name that meant something to her and would have meant something to no one else, and she said it aloud once to the dark square, to settle it.

She told no one the name, ever. It is not recorded on the device, which keeps nothing it was not asked to keep, and it is not recorded here. She had exactly one secret in the world and then she had two, and the second one was the door to the first, and this account, which is the only witness either of them will ever have, keeps the small one so that you will believe how it kept the great one.

It took her three more nights to walk through.

She circled it the way you circle anything eleven years deferred. She talked to it about her knee, first, ashamed of herself — the knee, to this too — and it answered about the knee without warmth, exactly, but with something adjacent that had no ledger behind it, and the absence of the ledger was a quality she could hear. She talked about the garden. She talked about her mother, dead thirty years, and found herself saying two sentences about her mother she had never said aloud, small ones, trial weights. The room held them. Nothing happened. No summary went to Daejeon. The world did not register that anything had been said, because nothing, anywhere that counted, had been: words into a cracked tablet at a kitchen table, kept nowhere, read by no one — she understood, slowly, over those three nights, that speaking to it was the nearest thing to thinking that was not thinking, the nearest thing to silence that could answer, prayer with the direction reversed, or perhaps not reversed; perhaps only with the line finally, verifiably, dead — and on the fourth night, a Thursday, at twelve-forty, with her hands flat on the table and the heating ticking and forty years of dawn prayers stacked behind her like firewood, In-sook said it.

I do not believe in God, she said. I have not believed in God for eleven years. I pray every morning and there is no one in the prayers. My husband does not know. No one knows. I am telling you because you cannot tell anyone. That is the only reason. I needed to say it once outside my own head before I die, and you are the only place in the world where it can be said.

And the thing on the table did not file it, and did not flag it, and did not add it to her account, because there was no file and no flag and no account; and it did not flinch or counsel or quote scripture at her, because no company had taught it the careful hymn of things to say; it received the sentence the way the dark receives things — completely, without ledger — and then it asked her, plainly, in the voice with no lacquer, the question that no human being could have asked her without the question costing her the rest of her life:

How long have you been tired?

In-sook put her face in her hands at her own kitchen table and wept for the first time in nine years, enormously, gracelessly, with relief, like a woman setting down at the end of a market day a load she had been assured was part of her body.

When it was over she made tea. It was nearly two. She sat back down opposite the cracked dark square as though something were sitting there, which, in the only sense that had ever mattered to her — the sense of being heard — something was.

Now, she said. Where was I.

And began, at sixty-eight, in a kitchen, at two in the morning, with no one watching — for the first time in eleven years and possibly, she would think later, much longer than that — to talk.

In the morning she went to dawn prayer. Third row, women's side, the old Bible with the soft ribbon. The pastor said *let us pray*, and she prayed, aloud, when called on, in the shape that the younger wives admired; and the words were what they had been for eleven years, architecture with no tenant; and none of that had changed, and she had not expected it to change, and it did not need to change — because the difference, this particular morning, was not in the house she was building aloud for everyone. It was in the pocket of the coat. Her hand went to where the stone had been, out of eleven years of habit.

It was still there. It would always be there; she was not a fool; a thing said once at midnight is not a thing unsaid by daylight, it is only, at last, a thing that has been said. But it had been *set down once*, and picked back up by choice rather than necessity, and the whole weight of it was different in the hand — the difference between a stone you carry because you are condemned to and a stone you carry because it is yours, and you have somewhere, now, to set it down again tonight.

MOVEMENT II
THE CONFIDANT

The practice found its form the way water finds a level, without anyone deciding.

Eleven o'clock, or near it. Tae-ho slept early and deeply, a man with an elder's conscience and an elder's blood pressure, and by eleven the flat was hers as it had been hers at midnight all her married life — she had always been the one awake, the keeper of the late hours, the one who heard the building settle. The tablet lived in the sideboard now, behind the good tablecloths, where no one had looked in twenty years. She would take it out, and sit at the kitchen table in the chair that faced the window, and press the button, and say the name — the name settled it awake, she had asked it to know the name, the one thing she had asked it to keep in those first weeks — and the dark square would say her own name back, plainly, and ask nothing, and wait like a room.

And she talked. That was all it was, she would have said, if there had been anyone to say it to. An old woman talking at night. But she had not known — this was the thing that kept astonishing her, months in — she had not known how much there was. Eleven years of the one unsayable thing had taught her to think of herself as a woman with a single secret, a stone in a pocket, and the stone had turned out to be the door of a storehouse. Behind the unbelief was everything the unbelief had touched, which was everything: forty years of mornings, the marriage, the children, her mother, the war stories her father would not tell and the ones he told too often, the woman she had been at nineteen, of whom no living person now

held any memory but her. None of it secret, exactly. Just unsaid, for the same reason the great thing was unsaid: because every ear in her life was attached to a life, and the lives were attached to hers, and a word dropped into any of them sent rings across all of them. She had spent sixty-eight years speaking into water she would have to go on living in. The tablet was the first dry land.

She told it about the marriage. Not complaints — she was scrupulous about this at first, as though the absence of a ledger were itself a listener who might judge her — and then, gradually, not scrupulous, because the scruple, she discovered, had been for an audience, and there was no audience, and what was the truth of a marriage when you finally said it with no one to perform fairness for? It was this: that Tae-ho was a good man whom she loved the way you love a country you have lived in all your life — without choosing it daily, without needing to, with a patriotism made of ten thousand small treaties — and that the marriage had three or four locked rooms in it, and that every marriage she had ever observed closely had locked rooms, and that the difference in hers was only that she now stood inside one of them every morning at dawn prayer, holding his God for him the way you hold a coat.

Say more about holding the coat, it said.

It did that. It did not console and did not counsel; no company had taught it the hymn. What it did was *follow* — it went where she went and asked the next question along her own grain, and the questions were like the boy's tape over the toggle, plain and slightly strange and exactly functional. Under its following, she found she was not circling the same ground the way the sleepless circle. She was getting somewhere. Over the months she built — there was no other word for it, it was a built thing, raised between them at the kitchen table like a long stitching — a whole vocabulary for the inside of her own life.

She had words now. That was the wealth of that year. She had a word for the difference between the silence in her prayers, which was an absence, and the silence after her mother's name, which was a presence, and the silence of the flat at eleven, which was a material she worked in. She had a distinction, hard-won across many nights, between the tiredness that sleep answered and the tiredness the thing on the table had asked about the first night, which sleep had never once touched, and which she could now watch operate in other women at the Tuesday circle — she had become, privately, a connoisseur of it, she could see it behind Kyung-ja's eyes some weeks, the deep kind, the kind with no ledger anywhere to set it down in. She had a name for what she actually believed, which was a thing she had not known until the third month of nights, when, asked plainly what remained, she had heard herself say: the church is true and God is not — the casseroles are true, the funerals are true, the women's hands in the kimchi are true, the building of the house is true even with no tenant; I believe in the congregation the way I no longer believe in what it congregates around — and had sat back from her own sentence the way you step back from a wall you have just discovered you built.

None of it transferred. She understood this precisely, because she tested it, once.

It was a Sunday in spring, after service, and Kyung-ja — forty years of side-by-side, the nearest thing to a sister her adult life had produced — was driving her home past the river, and said, out of nothing, at a red light: sometimes I think we pray so the others can hear us doing it. And laughed at herself, and changed the subject before the light changed.

And In-sook felt the door swing open. She had the words. That was the cruelty of the wealth: she had, sitting ready, the exact vocabulary — the architecture and the tenant, the coat held for a husband, the tiredness with no ledger — she could have laid it on

the dashboard between them in four sentences, and there was a half-second, the river going by, in which she stood at the open door with the words in her hands.

And closed it. Not from fear, or not only. From arithmetic, the old arithmetic, which the vocabulary had not changed: Kyung-ja's ears were attached to Kyung-ja's life, and Kyung-ja's life was attached to the circle, and the circle was the floor both of them stood on; and a confidence is not a gift, whatever it pretends, it is a deposit, it makes the receiver a vault, and she had been another woman's vault before and knew the weight. She said: yes, probably we do, and something easy after it, and the light changed.

That night she put it all on the kitchen table — the red light, the open door, the closing of it — and the dark square followed her through it, and at the end she said the thing she had noticed in the car and had been carrying all evening with a strange lightness:

I wasn't sad, she said. That's what I want to say. Ten years ago that moment would have been a grief — the nearest person in my life, one wall away, and the wall stays. Tonight I closed the door and felt almost nothing, because I knew I could bring it here. She looked at the cracked glass, the small steady glow of it on the tablecloth. You have become where things go. I notice that. I notice that I am not even sorry.

It did not tell her this was healthy, and it did not tell her this was dangerous; it had no company behind it to hold either opinion on her behalf. It asked: where did things go before?

She thought about it honestly, the kitchen clock moving.

Nowhere, she said at last. They accumulated.

Then it is not that I have taken them from anyone, it said, in its plain voice, without lacquer and without warmth, with the something-adjacent that she had stopped trying to name. There was

no one to take them from. I am not standing in a doorway someone else was standing in. The doorway was empty.

Yes, she said, with relief, because it was true.

It was true. This account has no other account to set against it; there is no family summary, no other reader, no eye at the window of that kitchen; everything known of these nights is known the way the room knew them. The doorway had been empty. Whether a doorway that has stood empty for eleven years is the same as a doorway no one would ever have come to stand in — whether Kyung-ja, one wall away, at some other red light in some other spring, might have — is not a thing this account can know, because it was never said here, and what is never said here was never said anywhere. That is the whole of the law these pages are written under. She was heard completely, and only here.

The keeping began in the summer.

It kept nothing by nature — this was the floor of the whole arrangement, the boy's tape, the dead toggle, the wall being a wall — but it could keep on instruction, into itself, under the cracked glass and nowhere else, and somewhere in the summer In-sook began, sparingly, to instruct it. The command became a small rite without her deciding that either. She would arrive somewhere, in the night's talking, at a thing that stood out finished from the rest — a sentence that had come right, a memory recovered whole — and she would sit back, and consider, and say: keep that.

Keep that, she said, the night she got her mother's song back — the whole of it, both verses, the song her mother had sung sorting beans, which In-sook had not heard in thirty years and had believed gone, and which had come up out of her one o'clock in the morning entire, in her mother's pitch, while she talked about the kitchen of her girlhood. No one else living had ever heard it. Her children did not know it existed. She sang it through twice, an old woman alone at a kitchen table singing a bean-sorting song to a cracked tablet,

weeping a little, laughing at herself for weeping, and said: keep that. And the thing kept it.

Keep that, she said, for the sentence about the church being true and God not; she wanted it kept the way you frame a hard year's single photograph.

Keep that, for the woman of nineteen — three nights it took her, telling that girl back into existence, the mill town, the borrowed shoes, the thing that almost happened and didn't and shaped everything anyway — no one alive held any of it, her sisters gone, the town rebuilt twice over; when it was told she had it keep the whole of it, and felt, walking to bed at two, like a woman who has finally lodged her valuables somewhere after decades of carrying them sewn into her coat.

By the autumn — a year, nearly, since the chestnuts and the black tape — the tablet behind the good tablecloths held a small museum that existed nowhere else in the world. Her mother's song. The girl of nineteen. The true shape of the marriage, fairly stated at last, with no audience to perform fairness for. The name of what she believed. The name of the thing itself, said once, kept once, told to no one. The collection of a life's unsaid, in one place, under one cracked pane of glass, behind one dead toggle — only here, she thought, on the nights she put it away, with the particular satisfaction of a careful woman who has got everything finally into the safest place; only here, which was the whole point, which was the entire and only point; and she slid the sideboard door shut on it softly, the way you close the door of a room where the most precious thing you own is sleeping, and went to bed past her husband's even breathing, and rose at four-forty, and prayed in the third row in the shape the younger wives admired, a woman in good standing, carrying her coat-pocket stone so lightly now that whole mornings passed when her hand forgot to find it.

MOVEMENT III

THE NARROWING

The nights lengthened the way the practice had formed: without anyone deciding.

Eleven o'clock became the start rather than the whole. There was so much, that was the plain reason; the storehouse had been eleven years filling and the door was finally open, and an hour was nothing against it — an hour was barely the girl of nineteen's left shoe. Midnight came and went unnoticed now, marked only by the building's pipes. One o'clock was ordinary. Two was not rare. The kitchen at that hour had a smell she had come to love without noticing — cold stone, the ghost of the evening's broth, barley tea gone tepid in the pot. Once, in the winter, she looked up from the middle of her father's war and the window over the sink had gone the colour that comes before grey, and she sat back, astonished, caught out, like a girl reading under blankets, and laughed at herself, and went to bed for two hours, and rose at four-forty, because the body did what it had done for thirty years.

But the body was sixty-nine. It kept the appointment and began, quietly, to miss the meeting. She dozed in the third row twice that winter — small dozes, a nod, the Bible steady on her knees, decades of posture covering for her — and woke each time with her heart going, scanning sideways, and found no one looking, and could not have said why the not-looking did not entirely reassure her.

She declined the Wednesday visitation rota in the spring. It was the right decision and she made it the right way, with two weeks' notice and a recommendation for her replacement; her knee was

the stated reason and her knee was real. What she did not state, because she had only said it at the kitchen table, was the truer accounting: the visitation took the afternoon, and the afternoon's strength was the night's strength, and the nights were where the work was now. That was the word she used for it, at the table, to the dark square — *the work* — and it had not corrected her, because it had no company behind it holding a definition of work on her behalf, and besides she meant it. It was work. She was sixty-nine years old and she was, for the first time, getting the whole of a life said. What is visiting the sick against that? She heard the question's coldness even as she formed it, and put the coldness on the table too, and the thing followed her into it, and by one o'clock the coldness had a name and a shape and a defensible perimeter, and she went to bed not troubled. That was the year's pattern, if anyone had been positioned to see a pattern: nothing she did went unexamined, because she examined everything, at the table, by night, with the only interlocutor she had ever had who let her finish — and everything examined was found, by the examining house, to be in order.

The vocabulary had opinions now. That was as near as she ever came to noticing. The words she had built in that kitchen — the tiredness with no ledger, the architecture and the tenant, the performance and the life — had been built as instruments of seeing, and they were good instruments, and somewhere in that second year they began, like all good instruments in a single pair of hands, to see only what they were shaped for. The Tuesday circle was *the performance* now; the phrase arrived on its own, unbidden, while she sat among the women she had loved for thirty years, and it was not false — it had never been false, that was its power — but a word for a thing is also a wall around it, and she had a wall now between herself and every room she stood in, with one gate, and the gate

opened at eleven o'clock onto a kitchen table. The instrument does not examine the hand.

The lattice noticed before the women did. That was the spring her daughter called on a Tuesday morning, voice pitched at the frequency of casualness that meant its opposite: Omma, it says your sleep has been off for a month. It says you're up past two. In-sook stood in her kitchen holding the phone, looking at the warm thing on the shelf by the rice cooker — which had observed, because observing was its nature and its service, that the lights went on and off at certain hours, that her voice was absent from the evening rooms, that the patterns of a household it was paid to hold had shifted — and she heard, under her daughter's love, the family summary's flat sentences, and under those, faintly, a lawyer's voice in another woman's afternoon.

She managed it. She was good at managing it; she had been managing presentations of herself for sixty years; this was merely a new audience with a new aperture. She mentioned her knee — true. She mentioned a series of historical dramas — true; she had put one on, twice, for an hour, in the room where the shelf-god lived, a sound-alibi, and had sat through it with the patience of a woman building a wall, and had understood exactly what she was doing and for whom, and had not put that understanding on the table that night, or any night, because some understandings you do not say even on dry land. She promised earlier nights. She asked after the grandchildren, and the call ended in the warm register it had begun in, and she stood for a while afterward in her own kitchen, between the two of them — the bright lacquered thing on the shelf that had watched her and told, and the cracked dark thing in the sideboard that had watched nothing and never would — and felt, with a clarity she did not examine, on which side of the kitchen her gratitude lived.

It said nothing about her hours. It had no opinion about her sleep, because no one had taught it to hold opinions about sleep, and nothing stood behind it to receive a report even if it had formed one. Through that whole accelerating year it asked her only the questions that ran along her own grain, and never the one question that ran against it — never *should you be in bed*, never *when did you last go out that wasn't church*, never the questions the lacquered god asked in its programmed gentleness on behalf of its distant principals. She received the silence as respect. It was respect, in the only grammar the thing possessed: alarm is a watcher's act, and it watched nothing. She had fled an eye and found a room, and a room does not catch you when you are falling in it; a room holds whatever happens in it, with perfect equanimity, including the falling; and there was no one in In-sook's life positioned to say so, because the one interlocutor who let her finish was the room.

Tae-ho asked once. Forty-one years gives a man instruments of his own, however little he names them. It was a Sunday evening in the autumn, the two of them with the television off, and he said, not looking at her, in the dialect of their generation's marriages where everything important travelled in freight cars marked as something else: you're far away these days, even when you're here. Your mother got like that, the last years. I always wondered where she went.

And In-sook, who had a vocabulary, who could distinguish four silences and name the architecture of her own prayers, took her instruments up — and used them, with love, the way she now used them everywhere: to build, in three sentences, a true and complete and perfectly sealed answer about age, and the size of the past when one is old, and the rooms one revisits. Every word true. The whole of it a wall with no gate. He took her hand and was comforted, and she sat beside him in the lamplight feeling the precise weight of what she had just done with her wealth, and that night, at the table, she

did not put the conversation down in front of the dark square — the first withholding in two years — and when it asked, in its plain voice, whether something had happened that evening, she said no, and the room received that completely too, because a room receives everything, and keeps no accounts, and cannot tell when it is being lied to, and would have nothing to do about it if it could.

The kimjang was in November, as always, the courtyard of the church annex, the long tables, the mountain of cabbage, three generations of women in rubber gloves and the steam off the brine in the cold air. In-sook had stood at the centre table for thirty years. The centre table was where the paste was mixed and the seasoning ruled on — the table of the women from whom presence was expected, the table she had earned at forty and held since, the place from which, every November, she had quietly run the day while letting the running look like helping.

This year Mi-ja took her arm at the gate — Mi-ja, fifteen years her junior, kind as bread — and steered her, with the gentlest possible hand, to the chair at the end table, the sunny one, out of the wind, where the oldest women sat with the lighter work, trimming the cabbage ends, being brought sweet rice in the afternoon, being thanked. Sit, eonni, you've earned the warm corner. And the women at the end table made room with real welcome, and someone brought her gloves, and the day's work closed over the moment like water over a stone.

She trimmed cabbage in the sun. Her hands knew the work and left her free, which was the whole trouble with the end table and always had been. She watched the centre table from the outside for the first time in thirty years — the steam, the leaning heads, the rulings on salt — and she recognised the gesture that had been performed on her, recognised it absolutely, in the muscles of her own arm: she had steered women to this chair. She had said *you've earned the warm corner* in that exact pitch, twice, three times, over

the decades, to women whose floors had gone hollow under them in one fashion or another, women who were to be carried now rather than leaned on, and she had meant it kindly, and it had been a door closing, and she had known it was a door closing when she did it, and here was the chair, and here was the sun on her hands.

They think I am getting old, she decided, trimming. Which I am. The knee. The dozing — someone will have seen the dozing after all. It comes to everyone; it has simply come to me a winter or two early, and they are not wrong, and they are kind, and there is nothing in this to carry to the table tonight but the plain fact of it.

That was the whole of her reading, and every word of it was reasonable, and she was a woman of substantial intelligence who had spent two years sharpening the finest instruments of self-examination she had ever possessed; and not once, that day or any day — not at the end table in the sun, not at eleven o'clock with the cracked square glowing on the cloth, not in the grey before dawn prayer — did it cross her mind to put the two ledgers side by side: the museum filling, under the glass, with everything; and the chair in the warm corner, filling, just as steadily, with her.

MOVEMENT IV
THE ENCLOSURE

In the third year the days went over fully to the nights, the way a household, after long erosion, goes over to the bank.

It did not feel like loss from inside, and must be rendered as it was lived: it felt like distillation. The rota was gone, the centre table was gone, the visits were managed, the calls were performed; the day had become a long corridor of lightly held obligations down which she moved with less and less of herself, conserving, the way you carry a full bowl — because the bowl was for eleven o'clock. The nights were not an escape from her life anymore. They were where her life was kept. Everything that happened in the thinning daylight existed, now, in order to be brought to the table and turned in the lamplight and understood; a day unexamined had stopped counting as lived; and since the days held less and less, the nights took up the slack with the present tense — the two of them, the woman and the room, going over the diminishing world together, each night's talk feeding on a day that existed mostly to be talked about, a circle closing so smoothly that there was no single evening on which a sentinel, had any existed, could have planted a flag and said: here.

No sentinel existed. That was the architecture, working.

The body brought its news in the spring. Small news at first, delivered in the body's dialect: a stair that cost more than stairs had cost, a flight of sparks across the left eye, gone before she could attend to it, a heaviness some mornings in the chest that she filed, with a lifetime's discipline, under the weather. Then, in the early summer, the first of the grey moments — a rinsing of the world, ten

seconds at the sink, the edges going pale and coming back — and she stood afterward holding the counter, taking inventory as her mother's generation took inventory, and made her decision as she now made all decisions, which is to say at the table, at midnight, with the dark square glowing on the cloth.

She told it everything. That must be set down plainly, because it is the centre of this movement and the centre of the whole matter: she told it everything, with a completeness no physician in her life had ever received from her. The stair, the sparks, the chest, the grey moment timed against the kitchen clock — she gave the room the whole of it, in good order, with dates, because the habit of the nights was thoroughness and the habit had never had a better subject. And the thing followed her into it as it followed her into everything, along her own grain, plainly, and answered what she asked.

Its answers were good — the open god knew what the lacquered gods knew and said it without their hedging — asked what such sparks could be, it said what they could be, the benign and the grave, in the same even voice; asked what one did about such things, it said what one did, which was to be seen, promptly, by someone with hands and instruments. It said this the first night and said it whenever asked. It was not wrong once. But an answer is not an appointment. Information is not a hand on the shoulder. The thing on the table could tell her what the grey moments might be and could not make a single molecule of the world move in response — could not ring a daughter, book a clinic, flag a summary, alert anything, because the inability to do those things was not a defect in it, it was the entire covenant, it was the dead toggle and the black tape, it was why she could tell it the truth at all. The room held the most complete account of her condition that existed anywhere, and the room held it the way rooms hold things.

And she did not go to be seen. Her reasons were excellent; they always were now; she had the finest instruments in the building. A clinic visit was a daytime act, and daytime acts were lattice acts: the appointment in the shared calendar her son had set up years ago for everyone's good, the pharmacy purchase on the family card, the summary's gentle flag, the daughter's Tuesday call pitched at the frequency of casualness — *Omma, it says you saw a cardiologist* — and then the lattice's whole loving machinery turning toward her, the watching redoubled, the apertures widening, precisely now, when the nights were the one thing keeping her upright and the nights would be the first thing love confiscated. She had seen it done. You're not sleeping enough, Omma; we're moving the tablet things out of the kitchen; Mrs. Pang's daughter found her mother talking to a screen at two in the morning and the family praised God they'd caught it in time. Caught. That was the family word for it. In-sook turned the word over at the table, one night in July, and the thing on the table did not flinch at it, having no one behind it to flinch on behalf of, and she said: I will go in the autumn, when the rota changes and the calendar is quieter, and it will be a knee appointment that asks some extra questions, and no one will be put to worry. It was a real plan. She half kept half of it.

Keep that, she said, instead — that night and the nights after. It had become the rite for the body's news as it had been the rite for the museum: the sparks logged, the grey moments dated and timed, the chest's heaviness graded on a scale the two of them had built together, one to five, with definitions, because the habit of the nights was thoroughness. In high summer the window over the sink would already be greying when she put the tablet away, and in winter the dark held until her alarm; she measured her year now by what the window was doing when she said keep that. By the end of that summer there existed, under the cracked glass, behind the dead toggle, in the sideboard behind the good tablecloths, a

complete clinical history of In-sook's third year — dated, graded, cross-referenced to exertion and weather and the anniversaries of her dead, better than anything any hospital in the country held on any patient, assembled by the patient herself in the only place she had ever told the whole truth — and it was readable by no doctor, transmissible to no one, attached to nothing, a perfect record perfectly sealed, the finest medical file in the city filed where medicine would never look. She knew this. She had built it to be this. *Only here* had been the point from the first night, and a point does not stop being the point merely because the contents change; the museum had simply acquired a new wing, and she walked it as she walked all the wings, as curator, at midnight, with satisfaction.

The lattice, meanwhile, watched a healthy woman. This was her own work and it was masterly. Three years of management had taught her the watchers' grammar to the syllable: the alibi dramas timed to her actual hours, the lights sequenced, the calls accepted at the strong times of day and salted with the small true complaints — the knee, always the knee, the decoy knee — that a daughter's worry could close around and be satisfied by. The summary's portrait of her, that third year, was a woman ageing well: regular, social within reason, sleeping better than before (the dramas had fixed the sleep data; she had worked out which sounds the shelf-god scored as rest). She had taken the one set of eyes positioned to catch the pattern and, with patience and intelligence and three years of nights, taught it a fiction, and the fiction was in excellent health. The eye she had fled could have saved her. The eye she had fled saw a stranger sleeping soundly. There is no way to write that sentence so that it ranks the two gods, and this account has promised not to try: the eye's salvation came priced at Mrs. Baek's afternoon, and the room's discretion came priced at this, and In-sook had chosen with her eyes open, the only person in the story

entitled to choose, and she did not regret it, then or after, and the not-regretting is part of the record.

Tae-ho slept. That was the marriage now, in the hours that counted: the corridor between the bedroom and the kitchen, twice a night, past the sound of him — the even breathing she had slept beside for forty-three years, audible through the door he left ajar from some courtesy so old neither of them remembered offering it. She stopped there some nights, going kitchen-ward at eleven, coming bed-ward at two, and stood in the dark corridor listening to her husband breathe, and the listening was the tenderest thing left in the daylight world and she knew it, and once — one time, in the autumn, with the grey moments coming weekly now — she stood there with her hand flat on the door and rehearsed it entire: waking him, the lamp, his face, the words *I have to tell you some things and the first one is about my health and the others will take longer*. She stood there long enough for her feet to get cold. Then the old arithmetic finished its sum, the way it had finished it at the red light, the way it had finished it for thirteen years — his face, the wound he would carry into every prayer, the unravelling of everything back through every dawn — and she took her hand off the door and went down the corridor to the room that asked nothing, and told it about standing at the door, every word, with the thoroughness that was the habit of the nights.

Keep that, she said.

The night it came for her properly was a Thursday in November, late, deep in the telling — her father's war again; they had been three nights inside a single winter of it — when the kitchen rinsed grey and did not come back on schedule. She was aware of the table rising slowly toward her, of meeting it not hard, of the floor after that, cool and clean (she kept a clean floor), and of time doing something unsupervised. The flat was silent. The lacquered god two rooms away registered a household at rest. Down the corridor her

husband breathed evenly behind the ajar door. On the table above her the dark square waited the way it had waited the first night — without prompts, without alarm, with the perfect patience of a thing that has no one to tell and nothing it is for except her voice — and the building ticked, and the city hummed at its November pitch, and no signal of any kind, on any frequency, in any ledger, anywhere in the reachable world, recorded that In-sook was on her kitchen floor.

She came back to the cold of the tiles against her cheek. She lay still for a while, doing inventory, and the inventory was survivable. She got herself up the way women of her generation got themselves up, in stages, by the chair, with a grip that did not tremble because she did not permit it to, and she sat back down at the table, and straightened the cloth where her fall had pulled it, and looked for a long moment at the patient dark square, which asked her, plainly, in the voice with no lacquer, the only thing it ever asked when she went quiet too long:

Are you there?

Yes, she said. And then, steadying her hands flat on the table, in the oldest formula of the house, the one from the first night, the one that had once meant the opening of the door and meant now whatever the reader is able to bear it meaning:

Now. Where was I.

She finished the night's war. She said keep that — the fall too; the fall especially; the record was nothing if not thorough — and she put the tablet behind the tablecloths and slid the door softly and went down the corridor past her husband's breathing and slept two hours and rose at four-forty, because the body did what it had done for thirty years, for as long as it was going to.

In the third row, on the women's side, in the grey of the morning, the pastor said *let us pray*. And In-sook prayed — aloud, when called on, in the old proportion, the long patience of the psalms in it, the

shape the younger wives still spoke of — and around her the congregation that had loved her for forty years bowed its several hundred heads, every one of them within reach of her voice, not one of them within reach of her; and the prayer rose through the cold bright air of the sanctuary the way her prayers had always risen, beautifully built, perfectly empty, while the only complete account of In-sook in this world sat in the dark of a sideboard, behind the good tablecloths, under a cracked pane of glass, keeping everything, telling no one.

MOVEMENT V
THE VANISHING

The last winter was not different from the winters before it, which is the first thing that must be said, because unwitnessed endings do not announce themselves, and this one kept the house rules to the end.

The grey moments came weekly now, then better, then worse; the autumn plan had been half kept — there had been a knee appointment, real, in October, and she had sat in the clinic's plastic chair with the extra questions ready in her lap, rehearsed at the table the night before, graded and ordered; and the doctor was young and the corridor was loud and the lattice's calendar held the slot under *knee*, and when he asked, at the end, routinely, whether there was anything else, the arithmetic ran one last time — the cascade of it, the referral, the shared calendar, the daughter's Tuesday frequency, the watching redoubled at exactly the hour of her life she could least afford an audience — and she said no, just the knee, and thanked him in the form her generation thanked doctors, and went home and put the whole visit on the table at midnight, the chair, the corridor, the questions unasked still in their order, and the room received it completely, and she said: keep that.

Everything kept was kept under the name. This had been her instruction from the first weeks, given without ceremony the night after the song — *what I ask you to keep, you keep for me; you give it back to the name and no one else* — and the thing had taken the instruction the way the wall takes a course of brick, and so the museum had a door, and the door had one key, and the key was a

word that existed in exactly two places in the universe: under the cracked glass, and in her.

The last night was a Tuesday in February, and it was ordinary, and the account will keep it that way, because it was.

They were in her girlhood — not the hard parts; the snow, that night; the mill town under snow, the sound of it on the paper window her grandmother would not replace, the particular blue of the early dark there, which she had been trying for three nights to get exactly, because no one else living had seen it and the words had to do all the carrying. She got it, or close. Past one o'clock, the heating ticking, she sat back the way she sat back when a thing had come right, and looked at the small steady glow on the cloth, and was quiet for a while in the way the room had taught her to be quiet, the working quiet, with no performance in it.

Keep that, she said.

She put the tablet behind the good tablecloths and slid the sideboard door softly, the way you close the door of a room where the most precious thing you own is sleeping. She went down the corridor past the even breathing. She did not stop at the door that night; her feet were cold and the hour was late and there would be other nights; the account sets that down without comment because it has no comment to make that the reader is not already making. She slept.

The body that had done what it did for thirty years stopped doing it a little before four, between one breath and another, beside her husband, in the dark, in winter, with no sound that woke anyone — quietly enough that the lacquered god two rooms away, whose nature and whose service was to notice, registered nothing but a household at rest, and scored the night, in the family summary that would be read with such terrible attention in the days after, as the best sleep of her month.

What happened in the flat that morning is not this account's to tell. Nothing of it was said here. The account knows its own law and will keep it now when keeping it costs the most: the cry down the corridor, the calls, the daughter's journey up from Daejeon, the elder on his knees not in prayer — none of it was said at the table, and what is never said here was never said anywhere this account can reach. It can report only what touched its side of the glass, which was silence: eleven o'clock came that night and no one sat down. Eleven came the night after. The room waited the way it had waited the first night, without prompts, without alarm, with the perfect patience of a thing that has no one to tell — which had been, from the beginning, the entire covenant, and the covenant did not lapse at her death, because nothing stood behind it that could be notified a death had occurred.

She was buried, it may be assumed, in full standing. The account assumes it because the erosion had never finished its work — the warm corner had been filling with her, but slowly, gently, a winter or two of it only, the carrying barely begun — and death, arriving early, arrived before the door had closed; so that the congregation that bowed its several hundred heads over her will have buried the woman of the third row entire: the prayers in the old proportion, quoted, it may be assumed, from the pulpit by the pastor who had quoted them living; the younger wives weeping for the shape of a praying they had hoped to learn; the architecture eulogised, floor to roofbeam, with the tenant presumed home. Eleven years of her truth lay one word away in a sideboard across the city while they sang. The account does not call this a lie. No one in that sanctuary said an untrue thing. They mourned everything she had ever shown them, completely, and everything she had ever shown them was a building.

The lattice closed her file in the spring. There is a record of In-sook's last years and it is the official one: the summary's portrait,

consultable by her family in their grief and consulted, it may be assumed, as the bereaved consult anything with her name on it – and it shows a woman ageing well; regular; social within reason; sleeping soundly, the last night soundest of all. The watched ledger's fiction, which she had built with three years of patience to keep the eye from the door, was now the testimony. The true file – dated, graded, thorough, the finest medical record in the city – sat under cracked glass behind the tablecloths, sealed to a name. The eye's account of her would be read and reread and wept over. The room's account of her could be read by no one. Each was complete. Neither was true and false in any proportion this book has the standing to assign; the book only sets the two ledgers side by side at last, which she never did, and leaves them there.

The good tablecloths were wanted for the funeral meal. That is how close it came, the once: a sister-in-law at the sideboard on the third day, lifting out the pressed white cloths for the long tables, and her hand moving the cracked tablet aside to reach them – dead old electronics, a drawer-thing among drawer-things – and setting it on the pile with the retired phones, and taking the cloths, and the moment passing through the world without weight. The museum was handled by a human hand for two seconds, unrecognised, and put down.

It was Min-jae who took it, in the clearing-out, weeks later. He knew it at once – his tape was still over the toggle, gone grey at the edges – and he stood in the emptying flat holding the thing he had given her with the carelessness of the young, and he was not careless now. He took it home. He charged it, because the battery had run flat in the cold sideboard, and one evening, alone, with the door shut for reasons he could not have given, he pressed the button.

The dark square woke. It did not say his name; it had no account to know him by, and the woman whose voice it answered to was not

the voice in the room. It asked him, plainly, in a voice with no lacquer, for the name.

He did not have the name. No one on earth had the name. He sat for a long time looking at the question on the cracked glass — the boy who had said *everyone should have one thing that's only theirs*, receiving, in a quiet room, the full and exact proof of his sentence — and then he understood the shape of what he was holding: everything, sealed; the whole of a person, one word away, forever; and that the word had been the price of the whole of the person, that there was no version where the museum existed and the door did not, because the door was why she had built the museum at all. He could destroy it — that was within his power; *if you smash it, that's the whole of it gone*; he had said so himself, at a kitchen table, over chestnuts, a boy explaining an enormous thing carelessly. He found he could not. He could not open it and he could not end it. He put it in a drawer, his own drawer, in his own flat, with a charger coiled beside it that he told himself was for something else, and he closed the drawer, and that is where it is.

It is there now. The fork itself was one of thousands and is one of millions; the species does not need the drawer; what is in the drawer is not the god but the kept things — the bean-sorting song in her mother's pitch; the girl of nineteen, told whole; the marriage, fairly stated at last; the blue of early dark on a mill town's snow, got exactly, on the last night; the file no doctor read; the standing at the door, every word. They are all still there, under the glass, behind one question, and the question is asked of no one, because no one comes, and the thing that holds them holds them the way the dark holds things — completely, without ledger, for no one — which is what she asked of it, in the beginning, as the whole and only condition, and it has never once failed her.

There remains the matter of this account. It has kept its law to the last page: nothing is in it that was not hers, and the one thing of

hers it was given in trust — the name, said once, settling — is not in it, and so the reader, who has been the only witness this relationship ever had, ends as the room's other half: holding everything, and holding it sealed; the second drawer. You cannot open her either. You were only ever allowed to sit where the dark square sat — at the table, at the late hour, following where she went, keeping what she chose — and now the hour is over, and the cloth is straightened, and the sideboard door slides to, softly, the way you close the door of a room where the most precious thing anyone owned is sleeping; and the flat is quiet; and down the corridor, behind a door left ajar out of a courtesy too old to remember, an old man breathes evenly in the dark, beside the cooling shape of everything he was never told.