

Their Last Visitor

Writer in
Focus:

by Kim Young-ha
Translated by Dafna Zur

“Don’t you think I should prepare *some* kind of dinner?”
Yöngsön called out from the kitchen, peeling off her pink rubber gloves. Between there and the living room was a walnut-colored table that barely seated two. Chöngsu was bent over his work, his back to her.

“Don’t bother. He won’t be staying long.”

Chöngsu wiped the back of his gloved hand across his sweaty forehead. Yöngsön dried the kitchen counter with a dishcloth. She looked over the sink out the window. Stray cats sometimes prowled along the windowsill and stared into their basement apartment. Yöngsön liked to toss them scraps of leftover fish. For some reason, though, their visits had become less frequent.

Chöngsu rinsed his narrow paintbrush in a bowl of water. Yöngsön picked up the container, emptied it into the toilet, and refilled it with fresh water. “Of all days, why the hell does he have to come *today*? And at this hour?”

The television in the living room showed masses of curious spectators swarming toward Chongno to watch the ceremonial striking of the bell in the Poshin Pavilion that rings in the New Year.

“He’s probably just curious.”

“A pair of night owls, the two of you. This year’s going to be the Year of the Monkey, isn’t it?”

Yöngsön brought Chöngsu the container of water and rested her

hand lightly on his shoulder. Chöngsu was mixing colors, trying to come up with the blend he was looking for.

“You were born in the Year of the Monkey, weren’t you?” she said.
“Mm-hmm.”

Yöngsön was twenty-four. She had majored in sculpture at a prestigious art school, then married Chöngsu, a graduate of the same school, before the ink was dry on her diploma. It happened so quickly that most of their friends thought the wedding invitations were a practical joke. She was already working as a graphic designer at an Internet firm, and a friend had gotten Chöngsu a job as a set designer for a movie producer. Yöngsön’s small-scale start-up company kept her busy, but Chöngsu was even busier. He usually worked through the night. Movies were always produced on a tight schedule. Chöngsu basically lived with his tool belt on. He’d pound away for days constructing an elaborate set only to bash it to pieces within hours. That was life: good work went completely unnoticed while carelessness was criticized ruthlessly. He had to put up with a lot of crap. Yöngsön tended to think her husband’s talents were going to waste, but she kept her opinion to herself.

And then, a week earlier, Chöngsu had brought home some materials from the art supply store.

“What’s all this?” she had asked.

“They need a corpse. The director told me it was time for me to live up to my reputation.”

The company had started production on a movie about a serial killer. The screenplay called for five bodies, four of which would be actors in makeup. The remaining corpse was the responsibility of Chöngsu’s unit. They were to fix up a mannequin so it looked real. Chöngsu slaved away. He mustered his five years of art school and the skills he’d picked up on the job, and put together a dead high school girl who looked so real it was creepy. Yöngsön, of course, helped when she could. The high school uniform hugging the mannequin was her own. Yöngsön and Chöngsu still felt like newlyweds, and Yöngsön was grateful for the time they spent

together the way they used to when they were students. Even if it was time spent over the mannequin of a dead girl.

“When’s the director coming?”

“He just called—he’ll be here any minute.”

“Is he coming alone?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t he married?”

“He used to be. His wife took off for New Zealand a few months ago along with their teenage daughter.”

Yöngsön was watching her husband’s hands. His brush was tracing a thick scarlet stream from the girl’s mouth down to her neck. He was alert—this part of her face would require the most delicate touch. There would surely be close-ups in the movie. Under the bright living room lights, the black lines along the throat—marks of decomposition—looked truly putrid. Yöngsön chuckled—if a thief were to break in and trip over the mannequin, he’d have a heart attack.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. It looks almost done!”

“Look, I know this hasn’t been easy for you. If it’s okay with the director, how about we take a few days off starting tomorrow? Check out the hot springs?”

“Hot springs? That’s for old people.”

“C’mon. For the New Year.”

Yöngsön looked at the clock hanging on the wall. It was almost eleven. Chöngsu examined his mannequin.

“Could you fix her right leg? It’s way too straight. She’s supposed to have twisted her ankle trying to escape the killer.”

Yöngsön bent over the mannequin and gave it a twist. It didn’t bend as much as she expected. She grabbed the ankle and yanked. With a *crack* it twisted. She felt awful doing it. And then the doorbell rang. Chöngsu paused and Yöngsön went to the front door. She opened it and found herself face-to-face with a man in glasses. She recognized him from the tabloids.

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“Please come in. It’s getting cold, isn’t it?”

“I brought a little something for the two of you.” The director held up the typical housewarming gift of laundry detergent.

“Really, you shouldn’t have . . .”

“I couldn’t very well show up at the newlyweds’ nest empty-handed, could I?”

Yöngsön set the gift down beside the table. Without bothering to take off his coat, the director went straight to where Chöngsu was working. They exchanged nods and he proceeded to examine the body as if he were a detective.

“So this is it?”

“Yes.”

Yöngsön caught a glimpse of Chöngsu, who suddenly blushed like a child who’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. It was the same expression he wore every time he completed a piece that was to go on display. She was used to that expression. But the director clearly didn’t appreciate the emotions involved.

“Not bad.” The director smacked his lips.

Yöngsön peeked at her husband to see if the timing was right, and turned to the director.

“Would you care for a cup of coffee?”

“That would be nice.”

Yöngsön led him to the small table where she and her husband shared breakfast each morning. The dead body continued to draw the director’s gaze. Finally he removed his parka and sat. Chöngsu joined him across the table.

“Unbelievable. Another year gone,” the director commented, looking at the calendar hanging on the wall.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Chöngsu stood and tore the December page off of the calendar. The wall behind it was left blank. But it was a brighter blank, shielded from months of dust.

“It looks like it wasn’t easy.”

“It was nothing.”

“It must be your first corpse.”

Chöngsu scratched his head. “Yes, it is. It was harder than I expected.”

“I’m sure it was.”

“And I’ve heard it’s your first thriller.”

Instead of answering, the director straightened his suit and rubbed his face. He looked exhausted. Yöngsön took the pot from the coffeemaker and poured a cup for the director and her husband. The director added a sugar cube and stirred. Yöngsön stood uncomfortably for a moment, then perched on a stool between the two men.

“So . . . when’s the release?” she asked awkwardly, reaching for the sugar bowl. The director’s open stare was making her feel uncomfortable.

“We have to finish filming first.” The director shrugged, bringing the coffee mug to his lips and sipping. Yöngsön immediately understood the kind of man he was: the kind who always put on an air of bravado and mystery because he thought it was “cool.” She considered his divorce. There was probably another woman . . . She tried momentarily, without success, to come up with a convincing scenario. In the meantime, the director’s eyes had returned to the mannequin lying on the living room floor. Chöngsu and Yöngsön followed his gaze, all three staring down at the bleeding girl in her high school uniform.

“It’s pretty much done . . . when would you like to pick it up?” Yöngsön asked.

The director turned to her; he took his time answering.

“Can’t she stay here for a few days?”

“Excuse me?”

“We don’t have anywhere to put her. And we won’t shoot her scene for a few days. The office is so small . . .”

Yöngsön felt herself frown. The problem wasn’t just that they had a body on their hands, a body bleeding from the mouth. Rather, her husband would fuss over it as long as it stayed there—he wouldn’t rest. But what choice did they have? No room, he’d said.

The director emptied his cup and got up. He threw one last glance at the dead girl lying on her side, went to the front door, and picked up his shoes. He looked around briefly for a shoehorn, then wedged the shoes on unaided.

“Leaving so soon?” Yöngsön asked.

“Yes, Happy New Year. You too, Chöngsu.”

Yöngsön opened the door for him. “Goodbye.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

They heard him walk up the steps to the street, slowly and deliberately. They locked the door behind him gently, so as not to make a sound. Back in the living room they stood over the mannequin. Yöngsön stared at her high school uniform clinging to the doll’s body. Chöngsu returned to water down the hardening paint, preparing to get back to work.

“Oh, shit! Did you see her eyes open just now?!” Chöngsu pointed at the corpse’s face. He was always playing tricks on Yöngsön, but this time the corpse’s glassy stare gave her a real fright and she shuddered.

“Cut it out, will you? You’re scaring me!” She scowled at him, lightly slapping his arm. Then they heard a mournful yowl. A white-striped stray was lurking on their windowsill. She walked toward the cat, looking it in the eye. She’d never seen this one before. She reached out and slammed the window shut with such force she thought the glass might shatter. At the same moment they heard the TV announcer start the countdown to the New Year.

Dong . . . dong . . . dong . . . Thirty-three dull, weighty rings ushered in the New Year. Hundreds of thousands of people were shouting. Fireworks exploded into the city sky. Only then did Chöngsu turn to the television. His face was blank, expressionless. Yöngsön picked up the remote from the floor and turned the television off. And with that a sticky silence blanketed the newlyweds’ apartment. A new year had begun.