

Caged Wings

The first time Mrs. Park saw the boy, she thought he was wearing the sun. Each day, he darted past her apartment window like a swift breeze, his yellow cap bobbing up and down with every step. The cap caught the sunlight, gleaming as if it were a tiny sun of its own—bright and vibrant, always in motion. His footsteps, a steady *tap-tap-tap*, would clatter in adherence to the same rhythmic staccato pattern.

She observed every detail, her attention unwavering as a cat's focus locks onto its prey: his stretched body and his short trembling legs as he tried to reach the first step of the school bus. His small frame still hadn't quite grown into the ease of movement that would come with a few more years.

Before the boy, the only source of distraction from Mrs. Park's solitude was the phone. Although it rarely rang, she would wait for days until the loud cacophony filled her desolate apartment. Often it was a confused caller who had dialed the wrong number, or an insurance salesman, but sometimes, it was her son—Siwoo, her boy, who no longer visited nor called for long. Regardless, a giddy warmth would expand through her chest; however, Siwoo's voice, distant and clipped, would quickly snuff her flickering jubilation. "I'm busy. I'll call you later," he'd say, the words hitting her like a gust of cold air, and then a *click*. The line went dead. The silence afterward always felt louder, a gnawing, hollow ache that settled deep within her. She would stare at the phone for minutes after, her hand trembling as she gently placed it back on the receiver. Her hand would linger, the ache spreading from her chest to her fingertips. The phone became heavier each time.

To console herself, every night, Mrs. Park would rattle a few sleeping pills from her medicine cabinet into her hand, and allow her eyelids to flutter shut. Her dreams were almost always the same: she would call out to her son. Her wavering voice would echo: *Siwoo, come back inside, dinner's ready*. Mrs. Park always remembered Siwoo when he was most beautiful: a little boy, only five years old.

But, even with the aid of sleeping pills, her fervid dreams could never sustain her for more than a few hours: a jabbing pain in her back, or her spasming leg would cruelly thrust her into reality. Her eyes would open only to take in the same patterned walls she had finally left: frozen, unchanging, painted fixtures of her life that refused to crash down to let vibrant life in. Day after day, the same stillness pressed in on her, as if the air itself refused to move.

Regardless, her ears perked every time at the distant whirring of tires rolling down the narrow street or the soft *scritch scritch* of hurried footsteps. Maybe it was Siwoo. She only wanted to envelop her son in her embrace, feel the touch of another living, breathing being. But no, it was never him.

Thus, Mrs. Park retreated into her cramped room, sinking further into stale torpidity every time she dared to leave. It was so much easier to simply observe the world beyond her window as it thrummed with life: laughter, voices, the sound of children running. All muffled, all out of reach.

For now, fleeting glimpses of the boy were enough to fill the void Siwoo left behind. His small feet would scurry to catch the bus. *Shff, shff*. And then, he'd disappear.

One morning, after a thick snowfall, Mrs. Park sat by the frost-crusted window, savoring the tangy fragrance of Siwoo's favorite yuja tea. As always, the boy came along, but she noticed his movements, unlike before, were strangely staggered, each step drawn out like a tenuto. Mrs. Park then saw the object of his focus: a milk bottle in his hands. His lips puckered in concentration, his brows furrowed as he struggled to pierce the straw through the tinfoil seal.

Then, he stopped. His eyes flicked up and met hers. Mrs. Park froze, the steam from her tea curling between them. For a moment, they simply looked at each other.

Then, the boy smiled—a broad, bright smile, luminescent and beaming.

Her heart stuttered. An opportunity. She knew she couldn't let this moment slip away.

With a slow, deliberate breath, she rose, her leg protesting with each step as she made her way to the door. She opened it just as the boy lifted the bottle again, still wrestling with the stubborn straw, the yellow cap perched on top of his head.

"Halmeoni! Can you open this for me?" The boy's voice was sweet, innocent.

Mrs. Park's lips curved into a small smile, her mind buzzing. "Of course, dear," she murmured, taking the bottle from his small hands. Her fingers trembled slightly, though not from age. She pierced the seal with one sharp thrust, a little too forceful.

The milk splattered across his blue shirt, as planned.

"Omona!" she gasped, her voice laced with mock horror, a strange exhilaration filling her within. She ushered him inside, with the tenderness of a mother hen clucking soft reassurances. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Once inside, she guided him to the kitchen with an insistence that was too gentle to resist.

Then, she rummaged through an old box of Siwoo's clothes, shirts from when he was just the boy's size. She pulled one out, running her fingers over the fabric, remembering how Siwoo used to wear it.

Her fists clenched, balling up the fabric. This time, she wouldn't let go.

When she returned, the boy had settled into a chair. "Here, change into this," she said, handing him the shirt. As he slipped it on, she glanced at the stove, where the pot of yuja tea still steamed gently. Her eyes flicked to the small drawer beside the counter where her pills were kept.

"Let me make you some more tea, dear." she whispered.

Carefully, Mrs. Park crushed a few pills into an empty cup, doing her best to hide the slight tremor in her hands. The boy must not be frightened; the boy must not know. "Halmeoni is going to put a special ingredient in your tea to warm you up," she murmured, her voice just low enough so that the boy couldn't hear.

She filled the cup with yuja tea up to the brim, stirring carefully so the sweet tanginess would mask the bitterness of the pills. When she handed the cup to the boy, her eyes never left his face, watching as he lifted it to his lips.

The warmth of the tea seemed to ease him, but Mrs. Park's gaze remained cold, focused. A minute passed, and the boy began to yawn, his eyes fluttering shut. Regardless, Mrs. Park continued her careful watch until the boy slumped to the floor, his breathing slowed and steady.

Gently, Mrs. Park knelt beside him. His yellow cap lay discarded, its brightness strangely muted. Her gaze swept over him, her fingers brushing his hair back from his forehead, savoring the moment.

"You're mine now," she whispered, her voice low and possessive. The hollow ache she had carried for so long began to fill. This boy would not say goodbye, nor would he run away.

Her palm gently caressed the boy's rosy cheek, his eyelashes fluttering ever so slightly. She remembered how she would tease Siwoo: *what a darling, you're so adorable, I could eat you up.*

Mrs. Park ceased her stroking, and she remained immobile for a few seconds. *You're so adorable, I could eat you up.*

Here was a way to keep this boy forever—what she had never thought of doing to Siwoo. A way to ensure he would never flee from her embrace.

Mrs. Park's hands steadily inched towards the boy's plump neck, his pulse reverberating through her own flesh. Her heartbeat issued a rapid *ra-ta-ta*, a thrumming in her ears, and she felt as though she might faint, but she refused to waver.

She doesn't know how she had the strength to do it—after all, she is weak, fragile with the sickness of isolation. But, somehow, her loosened palms closed around the boy's neck and clamped together.

The boy's breathing hitched, his lungs unconsciously gulping for air. His tiny feet bounced as they used to on the pavement for his kindergarten walks, this time kicking against the air—fighting against the throes of a terrible death.

Then, with a final, muted choke, the boy became still. His chest no longer rose and fell.

Humming gently, Mrs. Park rose from her knees, a soft smile resplendent against her lips. She knows she must hurry: the boy's flesh must not grow cold. He must be warm, the blood still trickling in its healthy youthfulness.

Mrs. Park turns the dials of the oven—*click, clack*. Although Siwoo wasn't here for this dinner, and perhaps never would, it didn't matter—after this meal, she would never be alone again.

They would live together, the boy's essence infused with her every pore. Morsel by morsel, she would consume him.

Mother and son, forever and ever.