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| Thieves Like Us | A Man,         | 2021 |
| —               | His Truck,     | 09   |
| Documents       | His Fruit      | 17   |
|                 | and            |      |
|                 | His Thoughts   |      |
|                 | —              |      |
|                 | The Tree Thief |      |

I had heard that some of these pine trees, especially those at these large residential houses in Yeonhuidong were quite expensive. Sometimes up to 300,000,000KRW. Easy. Just for a small tree that could fit in the back of a truck. And I had heard there was a huge market for these trees. They were for one, beautiful. Added a whole lot to any house in terms of atmosphere, charm and social status. And it also took years for such a tree to come to existence. To find its shape. Its beauty. Years upon years upon years. It was a long term business. Extremely long term and one where the years created the price. Years and perhaps the luck of the draw with nature.

His name was Jinsang. Jinsang Won. He worked in Yeonhuidong. Not by choice. Because his job just happened to be there. Yeonhuidong was an affluent neighborhood in Seoul. Home to two ex-presidents, it was a beautiful neighborhood with small, quaint streets. Large residential houses. Nice cars. But none of this was part of his life. This kind of life was far removed from his own. He was a man who sold fruit. He did not live here. He sold fruit here. He sold fruit from his truck. He actually lived quite far up north near a creek called Sung Choo. On a traffic free day about a 45 minute drive up north. He came to Yeonhuidong daily to sell fruit. This was his job. He made a fairly decent living. Nobody would know, but the fruit business was not too shabby. Everybody loved fruit. And everybody knew him. He was parked in the same location everyday. And he knew fruit. Knew it very well. Most of the time if you ask a supermarket employee, what is the best, or most tasty fruit of the moment, you will get a reply that is somewhat suspicious. Somewhat vague. The reason for this is that most of the time, these employees do not know. They do not know what is the best watermelon in this batch of watermelon. They do not know when these particular grapes are best to eat. For the most part, they are guessing. But he knew. He knew it all. And all the locals, knew he knew it too. And they would come, buy his fruit. Everyday.

He knew his fruit. He knew his vegetables. He knew plant life. This was his thing. He knew he was not good at many things in life. But this was the one thing that he knew. He never finished college. Went for a short time, to a no name college in north Gyeongsang province. But didn't finish. He was one of those unlucky souls that God had designated to only have one gift. For him it was the gift of plant

life. Knowing plant life. But this gift meant, he was absolutely terrible in every other category. A one dimensional man living in a multi-dimensional world. In this test taking, test based world of competition in South Korea, this meant he failed everywhere. Kind of like being born with an F.

But he was okay with his life. This gift had given him eyes. Eyes to see the green world around him. To know the value of certain plants. To know their meaning. And he saw this everyday. He saw it in the world around him. Plants were most definitely his thing. And he was constantly observing this world of plants around him. It was a world that for the most part, most human beings ignore or remain unaware of. But he could see it all. He could recognize species upon species. Sub-species. Families. Regions, origins. Conditions for growth. Conditions for blooming. This was his thing. And he was good at it.

Some days, on his way to work, he would sometimes do long, winding drives through Yeonhuidong. Come to work early. You find empty streets. And my, how the empty streets of Yeonhuidong were so beautiful. At six am. The crack of light. Beauty in silence. Absolute beauty in silence. And on these winding drives he would often do something his father had taught him as a youth. Tree watching. Tree observation. He was absolutely in love with trees, their aesthetics, their history, their symbolic meaning. So if there were an order of love in his life, it might go fruit, plants and then trees, with trees being what he loved most. They just made him happy. And on these early morning drives, he would just cruise the streets and check out the trees. For Yeonhuidong had some of the most beautiful trees in Seoul. And they would poke out of their gated homes. Sometimes poke above these gates. Enough for any passerby to catch a glimpse. Catch a glimpse and gain happiness. For he was always happy to see these trees. See their growth. See their changes. All of this joy on his daily route to eventually sell fruit from his parking spot in this neighborhood.

There was one particular tree he would sometimes make an extra effort to pass by in the mornings. It was a little out of the way. Halfway up the hill to Gungdongdan (the local mountain in Yeonhuidong), he would have to do a slightly roundabout drive to go past it. But it was always worth it. It was a pearl. The Arc de Triomphe. The Hagia Sophia. Majestic. Awesome. Enough to make him sigh as he passed by. That beautiful. It was. And he would intentionally drive by

this tree, two to three times a week. It was that beautiful.

He knew not who the owner was. Other than that the owner must have been very rich. And that the owner must know trees. For this was placed right over the fence and in a location that had to be just as much for bragging as it was for this owner's own viewing. It was as if he put it out there so he could say, 'Come you sad fools, come look at this piece of beauty. Come look at it. Surely, you can see its beauty. Surely, you can see its magnificence.' A way to make Yeonhuidong beautiful. But also a way to talk down to Yeonhuidong. 'This is yours but it is not yours either. It is mine.'

Some strange things happen when you see something repetitively over time. And they can get slightly stranger when you see something so beautiful, time and time again. Repetition. Repetition can sometimes enhance beauty. If you see something so beautiful, over and over again, sometimes that beauty can grow. It just becomes more beautiful. And this is perhaps illustrative of love and obsessions. Or how love can become obsession. To deliberately drive out of your way to see a tree two to three times a week. These are the seeds, the sprouts that eventually become obsession. He was obsessed. He knew every detail of this tree. The branch number. The position of the branches. Its trim and maintenance cycle. It's ever so slight seasonal changes. He knew it all. He knew every detail. And it just was so captivating. On every drive by, on every visit. He knew it all.

Obsession has multiple relationships with logic. But for the most part, it is not a tandem, or together type of relationship. They are at odds with each other. Obsessions sometimes speaks down to logic. Looks down upon logic. Ignores logic. For logic can never understand obsession. Logic sees no benefit in following the ways of obsession. And equally, obsession tends not to hear those wise words from logic. Why listen to this old man? This old man with nothing but critical thoughts, critical words? And when this happens, once obsession has completely shut down logic, well, this is when humans become humans. This tree was so beautiful, he would find himself some days muttering the craziest things. Things he even thought to be crazy himself. It first started as an inadvertent whisper. He would sometimes think to himself or mutter or whisper to himself, 'one day, you and I will be together.' Crazy. What? And he was even surprised that this had come out of his mouth. But again, obsession shuts down logic. Stops listening to logic.

Obsession speaks from the stomach. When obsession says it is hungry, it is hungry. As simple as that. There is no over thinking with obsession. There is no calculation. No strategy. Obsession says what it wants.

And this first whisper, this first muttering of sparse thoughts was crazy at first. But similarly, with repetition, it began to just become a part of him. An everyday part of his life. Like his daily commute. Like everytime he passed by this tree, this thought began to grow in him. Almost like a tree itself growing, roots poking downward into the soil that was his mind. The soil that was his brain. These roots began to take hold. 'One day, you and I will be together.' Madness. Nonsense. No? This thought had began to sink its roots deep. The soft tissue of his brain, fertile soil for such thoughts. Somehow now, a permanent resident in his mind. For as he drove by two to three times a week, it had slowly become the thought he thought every time. 'One day, you and I will be together.'

And this thought began to grow. Began to lead to other thoughts. With roots in place, thoughts, grew upon thoughts, upon thoughts yet again. As obsession somehow can do, he began to think wonderful wondrous things. His mind would wander. He began to imagine, perhaps 'rescuing' this tree. 'Rescuing' this beauty from its captor. Taking it, freeing it. It was just too beautiful to sit there captive. It needed to be free. Let the tree run, run away. Run away with him. This was what had to happen. For this tree should not live such an existence. There had to be a better life. 'One day, you and I will be together.'

He began to imagine all the possible ways he might rescue this tree. All the details that would help this tree escape. Every possible thing that could make a better life possible:

- The time it would take to uproot it. (Approximately four hours.)
- The team he would need, for he could not do it alone. (Five people would be enough he thought. Two to watch both angles of the street. One to handle the CC TVs, alarm system and also open the front door. Two to dig up the actual tree and uproot it. )
- The machinery he would need to borrow. (Human hands alone could not do it in the time span allowed. He would need some kind of small pickaxe, or digging machine. To dig around the roots enough to pull it.)
- The perfect time of day to do this. (This owner at work weekly from 8am to 5pm. Like clockwork.)

- The getaway machine he would need to actually hold the weight of the tree. (His fruit truck, sans fruit would be enough to do the job.)

- The place it would now reside post Yeonhuidong. (It would have to be a place he could admire it more frequently, and on a daily basis. The back forest near his home in Song Chu might be perfect. Perfect to hide such a beauty.)

- His alibi. (Not a strong alibi, but he could say he had gone to meet a new vendor down south. But damn, his truck not selling fruit that day, could be suspicious. Needs a bit more work, but it could work.)

This was it. A simple formula. A simple recipe for happiness. Almost full-proof he thought. It was the perfect plan. And he was ready. Mentally ready. Physically ready. Ready to do what was right. Ready to do what was needed. But then logic, this dear friend logic, would snap back at him. Almost yell at him. Remind him that he was absolutely crazy. That it was insane to think of such things. A 300,000,000KRW tree. One does not just take such things. And such things, never go missing lightly. Wake yourself from this madness.

And then back again. Back again. He would hear that voice. Who would know? Who would ever know? If the plan was executed to perfection, nobody would know. He was adamant. He knew it. He could feel it. He could feel it in his bones.

Feel it in his bones? Wait, what?

He had to admit, obsession was powerful. So good. So good at doing what it does. It was impeccable at clouding the brain. Creating a wondrous kind of haze. Where all decision making capacity would be questionable. And right at that moment when he would know quite clearly he was crazy. He was saying and thinking crazy things. He would feel it again in his bones.

'One day, you and I will be together.'

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D / P  
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