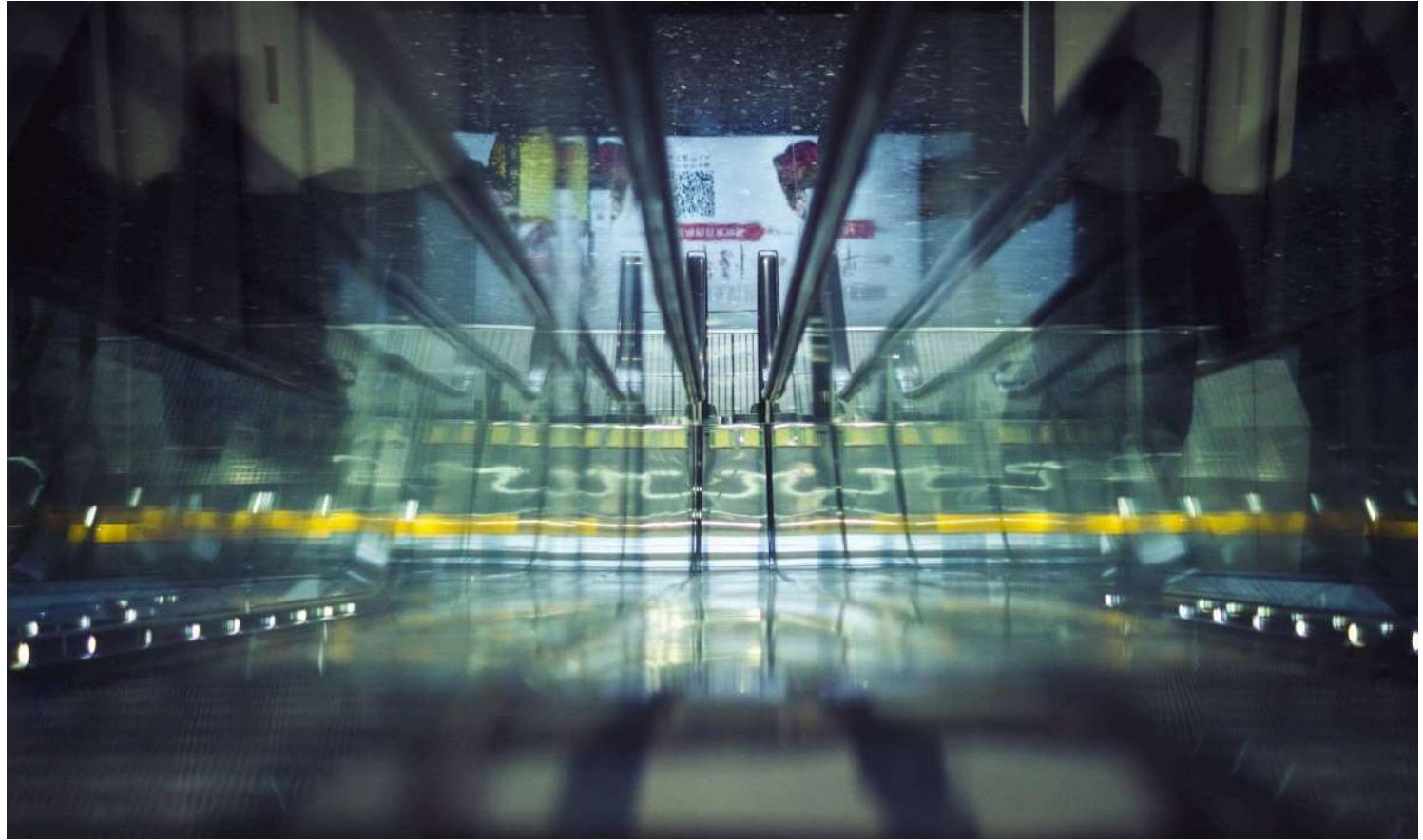


"Mirrorism" – Gu Byeongmo



BY NABILLERA [나빌레라]

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Mirrorism

by Gu Byeongmo
Translated by Beth Hong

Hold on, where is this? I was sure just a moment before, no—not just before. Nothing is certain or determinable at this moment. The last thing I remember is all broken up into pieces like the hand of an excavated skeleton. I'm not even sure whether it was from a few moments ago, or something I saw in a dream a few days ago. I don't know whether the pain of my organs being ripped out is from the incident or something I dreamt of in the distant past, and those people...

The gown, then white, now stained with filth and grime, the tired faces beyond the lenses of my glasses. Their outlines waver so that I wonder whether it's real or a hallucination. "Somebody, anybody over there. What day is it today, what time?" It doesn't come out and only I can hear my voice asking questions. No one looks here. How far away are they? I hear crying and wheels turning and the loud incessant sounds of electronic devices all around. My words feel like grape juice squeezed from a press. "Excuse me. Who is that?" And then suddenly, ah wait, what about the company? What should I do? The fact that I remember that I am a company employee means that I am alive and conscious. Looking sideways above my head, I see an intravenous drip. If I look at where the transparent plastic tube is going...

My right wrist is heavy and my fingers don't move. I know that the bandage is wrapped around them. The first IV needle was definitely in the back of my left hand. The fact that the needle is in a different place means that I had changed hospitals once, or that two or three days have passed—no, can it only have been two or three days? How can I be sure that it hasn't been a few years or a few months since then? Or who knows when it happened or if it happened? In the empty spots where parts of my consciousness fall out, short scenes come together in a roughly chronological order.

"You have a fever and rashes. What did you have for dinner?" someone, probably a nurse, asks.

"At a work dinner, some sashimi pieces, and a few drinks in a row. I'm not even a baby, so at this hour to be in the ER like this..." I say.

"No, it's good that you came here so fast. Many think that swollen hives on their faces and arms aren't so serious. They think that they'll go away if you scratch them hard, but no way. There are many who come here too late after they can't even breathe with their throats swollen shut," the nurse says.

Since it's urgent, I am getting an injection and a few simple checkups. There's an IV bag above my head, and I feel the sharpness of the needle in the back of my left hand. "You're getting some fluids because your fever is making you weak," the nurse says. "Also, a fever painkiller and antibiotics. Just rest comfortably."

What would be better than a smartphone to kill the hour and a half it takes for the IV to finish? There's a text from my girlfriend saying that she'll visit after finishing overtime. My bag hangs open, stuffed with a heap of documents to review. I text a reply with one hand. "There's no need to come, this IV will finish before your overtime." A nurse comes in pushing a cart. She connects another needle to a yellow rubber cap at the end of the IV tube, and I feel a cold carbonated liquid entering my blood vessels.

"That's the antibiotics," she says. "It can make you slightly nauseous. Then there's the fever painkiller, which makes the body warm and sweaty all over." Thirty minutes pass. I feel the edge of a dark green sleep. Then there's a different nurse holding a stainless steel container. When I look to see, she puts new needles in the vial and flicks at the back of the needle. And medicine drips from the syringe.

Every day, the emergency room is in pandemonium. Across from me is a man screaming, his leg crushed by car wheels. Behind me are the cries of a baby whose fingers were caught in a house door. It's hard not to lose your senses, but if the nurse messes up the order of the medicine... "Excuse me, what is this? You already put in the antibiotics and painkillers. It's not 'buy one get one free,' so why would you put it double? What if something goes terribly wrong?" I say to the nurse.

I'm only half serious in telling her off, but I'm trying not to throw up. The nurse frowns and asks, "Someone already put the needle in? This medicine was prescribed just now, so I don't know what's going on. Just wait a moment, please. I will check your records on the computer." Now I look more closely. Isn't this the short-haired nurse who checked my vital signs before the doctor did a medical examination? But right here, there are more than a few nurses with short hair, and they are all wearing the same color of cardigans. It's hard to tell them apart. Where on earth is the one who put in the needle earlier, I wonder. It'll be clear if this nurse asks her....

Wait, did that other nurse's cardigan have a name tag on it like the one in front of me now? The other nurse's cardigan also seemed to be in a different hue than the one before. I work with different colors and forms for a living, so it is absurd that I would be unable to tell the colors apart simply due to exposure to pain and bright lights. Was that woman really a nurse? The moment my overactive imagination merges with my conscious mind, I feel nauseous like my insides are towels getting wrung out, and I feel a sharp ringing on both sides of my head. I raise my upper body and sit, not knowing whether the warm liquid coming out of my nostrils is snot or blood. This can't possibly be cerebral fluid. The spot or the swelling—the early effects of the medicine—is already gone, but I'm itchier than before. It doesn't make a difference where I scratch. I'd rather have a skin rash than this because my fingernails cannot scrape away my intestines, organs, bones, and blood cells.

I'm itchy all over. I want to scratch away every last piece, even if it means exposing the insides of my body. I take off the bandage wrapped around my wrist and throw the needle away. The IV stand falls over, and the hospital staff rushes to grab both my arms and force me to lie down. Without being aware, I hit a resident doctor in the chest with my flailing arms and legs, making him fall over. I tear at the burning heat I can feel on my scalp with both hands, but it's a sensation like a ghost coming in and out of my body. I feel blood rushing to my eyes. Even without looking in the mirror, I know that veins in each eye are leaving red traces on the sclera as they pop. If someone taps the back of my head at this moment, my eyes will pop out of my eyelids. Bile rises in my throat, and then my face freezes in convulsions.

"You woke up after 72 hours." When I awake, the doctor next to me says that this is the intensive care unit of the same hospital. And that I was forced to be sedated for the safety of the medical staff. At some point, my heart stopped, so after reviving me with electric shocks, they put me on a respirator. When my condition stabilized, they took it off. Since then, I have woken up and fallen back asleep, and it is only now that I had finally regained consciousness. The doctor says that he couldn't find the last calls I had made on my phone because it broke during the scuffle earlier. Thankfully, though, he was able to look up my health insurance profile and contact my employer.

From the collage of randomly stitched memories, what the doctor told me seemed more or less true. However, the doctor looks hesitant. I ask about what happened to my body, and how I had gotten multiple doses of the same medication. Actually, I didn't get multiple doses to be precise because I raised a question early enough, but what was the problem among the three rounds of medication? The first round was hypodermic needles, the second IV drips, and the third antibiotics and painkillers. I had never had any negative side effects because of medication, but I had almost died from a serious allergic reaction this time. Was it a medical accident? Were my organs, including my kidneys, still functioning in the right place?

In a worst case, I have to check some facts to prepare for possible charges. However, as I open my mouth and barely push out my first words, my whole body stiffens with fright. Is this my voice? Is there a problem with my throat glands? At the sound of my voice, a medical team gather around me with

expressions of curiosity mixed with a hint of sympathy. Two nurses, each holding her mouth shut with both hands and frowning, cannot hide their pitying expressions. What's happened to my body? At that moment, the man who is turned into a cockroach in Kafka's story comes to mind, but when I check my right hand where the IV is connected, I see that I am at least a human being. All these people don't need to look down on me as if I am a louse. I am a human being. The urge to vomit and chills are gone, but another sensation fills up my body—a tearing in my veins and a sharp pain in my muscles. And this must be caused by all of their staring eyes.

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I arrive at work for the first time in two weeks. I manage to arrive out of sight from the reporters who had not yet given up waiting outside my studio. The incident was only... No, not "only." The incident has turned upside down all my attitudes and beliefs I'd had throughout my life. Still, I cannot give up my career. Even in light of my deplorable and irreversible situation, I can't put a stop the project that I had been working on. The hospital said that I should rest for at least half a year until I fully recover, but that's a load of rubbish.

In this country, only civil servants or those at the very top of the corporate hierarchy can rest for half a year and still come back to their jobs. My coworkers already heard the news, so when they come into the office, they flinch at first then greet me with awkward smiles. Those who actually looked into the details of the incident realized that there was no way I could go back to being the way I was, and that they'd better get used to the situation as soon as possible. However, it was clear that Mr. Kim from the other team only knew what had happened and its result and did not feel the necessity to figure out what led up to the incident or its context. I became sure of this when he said, "Ah, I heard you had some unfortunate mishaps?" as he passed by, patting my shoulders.

"What are you going to do with your condition like this? It is quite awkward for all of us working together," Mr. Kim says. "Is there no other solution? It can't be fixed with medicine or surgery?"

One of my team members replies back, faking a smile: "Our manager has come back to work too soon, when he's not completely recovered. For now, we're going to take care of his duties as much as possible to get back to business as usual, haha."

Despite his words, Mr. Kim can't hide his delight, which he tries to cover up with false concern. "Gosh, you didn't even take a moment to get some fresh air and rest before coming back in." I knew that if I had actually taken a long break, I would have come back to find that he had cleared my desk away altogether. If my team member had not intervened, Mr. Kim would have continued asking questions like, "Did you make any enemies who hold a grudge against you? Do you have any ideas?"

They would have been questions that were more malicious than concerned. He wants to believe that I had made enemies here and there with others. In any case, two weeks of absence is not a short time, so my team had taken care of most of the work, and I could just put the final OK on it. However, the sketch drawn by my team was quite different from what the client had wanted. This probably happened because I, the person who was supposed to lead the project, was unavailable. I'm grateful for their efforts, but it seems like it's back to the drawing board. If I put off seeing my girlfriend and pull all-nighters for three nights straight, I could barely get the presentation ready by the deadline. I feel sorry for breaking off our meeting so many times, but she understands and rather regrets not being with me when I got hurt. Moreover, she may even be relieved that we can't meet since the amount of overtime work she has to do at her job is second to none.

As she is so busy at work that she doesn't have time for anything else, even if she mentally prepares herself, it would not be easy to face her significant other whose appearance has changed so drastically. I didn't want her to hear my changed voice, so we've just been texting each other. Although she has been barely keeping afloat at her own workplace, she has stayed loyal to me and asked questions about things that even I, as the victim, didn't know. Questions were usually about things like whether they caught the fake nurse on a surveillance camera or found other clues and how the hospital would take responsibility for not properly monitoring who had come in and out. Yet, she has avoided asking whether I can't really think of any culprits.

She added that she would relay any updates from the crime reporters assigned to covering news at the police station, but that's just a courtesy. She takes care of recipes and home decoration tips at the monthly magazine for housewives—It would be hard for her to get in touch with people outside her department. I'm grateful for her willingness to help, but I don't know how to respond, so I just send "thank you" and "laughing" emoticons.

Among her barrage of questions, the only clear answer is that while the hospital does feel some responsibility for the accident, it is not willing to provide any compensation. Usually, in the ER, the hospital staff take care of high priority cases, and guardians are allowed in and out to watch over other patients. Unless there is a particularly visible or unruly outsider, it is difficult to track all of the people who come in and out.

Even so, to let someone disguised in a costume similar to their nurse's uniform sneak in and harm a patient and then let them get away is a huge loss of face for a big hospital. I don't want people to just look at the fake nurse and scratch their heads, asking who she was. Shouldn't they have called on this imposter and checked if it was the right nurse on duty?

I don't go into all of those detailed complaints with her over text. I will meet with a lawyer next week, and I foresee a long battle ahead. Even if I were to win this battle, my body will never go back to its original state, and I have to significantly change the trajectory of my life. I can't cling to my girlfriend with this body. For now, I have to resolve this project, and when I take a breather, I can tell her specific details. Everything will be resolved calmly, with no fuss. I still have all of my limbs and internal organs where they should be, and there's nothing wrong with my brain. I can work just like I used to. I just need to succeed in my project. I will put all of my energy into this project like it's the only purpose left in my life.

Before noon, the senior managing director calls. Upon seeing me, he frowns and makes an exaggerated display of condolence. Once he deems his show sufficient, he looks me up and down and gets to the point. He says that he will ask the client for their understanding and tell them that there will be no competing presentations. He will ask for just the summary of what our team made in two months and give the project to Mr. Kim's team.

"The basic framework is different, so force-fitting it will only make it awkward. And what are you even talking about?" I protest.

The director clicks his tongue and says, "Come on, you're not a newbie. Why are you acting like this is new? It's awkward for us to put someone involved in such an incident in front of the client. How will you explain in detail your changed appearance to these people in charge, who you've met and drunk with a few times? Their attention will be distracted away from the presentation, which is not fair to Mr. Kim. The higher-ups don't like anything that attracts unnecessary attention and don't want any extra

discussion unrelated to work. So we've decided to move you for now to the General Affairs department. Your team can combine with Mr. Kim's, and after things settle down a bit you can join the planning team with a new client account."

"Sir, I made a competing presentation outline as a matter of course just out of courtesy. It was us who got the new client, and it was our project from the beginning," I said.

"Oh, for crying out loud, who doesn't know that? I left all the files here as a reference, so please understand just this once. You're already experienced, so you know that there's no need to say this and that is mine," the senior managing director says.

This is how I am robbed of two months of hard work, right before my eyes. As the director said, few people can say they have never had their coworkers or boss take credit for their work. University research assistants often write 80 percent of some research papers, only to have their names listed as co-researchers. What about the art assistants who take care of all the sketches and storyboard, let alone putting in the coloring of a drawing? Their own works never get published under their names, yet they only get compensated for the tuition fees that only amount to their transportation fares. But I am not an assistant. I've already passed that stage from the bottom, and I am now the leader of a team. Over the course of ten years, I ground my way up to this position. I am not an apprentice or twenty-something rookie, nor a powerless, biologically disadvantaged... Thinking up to this point, I shake my thoughts off. I didn't think that I would end up like this again, resigning myself to giving up credit for my work... until the incident occurred. I have a premonition that this would be just the start of many doors closing. As I turn and leave the director's office, I can't tell whether the voices outside are criticizing or cheering me up.

"At the end of the month, you'll get double pay for consolation money. I know it would be far from enough, but it should be of some help to cover hospital fees and buy some new clothes. I don't know how well you dressed before, but the clothes you're wearing now don't suit you at all. It looks like you stole them from someone else. You should also take care of your hair. Somehow you'll have to get your act together," the director adds. Instead of answering, my timid act of defiance is slamming the door shut as loudly as I can. I go to the employee bathroom to cool my head. I look around for a moment before going in. Without even looking at myself in the mirror, I bury my face into the basin and rinse it with water.

In fact, the money would be enough to cover the hospital fees. The hospital acknowledges that it made serious mistakes, and it will provide something for the victim. However, other than doing tests on my bodily fluids and photographing each part of my body with fancy devices, there was not much else it said it could do. The hospital administration office simply checked my patient number and wrote off my debt, and my bill came out to zero. The office said the decision was made due to "moral responsibility" and behaved as if the hospital was doing me a favor. A nurse explained that if I wanted, I could take part in various experiments or trials for medications at no cost, as long as I signed all the necessary documents and an agreement that would not hold the hospital responsible for any side effects or results. Following the nurse's instruction, I had prepared all the relevant documents.

I would have to put most of my money into a lawyer... I look at my face, dripping water from my eyebrows. I touch this face which does not seem like mine. The warm, soft foreign sensation I feel on my fingers. My conscious mind and body are so thoroughly separated that I have never wished so strongly as this moment for one of them to be destroyed. I wipe away the water on the mirror, but I can't wipe away the calm confusion and alienness of its reflection. At that moment, someone comes into the bathroom and

meets my eyes. I immediately recognize him as a member of Mr. Kim's team. He flinches and takes a step backward, then awkwardly nods and passes behind me. It's clear that he needs to use the urinal, but he stands there at the sink as he arranges his hair. I shake the water off before leaving.

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I was told that employees in the General Affairs department work overtime for about three days a month to take care of various account settlements, but since it would be at the end of the month, I don't feel the urgency. No matter what, I'm determined to avenge myself in the future. I am willing to fight my way back up from the bottom even if it means taking on work that's below my level of experience and expertise. Holding a box filled with odds and ends, as soon as I enter the General Affairs department, the general manager only half-greets me awkwardly with his eyes before clearing away accumulated documents and papers on a desk for me. There is a phone, an old monitor, black and white laser printer, a pencil case and cellophane tape, and so on. Even with these minimal office supplies, there was no place to open up a paper notebook. Thinking of how everyone had their own spacious graphic workbench at my previous office, I unload my box on a squeaky rotating chair. Without any particular introduction, the other two department employees could not hide their baffled expressions on how they could handle this situation as they greet me.

At this stage of my career and my age, I'm embarrassed to ask about what I should do. Following my offer to examine the organized documents in the file cabinet from last year, I am asked to go through a thick booklet of expenditures and receipts to check whether they match. And I can understand the position of the General Affairs department. They probably feel like they are being used as a temporary holding pen for a difficult case. A former team manager from a different department has suddenly come without any guidance about what he needs to learn. Since it's hard to estimate what the higher-ups meant by "for the time being," they could not decide to share any sensitive information other than non-expense receipts. With expenditure statements and receipts the size of two palms on my desk, there is barely room for anything else. The size of this cramped space sums up and represents my upcoming new life. Still, without complaint, I calculate and compare those numbers listed in front of me as if to swallow them. That is the only condition of my life—to endure even if the world burdens me with misfortune as grand as the cosmos without this receipt.

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The evening I finally meet my girlfriend after several delays due to overtime, I stop in front of a shop window while crossing the street in Myeongdong. I admire a pair of nice looking pants with sleek stripes on display. It wasn't my boss' words that prompted this, but it occurred to me that it had been over two years since I had bought new clothes. Usually, other than meeting with clients, in the company, we didn't need to stick to a formal dress code, so I always dressed casually. On the pretext of building a trustworthy image, I rotated through outfits all in a similar style. Other than that, my girlfriend had gone on a trip with her friends last summer and bought me an expensive brand name suit from a duty-free shop, so it was enough to get me through. I hesitate at the window, wondering whether I should wear a proper suit now that I have changed departments, but I decide to ask about the price later and leave.

I want to ask for my girlfriend's opinion since she has a better eye for clothes, but this isn't the right time. I have an idea of what kind of conversation we will have. She has arrived before me and is sitting with her own coffee. I had sent a message asking whether we could meet at a pasta place, but after a pause, she had replied saying that she would prefer to meet at a coffee shop. It is one of the signs that

she has started the process of a formal break up. How can you accept a meal bought by the person you are going to break up with? It'd be hard to digest. She stares blankly off into space as I approach. Only when I'm right in front of her and ask, "Did you wait long?" does she finally look up at me with an unsettled expression and shakes her head. I look down at her 3,800 Won Americano. She doesn't even want to owe me a cup of coffee. I pay for my coffee and take a guest pager. *If you're startled, you can say so*, I think to myself.

I casually ask her a question to get to the point, and she nods without hesitation and says, "Well, there's no other way. Over the last few weeks, I've only seen a crude graphic of what happened to 'Mr.H.' But this is the first time that I've seen you and heard your voice." She asks sincerely whether I'd gotten better and whether I had any other side effects, but she doesn't ask about whether the criminal has been caught — or whether the police have the faintest idea, to say the least — since she would only get a deep sigh in response. If there had been any significant development, it would have been on the news anyway, and it's been confirmed that the perpetrators were not just one or two people, but a large and organized group. Even if a few of them were caught, it's a long way to go for my body to recover. There have already been eight cases this year of injection attacks without any apparent motive. They were neither the results of grudges nor crimes of passion. Also, I am the first incident that happened at a large hospital. The reason why the hospital failed to prevent this attack despite news of "injection" terrorism was that this incident happened in a place that was completely different from those of previous attacks.

Usually, victims were found unconscious near the trash cans in back alleys of popular adult entertainment districts, karaoke rooms, or the stairways of massage parlors. At each place, owners claimed that it did not happen directly on their establishment premises and thus avoided making any other comments. Two of the victims who were injected while drunk died. It's unclear where the others are, what they're doing, and whether they're even alive. Of course, since all the victims were conscious about attracting attention and had a keen sense of shame, they did not form any support group to share their pain and agony. I likewise had no desire to put on a meaningless act of licking my own or others' wounds through such a group. Above all, I'm different from those other victims. There wasn't much sympathy for many of them given where they were found and what they were doing right before.

But where on earth can a "rightful victim" like me appeal against this injustice? There was a televised news investigation last year to find out what happened to victims in the aftermath of the attacks, but most of them were reluctant to get media exposure. One of them did eventually appear on television with his face blurred and voice disguised, after holding out and saying he'd give the interview for car fare. The victim said he had lost his job and his family and was left with not even enough to buy a bottle of soju. After the broadcast, online forums were filled with anonymous commenters who claimed to have worked with the victim or be an acquaintance with the victim's wife. They said that that the victim was paying for his past wrongdoings, revealing details about his personal history unrelated to the case and saying that they expect the perpetrators to be more active in the future.

As it vibrates, the guest pager bounces from the table and falls onto my lap, bringing me back to the present. Seeing as how I am sweating with my fists clenched and my knuckles turning white, she picks up the pager with two fingers and gets up to get the coffee for me.

"Are you okay?" she asks with a concerned voice while keeping her distance. "Are you feeling ill again? Should I call an ambulance?" To put her at ease, I wave my hand and force myself to smile. I can understand her anxiety about taking care of my dead body in the course of our breakup. Halfway through her cup, as if she has nothing left to say, she puts a bag wrapped in a beige felt fabric on the

table. I don't have to open it to know what's inside. It's the Boston bag I had given her last Christmas, the 14 karat gold ring, and the silver-gold bracelet and necklace—evidence of the last four years of our relationship.

"I can't return the shoes because they're worn out, but I only wore the bag a few times, so you can sell it. The CDs and books aren't worth much, so I will just keep them as mementos."

I shake my head, laughing dejectedly. "Just have the bag. If you don't need it later, you can sell it. I can't return the clothes I already wore, so it's even. It's not like we're breaking up because we don't like each other. I understand that you'd like to settle everything as even—You don't want to owe me even a single cent, and you'd rather that I just keep the clothes you bought me. I'll consider all these items returned, so take them back. Quickly, or else I'll be mad," I say. She puts the bag back in her shopping bag with an uncomfortable expression but doesn't leave out the formality of saying, "Let's keep in touch as friends."

She gets up first, yet she doesn't shake off my request to see her off to the subway station. I put my more than a half-full cup of coffee on the counter and leave with her. We maintain a calm mood throughout the walk. She talks about difficult people she encountered while reporting for an article that she wrote recently, to which I respond with some witty remarks. I build a sense of solidarity by telling her about similar clients from the past. We seem just like good same-sex buddies, chatting about everyday life. If we were to meet again in a different place and situation, we could spend time together like this, I think. But isn't this what women really want—the most beautiful and safest way in the world to break up?

Telling a woman to work out and lose some weight? I just said that because I wanted that coworker to stop going on and on about how she had gained weight and how she had failed. Was I at fault for saying this?

Suddenly, in front of the store I had passed earlier, I ask her casually, "What do you think about that suit, does it look okay?"

My light tone is to reassure her that I regard her now just as a friend. She grins and shakes her head.

"Now I don't need anything. I don't wear suits as often as I used to."

At that moment, I become acutely aware of the important truth that I hadn't realized until then. I ask again carefully. "No, I'm asking if it suits me."

She stops and stands there, forcing herself to change her sorrowful expression into something else. With a soft and persuasive tone, she replies, "If your hair grows to medium length it would be suitable. I hope you don't misunderstand, but you do know that it's women's clothes, right?"

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Victims of the sporadic and irregular chain of injection terror acts were first called by reporters as "injection terror victims." Recently, as if in the name of economy and convenience, they have been just called "mutants." This intuitive label conjures up a comparison between the victims and laboratory rats, the experimental group in lab research. Looking at all the factors such as place of residence, age, social status, job, and political views, the only thing that all mutants have in common is that they all lived as men before the incident. They were given a dose of hormone-based compound close to lethal levels, if poisonous, and were rapidly feminized. Each developed at his individual pace, but they experienced

vomiting, chills, and narcolepsy, not to mention shock and confusion. Due to such side effects, many quit their jobs and gave up on what they saw as unnecessary medical examinations. Thus, it was hard to compare exact figures, the lawyer said.

Nonetheless, it can be assumed that the terror group was not small given the distribution of where the incidents took place. There are two main theories about the identity of the group: 1. It is a group of women who hate men. 2. It is a foreign group conducting secret tests to reduce military manpower, which is a mere conspiracy. Since it is hard to procure biochemical weapons that even professional military or medical organizations don't have easy access to, the first theory was ruled out. The hormones used were not ones for general use. The university research centers and pharmaceutical companies that deal with unspecified hormones have been thoroughly audited to account for each Won. However, no direct connection to the case could be found at any of them. Therefore, the second theory is also less plausible.

It could be argued that as a small, less powerful and less developed country, Korea was chosen as the testing ground for military experiments, as opposed to carrying them out in other more powerful countries whose people are constantly on guard against attack. Nevertheless, it's difficult to say that this was an experiment because they would have had to select similar subjects, maintain the same or at least similar conditions in space, and observe the results at regular intervals. Instead, they just chose subjects indiscriminately at random times. Above all, among the mutants were a man in his sixties, and one in his seventies, so it's hard to say that these subjects were relevant to a military experiment. So far, speculation has been that these have been hate crimes committed against unsuspecting men, but this does not give enough grounds for concluding that the group is made up of just women. Also, it is believed that those who committed the actual crime were paid to do so, but until someone from this group is caught, it's hard to fully conclude what the perpetrator's objectives are...

When you delve into the matter, every single thing is questionable. But the biggest mystery of all is, "Why me?" I know that since this will be the most common question, I raise my hand to block the lawyer's words. "I'm not worried about that, so let's focus on the next lawsuit." My complaint is against the hospital insufficiently managing its entrance. I didn't ask my lawyer to catch the criminal or speculate who that might be. Rather, the more he expands on the details, the more I'm reminded that I can't go back to my original state. The lawyer responds to this with a confident laugh, as if to assure me that he has not forgotten his duty and will definitely win. He also assured me that someone will be held accountable, and there is a high chance of getting compensation. He also stressed how fortunate it was for me to be getting physical tests and examinations for free.

While he was saying all of this, his tone of voice, attitude, and expressions were that of a male university student who just returned from Seoul placating a village middle school girl at a church. He talked to me as if I was an uncivilized person who should follow his enlightened guidance without any doubt. In my line of work, I've gotten a lot of overbearing demands and vulgar threats from lawyers and broadcasters, not to mention creative types who live in their own realities. Even so, this is probably the first time someone has talked to me this way since childhood. I don't know if he treats his other clients like this, but in any case, the lawyer says that he will win the case. Also, it would be too much trouble to take my case to another law firm, so I chose not to add any complaints.

"If we win, I'll also make sure that the hospital pays for the surgery fees. So if you by any chance decide to live as a complete transgender, you'd better do so quickly, so I can prepare the documents. I'll try to make sure that you get covered to at least the third operation."

As I leave the office, the mirror next to the metal door of the lawyer's office catches my eye. It's perhaps only two seconds that I see myself before immediately turning away, but it's enough time for the reflection to be etched on my retina. I flinch suddenly. Without even realizing, I am going over a checklist of what could be surgically fixed or enhanced. This was something I had learned to do instinctively through working for so long. This habit of seeking out things that are better, more beautiful, more balanced. This is not a temporary neurochemical malfunction due to my unbalanced hormones. I have no choice but to be as sensitive to beauty as I was when I was preparing and giving presentations. As a creator, it is simply my natural desire and way of seeing. My changed face is simply another drawing board for the artist inside.

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When I came back to work, the General Affairs office members simply greeted me with their eyes and buried themselves in their work at their desks. They did not interfere with me at all—in fact, it seemed as if they felt somewhat burdened when I was at my desk. Even at the end of last month's settlement, which was the busiest time of the year, all I had to do was check the slips. When I asked for instructions, they were evasive and blocked me from getting the ledgers from the cabinet. I once told them that I wanted to familiarize myself with my work, and they directed me to the last issue of a monthly current affairs magazine and entreated me to read it. At first, I stayed late with them to buy dinner or make coffee, but when I realized that no matter what my intentions, my presence was distressing to everyone, I brazened it out and just went home first. Now that work has calmed down, I can simply hand the accounts and payment documents that come out of my printer to my co-workers across from me. I go quietly to the common room, but no one says, "Hey, surplus worker, where are you going? Don't be away from your desk for too long."

Down a long corridor one floor up, there is a common room open in the corner. Of all people, Mr. Kim is there. I have a feeling that he would try to cause an argument, but if it's only a few pestering remarks I can handle it. To turn around and leave would make me the weaker person. Without a word, I just nod my head and stand next to the air purifier as the machine makes my coffee. I sip my coffee with my back turned when I hear Mr. Kim, in an overly familiar tone, say, "Thanks to you, our presentation went very well, and we're going ahead with the production."

Since there's no point in ignoring him, I reply with indifference. "Yes, that's good," I say. I know that more than half of the ideas are from my team since my former team member let me know by text.

"Your hair grew a lot," Mr. Kim says. I shake off his fingers, which brush through the ends of my hair as he passes by. Although we're in the same position, since he is older, I usually have to speak to him in a more respectful tone than he does. But this remark about my body, especially since it is deformed like in the current state, makes me feel as if I have been lowered to another level. However, this must be me feeling insecure about myself.

"I'm going to cut it," I say.

"Why, what a waste. Why don't you just grow it out since it's already grown this long?" he asks.

"I'm going to cut it," I say again.

"Your tone is quite short. Don't you see that I'm just showing you concern? I'm talking to you and you're not even looking at me," he says. Before I can respond, Mr. Kim grabs the back of my neck and turns me around. "If you've decided to live as best as you can in that body, you should adapt to the situation. How much longer will you think that things are the way they were? You still think that you're a man and a team manager, right? Even if you try, it's no use." He touches my cheek with his palm, and says, "Really, what are you going to do? Your face is soft and white like a woman's. The hair on your face doesn't grow anymore, right? It must be nice not to shave every morning, eh?" He pats my cheek a few times, then slaps it once loudly. As my neck is turned, I catch a whiff of Mr. Kim's breath, a foul mix of instant coffee and cigarettes typical of a middle-aged man. Compared to my previous experiences of getting scolded, this is nothing... I throw away the paper cup and turn to leave, but he blocks the door.

"Your skin's gotten softer but it's not like you've gone all the way and changed into a pretty woman. It's just awkward because you're just in between. Think about the people you work with. Why don't you put on some make-up? Look here, why are you still going around dressed like a man? You have breasts now, did you know that? But you're not wearing a bra, right? I heard that it hurts when your nipples aren't protected—though compared to real women yours are like a chewed up piece of gum on the street. Wouldn't it be more comfortable for everyone if you tried to cover it up a little more, so they don't have to get out of the way? You should think about how other people feel when they see you."

As he says this he rubs my chest and pushes against a small but noticeable mound of flesh hanging loose. Not only do I hate this, I feel a sharp pain. If he wants them, I'd take them off and stick them on him. Since my body changed, I haven't gone to the gym in over two months. Even so, I didn't think I was this weak. Mr. Kim grabs both my wrists and wrings them away, but I can't shake him off easily at once. And I know that exercise is not the problem. Fearing that something could happen, I head-butt his face with my forehead and step aside. It's not that I've gotten shorter, and I can still take him on. Wiping at his bleeding nose with the back of his hand, he backs away from me.

"You son of a bitch, since I'm in the company, I thought I'd go easy on you and stop here, but how dare you head-butt me. I'm going to check whether my nose is broken. You'll have to make a lot of money to pay me off," he says.

"What, you started this shit and now you want to get paid?" I say. In the military, I had been kicked in my shin by my commander; at the company, I have been kicked in my shin by my boss. While I recall all those moments, I write the Chinese character for "patience" three times. Doing so can help you control your anger and even prevent murders.

"But do you even still have it down there? Do you get it up in the mornings?" Mr. Kim says.

At this point, something in my head snaps. I grab him by the collar, but he is heavier than I thought, and, on the contrary, I am forced backward. I thought he was all fat—Did he actually have some muscle? As I fall onto the sofa, I realize that I should have used both hands at the very least. I kick the round table toward him, but it only wobbles in place.

"So you say I started it, but who's going to prove it? There's no surveillance camera here. I have a nosebleed, but you don't have any evidence, do you? Try telling it to the company ethics board, and see who listens. Even if you'd kept your mouth shut, it wouldn't have been enough. So how about looking into other places to work? Look here, a mutant works at our company. If word gets out about you and people start coming to ask questions and act bothersome, you'll have to write a resignation letter. You

know what the chairman hates most is when it gets noisy, right? Over 50 employees are covering up for you, keeping quiet and pretending like nothing happened. So be grateful and keep your head down, yeah?" Mr. Kim says.

I spring onto him with my entire body, thinking that at last this will make him fall backwards onto the floor. When I see his dry reaction and a smile spreading across his face, however, I finally become aware of the situation. I turn my head and see the senior managing director and the chairman with shocked expressions on their faces.

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Up until this point, Mr. Kim and I have never had a cooperative relationship. In fact, we were more like enemies but we only went as far as exchanging some sharp words here and there. What did I do to make him treat me this horribly? We had never gone at each other's necks directly, but I suppose even a small sense of inferiority could make someone act like this.

"I would not have experienced such unbridled hatred and rage if it weren't for this body. That bastard was probably glad to have the chance to confront me," I say later to my ex-girlfriend in the bar.

As I finish my third tequila and mumble, she sits without touching her drink. She has deadlines to meet at work and she's exhausted, but she's still here listening to me. "You shouldn't waste energy finding a suitable reason for that son of a bitch," she says, offering words of consolation.

It's the first time I hear her saying "son of a bitch." While she was getting used to difficult people at her monthly magazine, she must have been put through unbearable situations so that she couldn't help blurting out so many words like this that I didn't use in everyday life.

"Is 'son of a bitch' a bit much? Well, if he deserves to be called a 'son of a bitch,' why not. Bastards like that are often given any reason to justify their actions, so they are used to getting away with what they do. He had an inferiority complex? What a pity," she says. "But that bastard just wanted to fight, and the person who happened to be there was you, who was the weakest—well, you became the weakest. So don't think twice about it."

I am the one who suggested it, but now she really is talking to me like I am a female friend. I feel bad for calling up my ex for a drink, but I don't have anyone else to talk to. If I were to confide in a total stranger, I would have to explain how I became a mutant and deal with their looks of surprise and disbelief. Getting past the surprise, the suspicion would be about what kind of crass misdeeds I committed to become a mutant. Just like in those online discussion forums filled with attacks and criticisms against the victims, which makes it difficult to put together the true facts of the case.

What did I do wrong to become this way? Why were all the sons of bitches like Mr. Kim spared for me to be randomly selected? It's embarrassing to boast, but I have no doubt that I have treated women well from the beginning, including my girlfriend. This is true even now, as I have never paid a woman for sex, and I have never harassed a woman. Also, I have never touched a woman when she was drunk, even if she wanted me. Hidden camera videos of celebrities? Okay, I watched, shared, and commented on some of them with my friends. I didn't film them myself, I just shared some videos without knowing where they came from. If there's a man who says he's never done this, I'd like to meet him.

Since I am drunk, my voice is getting louder and louder. A group of women across the bar frown as they get up to pay the bill.

"Your voice, just a little..." At her embarrassed voice, I nod my head, but I don't stop talking.

"I've never told a female co-worker what she should or shouldn't do as a woman. I've never commented on the length of their skirts, and other than wiping up soju at work dinners, I have never touched their knees. And it's not like I spilled the soju on purpose. Even so, I wonder whether I did something wrong to women without realizing it. If I did something that was clearly wrong, it would have made me feel a little less wronged. Hinting to a female co-worker to fill up a client's empty glass? Isn't this something we all do as part of working life? Telling a woman to work out and lose some weight? I just said that because I wanted that coworker to stop going on and on about how she had gained weight and how she had failed. Was I at fault for saying this? Or how about telling a female employee that since she had to take so many days off, she should just take a leave of absence? Her relatives were taking care of her sick baby, and she was going out to the hallway every two to three hours to take calls about where the diapers were, and how many spoons of medicine the child should take. Given the burden this was for the team to make up for her lost productivity, it was the obvious decision for a team manager to make."

When I started digging up the reasons, there were so many that I could stay up all night unraveling the incidents. Nonetheless, other than those minor misdeeds, I haven't done anything to deserve this major retribution. I once warned and sent away one of my team members from the group chat room for sharing some memes making fun of middle-aged women drivers and laughing about it. I really treated the women of the world...

"Well, I admit that in the time we've spent together, you've been above average. Wouldn't this be saying that the expectation of 'an average man' in this society is not good enough? You thought that you were being good, but you do realize that courtesy is the mandatory default, not an option, right? Do you want to be acknowledged and praised for that?" she says.

Her tone of voice is somewhat acrimonious that it sobers me up. "I'm not asking you to tell me that I'm perfect," I say.

She seems to be looking for tissues in her bag and shakes her head.

"But that's not something to be praised for either," she says. "Until now, the things that you based your pride on were actually just doing the bare minimum. The fact that you want to be validated for that is the error itself. And being a victim doesn't mean that you have done something to deserve it. You can't imagine how much in my thirty-five years I've been exposed to malicious influences like Mr. Kim. Well, maybe now you can imagine. You didn't question having power, just like you didn't question your own breathing. Only when you've had half of your power taken away can you wake up to how much you took it for granted."

Even up until our break up, she had been careful not to touch upon sensitive subjects and gotten up before the conversation got too intense. Perhaps she remembered how we had jokingly agreed that the next time we meet we should meet as women. Now, she is really talking openly, without choosing her words.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me?" I ask sincerely, to find out whether I had hurt her without knowing while we were dating.

Instead of replying, she takes out a bottle from her bag and puts it next to the cocktail glass. It is brown and half the size of a Bacchus energy drink, and I can't see what color the liquid is inside. But she doesn't have to explain. Somehow, I know where it came from and what it is used for. With this realization, I feel the blood rush to my head, and before I know it, I have grabbed her by the collar for questioning.

"Calm down, it's different from the story you've made up in your mind," she says.

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We buy a syringe and needle at a midnight pharmacy that is just about to close up. "We have syringes but what are you going to do with the needle?" the pharmacist asks with an ambiguous expression, looking at my drunken haggard face. To the pharmacist, I probably seem like some drunk person of indeterminate gender looking to get high. "To give a puppy vaccination," I say, and the pharmacist gives it without a word. Going around with a weapon in my bag made me feel secure. Even though I haven't done anything yet, I could do something at any time. I go to the clothing shop where I have seen the nice suit. The lights are just about to turn off, and the suit is gone, and the mannequin is already wearing a different outfit. There aren't any clothes that catch my attention, but since tomorrow is Saturday, I will come back to this street and buy an outfit I like. My medium length hair is hard to manage, so I will straighten and dye it. My ex told me before we broke up that olive brown would suit me.

"I had nothing to do with them, and I had never even seen them before in real life. Before you became this way, I didn't even have any interest in them." This is what she told me. She hadn't forgotten my situation, and although I thought she was just being polite, she had really met two or three journalists. The reporter who gave it to her claimed to have obtained it from one of several informants while working on the failed investigative report. The informant—a scrubber at a bathhouse—said that she also got it from one of her many customers, and since all of her customers are not wearing makeup or jewelry and also naked, it's hard to remember any special details about their appearance other than their build. The customers said they got it from somewhere else, and those places said they got it from another place, and those other places said they got it from someplace else.

After a few layers, it led to Mexico or Southeast Asia. A plausible and convenient route. Ultimately, the reporter designated the group as "them," but who they were was still under the veil. That being said, what does it matter to know who first sent the seven letters about the assassination of President Kennedy? Even so, it's hard to line up and arrest all of the people who could have taken some of the substance, with the special investigative news feature getting axed. Not only is it not the reporter's duty, but there's also no proof that they actually used it. The informant who gave it said that it was given to her by a customer, but she was scared and didn't know whether it was the medicine in question or Gramoxone, a type of liquid herbicide. And so she handed the bottle to the reporter, telling him to find out and quench the curiosity on her behalf.

"We always have someone who we want to take revenge on, but killing is another problem..." the reporter said.

My ex had taken it on impulse for me, but I don't know what to do with it, or where to send it for analysis. If this really is the substance that was used in my attack, I am still not sure what I will do with it next. She says that I can take this and report it, and even put her into trouble for obtaining it with her own hands. "But let me tell you this. You'll get nothing but fatigue by doing so," she adds.

I hold up the bottle to a blinking neon sign. This could just be a tonic or impotence cure. It could be a cyanide compound or just a saline solution that doesn't have any effect. But now, I can perhaps understand the hearts of those who have to thrust themselves into an opaque world, those who have been conditioned to live without any certainty in their lives. So far, if the target is not those men they want to get rid of right away, but those who can project or replace them, anyone can have it happen to them. This is what terrorism is mostly about.

Therefore, I will strike in the near future Mr. Kim or anyone who reminds me of Mr. Kim. Once he or someone like him strikes at yet another Mr. Kim or someone like him, that other Mr. Kim or someone like him will find someone... As the light turns off and the shop window turns black, I see my face reflected. That would be good. No one in the world has yet seen the end of a plague-like distortion infinitely reflected in a pair of mirrors standing face to face.

END

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Gu Byeongmo [구병모] made her literary debut in 2008 when her novel *Wizard Bakery* won the 2nd Changbi Prize for Young Adult Fiction. She has since published novels *Gills*, *Damaged Fruit*, *A Spoonful of Time*, and *Your Neighbor's Table* and short story collections *I Hope It's Just Not Me* and *The Red Shoes Party*.

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About Nabillera [나빌레라]

Nabillera: Contemporary Korean Literature [www.NabilleraKorea.com]

↗ nabillerakorea.wordpress.com

