

Nabillera

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Play Me Hormones – Kim Mela

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COMMENTS 0



Play Me Hormones

By Kim Mela

Translated by Beth Hong

I'm wing forward number 9, muscadine, charcoal gray and IS. IS is short for intersex, but you can't look at me weird just because the word "sex" is in there. This is something that started from when I was in my mom's stomach, and it's not my fault. It's also not my mom's fault. Since I don't go to church, I don't even resent God.

I just have some mushrooms that others don't have. When other girls started developing breasts, I had mushrooms pop out. Sometimes I wear two panties at once, so they don't look too obvious. But it's not like I pee with my mushrooms. But in case they reek, I wash them every night with soap foam. My mushrooms can't grow as big as an adult's, and I can't have babies with them either. But they're also not just total fakes with the shape of the real thing. My mushrooms are just my own. I have to decide whether to leave my mushrooms alone or get rid of them. If I decide to chop them off, I have to get the hole widened to make a uterus. If I remain a woman, that is. If I am going to become a man, I can leave my mushrooms, but later I have to get surgery to make them bigger. What it means is that no matter whether I become a man or a woman, it's going to cost money. So I was forced to try the lottery.

"You could get the ball stolen. But it's a disgrace to lose it to Gu Do-rim." Yu-ji spoke in a rough voice. He was imitating the captain of the red team. Yu-ji ranted about how messy the red team's tackle was. He seemed to think that was what friendship was. I didn't care. If I didn't like physical fights, I would've taken the *baduk* or ukulele class.

I wasn't scared. My shin bones are sturdy, and the coach will keep me as captain of the blue team. The coach said that the difference between whether someone can use their left foot or not is greater than the difference between men and women.

"Let's race!" Yu-ji shouted. He stepped on the bicycle pedals while making a monstrous sound. Perhaps because the soccer game ended after the warm-up, he still had energy. He was small and slow to run. Shin Yu-ji was probably the only soccer player in the world to ask not to pass him the ball. What Yu-ji was good at was knocking back energy drinks and eavesdropping on the other team to hear whether they were cussing me out behind my back. I let Yu-ji, who was breaking the rules from the start, take the lead. Before catching up with Yu-ji, I smelled my crotch with one foot on the bike pedal and the other on the ground. Mom always told me to be careful because it could reek. It was Friday, but it didn't feel like it.

We rode our bikes to the park. I laid my bicycle on the ground and drank water from the tap. Yu-ji asked if I wanted to see who could shoot water from their mouth the furthest, but I didn't feel like it and turned him down. We rode our bikes again across the park and headed home. Yu-ji started his third game downhill and, as he reached the crossroads, swerved while making a braking sound with his mouth. I watched his triumphant pose. It won't last long either.

"Can you see my dad?" Yu-ji asked, standing behind the telephone pole. I looked in front of 'Yu-ji's Grocery.' In front of the store, Yu-ji's grandfather was stacking apples in the shape of a pyramid with white gloves on.

"I can't see him. I guess he's inside," I said.

Then Yu-ji turned around, took a tissue from his pants pocket and blew his nose. He blew his nose so hard I thought it would fall off. Then he folded the tissue in half and dabbed it around his blistered mouth.

Yu-ji's dad didn't even let him sniffle. He didn't even allow him to have anything messy stuck around his mouth. So Yu-ji stood behind the telephone pole and blew his nose before going home. Yu-ji's angel put a half-folded soft tissue folded in his pocket every morning.

"Look."

Yu-ji unzipped his bag and showed me what was inside. It was crammed full of white letter envelopes.

"I wrote them to an angel when my dad went to prison," Yu-ji said. Yu-ji called his mother an angel. Yu-ji's grandpa, aunt and uncles also called his mother an angel. This was because she lived with Yu-ji's dad without even getting a divorce, despite his drinking and being violent. Yu-ji's bike lock password was also 1004 (angel).

"Choose one," Yuji said as he opened the bag. It was stuffed with letters. There were easily over a hundred of them. Without Yu-ji noticing, I stepped back slightly and spoke.

"I'm okay."

"Pick one. They're mine now. She said I could have them. So you have some too."

"No, they're precious, so you should keep them all."

When I refused again, Yu-ji sniffled once. "Are you sure you like me?" Yu-ji asked. He was asking again. On Valentine's Day, Yu-ji jumped on the chance to ask me after getting chocolates whether I liked him. It was my fault for giving him chocolates. At the time, Yu-ji firmly believed I would give him chocolates a week before Valentine's Day. Yu-ji thought that we liked each other.

"What does it mean to like someone?" I asked Yu-ji, to shake his faith.

"Keeping each other's secrets." It wasn't a terrible answer. Still, it was my fault for giving him the chocolates.

I was 13, and Yu-ji was 11. Yu-ji was a year and five months younger than me. If I hadn't taken a leave of absence in fourth grade, Yu-ji would have had to call me nuna. Yu-ji was still a child. When a dog barked behind the gate while running through the alley, Yu-ji also barked along. It was a prank I stopped doing when I was eight. I had already smoked for the first time when I was Yu-ji's age. I didn't really smoke so much as just have it hang off my lips, but in any case I tasted the world of grown-ups. The cigarette was a butt that had fallen on the road. An indentation was visible at the end, so I rubbed it a few times with my fingers before putting it in my mouth. I breathed in with my eyes closed, imagining white cigarette smoke. When I sucked in my first dose, I realized my true nature. I felt like I was diving to the bottom of a swimming pool to discover its depth. Soon I was out of breath and came up to the surface, but I knew then there was a deeper place. I could go deeper and be more alone.

Yu-ji was my only friend, but sometimes I thought I couldn't be friends with anyone. Yu-ji was the only one I could hang out with in the neighborhood. He sniffled because of his hay fever and wore glasses for his bad eyesight, but he still had more good points. Even though his eyes weren't that bad, Yu-ji pretended that he couldn't see my shin hair. He also kept my once-a-month hospital visit a secret. And no matter how thirsty he was, he didn't buy a drink from another supermarket. He said it was out of loyalty to his grandfather, who ran a supermarket. After parting ways with Yu-ji, I rode my bike to the willow bridge. It was a place where there were no willows but only dried grass and mayflies. The stream

was like jelly made of muddy water. I pedaled slowly to see if there were any useful cigarette butts. Even past the bridge to the bus stop, I got nothing. I wish the lottery stall *ajumma* would sell me cigarettes with the lottery ticket, but that was just my greed. It was my luck; she even sold me the lottery tickets. Whenever I went to the hospital for counseling, I stopped by the lottery stall to buy my ticket. I played two games with Yu-ji's 1,000 won and my 1,000 won. Yu-ji has chosen the same numbers since spring up to now.

5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30

These are the numbers Yu-ji chose. These numbers always lost. I told Yu-ji that if he kept choosing numbers like this, he would only keep wasting his 1,000 won. But Yu-ji was stubbornly unwavering. Yu-ji said he only liked secure numbers, and it's safe only if they get bigger by fives. When I asked what he meant, he said that learning multiples of five was the easiest when he was memorizing the multiplication tables in second grade. I didn't understand what that had to do with the lotto. I chose the number of my identity.

9, 11, 18, 27, 36, 45

Eleven was the password to solve my secret. From my research, I found that there are several holes in the human body, including the nostrils, throat, eyeholes, earholes, and the butthole. If you add them all up, men have nine, and women have ten (excluding sweat glands). Since I'm a woman, I have ten holes, but a stick was added to make it 11. So I always choose 11 in my lotto. The rest are all numbers that add the front and back digits to nine. 1+8, 2+7, 3+6, 4+5. Nine is my identity number, so I also chose to be number nine on my soccer team.

It was Mr.X's argument that each person had several self-identities. Mr.X is an oppa who receives psychological counseling from a doctor like me, and his original name is Park Seung-bo, but he asked to be called Mr.X. He didn't know what would happen to his future, so he said he had to put an unknown variable "X." I hate unknown variables and equations, but I respected his wishes and called him Mr.X. Mr.X said he thought of the number nine when he saw me.

"As a number, you're nine, and as a fruit, you're muscadines, and as a color you're charcoal gray."

"I am?"

"Yep."

Mr.X said that when you don't know what you are, you can know by thinking of yourself as numbers, fruits, or colors. It's our fate to think of ourselves in metaphors. Mr. X said that metaphor is a way to

approach the truth, and Jesus and Buddha also spoke in metaphors.

"What's a metaphor?" I asked Mr.X.

"That you're muscadines and charcoal gray."

"What are muscadines?"

"I don't know either."

"What about charcoal gray?"

Mr.X said he didn't know that either. He's never seen muscadines, and he's confused about what color charcoal gray is, but anyways when he sees me those things come up. A few days later while watching TV, I found out what charcoal gray was. On a home shopping channel, there was a women's fall coat on sale. Among the three colors, charcoal gray sold the least.

Mr.X said he first came to the hospital after menstruating in the summer of his 15th year. When he woke up in the morning, he said that his underwear and blankets had blood on them. Being male and menstruating is because Mr.X has some syndrome. It's not Mr.X's fault, nor is it Mr.X's mother's fault. It is said that Mr.X attends church, but does not blame God. But he says that sometimes he wants to tell the pituitary gland in his head to do its job properly. Mr.X looks like a middle school student, but he's actually over 20 years old. After he menstruated from his anus and his breasts and hips grew, he developed a habit of examining whether everything he did was manly or not.

Mr.X told me to become fat like him if it was too hard to decide on a gender. He said that if you get fat, people don't see you as a man or a woman, but as just fat. But told him that I couldn't get fat, because then I won't be able to run fast while playing soccer. Then Mr.X told me to try the lottery. Whether you're a man or a woman, the important thing is to have a lot of money because then people don't care which one you are; they're just jealous. So I jumped on the lottery bandwagon on Mr.X's advice and chose the numbers of my identity. In addition to the lottery, Mr.X gave me a lot of new information. About a cartoon featuring people like us, a novel in which people like us are the main characters, and an online forum where people like us gather. Mr.X even helped me write a list that was difficult to write. It was a list ranking the pros and cons of when I lived as a woman.

The pros of Gu Do-rim living as a woman

1. I don't have to make my mushrooms big.
2. Being a tall woman: advantage.
3. Being a physically strong woman: advantage. (Still, living as a woman: lifelong disadvantage.)

Mr.X underlined the words in parentheses. He said that if you live as a woman, you have to menstruate 300 to 400 times until you get old.

"There's nothing to be disappointed about. There's menstrual leave, and if you use it on a Friday you can take Saturday and Sunday off for a three-day break," Mr.X said. "So why is that a disadvantage?"

"Because they'll ask why you always take menstrual leave on Fridays. Dr.Can-do cursed out the nurses. You must've not heard," Mr.X said.

Dr.Can-do was the doctor who counseled us. We were grateful that he counseled us for free, but every time the session ended, he would say, "You can do it!" and pat us on our shoulders. That's why we call him Dr.Can-do.

Mr.X and I met Dr.Can-do once a month. Dr.Can-do said that the human brain has male and female gender. The brain's gender is determined when we are fetuses, and once it is imprinted like an engraving, it doesn't change until the day we die.

“But there’s an exception. It’s hormones. Hormones have the power to change the engraving, so even as a man if female hormones come out, you become a woman, and even as a woman you gradually become a man,” Dr.Can-do said. I didn’t understand.

“The brain doesn’t have genitals, so how can you know if it’s male or female?” As soon as I asked, Seung-bo, the older boy sitting next to me, nudged my foot. That was also the first day that I met him. “Of course the brain also has...genitals,” said Dr.Can-do. He had concluded that my wearing soccer uniforms instead of skirts and Seung-bo dancing along to female singers was the brain’s ... genitals. Dr.Can-do looked a bit uncomfortable whenever he said the word “genitals.”

That day as soon as the counseling session was over, Seung-bo told me he had something to say and asked if we could go somewhere quiet. Seung-bo introduced himself as Mr.X and told me to take Dr.Can-do’s words with a grain of salt. He said Dr.Can-do was using our sessions to build up his research credentials. Mr.X said he preferred the urologist who fiddled with his testicles.

After that, whenever I met with Dr.Can-do I zoned out. I usually looked at the graph stuck on the wall of the counseling room which reminded me of an elephant. But under the graph, it said, “Number of sex chromosome anomalies per 1,000 people.” In my eyes, the graph looked like a boa constrictor that swallowed an elephant. I’m talking about that boa constrictor from the book “The Little Prince.” On the elephant’s back there were the most numbers, and the word “normal” written on it. But Mr.X and I were around the elephant’s tail. There it was written: “abnormal.”

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After the counseling, I walked out of the hospital and heard a handgun going off somewhere. When I looked up, it was not a gun but a rubber mat. On the third floor of the hospital, a woman was hitting a rubber mat against the veranda railing. The sound was so loud that it sounded like a gun to my ears. I grabbed my chest as if I was shot. I looked back down and thought as I kept walking, only stepping on the red bricks among the red and green ones.

I like the Little Prince because I don’t know if he’s a man or a woman. The Little Prince is called a prince not because he’s a man, but because they have a kingdom. I like the Little Prince, who wears a white shirt with wide sleeves like morning glory. I also like raincoats with magnetic buttons and robots that move on wheels. Those robots don’t walk all funny like arthritic patients.

In the future there’ll be more robots than humans, and by that point I could be just a human, not an abnormality. It’s not bad to quit being human and become a robot. Because robots are just robots, without having to distinguish between men and women.

I stepped on the final red brick and looked up. Mr.X was sitting on a log chair.

“You’re still ugly,” Mr.X said. That was his greeting. I didn’t respond. Mr.X waited for me after his counseling, and the courtyard behind the hospital’s history hall was our meeting place.

The history hall’s bricks were dark as if it had rained, even when it hadn’t. The door was locked with a metal lock and chain. Other than the occasional nurses who came to see the napping cats here, it was almost completely deserted.

“But your outfit is cool,” Mr.X said.

I sat on the stairs in front of the history hall and pulled up my soccer socks that had slipped down. Mr.X stood up, dusted off his butt, and sat next to me. We sat side by side and looked at a statue standing in the yard. The statue, which was covered with black spots on its left cheek, was the face of a missionary who built the first “American drugstore” here. Next to the statue, there was a pond surrounded by a stone wall. It’s said that salamanders lived in the pond during the days of the US drugstore. Once, while playing with Mr.X, his sneaker fell into the pond and there was a long strand of hair stuck on it. After that, we sat with our backs to the pond.

“Who was that?” I asked, looking at a photo of a woman Mr.X was holding.

“A legend in the dance world. An IS like us,” Mr.X said. I didn’t believe him. Mr.X had brought a photo before of someone I didn’t know and said the person was IS like us. But when I looked into it, it turned out to be a Chinese person called Xi Jinping. When I confronted Mr.X, asking why he had tricked me, Mr.X asked me to give evidence that Xi Jinping wasn’t intersex. That was how it was. “If you were a president or celebrity, would you reveal that you had a little caterpillar?” Mr.X said.

“Mine’s not a caterpillar but a mushroom.”

“That’s a caterpillar and you’re an apple. A caterpillar has gone inside your stomach and is eating up your organs.”

Mr.X wiggled his two index fingers like a caterpillar. I got pissed, so I pinched Mr.X’s nipple. I tried to run away, but soon Mr.Titty caught me by the neck. Mr.X became Mr.Titty and forced me to lie facedown. He became Mr.Hippo and held me down by pressing down between my face and shoulders with his butt.

“Surrender,” Mr.Hippo said. I didn’t surrender. My mushrooms were not caterpillars.

“You’re not surrendering?”

But if it had gone on longer my neck may have snapped. “I suh..rrender.”

“What?”

“I suh..rrender!” As soon as I shouted it out, Mr.Hippo stood up. Mr.Hippo became Mr.X once more and helped me up. Maybe I looked pitiful at that moment because he wiped away some drool around my lips.

Mr.X’s hand on my lips was as rough as a dish scrub. He only had half of his fingernails and red flesh was exposed on each fingertip. Mr.X talked while biting his nails.

“There was intersex in the past, and there is now too. Two out of 1,000 babies born every year are intersex, a little more than the probability of being born red-haired. It’s not a completely small number anyway. In the year I was born, 470,000 people were born in Korea – ah, this is rounding out above the thousands. So among 470,000 babies there is at least 799 intersex who are like us.”

I leaned back unnoticed and avoided Mr.X’s spittle. Mr.X handed me a book, saying he would only tell me this once, so please listen carefully.

“Look here, look. I’ve been twice. You haven’t even heard of this place, right?” Mr.X said. I looked at where Mr.X pointed. On the book there was a picture of a human and a monkey, and the title “Hairless Monkey.”

“Monkey?”

“Not that, this.”

Mr.X pointed at a white paper stuck below the title. It said “Namsan Library.”

“Do you know where this is? It’s the famous Itaewon. If you go to Itaewon, there’s that must-visit place called Namsan. People who go to

Itaewon drink and play all night and the day after they all go to the library. That’s the course. Have you seen a library card?”

Mr.X showed me a membership card he could use at any library in Seoul. According to Mr.X, if I go to Itaewon there is an underground hideout where IS people gather. They meet up on the third Saturday of every month and talk all night; in the morning they go on a walk up Namsan.

“Did the doctor tell you about it?” I asked while looking at the library card. On the back it said that you could not give the card to another person.

“The doctor doesn’t know. Trust me. If you go there you can see other people’s caterpillars too. If they feel good they wear their panties on their heads and dance.”

“Stop shitting me.”

“Okay, I was shitting you about that. But the library card is real. The Itaewon meeting is real too. Look.”

Mr.X showed me a map of Itaewon he said he drew it himself. The underground hideout where IS people gathered was marked with a heart shape.

“If you go there, you can see this person too,” Mr.X took out his smartphone and showed me a video. The woman in the photo let down her hair and shook her limbs like an octopus. Mr.X said this was the world’s coolest dance. The song is for people like us, and the rhythm in the lyrics is a metaphor for hormones. I watched the video several times. Though I found it strange, I could not take my eyes off of it. As Mr.X said, she seemed to be a legend in the dance world. Even as she shook her limbs continuously, her expression was the same from start to finish. She seemed like someone who had never laughed since the day she was born. The song kept asking to give her the rhythm, or give her hormones.

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To you, who’s gone through so much!

When I get out, let’s get lots of good things to eat. Pig trotters, chicken stew, potato stew, ribs, pork, cookd ramyun let’s make tteokbokki with Yu-ji too.

Let’s spend quality time together. Let’s live without greed, feeling the best happiness we can, because we have to be happy. We’re really special people. Especially you... you’re truly special. My angel!

I found spelling errors in the letter Yu-ji showed me. Although there were a few spelling errors, the writing was quite neat. It didn't seem to have been written by someone in a drunken rage. At the end of the letter, there was a scarlet stamp imprint of a huge smiley face.

Yu-ji told me another secret in this letter. His dad went to jail for ripping off some woman's bra. He said that his dad repented every day in jail by praying to God. It was a Jehovah's Witness in the same cell as him who taught him to pray. That person put a red smiley stamp every time he wrote Yu-ji's dad a letter. Yu-ji, who liked that stamp, said that he wondered whether he would go on to the military or prison.

"Do you want to be a Jehovah's Witness with me?" Yu-ji asked. He said Jehovah's Witnesses go to prison instead of the military. When I asked why, Yu-ji said he didn't know either. Anyway, I said I'll think about it if it comes up. "In case it comes up" means in the case I become a man. Yu-ji and I both hate the sound of guns, so we were worried about going to the military when we grew up. The only guns we shot were water guns, and whenever neighborhood boys shot BB guns at stray cats we thought they ought to go to prison rather than the military.

"Are you really going?" Yu-ji asked me several times. I nodded.

Whether it was the military or prison, that was for later. First I had to go to Itaewon. But Yu-ji was worried that I would die in Itaewon. Itaewon was two hours away, and I said I wouldn't die since I had the map Mr.X gave me. Yu-ji gave me a bag of potato chips and an energy drink to have on my way to Itaewon. He said it was from his grandpa's store.

"Read it on the bus."

Yu-ji put a letter on top of the potato chips. This time it was a letter that Yu-ji's grandfather had written to Yu-ji's dad. I asked why he kept giving me letters. Then Yu-ji said it was because the letter contained a secret of his. Who would say their secrets out loud, they would write it in a letter, he said.

"But you didn't write this, right?"

"I can't do anything about that. You know my weakness."

Yu-ji said that his head hurt when he sat still and wrote letters on paper. I gave up trying to talk with Yu-ji and put the potato chips and letter in my bag.

*In modern melodies
I'm fascinated by your new dance*

I headed toward Itaewon listening to music on my headphones. I thought about Dr.Can-do's words on my way there.

Dr.Can-do said that my consciousness is inclined to ... genitals. I tried to shake off my thoughts about ... genitals, but since my mushrooms started growing bigger, as in when they swelled up and got smaller on their own, my consciousness was completely focused on ... genitals. My testicles are hiding in my stomach, and my uterus was narrow enough to make three ants rub shoulders against each other if they were inside. The ultrasound picture of my testicles and uterus was like a photo of

heavy clouds right before a rainstorm. If the heavy clouds sprayed hormones, I wouldn't be Gu Do-rim, but a monkey. I really didn't want to be a monkey or a mushroom human, you know? There's a computer in my living room at home, and I know how to access illegal websites, but I didn't want to see a man getting on top of a woman and roughing her up. I didn't know what I wanted to see. Whenever my eyelash fell out I found myself putting it on my hand and making a wish. I wished to win the lottery. I blew hard to make my eyelash fly far away. If I won the lottery, I wanted to leave myself as I was. But my number never came up, and I had to tear up my dreams.

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It seemed like I had a better chance of winning the lottery than finding the underground hideout through the map. I walked the same streets and saw the signs over and over again with the map that Mr.X had given.

On the map there were snacks sold in Itaewon and a traverse table in the shape of a 4, but I couldn't find the Italian gelato or Thai coconut bread. Wide and narrow roads, big and small stores, the blackened walls were as complicated as a maze. The sky grew more and more charcoal gray, and just when I thought that Itaewon may be a place that doesn't exist on earth, the first drop of rain fell from the sky. Saturday wasn't even over yet, but it felt like 500 years had passed since I had left my house.

I crouched down in front of a closed store. I hugged my backpack and lowered my head. My heart was heavy from what I thought was a stench from between my legs. Like Yu-ji's grandpa, I couldn't stand it when my heart was heavy. Yu-ji's grandpa said that you have to be

good to the angels in his letter. He said that it was a miracle that they came to Yu-ji's dad. I needed angels too. If I had angels too, I wanted to pray for them to take my hand.

"Can you move aside?"

Unbelievably, at that moment I heard a voice from the sky. "I have to go inside, so can you move?"

I looked at the angel. No, it wasn't an angel. Her lips were too red to be an angel's. In one hand she was holding a plastic bag filled with cup ramen, and an umbrella in the other, but she was so thin that her wrist bone jutted out. Just in case, I spoke to the angel.

"Is this Itaewon?"

"What?"

"Isn't this Itaewon? I need to go to Itaewon." As soon as I said this, the angel stared intently at my face, and then asked why I had to go to Itaewon.

"Whenever I go to the market with my mom she always asks me, 'Did I close the gas valve?' Then I tell her she did," I said.

I wanted to stand up, but my legs were cramped and I couldn't move.

"I also need someone to ask about things, whether I'm a man or a woman."

Eventually I fell on my butt. My pants and panties got wet with rain, but I couldn't move. The sky was the color of muscadines, and I had neither an umbrella nor a raincoat. Then the angel gave me her hand. I took it. The angel's palms were big enough to cradle my face, and strong enough to lift me up in one go.

I saw blue light as soon as the shutters were raised. I followed the angel down the stairs. I went down over seven steps that made an echoing noise with each step. I tried not to be nervous as I entered Itaewon. But my knees were shaking. A man was standing at the base of the stairs,

his face as blurry as a ghost's. It was only when I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hands that I could see his face clearly. A man with serpentine long hair tied back in a bun stood in front of me.

"Give me a dark beer," the angel told the serpentine man, and sat at a wooden table. There was a blue light fixture above her head. There were other lights along with the blue, but they were all blurry. The light from the fridge was also faint.

"Who's this?" The serpentine man asked.

The man was wearing a sparkly hat like fish scales on his head. He took out and applied pink Chapstick. He took out a beer from the fridge and gave it to the angel. The angel leaned her elbow against the wooden table and looked at me.

"Do you want to drink something too?" the angel asked. I went through my pockets and took out some money. I had some money to buy a drink. When I took out 2,000 won, the fish hat put a Dr.Pepper can in front of me. I sat at a chair a few seats away from the angel and sipped my drink. The angel took out a cigarette and lit it. She traced the opening of her beer bottle with her finger.

"Let's listen to music."

She walked over to the sofa with her beer.

With her low-heeled shoes, she made a nice sound with her boots.

"What song is this?"

I asked the serpentine man in the fish hat.

"Jazz," the hat said.

"Jazz, and what?"

"What do you mean, what? That's it."

"Does it have something to do with modern melody?" As soon as I asked, the fish hat shook my half-full Dr.Pepper and told me to get going if I was done with my drink. I turned my head and looked at the angel sitting on the couch. The angel told the fish hat to be nice to

customers. The fish hat's shoulders tensed, and then he took out his Chapstick from his pocket again and applied it on his lips. He emitted a peach scent.

I put my bag on my lap, unzipped it and took out a book. I put “Hairless Monkey” and the library card side by side, and my lottery ticket on the side as well. When I raised my head, the fish hat looked away furtively, pretending he hadn’t been looking.

“It’s not 8 o’clock yet, is it?” I asked the hat. The fish hat came over and picked up my book, card, and lottery ticket in turn.

“Park Seung-bo? Is this you?” the fish hat asked. I told the fish hat that Park Seung-bo was not me, but Mr.X. I told him Mr.X is Seung-bo’s nickname, and if you ever get pinned down by Seung-bo’s butt, your neck will snap.

“Why did you come here and not the library? Does your mom know you’re going around like this?” the fish hat asked.

“She knows. I told her I was on a research field trip.”

“What?”

“A research field trip. This is a research field trip for me.”

I told the fish hat about the library card which couldn’t be passed on to anyone else, the Itaewon meeting, and the expressionless dancer’s legendary dance. The fish hat asked what on earth that was, and I told him about the rhythm and hormones, but he kept asking what on earth I was talking about, and whether I was drunk. Then he brought over a yellow bottle from a shelf full of liquor bottles.

“Wanna drink this?” the fish hat asked. I didn’t know whether I could drink this too, so I looked over at the angel, but she wasn’t there.

“Your mom would be so glad to know you’re doing this,” the fish hat poured some yellow liquid into a small glass. I put the bottle containing the yellow liquid to my nose and sniffed. I felt like I was getting drunk just from the smell.

“So, your friend X gave you this monkey book and told you to go to Itaewon?” the fish hat said, touching his chin to his chest as if to burp.

“Something like that.”

“What are you going to do in Itaewon?”

“Watch some people dance, I guess. Do some life counseling too. I can’t say any details. Because you don’t seem like an IS, mister.”

I said this while looking at the fish hat’s thick eyebrows and stubbled chin.

The fish hat’s adam’s apple bobbed as he drank his alcohol.

“What’s this?”

“Tequila. Open your mouth.”

The fish hat told me to bend my neck back, and squeezed some lemon juice into my mouth. Drops of lemon juice dripped into my nose and around my mouth.

“I thought you were Teu-ru’s daughter. I wondered if you were her secret daughter. Teu-ru is not your mom, is she?” the fish hat asked, pouring the yellow liquid into the glass again.

“Who is Teu-ru?”

“The woman who came in with you earlier.”

Oh, Teu-ru. The angel’s name was Teu-ru. I recalled the meaning of the English word “true.” But just in case, I asked the fish hat whether Teu-ru was the English word true.

“So you’re not an idiot.”

“Who’s an idiot? And why is Teu-ru my mom?”

“If not your mom, your dad?” The fish hat laughed his head off. On the laughing fish hat’s cheeks, two dimples appeared as if someone had pinched them. Pissed, I asked the fish hat for a drink. The fish hat told me not to say crazy things, and brought over a bottle of liquor.

“Why? If my friend Yu-ji’s with his grandpa while his grandpa is drinking makgeolli, he gets some.”

When I said that, the fish hat put a few drops of the yellow liquor in my Dr.Pepper. Very little, a few drops. But the moment I drank it, I felt like gunpowder exploded in my throat and chest, and a yellow current flowed through my head.

“Are you really not Teu-ru’s daughter? You two look alike,” the fish hat said.

“My mom doesn’t wear makeup. And her hands are small.”

“Then who are you?” the fish hat asked, but I could not answer. I’m Gu Do-rim, 13 years old, number 9 and charcoal gray – but suddenly I didn’t know who I was.

“Do you know where this is? Why did you come here?”

“I’ve come here on a research field trip. I’m going to middle school next year, but all of the girls in my neighborhood are going to Jinseong Girl’s Middle School. But if I’m a man, I can’t go to Jinseong Girl’s Middle School, right?”

“Are you a guy?” the fish hat asked. I shook my head.

“No, maybe, I mean maybe. I’m a girl but it’s possible that I’m not a woman, right? Don’t you know ‘maybe,’ mister? If maybe I’m a guy, where do I go?”

As soon as I asked, the fish hat said he needed to take a piss and like a snake disappeared with a swish of his long hair. Alone, I stared at the liquor bottles on the shelf. On the table was the Chapstick the fish hat had left. I uncapped the Chapstick lid and smelled it. Before it had a peach scent, but strangely now it smelled like a wet rag.

“I have a good idea,” the fish hat appeared in front of me once more, dragging his slippers on the ground. “Can’t you go to a co-ed school? Right?”

“I can, but there’s no cafeteria there. I’m scared of the older kids too. They say the seniors beat you up if you don’t wear makeup.”

I drank. Then I took the cigarette butt in the ashtray and put it in my

mouth. The fish hat said he had never seen a kid like me, and told me to spit out the butt before he reported me to the police. Then Teu-ru showed up. She put my Dr.Pepper to her nose and sniffed, then crumpled it up and threw it at the fish hat.

“Did you give this kid alcohol?” she shouted. “How many drops.....”

The fish hat responded. “So what? She says her friend drinks makgeolli. And I’ve already been hit over the head with a bottle when I was younger than this kid.”

Teu-ru threw the cigarette butt she grabbed from my mouth at the fish hat. Then she took me somewhere. “Teu-ru is ‘truth’ in English, I thought as she dragged me. I wanted to write a letter to my angel too. I want to eat a lot of delicious things and live happily with precious people without greed. But suddenly my insides felt queasy and I felt like puking. I stopped and bent over, and puked out the yellow liquid. The liquid I threw up splattered onto Teu-ru’s shoes and stockings. I couldn’t raise my head, smeared with snot and saliva.

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“Since the day you returned, we’ve been anxious every day for months. What else is there to tell you? We’ve told you so many times you’ve gotten scabs in your ears, but you just don’t listen. You think our words are as meaningless as the sound of a dog pooping in midsummer. There’s a saying that goes, “The mirror doesn’t laugh first.” It means you have to think of your family first and love them before they love you, right? Loving and living is life.

What are parents? Parents are the greatest idiots who know no one else but their children. Parents are also medicine. Parents are a warm room with heated floors. Parents are aftercare service. How unbearably heavy – I can’t take it anymore. Children are a lifelong heavy burden.”

After reading the letter, Teu-ru told me to rinse out my mouth one more time. I lowered my head and rinsed my mouth for the third time.

“Mark my words. If you drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes, this is what happens.”

Teu-ru watched me rinsing out my mouth in the mirror above the sink. “Whose letter is this?” she asked. I spat out the water and told her about Yu-ji and the letters. There are over 100 letters, but I’ve only read three.

“I made a mistake and gave him chocolates on Valentine’s Day. Yu-ji is half angel and half devil, but when his nose is backed up and his head hurts, he’s the devil. So I’m just reading them.”

I wiped my mouth with a towel. After that, I stood in front of Teu-ru and breathed on her face. She sniffed to see if there was any bad smell from my mouth.

“But isn’t this really Itaewon?”

When I asked, Teu-ru said it seemed like I was still drunk.

In modern melodies

I’m fascinated by your new dance

The fish hat put on the hormone song for me as a sign of reconciliation. It was getting close to 9 o’clock, and I checked to see if the lottery numbers Teu-ru called out matched mine. Another losing ticket. I had to tear up my hopes again. I couldn’t go to Itaewon, and I couldn’t decide whether to become a man or a woman. All that remains now is for me to go home and learn how to solve equations before I become a middle school student as my mom tells me to. My mom says that regardless of whether I’m a man or a woman, the priority is

getting into a good university.

“Don’t give up. If you keep going, you’ll get there someday,” the fish hat said. Then he said he would dance for me to lift my spirits.

After throwing off his slippers, the fish hat jumped onto the sofa and started swaying.

“You can’t laugh. They say it’s not a modern melody if you laugh.”

At Teu-ru’s words, the fish hat said, “I’m not laughing, I’m not laughing,” but the dimples on his cheeks kept appearing as if someone pinched them.

I rode my hormones into my brain and spoke to it.

Hi, it’s me. I’m number 9 and 11, a hairless monkey, a lottery ticket that has to be torn up and thrown away – and you. Tell me, what’s the gender imprinted on me? What color ink will it come out as? Is it a hit or miss? Where are you going to take me now?

- For the medical claim that there is gender in the human brain and the connection between the brain and hormones, I referred to Anne Moore and David Jessel’s “Brain Sex” (translated by Kwak Yoon-jung, Booksnut, 2009).

END

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Kim Mela was born in 1983, Seoul. She debuted as winning the Jaeum and Moeum New Writers Award. Her latest works include *At Least Twice*, *Cats*, *as Clear as Day* and *Spring 2021: The Novel*. In 2021, she won the 21st Young Writers Award.



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