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Bruce Fulton

University of British Columbia, bruce.fulton@ubc.ca

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Butterfly in the Dust

Ůn Hŭi-gyŏng

Translated by Jennifer Kyung

I started the car and the digital clock on the dashboard lit up. 5:35. God, had it been that long? We’d arranged to meet at three, and she’d arrived ten minutes fashionably late. And so I’d had to put up with her yammering for two and a half hours – unbelievable. Two and a half hours of her interminable success story, her cloying perfume, and the subtle feline odor that was wrong for her age. “Working Woman,” the column in which we spun autobiographical stories of successful women, was a topic I absolutely despised. Maybe it was just my bad luck, but every single woman I had interviewed so far was armored up in a power suit ready for battle -- or else dressed to flaunt her coy intentions.

It was supposed to have been Kim’s column, but a few months ago it was passed on to me with the explanation that a fresh viewpoint was needed. Well, perhaps “passed on” isn’t quite accurate. After all, the column was central to the success of C’est magazine. One of the ways that the president of C’est was able to legitimize running a women’s magazine was the growing numbers of “working women” eager to appear in the column, and this interest enabled the advertising department to fill its page quota with no problem. As for me, I had a splitting headache thanks to having to dally with yet another adept “lobbyist.”

The route to Kangnam, which was always congested during the day, was now a virtual parking lot. It wasn’t bad from the Shilla Hotel through the Yaksu Tunnel, but after a few miles I hit an endless line of vehicles at the Tongho Bridge and came to a standstill. It was always backed up here. Every car seemed to have given up, most of them idling peacefully, emergency brakes on.

I lit a cigarette. I was definitely going to be late for my date with Sŏn-hŭi in Insa-dong. Though I’d wanted to head straight there instead of going back to the office at this time of day, I didn’t want to be lectured by my editor, who’d been turning bitter in the face of harsh competition. I could imagine him telling me, if I tried to report on the interview over the phone, to return to the office instead to discuss it in more detail.
I lit up cigarette number two. Thinking of Sŏn-hŭi made my heart pound and ache at the same time. I can't really recall when I first saw her. A few months ago she was just another freelance writer passing through the office. Kim, my senior at C'est, was usually the one she turned in her drafts to. A few times when he was out on assignment it had been me, but I remember it had taken a while before her face had registered in my mind. There was some homeliness and some cuteness to her, but on the whole her features were rather ordinary. Perhaps such a generic face made her more approachable. The thing I couldn't understand was how such a woman could be the subject of so much gossip.

The day Kim passed on the “Working Woman” column to me he said, “If you need a freelancer, Ch’oe Sŏn-hŭi’s the best. But be careful-- she’s poison.”

“Why? You mean she doesn’t do what she’s told?”

“No, it’s not that. Have you seen those dimples when she smiles? She looks like she’d be supple, but man, she’s got bite! She’s stubborn too. I don’t know who’ll get her, but whoever it is, he’ll have to swear an oath before she lets him tap into her. After all, women like her go wild at night.”

Kim always talked like that. Everything he said ended with a reference to genitals, sex -- that kind of thing. The more the women writers on our staff despised it, the dirtier he talked.

“Last time, I got the assignment with hardly any notice and still managed to get myself a last-minute interview. I made all the arrangements and everything, but being short on time I got Sŏn-hŭi to write the report. But you know what she said? She says to me, ‘Her? Do you realize she’d be nothing if not for her inheritance and her father’s name? What do you expect from a woman like that?’ And she flat-out refuses to do it. So I tell her, just write that she’s more down to earth and sympathetic than people think, or something along those lines, but she starts swearing and shit about why she should have to write dumb clichés. She’s a royal pain in the ass. Who needs her bitching? Plus, she’s a cock-tease!”

Kim spoke loudly enough for Pang Hye-wŏn sitting next to him to hear. Hye-wŏn stared intently at her monitor as if to show that she wouldn’t let herself get provoked, but I noticed that the screen she was staring at was blank and her pretty face was all clenched up. Kim went on to say how Sŏn-hŭi did everything she pleased, making sure to throw in a few more sexual innuendos as he did. Then he lowered his voice and said, “They say she’s quite the slut,” as if divulging a secret. That’s when Hye-wŏn jumped up from her seat.
My throat cracked dry with tension. This was getting out of hand. Hye-won was a nice, principled woman and she wasn’t going to let her fellow alumna Son-hui be slandered. After all, it was she who had introduced Son-hui to C’est. Besides, these weren’t just random insults she was hearing. A self-styled spokesperson for women, Hye-won stood up for them whenever a gender-related issue came up in the editing department. She wasn’t about to let this incident pass unchallenged. And yet that’s exactly what she did, walking off to the washroom, heels clicking, seemingly unruffled by Kim’s words. Kim for his part plopped into his chair-looking rather miffed and purposeless, and began to flip through piles of photocopies. He didn’t even glance in my direction, as if he was done talking about “Working Woman” and Son-hui.

“Mr. Kim, is there any more photocopying to do?” I asked.

“No,” he answered dully without raising his head. I wondered where all his spunk had gone. Then I noticed that not only Hye-won but the other women in the editing department were gone—no more women to provoke. I could see why he was deflated.

A while later, on my way back from the washroom, I saw Hye-won in the lounge. She had her back to me, drinking coffee from the vending machine. I tapped her on the shoulder. She jumped—she must have been deep in thought—and turned to me.

“Pak Chu-won,” Her tone was stiff and her usual smile was nowhere to be seen. “Are you one of them now, Mr. Pak?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t be like that, trashing women and such...”

When I didn’t reply, she continued.

“I don’t expect you to change the way you think. I mean, I give men the benefit of the doubt so long as they watch how they speak.”

I could feel myself blushing at her blunt, confident tone—I had expected no less. But what surprised me were her next words.

“You know, Son-hui really is a slut. But there’s no need to treat her like a little girl.”

This was the second scandal about Son-hui.

The department head didn’t have nice things to say about her either. Kim had told me a story, quoting the head: “I had lunch with her once, and she was something else. If you want her to do your write up, you gotta let her know who’s
boss from the start.” And then the head had whispered, “Or just nail her real hard.” He had continued to discuss her impressive complexity with Kim.

And there was the time Sŏn-hŭi had come in with her draft just before lunchtime and had ended up joining Kim and the head for lunch. While they waited for the kimchi stew to boil, Kim was being his usual uncivilized self with women.

“I’m worried about how much weight I’m losing,” he had said to Sŏn-hŭi.

“Have you considered working out?”

“It’s the working out that’s to blame, hon. I don’t know what’s gotten into the wife, but she just can’t get enough of me. She’s quite the praying mantis! Man, I gotta do something because I’m wasting away.”

“How much do you weigh, anyway? You don’t look all that thin to me,” said Sŏn-hŭi, trying to change the subject.

“You wanna know my weight? What part exactly? Some parts weigh more than others.”

That was Kim, relishing the moment of triumph when a young woman blushed and dropped her head. But Sŏn-hŭi was different. Unfazed, she looked at Kim and said, “That’s a heavy load to be carrying all day.”

But Kim was pretty clever, “Only when I’m around you, Miss Ch’oe.”

“Well,” said Sŏn-hŭi dubiously, “I’ve never been able to confirm that firsthand.”

Sŏn-hŭi had been writing for various magazines other than C’est, according to a friend I was eating lunch with who’d left C’est for another magazine. He said he knew a lot about her because she also wrote for his magazine.

“She turns in her work a little late, but her interviews are amazing, the way they capture the main points and weave the person’s words into a clear picture. And she’s especially brilliant at dissecting people. After she interviewed the stage actor Kim T’ae-sŏp he said he felt naked under her questions. So I told him he should’ve gone ahead and stripped down---what’s the difference?”

He let out a good laugh, evidently delighted by the notion.

“I understand there’s a lot of dirt on that woman,” I said and then quickly emphasized, “About Miss Ch’oe, I mean.” I found myself using the “Miss” because I felt a pang of guilt about what Hye-wŏn had told me.

At the mention of her name, he produced an uncertain grin.

“So you know about her too, huh?”

“Know what?” I asked. His grin slowly spread into an open smile. “What’s up? Was there something between you two?”
“No, it was someone else.”
“Someone I know?”
“Probably.”
“Did they fuck?” I asked bluntly.
“Well, it wouldn’t be the first time.”
“So she’s really been around?” I left out the formal reference this time.
“You too, eh?”
“Not quite,” I chuckled. “But we did kind of get down once after some drinks.”
“What’s so amusing over there?” It was Hye-wŏn.
“Hey, long time no see. You here for lunch?” my friend asked, a smile pasted to his face, exaggerating his pleasure in seeing his former colleague.
“Yeah. But what kind of mischief are you guys getting into? You’re both red-faced with excitement over something.”
“That’s one of your flaws, Pang. You’re the type of woman that has to poke her nose into everything,” he said coolly.
“Then don’t start anything in the first place if a woman butting in is going to make you feel uncomfortable and guilty.” And then with a look that told us we were hopeless in her estimation, she told us to enjoy our meal and walked away to her awaiting party – several models and a stylist. She must have just come back from a photo shoot.
“Still as smart and beautiful as ever,” my friend mumbled as his eyes followed her. But he was quick to add that she’d be a pain to live with. I didn’t reply and let him babble on while I observed the refined way in which she placed her order.
“Judging from her costume bag they must have been at a swimsuit shoot. Well, it is May already. That male model sure looks like he’d have quite the package. Hey, during a photo shoot, do you think a woman like Pang stares at the guy’s dick? I bet she can’t take her eyes off it. They say smart women are natural cockteasers but horny as heck. And the women who go to watch ballet...we all know they’re there to check out the ballerino’s package when they’re dancing.”
Just then, Hye-wŏn turned her head towards us as if she had heard him. I felt my face flush.
We returned to Sŏn-hŭi.
“Rumor has it she’s writing a sex bible.”
According to my friend, Sŏn-hŭi was compiling a record of everything a man had said to her during sex. The second I heard that, I felt that our conversation about her was pathetic. I felt a bit sorry for Sŏn-hŭi as well. I couldn’t shake the guilt I felt at the thrill of hearing her get butchered, not to mention the stabs I had taken at her myself.

“Let’s stop. Enough is enough.”

“I wonder who all the guys could be. One of them is probably her news source provider, and there’s gotta be a few more that we know. This could be fun. Should we try persuading her to get it published?”

All of this was from three months ago. From this month on, I was to write the “Working Woman” column on my own because Sŏn-hŭi would be launching her new project, “New Age Esprit.” But in the interval, collaborating on “Working Woman” had brought us closer together. Despite her numerous scandals and my nitpicky, demanding personality, Sŏn-hŭi had stolen my heart—it was a classic fairy tale made modern.

I checked the digital clock once more. It was well past six. I put a third cigarette in my mouth but didn’t light it. Cars were slowly starting to move. Just then I thought I saw a flicker of motion. I looked through the car windows and the windshield but saw only the empty sky, gradually filling with darkness. But then, another flicker. A small white speck was floating through the night.

At first I thought it was a fleck of dust. But had it been dust, it would have moved along with the draft from the car. Instead, it seemed to be using all its might to go in the opposite direction. Looking closer, I realized it was a small butterfly. This one butterfly was telling me it existed, as it made its anxious way through the darkening void. I felt myself choke up.

“I hate having to suffer,” Sŏn-hŭi had once told me. She said she couldn’t stand suffering when she wanted to have something, wanted to eat something, or wanted to see something so badly.

She told me she had a dog when she was growing up. “A poodle, you ask? No way. I didn’t want a ticklish-looking furball. It was just a mongrel; one that exists solely in order to please you, a mongrel with a black nose and droopy ears. Mom nagged at Dad when he brought it home, saying we’d only keep it for a day. So we named it One Day. But after that first day, One Day had already justified its existence. Names are quite strange. From the moment we gave it a name, the dog became part of the family. It differentiated him from stray dogs. Until the previous day no one had given a shit if he was starving or dying. The previous day
he probably would've gotten a swift kick from me had he chewed the hem of my pants, but after that first day he was the symbol of love. One Day did a lot of stupid things, which is why I liked him so much. But in grade five, on the last day of school before summer break, I came back home to find him dead—he’d gotten into some rat poison. He’d jumped into our family room through a window twice its height. He had totally scratched up the wardrobe door too. I didn’t cry but gave him a kick as he lay there foaming at the mouth. The grown-ups wouldn’t stop saying how heartless I was. A few years later I came across a strange poem. The poet talked about having such a cute dog, he imagined what it would be like having a child of his own and panicked. It was only then that I understood why I had kicked One Day that day.”

She also told me about a time she’d lost her fountain pen. It was a present she’d received in grade eleven. Something she liked so much that she carried it around with her all the time. But during PE, when she was in the washroom, the pen she had tucked away in her gym pants fell out through a hole in the pocket. Into a pit toilet, that is. She shoved her hand into weeks’ worth of bubbling crap, felt around, and managed to pull it out. But with the very hands that had recovered her pen, she dropped it into the pit once again.

“I stopped smoking too. Actually, I didn’t really quit. I just grew out of it since I only smoked if I had some on me. Think about it. I was all out of cigarettes, it was the middle of the night, and I went through all the trouble of going to three different vending machines only to find they were all broken! Unless you experienced it, you wouldn’t understand. So from that day forward, I stopped smoking...’cause I can’t stand the suffering.”

-Right now, I can’t stand the suffering of wanting to hold you. I couldn’t say it out loud, but I was tormented by my desire for Sŏn-hŭi. From the moment she told me about her dog and all the while she was telling me the tale of rummaging in shit, I didn’t know how to deal with the hard on in my pants. Whenever I looked at her, I felt a burst of desire that left me longing for her lips. She was definitely far from being sexy or feminine. She was of average height, a bit on the skinny side, with a small rack. There really were no other words to describe her physique. It was a lot harder as well to find the adjectives to describe her attractive qualities. The only one I could mention with any degree of certainty was her haughty strut, which made it look like her heels hardly touched the ground. And then those lips of hers, always dry but delicately contoured.
Even so, she had a magnetic power that drew people in. Although she didn’t have any special features that left a lasting impression upon first glance, anyone who’s looked her in the eye would agree that she had charm. The way she spoke, the way she looked, and the way she smiled - in essence, any part of her soul-bearing form had the strange effect of captivating and seducing you as you unknowingly got sucked up by the power radiating from her.

*I want to hold you so bad I can’t stand it.* How would she respond if I said this? Probably something along the lines of: “Really? Then let’s fuck. You don’t have to suffer. Afterwards, you’ll laugh at yourself for the meaningless suffering you made yourself endure. Everything’s like that. It only seems important when you’re suffering.” I wondered why she had to use her body so recklessly. But I didn’t dare throw myself at her-- I cared for her too much.

The stronger my desire for her, the more I suffered from the harsh rumors about her. I really don’t know what I was thinking when I purposely dug around for more dirt on her. If I hadn’t judged her on the basis of those rumors, I could’ve accepted Sŏn-hŭi for the way she was...To be honest, I was just being a guy. There were times when I reacted with compassion and tolerance toward the scandals that engulfed her, but jealousy and disbelief always took over in the end. Within the stifling frustration of wanting to know the truth, I was in denial. Could it be true? No, it couldn’t be. But what if it were? No, there’s no way. I saw myself as a loveless moron repeating soliloquies of forgiveness and rage at things I wasn’t completely sure of. Finally, I came to the conclusion that there was nothing I could do about wanting her.

“What? That I’m a slut?” I asked one time, pretending to be indifferent. I knew it was cowardly, but I consoled myself that as a man who loved her I had the right to know.

“What? That I’m a slut?”

Before I had a chance to absorb what she said she’d changed subject. Not on purpose, I don’t think. She simply didn’t care what people thought of her.

“So, will you really fuck anyone?” My voice was quivering ever so slightly.

“What, like you don’t?”

There wasn’t a trace of hostility or curiosity in her voice.

“Haven’t you been to Kirum-dong or Ch’ongnyangni? Men always try to differentiate between sleeping with women they like and sleeping with prostitutes. A man can get as much sex from a prostitute as he wants so it’s
irrelevant. Are you telling me that since you only sleep with women you love it’s wrong to sleep with anyone else? I sure don’t see things that way.”

“I bet it’s got something to do with that absurd philosophy of yours about not wanting to be tied down. That’s what enables you to forget about anyone you ever sleep with right? So you don’t have to worry about getting attached or obsessive.”

My voice came out sounding harsh because I’d just remembered what my friend had said about her writing a sex bible.

“What’s the matter with you, Chu-wôn. Why are you getting mad? I’m just saying that I don’t fuck the anonymous dick. Don’t think of it as me having sex but as me breaking free from the shackles of not having sex. Putting up a fight against it is just a pointlessly tiring battle. From the moment we get up in the morning, when we eat, when we walk, when we buy something, even till the day we declare peace, the whole world is talking sex, displaying sex, having sex, or pretending to hide sex and yet all the while stressing its importance. So, tell me this. Why put up unconvincing fights and burden yourself of saying, “No! Please, not that?” It’s silly.”

By the time I got to the office parkade it was nearly 7. No way was I going to make our 7:30 date. Actually Son-huí probably wouldn’t have left her place in Myôngnyun-dong yet. As I stared at the elevator display, watching the numbers go down, I could only think about calling Son-huí the moment I got to my desk. And then the elevator doors opened and Hye-wôn stepped out.

“Oh, Mr. Pak. Shouldn’t you be going home?”

“Yeah. Is the head in?”

“Yeah, seemed like he’d been waiting for you for a while.”

Suddenly she turned to say, “Oh yeah, Son-huí called. She said she can’t meet up today but she’ll see you tomorrow when she drops off her piece. I left a note on your desk.”

As she was about to leave she whipped around once more, rather provocatively, I thought.

“So, Son-huí’s writing a sex bible or something, eh? Mr. Kim thinks you’ve been seeing Son-huí as a cover to steal it. When he heard me talking to her over the phone he asked, ‘Has he finally gotten through to her? Chu-wôn, softy that he is, couldn’t possibly have fallen for her, right?’”
“My God. I can’t believe he still remembers that—it was months ago. I only said those things ‘cause I didn’t know much about her back then.”

My face must have been full of discontent.

“Oh, is that anger I see? The head was right. I guess you really are falling for Sŏn-hŭi.”

“That’s enough.”

“Mark my words. You can’t treat Sŏn-hŭi like a little girl. She was always a bit wild through university but I never knew she was that big a slut. I mean, I’ve heard my share of things, being in this business as long as I have, but a sex bible? Come on, that’s just sick, I tell you—it’s sick!”

Staring into my cringing face, Hye-wŏn continued.

“Think I’m being too harsh? Let me give you a heads up so you can decide for yourself. Know why she stood you up today? It’s probably ‘cause of Pak Yong-sae, you know, the interior designer. Today’s the grand opening of his café.”

How could she say it so smoothly? I felt a wild urge to seal her lips, which were painted with the latest “sexy color” lipstick.

Finishing her spiel, she straightened up her Max Mara suit and disappeared to the signature clacking of her heels. Hers was a polished silhouette.

After briefing the head I returned to my desk. I tore up the note that Hye-wŏn had left, then opened my desk drawers and rummaged around for the invitation that Pak Yong-sae had sent me. I had tucked it away thinking that rich bastards sure knew how to keep busy. Thankfully, I found the invitation, still baring the honorific “Mr.” before my name.

I don’t even want to think about what happened that night. Just as Hye-wŏn had anticipated, Sŏn-hŭi had gone to the café, and I found her sitting there next to Yong-sae. From that moment on I chugged drink after drink, glancing up at her from time to time, catching her laughing or nodding in agreement to whatever the hell Yong-sae was saying. I’d down one drink, take a look at Sŏn-hŭi, down another drink, take a look at Sŏn-hŭi... and in the end I blacked out.

When I came to, I was crouching in a back alley—I think it was Shinch’ŏn—with a splitting headache. My day’s meals were laid out before me in a neat circle-barfed up sometime earlier. Judging by its close proximity, I must’ve been sitting when I spewed it out because the spill wasn’t very big. Next to it stood Sŏn-hŭi.

“Aren’t you going back to your Yong-sae?” I asked sarcastically.

“Yeah. I was just about to leave.” Her voice showed no interest.

“So, nothing I say bothers you now?”
No reply.

"Tell me. In your own words, do I actually exist for you? Or am I just another name? Answer me, dammit!" My shrunken stomach felt ready to burst out, I was so angry. And sure enough, a tear rolled down my face. "That's right. I'm just a weepy loser while you and that bastard..." I couldn't finish and instead started bawling my eyes out. Sŏn-hŭi simply stood there, at a distance, in silence. Actually, no, she wasn't just standing there. She was standing there rubbing my shoes against the edge of a manhole, wiping off the splattered vomit. I continued to sob some more. The next I knew, she was gone. It was a May night, cruelly infused with the scent of flowers.

The next day, Sŏn-hŭi showed up with her draft as promised. I had waited all day for her to show up, yet the moment she stepped through the door, I typed away on the keyboard pretending not to see her, though my senses picked up on her every move. From the corner of my eye I saw her look in my direction, but when I didn't turn to face her, she just smiled at Hye-wŏn and went straight to the head's desk. Coincidentally I had a newspaper article spread out on my desk that I was using to type up something meaningless while all ears strained to hear what Sŏn-hŭi and the head were saying. After an exchange of greetings, I could hear her hand in her draft, followed by flipping of pages.

"Looks good."

"Did you read the whole thing?"

"Well, I just skimmed through it. Let's see now. So the title is...ah, here it is, 'Sex, Life's Passion.' Ha! Of course, I should have known. Ch'oe, you've certainly got good taste! To capture the attention of the new age singletons, obviously it has to come down to sex. Isn't that right, Pak?"

Only then did I turn and greet her, and rather coldly, "Oh, when did you get here?" I gave her an icy stare, which she returned with a bright smile. It was this aloof attitude of hers that pissed me off even more. The head handed me her draft, telling me to take a look, which gave me the opportunity to turn my back to her.

Combining the literary style and format of fiction and poetry, a newly attempted genre of sensual essays was going to be published for a project called "New Age Esprit," and Sŏn-hŭi's would be the first article in the series. This was how her story began:
I woke up in my lover's apartment at the crack of dawn. I had entered it the night before, using my own set of keys. He wasn't home yet so it was completely dark. I was thankful he offered me this desolate space which I liked so much. For some time, I lay still on the cold hard floor, the lights still off. I don't know when he came in. I had fallen asleep like that and only just opened my eyes to see his face looking down at me. He greeted my opened eyes with a kiss. Then, still in the dark, his fingers fumbled around my waist as he unzipped my jeans. And then he entered me, skillfully unlocking the door to my body, just the way I had entered his home in an all too familiar way. His heartfelt hands caressed the crevices of my body like a gardener tending to his own little domain. It was so warm and peaceful that I came to realize how intimate it was to live with such affection.

Yesterday was also the day I had arranged to meet up with my new beau. At noon I left my lover's apartment and went back to my own. I soaked in a long, hot bath then took out a satin blouse and pleated skirt to wear. And didn't forget the chiffon scarf, earrings, and of course a spritz or two of eau de cologne behind the ears. He arrived at our meeting spot a tad late. He also spoke a lot about his childhood. He described the picture he was currently sketching, and the children he taught at his studio - especially this one girl in particular. When he talks about drawing, his eyes light up with innocence.

"3D art is more popular but it's for that very reason that I chose to do 2D. I just cannot explain things to people in detail. All I can do is express my world. So it seems that only those who understand my mentality can truly appreciate my work."

He looked deep into my eyes as he said this as if to say that I was the very person who could understand him. A current zapped through my heart—it was electrifying. I could feel a soft flush in my cheeks. We walked through a dark alleyway and suddenly he pushed me against a brick wall. A piercing kiss, like my very first. Our bodies quivered and with an unspoken agreement, we both knew how our night would end.

Slightly awkward and careful, thus all the more impressive sex. My heart pounded not knowing how to approach him. I was nervous about every movement and every word because I didn’t know how he’d respond. Honestly, I didn’t really care about being satisfied. Just the idea of us being one body due to this special bond, and the happiness I felt knowing that at this moment he was completely mine. These were the only things that kept me going. Such
overwhelming and sentimental feelings finally led me to understand the beauty of sex.

I craved coffee the minute I got home. I was about to brew up an Irish blend when I suddenly felt like drinking a pre-packaged mix instead. Luckily I found some packages by the sink left over from last year’s ski trip. The taste of instant coffee, long forgotten, brought back memories of my younger days when I had first started drinking it. Memories are such short, vivid images, sounds, smells, and tastes that cling to moments in time past. They have no meaning. Sex is just the same. Why fuss over things such as defining what it means, discussing tips and ways to improve, and coming up with a set of desirable standards? How is that any different from investigating how often someone goes to the washroom, how much they juice out, where they want to excrete, what they think about most when on the can, and if they listen to the sound or smell of their waste, and what they make of it?

As long as you’re honest, you’ll never be trapped by sex. And should any heartfelt feelings arise in life, it would be because of untainted sex. It isn’t my fault if my desire for sexual freedom makes me look like I’m abusing my life. The world is to blame for setting up such conventions.

The head’s voice rang in my ears as I finished reading.

"Is this story based on your own experience, Sŏn-hŭi?" he asked in an unnecessarily loud voice.

Sŏn-hŭi merely offered a gentle smile and turned to face the window.

"Sleeping with two men in one night...there’s no way someone can come up with a story like that unless she’s writing from experience."

His thundering voice caught the attention of the entire graphics and photo team. I opened my mouth, wanting to snap at the head, something I’d never do normally. But then I saw Hye-wŏn a step ahead of me, whip her chair around and I clamped my mouth shut. But what she said blew me away.

"Sŏn-hŭi! When are you going to hand over your sex bible? Stop toying with poor Chu-wŏn and hand it over already."

Sŏn-hŭi turned from the window to Hye-wŏn, her lips looking ready to open, but she kept silent. Slowly she turned to look at me, lips slightly parted as though she really had something to say this time. But perhaps she thought it wasn’t worth mentioning because the delicate contours of her lips remained as they were. The statue of Venus couldn’t have looked more refined.
There were no words to describe my level of shock. I wanted to wave my hands frantically in denial but Sŏn-hŭi got up from her chair, gave a clumsy nod in our direction, and walked out. Frozen on the spot, all I could do was gulp painfully. From behind she looked a bit airy yet somewhat precarious at the same time.

The butterfly from yesterday came to mind -- small and unstable as it flew relentlessly against the wind. Why had I assumed it was going in the wrong direction? Why hadn’t I considered that it might have had its own desired path? If it really had been a speck of dust as I originally thought, it would’ve just taken flight with the wind, the way it should. I had assumed it was going the right way or wrong way according to my point of view instead of considering the butterfly’s motive. Not realizing that the ability to proceed along one’s desired path was the critical difference between being alive and being dead.

I jumped up from my seat and ran after Sŏn-hŭi. The sun had set and it was dark. Sŏn-hŭi’s light gray trench coat flashed past the stairs leading to the subway. Her nimble, haughty steps stirred my yearning emotions. I continued after her, dismissing the staring eyes of passersby. But in the split second it took me to apologize to someone I’d bumped into, she was gone. Thinking she had gotten on the train, I desperately ran down the steps but she was nowhere in sight. I bought myself a ticket and searched the trains, the platform on the other side, everywhere I could, including the washrooms, but it was no use.

I went back outside and turned down a side street opposite the steps to the subway. The alley was filled with the scent of spring blossoms, much like the night before. I had no idea such an alleyway existed so close to the building I had been working in for the past two years. I was surprised at how busy it was. Where the alley sloped it forked into three paths and from those paths forked even smaller pathways. After twenty minutes of reckless wandering, I found her, near the end of the last alleyway, leaning against a stone wall like a shadow lurking in the background of a canvas painting. As I stepped towards her, all I got were flitting glances. A passionate hug would have been just the thing in moments like this, but Sŏn-hŭi showed no signs of wanting it. Even so, panting for breath, I pulled her into a strong embrace. My stiff and tired legs gave way and I staggered, but she was still in my arms.

We were now lovers who had passed the test of love, and to celebrate, we drank ourselves drunk. The shabby old pub in the alley had quite the ambience, but it was doubtless the powerful fragrance of blossoms engulfing my face every
time I stepped outside to use the washroom that got me all the more intoxicated. That night I took Sŏn-hŭi to a motel. The moment we entered our room, Sŏn-hŭi collapsed against the bed like a worn out gypsy. When I came back from taking a leak, she was already fast asleep. Her face was so innocent and peaceful that I stared at her for the longest time, resting her head on my arm. Maybe it was from getting hammered two nights in a row, but I too conked out soon after.

When I woke up early the next morning, it was Sŏn-hŭi looking down at me.

"Chu-wŏn, you look so innocent and peaceful when you’re asleep."

I stripped off Sŏn-hŭi’s clothes and looked into her eyes. The reality of this moment was so overwhelming that I held onto her tight. Then I piggybacked her like a baby toward the window and we looked out into the early morning streets.

"Look at the colors. Doesn’t it look like the whole world is blanketed in blue paint?" I asked thoughtfully.

"Blue paint and the crystal clear wind." Sŏn-hŭi added haughtily as if pointing out a huge error on my part.

I walked to the bed with her still on my back.

"Want me to drop you?"

"Yeah. Do it real hard."

I threw her onto the bed with all my might and—she burst into laughter. We lay down side by side. Sŏn-hŭi looked like she was zoned out deep in thought.

"What are you thinking?"

"Oh, just what position would be best."

"And? Did you come to a conclusion?"

"Yeah"

"Well, what is it?"

"A lot of different, very lengthy positions," she replied, with a giggle.

It was then that I realized she was being shy.

Sŏn-hŭi was so warm inside.

Smokes taste the best after exercise.

"Want a smoke?"

I brought my cigarette to her lips. She took a drag and blew a long puff of smoke onto my naked chest. I watched as she played with the chain I wore around my neck. Passion might be felt during the sex act itself, but affection is only achieved by the cuddling and looking into each other’s eyes afterwards. I think I even remember reading somewhere that love is not defined by the act of
having sex but the falling asleep together when it’s done. It was either laxity from the peaceful atmosphere that did it, or the satisfaction of scoring that led to my possessive behavior – either way I had doomed myself. I remembered the sex bible and the next thing I knew I was asking her about it.

“Was it really from your own experience?”

Son-huí removed the hand she was caressing me with and slowly got out of bed. I assumed she was going to the washroom.

“So, Yŏng-sae must be your current lover... then who’s your new beau?”

Having brought it up, I couldn’t stand not knowing. At first it was out of mere curiosity but now it was more like a full-blown obsession. In fact, I was getting pissed off. This was definitely a matter of concern to me. After all, I had just slept with her. I propped myself up in bed. I could hear in my voice the carefree tone that men inevitably adopt after a successful lay. I started to think that perhaps now was the time she would come clean about everything. Maybe even expressing a bit of regret and then solemnly swearing her love for me. But it didn’t seem like Son-huí was headed for the washroom after all. Instead, she was picking her clothes up off the floor and getting dressed, showing no signs of having heard me. When I saw her pick up her bag, legs once again stockinged, I jerked out of bed.

“You’re leaving?”

I had no idea what was happening even as she pulled her wallet out from her bag. I stared at her with blinking eyes as she held out some money. But why?

“Let’s just call it business.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Or consider it rape if you don’t want the money.”

There was no emotion in her voice.

“Mr. Pak, I have a hunch you were out all night.”

Hye-wŏn sure did catch on quick. I had taken a shower and shaved at the motel so nothing would’ve stuck out as being any different from any other day. She must have spotted yesterday’s umbrella dangling from my briefcase on this bright and sunny morning. That probably said it all. I had no intention of explaining myself to her, and tried to tell her as much by dropping my bag onto my desk with a loud thud.

“So, how does it feel to have finally gotten your name in that sex bible?”
There was a slight quiver to her taunting voice. Then, as if she had been slapped in the face, Hye-won jumped up out of her seat and went out into the hall.

Although the dust storm that had been forecast was supposed to be over by now, outside the window I could see a haze of white fluff from the willow trees stirring in with the dusty air. Could there be something else in the air this time as well? I tried to take a closer look but a sudden gust of wind scattered everything into the vast emptiness of the sky. My vision was blurred.

Hye-won came back inside muttering to herself, “I hate spring! There’s so much fucking dust.”