

I imagine what happened inside one police interrogation room so many years ago. By *imagine*, I don't mean *invent*. But it's not like I was actually there, so I don't know what else to call it. I picture the scene from that day, based on what he told me and some other clues, my own experience and conclusions. It's not just this scene I imagine. For over sixteen years, I've pondered, prodded, and forged every detail embroiled in the case known as "The High School Beauty Murder"—to the point I often fool myself into thinking I'd personally witnessed the circumstances now stamped on my mind's eye. The imagination is just as painful as reality. No, it's more painful. After all, what you imagine has no limit or end.

\*

The boy sat alone in the interrogation room for over ten minutes. The room was bare apart from a table and four chairs. No pictures decorated the wall, no flower vase or ashtray sat on the table. Some people appear uneasy no matter what they do, and this boy was one of them. He

sat awkwardly in his chair, with eyes dull and sleepy-looking, like constantly shifting camera lenses trying to find focus on a white background. Maybe because there was nothing to look at.

A detective entered the room and sat across from the boy. The boy's gaze grew a bit more focused.

"Han Manu!" the detective snapped, in a tone used by a teacher or head disciplinarian to summon a troublemaker before dealing out punishment.

It was enough for resentment to take root in the boy's heart. I believe this was also the moment his cruel fate was sealed.

At the time, no one at school called him by his actual name. The other students called him *halmanggu* or *manujeol*, but his most shining nickname came from the song "Han-o-baeg-nyeon."\* To their ears, the opening words sounded just like his name. If you slurred the *n* sound so that you said "ha-an-man-u-u-u" instead of "ha-an-man-eu-eu-eun," it was perfect. This particular nickname proved so popular that both *halmanggu* and *manujeol* died out eventually, and his friends would belt out "Ha-an man-u-u-u!" like a master pansori singer, warming up her voice before a performance.

But until the incident, I wasn't even aware of his

\* The translation of *halmanggu* is *hag*, and *manujeol* is *April Fool's Day*. "Han-o-baeg-nyeon" is a famous Korean folk song. Translated as *five-hundred-year sorrow*, the song became a big hit when singer Cho Yong-pil released it in his 1979 debut album.

existence. He was in his last year of senior high and I'd just entered the school. When I grope through my memory, though, I seem to recall boys warbling his name in ridiculous, plaintive fashion in the halls. They meant no harm or disrespect. After the incident, the nickname stopped altogether. No one called him anything. There was no need.

I sometimes try calling him the old way. *Ha-an man-u-u-u*. This life full of misery, as the lyrics say. Then I start wondering if this miserable life has any meaning. I don't mean life in an abstract or general sense, but the life of an actual person. Did the pages of his life hold any meaning? Probably not. At least that's what I believe. Just like how I believe life has no special meaning. Not his, not my sister's, not even mine. Even if you try desperately to find it, to contrive some kind of meaning, what's not there isn't there. Life begins without reason, and ends without reason.

\*

The detective told the boy to listen carefully: This time was different from last time, he needed to think carefully before answering; if not, things will not go well for him. The detective's face was curiously blank. Though the boy wasn't the brightest kid on the block, he could sense the older man had become more frightening than he'd been at the initial questioning. Something seethed

within him, and anyone seething with something was to be feared.

“Why don’t we start by reviewing your statement from last time? On June 30th, 2002, around 18:00—” the detective said, punctuating his words by gingerly pressing the tip of his ballpoint pen on the table. “That is, around six o’clock in the afternoon, you were on your scooter on your way to a chicken delivery when you passed a car being driven by Shin Jeongjun. Correct?”

“No.”

“No?” The detective’s gaze skimmed the document and shot back up. “Well, that’s what your statement says.”

“I wasn’t on my way to a delivery. I was on my way back.”

An inconsequential detail. The detective looked down once more.

“Then why does it say here you were going to a delivery? Fine, you were on your way back when you passed a car that Shin Jeongjun was driving? Correct?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of car did you say he was driving?”

“Pardon me?”

“The car model!” He was sure the boy was pretending not to understand. “What kind of car was he driving?”

“Uh, I’m not sure, but I think it was dark gray. And shiny. Didn’t I mention all this last time?”

“I told you, we’re going over your statement. So a shiny dark gray car?”

“Yes.”

“Like this?”

The detective pulled out a photo from the file. The boy leaned forward, peered at the photo, and looked up.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Even if it wasn’t this exact one, would you say it was the same kind—an SUV?”

The boy studied the photo once more and finally looked up at the detective.

“I think so.”

“For the last time, was it an SUV or not?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. You’re doing good.”

The detective pulled out another photo. The boy peered at it and then at the detective.

“Is this your scooter?” the detective asked.

The boy said yes right away.

“Good.”

The detective riffled through the pages of the file, delaying the moment of the decisive blow.

“Now for the important part. You said you saw Kim Hae-on sitting in the passenger seat of Shin Jeongjun’s car, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And what did you say about her appearance? How was her hair arranged and what was she was wearing?”

“Her hair was down.”

“You mean it was loose, not tied up.”

"Yes."

"And? What was she wearing?"

"Um...she was in a tank top and shorts."

"A tank top and shorts?"

"Well, that's what I—"

"That's what you remember? What color?"

"Color?"

"Her clothes!" the detective barked, thinking idiots like this never answered straightaway. "What color were they?"

"I don't know."

"You don't remember?"

"Well, I'm not too sure."

"You know she was in a tank top and shorts, but you don't know what color? You think that makes sense?"

"But I swear I don't know!"

The boy was either hiding something or being intentionally vague. The detective wondered if the time had finally come to nab him. Right then, the boy glanced around the room.

"What's the matter?" the detective asked.

"Um, I have to go."

"What?"

"Do you know what time it is? I have to go to work."

The boy placed his hands on the table, as if he meant to get up. The detective glared at him in silence. What did he think then? Did he think: Got you, asshole! Was it then that he became convinced of the boy's guilt? Or

did he glance at the boy's hands on the table, and try to determine if they were capable of clutching something like a brick and bringing it down on someone's head? Hmm, he might have thought with a shake of his head, those hands do look tougher than Shin Jeongjun's. Not that you need a whole lot of power to bash in a girl's small head with smooth, glossy hair. If anything, Shin Jeongjun was taller, with a body hardened by sports, while Han Manu was rather small and of average height.

The detective cleared his throat and told the boy to pay attention. "Your statement doesn't add up. Look here."

He turned the photos around to face the boy, and proceeded to explain: Shin Jeongjun wasn't driving just any car, but a Lexus RX300. The seat height of an SUV is higher than that of the average sedan, which means its window height is also higher. But if you're sitting on a scooter, you would be at eye level with the window of the SUV, or even slightly lower.

The detective asked if he knew what all this meant. The boy didn't respond; the detective was kind enough to spell it out for him.

"What I'm saying is, from your stumpy little scooter, it would have been physically impossible to see if Kim Hae-on was wearing shorts or jeans."

So he said, but he wasn't completely sure. It was just a hunch. But when he saw the shock on the boy's face, the detective knew it was time to go in for the kill.

"Therefore, you didn't actually see Kim Hae-on in Shin

Jeongjun's car. You saw her out of it. That's how you knew she was wearing shorts. You saw Shin dropping her off, or you saw her after he dropped her off, walking by herself. Either way, you didn't see her sitting in the passenger seat of his car. If we follow that logic..."

The boy blinked several times and listened. Though he understood what the detective was saying, he didn't seem to comprehend the situation he was in. Around the detective's lips hovered the nervous smile of one who was about to land a fatal blow.

"The last person to see Kim Hae-on wasn't Shin Jeongjun, but you. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The boy could only stare. Once again, the detective got the sense that the boy was feigning ignorance. He needed to come out a lot stronger.

"What I'm saying is, you're the prime suspect. You killed Kim Hae-on. You struck her with a blunt object and killed her."

"Me?" the boy cried with a shudder. "But why?"

The boy, who appeared unnatural no matter what he did, seemed as if were acting. The detective became convinced the imbecile couldn't do anything right.

"Weren't you listening? You killed Kim Hae-on and then tried to pin it on Shin Jeongjun, passing yourself off as a witness. Isn't that right?"

"No! Why would I do that? Why would I kill her?"

"How would I know? You tell me."

"But I've never even talked to Hae-on! She hardly ever



talked!"

"Says who?"

"Everyone! She never answered you even when you talked to her. Not that I ever tried."

What the boy said was true, but the detective had zero interest in details that didn't concern the case.

"What hogwash is this? Han Manu, what are you gonna do now? Didn't you say you saw her in shorts? Tell me how that's possible."

The detective leaned across the table. He wondered how the fool was going to dig himself out of this one.

"I don't know—" the boy mumbled with difficulty, but the detective, intoxicated by his sense of victory, was unable to hear the rest of what he said.

"Oh, you don't know if you saw her in shorts now? You're changing your tune?"

"I'm not saying that..."

"No?"

"I think maybe...uh...maybe somebody else saw it, too."

"Somebody else?"

The boy closed his mouth. He didn't feel like talking anymore. In fact, he was wishing he could take back what he'd just said.

"I don't think you grasp the seriousness of your situation," the detective said. "This isn't something you can weasel your way out of. Until now, you said you were the only one who saw Kim Hae-on, so what do you mean by *somebody else* all of a sudden?"

"I never said I was the only one who saw her."

"You never said that? Fine then. Who else saw her?"

"Do I have to say? I really don't want to."

Manu wouldn't have wanted to tell. He would have hated to bring her up. He would have recalled the warmth of her body, as she'd sat slightly pressed up against his back that day. Recalling that sensation, he might have grinned like an idiot before the detective, just as he had done with me.

"Have you lost your frigging mind?" The detective felt like smacking the boy's ugly long face that resembled a pickle. "You think this is a joke? You realize you're contradicting your statement, don't you? You'd better fess up right now—who else saw Kim Hae-on?"

The boy's upper lip twitched. "Um—"

The detective leaned closer. Was it someone with the last name of Um?

"Um...I've gotta go. Really."

The detective felt the energy drain from him. He found the boy absolutely maddening, with an uncanny knack for getting under his skin. Was the boy even more stupid than he gave him credit for? Or was he only pretending to be stupid?

"You're not leaving until you tell me the truth. I don't care if it takes all night. I don't care if it takes forever."

"But my boss can't do all that work by himself. I really have to go—"

"Who else saw?"

The boy mumbled something under his breath.

“Speak up!” the detective roared.

“It was...uh...Taerim,” he said, as a fleck of spittle flew out of his mouth.

“Taerim?”

“Yun...Yun Taerim.”

“Who the hell’s Yun Taerim?”

“From Division 3. The same class as Hae-on.”

“And this Taerim is female?”

Confusion passed over the boy’s face. “Of course. Division 3 is a girls’ class.”

How in the world was he supposed to know that Division 3 was a girls’ class? He then recalled the boy had mentioned she was in the same class as Kim Hae-on. He felt a wave of anger surge through him.

“Why would you leave out this important information until now? You know what you’ve done? You’ve committed perjury. You know I could put you away for that? I swear to God, if you don’t tell the truth from now on, you’re in deep shit. Were you with Yun Taerim that day?”

“Yes.”

The detective felt as though he’d been clobbered over the head.

“Why were you together?”

“Because Taerim asked for a ride.”

“On what? Your scooter?”

“Yes.”

“You’re killing me, Manu. Are you saying Yun Taerim

was actually on your scooter with you? I thought you were going to a delivery—I mean, coming back from a delivery!”

“I was on my way back when I saw her on the street. She waved me over, so I pulled up, and then she asked for a ride. She said it was urgent.”

“So you two were on the scooter together and that’s when you saw Shin Jeongjun’s car?”

“I didn’t know it was his car—or his sister’s car, I mean. Taerim said his sister had just gotten it, but Jeongjun was driving it around. She told me to get in front.”

“In front?”

“Yeah, when we were stopped at a red light. She told me to get in front of it.”

“In front of what?”

“Jeongjun’s car.”

“Why’d she say that?”

“I don’t know.”

“So did you?”

“Yup.”

The detective felt his frustration build. The strange way the boy had of contradicting himself was getting on his nerves, and he felt his own words were getting tangled up.

“And then?”

“So that’s why.”

“That’s why what?”

“That’s why Taerim might have seen, too.”

Taerim might have seen, too. To the detective, these words would have sounded like a lie, but I confirmed the truth. That day, Yun Taerim would have wanted to know who was in the passenger seat of Shin Jeongjun's car, and so would have gotten on Han Manu's scooter, telling him to pull up in front of it. This story contained a subtle truth that the boy would have never been able to invent on his own.

"Why the hell didn't you mention this last time?"

"I just...I didn't think she liked it."

"Didn't like what?"

"The scooter."

"What are you talking about?"

"Taerim didn't like it."

"Come again?"

"That she was on the scooter."

"You mean she didn't like the fact that she was on your scooter?"

"No."

"Why'd you give her a ride then?"

"Because she asked me. She was the one who waved me over. I never asked if she wanted a ride!"

"You didn't ask her, fine. But why would you give her a ride if she didn't like it? And why didn't you say anything until now?"

"You don't understand, Mister. She'd never get on something like that."

The detective felt as if he were about to lose his mind.

“So correct me if I’m wrong. It’s not that you didn’t want to give Taerim a ride, but she doesn’t like scooters and would never get on something like that. Is that what you’re saying?”

“She wouldn’t be caught dead on a delivery scooter. So imagine how shocked I was when she asked me for a ride! Then she wanted to be dropped off right away, so I dropped her off. That means she didn’t like it, doesn’t it?”

“So she asked you to drop her off right away? What was so urgent then?”

“Urgent?”

“You said she waved you over and asked for a ride, because it was urgent.”

“Oh, I didn’t ask why.”

Was there ever such an idiot? the detective thought. A stupid detective wouldn’t have figured it out, but if a girl, who is ashamed of being seen on a scooter, asks an idiot boy for a ride on his delivery scooter and then tells him to pass Shin Jeongjun’s car, only to get off immediately, isn’t the reason obvious? It’s clear she was trying to see who Shin Jeongjun was with in his car. After confirming my sister’s presence in the car, Taerim had promptly gotten off the scooter. What exactly had she seen? How beautiful had my sister looked to her right then? How indifferent? How cruel?

\*

The detective shook his head. His belief that this moron was guilty remained unshaken; the boy's attempts to take the negative attention off himself by dragging in a girl named Yun Taerim were only making the situation worse for him.

"Han Manu, I know you're lying."

"I swear it's the truth! But I really have to go."

"You're lying, one hundred percent. You realize I'm going to bring Yun Taerim in for questioning, don't you? Before deciding to lie, you really should have gotten your story straight. How in the world would Yun Taerim manage to see something you couldn't see? Fine, let's say she saw Kim Hae-on in a tank top with her hair down, but how could she have seen anything else? Is she taller than you or something? Even if she's taller, she still wouldn't have been able to see what Kim Hae-on was wearing below the waist. It's physically impossible."

"I really gotta go," the boy said sullenly.

"You listening with your ass? For the hundredth time, from your crappy midget scooter, there's no way you could have seen that Kim Hae-on was wearing shorts. Got that?"

"All right."

"All right? That's all you have to say? Are you admitting you're wrong?"

"No, but—"

The detective leaned across the table, sensing that victory was at hand.

"Mister, could you stop calling it a *midget scooter*?"

The detective gave a humorless laugh. "I'm going to ask you one last time. You saw Kim Hae-on in shorts, so you're saying Yun Taerim probably saw, too?"

"Yes."

"I'll be looking into this. If it turns out you're lying, you're dead."

"Can I go now?"

"You can go."

Frowning, the detective watched the boy get up from his seat, bow, and make his way out of the interrogation room, his sneakers dragging along the floor. He would have fallen into thought then, tapping the documents on the table, lining up the corners and edges. I know of this habit. Just as I know of his other habits, of placing the stack on the table and stamping it with the tip of his retracted pen, scattering the pages he had just straightened. Even now, I can recall his facial expressions and manner of speaking, his squat neck atop a stocky frame, which made him resemble a gorilla. Many times he had come to our house, and many times I'd gone to the station with my mother.

That day, the detective would have weighed Han Manu's narrow, pinched face against Shin Jeongjun's clean features, the former's cheap World Cup T-shirt against the latter's IVYclub button-down shirt, a single mother against an accountant father, twentieth in class against the top ten of the entire grade, not to mention the



credibility of the witnesses providing the alibis. Rather than try to find the real culprit, the detective would have considered whom he could—or should—crush into becoming the culprit. And that's exactly what he tried to do.

\*

I've been constructing Han Manu's second interrogation in my mind for a long time, the way you might put LEGO pieces together. He was questioned a total of seven times, but it was the second interview that hinted at the truth, as well as the way the case would eventually unfold. Yet, the strange thing was, each time I recreated the scene from the second interrogation, an excess of details would emerge. As if small, warped pieces of LEGO were finding their way in somehow. This had nothing to do with Han Manu or the detective. It was my problem.

It happened again this time. I'd written that the detective, as he gazed at Han Manu's hands, thought that one doesn't need a whole lot of power to bash in a girl's small glossy head. Smooth glossy hair—why had such an unnecessary detail intruded into the scene? A small head, fine, but hair that's smooth and glossy has no bearing on the way someone is struck with a piece of brick. The detective would have never added such a useless detail while questioning a suspect. Of course my sister's dazzling beauty, clearly displayed by her lifeless

body, may have very well crossed his mind all of a sudden. It doesn't matter if he imagined these things or not. The problem is that this kind of excess keeps slipping into that imagined scene. What I've done is project my own thoughts and desires onto the detective. Does this mean I'm still not free? That I'm not free, not one iota, from those smooth, fair, irrelevant details from sixteen years ago, those endless memories of my sister's loveliness, which had made me undergo plastic surgery, turning my face into a crude patchwork?

It's true. My sister was beautiful. Unforgettably so. She was perfection, bliss personified. But more than anything, she was at that mythical age: eighteen. Who dared destroy her lovely form? Was it Han Manu, Shin Jeongjun, or a third figure? Now I know. Maybe I don't know who killed my sister that day, but I know who didn't do it. No, that's not true. I do know who the murderer is, just as I know what the motive was, just as I know I will never be free from this crime until the day I die.

I hear my mom's voice and a child laughing. The child's laugh rings like a bell, announcing my guilt. Soon this child will enter elementary school, and I'll become a school parent. Before June of my sixteenth year, I never imagined I'd be living this way. Not once have I desired this kind of life, yet here I am. What meaning, then, could life possibly hold? I didn't desire such a life for myself, but at the same time, I can't say I didn't choose it.