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KIM JIYOUNG, BORN 1982



A NOVEL BY
CHO NAM-JOO

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CONTENTS

Autumn, 2015

Childhood, 1982–1994

Adolescence, 1995–2000

Early Adulthood, 2001–2011

Marriage, 2012–2015

2016

AUTUMN, 2015

Kim Jiyoung is thirty-three years old, or thirty-four in Korean age. She got married three years ago and had a daughter last year. She rents a small apartment on the outskirts of Seoul with her husband Jung Daehyun, thirty-six, and daughter Jung Jiwon. Daehyun works at a mid-size IT company, and Jiyoung used to work at a small marketing agency, which she left a few weeks before her due date. Daehyun usually comes home from work around midnight and goes into the office at least once on weekends. Daehyun's parents live in Busan, and Jiyoung's parents run a restaurant, making Jiyoung her daughter's sole caretaker. Just after Jiwon turned one in the summer, she started daycare as a half-day infant. She spends her mornings at a converted ground-floor apartment daycare center in the same apartment complex where she lives.

Jiyoung's abnormal behavior was first detected on September 8. Daehyun remembers the exact date because it was the morning of *baengno* ("white dew"), the first night of autumn when the temperature drops below dew point. Daehyun was having toast and milk for breakfast when Jiyoung suddenly went to the veranda and opened the window. It was quite sunny out, but the cold air rushed in as soon as the window was opened and reached the kitchen table where Daehyun was sitting.

Jiyoung returned to the table with her shoulders hunched and, as she sat down, said, "I knew there was a little nip in the air these past few mornings, and today's *baengno*! White morning dew on fields of *goold*, on *baengno* when the nights grow *coold*."

Daehyun laughed at his wife, who was talking like a much older woman.

"What's up with you? You sound like your mom."

"Take a light jacket with you, Jung *seoba-ahng*. There's a chill in the mornings and evenings."

Even then, he thought she was just joking around. Her imitation of her mother was flawless, down to her signature right-eye wink when she was asking for a favor, and the elongated last syllable of "Jung *seobang*." He had

found her staring off into space or crying over sad songs, but Daehyun figured she was just exhausted from taking care of the baby. She was basically a cheerful person, full of laughter, who often made Daehyun laugh by doing impressions of celebrities. So Daehyun shrugged off Jiyoung's imitation of her mother, gave her a hug and went to work.

When Daehyun came back from work that night, she was sleeping next to their daughter. Both were sucking their thumbs, looking cute but absurd. Gazing at the two side by side, he tugged at his wife's arm to pull her thumb out of her mouth. Jiyoung's tongue stuck out a little and she smacked her lips, just like a baby, and then settled back into sleep.

A few days later, Jiyoung said that she was Cha Seungyeon, a college friend who had died a year before. Seungyeon and Daehyun started college the same year and Jiyoung had been their junior by three years. All three were members of the same university hiking club. However, Jiyoung and Daehyun didn't know each other in college. Daehyun wanted to go on to graduate school, but had to give up due to family circumstances. After he completed his third year of university, he took time off to belatedly fulfill his military service, after which he returned to his home in Busan to work part-time for a year. Jiyoung had entered college and was an active hiking club member during his time away.

Seungyeon had always been good to her fellow female club members, on top of which she and Jiyoung had something in common: they didn't actually enjoy hiking. They became friends and kept in touch and met up frequently even after Seungyeon graduated. In fact, Seungyeon's wedding reception was the very occasion on which Daehyun and Jiyoung met for the first time. Seungyeon died giving birth to her second child due to an amniotic fluid embolism. Jiyoung was suffering from postpartum depression when she heard about Seungyeon's death, and the shocking news on top of everything else made it hard for her to handle everyday tasks.

After their daughter had gone to sleep, the couple relaxed and drank some beers, something they hadn't done in a while. When Jiyoung had almost finished a can of beer, she tapped her husband on the shoulder and abruptly said, "Hey, Jiyoung is having a hard time. Raising a toddler is emotionally draining. You should tell her every chance you get: *You're doing great! You're working so hard! I appreciate you!*"

"Are you astral-projecting, hon? Fine, fine. Yes, you're doing great, Kim Jiyoung. I know that you're going through a tough time. I appreciate you and I love you." Daehyun lovingly pinched her cheek, but she swatted his hand away, irritated.

"You still see me as the lovestruck twenty-year-old Cha Seungyeon? Who shook like a leaf in the middle of summer confessing her feelings?"

Daehyun's heart stopped. That was almost twenty years ago. In the middle of the day in the middle of summer, in the middle of the university athletics field, yards away from the tiniest spot of shade. The blazing sun was beating down on the two of them. He couldn't remember how they ended up there, but he'd run into Seungyeon who suddenly said she liked him. She liked him, she had feelings for him, she had said, sweat pouring, lips trembling, stammering. Daehyun gave her an apologetic look, and she instantly folded.

"Oh, you don't feel the same. Got it. Forget what I said. Forget this whole thing happened. I'll treat you the same as before, like nothing happened."

And with that, she trotted across the field and disappeared. She really did treat him the same as before, as if nothing had happened and so casually that Daehyun wondered if the whole thing had been a sun exposure-induced hallucination. He never thought about it again. And here was his own wife bringing it back—a scene from a sunny afternoon almost twenty years ago that only two people in the world knew about.

"Jiyoung," was all Daehyun could say. He might have mumbled her name three more times.

"Hah dude, stop calling me by her name. I get it, I know—you're a model husband!"

Hah dude, Cha Seungyeon used to say over and over when she was drunk. His hair stood on end and he felt something like electric currents spreading over his scalp. Pretending to be unfazed, he kept telling her to stop kidding around. Jiyoung, leaving her empty can on the table, went to the bedroom and lay down next to her daughter without brushing her teeth. She immediately fell fast asleep. Daehyun got himself another beer and knocked it back. Was this some kind of joke? Was she drunk? Was she possessed by a spirit or something, like those people on TV?

The next morning, Jiyoung came out of the bedroom massaging her temples. She didn't seem to remember what had happened the night before. On the one hand, he was relieved to think she had simply been drunk, but on the other hand, that was one spooky drinking habit. He also found it hard to believe that she had actually been drunk and blacked out. She'd only had one can of beer.

Her odd behavior continued sporadically. She'd send him a text message riddled with cute emoticons she never normally used, or make dishes like ox-bone soup or glass noodles that she neither enjoyed nor was good at. Jiyoung was starting to feel like a stranger to Daehyun. After all this time—the stories they shared, as countless as raindrops, the caresses as soft and gentle as snowflakes, and the beautiful daughter who took after them both—his wife of three years, whom he married after two years of passionate romance, felt like someone else.

Then came the *Chuseok* harvest holidays. They were visiting Daehyun's parents down in Busan. Daehyun took Friday off, and the three of them left home at seven in the morning and arrived in Busan five hours later. They had lunch with Daehyun's parents immediately after they arrived, and Daehyun, tired from the long drive, took a nap. Daehyun and Jiyoung used to take turns at the wheel on long drives, but ever since their daughter was born, Daehyun did all the driving. The baby fussed, whined, and cried every time they put her in the car seat, and Jiyoung was better at keeping her occupied and happy by playing with her and giving her snacks.

Jiyoung did the dishes after lunch, took a coffee break and went to the market with her mother-in-law to shop for *Chuseok* food. They spent the afternoon boiling the ox bone, marinating ribs, prepping and blanching the vegetables to season some and freeze the rest for later, washing and preparing seafood for the next day's pancakes and fritters, making, eating, and clearing dinner.

The next day, Jiyoung and Daehyun's mother flipped pancakes, fried fritters, stewed ribs, and sculpted rice cakes. The family ate freshly made holiday dishes and enjoyed themselves. Their daughter, Jiwon, felt right at home in the arms and laps of her grandparents, who showered the affectionate child with love.

The day after that was *Chuseok*. Daehyun's older cousin was in charge of the ancestral rites, so Daehyun's family didn't have much to do on the day itself. Everyone slept in, had a simple breakfast of food made the day before, finished the dishes, and Suhyun, Daehyun's younger sister, arrived with her family. Two years younger than Daehyun and a year older than Jiyoung, Suhyun lived in Busan with her husband and two sons, and her in-laws lived in Busan as well. Her father-in-law being the eldest of his male siblings, Suhyun was under a great deal of pressure during the holidays to make food

for the ancestral rites and wait on the guests. Suhyun passed out as soon as she arrived. Jiyoung and Daehyun's mother made soup from the ox-bone broth, cooked a fresh batch of rice, grilled fish, and seasoned vegetables for lunch.

After lunch was cleared, Suhyun brought out a big bag of gifts for Jiwon: dresses of all colors, a tutu, hair slides, lace socks, and so on. Suhyun put slides in Jiwon's hair and socks on her feet, admiring the baby girl. *I wish I had a daughter. Daughters are the best.* In the meantime, Jiyoung brought out plates of apple and pear slices, but everyone was so full from lunch they barely touched them. When she brought out rice cakes, Suhyun took a piece.

"Mom, did you make this at home?"

"Of course I did."

"Mom, how many times do I have to tell you? Don't make food at home! I was going to mention this before, but don't make ox-bone broth, either. Buy the pancakes at the market, and get the rice cakes from the shop. Why do you make so much food when we don't even hold ancestral rites here? You're too old for this, and it's hard on Jiyoung."

Disappointment flashed across the mother's face. "It isn't work when you're feeding your own family. The point of the holidays is to get together, make and eat food together." She turned to Jiyoung and put her on the spot: "Was it too much for you?"

At this, Jiyoung's expression softened, her cheeks flushed into a gentle pink, and a warm smile emerged in her eyes. Daehyun was nervous. Jiyoung responded before he could change the subject or get her out of there. "Oh, Mrs. Jung. To tell you the truth, my poor Jiyoung gets sick from exhaustion every holiday!"

Time stood still in the room. It was as if they suddenly found themselves sitting atop a great iceberg. Suhyun finally broke the silence by letting out a long, frosty sigh that dissolved in the air.

"Ji, Jiwon needs a diaper change, no?"

Daehyun belatedly grabbed Jiyoung by the hand, but she swatted him off.

"Jung *seoba-ahng*! You're to blame, too! You spend all your holidays in Busan and drop by our place just for a quick bite. This year, try to come earlier," she said, winking her right eye.

Right at that moment, Suhyun's six-year-old son fell off the sofa while playing with his little brother. He began to howl in pain, but no one had the mind to tend to him. He took a look at the adults sitting there, mouths agape, and stopped crying on his own.

"What is this nonsense?" Daehyun's father thundered. "Is this how you behave in front of your elders? Daehyun, Suhyun and everyone else in our family only get together a few times a year. Is this really something to complain about—spending time with family?"

"Father, that's not what she's saying," Daehyun tried to explain, but he didn't know how to start.

"Mr. Jung, with all due respect, I must say my piece," Jiyoung said in a cool tone, pushing Daehyun aside. "As you know, the holidays are a time for families to gather. But they're not just for your family. They're for my family, too. Everyone's so busy nowadays and it's hard for my children to get together, too, if not for the holidays. You should at least let our daughter come home when your daughter comes to visit you."

In the end, Daehyun had to cup his hand over Jiyoung's mouth and drag her out.

"She's not well, Father. You've got to believe me, Mom, Father. Suhyun, too. She hasn't been well lately. I'll explain everything later."

Daehyun got his wife and daughter in the car so fast that they didn't even have time to button their coats. Once in the car himself, Daehyun pressed his head against the steering wheel, overwhelmed. Meanwhile, Jiyoung sang to their daughter as if nothing had happened. His parents didn't even come out to say goodbye. Instead, Suhyun appeared carrying her brother's bags and put them in the trunk.

"Jiyoung's right," said Suhyun. "We've been inconsiderate. Don't fight or argue about it. Don't get mad. Just say that you're grateful and you're sorry. Got it?"

"I'm off now. Talk to Father for me."

Daehyun wasn't angry—he was baffled, sad, and scared.

Daehyun visited the psychiatrist alone to discuss Jiyoung's symptoms and treatment options. He told his wife, who didn't seem to be aware of her condition, that he had booked a therapy session for her since she hadn't been sleeping well and seemed stressed. Jiyoung thanked him, saying that she had indeed been feeling blue and enervated, and that she suspected maternity blues.