

## **Korean Delicacy**

Faf, Vle, Goncho and the one they called the Beast sat at the celebratory table. It was not the New Year, nor was it anyone's birthday among the four or any official holiday of any kind, but the table that had been set was a real celebration because Vle used to always say, "In this day and age, any occasion where you manage to have something to drink and a bite to eat is a cause for celebration." Vle's explanation was enough for the dinner to be treated as a celebration, because there was something to drink on the table, and the bite to eat was cooking on the furnace. The dinner was also a celebration because this was the first time in two years that they had gotten together for a meal. Goncho had come back from Russia two days ago, the Beast had returned from the battlefield a few months earlier, while Vle and Faf had just been released from a "correctional labor" penitentiary with just a few days difference between each other.

There was no electricity and they had to eat dinner with the light of a pair of candles and a kerosene lamp with a blackened glass chimney. Vle and the Beast, in his army fatigues and with a freedom fighter mustache, smoked silently, Goncho concentrated on crushing the dried marijuana on a newspaper full of stories on the political events of the day, while Faf was cleaning the dirt under his fingernails in an attempt to keep himself busy with something. The Beast's wife, Sirush, was tearing out pages from a volume by Lenin with a bright red cover that had so far been spared the fire; she was keeping the flame alight by casting the paper into it. The *khashlama* bubbled in a pot on the furnace.

"We did a bad thing," Faf said, "Poor child."

"Yes," Vle said, "We did a bad thing."

The drink had worn off, and the timeless and rich menu that guilt offers was weighing down on their conscience with a feeling that was incompatible with the moment. The Beast opened a bottle of vodka and filled their glasses – they had to numb their brains again. Goncho had already prepared a "joint" and was shifting it between his thumb and forefinger. They swallowed the vodka and then passed the marijuana-stuffed cigarette among them. The drug began to act, but the aroma and bubbling of the appetizing food on the furnace had a greater effect when it came to fogging up their minds. Only Faf remained in a depressed mood. The alcohol and marijuana had had the opposite effect on him.

“We did a bad thing, guys. The kid was really attached to it.”

“Get up and fuck off,” the Beast grew angry, “You’re ruining this party.”

“Yes, get up and leave. That’ll leave more food for us,” Goncho said, with a cynical smile that was typical of him. Faf grew quiet.

“What’s taking that meat so long, woman?” the Beast asked his wife, who was standing above the pot on the furnace.

“I’ll bring it over in a minute.”

Around a month ago, the Beast had heard a radio program where the host had said that dishes made of dog meat were considered the most delicious food in Korea. And it was on the basis of this strong evidence that he had convinced Vle and the others to get this meal together. Vle had not agreed at first, but a few shots of low-quality alcohol had changed his mind. “We’re not inferior to the Koreans, after all,” he had said.

The Beast realized that guilt was beginning to ruin the occasion, he felt it crawl through his skin, and he knew that it would all come crashing down on him in the end. That is why he had to keep repeating the one thing that everyone knew for a fact and that the radio had declared to the whole world.

“Dog meat is considered a delicacy in Korea,” the Beast said.

The Beast had tasted dog meat before. During the war, when starvation was the only other alternative, he and his army friends had skinned and eaten a dog, but the Beast had considered eating dog meat to be an unusual and desperate act at the time. However, he had come home from the war now and here was the public radio telling him not only that there was nothing unusual in eating dog meat, but that there were a people out there, the Koreans, who considered it quite a normal thing to do, not too different from eating mutton or beef.

The boy had already regretted that he had given them the dog, and he was now wondering how he could get it back before the next day. At noontime that day, he had given Jacko over to his father and the Beast, but when he stepped out into the yard of the house and did not hear Jacko’s

usual vigorous barking and the jangling of his chain, his level of concern multiplied. The Beast had asked for Jacko for one day, on the pretext that he had to protect his fields from robbers.

He recalled that Jacko had not wanted to leave, he was barking savagely at the Beast. His father and the Beast were still on the other side of the gate when Jacko had started to bark. He had lifted his head from the construction material—pieces of cardboard and wood—that he was using to build a doghouse, turned towards to the gate and when he saw that it was his father and the Beast approaching, he had continued to work, but Jacko would not shut up, he was jangling the chains as he paced to and fro uncomfortably, barking with incessant anger. He thought that his father and the Beast were probably going over to the end of the field to smoke weed and would return in about ten minutes with idiotic smiles on their faces, in an illogically and senselessly good mood, or angry for no reason. But they came to a stop next to him. He raised his eyes from the Beast's army boots, over his army pants and saw the Beast's thick freedom fighter mustache, his eyes betraying a sinister smile, and his matter-of-fact body language, and he felt an uncertain uneasiness. His father was standing behind the Beast, his head hung low and his eyes vacant. "Good job, you've been looking after him well," said the Beast, "He's really grown and fattened up."

Jacko did not want to go with them, he was resisting. The Beast dragged him along at the end of the chain. "Forget about that doghouse for now, don't tire yourself. I'll make it later," his father said and followed the Beast.

The boy walked out of the house and walked with uncertain steps toward the Beast's place, which was right across the street from them. It was a dark night and a light rain was drizzling. The windows of some of the houses were lit with the weak light of a candle or lamp. The boy swung the Beast's gate open and walked along the dark corridor, feeling the wall with one hand to help him find his way. His foot came across something and it rolled away. The boy paid no attention to it and continued walking. Two steps later he reached the door, felt his way along it to find the handle, and went inside.

In the depths of the room, the men sitting at the table did not notice that the door had opened and the boy had entered; it was only when the door's spring slammed it shut that they turned towards it and, seeing the boy, froze in place for a moment. When the door slammed, a bony piece of

meat that Faf had held in his hand crashed into his plate. The boy's father held the vodka bottle in one hand and a glass in the other. Goncho looked over his shoulder and mechanically continued to chew the morsel in his mouth. The Beast was smiling with confusion and misery. Like a band of robbers that had been caught distributing the loot, they were stunned in place as they waited for the consequent events to unfold, to hear what the boy would say. The boy stood at the door, taking in the heat and the appetizing aroma coming from the furnace, waiting for his father to say something. The warm room with its aroma of *khashlama* had broken his sense of conviction, and not just because he no longer considered it realistic that the men would leave the warm room and the *khashlama* and go searching for Jacko. The smell of *khashlama* had distracted the boy's thoughts and he no longer wished to walk up to the table because the men might then think that he had come over just to get a bite to eat.

"Come here, eat a piece of meat," the Beast broke the silence and, although the boy responded to the invitation immediately, each of them began to invite the boy over in turn.

"Come on," said Goncho, "It's game meat, a hunted deer."

"Eat some, it's a delicacy, a delicacy!"

"Come on, don't be shy. You're supposed to eat some of this, who else would this be for?" Faf said, unable to look him in the eyes.

"They're your elders, you have to obey when they say something," his father concluded.

The boy extended a hand and picked up a piece of meat and some bread. For the Beast, this was a sign that the interrupted feast could resume. The boy had interrupted it, and the boy would get it going again.

"Pour some vodka, what are you waiting for?" the Beast said.

The sinewy meat was tough to chew but at the same time, it was delicious, it was meat. Even though, as he chewed, the boy's thoughts were with the unfortunate deer that fell victim to the Beast, and at first this prevented him from enjoying the taste, this soon passed and the deer was quickly forgotten. When they used to go to the village, his grandfather would slaughter a sheep, the boy would watch as the skin and meat were separated from each other, and the sheep would

constantly be in his mind when he ate. Mutton *khashlama* was delicious, he would eat it, but the scene of the slaughter would constantly repeat in his mind; however, he quickly forgot the deer this time. He had only seen deer in his illustrated copies of fairy tales, those pictures were not compatible with the scene of a slaughter.

The boy was chewing quickly. So quickly, that anyone watching him would think that he was greedy and insatiable, but in truth the boy wanted to quickly free his mouth so that he could say something about Jacko, although he seriously doubted that the Beast or his father would leave the warm house or feast on this dark night and go to the Beast's fields to bring Jacko home. Actually, he also wanted to quickly mention Jacko, so that they would not think that it was hunger that had brought him to the Beast's home.

"Father, Jacko..."

"What about Jacko?" his father raised his voice.

"Jacko might break loose and run away."

"He won't, don't worry," Goncho said with a cynical smile.

"Where would he go? We'll go and bring him back tomorrow," the Beast said.

The boy turned around and walked towards the door, expecting them to call him back and give him a decent portion, but the men did not call after him. They were happy that they would be rid of the boy's stressful presence.

He walked out into the corridor. He was already close to the outside door when the power came on. Bursting with joy, he turned around towards the light and saw an ax wedged into a bloodied stump, a knife with a broad blade, the hairy paws of the dog and its head, which had rolled a short distance away from the stump and was covered in congealed blood. The boy began to retch as he stepped out onto the street. He could see the men continuing their feast in the dining room, through the window and the glass on the door. Faf was singing a song, Vle and Goncho were clapping along while the Beast was drumming the beat on the table. They were celebrating the surprise resumption of the power supply.

The following evening, the Beast and Vle came to the boy after having downed a few shots but failing to silence their consciences.

“You were right,” the Beast said, “Jacko has broken free and run away. Come, come with us, we’re going to the fields to look for him.”

“Drop those sticks for now, we’ll find the dog and then I’ll make the doghouse, we’ll make it together,” Vle said. He did not want the child to waste any energy. He would need it later in life.

They stepped out onto the street. There were drops of rain and it was close to evening. The Beast’s blue Moskvich was parked near Vle’s door, the engine still running. The Beast took the driver’s seat, Vle sat next to him and the boy sat in the back. The Beast pressed the accelerator and revved the engine a couple of times without moving the car from its spot. He turned to the boy with an artificial smile and said, “We’ll find him, don’t worry.”

The car moved with great speed and accelerated further as it zoomed. The boy could not understand whether he was driving this quickly because he was drunk or whether he was pretending that he wanted to find the dog as soon as possible.

Almost lying down in the back seat, the boy recalled the day he had found Jacko. He had been waiting to buy bread in a long line that simply refused to move forward, there were arguments and scuffles, the street had patches of ice, and his feet had frozen and grown numb in his boots, and any movement he made would send prickles of pain shooting upwards. He remembered the icy, gray and unattractive road that led from the shop to his home and his efforts to not slip on the ice, and then the strong but uncertain barking that came from Jacko in the wintery twilight.

One kind look and a little attention on the boy’s part was enough for the little puppy to leap forward and, reaching the boy, circle him with his tail wagging, rubbing against his legs. The boy did not have a bicycle, he did not have a sled, he did not have warm boots or a coat, he did not really have his father by his side and, sick of this poverty, he had long dreamed of a dog just like this one. Actually, he had not yet known that he had been dreaming of a dog, but he realized it as soon as he saw the creature. He tore off a piece of bread and threw it at the dog. The dog immediately grabbed the bread, swallowed it and looked up at the boy. The boy tore off another piece and threw it at the dog, with the expectation that the dog would leap up and grab it in mid-

air. But the dog waited till it fell to the ground and only then put it in his mouth. "That's okay," the boy thought, "He's still a puppy, I'll train him."

The rain had grown stronger and it struck the side windows of the car at an angle. The Beast and Vle were mostly quiet, except for a few occasions when Vle blamed the Beast for losing the dog and cursed him.

"You managed to take the dog and lose it. I told you, didn't I, that the child was attached to it, that you shouldn't take it?"

"You made a weak argument, but then you agreed."

"Oh, get lost, you and your Korean... The child has been moping around all day today, in a horrible mood. You took the dog and lost it."

"We'll find it," the Beast turned to the boy with the same artificial, guilty smile, "It was a good dog, maybe someone tried to rob the place and he ran out after them."

"Watch the road, you ended up losing the dog, do you want to get rid of us too?"

The car swerved off the asphalted road and on to the muddy one that led into the fields. The Beast parked the car in front of his plot. Vle and the Beast got out of the car and started walking around, clapping their hands and saying "Jacko, Jacko." The boy watched from the back of the Moskvich as his father and the Beast walked here and there under the headlights of the car, calling the dog's name, unprotected from the pouring rain.

The owner of the adjacent plot of land, a short elderly man, stepped out of his hut holding a plastic bag over his head.

"What happened?" he asked.

"It's the dog. The dog got lost, he broke loose and ran away. Have you seen him?" the Beast shouted.

The old man stepped back into his hut. The clouds boomed and the rain flooded down with increasing might. The powerful wind rubbed the roof tiles of the hut against each other, causing a ringing sound. The Beast took out a cigarette from one of the pockets of his army fatigues, put it

in his mouth and tried to light it with a match, but the wet cigarette broke off and fell to the ground.

Vle and the Beast had already walked some distance away from the car and each other.

“Well?” Vle shouted, “Any sign of him on that side?”

“No. Let’s go, let’s go, we’ll come back tomorrow.”

“No. You have to find him. I don’t care how you do it, find him.”

“It’s late already, and it’s raining. Damn it all...”

“No. We’re not going anywhere until we find him.”

The boy did not want his father or the Beast to suffer, but he remained quiet. If he told them, the torment would be greater. Sitting in the car with the engine and heating running, the boy felt a sense of guilt more than one of revenge.

He got out of the car and walked to his father. His clothes were drenched immediately. His feet were sinking into the mud, the wind he was walking into was pushing him back, and it was difficult for the boy to advance.

“Dad,” the boy shouted when he was just a few paces from his father.

“Get back into the car,” Vle said, “You’ll get wet.”

“Go back,” the Beast said, walking towards them, “Don’t worry, we’ll find him. Where would he go?”

The boy’s presence gave the Beast and Vle a boost and they went deeper into the field, shouting Jacko’s name and whistling. The boy walked after them.

“Jacko, Jacko,” the Beast called out.

“Jack, Jacko,” his father echoed.

“Jacko, Jack, Jack,” the boy shouted.



