

THE CATKILLERS

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It was Christmas when Joon-seok first told me about the cats they killed. He was as I remembered him, his curly hair, his angular features, his somewhat detached demeanor. I met him at his parent's church, as I used to back in the day. My parents were looking for a church to attend for the holidays, and Joon-seok's parents were running one of the few remaining Korean ones nearby. There had been an exodus of Koreans from the Philippines that had been going on for a while as all the businessmen, missionaries, and parents looking for some cheap English education had all but gone back to Korea at that point. I caught up with Joon-seok during the after-service lunch. We were both in high school at the time, both of us going to different schools, both of us having different friends. I was having trouble with my grades. He took up smoking. I had my first crush. He had been practicing pool. My dad's English academy had seen better times. There was a pastor visiting the church for a few weeks. I was worried about college. He told me about the cat killings.

I was with Min-cheol and Joshua at the time, you remember them right? I think it was April or maybe March. We were hanging around as usual, going around on our rounds, right, so we went to the nearest sari-sari for two bags of Pepsi. Min-cheol didn't drink it, he always had that weird fear that there would be cockroach eggs in the straws or whatever. Anyways, I'm telling you all this because I remember it was a hot day. Yes, it's always a hot day but this one was especially hot. It was noon then. I guess that meant that it was a weekend, and we were looking for something to do. No one was in the mood to go to the PC cafe, and we already hit the billiards place yesterday. Joshua had to go back by six so we couldn't really go anywhere. Just fuck around the place, shit all to do. I had a basketball but it was too hot to go to the court, it was too hot to do anything. We couldn't even go to the mall because of the time. I think Joshua was the one who brought up killing cats. We hadn't done that in a while.

Joon-seok's father was a Presbyterian pastor who had been searching for a place to settle, going to Mexico, Vietnam, before eventually settling in the Philippines. It was the 90s, the youth coming out of the decade of dictatorships and student movements filled with a certain purpose, some finding new places to put down roots. My own parents met in the Philippines during a college missionary program, both finding religion as a form of escape, an escape from the patriarchal society that surrounded my father, and an escape from a future of fields and factories for my mother. An escape needs both a starting point and a destination, and as that escape was altered into a mission by the words and ideals of Christianity, the energy produced by the movements of the time ended up releasing into the Philippines. After all, Korea was developing an export focused industry. Why not export people as well?

I know it's been a bit since you came back to Dasma, but do you remember that place we used to go to, somewhere in the fields beyond our houses, the one over the hill and the creek. I knew you would remember it; I just wasn't sure whether you'd have fond memories of it. That's where we brought the cats later, after we killed them. There were a lot of them in the area around the playground, the one that really should be torn down, it's really old. A lot of cats moved in there after no one used it anymore, cause you would get rust stains on your shirt and pants if you used the swings and I'm pretty sure the slide would fall after a few more kids used it. We went there, not really knowing what to expect, I was sweating, it was getting really hot and you know how much I sweat. I'm drenched right now as well, take a look. We didn't see anything there for a bit, Joshua was getting a bit antsy about finding a cat, I think he was bored and such. You know he's a bit messed up right? I went back to the field alone one time, just to look at where we buried all the cats. I don't know, I just wanted to think I guess. On the way I saw one hanging on a noose on some tree, and I asked Joshua later if he was the one who did it. He just shrugged and said "Maybe". There's something wrong with him, man. Probably why he was the one who first heard those damn cats.

There wasn't much interaction between Koreans and the Filipinos in the area, outside of the missionaries. A lot of them founded churches in places without one, with seed money from Korea and local donations. Problem was, they didn't know Tagalog, and the locals definitely did not know Korean. All either side had was an almost adequate grasp of English, speaking in tandem with gestures, hands flailing wildly. There were a few missionaries who ended up having most of their sermons

delivered like a game of charades. The kids fared better. I never fully understood the local language, but Joon-seok ended up absorbing enough to act as a translator for his father, going after school to all these other churches, a trip here and there, a path forming, revealing the mesh that connected all these disparate communities. He hated doing it, really, I mostly found him trying to find any excuse to stop going there, and ultimately, as he spent more and more time away from home, from the days to the ever-saturated dawns, the web was handed over to his elder brother in all but name. "Suits him right", he said to me once, kicking a rusted can into the puddle, the ulcer in the middle of the muddied road, "he should have done it in the first place, fucking dolt."

There was some space below the slide, which was drier than the rest because it had been raining for a day, and there was that platform above it where you get on to the slide. There were two cats, and they were fighting each other hard. And by hard I mean they were really going at each other, claws out and drawing blood and everything. Joshua mostly thought of whether we should be betting on who would spill blood first. I told him, that was messed up, which he pretended not to hear. The fight was one-sided to begin with anyways. The one cat was smaller, and it was clear that it was not doing well. It was pathetic, you know. Was getting hard to watch so I just tried to scare them. The older one got up and bolted, but the smaller one basically stayed in its place, didn't try to escape or anything. It had this one real nasty gash on its eye, and I think I remember it trembling a lot. The other two were looking a bit off so I went behind it and picked it up and put it in the bag. Usually, we had to bash their heads in first, those sneaky fucks, usually running off if we even make some semblance of a sound. This guy just gave up, I guess. It was in the bag, and we started going for the field.

Joon-seok's family came from a lineage of shamans, or so he says. When we were ten, he would talk about the night terrors he would have, the ghosts that came slipping into the night, standing in that open corridor beyond the open door, arm slowly stretching out crawling on the floor, slithering across his room, onto his bedframe, over his sheets. He said that it was because of his blood, ghosts drawn to those with his heritage, and his home, the second floor over his father's church. His room would be right over the pulpit, a gathering place of power, such that spirits are drawn to. I heard a lot of discussions on spirits during those days, some from Filipinos about ladies in white, ghosts of the water. Min-cheol was the one who really got into these stories, asking all his classmates at school for them, and attempting to

scare the kids at church with them. They mostly didn't care after the first time they heard them, and there was the feeling that they were just humoring them, the inherited respect you have for someone older than you. They were even less impressed by the cat killing stories, just an offhand comment of how it was disgusting, sticking their tongues out, then setting off to play with the mounds of cement laid nearby the constant construction projects the church was going through, just passing the time until the adults were done with their service. I never knew how much the adults knew about the ghost stories, or whether they believed in them. Maybe they just laughed at them, having outgrown those silly tales. Maybe they still double checked whether they closed all their doors.

We got to the field, and we just dumped it onto the grass. There's this barrel we would grab some wood and make a fire in, then burn the corpse. This one wasn't dead though, so we didn't do that. It was just laying there, where we left it, staring at us. I wonder what it was thinking. It probably didn't know what we wanted to do to it, why it was there or anything. I think it still knew somehow, or still it knew it was going to die whether by our hands or from its wounds. Joshua kept saying we should be killing it, that we should be getting it over with. We just kept staring at it. It was still, and yet we could still see its stomach breathe, air coming in and out. It stopped breathing eventually, but it still kept its eye on us. Min-cheol was the first person to leave, since he had to go back early anyways. Joshua mostly shuffled about before leaving, he kept talking the big talk, but left anyway. It was one of the few times I saw him, before he went back to Korea with his parents. Me, I just stayed there, late into the evening. Don't know whether I didn't want to leave or whether I didn't want to go home. And that was the end of it. Both Min-cheol and Joshua ended up going back to Korea anyways, and that was the last I saw of them. I still went back to that field sometimes. I'd see the cat laid there for a while, rotting away. It's something, you know, seeing something degrade. There's the ants, coming claiming stuff first before the worms come in. You're seeing something disappear, just that it was there and I know it's not there anymore, but now that the body is gone, you know it isn't. I would come back daily, and see it all. I ended up burying it after it was all bones, felt that it was the only thing I could do.

Several years passed before I saw Joon-seok again, a chance meeting while I was on the way to a doctor's appointment. We were both living in Korea by this time, having left the Philippines as if we were destined to. We sat at a nearby cafe. I was in college, he was working in a furniture store. He said he was working on being a

pastor. I was working for my dad. Korea had impeached the child of a dictator, while the Philippines would soon be voting their own. He dismissed the stories he told me, said that he probably was just talking about a dream he had, confused that they were real. He was living with his brother, whom he'd confessed had hit him a lot back in the day. It looked like it was starting to rain, so we said our goodbyes. He said he would pay for the coffee. I looked back, and it seemed like he was just at a pet store, holding a paper bag with some pet food. I never saw him again.