

PARK Chan-soon**Ladybugs Fly from the Top**

Climbing the railing on the rooftop, I stick my right foot out into the air. The dizziness is petrifying. Holding onto the rope, I set my feet one by one on the *zendai*. This is my workplace, a piece of wood the size of a chopping board hanging in the air. It's a rectangular "safety board" made of wood. Carefully I sit on the board, putting my legs down between the ropes that hold it in place. It's just wide enough to perch my butt on it. The board lurches and sways like a swing. I hold on to the rope tight, channeling all my strength into my hands. My life is hanging on a single rope. Suddenly my mind goes blank. I press down on the board slightly with my butt. The rope slithers down several feet. I'm seized with terror, and it takes a while to recover. That's strange. I'm sure I hooked the ropes on two points and tied them in figure-eight knots. This is the rope engineer's first safety rule: hook the rope on at least two points and tie it up in a figure-eight. The sound of my stomach dropping seems louder than the sound of the rope sliding down. My arms are covered in goose bumps like little grains of millet stuck to my skin, but my hands are sweaty. I was about to cry out "Mom!" but shut my mouth tight. No matter how loud I shout, my mother can't hear me. She's been lying in bed unconscious for the past eight months. So I bite my tongue to stop any sounds from coming out of my mouth. Someone should put a gag on me, on the mouth of this rookie rope engineer.

I was terrified when the rope slid down, but now that I'm on my safety board I begin to relax a bit. Having securely seated myself, I feel my work is already half done. Most accidents in this business occur when getting onto the safety board for the first time. With absolutely no protective device in place, it's easy to lose your balance. The horrible dream of last night comes back to me. I dreamt that a colleague slipped and fell from this safety board. I woke up screaming. It's because I went to bed straight after hearing on the news that a painter working on the exterior of a high-rise apartment had slipped as he stepped onto the safety board and fallen to his death. The few short minutes it takes to step onto the board are a matter of life and death. This feeling that ordinary people experience just once or twice in a lifetime, the rope engineer faces several times a day.

I shake my head. This won't do. It's stupid to bring up last night's dream. This dark mood could lead to an accident. Closing my eyes I recall the happiest and most peaceful moment of my life. I can see the woods near my grandmother's house in the country, where I lived when I was young. I can see myself hunting for shiny-backed ladybugs and my grandmother waddling after me, dragging her bad leg. I can't think of a more peaceful scene. I can hear my grandmother exclaim at the sight of the ladybug in my hand: "See how plump and round it is. It's as sweet as my little Yong."

Even now I half expect to hear my grandmother's voice echoing off the windows in front of me. At first I didn't like the way she compared me to a ladybug, but after hearing her say the same thing over and over I began to think of ladybugs as something good. My childhood is reflected in the window. I can see the kid who is pleased at being grandmother's "cute little ladybug" after learning in science class that ladybugs are useful creatures that eat up pests.

I pull myself together and rearrange my position. Gingerly, I shift in my seat to make myself more comfortable. This small, tatty piece of wood, grimy from dirty water and detergent. If I put my nose up to it, it would give off a bad smell. In this business we still use the name *zendai*. It's the Japanese pronunciation of *seondae*, which means "shelf" in our language. These days it's also called a "hanging scaffold," or "work bench," or "safety board." Hmm. Do we call it a safety board to make ourselves feel safer? Who knows? But sometimes there's great comfort in a single word.

I'll never forget the thrill I felt when I was first given this safety plate, the one I'm sitting on. The boss called me one day and asked me to help him make a new one. Seeing me hesitate, he

screwed up his nose and scolded me: “What are ye doing? Get yer ass over here. Now!”

My sixth sense, like the feelers on a ladybug, told me that the new safety board was mine. Several months had passed since I’d taken on odd jobs for the older guys. I can see myself cutting the wood with shaking hands and tying the rope in the four corners. My *zendai*, a piece of pine wood one hundred millimeters wide and fifty millimeters thick. Finally I had one of my own. My heart pounded as I looked at it. I picked it up. This wooden seat will hold me up in thin air. So, everyone has his seat in life, I thought. For the first time, I sighed in relief but I felt as if I was standing on the verge of a cliff.

The ropes in the four corners are gathered together and tied to a steel ring. A metal shackle in the shape of a horseshoe connects the ring with the ropes. When the shackle and ropes are pushed gradually upwards, the seat goes down. The shackle acts as a kind of stopper. When the ring gathering the four ropes is held in the hand, the safety plate looks like one of the pans of a balancing scale. It’s just the right shape to hold something to be weighed. When we win a contract with one of the big companies, they say the safety plate has to be changed to an aluminum one, but I like this wooden one. When I run my hands over the wood grain, I feel the tenderness of first love.

Laid out on the railing on top of the roof is a bucket of detergent, a rubber press, and a running hose. The pump installed on the roof draws water from the tank, which runs through the hose. The detergent bucket also holds a scraper used for cleaning the dirt, and a T-shaped window cleaner. I hang the bucket on the right side of the safety plate and the hose on the left side. The bucket looks like it’s attached to the hip, so we call it the hip bucket. I hold the rubber press with my left hand. On my left Chang is getting ready to work, and on my right is Gonn. We’re about four meters apart from each other. They put me in the middle because I’m a beginner, and the youngest.

Once we’re in position up in the air, the early winter wind slaps my face. There’s a thrill in its sting. This feeling, neither pleasure nor pain, is something completely new to me. It’s the feeling of being as bold and brave as anyone else, despite a loneliness that cuts to the bone. A single rope dangles in front of my eyes. It’s the 18mm-thick piece of rope that I’m using today, the string on which my life depends. When I’m seated on the safety board I never look down. That’s a trick I learnt from the boss.

“When yer a beginner, never look down,” he said. “The most important thing in this business is conquering yer fear. Keep yer eyes on the sky or the top of the building. Look at the clouds or the birds passing by. Look at the wind under the birds’ wings. One day you’ll find the wind that’ll give flight to yer own wings.”

I can’t speak for the others, but as far as Chang and I are concerned, we don’t even bother to scoff. We write his words off as the bluster of a middle-aged geezer who’s been in this gig for a long time. The wind that’ll give flight to my wings. Yeah right. Defying the laws of gravity. What a load of rubbish.

No matter how much I try not to look down, I can’t hold back the fear. Again, I think of my mother, but it’s no use calling her. Instead of hearing my mother’s voice, scenes from the past run through my head. There’s a woman bent over on the apartment stairs, cleaning the stair nosings. Whenever her arms reach either end of the step her baggy house pants flap, creating a puff of air. A floral pattern blooms across her bottom, which heaves and shakes like the waves on the sea. Mortified, I shut my eyes. Again, there’s that sudden stab of fear. I stifle the sound of Su-hi’s name, just as I did in army training.

“Damn! You think we’re not afraid? In any case, you’ve been thrown upon the world. Just do what you have to do. Blasted fool!”

I remember the day I first started working on a high-rise building. When Chang saw me on the roof trembling with fear he spat out these scathing words as he ground down his cigarette butt. The words come bouncing back to me and ring in my ears. Strangely enough, they have the power to stop me from even thinking about my fear. What does he mean “thrown upon the world?” How did he get into my head and hone straight in on that feeling, hidden away in a dark corner in some formless state? He was right. When my mother said, “Don’t ask any questions about your father,” back when I was in the ninth grade, an indefinable mass of anger took place in my heart. I didn’t

know how to explain it or what to call it.

The way Chang talks and the look on his face are a complete betrayal of his pretty boy looks. I wonder where it comes from, that betrayal. Loneliness, or perhaps some elevated state reached only by those who've experienced the worst kind of loneliness? The sharpness in his voice when he spits out the words "in any case," is laced with a grim severity that forbids any attempts to get at its core. But instinctively I realized that to show no fear, no matter what, was a tacit agreement, or a virtue, in this line of work.

It was no use calling Su-hi's name either. In the window I see Su-hi's brutal daily schedule as she prepares herself to get a job with a foreign airline. English and Spanish lessons in the morning. Stewardess training in the afternoon, learning the basic etiquette and getting the image right. Exercising at the fitness club at night to lose weight. CPR practice several times a week. Su-hi with sweat running down her determined face as she practices artificial respiration and chest compressions on a mannequin. She has no time to listen to my grievances.

The rope slides down a few dozen centimeters, but pretending I don't care, I give a few coughs. Ahem. On my right is Gonn, a veteran rope engineer with six years' experience. I've never seen him scared. He looks like a person who knows no fear. He always looks calm and untroubled, with the faint smile of the Seosan rock-carved Buddha triad playing on his lips. Chang calls him "a sly bastard," because you can't tell what he's thinking. From the first I recognized the tension between them. I wonder what makes them regard each with such misgivings.

They say it's eight degrees on the ground today, which is average for November. Up here, 150 meters above ground, at the 50th floor, it's probably three or four degrees lower. But I can't feel the cold at all. When the rope first slipped, my heart thumped wildly and my face grew hot. I'm surrounded by buildings 40-50 stories high. From the bottom we look probably like bugs wriggling around the top, hanging from ropes. For me, this bug-like wriggling is a huge challenge. It's not the movement of any old bug, but of a ladybug whose color and pattern can make the much bigger praying mantis stop in its tracks. I remember what the boss said to me when I came to work this morning: "Yong, today ye finally get a crack at a high-rise. Let's see if ye've got the nerve, eh?"

I took extra care today in getting my things together. I put on my gear—my slicker, of course, my fiberglass helmet, and my metal-capped work boots. At least my toes won't break if I fall. When I was young I was struck by the hardness of the shell on the ladybug's back. Though small, the armor-like shell protected the wings and body underneath and the antennae on its head were on the lookout for predators. To prepare ourselves against danger like the ladybug, we rope engineers should have another rope. We need to put on an X-shaped safety belt and hang a crash prevention device called the cobra from the back and connect it to a subsidiary rope. If the main rope breaks, the cobra on the subsidiary rope acts to immediately stop the fall. But most rope engineers work without such an extra rope. Does everyone think they're immune from an accident? Or are they all concerned about speed only?

"Subsidiary ropes, cobras. They're all luxuries. You can only ask for those at big cleaning companies that do business with the big boys. We don't have time for all of that."

That's what Chang said when I first started this job and asked about safety gear. So the boss, or rather the CEO—the CEO is still the CEO, even if there are less than ten employees—of Green Power Cleaning warns us about safety throughout the day.

"Ye all know that it's safety first, don't ye? There's no room for mistakes. Ye make a mistake on land and ye get a second chance, but up in the air, just one mistake means death!" he says.

I can see the boss speaking, broad shoulders, round face, and slit eyes looking narrower than usual as he points up into the air. His strident voice and confident gestures told that he was a rope engineer with thirty years' experience. He's always boasted that there's never been an accident in his company. Maybe that's why he doesn't insist on a safety rope. What he means is that since we have no safety equipment, no accidents are allowed. But human beings are full of mistakes. What working condition could be tougher than being forbidden from making a mistake? But that's the fate of the rope engineer, and his reality.

Water flows continuously from the hose hanging on the left side of the safety plate. I put

the rubber press against the window and push. When the knob sticking up in the middle is pulled up, the air comes out and the press can be taken off the glass again. Pushing the press onto the window and pulling it off again, I move in an area two to three meters to either side, my cleaning territory. Holding the rubber press on the window with my left hand, I use my foot to get a hold on the window below. This would all be a lot easier if I had three pairs of legs, or rather six legs. Holding the window cleaner, a stick with a sponge on it, in my right hand, I dunk it in the detergent and wipe the glass all over, not missing a single spot. I put the stick back in the bucket and take the scraper and scrape off the grime and dirt from exhaust fumes. When I shoot water over the glass from the hose, the detergent and the dirt are washed down. The filthy water splashes my face, getting into my eyes, my nose, and my mouth. But we don't bother with face masks unless it's really cold, because of the discomfort.

In this fashion, the city buildings grimy from the exhaust fumes and yellow dust storms are given a bath two or three times a year by us rope engineers. Let's suppose there's no such thing as a rope engineer. It's possible to imagine the exhaust fumes that cake the buildings floating in the air like seeds on the spring breeze, settling blackly in people's lungs. As the ladybugs catch the aphids, we catch the dirt and exhaust on the buildings of the city. But it's rather humiliating to admit that, unlike the ladybug, we haven't got the ability to clear the dirt away with no equipment other than our mouths.

This building is getting its last bath for the year. Perhaps it should be called a christening rather than a bath. After we christen the building with our hands, the particles of sunlight that fall on it dance gleefully on the glass. They caress the glass, unable to contain their delight in the bare smoothness of the freshly washed surface, like the first time I took Su-hi in my arms.

My body is hanging high up in the air, christening the buildings of the city, but my mind is still back there on the ground. The video stuck in my mind starts playing again. There's a woman standing bent over the stairs, cleaning the nosings putting all her strength into her arms. Ferociously, she scrubs the white polisher into the brazen nosings attached to the edge of the stairs. Her arms move once to the right, then once to the left, then back and forth like a piston. As they swing from one end of the step to the other, her baggy house pants stir up a wind and her bottom heaves like the waves on the sea. A big floral pattern blooms across her heaving bottom.

Reflected in the freshly washed window is last night's scene from the hospital. The only sound is the *beep beep* of the machines every now and then. From the door, my mother lies on the second bed from the windows in the right hand row. She's sleeping deeply, her breath raspy. The monitor by her bed reads HR 152, BP 165/115, SaO2 90, the vital signs of her life. The numbers are strong for a patient so deep in sleep. The pulse is too fast, her blood pressure is high, and the oxygen saturation figure is dangerously low, far below 100. Even in her dreams, my mother may be cleaning the stair nosings to earn money for my education. What else would explain her racing pulse and high blood pressure?

"Mom, I'm here. It's your son, Yong. Open your eyes."

Wiping my mother's sweaty back with a piece of gauze and fanning it dry, I grumble under my breath, "You could have waited a few months. Why did you have to go and collapse? I was going to take a job somewhere this fall. Who told you to do that kind of work? Huh?"

I think back to the phone call informing me of my mother's collapse. In addition to studying for all kinds of professional certificates, I'm also taking classes that are supposed to get me into a certain firm at a privately run school, or *hagwon*, in front of the university. In this area where a number of universities big and small are clustered, schools for everything from computers to English to job preparation do battle with each other for the pockets of students and job seeking graduates. Between the various *hagwon* there are as many fortunetelling places as there are beer halls—tarot card cafes, the Psychic Granny, the famous House of the Four Pillars, the Original Philosopher Kim Bong-su—which all ask you to come and entrust your future to them. In addition, the smells from Gimbap Heaven, Andong Steamed Chicken, restaurants selling beef intestines, and street carts selling sweet green-tea pancakes are a reminder that even getting a job comes after a full stomach. On one side of the road is a row of cosmetics stores, Ace of Face, Etude, Image Queen, which promise to take care of our faces, and at the corner of the lane a gaggle of smart phone salesmen grab at the sleeves of passersby promising to put "the world at your fingertips."

The department store and hypermarket standing spruce on the corner deviously lure us with the message that you have to spend big to enjoy a rose-colored life. There's not a single place that's concerned with helping us get a job. I can't even begin to guess how much I've spent in those shops from the time I started university up till my present unemployed days.

One by one the pieces of paper that sucked the blood and sweat from my mother appear before my eyes and disappear again. The MOS computer certificate, the internet information retrieval certificate, the logistics management certificate, the office automation certificate, the accountancy certificate, the multicultural family counseling certificate, the Japanese certificate, the Chinese character certificate, my TOEIC scores... I can't even remember them all. My phone rings in the middle of a lecture. I'll never forget the shock of that day. Up till the day she collapsed I thought my mother was working as a supermarket cashier. After racing to the emergency room and filling in the papers, I rang the number on a note left by one of Mom's work colleagues. I met him at a worksite, cleaning the outside of a building. As I wash down the soapy windows, I recall my first meeting with the man who's now my boss.

"She was cleaning the stair nosings..." he says.

The owner of the cleaning company, a man around 50 years old, stopped mid-speech. I had interrupted him.

"Stair nosings? What do you mean?" I ask.

He looked at me as if he didn't know what I was talking about.

"Do ye mean to say ye didn't know what kind of work yer mother was doing? She's been working with us for several years now," he says.

I can't believe what I'm hearing. Turning my head I catch sight of the men cleaning the outside of the building, hanging from ropes. Before I realize what I'm doing, I ask, "Could I work here as well?"

The boss looks skeptical.

"Huh. How did ye know? This type of work offers the best pay. But it's not a job that just anyone can do."

I have no idea how those words came to my mouth when I saw the cleaners on the outside of the building. All I know is that some vague feeling was surging up inside me, the feeling that I was sick and tired of the never-ending quest to build up those blasted "specs," which had become so routine, and that I wouldn't mind stopping now. The incident on the apartment building stairs compelled me to act. It commanded me to make use of my four limbs, to do something. Now. It was as if I'd been waiting for that something inside me, something ripe and sated to burst. It told me to do something on my own resolve before I passed out of my twenties. How long was I going to hang around whining that nobody would hire me? That something inside me rises up in a burst of anger and, in a strident voice, throws this question at me.

It wasn't easy to get the boss to say yes. I can see him waving his hand to say no, sure that I'll give up before too long. I can also see myself going to the office every day, working as an assistant and waiting for the go ahead. I gladly took on jobs such as cleaning and sealing the cracks in marble with silicon. I had been cleaning the stair nosings, like my mother, for a couple of months when the boss says one day, "Do yer want to try cleaning the outside of a three- or four-storey building tomorrow?"

I think I've come about a third of the way down the building now. This looks like the 34th or 35th floor. I'm still too scared to look down. On my left, Chang is still lingering a few floors above me, because he's so meticulous perhaps; and on my right Gonn is at about the same height as I am. Gonn is always at ease. When I ask him sometimes if he's not afraid, he just grins, his teeth showing white in his dark face. One time, however, he did say something after blowing smoke from his cigarette: "You and I, in any case we're all the same. Life is like walking on a tightrope."

Gonn, of medium height with broad shoulders and a flat round face, is always so calm that sometimes he seems rather secretive. But you can't help liking him. He has the knack of making you feel comfortable. In contrast, Chang with his pointy chin and narrow eyes looks sharp, but difficult. Chang also likes to say "in any case" but the words feel different to the way Gonn says them. Chang's "in any case" are the words of a person who has been left alone in the world with no

one to take care of him. Well-read, Chang often compares us to the young chimney sweeps of the Victorian era. Whenever I'm hanging from a rope outside a building, I think of myself as a child chimney sweep, face black with soot and frozen with fear.

Little Tom, the boy who was sold by his father and forced to work from a very young age sweeping the soot out of chimneys. The adults, who lit fires in the fireplace when Tom hesitated to go higher up the dark, narrow chimney out of fear. The child, crying with fear, who was forced to climb higher and higher to escape the heat of the flames. When Tom and his fellow chimney sweeps grow into adults and fall victim to testicular cancer, the carcinogens contained in soot are found in their cancer cells. I'd heard this story so often from Chang that it was stuck in my ears. I dream that one day, like Tom in Blake's poem, I'll be locked up in a black coffin with the other rope engineers. Fortunately, an angel with a shining key comes and opens the coffin and sets us free. A few days ago I also dreamt that Dickens' Oliver, who was almost sold for five pounds, rapped on my window and shouted, "Help me!" To Chang, so familiar with such stories, Gonn is no doubt a thorn in his side. Gonn always says "yes" when the boss calls him out to work on a Sunday or the Chuseok holidays, or when the boss takes a cheap contract and cuts our wages.

I once saw the two of them slug it out. The boss had told me to work on a Sunday as well, and I'd asked them what I should do. The look on Chang's face as he taunted me, twitching his lips, is stamped in my brain.

"Are you gonna work on holidays, or not? Ask Gonn. And are you gonna live like a human being, or not? Ask Gonn. And are you gonna keep your mouth shut when your wages are cut, or not? Ask Gonn about that too," he says.

At that, Gonn begins a fierce attack on Chang, which is not like him at all.

"What? You want us all to insist on our holidays and lose our jobs? Any old dog or cow can get a cleaning job. All you need is yer four limbs. What are we supposed to do about it?" he says.

Chang's fist flies, striking Gonn on the chin. Not satisfied with hitting him, Chang continues to lash out in the same prickly manner.

"Gonn. Are you gonna pretend not to understand what I said, or not? Are you gonna be a bald-faced fucking idiot in front of this kid, or not?"

Goaded by his gibes, Gonn grabs Chang by the collar. His face is all screwed up, his chin thrust forward.

"Ye rotten bastard! If yer belly's full ye can leave the table by yourself. Why wheedle the others into going with ye and leave them to starve?" he shouts.

For a long time they exchange fists, until Chang's nose begins to bleed and Gonn's shirt gets torn. I'm exhausted from trying to stop them. The mood is so intense, there's no way I can mention safety ropes or any other accident prevention devices.

Anyhow, Gonn's "Our lives are like walking on a tightrope" carries no sense of injustice or resentment. He's just quietly doing what he has to do. What's more, he plays a mean guitar, just like Eric Clapton. When he plays my favorite, "Let It Grow", I sing the chorus with him at the top of my voice. *Let it blossom, let it flow/ let it grow, love is lovely.* The message is "let love grow." My mother taught me the song. Like Eric Clapton's mother, she was an unwed mother, too, and while raising me on her own she may have hoped I'd turn out to be something great, like a singer. But I have no musical talent, and I'm almost tone deaf. I'm also not much of a student. But by raising me unashamedly all on her own, my mother did a great service to the man she once loved. Otherwise, I would have spent my life trying to hurt him. But Mom should have given me the chance. In the window I can see myself as an adolescent rubbing that in her face.

"If he dumped you, you should have gone to some other man. Why did you bring me up a fatherless..."

I couldn't say the last word, but everyone knew what it was anyway. That awful word which had already spread among all my friends—I wanted to spit it out defiantly in my mother's face. I don't know what stopped me from saying it that day. But if it was my mother's choice to have me even when she couldn't get married, then that's a different story. I don't think I can lash out at him too harshly. Anyway, considering my mother and my grandmother, may lightning strike me if I say I was "thrown upon the world." I'm not the offspring of some Y chromosome—the name "Father"

is too good for him—but my mother’s son and the child of nature.

I recall the time I lived with my grandmother in Yang-gu, Gangwon Province, while my mother went to Seoul to earn money. Grandma. When I came home from school she would wash me, feed me, help me with my homework, and sometimes, holding my hand, take me on picnics in the woods. Like the brilliant ladybugs that flit and fly through the woods before coming to land on the leaves, I sit safely on a leaf and grow up drinking clean drops of dew. I grow strong with the warm sun on my back, feeding on the aphids found in such abundance on the leaf. I’m Grandma’s cute little ladybug. An intelligent life form, brilliant in color and pattern. Then there’s the sound of Grandma’s voice as I look at a shiny-backed ladybug sitting in the palm of my hand: “See how plump and round it is. It’s as sweet as my little Yong.”

Grandma’s plump and round and sweet little ladybug is at this moment hanging high up in the air giving the city a christening. I’d forgotten the very existence of the faithful leaf that had sustained me up till now. So my life has been filled with grief. But now, having climbed courageously to the top of this building, I fly about doing my work as I hang from a rope. I’m a ladybug that flies from the top.

I once watched the movements of the ladybug when I wandered through the woods with my grandmother. From the bottom of the tree, it climbed up the trunk eating the aphids on the way, and when the critter reached the top it flew off to another tree. Though it goes about its work in the opposite direction to us rope engineers, like us it flies from the top. Twenty years have already passed since then, but I can see it all clearly. The way the ladybug spread out its round wing covers, colored red and marked with a pattern of black dots, and proudly flew off with a quiver.

On my right, Gonn hangs the hose over the safety board and putting his left arm behind he pounds on his back a few times, moves up to the top of his head and back down again, over and over. Looks like Gonn’s back and shoulders hurt too. In the glass I see myself this morning spreading pain relief plasters on the floor and clumsily aiming them at my back and shoulders. I see myself back up to the wall and hit my shoulders against it to massage them and, unable to use my chopsticks with my fat swollen fingers, clumsily pick up the kimchi with a spoon. My face with its contorted expression after gargling a few times because my hands are too sore to hold a toothbrush. My smiling face when I greet the others in the morning, trying to hide the pain. I stopped whining about the world when I was 29. It was a revolution of sorts. But I haven’t been able to get rid of my fear of heights.

One time I asked Gonn what inner strength allowed him to stay so calm when sitting up in the air on a swaying wooden board, this when he doesn’t have the education that Chang or I have.

“Inner strength? I don’t know what yer talking about. The only thing I have faith in is the guitar,” he said.

“Aren’t you scared when you ply the rope? You can’t take your guitar up with you.”

“But playing the ropes is fun.”

“Don’t play with words. Tell me the truth, you monster.”

I slapped Gonn loudly on the back. But a happy smile remained on his lips.

“When ye play the guitar ye pluck the strings with yer fingers, but we play the ropes with our whole bodies, don’t we? It’s natural to sing under yer breath to the beat of the music.”

I feel the anger slowly rising inside me.

“Sing? When I’m scared to death? All I can do is shake with fear!”

Biting his lower lip, Gonn stared at me for a long time. Then in an unusually curt voice he said, “You and Chang. If ye saw me trembling up here, how would that make ye feel?”

Only after hearing this did I begin to feel assured. That Gonn wasn’t some kind of monster who knew no fear. I felt as if I’d met a comrade. When his pauper of a mother got re-married, Gonn’s life, jumbled in with his stepfather and half-brothers and sisters, may have been even harder than mine. Living through that time, perhaps he found comfort in believing that a rope engineer is a person who plays the strings with his whole body. That’s right, play the strings wherever you are, whatever you do. Hugging them close like a guitar—*di-da-da, da-da-la-la, di-da-da-la, da-la-la*—till the sound strikes a chord in someone’s heart.

Come to think of it, Gonn looks just like a “guitar-playing ladybug.” But the word

“ladybug” bugs me a bit. In America it’s called a “ladybug” but in Europe it’s called a “ladybird” or “ladybeetle.” They go to the trouble of adding the word “lady” to this mere insect from the beetle family. It also goes by the nicknames Lady Clark, Lady Cow, and Lady Mary. They say it’s because early portraits of Queen Mary often show her wearing a red cloak with black dots on it. Whether this refers to Queen “Bloody” Mary I or the tragic Queen Mary II, I don’t know. From her history of mistreatment under her step-mother and demotion from princess to lady-in-waiting, Queen Mary I seems most likely. Whatever the case, the ladybug’s name seems to be a reflection of people’s desire to somehow raise the insect to higher status. In Korea, however, it’s called a “shaman-bug” because the bright red and black shell is reminiscent of the colorful shaman’s robes. Suddenly a bell rings in my head. You could say the shaman is a step above the queen, for the shaman is one who sees into the future.

The sky, undecided this morning, is clear and sunny now. I see myself in the sunny woods looking for ladybugs. In those days, I was perfectly happy. I didn’t care whether I had a father or not. Like the ladybug, I would have been feeding on dew and nourishing my body in the sunshine, a child of nature. Holding the rubber press in my left hand, I put the stick in the detergent bucket and stretch my right hand out. I wriggle my swollen fingers inside the gloves. My toes too, numb with cold inside my work boots. If I’m a true child of nature, let my body absorb the nutrients from the atmosphere through my fingers and toes. My face will make chlorophyll by assimilating the carbon dioxide and sending it through the rest of my body. Then, like the ladybug I’ll fly from the top to another tree.

At times like these I get to thinking that we’re much better off than the child chimney sweeps that Chang told me about. But Chang insists that our present lot in life is exactly the same as the lot of those boys. We’re diseased young leaves that can’t grow or flower, no matter how much we want to. I wonder if he’s right. If modern urban civilization is a chimney, I guess we could be called the new-generation chimney sweeps who wash the city down.

I’ve come down to the 30th floor now. I’m dying for a smoke. I take my gloves off for a minute and light up. The tension seems to ease a little. In his prime, the boss said he ate noodles, emptied his bowels and did all sorts of other things sitting on his safety plate. But Chang and Gonn never think to rest. I’m about to say something to Gonn but, thinking the better of it, I take up the window cleaner again. But as I wipe detergent over the glass I realize that the window frame has expanded, leaving a gap that water will seep through. Now I’ve got a good excuse to call him.

“Gonn, can you come and take a look at this? There’s a gap in the window frame. Is it alright to hose it down?”

“Can’t ye just go gently with the water?”

“Still, have a look for me. I’m not sure.”

With a few moves over the glass with the rubber press, Gonn comes rolling over. His face is splattered with dark, dirty water. He’s a black crater face. I barely manage to stifle my laughter.

“What? What’s so funny?”

“Do you know what you look like? A crater-faced nigger.”

“Hey, do ye think ye look any different? Stupid crater face.”

Suddenly Gonn’s face, cheeks splattered black with grimy water, looks like a ladybug’s shell. If Grandma could see me or Gonn now she’d probably exclaim, “Oh, look at my little ladybugs. How round and plump and cute!” Gonn is a rope engineer who has been in this gig a while and is tireless in his work, so it’s certain that he’s a Seven-spotted Ladybug with seven black spots on a scarlet background, a real glutton. Grandmother told me that the Seven-spotted Ladybug eats up hundreds of aphids a day. Good-looking Chang is an omnivorous Twenty-eight Spotted Ladybug with twenty-eight spots on an orange background. This creature eats up the aphids as well as potato leaves and eggplant leaves and is constantly on the lookout for something new to eat. Then, what am I? Still a rookie with a vague orange background and indistinct black spots, perhaps I could be called a Moon-halo Ladybug. It’s strange how much ladybugs resemble us. Gonn and I look at each other and laugh. Gonn looks closely at the gap in the window frame and hands me a towel from his back pocket.

“The frame’s damaged. The water will seep through. It’s hard to tell what’s inside, so ye’d better wet this towel and just wipe it down,” he says.

“You’ve got an answer for everything.”

“Hey, do ye still call yer girlfriend’s name when yer scared?”

“What. Are you still going on about that? Forget it, will you.”

Gonn hasn’t forgotten the time I mumbled Su-hi’s name. After talking to Gonn, short though it was, I don’t feel so nervous. At this moment, a bit scared and hungry having practically skipped breakfast, in the window I see Su-hi visiting me in my tiny room. No vision could be sweeter.

“Surprise! I made it. I reached my goals—47, 24, 212.” she says.

“Weight and waist measurement, I get. But what’s 212?”

“Can’t you guess? It’s my arm-reach. The length of my body when I stand with arms stretched up as high as possible. We have to open and shut the overhead stowage bins and take down luggage, you know.”

“The terminology’s a bit fancy. I thought it was something more important,” he says.

Even at a glance, she’s very thin now. My girl Su-hi—173cm tall, she’s brought her weight down from 60kg to 45kg. It’s not just us rope engineers that risk our lives. I try to imagine Su-hi working in-flight after her suicidal weight loss campaign and accumulating all kinds of qualifications. Standing at the entrance and bowing 90 degrees to the passengers; handing out meals, pouring drinks and selling duty free; holding back her disgust while cleaning the muddy creation made on the toilet seat by some passenger ignorant of the way western style toilets are used. No, wait. She may revive some passenger suffering cardiac infarction using the artificial respiration skills she’s been practicing, or suppress some weapon-wielding hijacker with her quick wits and the taekwondo skills she’s polished from childhood, saving the lives of hundreds.

“You did it. I’m proud of you. Starving yourself like that. In the end it’s all a numbers game with your body,” I say.

“Aww, don’t be mean. We need to know at least three languages, have a CPR certificate, and be well-rounded with culture, manners, and a bright smile. But what do you think of my thighs? They’re still really big, aren’t they?”

“You’re not entering a beauty contest! Above all, a stewardess should be healthy. They say the size of your thighs shows how healthy you are.”

“Ah, you kill me. I give up. The Qatar Air open day is next week, you know. The first thing is to grab the attention of the judges with my style.”

I imagine open day at this foreign airline which makes no restrictions on qualifications. The applicants, all slim thanks to the determination to starve themselves if they have to, circle before the judges to show off their style and come to stand in line. They can’t afford to let go of their smiles for a minute. A little brighter, a little wider. A smile as innocent as a seven-year-old child’s, or rather, a smile so enchanting that it’ll knock the Arab tycoons flat. Su-hi’s already botched it several times.

“Hey, do you know a good native speaker? I think it’s because of my pronunciation,” Su-hi says.

“If you start rolling your r’s at this point, is that going to turn you into an English native speaker? Why don’t you consider another line of work? With your dedication you could easily get into the president’s office.”

“What do you take me for? If I say I’ll do something, I’ll do it. If you can’t help, at least don’t ruin my hopes.”

To prevent any harsher words from flying, I stop Su-hi’s mouth with a kiss. Quickly I shove my hands up her T-shirt. Her breasts, cupped in my hands, are the size of cheese crackers.

“They’re too small, aren’t they?” she says.

Now she’s going on about the size of her breasts. At times like these, Su-hi really seems quite dumb. She’s fallen for it again. Her nipples, the size of sultanas, stand stiff and erect as if they’ve been waiting for my hands.

“No. They’re big enough for me. They say small ones like these grow huge later on.”

For now, all we have is our two clumsy bodies. The ladybug’s shell has yet to harden on both Su-hi and I, and our spots are not mature enough to stand out. We’re both Moon-halo Ladybugs. With my lips on hers I take Su-hi to the bed. I’ve waited for a long time and feel like

I'm about to explode. But the night is still young for Su-hi. I suffer badly that night. Every night we expend our despair in this way, leaving it up in the air. But how long can we keep using our inexperienced bodies to deal with it in this nebulous fashion?

Younger than I, Su-hi's history of defeat is less dazzling than mine. Perhaps it's too early for her to give up. The 80 resumes and job applications that I've written are floating in the air like scraps of tissue. I can see Chang's embarrassed look as he says he's written five more than I have. Ours is a great nation of education attracting the envy of even the American president, with a university entrance rate of 80 percent, the highest of any OECD nation. But the American president doesn't know the truth. That even foregoing group dates and studying like a fiend to get a degree doesn't lead directly to a job. The university degree is no more than a certificate of your leisure activities. As useless as it may be, however, no piece of paper is better for putting the starch in your shoulders and putting on airs. Professors who studied at some of the world's leading universities play handmaid, though it makes little difference. Even if you end up a street cleaner, you have to get that piece of paper first. For any place passed over by the broom of a degree-holding street sweeper will be marked with a sign saying "graduate's cleaning section" and stamped with five stars.

Chang is still about five stories behind me. He may be crabby but he's a perfectionist. Go easy, I mumble to myself, and then call out to him: "Hey, Chang! Don't overdo it. Come on down. You think you're cleaning the queen's bedchamber?"

"Don't talk to me when I'm working. Anyway, you shouldn't have time to worry about what I'm doing."

"You should take time to look around, Chang. If someone was on the verandah railing ready to jump, you wouldn't be able to save him."

"Stop it! Don't kid yourself. Things like that don't happen."

"Who knows? Maybe you'll save some girl who's about to jump and return her to her family, who are so grateful they end up taking you for their son-in-law."

"Have you forgotten where you are to be talking such rubbish. Get on with your work, and don't waste your time in stupid fancies."

But is it really so improbable? Let's say I'm cleaning the windows on the 15th floor of a 30-story building. I'm singing to get rid of my fear, a trick Gonn taught me. *I start to miss you before the day is out / What can I do? My heart is ... /* When I sang this song, Su-hi used to tell me off for not being able to get the vibration right, the way the boy-band pop idols do it. It's a single apartment building and as I'm working on my own I'm practicing the vibration part *What can I do? My heart is...* over and over, when the door to the verandah opens in front of me. I'm about three to four meters to the right. Assuming that it's some lady carrying a glass of water onto the verandah, I don't take any notice. But a strange feeling makes me turn and I'm amazed to see a fresh young girl climb out onto the railing. She positions herself ready to jump. Using my rubber press I move toward her. The taut calves of the girl, who's just thrown her body into the air, land in my arms. The ladybug's flight is superbly timed. Carefully I place the girl back on the verandah. I hear a sharp voice and a loud slap on my cheeks.

"Why are you interfering? It's none of your business. And if you're going to sing, do it properly. Are you tone deaf? Damn it."

Astonished, I stare at the girl. She's wearing jeans and a white T-shirt and has the kind of face where her big eyes seem to be gazing far into the distance. This girl, who'd been frowning and glaring at me, suddenly grabs my face, grimy like a chimney sweep's, and grinds her lips into mine. I have no time to fight back. I'm lost in the kiss, thinking "so there's someone who realizes that underneath my dirt splattered face I'm really a good-looking ladybug, and that salvation comes even to the tone deaf," when I hear a man shouting. The sound comes from the window below, opened just a peep.

"Hey! Are you crazy? Why do you keep hosing down this window? It's been over half an hour now!"

Startled, I come back to reality. The girl has clean disappeared and Gonn is no longer at my side. He's already way down there. I make my way down, too, hastily cleaning the windows in my hurry to catch up.

The weather's very fickle these days. Not so long ago I was happy to see the sun out, but suddenly the wind is blowing fierce. After Marilyn Monroe was posed in a movie standing over a subway grate with the wind lifting up her skirts, gusts of wind in the city came to be called the Monroe. The name is attractive but the wind is strong and fierce. It picks up speed as it hits the face of the building and as its escape channel is so narrow it gains greater velocity than it would out in the open. As we found out with Kompas last time, when typhoon winds run into buildings they change into sharp, biting winds that pull trees up by the roots. Holding onto the rubber press, with all my might I stick like gum to the building. Gonn, too, pushes the press down with his arm, not moving an inch.

And Chang. Was he a little anxious at being left behind? He keeps working, even though the wind is blowing. He's asking for an accident. Chang doesn't seem to know that when a ladybug meets a predator it plays dead and keeps absolutely still. What's he going to do? We have no poisonous gel oozing out of our legs like the ladybug has. Then, in an instant it happens. When Chang goes to move his hands the wind makes off with his scraper. Chang's all in a fluster. As his weight shifts because of the right hand holding onto the rope, the safety board spins about. Alarmed, Chang tries to get a grip on the window frame with his right foot, when the wind blows again and spins his safety plate round once more. His work rope and the ropes on his safety board are all twisted round, leaving Chang unable to move. As he bumbles around trying to fix things he drops his rubber press. The safety board, anchored to nothing, spins around once again in the whirlwind. The shackle can't be moved since the ropes are so twisted, so Chang can't even come down.

But Chang's problems aside, I don't know if I can hold out much longer. What should I think about to beat this feeling of terror. My mother, lying in bed plugged into all sorts of terminals that keep check on her vital signs. My mother bending over the apartment stairs cleaning the stair nosings. How much do the nosings have to be rubbed to make them shine? Those great and tight-fisted nosings. Mother's bottom heaving like waves upon the sea. And across her bottom the flowers blooming large. In French the word for "mother" has the same pronunciation as the word for "sea." Mother, *la mère*. The sea, *la mer*. My mother's bottom, where I was conceived and nurtured and which then shoved me out into the world. Something comes to mind all of a sudden. That perhaps I am the floral pattern stamped across my mother's bottom. My mother cleaning the nosings to make the flowers bloom. A different smell seems to come abruptly from the safety plate. It's not the smell of my detergent. *Sniff, sniff*. That's it. The smell of the brass cleaner mixed with grimy water—it's the smell of my mother's baggy house pants. That fusty smell now tickles my nose like the fresh scent of mint. If it's my fate to fall right at this moment, I'll end up going to heaven or hell with my face rammed in my mother's baggy pants, smelling that fusty odor.

The wind still hasn't eased up. I pray that Chang will be all right. Chang and I still haven't finished talking. About whether we've been "thrown upon the world or were born to enjoy all the sweet things in life." Ah, the Monroe. Why is she unable to escape this lane of all places? Oh wind of a beautiful woman, have you become besotted with one of us? If that's the case, say who it is. Your desires, which the world's leading politicians and writers were unable to satisfy, I, Kim Yong-wu, will completely fulfill. As if Monroe has heard my pleas, the wind gradually dies down. Gonn shouts loudly, "Chang! Wait just a minute. We'll untangle ye. Yong, you come down quickly, too. We're going to go back up and come down on either side of ye. Chang, if ye got that, wave yer hand."

As still as the dead, Chang feebly raises his right hand.

"Chang, stay alert. You mustn't let go of yourself," I shout loudly, then start to make my way down with careful steps. On the way I think, today's news will also mention a rope engineer who has fallen. But no doubt the boss will still be battling it out with the other companies to calculate the tender price. The rope falls easily and my descent is smooth and swift. For the first time since starting this gig, I feel that descending on a rope is not so bad, but as soon as I think that I hear a buzz down below.

"The speed's hopeless today. Everyone, listen up. This afternoon the rookies will join you. They've been going through some tough training. I'm going to see who does the fastest and cleanest work. From now on, it's skill that matters not your chops in this business. Make sure you

eat a good lunch. We'll meet back on the roof at two sharp."

I don't know when he arrived, but there's the boss speaking in a solemn voice, his dialect unnoticeable. Oh my God. I thought there were strange vibes in the company. Flashing through my mind is the thought that fear is a luxury now. Looking back, those days when Chang and I discussed sham psychology were the rope engineers' heyday. Already a grand view is spread before my eyes. From the top of the 50th floor dozens of rope engineers dangle from their ropes, waiting for the boss's ready, set, go! The race begins to clean the windows faster and cleaner. Who cares about your life? You have come in at the top to survive. Not for nothing does the safety board look like the pan on scales. Looks like my value will be weighed on it after all. I picture the value of my life placed on the scales and balancing with the weight of a fly. The dizziness is petrifying. Mouth pressed shut, aggressively I kick the air.

That instant, my eyes grow hazy as if there's a halo round the moon, and strangely enough my movements in the air are neither heavy nor frightening. The Moon-halo Ladybug has cast a halo around the moon. I feel as light as if I had wings. Have I really turned into a ladybug? It's not just me. One, two, three, four...the number of ladybugs fluttering and fluttering about begins to grow. There's a Seven-spotted Ladybug playing the guitar, and a Twenty eight-spotted Ladybug with a pointy chin. Tom the chimney sweep and Oliver the pickpocket have also become ladybugs and are at my side. My eyes are blinded by the sight of countless red, yellow, blue, and orange ladybugs with black spots on their shells, round and plump and cute, grouping together and flying from the top.

Translated from Korean by Jo Yoon-jeong