

This story was written for the project *Novel 01: In Search of Jun-ho Lee*, a collection of visual artists' narrative based writings. The organizer of the project, Dae-bum Lee, asked participating artists to include a character named Jun-ho Lee in any role they saw fit.

Not A But B (This is not A but B)¹

Jun-ho Lee² was born in Kunsan, Jeonbuk province, Korea in 1925. He led the fight against the Japanese colonization of Korea. He supported the Korean fight against Japan by revealing to the Korean public that many of the Korean students drafted by the Japanese army around Manju, China had deserted and joined armed militias fighting for Korean Independence. He also tried to reorganize these groups to make them more effective. Jun-ho Lee was one of the few genuinely brave and righteous intellectuals in Korean history, a fact drilled into me by my father. Jun-ho Lee is also the father of a friend of his.

Every night after my father started drinking, he would regale my mother and me stories about Jun-ho Lee. We had to put up with his constant praise of Mr. Lee's intrepidity and patriotism. He would go on and on until late in the night. My grandfather, my father's father, was a kind of free spirit who never held a serious job in his life. My father's veneration of Mr. Lee seems to have come out of his resentment toward him. Otherwise, how can you explain his unusual passion and deep affection toward Jun-ho Lee? My father even named me after him before I was born. You can guess how he felt when it turned out that I was a girl instead of a boy. Even so, he insisted on giving me the name.

That is how I became Lee, Jun-ho. I teach kids English in a small cram school near my house. At the school, under one director, there are two English teachers including me, two mathematics teachers, and one Korean language teacher. Apart from me and a bookkeeper, everybody working at the institute is male. Work starts at 3 pm and finishes at 10 pm. My routine at the institute is very much the same everyday. Kids attend class for 80 minutes, and then have 10 minutes break to change classes. After the chaotic 10 minutes break, all the students vanish into class and it's quiet again for another 80 minutes. If one kid quits the class, a new one – pretty much identical in every way – replaces him or her. I always teach the same English grammar to class A on Tuesdays and class B on Thursdays. There is no reason to teach new grammar or composition - I just need to drill students on standard grammar and sentence patterns for their university entrance exams. It is no surprise then that there are no students who pursue anything new or different. When I am not in class, I prepare handouts for the next class, making exactly 10 copies.

Today, 6 kids have once again endured 80 minutes in front of me. "Ok. I will wrap up today's class with a review of various auxiliary verbs we learned last class. *I would rather die than live in*

¹ Jang, J. 1992. *Man-to-Man Advanced English II: Gerund*. Seoul: Man-to-Man. p30

² Lee, Jun-ho (1925. 10. 17 ~): Born in Kunsan, Jeonbuk province, Korea. Near the end of the Japanese occupation, he was an activist who fought for Korean independence. He led the struggle for independence by announcing Japan's defeat in World War II and mobilizing other independence leaders. He received a presidential citation in 1983 and the Order of Merit from the National Foundation in 1990.

dishonor.³ Can anyone rephrase this for me? We covered how to do this last class. Use a verb starting with P!” Kids look at me with blank faces, pretending they have never even heard anything about this. Some of them try to avoid making eye contact with me, while others pack their bags preparing to go home. I face this same scene every day. I raise my voice, “How could all of you forget this? You know the expression *prefer A to B*! You can rephrase the sentence as *I prefer dying to living in dishonor*! If you do not study hard, how are you going to succeed in life? Without a good English score, how can you succeed?” Before I even finish, one kid retorts, “you’re good at English, but you’re not successful!” The rest of the kids start to giggle. I am speechless. I am sick and tired of both the 80 minutes’ repetitive teaching and these hopeless students. I murmur to the kids, who are practically running out of class with their already-packed bags, “*Would rather A than B* has the same meaning as *Prefer A to B*. Here, *to* is a preposition, so you have to put a noun or a gerund instead of the simple form of a verb after *to*. Do not confuse it with the infinitive...” These English words feel like sand, gritty in my mouth.

My father has always said that I have to be a great man like Mr. Lee. He often harangued me not to disgrace his name. I have to be righteous and brave so that I can keep my head held high even though I am a woman. I am not sure if my decision to study social science at university was affected by my father’s abstract patriotism. Anyway, I started to study sociology, and it was true that in my department there were many students involved in activism. I remember many nights that we staggered in after drinking and endlessly discussing political issues in debates that never reached any conclusions. I do not remember the slogans we chanted, but I clearly remember the strong smell of liquor and cigarette smoke on our breath. I also can’t forget the rally we organized to keep our public green space (which they eventually paved over for a parking lot), the annual strike to demand tuition fee reductions (held every year without exception), and the tense and furious demonstration together with the alliance of university students to stand against the conservative government’s reactionary agenda. At that time, I think I believed that was the way to live up to my name – Jun-ho Lee, a great person who stands up for justice. However, I should have realized that to be a great person in our time, I had to study English or prepare for a civil service examination, shutting myself in the school library, rather than joining a student union and going to rallies.

The year that I graduated from university, Korea had a difficult time with the IMF. All the media was flooded with news about the dismal unemployment rate and dramatic stories of people who had lost their jobs. We even called ourselves the cursed, those who had to leave school in the worst labor market in modern history. To avoid facing reality out of school, some of my male friends who had deferred their military service joined the army, and other friends who had money saved away prepared to enter graduate school or study abroad. I couldn’t do either. I had student loans from 4 years of tuition fees. My father also wanted me to get a job as soon as possible as he was forced into early retirement. As a result, I graduated school the year everybody else avoided. Of course, there was no job for me with my sociology degree from a merely average university and record of student activism instead of good grades or qualification in English.

³ Jang, J. 1992. *Man-to-Man Advanced English IV: Auxiliary Verbs*. Seoul: Man-to-Man. p19

3 pm again. Today my first class starts at 5 pm. As the midterms approach, I need to prepare special exam material for the kids. Every school has different English textbooks from different publishers. This means I have to make different versions of my handouts for each school. Deok-poong and Nam-young Middle Schools use the Jihak-sa (a) textbook. Baek-woon and Hyun-kyung school cover the Dong-a textbook. Dong-nam Middle School is the only one using the Cheon-jae textbook, which gets my goat. However, when the midterm is coming, my work life improves. As kids come in separately, I have more free time than usual and classes finish earlier. But it feels too empty today. It is just me and the other English teacher in the staff room. He is looking at stock quotes online when he glances up at me and says, "Isn't it quiet today? Mr. Yu, the Korean teacher threw up on the job. It was quite wild. The director yelled at him, even throwing a potted plant at him. Then, the director went out to smoke a cigarette with the big math teacher and Miss Li had to go to the store. She seemed pretty shocked but she's probably okay by now. Also, I haven't seen Park, the other math teacher. He probably has a late class today." I see. So the Korean teacher's last name was Yu. We have worked in the same school for half a year, but I did not know even his name, first or last. Well, there will be another new Korean teacher soon. Who cares? I just envy him for being able to leave this hell. Just then, the director and the senior math teacher enter the school. The director seems very upset, so he just passes us and gets into his office without even giving us a single look. He slams the door. Bam! After him, the senior math teacher comes in with unpleasant smile around his mouth. He's tall and fat. He wears small glasses that fit tightly on his big pale chubby face. It's not just his looks either – the man acts like a pig as well. He has worked here for quite a long time. There are some students who register at this school just because of his reputation. Since the school is paid by the students, he must earn nicely – "The highest salary after the director" as he likes to boast. He is cheap and chatty. "Jun-ho, just do what I do! I bought a car for my wife this time. You know, an Optima? I got the jade color Optima for my wife, so she really puts out these days." He also loves to talk about hostess bars. "Jun-ho, you may not know about this since you are so young and naïve. If you go to a hostess bar, one where you pay 2 million won⁴ a night, you can be served by Seon-young Hwang, who used to be a famous actress. She is such a bitch. People say she is so good at sex. Well, she has really thin ankles. Jun-ho, I am sure you know what bitches with thin ankles are good for," he says, looking over my legs. I feel like worms are crawling over them. I imagine spitting my energy drink in his face. Pst! Damn, bloody dirty pig. That moment, the director comes out from his office and says "Jun-ho Lee, please teach Yu's Korean classes today. You can just play a recorded tape to train the kid's listening skills. Ok? Easy." I am totally sick and tired of my life.

I met an old classmate who I haven't seen for a while. We used to be close friends in our school years, joining student activist groups and taking sociology classes together. He would passionately insist that we have to be aware of how the power structure controls us and how it has been embedded into our cultural and social values, expounding on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci. He often repeated that we must always be on guard for things that we take for granted under the superstructure. He was also good at Japanese. He scorned the government policy to exclude Japanese from the foreign language examinations in national universities while tolerating Japanese collaborators in power within

⁴ USD \$1,700

the conservative party. He liked Haruki Murakami. I remember his mild face and shy smiles whenever he talked about Murakami's books. Now he works in a bank. He already has two children from his marriage with a colleague from the same bank. Since he has to work weekdays and spend time with his family on weekends, we weren't able to see each other for a long time. I think it was only our second meeting since he got married. While grilling pork BBQ in a restaurant, he told me about his life these days. His work starts at 9 am and finishes around 10:30 pm at night. Until the bank closes at around 4 pm, he is occupied by trivial chores behind the counter – his real job starts at 4 pm. After finishing work, he rushes home and gives his kids a bath, and then he can go to bed. As he and his wife both work in a bank, they can save some money. However, to make more money, he is living with his parents in their place. He says, "My second boy just started to speak. He remembers that I sometimes buy a snack, kokal-corn from a corner shop owned by an old woman, so that he always repeats 'papa, papa, nanny koki-co' whenever I return home. Isn't it so cute? He says koki-co instead of kokal-corn!" He chuckled. I don't know what makes this funny. He stopped laughing and says, "You don't understand because you don't have kids yet. By the way, when are you going to get married, Jun-ho? You had better hurry up if you plan to. Children cost a lot, so it is better to have a kid when you are young. It would be tough if you have to retire from your job while your kids are still in university. Right?" We emptied one bottle of soju together that night. At the end of the night, he said, "Jun-ho, I remember our days in university, talking about Murakami. You know, I like Haruki Murakami." I was a little embarrassed at this.

3 pm again. When I enter the school, the piggy math teacher grades my dress, looking me over. "Jun-ho, you're wearing a hoody dress today! Nice! It makes you look young like Heidi, the girl of the Alps in that anime. Nice, nice. 6.7 out of 10!" Damn pig. I want to call you out, you, dirty, bloody, pig. I print 10 copies of the handouts for a vocabulary test and today's grammar lesson. One for my files, one for the director, one for myself, 2 extras and the other 6 are for the students. When I just finish printing, the pig calls to me again, "Jun-ho, do you know why Kyung-su seems down?" Kyung-su Park is the other math teacher in the school. He graduated from the same university as the pig. The pig always looks down on him because Park, the junior math teacher, was a year below him at school. He is in his early 40s but still single. The piggy continues, "You know, he is dying to get married. Just before you came, Kyung-su tried to join a matrimonial site, but they rejected him at once. Can you guess why? Jesus, it's killing me. So funny! Because he is bald! Did you know neither the handicapped nor the bald can join a matrimonial site? It's like he's handicapped, like he's a cripple!" The pig shrieks with laughter, his face flushing and almost choking. Behind a computer monitor on the junior teacher's desk, Kyung-su's face rises. "Hey, don't insult me! The girls at the hostess bar prefer me to you!" he tells us, smiling proudly. Of course, the pig math retorts immediately, "What a jerk! Yeah, they like you more than my fat ass or our 60-something boss. Congratulations! Jun-ho, help a guy out! Kyung-su, what do you think about Jun-ho? She might be a bit old, but I bet she looks good dressed up?" The pig giggles, glancing at me. Morons. Pig. Disgusting fat pig. I hide behind my computer monitor, making myself as small as possible.

“*Anything does not please her.*”⁵ Kids, do you think this sentence is correct?” One kid replies, “yes, it is correct!” I set him straight, “No, it is not. If you want to say this properly, you have to say *Nothing pleases her*. You always have to put *not* at the beginning of a sentence. Then, if you change the sentence to a passive voice, you may think you have to say that *She is pleased with nothing*. But, it is not true. As I said before, *not* does not like to be put at the end of a sentence, so you have to pull it into the beginning. As a result, if you want to change *Nothing pleases her* into the passive voice, you are supposed to say *She is not pleased with anything* by splitting *nothing* into *not* and *any*.” The first student, the one who answered wrong, whines “I don’t understand! Why should it be so complicated? We all know she is just unhappy and unpleasant, so why is there a right way and a wrong way to describe her? Is she really that deep?” The kids started to giggle. Then another kid raises her hand, saying “Miss, class is over!” Kids packed their bags, preparing to go home. I muttered, “Alright, kids. Isn’t it difficult to understand the negative form of passive voice? I will review this next time. At least remember to put a preposition next to pleased, so you can use such expressions as *be pleased with...*” There is no one left in the class. I erase my writing from the black board. It turns into white powder and falls onto me like mist.

The delivery menu for dinner at the school is usually the same – squid fried rice from a small luncheonette around the school. The director recommends the place so we eat quickly, without side dishes and extra chopsticks, and it tastes pretty good. I have squid fried rice for dinner about 4 times a week. If I feel like eating something different, I order kimchi fried rice - maybe once a week. I have dinner on the table, covered with newspaper to keep it clean and simple, with other teachers who are on break. Today, except for the director, everyone is around. While we are having dinner and watching TV in silence, the junior math teacher speaks up. “Jun-ho, what are you planning after work? Do you want to go to see a movie together?” Before I can turn him down, the pig raves like a madman. “What? Are you guys really making out tonight? So, you two...! That’s right, Kyung-su. You have to let your woman lie down on the bed for the first date. Jun-ho, Do you know a bald man has unbelievable stamina, so he can really please a woman? You have to say thanks to any man who asks you to go out and lifts up your skirt! Considering your age, it’s a big favor. Ok. My boy finally can get married, Hoorah!” Then he chuckles, opening his mouth wide enough for me to see everything mashed up inside of it. Ah, really disgusting. I can’t understand how Kyung-su can grin at his jokes. Kyung-su’s yellow teeth are on full display between his fat lips, greasy with squid oil. I feel like throwing up. However, I continue to stuff food down my throat. The other English teacher finishes his dinner early and stands up, saying, “Don’t you think there was less squid in the fried rice today?”

Today at lunch, my father has a drink as usual and starts up again. “Whenever I visited Jun-ho Lee’s place as a boy, the house was always full of people. They were there to see if everything was all right with him and to help him if he needed it. Once at Mr. Lee’s, I saw a man in a full white formal suit with a fedora cocked on his head. I thought the man had extraordinarily sharp eyes. Sure enough, I later learned it was Doo-han Kim⁶! Even that gangster would come by to pay his respects to Mr. Lee.

⁵ Jang, J. 1992. *Man-to-Man Advanced English III: Passive Voice*. Seoul: Man-to-Man. p265

⁶ Kim, Doo-han (1918. 5. 15 ~ 1972. 11. 21): Born in Seoul. His father, Kim Jwa-jin, was a famous activist who fought for Korean independence from Japan. Near the end of the Japanese occupation,

That's not everything. I never saw snow piled up in front of his house either. No matter how much snow came down, his neighbors cleared it from his house, even if they couldn't manage their own." Mum and I don't say anything. We just eat our lunch in silence. I feel stressed because I know where this story is going. "People respected his courage and honor in fighting for our county. In 1942, young and in prison, the ruthless Japanese tortured him..." I heard somewhere that chewing with just one side of your mouth distorts your facial muscles. As my father goes over all the torture endured by Jun-ho Lee, blow by blow, I chew my food, mouthful by mouthful, counting each bite, one, two, three on the left and one, two, three on the right. Now it's time. "What the hell are you doing with your life, Jun-ho? I named you after Mr. Lee, hoping you'd live up to the name. Where is your ambition, your calling? What on earth is the matter with you? You barely get out of bed at noon and spend the rest of your day arguing with kids at a small cram school around the corner. Why don't you study for the civil service exam so you can get a real job, maybe start a career, Jun-ho? Your name is Jun-ho Lee. Remember *the* Jun-ho Lee, your namesake, and how he fought for our country when he was even younger than you! You have to play in the big leagues to hit a homerun! What are you going to do, stuck in a dead-end job with stupid kids?" I've heard this all before, but today it's even less tolerable than usual. Maybe I have a slight fever. I have a headache and feel dizzy. Mum waves her hand to say that I had better leave after lunch.

I leave early to get some aspirin from a pharmacy. After taking them, I head back to the school. Father, you are not the only one unhappy with my life. I'm not happy with it either. I am sick and tired of this life, which seems to go on forever. Yes, I am tired. I envy the people who lived at time when there were things worth fighting for. They must have felt true passion since they had real enemies and a cause they believed in. My life feels empty, and I go on because that's what's expected from me. I arrive at the school, and it's only 2:40 pm. I might have miscalculated the time I left home. It's still quite early. As I enter the school in gloomy mood, Miss Lee, the bookkeeper nods curtly to me. The staff room is empty, meaning no one has come in yet. The bookkeeper heads out the door, saying "Ah, Jun-ho, since you come early, I can go to a bank. Please take care of things here just for a moment. I'll be back in a minute." I sit down in front of my computer to prepare handouts for today's class. It is going to be about the To-infinitive. 'To-infinitive as an adjective. (1) When used as a predicate adjective, it sometimes implies destined. *The day was to decide the fate of Korea.*⁷' The pig appears. "Oh, Jun-ho Lee, you came early. You put on my favorite dress. Good! With the dress, your ass looks a bit flat, but your legs look longer. That's hot. You've got nice, thin ankles, though I'm not sure about the rest of your body." Damn pig, how pathetic. I still have a headache, like someone is hammering nails into my head. I pop two more aspirins. Ignoring the stupid pig, I keep typing the handout. 'Split infinitive: *It was our duty to bravely resist the enemy.*⁸' Then the director arrives with the junior math teacher, opening the door. "Good Afternoon! Oh, Jun-ho Lee, you came early. It's good, you're just in time. I have something to talk to you about. A couple of days ago, I got a phone call from the mother of one of our students. She called me to complain that we don't teach classes on Sunday. Mothers these

Doo-han was the most infamous mobster who fought a vicious turf war against the Japanese mob, the yakuza. He became a congressman in 1954, 9 years after Korean Independence.

⁷ Jang, J. 1992. *Man-to-Man Advanced English IV: To-Infinitive*. Seoul: Man-to-Man. p229

⁸ Ibid, p260

days want their kids to be learning all the time. Other schools have started up Sunday classes. So I'm thinking about offering English listening classes on Sundays. What do you think, Jun-ho? Can you cover two classes on Sunday? Do you have anything going on Sundays? I know you don't go to church, and you don't have a husband to cook for, right? Don't waste your time playing around. You're better off making money on Sundays than just killing time. Don't you agree? Will you do it? Jun-ho, it's not really a question. I already told all our parents about the plan." After all of this, the junior math teacher gives me a Vita500⁹ with a wink of his ugly eye. 'To-infinitive as a noun – functions as an objective: *She decided to resign her post.*¹⁰

One night in May, 1942. Jun-ho Lee walks to Jong-ro police station¹¹, a bomb clutched to his chest. He knows that this moment can be his last. The darkness of the night is deeper than usual. He can't stop thinking about his mother, in tears everyday out of worry for him. That night, her mother's intuition told her that something was wrong, and she followed him to the door, grasping his hands in hers and refusing to let him leave home. When he finally pulled away, he could see the tears in her eyes. The rough texture of her cold hands lingers in his memory. He hesitates for a second – 'Do I stop here?' That very moment, two Japanese police officers emerge from the station, starting to walk their beat in his direction. Jun-ho Lee hides in the shadow of an ally. His mouth feels dry and a cold sweat breaks out all over his back. Was it because I took that painkiller? Everything was easier than I expected. I slowly raise myself up from behind a computer monitor and snatch the Vita 500 from Kyung-su's hand. I launch it at the pig's desk. The bottle flies to his desk and smashes into pieces. Crash! Yellow fluid – urine colored – flows down on to his keyboard. The pig shouts "What the hell?!" to the director, mouth still agape with shock. I speak clearly, for everyone to hear, "I will not live like this anymore." Then I take my bag, turn my back on them, and walk right out the door. Over the jingling of the bell tied to the top of the door, I can hear the director cry "What's wrong with you? Miss Lee! Teacher Lee! What the hell do you think you're doing? Come back right now! You, there! Jun-ho Lee! English teacher! Jun-ho Lee! Jun-ho Lee!" But I don't look back. In the dark moonless night, only Jun-ho Lee's two eyes show, boring into the Japanese police officers, glaring in white.

* This story was written based on an idea archived in *Forgotten Ideas*, a project created by Italian curator Cecilia Cuida which collects abandoned project ideas and plans from artists, curators, academics, writers and other creative minds. This particular idea belongs to Mikolaj Lozinski, a Polish writer, who came up with it as a story topic. Mikolaj planned to write a novel about a person who identifies with a famous person whose name he or she shares, but he abandoned the topic.

* This story is originally written in Korean. Jakub Wrzesniewski (Canadian, PhD in Political Science, UC Berkeley, USA) helped me to translate it into English.

⁹ Common energy drink in Korea including vitamin C

¹⁰ Ibid, p226

¹¹ Jong-ro police station served as the main detention centre for Korean independence activists during the Japanese occupation. It became notorious because of the inhuman tortures inflicted on its inmates. It remains in operation as a major police station at the centre of Seoul.