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The Canning Factory

P'yŏn Hye-yŏng

Translated by Soohyun Chang

It didn't take long for the news to spread. The Manager had never been absent before—not once. The quick-witted ones had a hunch—something had happened to him, something bad, since the Manager was always the first to show and the last to go. Long ago, one of the workers had christened him The Custodian, not to his face of course, and the name had stuck. He had been around since the days of manual production—and like most of the workers from that vintage era, he distrusted automation and machines despite their benefits. Whether it was the rust check or the vacuum-seal test, or something in between, he made sure that the “random” inspections of the cans were done twice. And he availed himself of every opportunity to dress the workers down for gaping slack-jawed at the cans while the machines did all their work for them. His managerial style was to mind everyone's business and give painfully precise orders. With his female workers, a crooked name tag was taboo. The Manager always took it upon himself to straighten the offending item, placing hand to chest as he did so, and if the women reacted with horror, he was quick to humiliate them with gross remarks about their chest sizes. He was a short-tempered man and in any dispute he would immediately fly off the handle. Nor did he ever apologize, even if the misunderstanding or the fault was his. So said the workers, at any rate, when the Boss questioned them about the Manager's absence. The Boss was inclined to give the Manager the benefit of the doubt—rare was the manager, after all, who didn't have a bad reputation among the workers.

According to Pak, who had worked overtime with the Manager the night before his disappearance, the Manager had suggested a nightcap afterwards. When Pak turned him down, he had stomped off in the direction of the manager's residence nearby, muttering that young people these days were so damned hard to deal with.

“You think he's passed out somewhere?” the Boss had asked Pak. Not likely. The Manager drank himself silly nearly every night, but the next morning you

could bet he'd be the first one to arrive, the stench of alcohol in his wake. You might say The Manager was a high-functioning alcoholic.

When Pak merely shrugged, the Boss had followed up: "What were you guys doing here last night anyway?"

There wasn't so much work that night shifts were necessary. The factory workers followed a nine-to-six work day, a schedule that even the office workers in the big-city companies would envy. Pak had read that the economic recession was a global trend. And the doubts about the wholesomeness of the processed foods were being voiced louder by the day. The variety of foreign objects—a piece of a sharp metal here, a fly there, sometimes a worm, sometimes a scrap of plastic, even a fingernail clipping – that were found in the canned foods kept the issue alive in the people's memories. Every time a story hit the papers or made the evening news, sales plummeted. Fewer cans were being delivered to domestic markets. It was the export market that sustained the factory, but only barely—the canning factories in the neighboring countries had captured a market share by offering lower prices.

"It was a personal request from the Manager," Pak replied.

"A personal request? In case you've forgotten, this is *my* factory. No one gets paid to do personal favors."

"We canned things," Pak was quick to add.

"So, you canned things. Why am I not surprised? Yes, this is a canning factory. We put things in cans, it's all we do. It's what we did yesterday, it's what we did twenty years ago, it's what we'll do tomorrow, and it's what we will do twenty years from now."

"He said they were going to be shipped to T."

The Boss looked Pak straight in the eye. Was T one of the countries his factory exported to?

"Why T?"

"His daughter is studying there."

"Is that what he said." The Boss nodded.

Pak noticed The Boss clenching his fist tight enough to crush an aluminum can.

"That no-good. He's learned a few tricks," the Boss muttered to himself. The Boss could guess what was being canned for the Manager's daughter. When his own son was off studying in U a long while ago, he made a point of having

various foods canned for him: fresh kimchi, spicy radish cubes, crabs slathered in soy sauce, marinated beef and pork, and stir-fried squid. The list went on—sweet rice drink, kimchi stew, radish-leaf-bean-paste soup, and crispy anchovies. Not for a day was the Boss's son homesick. And guess who had done the canning? The Manager, of course. *Who did he think he was, to run the machines, use up electricity, and work his employees after hours?* The Boss had a mind to tell Pak to check the manager's residence and see if everything was all right—he knew the Manager lived alone, his wife having gone to T to look after their daughter. But then he changed his mind. And the next day, and the day after that, the Manager failed to show up. The Boss sent his secretary, who also served as his personal assistant, to the manager's residence to tell the Manager he was fired. *And if he ever sets foot in my factory again...*

The workers gathered in the lounge for lunch. Each opened a can of mackerel, pike mackerel, or spicy sesame leaves and a container of translucent steamed rice from home.

"It's so unlike our Custodian," one of the workers commented while chewing on a piece of a mackerel. The deadliest flu couldn't keep their Custodian from showing up before anyone else, reeking of alcohol as always.

"I'm not too worried. Still, someone ought to call the police," another added. Everyone nodded in agreement, all the while chewing on his mackerel, pike mackerel, or spicy sesame leaves with rice.

Someone pointed at an opened can. "This reminds me of him." The Manager had canned food for breakfast, alone at his residence. He had canned food for lunch, with the others in the lounge. He had had canned food for dinner, washed down with alcohol.

"What kind of a life is that?" someone else asked before chomping away on a sesame leaf-wrapped spoonful of rice.

"Who here doesn't live that life?" yet another blurted along with a blast of mackerel breath.

Silently the workers scooped up rice stained with various garnishes together with a chunk of mackerel. They chewed more slowly than usual. One by one they had all come to realize that the Manager's daily life and meals weren't much different from their own. They worked hard and lived compliantly, and that was perhaps why they felt as if their lives had become so mundane, like the taste of the

canned food they were eating. It was as if the future had been laid out for them. And this future was not much different from the Manager's present—as much as they wanted to deny it. Perhaps that was why no one liked the Manager and why no one particularly hated him.

They finished with their usual dessert—canned peaches and mandarin oranges. While they worked on the mushy peach flesh they discussed who would call the police. Each stole glances at Pak. He had been the last to see the Manager. If something horrible had happened to the Manager—and by now they all suspected the worst—would it not cause trouble for Pak? Pak did have an alibi. After his night shift he had dropped by his favorite eatery and there he ran into a co-worker. Joined the man at his table, he watched a popular sitcom on the TV. How come the female lead was screaming her head off? He had asked the waitress. The waitress had explained, as if defending the actress. Being the last one to see the Manager didn't automatically brand Pak as a suspect. The Manager could have had the bad luck to have fallen off a bridge, to have been beaten to death by a gang of robbers, or to have fallen victim to a hit-and-run driver as he wobbled around town drunk. Such misfortunes could happen to anyone.

Just as someone reached for the last slice of canned peach, the Secretary came running in. After catching his breath, he took a big swig of the peach juice remaining in the can.

"You'll cut your lips drinking it like that," someone advised the Secretary.

"As if! Let me tell you--I drank peach juice out of the can yesterday, I drank it the day before that, and I drank it twelve years ago," the Secretary muttered as he put the can down. "The Boss notified the police."

A short moan of grief escaped everyone in the room. It was as though they all had cut their lips on a partially opened can.

"And the police--" The Secretary slurped the last drops of peach juice. Someone gulped.

"The police said he might simply have gone off somewhere on his own, so we should be patient for the time being." As he finished, the Secretary found another can of fruit—this time mandarin oranges—and sipped the juice. Like a group of friends sharing a hot bowl of fish-cake soup in the cold outdoors, the workers passed around the cans that still had some juice. No one cut his lips. The last one gathered the empty cans and as if the rattling were a cue, the lunch bell rang.

Pak's job was to seal cans of pike mackerel. For a short period, just after the Manager's promotion, he had sealed cans of mackerel. This interlude aside, he had always been a sealer of cans of pike mackerel. The workers were free to choose which items they worked on. If one was tired of the salty smell of fish, one could move to the produce line and can peaches or mandarin oranges. If the sweet, tangy smell of fruit made one nauseous, one could transfer back to the seafood line. This was the principle, but the reality was that no one changed. It was the Manager who had first implemented that policy. The story went like this: The Manager himself had held the same post--canning pike mackerel--for twelve years, ever since he started working at the factory. Those were the earlier days of the factory. After two years, everything long and pointy, even rulers at the stationery stores, reminded him of a pike mackerel. The pike mackerel alone made him want to quit. And so he went to see his supervisor.

"I'm sick and tired of pike mackerel. I think it smells worse than plain mackerel." Mackerel had entered his mind just then. He had always liked mackerel.

"If that's how you feel, then switch to mackerel. Don't they do that in other companies too?" the Boss told the Manager, who stank of fish.

The Manager ended up staying at the factory, and for ten years he canned mackerel. As soon as Boss number one was dead and buried, Boss number two increased the production lines. The tangy smells of peaches and mandarin oranges, citrus acid, and sugar mixed in with the odors of salt, fish, and grease and together they became the relentless reek of the factory. Night shifts were increased, and more workers were hired. In his inaugural speech, the Manager told the workers that they were free to can whichever item tickled their fancy. It was like choosing a favorite song or a favorite movie. Which was their pleasure--mackerel, pike mackerel, peaches, or mandarin oranges? Pak chose the mackerel line. It had nothing to do with his preference. He was just weary of pike mackerel. Like Pak, most of the workers chose an item they hadn't work with before. But it wasn't long before each crawled back to their original item. The fat mackerel resisted hands accustomed to pike mackerel; the skinnier pike mackerel slipped through hands familiar with plain mackerel. And it wasn't long until the workers found that there was nothing unique about their newly chosen item. Anyhow, all the items went through the same process: cut, gut, marinate, cook, seal, disinfect,

freeze, and then pack. It would not have mattered whether they were given a choice. Pak went back to canning pike mackerel. Come to think of it, choosing pike mackerel perfectly fit his personality of preferring the familiar to the unknown.

Different explanations of the Manager's abrupt disappearance went the rounds. Rumor number one went like this: The Manager had run away fearing the discovery of his affair with one of the workers. Someone claimed that whenever the Manager got drunk—which was nearly every day—he visited a woman worker's residence. Another said he had spotted the Manager on a date with the woman worker on a day off—but he wasn't a hundred percent sure, as it had been a distant sighting. It could have been another woman, someone who looked similar, or a friend's wife that the Manager had happened to run into. And because the sighting had been some time ago, the woman could even have been his wife before she left for T. The gossip reached everyone's ears in no time, but not many believed it. After all, the Manager had a swarthy complexion, a receding hairline, a beer belly, and short legs. Dandruff had turned the shoulders of his dark blue work uniform practically to white, and his greasy hair curved up at the base of his neck like a bird's tail. And whenever he opened his mouth, a fish stench or a sweet tangy smell, like that of a child, escaped from it. In short, he was not the type a woman might become infatuated with. For her part, the heroine of the rumor had a pale face, a taciturn disposition, and a cool air. The other women didn't like her for looking different. And they were disgruntled that the men seemed either to look down on them or to ignore them altogether. But the rumor was not just a rumor. The secret affair story had some truth *and* some lies to it. The Manager *did* visit the woman's residence--but not every night. And their relationship had not started *after* his wife left for T—it had begun *before* his wife's departure, and it had ended a while ago. The woman said not a word about the Manager. Maybe she had some information, maybe not. She was entitled to her privacy.

Rumor number two was the embezzlement theory. Some said the Manager had been under financial strain every since he had sent his daughter to T. Those who knew better knew that the factory didn't make enough money for the Manager to have stolen a large sum. But no one stepped up to counter the theory.

"Going back to Korea won't make my husband appear out of thin air," was her response when the Secretary called to inform her of her husband's

disappearance. The Manager's daughter had recently been admitted to a prestigious private school in T and could not miss school--the semester had already begun and the Manager's wife had to stay to take care of her daughter. In short, the circumstances were such that she could not return to Korea just then.

"The police said that cases like this are more likely to involve a fatal accident than a simple disappearance." The Secretary paused for dramatic effect. "He might be dead."

The Manager's wife heaved a sigh.

"I'll say it again--that does not change the fact that my return will not bring him back from the dead. I'll pay a visit when his body is found."

As he hung up, the Secretary recalled how his own wife had recently begun pestering him about sending their daughter overseas to study. *Not a good idea.*

A week into his investigation, the Detective found that the Manager and Pak were not on good terms with each other. Someone had reported seeing Pak talking back to the Manager in the locker room on the day of his disappearance. The Detective summoned Pak to the small office inside the storage building. Why had he argued with the Manager in the locker room? Did the Manager often ask him to work after hours as a personal favor? How long had it taken him to can things for the Manager that night? Which items did he can? What did he, Pak, do after he left the factory that night? Did anything seem different about the Manager that day? How did he and the Manager get along usually?

When Pak had answered these questions, the Detective rose and walked out into the storage building. Pak followed.

"So what did you do with the cans you packed that day?"

"The usual--I sent them to T the next day."

"Is it common for the workers to can things for themselves like that?"

Pak shook his head slowly. The truth was, all the workers had secretly sealed something inside a can. One of them had put a ring inside a can of tuna and given it to his girlfriend, who opened the aluminum container, heard the ring rattle inside, tried it on, and laughed. Another canned a cheap toy and gave it to his son for Christmas--pulling the lid off revealed a few Lego blocks and a simple robot that could transform into an airplane. The workers soon found that there were no limits to what could be canned--the deed to one's very first home, love letters written to former lovers, a cat cooked up for a father suffering from rheumatism.

The cat canner had bought the animal at the market—his co-workers had assumed it was a stray—and poached it until its meat was tender before canning it. He got caught, though, and had to submit a written explanation. And rumor had it that the Boss used cans instead of a safe to store his cash. Someone claimed to have witnessed him stuffing wads of cash inside cans and then securing the money with the pressurizer button—this was after the Boss had completed his beginning-of-the-month task of reconciling the accounts. It was plausible. But the Boss denied it furiously when the rumor reached his ears.

One night, when Pak and the Manager were alone in the factory to can things to be sent to T, the Manager had asked him, “So, what’s *your* secret?”

“What do you mean?”

“What have *you* canned?”

Pak had never canned anything for personal use. Even if he had wanted to, he didn’t have any treasures of his own to can, nor was there anyone to whom he might have bequeathed canned goods.

“Just between you and me,” the Manager began.

“My daughter used to have a dog. When it died, she wouldn’t stop crying and she wouldn’t let anybody take it from her. This was in the summer and I was afraid the dog was going to stink to high heaven, but she wouldn’t let me bury it. So when she was sleeping, I sneaked it from her and canned it. The can stayed in her room for a while and she used to pet it and cry over it. But then she got a new dog completely forgot about the can. So I threw it into the ocean.” The Manager put his finger over his lips. “Don’t tell anyone.”

Pak nodded. A shadow of regret glazed over the Manager’s eyes. Pak had kept silent throughout the story to give the impression that he could keep a secret. But he felt he had to say something lest the Manager mistake his silence for disinterest.

“By the way, how did you manage to get the dog into the can?”

“It was a tiny little thing and it fit snugly in the largest can. No need to chop it up—but I almost had to.” The Manager frowned as though he was imagining himself doing it. “I shouldn’t have to get blood on my hands because of a dog.” The Manager looked down at his hands and turned the palms up a few times as if checking for blood.

“Sometimes I wonder—maybe I’ll change my will so I’m cremated and my ashes are kept in a can. Who wants to rot away beneath a pile of dirt or have your

bones dumped in a marble urn and shelved in a charnel house? All my life I worked in the canning factory, and all my life I handled cans. I saw the cans evolve over time—new materials, new ways to open them. And from this I came to realize that people's lives were becoming more and more convenient. From the transformation of the label design I noticed new trends in advertising. The different flavors, the new items we canned literally showed me that people's tastes change. In a way, these cans taught me the ways of the world."

"It'd be a shame if the world turns out as hollow as a can."

It was a hasty remark, and Pak regretted it instantly. Nevertheless he added, "I guess you could at least be canned for transport to the crematory."

The Manager gazed at him blankly. Looking at that humorless face made Pak realize that he and the Manager would never be able to relate to each other; they were like birds that migrate during different seasons. But at the same time, he wondered – it was a bit strange that the Manager mentioned such things to him out of the blue. If he had asked, the Manager might have said more. But Pak had not asked. Would things have changed if Pak had asked and the Manager had answered? Perhaps. But perhaps, of course, was only an assumption.

"Big cans like these"--the Detective now tapped his fingers on a 10 kg-capacity metal canister-- "what are they used for?"

"They're used for export or for sale to businesses."

"So, I guess you like eating canned goods?"

"Not really. In fact I don't."

The Detective gave him a puzzled look.

"Then how can you eat them every day? And how have you managed to last at a canning factory for nearly ten years?"

"Well, I don't eat canned goods. I don't like how they taste. But that doesn't mean I can't work at a canning factory. Just because a man doesn't use tampons doesn't mean he can't work in a tampon factory."

The Detective nodded. "I guess you don't find your job very interesting."

"I'm sure you'd agree that when it comes to jobs, there are parts you like and parts you hate."

"I suppose so. What's the hardest part in canning?"

"Sometimes I nick my fingers on the rims or the lids. That can be annoying."

"Other than that, you like your job?"

“The salty stink of fish is hard to tolerate. The oil smell gets pretty bad too. Right now I’m sealing the cans, but for a bit I gutted fish. Back then I didn’t feel like touching anything mushy or smooth. Not even the skin of a woman. But the worst part of all...”

The Detective shifted his eyes from the ingredient list on a can label to Pak.

“...is everything is repetitive. Me, I seal cans all day. Some people chop off pike mackerel heads all day, some people finger out fish intestines. Some salt fish, some box cans. All day long.”

“That does sound a bit boring. Then what’s the fun part?”

For the first time since he graduated all those years ago, Pak felt as if he were taking a test. It gave him an unpleasant feeling, but the Detective’s indifferent attitude thus far had him feeling obliged to answer sincerely.

“The fact that everything is repetitive.”

The Detective shot him a look. *Is he kidding me?*

“All day you watch empty cans moving round and round the factory on conveyor belts. It makes you dizzy. It gives you a headache. Small flies buzz around your ears, so you have to pick at your ears constantly. Not a day goes by without a new scab on your ears. If the work required thinking or problem solving, I’d probably have a devil of a time doing it. But all that’s required is that you stand in front of the belt and go through the familiar motions. Your thoughts dry up and you become part of the machine. It’s like reaching a whole new level, though I can’t say I’m proud of it.”

The Detective nodded curtly, then snapped his notebook shut and asked Pak to show him the Manager’s residence. The Detective hadn’t written a word in that notebook. Intimidated all the same, Pak set off toward the Manager’s residence, mumbling to the Detective about the time the conveyor belt broke and he had sealed the same can twice.

The Manager’s residence was a modest bachelor’s apartment. A stiff-looking bed more suitable for long-term care in a hospital; a desk and a bookshelf made of compressed sawdust, most likely purchased in bulk by the general affairs department; a fabric sofa and a dresser--that was it for furniture. The kitchen was minimally equipped. The refrigerator held water, leftover rice, and a bunch of plastic containers of canned food opened up for drinking snacks. Almost all the storage space available—the cupboards above the sink and the three drawers below—was filled with cans of mackerel, pike mackerel, pickled sesame leaves,

peaches, and mandarin oranges. The dresser likewise yielded not clothes but stacks of cans—in all three drawers.

“He must have developed a craving for canned foods--he’s got them squirreled away everywhere,” the Detective commented.

Pak selected a couple of cans from one of the piles and handed them to the Detective.

“Here, try one.”

“Just don’t tell the Manager I had one of his cans,” the Detective joked.

“He wouldn’t mind. We all have plenty of them--in the factory and at home. Actually they’re part of our pay.”

“They are?”

Pak nodded assuredly.

“The factory has always struggled. And the recession is getting worse--the Boss said it could put a small canning factory out of business. What’s worse, no one trusts the cans—or rather their long expiration dates, to be exact. The principle that canned foods don’t spoil fast makes people skeptical. Killing and processing living things and then sealing them so they’re kept fresh—in other words, artificially treating something that’s dead and then storing it so it doesn’t go bad—that’s what canning is all about. But no one really believes it works--keeping materials in the same state, that is. And so the cans don’t sell, and because they don’t sell, we get to take them home as part of our salary.”

“But you said that you don’t eat canned foods. So what do you do with the cans you take home?”

“Well, I don’t eat them but my family and my relatives in other cities do. So I send them off.”

The Detective nodded.

“This can you gave me today, how long will it last?” he asked as they headed back to the factory.

“The expiration date is different for different items, but generally it’s somewhere between twenty-four and sixty months. It’s printed on the lid.”

“Five years at the most. So you’re saying it’s possible to keep food from spoiling for as long as five years....”

“Approximately. The assumption is, that up until the expiration date the food is perfectly safe and that right afterwards it starts to break down. That’s why we dispose of cans that are past their expiration—we don’t even check them.”

The Detective shrugged and got in his car.

A couple of days later the Boss got a call from the Detective—owing to lack of evidence, the investigation into the Manager’s disappearance was being suspended.

The Manager was gone, but on the whole the factory operated without much trouble. Nothing happened that couldn’t be expected to happen in a canning factory. The machines whirred, the foodstuffs were canned, the cans were sent off for distribution and shipping. When the bell rang at lunch time, the workers gathered in the break room as usual, sitting in a circle around the cans they had opened. And when they opened the cans they were sometimes confused as to whether they were having lunch or performing a post-production inspection. Nevertheless, their mouths, once the food entered, moved mechanically as if *that* was part of the post-production inspection. No one was crazy about the canned foods but no one outwardly disliked them either. And so the workers ate them without complaint. One day one of them exclaimed that she was tired of canned and proceeded to cook a pot of kimchi stew in the kitchenette. The stew wasn’t anything exceptional, and even the pork she added didn’t do much for it. As the others waited for the stew, their hunger got so bad that their appetites were ruined. Everyone fussed about how the noise from the machines and the smell in the factory must have affected their taste buds. But the next day, when they didn’t have time to cook anything, they had to resort to canned food and their appetites and taste buds seemed back to normal. The salty, fish taste was what they were comfortable with—thanks to their numb, tolerant taste buds. Most telling of all, the canned foods were plentiful. After lunch, ample amounts of canned peaches and mandarin oranges were available to wash down the canned fish. Someone asked if it was all right to eat canned food every day. Someone else answered that it probably didn’t matter as long as it was just for lunch. But it wasn’t just for lunch. When most of them returned home at the end of the day, they put canned pike mackerel into soup or stew along with kimchi or they diced up canned mackerel and added it to bean paste and had it in lettuce wraps for dinner. One time, a worker sighed about how she had gone grocery shopping and happened to pick up a can of pike mackerel and a can of mackerel produced in their factory. Here and there, reticent voices confessed to having done the same. Another time someone declared, “People can say what they want, but at least *we* should eat

food that we can at our factory.” The same sentiment was voiced the day it was reported nationwide that a worm was found inside a can of mackerel produced at a different factory. But these workers would have been hard pressed to say it was loyalty that made them open their own factory’s cans for lunch. As the Manager had said, eating canned food was a matter of personal preference.

While the others were sitting in a circle around the opened cans as they ate, Pak had a quick lunch in the small storage office and then took a nap until it was time to go back to work. All kinds of odors hung in the air in this cramped office—a mixture of phenol, acetic acid, grease from the motors, lubricant thinly applied on the machines, rubber from tubing or boots, fish intestines, and fruit peels. Maybe it was that medley of smells that had Pak dreaming about factory work even during these short naps. In the dreams he was sealing the cans that came up to him on the conveyor belt. In those cans he sometimes sealed his own hand, or an empty can inside another empty can inside yet another empty can. Or the Manager would show up and hand him items to be canned in turn. Some items he could can. Others he couldn’t—the Boss’s safe, or his head or a dead dog with its legs amputated. One time he was given a large skull. When Pak asked how he could possibly seal a skull the Manager pointed to a grinder that looked like the ones used in mills to crush grain. Without skipping a beat Pak went to the machine, adjusted its settings, then dropped in the skull. The pulverized skull spewed out the other end, Pak collecting the powder inside a can. The canned skull was mixed in among thousands of identical- looking cans.

Lunch time wasn’t long, and when the second bell rang to signal the return to work, the workers flooded out from the break room and reclaimed their positions at the mackerel line, the pike mackerel line, the pickled radish line, the peaches line, or the mandarin oranges line. The conveyor belt slid along endlessly, bringing mackerel or pike mackerel to cut up, peaches and mandarin oranges to treat with a weak solution of hydrochloric acid and then peel, foods to process with acetate, cans to seal and monitor, and cans to collect at random for inspection.

Small accidents did occur, like the one on the produce-canning line. Near the end of the day, a worker tearfully confessed that her right contact lens must have dropped into one of the cans during the sealing process.

“How did that happen?”

“I was rubbing my eyes because I was sleepy. I think that’s how.”

“How come you didn’t notice it earlier?”

“Watching the belt go around always makes my head swim. I thought my vision was blurry because I was dizzy, not because I couldn’t see.”

She had only discovered the loss of the contact while she was changing out of her uniform to go home. The persistent dizziness was not due to vertigo but to the mismatch of vision of her eyes. She had combed through every item to which the lens could have stuck, but it didn’t turn up. More than a thousand cans of fruit had passed in front of her that day. Those thousand cans had passed the disinfection stage and were lined up waiting to be boxed. One of those thousand cans stacked along the wall contained her lens. To find the nail-sized contact, she would presumably have to open a thousand cans. And then there was the matter of re-sealing then. Easy enough to say, but because microbes start to grow as soon as the cans are opened, re-sealing was not an option—it was company policy.

To the flustered worker, Pak made a suggestion.

“Tomorrow morning, just tell people that you found it. Say it was stuck to your uniform.”

“But what if someone finds it?” the worker asked anxiously.

“The lens could turn up inside one of the cans next month, five years from now, or never. If the can ends up at a bar, probably no one will notice. The cook will just pick it out—he won’t be eating food like that. The customers might be too drunk to notice or they might think someone in the kitchen lost it. And if it ends up at a hospital, that’s a luckier outcome too. But while we wait for something that may or may not happen, our situation here at the company might change--don’t you think?”

The woman slowly nodded, as if understanding for the first time that the sealed cans contained a secret universe of their own.

Three months after the Manager’s disappearance, there was a recall of mackerel. The recalled cans had been produced around the time the Manager went missing. A consumer had found a red clump inside a can of mackerel he bought at a supermarket. He had thought it was mackerel blood, but the mere sight of blood in a processed food item had made him queasy enough to report it. Shock waves spread when tests revealed it was human blood. The factory spokesman explained that one of the workers had cut his hand and that blood from the wound had found its way into the can. But in fact, there had been no injuries at the factory around that time. And none of the procedures ran the risk

of a wound severe enough to result in such severe bleeding. Even a cut finger was bound to have been noticed. Over fourteen hundred cans were produced on the day the tainted product was canned. Some of those recalled cans were discovered to contain a significant amount of blood, some a moderate amount, and others barely any. The resulting suspension of production led the Boss to work his lines night and day to get back up to quota. Mere mention of the recall caused the Boss's face to scrunch up. By the time the suspension was lifted, the Boss's eyes had become redder than blood due to exhaustion and the Secretary's face seemed to have turned permanently blood-red in reaction to the Boss's flaring temper.

The Manager didn't own much. If you eliminated his factory uniform, his worn undergarments, and a few outfits for going out to the town, his remaining possessions all fit into a single trunk. The Manager's wife bequeathed Pak all the cans in the kitchen cupboards and the three drawers. But when Pak attempted to reciprocate with a couple of can he had packed for her as keepsakes, she adamantly refused.

"My daughter and I, we don't eat canned food anyway. Once I opened a can of mackerel and" --the Manager's wife shuddered, as if the memory still haunted her-- "found a dead dog inside. Since then, my daughter's been disgusted by canned food. But now that I think about it, a parcel was mailed to us a few days after I got that phone call about him. There were cans of pike mackerel and cans of mackerel. I was sure he would have sent kimchi, spiced radish cubes, or something like that. Why would he send us cans when he knew so well that we didn't eat canned food?"

Pak looked squarely at the Manager's wife.

"His body will turn up someday, won't it?" She asked in a grief-filled voice.

"Don't say that. He might just have gone away for a while."

"You know he's not the type to do that—and where would he go?"

Pak couldn't find any words of consolation, and shut his mouth.

After the Manager's wife returned to T, Pak moved his belongings to the Manager's residence. He didn't own much—just a few undergarments and lightweight clothing that fit easily into two of the three dresser drawers. He filled the third drawer with the cans—but not quite, for the cans had enough room to rattle loudly every time he opened or shut the drawer. Among the cans left by the Manager, some were past their expiration date, some were close to it, and others

had plenty of time left. Pak took the time to organize the cans in the drawers by type, expiration date, and size.

The Boss promoted Pak to fill the vacant managerial position. And now it was Pak, the new manager of the factory, who was the first to arrive in the morning. Being the only one in the factory as he pressed the power buttons that set the silent machines into motion gave him the jitters—like awakening a monster. Only when the machines started to roar like a barking beast did he feel as if his day was under way. And he was the last one to leave at the end of the work day. When he turned off the power and was enveloped by the silence, he felt as if he was a dead pike mackerel or mackerel sealed inside a can. Feeling like a pike mackerel or a mackerel, he returned to his private residence and marinated himself in alcohol. He needed his sleep. He knew that being the first to show and the last to go had others calling him the Custodian behind his back, but he pretended to be unaware of it. One day he decided to have breakfast, for the combination of working longer hours on an empty stomach and suffering from a hangover gave him heartburn. He hesitated briefly, then took a can from the drawer and opened it. He took his first bite—not bad. The salty fish taste gradually disappeared as he chewed on the mixture of bones and flesh, the sauce in the pike mackerel spreading in his mouth. It tasted better than he had imagined. Then a few more bites—pretty tasty. At lunch time he mingled with the other workers and ate rice with canned food.

“Oh, I thought you didn’t eat canned food,” someone commented as Pak stuffed a chunk of pike mackerel into his mouth. It had been a while now since he had begun joining the others for lunch. Pak grinned widely as he spooned in white rice stained with sauce from the canned pike mackerel. For dessert he had canned peaches and mandarin oranges with the others. The sweet tang in his mouth persisted even after he brushed his teeth. It was like sucking on candy all day. It didn’t bother him. After work, back at his residence, he selected some cans and cooked the contents with kimchi or diced them up to have it as a drinking snack.

When he had exhausted his own stock of cans he turned to the Manager’s. He opened the first can. *What the...?* He checked the label, and then reexamined the contents. He opened a couple more cans, then burst into laughter. What a splendid joke! The label and contents didn’t match. Sometimes a can of pike mackerel yielded not pike mackerel but regular mackerel or pickled sesame

leaves. It was the same with the cans of mackerel. And the cans of fruit. Other cans, probably intended for shipment to T, contained the likes of beans in soy sauce or anchovy stir fry, even moldy old boiled potatoes that gave off a sour smell. No can could be judged by its label. As he ate mackerel in pike mackerel cans, beans in mackerel cans, and sesame leaves in sesame leaf cans, he thought to himself that this was the first time the Manager had ever made him laugh.

It wasn't just food that came out of those cans. There were unwashed socks and underwear—repulsive! There were bank statements showing cash transfers to T. A couple of letters from his daughter in T, written in English. A couple months' worth of pay slips, bank receipts for his pension contributions, an insurance contract. A key chain with the Manager's initials engraved on it, along with a matching one with someone else's initials. And then there were the credit card statements. Pak pored over the various payments. There for all to see was the evidence that the Manager had met someone for dinner, coffee, and a movie sometime ago. He paid close attention to each and every item, but it did make him uneasy—he felt as if he had gotten himself involved in the Manager's life without meaning to. The moment when he pulled back the lid of a can continued to unnerve him. As for the contents, they were still anyone's guess. What if one day a mysterious gumbo of bones and flesh smelling of blood and rot came up? Pak gave it some thought and decided he would take it to the factory. After all, the Manager had even canned a dog there. He would put that gumbo in the largest can—carefully, without getting blood on his hands—and seal it nice and tight with the pressurizer. The air trapped in the can will be sucked out with a hiss and the foul-smelling mix of bone and flesh would again be sealed away in silent secrecy. This would be the first can Pak sealed with something other than pike mackerel or mackerel inside. For some time Pak gazed into the contents of the can he had just opened so slowly with his can opener as he thought to himself—the old Manager probably would have done the same thing.