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Category: Short Story

The Last Gift: For the Lost Children in Sewol Ferry

'*She should be here by now*' I thought nervously in my wooden seat as the minute hand on my silver watch ticked away. As soon as the minute hand pointed to 12, I saw a dark, cloaked woman.

She was slim and petite, with dark chestnut hair chopped above her shoulders. Unlike the warm weather, she was covered in heavy winter clothes from head to toe. The young lady continued her stride until she stood before me.

"Hi... you must be Hana, right? Nice to meet you. I'm Ara Jung," I tried to sound friendly, but I couldn't hide my quizzed expression as I scanned her clothes.

"Come sit here," I gestured to a space on the bench. The young lady timidly sat down.

I gave her a forced smile and continued to speak, "I was shocked when you finally wrote back to me. I honestly thought I would never be able to meet you."

I paused and met her eyes. "I know that this is not an easy subject for you to discuss with anyone. But could you take me back to that day and tell me what happened?"

"The ferry sank," she replied flatly. I sighed and held her hands.

"Hana, this is the last thing I can do for the children who drowned painfully that day. Their souls are still trapped under the cold water. I need your help to free them... to let them rest in peace finally."

She hesitated before she finally spoke, "At the ferry....."

And I closed my eyes.

This is an announcement for all passengers departing at 6:30 P.M. on the Sewol Ferry. We are sorry to inform you that there will be a slight departure delay due to inclement weather conditions. The new departure time is 9:00 P.M. Thank you for your patience.

"Again?" whined Wooyoung as the robotic announcement came on for the fourth time.

Every year, Danwon High School offered an annual overnight field trip to Jeju Island for juniors. But now, that was about to be ruined because of the foggy weather.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

"Just answer the phone, Wooyoung," Jisoo muttered disapprovingly.

Wooyoung pretended not to hear her and turned off his phone once more. "Gosh, can she just stop calling me? It's so annoying."

"Your mom is *worried* about you because you didn't wear that jacket this morning. It's going to be freezing the next morning," chided Jisoo.

Around 8:30, a port worker approached Miss Kang and whispered something into her ear. Her face lit up with a smile.

"Kids! Listen up! I have some good news for you!"

The students looked up with sudden interest.

"We're finally boarding!" The joyful announcement aroused cheers from the listless students. "Just some quick instructions, though. Make sure you have your passport ready along with all of your belongings before you leave. When we board the ferry, go to your designated suites. *Do not* scavenge around until I make an announcement later in the night telling you that you can. DO NOT go around without my instructions. It is dangerous...."

I ignored her and popped my mint earbuds in.

103, 104, 105. I stopped in front of room 106. I could already hear a group of giggling girls inside. I already hated this room.

When I cracked the door open, a musty smell gushed out.

"What *is* this smell?" I grunted as I wrinkled my nose.

I went inside and stopped before an empty bed.

"These bedsheets look like they existed ever since this boat was made. Thank god I brought my pillow and bedsheets."

After I replaced the bed sets, I looked up to see three gaping faces. There was an awkward silence until one of the girls spoke.

"Hi, I'm Sori," She gave me a shy smile and reached out into her cardigan pocket to pull out a lollipop. "Do you want one?" she asked.

Strawberry flavor. Disgusting. "No, thanks. I don't like *those*." I gave her a sarcastic smile and waved her away. I turned around and sat down on my bed. I put in my earbuds and turned on my favorite music.

My 2014 playlist softly hummed in my ears as I closed my heavy eyes. *Give your all to me. I'll give my all to you. You're my end and my beginning—*

"You should see this video! It's like the funniest thing ever," Soyoung laughed as she shoved her camera to Jisoo and Sori. Jisoo burst into a cackle as soon as she saw the video.

"When did you film this?" Jisoo giggled as she looked at the video.

"I've been filming since we arrived at the port. And everything," Soyoung pointed to her camera with a smug grin, "is in here. I am *so* ready to become a movie director."

"That's so cool," Sori breathed. "Well, for me, I want to become a singer when I grow up. Don't be surprised when you see me on TV in the next couple of years!"

"Wait," Soyoung mumbled as she reached into her bag to pull out her notebook and a pen. She flipped to an empty page and started signing it.

"When I become super famous, my autograph is going to cost a few thousand bucks." Soyoung ripped the page out and handed it to Jisoo. Jisoo folded the paper and tucked it inside her jacket with a smile.

"Jisoo. It's your turn now," Sori beamed.

Jisoo hesitated for a moment and then whispered inaudibly, "I... I want to marry Wooyoung."

"I didn't expect that," Soyoung cackled as Sori burst into a fit of giggles. Jisoo's face turned into a shade of pomegranate.

Suddenly, Miss Kang's voice came on the intercom, breaking their laughter. "This announcement is for all Danwon High School students. In ten minutes, please report to the top deck."

Soyoung and Sori jumped up and dashed outside.

Jisoo shook her head and approached me.

"Hana, Miss Kang called us to the top deck. Let's go."

When we arrived at the deck, a crowd of high school students was chatting excitedly.

"Attention, guys!" Miss Kang yelled over the students. The students suddenly hushed and waited.

"We wanted you guys to make an extra *special* memory while on this trip. On three, we're going to launch the fireworks. Everyone scream, 'Danwon High School Forever!' on the count of three. One, two, three..."

"DANWON HIGH SCHOOL FOREVER!"

"Hana, get ready," Jisoo spoke urgently as she noticed me. "We have to report to the cafeteria by eight for breakfast. It's first-come, first, serve!"

We rushed to the cafeteria and quickly received our breakfast.

"This tastes so good," Sori mumbled as she shoved the rice into her full mouth.

"Hana?" Jisoo suddenly asked; her voice was full of uncertainty. "Why is the soup tilted?"

I shrugged nonchalantly and resumed eating.

"Hana, this is weird. It's not only the soups that are tilted; *we* are tilted too. The whole boat is tilted," Jisoo shuddered.

Our conversation ended there; we ate in silence as we pushed the terrible thought away.

After we finished eating, we returned to the room.

"Done!" Soyoung exclaimed as she leaped up from her bed. "I can't wait to film the island when we—"

Jisoo's charcoal eyes were full of fear as she looked up to Soyoung. "The boat's *tilted*. I swear it is."

Soyoung laughed slightly, "Huh? What do you mean? This boat is complete—"

Soyoung's smile faltered as an urgent voice on the intercom broke her words. "PLEASE STAY WHERE YOU ARE. AND DO NOT MOVE. OUR SHIP IS SINKING. LIFE VESTS ARE BEING DISTRIBUTED STARTING FROM THE SECOND FLOOR. REMAIN IN YOUR DESIGNATED SPOTS."

The four of us looked at each other, alarmed. A drop of tear rolled down Jisoo's pink cheek.

"WE NEED ONE MORE LIFE VEST!" screamed an indistinct voice.

"TWO MORE, HERE!" another shouted frantically.

We waited until Ms. Kang poked her head into our room, clutching a bundle of life vests. "Girls, here're the life vests. Put them on and *don't* take them off. Capish?"

Jisoo nodded and reached over to distribute them. "One for Sori, one for Soyoung, one for me, and one for..."

Jisoo stopped and looked at her empty hands.

"She only gave us three," Jisoo gulped.

Soyoung started to hand me over her life vest, but Jisoo was faster.

"Take mine. I know how to swim," Jisoo spoke as she fastened the vest around me, "*you* don't."

The dirty material was on me before I even knew. Before I could retort, Soyoung's voice interrupted me.

"Guys, I'm going to be filming this. This is going to get millions of views as soon as I post," Soyoung chirped.

"Are you crazy?" Jisoo asked.

"Come on," Soyoung whined playfully, "This is going to be fun, guys! The topic is... the last message to our loved ones before we' sink.' I'm going to start filming in three, two, one...Currently, it is 9:32 A.M., and we are aboard Sewol Ferry, And as you can see, our ship is tilted, and we are... stuck. And I'm not sure if this will be a rescue mission or an escape mission since no one is currently trying to rescue us."

Soyoung turned to Sori and asked, "Sori, how do you feel right now?"

"I... I... I'm terrified," Sori stammered.

Sori hesitated for a moment then spluttered, "Just in case I never get to repeat this, Mom and Dad, I love you. And I said '*just in case*.'"

Soyoung gave Sori a thumbs up then faced the camera to Jisoo and Hana.

"I don't want to talk," Jisoo answered sternly.

"Same with Jisoo," I replied flatly.

Soyoung gave me an irritated glare and grunted, "Guys, these are boring answers."

Soyoung cleared her throat and spoke dramatically, "For me, even if I don't survive, I want to say that I love everyone in this entire world. And if anyone finds this video for me, please make umm... a movie or a film out of this."

"Stop saying that," Sori blubbered. "No one is going to die."

Soyoung laughed, "Everything is going to be fine, Sori. Look, we're going to be rescued..."

Soyoung's laugh trailed away as her eyes scanned over the empty ocean. She gave us a frightened glance and closed her mouth.

I sat down and took out my phone. When I unlocked it, a demanding number 15 glared at me from the messaging app. Slightly intimidated, I opened the app. And as expected, they were from my mom last night. With trembling fingers, I started to type:

Me: Mom.... are you busy?

I've never texted my mom first and rarely replied to her yelling texts. I bit my fingernails and waited for the number one next to my message to disappear. After a few minutes, my mom texted back:

Mom: No. Did something happen?

Me: I just wanted to hear your voice.

Mom: Aww, thanks. Everything all right?

Me: Everything's fine

Mom: Okay, sweetie ≡

But before I could text back my last goodbye, an ear-splitting shrill broke out from the end of the hallway.

Then, the first wave of water surged in.

"DON'T LET GO OF MY HAND!" Jisoo screamed over the panic-struck students.

I nodded and squeezed Jisoo's hand as we crawled our way out of our room. The cabinets that separated our dorms had come crashing down as soon as the water gushed in, locking students in the tiny spaces.

Jisoo dragged me into the ship's hallway with her and quickly joined the crowd of students huddled at the ship's main lobby.

"We are getting out of here. *Alive*," Jisoo heaved as she stared into my eyes. "So don't you dare leave me. We are *both* going to survive."

"JISOO!" a voice suddenly shouted behind us.

I turned around to see Wooyoung. His hair was a mess, and on the one hand, he held his broken phone.

"My phone's not working! I dropped it in the water, and now, it's not even turning on!"

Hearing the desperation in his voice, I fished into my soaked shirt pocket and took out my phone.

Wooyoung quickly punched in a phone number.

"Please answer my call. Please. Please..." Wooyoung whispered.

"Hello?" a soft voice hummed from the other end.

"Hello? Mom, this is me. I'm so sorry that I didn't wear the jacket you told me to wear last morning. I should have listened to you. I always ignored you and never listened to you. Sorry for never making you proud. Mom, I love you."

I couldn't hear the voice on the other side of the phone. But whatever it was, as soon as Wooyoung heard it, his dark brown eyes filled with tears.

"When the wave reaches us, we're going to hold onto each other. Never let go." I spoke determinedly.

"I will," Jisoo replied. "Ready?"

"Ready," I reassured.

I was forced to let go of Jisoo's hands as soon as the massive wave swallowed us.

"JISOO!" I hollered above the roaring of the water.

I'm dying, I thought to myself as I was pushed back further into the darkness. As time went on, I could no longer feel the coldness of the freezing seawater.

The water, for a brief second, stopped twisting me around. And in that short moment, I heard a beautiful melody echoing from a tiny room.

From underwater, I could see Sori's reflected face. Her eyes were almost closed, and she sang a beautiful lullaby to a baby cradled in his grandmother's arms.

*Hush, the baby, don't say a word,
Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird.
And if that mockingbird don't sing,
Mama's going to buy you a diamond ring.*

Before I even knew, the waves pushed me back to the surface. As I gasped for breath, waves from all directions slapped into my face.

"Don't *give up*," I told myself as I clawed the nearby objects to push forward.

When the next wave came, I propelled myself toward the last exit. I clutched the metal bar around the opening and attempted to receive attention from the nearby rescue workers.

"*Help*," I shouted as the boat groaned. *Please help—*"

Someone roughly grabbed me by my right arm and guided me toward the exit. I looked down slowly and saw Ms. Kang. Her trembling lower lips already showed a blue hue, and her ragged breathing was distinct above the roaring of the gushing water.

"Go," Ms. Kang's voice was hoarse from yelling over the noisy crowd of students earlier.

"No. I can't," I croaked.

"Hana, if you don't leave right now, both of us are going to die. Leave. This is my last duty as a teacher." And for the first time, I saw the woman in front of me as someone more than an austere high school teacher; I saw a young and determined 24-year-old.

"GO. LISTEN TO ME."

Ms. Kang pushed me through the exit with her last remaining strength. Then, the next huge wave engulfed her.

"Hana, are you okay?" a voice asked.

I blinked a few times and saw Jungsu. Even though the weather was freezing, his face was covered with sweat; he helped the students rescue by using his taekwondo belt to pull them out.

"Ms. Kang's in there," I breathed as I pointed toward the exit I came out of.

Then, the world went black.

My eyes fluttered open to see a spatter of white. I blinked harder to adjust my eyes and almost passed out again from the effort.

I managed to sit up by clawing the bed sheet, but I could feel excruciating pain in my lower back. The pain zigzagged up to my shoulders, creating a new agony.

"Hana," an urgent female voice whispered next to me. It was my mom. My mom dried her tears and then silently held my hands.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered as my memories came back. "I'm sorry that I wasn't there to save you guys."

"... that's how I lost my friends," Hana spoke softly. "I never saw them again after that."

"I-I-I'm so sorry, Hana," I murmured as I bit my lower lip to refrain from crying.

"Ms. Ara," Hana started as she held my hands, "please don't let others forget about them. I want others to remember every one of the students who had to drown that day painfully. Their deaths were so... wrongful."

Hana reached into her leather bag and pulled out a small camera.

"This is the last piece of memory I have from that day," Hana spoke as she handed me a tiny camera. "This is the last thing I can do for Soyoung.... She wanted to make a film out of this."

My hands trembled as I received the camera.

"I would have... never been able to tell my story if it weren't for you. Thank you so much," Hana whispered.

After some hesitation, she took off her massive, black coat and hung it on her right arm.

Hana gave me a final grin and walked away, dropping down all of her burdens with each step she took.

-6 months later-

"Is this the restaurant?" the taxi driver asked.

"Yes," I replied as I gathered my belongings. "Thank you."

I got off the taxi and stood before a bustling restaurant. Lines of customers snaked to the next block, and several

people posed in front of the illuminated sign that read "Kim's Bibimbap."

"Wooyoung, hurry up! We have dozens of customers waiting!" the older woman scolded as she noticed the young man beaming at his elated customers.

"Okay, Mom!" he shouted back as he ran to the back of the shop.

I stood there watching Wooyoung as waves of people rushed in and out of the shop.

After a while, I looked up to the cloudless summer sky; it was the same beautiful sky I saw six years ago.

"Everything stayed the same," I thought to myself. *"Nothing changed."*