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Excerpt from Nurma's Daughters.

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Yoo Jae-Hyun

From the novel *Nurma's Daughters*

- *Stanley Story 1*

The rainy season, July, Hong Kong Island, Stanley (Chek Chue) Peninsula. In Tung Tau Wan the always heavy, moisture-soaked and hot wind blew languidly. The first place the bay wind hit was the barbed wire and six meter walls of Chek Chue Prison, constructed in 1937 and unchanged since then. After the wind climbed up the walls and glanced over them for a moment, it sprinkled raindrops along the Tung Tau Wan Road and swept up the leafy Ma Hang Hill. Turning into a mountain wind as it crossed a narrow strait to the Kowloon Peninsula, the continent's tip, it scattered.

The Tung Tau Wan sky was filled with ashen clouds risen from the bay. Since morning the rain was constant, neither stopping nor thickening, making the concrete yard and the roofs of rows of the prison buildings inside the 200 x 400 meter enclosure unpleasantly wet.

A Korean, Park, was greeting noon as the morning shift ended in the workshop of Building 7-A (CAT-A), Unit 5 in Chek Chue Prison .

A Chinese, Wong carried sheaves of paper from his workbench, and grumbled over his shoulder to Park, who was hole-punching books at a drilling machine. He said, "Shitty weather. It's always like this around this time." Park wiped his face, lifting his hand from a lever, and sweaty particles of paper dust rushed into his mouth.

The workshop for Unit 5 workshop was set up for bookbinding. In the outside world, thin sheaves of paper were not bound mechanically, and so the pages had to be manually arranged, perforated with a drill, and bound. Four months ago, immediately after his transfer to Chek Chue Prison from his cell in Lai Chi Kok, Park was in charge of cleaning, but now he was responsible for drilling. 28 of the 31 prisoners in Unit 5 spent four hours a day at the workshop. But because their daily work load took less than two hours, nobody had to hurry and so no one did. The two prison guards who were also stuck in the workshop were indifferent to the prisoner's work, and only interested in accidents. Still, Park felt lucky he could at least work. For the ten month he had spent in Lai Chi Kok, all he did was go back and forth from his cell to the dining hall to the tiny playground, or appear in court. That he had things to do everyday was about a hundred times better than doing nothing. If he hadn't had this work, he might have gone crazy.

In court, when the Korean translator murmured that a twenty year sentence had been issued, Park's hair rose; still, he was incredulous. He would have felt the same way had the sentence been ten or thirty years. Then the thought of twenty years in prison began to tighten his chest as he imagined the accumulation of long days. The day finally came, a week after his transfer to Chek Chue, when his eyes grew hot and he burst into tears. Despite the rule that well-behaved inmates could get a third of their sentences remitted, the thought of spending thirteen years in a strange and foreign prison pushed him into a world of desperation.

Whenever he thought of his thirteen year sentence he felt faint, but now after spending four months at Stanley he felt much better. Above all, his sentence in CAT-A in Chek Chue Prison was considerably shorter than those of the others.

Wong, the Chinese from Room 2, said "You can get out of here and still see the world before you turn fifty." In his late forties, Wong, with big bright eyes, fine double eyelids, and a round, fair face, still had twenty years of his sentence to serve. It might have been because Park's

room, Room 3, was right next to his, but Wong had always been kind to Park because they were in the same department. The prisoners of CAT-A were in one of three departments: Murder, Drugs, or Rape. Wong from Shandong Province left his hometown when he was in his twenties, and settled in Hong Kong. It seemed that he had had a hand in heroin production, and was captured five years ago and sentenced to 25 years.

This is how Wong described production.

“It’s complicated. I diluted 100% heroin in cold medicine to make it 50% pure. That was my job. And, um, sometimes I used painkillers or tranquilizers, instead.”

“That’s *production*?”

“Ho-ho. Not everybody can do this. Who’s going to pay a lot for 50% heroin? If it isn’t 100% pure, it should look at least 70 to 80% pure. That’s the *essence* of my skill. Even people who tasted my work, didn’t think it was 50% heroin.”

People like Wong were called DD (Dangerous Drug), after their crime. The Korean, Park, was also a DD, but if there was a difference between the two, it was that Wong was a so-called Heroin Major from Production University, while Park had attended The University of Delivery.

“What was your major?”

“My ‘major’?”

“I mean, what did you mostly deal in?”

“People say... it’s ice.”

“Ah, ice.”

Park, the Ice Major from The University of Delivery, was captured and hooded by the Hong Kong police at Chek Lap Kok Airport, six months after he had begun his ice deliveries. It had been his fourth business trip. At the police interrogation, Park insisted on his ignorance. The drug, ice, had been stored inside an exceptionally large ginseng tea box. In fact, right from the beginning, no one had ever told him what was inside. Even President Kim, who had offered him the job of delivering goods from Shenzhen to the US territory of Guam, never once mentioned the contents of the ginseng tea box. But there was nothing but drugs that could have fetched KRW 10,000,000 for the price of delivering two boxes. Park had not been unaware of this.

—All because of money.

Whenever he thought about the money he had received as payment for delivering the drugs, Park let out a long sigh. He had planned on quitting once he snatched KRW 50,000,000. During South Korea’s IMF Economic Bailout, after Park had been fired from the factory he had worked at for 16 years without a hitch, he opened a *kim-bap* restaurant with a loan he had obtained using his severance pay and apartment deposit as securities. After having to give up the this business completely, he looked for jobs at construction sites for a year, but it had been hard to eke out a living, not to mention pay tuition for his growing children.

It had been five years since he first left for Bangkok, also known as “Utterly Stuck in the Room”¹, taking an airplane for the first time in his life, after having heard from a high school classmate by chance that a person in Bangkok was looking to hire someone. He let his wife and two children stay at his parents’ house in Gong-Ju. The person in Bangkok engaged in the tourist business or something, didn’t give him any money, and ordered him to do all kinds of chores. After a year, he came to know enough about Bangkok that he spent his own money to guide tourists from Seoul, but it was not a job he could make money from. It was hard to send KRW 300,000 a month to his wife. To make matters worse, his wife, who looked as though she’d born

¹ This is a pun on “Bangkok”: *bang*, in Korean meaning, “room,” and *kok*, “utterly.” This is followed by the word “stuck,” to complete the pun.

to be healthy, had been suddenly diagnosed with gastric cancer. Frantically running here and there to borrow money, he boarded a plane to return, but Park was speechless when he saw his wife lying in bed in the shabby general hospital with a dark, gaunt face and vacant eyes. He took the price of a plane ticket from the KRW 2,000,000 in his pocket, and put the rest of the money in his wife's hand. Park returned to Bangkok. Since he had spent almost five years in Bangkok, if he had anything to do, he had to do it there. After desperately searching for a job he had heard about in a bar, he finally met *that person*, President Kim.

“So, you want to make money?”

It was questionable what he had been involved in, but that person, President Kim, with the sunken eyes and projecting cheek bones, shook Park's hand. He introduced himself as a Korean-American from L.A, but whether he was a Korean-American or a Korean-African didn't matter to Park. The work was simple and everything including airfare and accommodations would be paid for. Park would have to go to Hong Kong; then go to Shenzhen, where he would meet someone who would receive something; and then go to Guam to deliver it.

“How much will you pay me?” he asked clenching his teeth, staring into President Kim's hollow eyes and indifferent face. The haggard face of his wife seemed to overlay President Kim's.

“Give me your bank account number. I'll transfer KRW 10,000,000 into your account when you're done in Guam.”

“KRW 10,000,000.”

Park blushed and felt as though the wind had been knocked out of him.

“Let's do it,” he said.

He quietly wrote his bank account number into the notepad President Kim held out to him. Two weeks later, Park took two boxes someone had given him in a hotel in Shenzhen, and then went to Hong Kong to catch a plane for Guam. After arriving in Guam, he waited in the hotel President Kim had told him to stay, and as expected, the following day someone came and took the boxes. The next morning at an international phone in his hotel, Park confirmed the money he had received. He checked his bank account three times and not a single Won of the KRW 10,000,000 was missing. This is how it started.

Nothing worrisome happened the second or third time. On the fourth he had decided that after his current job he would only do one more. After checking in at Chek Lap Kok Airport, Park walked to a corner coffee shop, thinking to kill time. Three or four people seemed to approach him. Two of them suddenly forced his hands behind his back and another pulled something black over his head. His legs went limp. Even if the black hood had not been put over Park, he still would have only seen darkness.

After a two day interrogation at a police station, he had been imprisoned in a cell where a Thai had told him, “Someone blew the whistle.”

“But there's no reason.”

“Come on, baldy. Use your brain. You were caught before departure. That means they already knew everything and were only waiting for you. It's not rare, you know.”

The man was right in the end. While Park had been unaware of this during his interrogation at police headquarters, later in court, the police report revealed that the police had been waiting for him with advance information.

Gnashing his teeth, Park said, “I'll rip that fucking bastard's eyes out when I get out of here.” But Wong, the Heroin major from Production University—currently in the DD department—thought differently.

“President Kim wouldn’t have said anything.”

“What?”

“That kind of thing comes with the territory. I’m not sure about this President Kim, but nine out of ten times it’s the delivery people who do that kind of thing.”

“The delivery people?”

“A trail begins when your friend, President Kim, even receives the goods.”

“...”

Park’s head was about to burst. “But, why? Why would they do that?”

“You see, they’ve learned to help each other to survive. If police can raise their efficiency ratings, dealers can keep doing business. Over a third of the DDs here are in the same boat as you.”

Wong patted Park’s shoulder. “Forget it. It’s done—no use thinking about it. You were just unlucky. You can’t do anything about it now, but after a year, you’re bound to feel better.”

Park gnashed his teeth at his nameless informant, but like Wong said, it was no use—nothing could change. Everything had already happened.

The noon bell rang, morning work was over. Park turned off the switch of the drilling machine and wiped sweat from his forehead. His work clothes were soaked, and so wrapped tightly around his shoulders and thighs. At the long line of showerheads beside the entrance of the workshop, five or six men were already shoving their heads beneath the running water. Park got out of his work clothes and stood under a vacant showerhead. The stream was weak and lukewarm, but at least he could wash off the layers of sweat that were stuck to his body. Next to him the man from Room 12, a Vietnamese named Dinh, babbled to himself as he scrubbed his groin. Since the man spoke to himself in Vietnamese, Park couldn’t understand what he was saying. He was a young guy—imprisoned at the age of fifteen—and had already rotted in prison for ten years with 22 still remaining. His crime was murder. And though first serving a life sentence, at the hearings of his last appeal his sentence was reduced to thirty-two years. The DD and Murder Department people usually did not mix, but in this guy’s case, things were different. Unlike the other murderers, he didn’t smell of blood.

“I remember stabbing someone, but I don’t remember why. I didn’t know who he was and I can’t even remember his face. I drank a lot of beer that night.”

The guy had said it sincerely. And looking in his eyes, maybe it was true. At such a young age as fourteen, it was possible to do something so reckless. But Wong thought differently.

“He didn’t know who he’d killed? Of course he didn’t. The ‘TRIAD’ gang had probably thrown a little money at him with orders to do the job, so he probably really *didn’t* know who he’d killed. But he shouldn’t keep saying he didn’t know. At his last appeal he probably sang like a canary.”

“So, who did he...?”

“I heard the victim was from Hanoi. Maybe he did something to annoy the ‘TRIAD’.”

Park clucked his tongue in disapproval. “The only thing that kid ever did in Hong Kong was stab someone from his own country.”

After having showered and dressed, Park walked from the locker room slowly as the two prison guards left their office for roll call. Andy, slightly over twenty and not yet accustomed to being a prison guard, walked as though he were a puppet, his shoulders stiff and an arm band wrapped tightly around his arm. The other guard, with the black mustache in his right hand, was as old as Wong. He wore black-rimmed glasses and dragged his feet as sluggishly as the prisoners.

What set him apart from them, however, was that he thrust out his jaw when he walked, and cast his eyes in all directions. People said a twenty centimeter long knife scar ran down his right shoulder, but it couldn't be seen so long as he wore his khaki uniform. Rumor had it that one of the prisoners had once pounced on him, leaving the scar, but still, he had never become brutal with the prisoners of Unit 5. He neither swore nor raised his voice with them. Peeking through the office windows, Park always could always see him reading some book. But the books weren't so good. When Park had once been called into the office, he finally had a chance to see the titles scattered on the desk. During this instance, the titles he saw were *The Treatment of Venereal Disease* and *A National Study on the Sexual Intercourse of College Students in the Past Ten Years*. Since he could read some Chinese, Park wasn't unacquainted with the words "venereal" or "sexual intercourse."

Before 12:30, as usual, 28 prisoners stood loosely in line in front of the exit of the workshop. Roll was called by having prisoners raise their hands when their names were called. Because the only way out of the workshop was through a heavy steel door that led to the cells, it was impossible for people to go missing. After roll, the young guard opened the steel door. As they walked in line, the prisoners were given simple searches. Though done twice a day, they were done fairly meticulously. Carrying a tool out of the workshop was bad. Outside of the workshop was another other steel door. Prisoners waited until everyone gathered in front of it. The guards then opened this steel door. Eight concrete pillars towered over Unit 5's two floors, with 31 cells lining both its sides. Cell doors did not open until each prisoner stood in front of his cell.

Before the doors opened, Wong held out a cigarette to Park. He silently accepted the cigarette from Wong and lowered his head. At the bottom of his steel door he looked at his food slot. Fixing his eyes on it, he again used his palm to wipe the sweat off his forehead and shook it. Sweat speckled the cement floor. He had just showered, but it had been useless. Sweat from all over his body drenched the purple prison uniform he had only just changed into. The steel door clattered opened. Before entering his cell, Park saw the stainless steel bars of a window across his cell below the ceiling. Between the bars a tiny sky thick with clouds could be seen. It was still the sky of Hong Kong. He lowered his head as he stepped into Room 3. After setting down the cigarette he had received from Wong on the small triangular table below his window, he removed his top to wash his face and chest at the sink beside the steel door and sat on his bed, which was beside the table. He lifted the cigarette from the table to his mouth, and bit it before lighting up. After gathering the strong bitter smoke in his mouth, he pushed it deep into his lungs and held it there for a while. Again, sweat streamed down his body. Before pushing the smoke back up his throat in a long exhalation, he carefully pressed out the embers on the cigarette's tip. Until the plastic lunch tray had passed through his food slot, Park sat idly at the edge of the bed, once suddenly hesitating to drag on his cigarette before giving up. Unlike at his first prison, because prisoners could not receive packages in Chek Chue, cigarettes were rare. As payment for his four hours of labor in the workshop, he was paid 150 HKD a months, but using them could only get him three packs of cigarettes. It was said that salaries increased in small increments. After a month or two, he would receive about 300 HKD a month. On his current wage he could afford to buy chocolate, snacks, and other things, but with cigarettes topping his priorities, he never dared to buy anything else. Wong, Park's next-door neighbor, sometimes gave him cigarettes in secret. Whether Wong had special influence in the prison or not, he certainly had the best financial situation in Unit 5. Of course, Wong received more money than Park, approximately 500 HKD, but Wong's expenses usually exceeded his salary.

At his nostrils, Park inhaled from the cigarette he had dragged on and pressed out, and slowly got to his feet to bring the tray that had come through the food slot to his table. Thinly sliced meat, potatoes, vegetables, and bright red tomatoes filled his tray, and were all smothered in an unidentified sauce. What a feast! If only he could have eaten three meals a day like this his whole life!

“Live worry without,” Mudi Shiraf said in Cantonese, his customary greeting. Mudi Shiraf, a Pakistani from Karachi, was a Heroin major from the University of Delivery, and was serving out a 24 year sentence, during which time he’d picked up broken Cantonese.

“Even when we work slow, when it is time they give the meal. A clean and sturdy house. Nobody is beaten. Hong Kong prison is the best.”

“You really like it?”

“*Hao, Hao,*” agreeing in Cantonese. “It really is.”

“Then why don’t you stay here forever?”

“*Puk You.*”

Mudi Shiraf immediately raised the middle finger of his right hand. Park was right. Even without anything to wear or eat, the wide-open outside world, free in all directions, was best. Where one could walk and walk along endlessly open roads. To the right or to the left, wherever one walked was freedom. It was a place where a person could see the whole sky in a single glance.

Park took the plastic fork and knife from his cup, and cut his meat clumsily. The thinly sliced meat cut easily.

—I really miss kimchi.

As thoughts of kimchi overtook him, he closed his eyes tightly. Above his head the humid wind of Tung Tau Wan leaked through the short stainless steel bars, swirling in the small prison cell, and stealthily smeared the nape of Park’s neck.

The afternoon shift began at two and ended at four o’clock. Because the daily amount of work was finished in the morning, in the afternoon there was nothing to do. The skillful prisoners would make frames or boxes out of the leftover paper spread over the floor, but usually the other prisoners clustered together according to their departments and chatted. The members of the Murder Department neither talked much to each other, nor sought the company of other departments. In a corner, they just leaned against the walls with their eyes glued to the four meter high ceiling, or they flipped through unfinished books. The largest and most garrulous of the groups was the DD Department. While the Murder Department consisted mostly of Chinese, the DD Department consisted of a variety of nationalities: a combination of Southwest and Southeast Asians, and even a few prisoners from as far away as South America. For this reason, poor English was prevalent. Park also, through the poor English he’d learned his five years in Thailand, somehow joined the group. Though five or six out of ten prisoners spoke English unintelligibly, it was of no consequence. No matter how ragged their English was, in the end, as time went by, the prisoners could understand each other. If a prisoner could not understand the words of an acquaintance today, if understanding did not come tomorrow or the following week, surely it would come the following month.

Park quietly asked Wong, “What did he say?” He was asking about a Taiwanese prisoner who had come two days earlier. Since Park could not make out their loud speech, he assumed they were speaking in Mandarin. Wong’s command of Cantonese, English, and even some Thai,

made Park suspicious that Wong's career extended beyond the simple bounds of a Heroin major's from Production University.

"He said he was on his way to Taipei with two *number fours* (a street name for heroin) when he was caught in Hong Kong in Chek Lap Kok. Not counting the one-third for good behavior, his sentence is fourteen-years and eight-months long. He also seems to have delivered like you, but he'd only made two deliveries before his luck ran out. Still, he was lucky though, don't you think?"

"Why was he lucky?"

"That he was caught in Chek Lap Kok was lucky. What if he'd been caught in Chiang Kai-shek Airport? He would've been given the death penalty immediately. By going between countries like that, he would have been nabbed eventually, so it was lucky that he was caught in Hong Kong and not Taipei."

"So lucky that now he can rot in here for fourteen years and eight months."

Unconsciously, Park clicked his tongue as he looked over the newcomer from Taipei, his forehead too wide and bald for his age. Like himself four months ago, the man had done something foolish.

Patting his shoulder, as was his custom, Wong said, "Think positively. If you aim too high, you won't get anywhere. Aim lower. If your sentence is fourteen years, imagine it's twenty; if it's twenty, imagine it's thirty; if it's thirty, think of it as a life sentence. You were also lucky to have been caught in Hong Kong, because if you'd paraded through either China or Thailand, or even Indonesia or Vietnam, you'd have been dead twice over."

Smiling with his characteristic laugh, he slapped Park's shoulder a little harder. *This bastard. If he goes unchecked, he'll end up punching me one day.* His shoulder sore, Park stepped out of Wong's arm reach. Nevertheless, Park envied Wong's thinking. With time maybe he would also laugh like Wong, but for now, he couldn't. He returned to his cell after the shift was over, and after the steel door had been shut, the world's profoundest silence and calmness visited him, and cut him to pieces. His wife's face, as he had last seen it on the hospital bed, and the image of his two sons who by now, were no longer toddlers, colored the empty grey walls. A letter his wife had sent informed him that with the money he had wired home, she had been able to have her entire stomach removed and complete her cancer treatment. Their children were doing well in school. "We're doing OK, so please take care of yourself." Now that a great worry had been resolved, she would visit soon, she he had written. *Nonsense.* Despite his wife's sincerity, without a stomach, how could she possibly travel to the strange and unfamiliar country of Hong Kong? "If you have that much money," he wrote in his stern reply, "then either buy the children a ball point pen or buy yourself something good to eat." He didn't include this next thought though, but as he wrote he continuously mumbled, "Even if the sky split in two, I still would have to stay here for more than ten years."

Nurma, from Jakarta, Indonesia, slouched listlessly against the wall in the corner of the workshop by a paper cutter. He'd come to Chek Chue, CAT-A two years ago via Lai Chi Kok. Now he was at home in the ways of the prison. He had been captured in Chek Lap Kok Airport, an Ice Major from the University of Delivery, and sentenced to twenty-four years, eight months, or sixteen years, five months minus a third.

Thirty six years old, Nurma was from Jati Pulo slum in Jakarta. Born to parents with neither money nor land, he was the eighth child in a family of ten brothers, and grew up working a variety of jobs in Jati Pulo, tasting heroin for the first time at the young age of eighteen.

Though free at first, he later had to pay for it. But since he lacked the nerve to mug people in the dead of night, to threaten them at knife point, he only had the chance to use heroin about once a month, and so he had never formed an addiction. It was for gambling that Nurma, in his thirties, had acquired an addiction. Even if gambling was illegal in Indonesia, untold numbers of gambling houses with Mickey Mouse poker machines were all over Jakarta. For some reason, Mickey Mouse's allure had been stronger than heroin's, and Nurma, day by day, had begun to sleep and wake in Mickey's bosom. Since then, Nurma's wife, who had married him at age nineteen and borne him three daughters and a son, saw his face scarcely once a month.

Now and then, when he crawled to his shack in Jati Pulo, Nurma boasted. "Just wait. We'll hit the jackpot. And when we do, our luck will change."

Whether he boasted or not, his wife nagged him and wished that he would show his sallow face to their children after the sun had risen, but it was useless. After giving her black eyes and scouring her pockets for change, like the wind, he would disappear for a while without contact.

One day, after a long while, Nurma had finally won some change from Mickey Mouse, and went in search of clubs in town where he could snort heroin. As he tripped on the drug in a chair in the corner of the club, trying to forget everything, he met an old friend.

"Hey, buddy," Nurma said.

Greeting his friend by placing his hands over each other and holding them to his chest, in the dark Nurma examined his friend snort heroin, and noticed of their differences. A gold necklace hung from the man's neck and he wore thick rings on his fingers. He wore a silk shirt.

Nurma said, "Buddy, if we grew up together, how is your life so different from mine?"

Upon hearing Nurma's question, his friend hesitated to touch the hem of his expensive-looking shirt and said, "Nurma. Mohammed said, 'He is not a believer, who lets his neighbor starve as he fills his own belly.' Since you're my friend, I won't keep you in the dark."

"Allah is most great!" Nurma said, "Praise be to Allah!"

[...]

Translated from the Korean by Miyeon and Albert Pulido