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Please Look After Mom



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWINNER OF THE MAN ASIAN LITERARY PRIZEWhen sixty-nine-year-old Sonyo is separated from her husband among the crowds of the Seoul subway station, her family begins a desperate search to find her. Yet as long-held secrets and private sorrows begin to reveal themselves, they are forced to wonder: how well did they actually know the woman they called Mom?Told through the piercing voices and urgent perspectives of a daughter, son, husband, and mother, Please Look After Mom is at once an authentic picture of contemporary life in Korea and a universal story of family love.From the Trade Paperback edition.Extrait1Nobody KnowsIts been one week since Mom went missing.The family is gathered at your eldest brother Hyong-chols house, bouncing ideas off each other. You decide to make flyers

and hand them out where Mom was last seen. The first thing to do, everyone agrees, is to draft a flyer. Of course, a flyer is an old-fashioned response to a crisis like this. But there are few things a missing persons family can do, and the missing person is none other than your mom. All you can do is file a missing-person report, search the area, ask passersby if they have seen anyone who looks like her. Your younger brother, who owns an online clothing store, says he posted something about your mothers disappearance, describing where she went missing; he uploaded her picture and asked people to contact the family if theyd seen her. You want to go look for her in places where you think she might be, but you know how she is: she cant go anywhere by herself in this city. Hyong-chol designates you to write up the flyer, since you write for a living. You blush, as if you were caught doing something you shouldnt. You arent sure how helpful your words will be in finding Mom. When you write July 24, 1938, as Moms birth date, your father corrects you, saying that she was born in 1936. Official records show that she was born in 1938, but apparently she was born in 1936. This is the first time youve heard this. Your father says everyone did that, back in the day.

Because many children didnt survive their first three months, people raised them for a few years before making it official. When youre about to rewrite 38 as 36, Hyong-chol says you have to write 1938, because thats the official date. You dont think you need to be so precise when youre only making homemade flyers and it isnt like youre at a government office. But you obediently cross out 36 and write 38, wondering if July

24 is even Moms real birthday. A few years ago, your mom said, We dont have to celebrate my birthday separately. Fathers birthday is one month before Moms. You and your siblings always went to your parents house in Chongup for birthdays and other celebrations. All together, there were twenty-two people in the immediate family. Mom liked it when all of her children and grandchildren gathered and bustled about the house. A few days before everyone came down, she would make fresh kimchi, go to the market to buy beef, and stock up on extra toothpaste and toothbrushes. She pressed sesame oil and roasted and ground sesame and perilla seeds, so she could present her children with a jar of each as they left. As she waited for the family to arrive, your mom would be visibly animated, her words and her gestures revealing her pride when she talked to neighbors or acquaintances. In the shed, Mom kept glass bottles of every size filled with plum or wild-strawberry juice, which she made seasonally. Moms jars were filled to the brim with tiny fermented croakerlike fish or anchovy paste or fermented clams that she was planning to send to the family in the city.

When she heard that onions were good for ones health, she made onion juice, and before winter came, she made pumpkin juice infused with licorice. Your moms house was like a factory; she prepared sauces and fermented bean paste and hulled rice, producing things for the family year-round. At some point, the childrens trips to Chongup became less frequent, and Mom and Father started to come to Seoul more often. And then you began to celebrate each of their birthdays by going out for dinner. That was easier. Then Mom even suggested, Lets celebrate my birthday on your fathers. She said it would be a burden to celebrate their birthdays separately, since both happen during the hot summer, when there are also two ancestral rites only two days apart. At first the family refused to do that, even when Mom insisted on it, and if she balked at coming to the city, a few of you went home to celebrate with her. Then you all started to give Mom her birthday gift on Fathers birthday. Eventually, quietly, Moms actual birthday was bypassed. Mom, who liked to buy socks for everyone in the family, had in her dresser a growing collection of socks that her children didnt take. Name: Park So-nyo Date of birth: July 24, 1938 (69 years old) Appearance: Short, salt-and-pepper permed hair, prominent cheekbones, last seen wearing a sky-blue shirt, a white jacket, and a beige pleated skirt. Last seen: Seoul Station subway Nobody can decide which picture of Mom you should use. Everyone agrees it should be the most recent picture, but nobody has a recent picture of her. You remember that at some point Mom started to hate getting her picture taken. She would sneak away even for family portraits.

The most recent photograph of Mom is a family picture taken at Fathers seventieth-birthday party. Mom looked nice in a pale-blue hanbok, with her hair done at a salon, and she was even wearing red lipstick. Your younger brother thinks your mom looks so different in this picture from the way she did right before she went missing. He doesnt think people would identify her as the same person, even if her image is isolated and enlarged. He reports that when he posted this picture of her, people responded by saying, Your mother is pretty, and she doesnt seem like the kind of person who would get lost. You all decide to see if anyone has another picture of Mom. Hyong-chol tells you to write something more on the flyer. When you stare at him, he tells you to think of better sentences, to tug on the readers heartstrings. Words that would tug on the readers heartstrings? When you write, Please help us find our mother, he says its too plain. When you write, Our mother is missing, he says that mother is too formal, and tells you to write mom. When you write, Our mom is missing, he decides its too childish. When you write, Please contact us if you see this person, he

barks, What kind of writer are you? You cant think of a single sentence that would satisfy Hyong-chol. Your second-eldest brother says, Youd tug on peoples heartstrings if you write that there will be a reward. When you write, We will reward you generously, your sister-in-law says you cant write like that: people take notice only if you write a specific amount. So how much should I say? One million won? Thats not enough. Three million won? I think thats too little, too. Then five million won. Nobody complains about five million won. You write, We will reward you with five million won, and put in a period. Your second-eldest brother says you should write it as, Reward: 5 million won. Your younger brother tells you to put 5 million won in a bigger font. Everyone agrees to e-mail you a better picture of Mom if they find something. Youre in charge of adding more to the flyer and making copies, and your younger brother volunteers to pick them up and distribute them to everyone in the family. When you suggest, We can hire someone to give out flyers, Hyong-chol says, Were the ones who need to do that. Well give them out on our own if we have some free time during the week, and all together over the weekend. You grumble, How will we ever find Mom at that rate? We cant just sit tight; were already doing everything we can, Hyong-chol retorts. What do you mean, were doing everything we can? We put ads in the newspaper. So doing everything we can is buying ad space? Then what do you want to do? Should we all quit work tomorrow and just roam around the city? If we could find Mom like that, Id do it. You stop arguing with Hyong-chol, because you realize that youre pushing him to take care of everything, as you always do. Leaving Father at Hyong-chols house, you all head home. If you dont leave then, you will continue to argue. Youve been doing that for the past week. Youd meet to discuss how to find Mom, and one of you would unexpectedly dig up the different ways someone else had wronged her in the past. The things that had been suppressed, that had been carefully avoided moment by moment, became bloated, and finally you all yelled and smoked and banged out the door in rage. When you first heard Mom had gone missing, you angrily asked why nobody from your large family went to pick her and Father up at Seoul Station. And where were you? Me? You clammed up. You didnt find out about Moms disappearance until shed been gone four days. You all blamed each other for Moms going missing, and you all felt wounded. Leaving Hyong-chols house, you take the subway home but get off at Seoul Station, which is where Mom vanished. So many people go by, brushing your shoulders, as you make your way to the spot where Mom was last seen. You look down at your watch. Three oclock. The same time Mom was left behind. People shove past you as you stand on the platform where Mom was wrenched from Fathers grasp. Not a single person apologizes to you. People would have pushed by like that as your mom stood there, not knowing what to do. How far back does ones memory of someone go? Your memory of Mom? Since you heard about Moms disappearance, you havent been able to focus on a single thought, besieged by long-forgotten memories unexpectedly popping up. And the regret that always trailed each memory. Years ago, a few days before you left your hometown for the big city, Mom took you to a clothing store at the market. You chose a plain dress, but she picked one with frills on the straps and hem. What about this one? No, you said, pushing it away. Why not? Try it on. Mom, young back then, opened her eyes wide, uncomprehending. The frilly dress was worlds away from the dirty towel that was always wrapped around Moms head, which, like other farming women, she wore to soak up the sweat on her brow as she worked. Its childish. Is it? Mom said, but she held the dress up and kept examining it, as if she didnt want to walk away. I would try it on if I were you. Feeling bad that youd called it childish, you said, This isnt even your style. Mom said, No, I like these kinds of clothes, its just that Ive never been able to wear them. I should have tried on that dress. You bend your legs and squat on the spot where Mom might have done the same. A few days after you insisted on buying the plain dress, you arrived at this very station with Mom. Holding your hand tightly, she strode through the sea of people in a way that would intimidate even the authoritative buildings looking on from above, and headed across the square to wait for Hyong-chol under the clock tower. How could someone like that be missing? As the headlights of the subway train enter the station, people rush forward, glancing at you sitting on the ground, perhaps irritated that youre in the way. As your moms hand got pulled away from Fathers, you were in China. You were with your fellow writers at the Beijing Book Fair. You were flipping through a Chinese translation of your book at a booth when your mom got lost in Seoul Station. Father, why didnt you take a cab instead? This wouldnt have happened if you hadnt taken the subway! Father said he was thinking, Why take a taxi when the train station is connected to the subway station? There are moments one revisits after something happens, especially after something bad happens. Moments in which one thinks, I shouldnt have done that. When Father told your siblings that he and Mom could get to Hyong-chols house by themselves, why did your siblings let them do that, unlike all the other times? When your parents came to visit, someone always went to Seoul Station or to the Express Bus Terminal to pick them up. What made

Father, who always rode in a family members car or a taxi when he came to the city, decide to take the subway on that particular day? Mom and Father rushed toward the subway that had just arrived. Father got on the train, and when he looked behind him, Mom wasnt there. Of all days, it was a busy Saturday afternoon. Mom was pulled away from Father in the crowd, and the subway left as she tried to get her bearings. Father was holding Moms bag. So, when Mom was left alone in the subway station with nothing, you were leaving the book fair, headed toward Tiananmen Square. It was your third time in Beijing, but you hadnt yet set foot in Tiananmen Square, had only gazed at it from inside a bus or a car. The student who was guiding your group offered to take you there before going to dinner, and your group decided it was a good idea. What would your mom have been doing by herself in Seoul Station as you got out of the cab in front of the Forbidden City? Your group walked into the Forbidden City but came right back out. That landmark was only partially open, because it was under construction, and it was almost closing time. The entire city of Beijing was under construction, to prepare for the Olympic Games the following year. You remembered the scene in *The Last Emperor* where the elderly Puyi returns to the Forbidden City, his childhood home, and shows a young tourist a box he had hidden in the throne. When he opens the lid of the box, his pet cricket from his youth is inside, still alive. When you were about to head over to Tiananmen Square, was your mom standing in the middle of the crowd, lost, being jostled? Was she waiting for someone to come get her? The road between the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square was under construction, too. You could see the square, but you could get there only through a convoluted maze. As you watched the kites floating in the sky in Tiananmen Square, your mom might have collapsed in the passageway in despair, calling out your name. As you watched the steel gates of Tiananmen Square open and a squadron of police march forth, legs raised high, to lower the red national flag with five stars, your mom might have been wandering through the maze inside Seoul Station. You know this to be true, because thats what the people who were in the station at that time told you. They said they saw an old woman walking very slowly, sometimes sitting on the floor or standing vacantly by the escalators. Some saw an old woman sitting in the station for a long time, then getting on an arriving subway. A few hours after your mom disappeared, you and your group took a taxi through the nighttime city to bright, bustling Snack Street and, huddled under red lights, tasted 56-proof Chinese liquor and ate piping-hot crab sauted in chili oil. Father got off at the next stop and went back to Seoul Station, but Mom wasnt there anymore. How could she get so lost just because she didnt get on the same car? There are signs all over the place. Mother knows how to make a simple phone call. She could have called from a phone booth. Your sister-in-law insisted that something had to have happened to your mom, that it didnt make sense that she couldnt find her own sons house just because she failed to get on the same train as Father. Something happened to Mom. That was the view of someone who wanted to think of Mom as the old mom. When you said, Mom can get lost, you know, your sister-in-law widened her eyes in surprise. You know how Mom is these days, you explained, and your sister-in-law made a face, as if she had no idea what you were talking about. But your family knew what Mom was like these days. And knew that you might not be able to find her. From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* A suspenseful, haunting, achingly lovely novel about the hidden lives, wishes, struggles and dreams of those we think we know best.

Seattle Times A moving portrayal of the surprising nature, sudden sacrifices, and secret reveries of motherhood. *Elle* Intimate and hauntingly spare. . . . A raw tribute to the mysteries of motherhood. *The New York Times Book* Lovely. . . . Please Look After Mom, especially its magical, transcendent ending, lifts the spirit as only the best writing can do. *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* Shin renders a tender and beautiful portrait of South Korea, but the novel recognizes a familial dilemma experienced throughout the world. *Ms. Magazine* blog The most moving and accomplished, and often startling, novel in translation Ive read in many seasons. . . . Every sentence is saturated in detail. . . . It tells an almost unbearably affecting story of remorse and belated wisdom that reminds us how globalism at the human level can tear souls apart and leave them uncertain of where to turn. *Pico Iyer, Wall Street Journal* The novel perfectly combines universal themes of love and loss, family dynamics, gender equality, tradition, and charity with the rich Korean culture and values which make *Please Look After Mom* a great literary masterpiece. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* An authentic, moving story that brings to vivid life the deep family connections that lie at the core of Korean culture. But it also speaks beautifully to an urgent issue of our time: migration, and how the movement of people from small towns and villages to big cities can cause heartbreak and even tragedy. This is a tapestry of family life that will be read all over the world. I loved this book. *Gary Shteyngart, author of Super Sad True Love Story* Haunting. . . . The novels languages so formal in its simplicity bestows a grace and solemnity on childhood scenes that might otherwise be overwrought. . . . Throughout the novel, the rhythms of agrarian

life and labor that Shin deftly conveys have a subtle, cumulative power. Boston Sunday Globe An affecting account of a slow-burn family break-up. . . . Well-controlled and emotionally taut. . . . What distinguishes this novel is the way it questions whether our pasts, either public or private, are really available for us to recollect and treasure anyway. The Financial Times A captivating story, written with an understanding of the shortcomings of traditional ways of modern life. It is nostalgic but unsentimental, brutally well observed and, in this flawlessly smooth translation by Chi-Young Kim, it offers a sobering account of a vanished past. . . . We must hope there will be more translations to follow. Times Literary Supplement (London) A poignant story of a family told in four voices. . . . Shins storytelling and her gift for detail make Please Look After Mom a book worth reading. Post and Courier Shin perceptively explores the greatest mystery not Moms disappearance, but who Mom really was. Every mom, that is. Richmond Times-Dispatch Here is a wonderful, original new voice, by turns plangent and piquant. Please Look After Mom takes us on a dual journey, to the unfamiliar corners of a foreign culture and into the shadowy recesses of the heart. In spare, exquisite prose, Kyung-sook Shin penetrates the very essence of what it means to be a family, and a human being. Geraldine Brooks, Pulitzer Prizewinning author of March Shin is a scribe with a slow and steady pulse; this is writing that allows you to meander with your own thoughts (and reflect on your own mother, perhaps), while still following the physical and mental travels of her characters. . . . Plain and softy insistent eloquence. Hyphen Magazine Intriguing. . . . It is easy to see the source of this global popularity, for not only is Shins absorbing novel written with considerable grace and suspense, but she also has managed to tap into a universality: the inequitable relationship between a mother and her children. Bookpage An arresting account of the misunderstandings that can cloud the beauty of the affection and memories that bind two very different generations. . . . A touching story that effectively weaves the rural, ages-old lifestyle of a mother into the modern urban lives of her children. Newark Star-Ledger Here is a deeply felt journey into a culture foreign to many yet with a theme that is universal in its appeal. A terrific novel that stayed with me long after I'd finished its final, haunting pages. This is a real discovery. Abraham Verghese, bestselling author of Cutting for Stone