

# A The Atlantic



Asako Narahashi

FICTION

## PERSON OF KOREA

A short story

By Paul Yoon

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**Editor's Note:** *Read an interview with Paul Yoon about his writing process.*

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**H**E WAITS THREE WEEKS for his father to respond. During that time, whenever he checks the mail, the dog follows him. She eyes the birds on the telephone wires. Then the migrant workers in the fields.

One day, the payphone near the mailboxes rings. He hurries to the booth. But it is a woman from Vladivostok conducting a survey of the Korean communities in the Russian Far East.

The surveyors have been calling ever since Russia's first president was elected. He usually hangs up, but today he doesn't. The dog lies down beside him as he answers all her questions.

*No, I don't work on the barley farm. No, we rent the house.*

*Yes, the electricity goes out often. Yes, the water tastes tinny. Yes, we have a store for basic groceries, but the nearest town is an hour south.*

*Yes, he lies. I go to school.*

*No, I don't use the payphone often.*

"Why?" the surveyor says.

"Because you have to pay."

He hears her writing. Listening to her voice, he tries to remember the voice of his father.

"What's your name?" the surveyor asks.

"Maksim."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"How many people are in your household, Maksim?"

Maksim begins to count the people who live in the row of houses next to the farm until he realizes the woman is referring to only his family.

Maksim says, "Two in our household," knowing that is no longer true.

He hangs up. The noise startles the dog awake. The dog follows Maksim back to the house, and once he is safely inside, she bolts into the field toward the far woods. She is no one's dog, but for the past few weeks she has followed only him. He leaves the door open for her. His uncle would have never allowed that, but his uncle is three weeks dead, so what does it matter now?

Maksim is like the dog. He does what he wants. He wears what he wants to wear and eats when he wants to eat. He doesn't make up the mattress on the floor, and it doesn't matter if he knocks over a glass, waking himself up from a dream he keeps having in which people are speaking to him in different languages he has never heard before. There is no one to explain the dream or to chastise him or to tell him to go to the corner store and see if there is work so that he can earn some money for the house.

There are only his uncle's things everywhere: his baseball cap on the wall hook, his tin mug and his stack of car magazines in this one-room house Maksim has lived in for longer than his father has been away. There is the door always swinging open from the wind that comes at the end of summer, and outside the barley that hasn't had rain in a long time, long enough for Maksim to know that it has been a bad year; a bad year after several and there is talk of the migrant workers not returning.

Through the doorframe, he can still see the tire tracks of his uncle's taxicab. The company came the other day and towed it. As his neighbors watched, the truck driver tossed a road map to Maksim and told him it had been in the taxi's glove compartment. Maksim waited until he was alone before opening the map, wondering if by chance something else was folded in it, some secret message for him. But it was only a map, one his uncle hardly ever used because he knew the roads.

In the mailbox yesterday was a letter telling Maksim that his uncle owes money for the cab. Next month, Maksim will owe rent for the house. For the fourth time this week, he heads out to the corner store to ask the owner if he can do anything today. The owner ignores him and opens boxes of instant ramen as the newscaster on the television describes a skirmish at the border with Chechnya.

Then the man tosses Maksim a ramen pack and says, "Why do you all keep eating only this shit?"

Later, Maksim opens the map again, but Chechnya isn't there. Sakhalin Island is there. East of where he is, next to the Sea of Japan. It is 950 kilometers long and 160 kilometers wide. It is like a giant, leaping fish. He draws a route from the mainland coast to the island coast, 100 kilometers back and forth, he reckons, and then spots a town called Terney on the mainland that he can get to in a few hours.

Maksim doesn't know if his father still works on Sakhalin or if he got the letter telling him that his brother, Maksim's uncle, is dead. He doesn't know what his father's favorite food is anymore. Whether he is fat or thin or speaks in Russian or Korean most days.

Maksim's father left for the island five years ago. Or was told to leave. Maksim has not seen him since.

The wind blows in. He cooks the ramen in the microwave, staring at the calendar marked up with his uncle's handwriting, unable to decipher it. Today is the last day of August.

The month ends. The mailbox stays empty. Two days later, shutting the door behind him, Maksim walks to where the migrant workers are climbing onto the bed of a pickup truck and asks whether he can catch a ride with them. The workers are Koreans from Uzbekistan, and they have been coming here for years. They are heading east, he knows, to another farm, before they head south for the winter.

Maksim is standing on the road with a backpack on his shoulders. He is wearing a denim jacket and his uncle's baseball cap. Maksim holds out some money he had been keeping under his mattress, but the Uzbek closest to him says to keep it. In Korean, the Uzbek says they were sorry to hear about Maksim's uncle, that the man used to give them free rides. Then the workers help Maksim up and ask where he wants to go.

"Terney," he says.

As the truck begins to move, the dog leaps up onto the bed. The Uzbeks laugh. The dog looks up again at the birds on the wires as they all leave the farm.

OUR FATHER still on the island?" The Uzbek beside him is shouting over the wind. They are speeding through a forest with a high canopy. "Is he still at the camp?"

**Y** Maksim isn't sure what they think of his father, so he just nods, holding the dog as the truck shakes.

Maksim's father is a prison guard. Or the last time they spoke he was, working at the prison on the island. The older people call it "the camp" because it was a labor camp run by the Japanese, when the Japanese claimed the southern half of the island. They rounded up thousands of Koreans during wartime and brought them there to log, pulp paper, mine coal. Maksim's grandfather had been one of the laborers when he was in his 20s. When the war ended, many of them, including Maksim's grandfather, never went back home. They took a boat west, first to Vladivostok, then eventually headed inland, north, where they settled.

That is their family story. That is the story of almost all the families who rent on the farm.

Her eyes have a steadiness that makes him feel at ease,  
and so he asks, in Russian, whether she knows of  
anyone with a boat.

Maksim has always been aware of the strangeness of his father going to work where his own father had been imprisoned. He once asked his uncle about it, but his uncle only said, “Better your father there than here,” and left it at that.

They ride the rest of the way in silence. The forest turns into meadows and then into hills and dunes. Then, suddenly, the smell of the sea. Seabirds. When they pull into Terney, the Uzbek he was talking to hands him a piece of paper with an address near Vladivostok. He tells Maksim that they aren't sure there will be work at the farm next year—and that if things don't work out for Maksim, he should come to them.

“We will see each other again,” the Uzbek says.

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The dog leaps down, following Maksim. Together they enter the hill town, heading directly to the coast. The afternoon air is sandy and cold and full of a heavy sound he doesn't yet realize is the movement of water. He has been on the road for only two hours and already he feels a world away. He grips the straps of his backpack and feels a rush of relief that the dog is here. He ducks under clotheslines. The dog steals some water from a bucket. Other dogs eye her, then vanish into alleys. He avoids looking at the windows.

It occurs to Maksim that he doesn't know the route his father took to the island. For many years now, he has imagined him in a guard uniform gripping a club and has wondered how the club has changed the way he strikes men. Maksim's greatest fear as a child was that his father would one day use a kitchen knife.

He finds a path to the beach. The dog is elated. She bounds into the water and back as Maksim walks on the sand, listening, watching. He comes upon some wooden houses, a restaurant, and then a garage in which surfboards lie stacked on a rack. He returns to the restaurant. A gray-haired woman stands behind the bar, wiping the counter. Her eyes have a steadiness that makes him feel at ease, and so he asks, in Russian, whether she knows of anyone with a boat. She considers him and then points out toward the cliff and says that if he keeps going, he'll find the fishermen.

So he keeps going. He walks past some large rocks sticking up out of the water like miniature islands. When he reaches the base of the cliff, he spots the motorboats pulled up on the beach. In the shadow of the cliff is a cluster of shacks. The ocean sound is louder here, and everywhere. If someone were behind him, he wouldn't know. He turns. When he turns again, a group of people is approaching him from the shacks.

"That your dog?"

"She's no one's dog," Maksim says.

"Then I guess we can take her," a man says.

Maksim is silent. The dog stands rigid and is also silent. A woman is standing behind the group of men, smoking a cigarette, looking bored. Maksim asks if these are their boats. When the men don't respond, Maksim asks if one of them could take him to Sakhalin.

"I can pay," Maksim says.

Another man asks if he is Japanese. That the Japanese keep coming here with their surfboards and Jet Skis. "We don't want your Japanese money," they say. But then a moment later they say, "Prove you've got the money."

The dog snarls. Maksim quickly turns and hurries away. He counts to 30. For every number he takes a step. Twenty-eight ... step ... 29 ... step ... He spins around, his hands clenched. The group hasn't moved, but they've lost interest in him.

Now he is alone. He and the dog. He approaches the large rocks he passed and begins to walk out into the water. From the shore, the dog watches. The rocks are slippery, but Maksim keeps going, treading carefully. He goes as far as he can without the waves splashing all over him and squints out into the vast nothing, searching for the island or even Japan.

Maybe he will try heading farther down the beach in the opposite direction and ask someone else. Or maybe he will try another town on the coast. He thinks of his uncle trying to teach him to swim one year but can't remember which beach they were on.

Only that his uncle ended up swimming on his own and Maksim stayed on the sand, following him.

He thinks of moving here. Working at a restaurant. Buying a club and beating those fishermen one at a time, the others tied up and forced to watch.

He smiles. He hops back toward the sand where the dog is waiting, wagging her tail. Otherwise, the beach is empty. Stars are now visible and the sunset water is thick and undulating. He feels the strange pull of it. He asks the dog, "What next?"

He finds himself back at the restaurant. He steps onto the deck and peers in. The glass doors are locked, the lights off, and no one is inside. He sits on the steps facing the water and reaches inside his jacket pocket. He pulls out a pack of cigarettes that belonged to his uncle and smokes one. It helps his hunger. Then he realizes he has not fed the dog, has brought nothing for the dog. What a stupid thing to forget. He opens up his backpack as though food might magically appear. But by now, the dog has fallen asleep, and Maksim tucks his feet under her body to keep warm.

He matches his breathing with the dog's. His eyes begin to close; the ocean comes and moves over him.

He jerks awake to someone lifting the brim of his baseball cap. The woman from the bar is leaning down. He has no idea what time it is—late enough that the water is lit by the night. He can see her there in the silver light. Then he wonders why the dog didn't bark and turns.

"Where's my dog?"

"No dog," the woman says. "Did you find your boat?"

He shakes his head. He searches around him for tracks in the sand.

"You could try looking for a boat again in two days."

"Two days?"

"Rain tomorrow. Fog. Not good to see the sights, yes?"

"I'm not seeing the sights," Maksim says, and gets up.

Again, she considers him. "Come on," she says.

He says he needs to look for the dog, but she says, "The dog will come back."

She brings him inside the restaurant to the bar. She hands him a blanket and a glass of water and brings out a bowl for the dog, which she leaves outside. He asks if she has any food for the dog. She takes out a jar full of pretzels and peanuts.

"That's for you both," she says.

He twists open the gray lid and eats fistfuls of the snack. The salt wakes him. He drinks more water. She opens two beers and gives him one. He drinks it fast enough that it goes to his head. She sips hers and watches the television. Yeltsin is talking about Chechnya. She glances at him, presses mute, and switches the channel to a soccer game.

"I'm Sofia," she says.

"Maksim."

"How old are you, Maksim?"

He lies. "Eighteen. You?"

She chuckles. She tells Maksim it was her husband's restaurant, but doesn't go on.

"I wouldn't mind working at a restaurant," Maksim says.

"You might," Sofia says, and taps her fingernails against her beer.

He walks to the deck, looking for the dog. For the first time, Sofia asks what he is doing here, and he explains. He takes out the money, too.

Sofia counts the money, returns it to him, and then says, "I know someone with a boat."

"You didn't say that earlier," Maksim says.

"I didn't know you earlier," Sofia says.

He tries to give her the money again but she refuses. On the television, a goalie dives and catches the ball. Sofia tells him to get some sleep, that she will see him tomorrow, and she turns the lights off and steps out.

Maksim lies down against the bar. The floor is sticky and smells of old beer. But a tiredness that is much greater than the trip today settles inside him. He concentrates on the ocean swell, thinking again of his uncle in the water.



Asako Narahashi

THE DOG does not come back the next day. Sofia arrives in the morning and brings him to an old, tiny fishing trawler on the dock. She says it is her nephew's boat, and that she will take him herself. He hasn't told her that he has never been on a boat before.

A curtain of fog has settled on the coast. The air sticks to him. Soon, they are off, pushing away from land and heading east into the Sea of Japan, into a fog that grows denser the farther they go. He sits on the floor beside her, his knees to his chest and his eyes closed, waiting for the nausea that has hit him to pass.

The trip takes hours. At first he keeps his eyes closed. Then he grows used to the rhythm of the boat and the engine noise, and as the nausea recedes, he stands, peering over Sofia's shoulder. He cannot see the island, because of the fog. Then glimpses of it appear, and he spots the port and the tall green hills near the water. The port is busier than he thought it would be. He can see fishermen on the dock and a cargo ship a little farther down, everything vanishing and then reappearing in the fog.

They find an empty space for her to dock quickly. She asks how long he needs.

He hasn't thought about that. But he feels a new energy as he picks up his backpack.

His heart beats fast.

He retreats, unsure if they have noticed him, but the language they are speaking to each other catches his

ear. He has never heard it before.

"I can't stay here," she says. "So I'll come back tomorrow at noon. And if you're not here tomorrow, I'm calling the police. Deal?"

He nods. He almost asks her to come. He jumps off and turns. "My dog," Maksim says.

"Yes," Sofia says. "I'll find the dog."

He tightens the straps of his backpack and hurries through the fog down the dock. Seabirds have flocked to the main street, eating crumbs in the middle of the road. Every time a car races out of the fog, the birds startle and scatter.

Maksim takes a trail up a hill. He knows the prison isn't far from the dock; he wants to reach high ground, above the fog. But the higher he goes, the less he can see. A wind gusts over him. Rounding a bend, he stumbles upon two men kneeling beside a boulder. One of them is placing something into a duffel bag. He retreats, unsure if they have noticed him, but the language they are speaking to each other catches his ear. He has never heard it before. Then he hears the men calling him over.

In Russian, Maksim asks if they know where the prison is.

"You turning yourself in?" The man closer to him grins.

"My father," Maksim says. "He's a guard."

The man's grin doesn't break. He says the trail will end soon, at an intersection where three roads go three ways. "Take the far right," he says. "It'll get you there. But stay on the curb. People speed here."

Maksim thanks them. Before he goes, he asks what language they were speaking.

Instead of answering, the man says, "You are *Koryo Saram*, yes?"

*Koryo Saram*. Person of Korea.

"Yes," Maksim says.

"We were here long before you, my friend."

The man keeps grinning. "So long," he says. His companion lifts the duffel bag and they both take the trail down and vanish into the fog.

Maksim finds the three roads, takes the far-right one. He keeps to the side as the man said, following an empty field that reminds him of the farm. Almost half an hour later, the prison appears: high walls, barbed wire, and a tower. By the main entrance stands a booth with a guard inside.

When the guard notices him, Maksim says his father's name. He says his father is also a guard and that he is looking for him and that it is important. He says if the guard doesn't believe him, he should ask around.

The guard puts down the magazine he has been reading and leans forward. "You're Vasily's boy?"

Maksim nods.

The man checks a clipboard and says Vasily's shift hasn't started yet. "He's home," the guard says. "Go there."

Maksim doesn't know where that is.

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The guard hesitates, then says, "Walk back to the road. Take a right and keep walking until you reach a hill where a cluster of houses overlooks the prison. If it weren't for the fog, you'd see the houses from here. You're really Vasily's boy?"

Maksim doesn't answer. He has been on the island now for over an hour. He pictures Sofia's trawler well on its way back to the mainland. The more tired his legs grow, the more the fog is like an ocean and the land is floating on it.

He reaches the houses. They are well built, with sturdy, new roofs—the kind he would like to live in one day. He wonders which one is his father's when almost at once, Maksim spots him behind the window of the first one. Vasily then steps out the back, lights a cigarette, and turns toward the road.

"Maksim!"

They stand facing each other. Maksim's eyes do not leave his father as Vasily sits on a bench beside a picnic table in the backyard, facing the prison below, though it is barely visible right now.

Five years. All those days seem to collapse. He cannot remember a single one.

Maksim sits across from him on the other bench. From here, he can see the back of the house, where a woman is staring at them through the doorway. She is wearing a bathrobe and when she steps out, his father tells her to go back inside. She doesn't listen. She is Vasily's age and has very long hair that she has washed and blow-dried. The cigarette smell around them mixes with the smell of her shampoo.

She says, "That your boy?" but Vasily doesn't respond. Maksim doesn't either. He is looking at his father, who is clean-shaven for the first time he can recall and wearing a pressed shirt.

"He doesn't look like you at all," the woman says.

"He's better looking than I am," Vasily says.

"That's the truth."

"You staying for a bit?" his father says.

The woman leans toward Vasily's ear. "I don't want no boy," she says, and walks back inside, taking the shampoo smell with her.

"You hungry? You want a beer?" his father says. Then he says, "How old are you now?"

A wind pushes over them, bringing the fog, erasing his father for a moment.

"It's a nice house," Maksim says.

"It's a good job. A steady one. Like I told you."

"You've lived here the whole time?"

Vasily shakes his head: He used to live farther away in an apartment complex. The houses here were built by the new government. A lottery was set up for guards who were interested; he was one of the winners and moved here last year.

Maksim pictures his father winning a house. He tries to think if they ever won anything. "That's some luck," Maksim says, and his father takes a drag of his cigarette, shutting one of his eyes so the smoke doesn't go in.

The more tired his legs grow, the more the fog is like  
an ocean and the land is floating on it.

"I remember that hat," Vasily says.

Maksim takes off his uncle's baseball cap and places it on the tabletop.

"He knew nothing about baseball," his father says. "He just liked the hat."

"He knew a little," Maksim says.

His father looks down as though he is recalling something and then asks how the house is, who is living there these days on that farm road, and Maksim considers how to answer. He wants to say there have been bad years at the farm. The corner store isn't making enough money to hire him, and he can't pay next month's rent. He wants to say he isn't sure he will be there anymore and is thinking of going somewhere else, except he doesn't know where to go.

"Did you get the letter?" Maksim says.

"I did."

"You didn't come to the funeral."

"I didn't know if he would've wanted me there," Vasily says. "I didn't know if you would've, either."

Maksim breaks away from his stare, turns to the hillside. He points down below. "Was any of that the camp?" he says.

"The what?"

"The labor camp. Grandad."

His father doesn't know.

"Do you think of him?" Maksim says. "When you're working in there? I would think of him all the time. If I was working there."

"Then I'm glad you aren't working there," Vasily says. After a pause, he softens his voice and says there's too much going on inside the prison to think of much.

"Do you know why Grandad ended up where he did?" Maksim says. "Why he stayed in this country?"

"Yeah," Vasily says. "He got on the wrong boat."

He can't tell if his father is joking. Then his father laughs. Maksim is startled. He can't remember the last time he heard his father laugh. It is like ash being thrown over a small fire inside him.

"Do you remember a dog?" Maksim says. "At the farm?"

"I've got no use for dogs," his father says.

"It's a Rhodesian ridgeback. The breed came from Africa. The workers told me that. I caught a ride with them."

"What's Africa got to do with me? Or you?"

"I'd like to go to Africa," Maksim says.

Vasily stubs out his cigarette. "You came all this way to ask if I got your letter, to talk about your grandfather, and to tell me you're going to Africa?"

"No," Maksim says. "I came to say two other things."

His father waits.

Maksim's throat tightens. He looks down and grips the edge of the tabletop. He says, "I don't know if you were planning on coming back to check on me. But if you were, I don't need you to."

"You don't need me to, yeah?" his father says.

"Yeah," Maksim says. "I'm okay. I'm okay on my own."

His father reaches across and Maksim flinches. His father laughs some more and then, to Maksim's surprise, he reaches across more carefully and takes Maksim's hand. He takes his hand gently, as though they are praying together. Maksim fixes his gaze down at the fog slipping in under him. The way it floats there around his legs like something ancient and alien.

"Do you use a club?" Maksim says.

He says it quietly, but Vasily hears.

"What?"

"At the prison. Do you use a club?"

He feels the pressure of his father's hand against his own. He waits for the break in the silence, for his breath to be knocked away, for that sudden crack in the world, and it is like he wants it to happen. He doesn't understand why he would want that. It is like the way the dog bounds across the barley fields into the woods, as though being drawn there by something the dog can't control.

But nothing happens. His father does nothing. He lets go of Maksim's hand, and the wanting vanishes as quickly as it came. All of a sudden, the air fills with a foreign

noise. A siren. An alarm. It fills this corner of the island. Maksim thinks perhaps it is an airplane, but then bright lights flicker down below at the prison.

From inside the house the telephone rings, and the woman appears, waving the receiver.

His father goes inside. He comes back out a few minutes later, buttoning up his uniform.

"Someone broke out," he says. "It's all right. It's nothing to worry about. It happens a few times a year."

Maksim watches as below a pickup truck comes out of the prison and approaches the house.

"You know who it is?" Vasily says. "It's always those Nivkhs. They break the law and get punished for it and they think they can just walk out. Because they think it's their island and they can do whatever they want. We try, you know? We try to be good to them. We even hire some as guards. Then all they do is break one of their friends out."

Maksim has stopped listening to his father. He is thinking of the two men he ran into on the trail. The duffel bag. One of the men grinning at him. The cadence of their language. Nivkh.

The truck pulls up out front. Maksim walks around with his father. Vasily goes on:

"Do you know? All they ever do is go home. The world changes, it will always change, and they will always stay the same. Why do you think that is? Stubborn fools."

Before Maksim can say anything back, his father says: "Maksim, what was the second thing?"

"The second thing?"

"That you wanted to say to me," his father says. "You said you came to say two things. What is the second thing?"

Two guards with rifles are in the cab, staring at Maksim.

"Is there anyone else?" Maksim says.

"Anyone else?"

"In our family," Maksim says. "Is there anyone else, somewhere else?"

"Hell if I know," Vasily says, and jumps onto the bed of the pickup.

The truck speeds away. The woman is by the front door, but Maksim ignores her. He feels a lingering beat where his father held his hand, focused there in his palm. He

keeps feeling it as he passes the prison and gets back on the trail. At the port, he searches for Sofia's trawler, in case she never left. Some fishermen are staring up at the hills, at the noise.

It is then that he realizes he forgot his uncle's baseball cap on the picnic table. For a moment, the air goes quiet. He sees nothing in the fog but panning light—the dog in the field, his uncle swimming. He reaches out. Then a car rushes by, swift and dark, almost touching him as the alarm continues to sound, louder now, across the island.