

CHEATER

I caught the school bus today. I missed it often. Every morning, I found it almost impossible to leave the house. Each time I walked by my school bag I had a compulsion to check and recheck its contents.

My school bus, like the other school buses, came equipped with a bus driver and a lady, who didn't have a formal job title. I secretly called her the *packer*.

“Good morning. Ready to go to school?” The *packer* bowed to the parents as she welcomed their offspring onto the bus. The parents made barely perceptible nods at the lady with the messy ponytail and drab clothes.

Once we entered her lair, her smile faded. She was the boss lady of the school bus and she had a system. The first three student riders sat in one seat. The next two to board had to stand facing the back of the bus wedged in-between the already seated students, like the two black piano keys between the three white keys. By the end of the route, the bus was completely filled this way but I didn't understand why she wouldn't allow us to take the seats before slotting us in the standing positions. But the *packer* had her way of doing things and nobody questioned her. She marched every student to the correct spot to make sure her precise method was followed and gave us a shove if we weren't fast enough to assume our position. I had a feeling that she didn't like her job. It probably wasn't much fun riding the bus with a bunch of kids dressed in pressed uniforms, to and from our private school, twice a day, six days a week.

As one of the first pickups, I had to stand between the sitting students even though nearly all of the bus was empty. I hated going backwards. The traffic was crazy. What were the rules of the road in the crowded city of Seoul? Did anyone obey them? Sudden accelerations, screeching stops and hairpin turns had my breakfast of toast and soup doing summersaults.

Every time the bus driver braked hard, the standers toppled forward onto the trio of white keys who squawked in discordant voices, “What are you doing?” “Get off me!” *What nerve!* At least they got to go to school sitting down, facing the right way.

As we neared the final leg of the seemingly endless, miserable trip, I had to force myself not to throw up. Mercifully, the bus pulled into the school parking lot. As we filed out, I felt another lurch and I couldn’t hold it in. I threw up on my school bag. Students around me yelled, “Eeeew!” “Gross!” I certainly wasn’t the first to upchuck after a long bus ride to school and wouldn’t be the last.

I made a beeline for the hand washing station in the school hallway. The large, tiled in area had faucets coming out of the wall and drains on the ground. After I gurgled and washed my mouth, I pulled out my handkerchief with blue bunnies on it that Mom made me carry around. I never thought I’d need it. I felt bad for the pretty handkerchief for the yucky job it had to do. I washed the bag with it and wrung it out thoroughly.

I went to my classroom and sat in my chair. It was nice to sit down. My desk, my small rectangular island, one of sixty, neatly aligned in rows.

I was lucky to be in a small class. Private schools had only sixty students. My parents could afford to send only me, their oldest child, to a private school. My sister, a year younger, went to a public school where there were a hundred students per teacher. The public school kids had a reputation of being rowdier compared to the private school kids. My youngest sister was too young to go to school but she'd be going to a public school as well.

“You better do well in school,” my parents threatened. “You’re sucking up all the money. There’s none left for your sisters.”

It was “No Rice Wednesday.” The government sanctioned that no rice be eaten on Wednesdays. There was a shortage of rice in the country. On Wednesdays, the students bought one of the assorted buns sold in a kiosk in the school basement. The choices were either Castella (Japanese sponge cakes) or flat buns with cream and jam in the middle. I didn’t mind. It was a nice change from the usual bento boxes from home. And besides, my tummy wasn’t fully back to normal. I could still feel the dizzying turns and the smell of the bus fumes from this morning. With our regular lunch of rice and *bun-chun* (sides), delicious aromas of all kinds of food and spices permeated the classroom. Today, the combination of some of the smells might’ve bothered me. Now the room just smelled like sweet bread. I ate less than half of my Castella.

After lunch, Mr. Park covered a new concept in math. The numbers and symbols on the blackboard turned into swirls and I was not able to completely follow. The teacher surprised us with a four question pop quiz. It just wasn't my day.

"Times up. Trade your paper with the person next to you." The boy who sat next to me was a poor student and got into a lot of trouble for talking and acting up.

I tried to tell my partner telepathically to go easy on the answers, but it was math, there was only one right answer.

He had one wrong answer on his quiz. He gave back my paper with two wrong answers. *Is the teacher going to collect the quiz? I worried. This isn't going to affect my report card. Is it?*

Mr. Park said, " Anyone who has one wrong answer, come to the front." I held my breath. *This can't be good.* Seven students including my partner went up to the front.

"Stand in a straight line facing the class." He picked up the wooden yardstick and held it like a baseball bat. "One for every wrong answer," he said. Then, he went down the line whacking the back of the legs of each student once. The hard hit forced some of the kids to take a step forward to balance themselves. My heart thudded above my already queasy stomach.

My partner came back to his seat wearing a grin. He had been in trouble so many times, he seemed unfazed by his punishment. The teacher said, “Those who have two wrong answers come up.” My legs wouldn’t move. With pleading eyes, I begged my partner, *Please don’t rat me out. No one needs to know.* For a moment he looked like he understood me, he wasn’t going to say anything. Then he pointed to me, practically jumping up and down, and said, “Go up! You have two wrong answers.” Then he turned to the class and announced, “She has two wrong answers!” I hated that doofus.

Before this, I’d been called up to the front just once in my entire student career. I was caught talking which was unbelievable because I was an unusually quiet person. I never talked in class. In fact, more than once, I’d been accused of being a mute. The one time I talked to my neighbour, the teacher happened to look my way. In a playful voice, Mr. Park called me up to the front, but I was wary.

He said, “Would you like to go on a helicopter ride?”

I stared at him blankly.

“Say, yes.”

In a barely audible voice I said, “Yes.”

“Stand on your tippy toes.”

When I balanced myself like a prima ballerina, the teacher grabbed the top of my head and spun me like a top. My pleated uniform jumper opened up like a black umbrella with an automatic button. Everyone cracked up, howling like hyenas. How could they laugh? I wouldn't find another person's humiliation funny or entertaining. I had walked back to my desk staring at the floor, their laughter ringing in my red, hot ears.

This time, I stood in a line with two other people. I involuntarily stepped forward with the force of the first impact. Mr. Park waited for me to step back for my second hit with the yardstick. The punishment hurt on the outside and the inside. No one had three or four wrong answers. At least no one else went to the front. The teacher told us to get our quizzes signed by a parent.

When Mom saw the quiz, her face darkened like a storm cloud. "You'll never finish your education properly. Do you know how competitive it is to get into a university? You're going to end up as a *shig-mo*!"

At the market where all kinds of food from fruits and vegetables to live chickens were sold, in-between the stalls, there were moms standing around with their teenage daughters. The daughters were uneducated girls looking for work as a *shig-mo*, a lowly maid-servant; their moms were there to negotiate their wages. That's where Mom found all our past *shig-mo*. None of them lasted long. There was one that got dismissed because she was caught stealing. Another got let go because she had no work experience and didn't know how to clean or cook. Another

one did her work carelessly and read the bible non-stop. I was always sorry to see the young maidservants go. They were teenagers who wanted to play with me and my sisters rather than work. And honestly, who'd want to clean and cook all day. Nope. I would not want to be a *shig-mo*. Perhaps, I could be a *packer* on a school bus. I wouldn't be so mean and push the students. I'd let the kids have seats before I put the standing kids between the seated ones. Maybe the sitters and standers could switch half way through the ride. Then I thought about the constant motion and smell of the bus fumes, and I didn't think I could be a *packer* either. I guessed I had no choice but to be a better student.

Mom went to see Mr. Park about my quiz. They stood near my desk.

“Are the grade threes already learning algebra?” Mom said.

“Yes, they are.”

“My daughter must find the algebra unit difficult to get two wrong answers on the quiz.”

She held the evidence in her hand.

“I covered the lesson,” Mr. Park replied coolly “Perhaps you should get her a tutor if she can’t keep up.”

At home Mom yelled, “We can’t afford private school and a tutor.” I promised I’d try harder and I meant it.

Poor Mom. Even though she had top marks in high school, she didn't get the chance to go to university. Her father had already passed away and there was little money in the house. While working as a kindergarten teacher, she took care of her younger brothers and her mother who suffered a lengthy illness and became bedridden.

Our monthly exam period on the four core subjects was closing in. Twenty-five multiple-choice questions for each subject, which added up to a hundred.

Every night I did the homework that was designed to keep the students busy for hours.

The day of the first exam arrived. I had studied extra hard, but my nerves got the better of me and I doubted my preparedness.

“Pencils down!” Mr. Park said after our first exam, science. I was positive that all my answers were not correct. Instead of collecting the exams as usual, he said, “Trade your paper with the person next to you.” I traded with Doofus who had turned me in for the two wrong answers. “Check marks for correct answers, x’s for wrong answers,” Mr. Park instructed.

Every time, the teacher called out the answer, I looked over to see if I got a check or an x. When I got my first x, I heard a cacophony of all the piano keys being banged at once. A mixture of fear, shame, and desperation filled me. Was this the beginning of the avalanche of wrong answers? *How do I stop this from happening?*

I tapped Doofus on the arm to get his attention. Then, on his paper, I erased the circle around the wrong letter and circled the right one. Doofus nodded, understanding. He did the same correction for my paper. We fixed each other's test glancing up at our teacher, terrified of getting caught. How lucky for us that our teacher was too lazy to mark the papers himself and had us trade. I didn't keep track of how many of my questions Doofus fixed. I didn't want to know. In the end, he showed me my paper with a perfect score of twenty-five. I kept a couple of wrong answers on his paper to make it believable. Doofus was happy with his score.

In the following days, as luck would have it, our teacher made us mark each other's tests for the other three subjects as well. I received perfect scores on those exams also, thanks to Doofus's eraser and pencil. When the last exam papers were collected, we sat back in our chairs, finally able to exhale.

Doofus had been moved next to me only a few weeks ago. Mr. Park, fed up with his shenanigans, ordered him to switch places with the girl who sat next to me. Pointing to me, the teacher had said to Doofus, "Let's hope her goodness and quietness rubs off on you." I was ashamed to know that I had accomplished the opposite. He had been a run-of-the-mill class clown till I dragged him down to the level of a hard-core cheater.

For the first time in my elementary school career, I brought home the mark of one hundred. Mom shot up into the clouds of ecstasy when she saw the perfect score. Immediately,

she started phoning people bragging about my perfect score. She called Dad at work, my aunt, her friends whose names I recognized, then names I didn't recognize.

I knew I had done something dreadfully wrong. I didn't know what to do with myself. Listening to her loud and hyper voice was pure torture. Without thinking, I took a shoestring and tightly tied my ankles together. Then I started bouncing up and down like I was on a pogo stick.

Mom motioned with her hand, not holding the phone receiver, to knock it off. But I kept on jumping higher and higher masking my trembling.

It took a while, but she finally ran out of people to call. She continued to beam. Rays of sunshine blazed out of her head. She was floating. Heat rises. That was on the science exam. I continued jumping.

She observed me for a while. "Why are you doing that?"

"I don't know." My body parts did their own thing to their own rhythms – legs jumping, jumping; heart pounding, pounding; head spinning, spinning.

"You're acting strange. Do you have something to tell me?"

"No," I said, looking all around her, but not at her.

“Did you do anything *wrong*?”

I replied, “No,” a little too quickly and loudly. I started to sweat, but my legs carried on jumping up and down in unison.

“You didn’t... cheat?” Her radiant glow faded. Her feet came back down and touched the ground. A cold front was moving in.

I said, “No,” in a weak, breathless voice.

A much louder “Did you cheat?” Her eyes bored into mine and pinned me to the wall mid jump.

“Yes.”

“How did you cheat?” she asked in a lulling voice that I knew was a trick but I didn’t have any more energy to resist. I told her that my partner and I had fixed each other’s answers.

Her mountainous heat wave of joy and pride turned black and icy sharp. It crashed down on me and it was loud and painful. The yelling and the hitting were more severe than if I had brought home my real exam scores.

I yowled. It was a summons. My sisters came running already crying. Whenever one of us got hit, the other two came and tightly wrapped themselves around the one getting punished. In a frenzy to get the culprit, Mom kept striking as she tried to pull us apart. My sisters refused to let go even though they were now getting most of the fisted hits.

Encased like a slimy center of a mollusk in a bivalved shell, I blubbered that I would not cheat ever again. And I knew I wouldn't. However, this conclusion didn't make me feel better. *Now, what do I do?* Not smart enough to get a perfect score but not gutsy enough to get away with cheating.

At least, for the first time, I had seen Mom proud of me, however short-lived. I knew I wouldn't see her like that again for a long time. Maybe never.

Over the next month, I continued to miss the school bus on a regular basis. I checked my school bag over and over again. I was sure I had everything I was supposed to bring to the classes, but I needed to make sure – one more time.

On our next monthly exam period, Mr. Park told us to mark each other's exams again. Doofus next to me picked up his eraser and looked at me with a grin. I shook my head to tell him that I wouldn't be fixing his paper. He thought I didn't understand him and made exaggerated erasing motions. I shook my head again. In his disappointment, he threw down his eraser and it bounced off his desk. The teacher started to read off the correct answers.

At the end of the school day, I stood in line for the school bus. In my bag were the exam results. I had a few wrong answers in each subject. I looked at the grim faces around me. My parents were not the only ones who insisted on perfect scores. Many of us were in for another round of yelling and hitting. Without a doubt, Mom would tell me once again that I'd only amount to be a *shig-mo*. Dragging my feet, I boarded the school bus for home. As the *packer* led me to my seat, I asked her, "How did you get this job?" I truly wanted to know. I'd rather have her job than be a maid servant. She glared at me and gave me an extra hard shove as she wedged me in between two white keys.

It was a jerky ride. I hated going backwards. The fumes were making me nauseous. And, I didn't want the bus ride to end.