

Once you were told to leave the interrogation room and go back to your cell you might be forgiven for thinking that you'd be able to relax, to let your guard down a bit. But that would be a mistake.

We had to sit on the floor of the cell for hours at a time, shoulders and back ramrod straight. Eyes front, too, directly at the window. The sergeant would bark out a warning if your gaze even threatened to stray from those iron bars, and one older guy actually had a cigarette stubbed out on his eyelids as an example to the rest of us. One of the high school kids inadvertently scratched his neck, once; him, they beat until he lost consciousness and went as limp as a rag doll.

There were close on a hundred of us all told, wedged in so tight you could feel the knees of the guy behind you pressing into the small of your back. We sweated buckets; literally, it was like we'd been caught in a downpour. Our throats were screamingly dry, but we were only given water three times a day, with meals. I remember how savage, how animalistic that thirst was, how I would have jumped at the chance of literally anything to wet my lips, even a splash of urine would have done. And I remember the constant terror of thinking I might accidentally fall asleep. The terror of having a cigarette stubbed out on my eyelid, so vivid I could practically smell the singed flesh.

And the hunger, of course. How persistently it clung on, a translucent sucker attached to the nape of the neck. I remember those moments when, hazy with exhaustion and hunger, it seemed as though that sucker was slowly feeding on my soul.

Three times a day, every day, the meal we were given was exactly the same: a handful of rice, half a bowl of soup, and a few shreds of kimchi. And this was shared between two. The relief I felt when I was partnered with Kim Jin-su says something about the state I'd been reduced to at that point, a brute animal with whatever had once been human having been gradually sucked out. Why was I so relieved? Because he looked like he wouldn't eat much. Because he was pale, with dark shadows around his eyes that made him look like he belonged in a hospital. Because of his empty, lifeless eyes.

A month ago, when I saw his obituary, those eyes were the first things I thought of. Those eyes that used to track my every movement as I fished out a beansprout from the watery soup; that regarded me in silence as I stared with open hatred at any morsel of food that passed his lips, consumed with

the fear that he might take it all for himself; those cold, empty eyes, utterly devoid of anything that could be said to resemble humanity. Just like my own.

## Reflection

### **Conceptual Understanding:**

- How does the narrator's description of life in the cell reflect the dehumanizing effects of their captivity?

### **Stylistic Features:**

- What is the impact of the vivid sensory imagery (e.g., hunger, thirst, and fear) used in the description of the cell conditions?

### **Character Relationships:**

- What does the narrator's reaction to being paired with Kim Jin-su reveal about their mental and emotional state during imprisonment?

### **Symbolism:**

- How might the repeated focus on the "cold, empty eyes" symbolize the loss of humanity in the narrator and those around him?

### **Message and Themes:**

- What does the extract suggest about the psychological toll of survival in inhumane conditions, and how does it challenge the idea of resilience in such situations?