

Slap One

Now begins the process of forgetting the seven slaps. One per day, then it'll be over and done within a week. Today, then, is that first day.

She turns the key in the lock and steps inside her rented room. She removes her shoes and lines them up neatly, then lies down on floor, on her side, without even bothering to unbutton her coat. She rests her left cheek on her folded arms. The right cheek is still swelling. The upward pressure prevents her from opening her right eye properly. The toothache that had begun in her upper molars throbs up to her temples.

After lying in the same position for close on twenty minutes, she gets up. Stripping down to her white underwear, she hangs up her clothes, slides her feet into her slippers and shuffles out to the washroom. A scoop of cold water from the washbowl to splash onto her swollen face. She opens her mouth as far as she can manage, and brushes her teeth so gently it's more like a caress. The phone rings, then cuts off. She dries her wet feet with the towel, and as soon as she steps back into the room the phone rings again. She reaches out to pick up the receiver, then changes her mind and yanks the cord out at the wall.

'What will happen if I answer?' she mumbles to herself, rolling out the thin mattress and cotton quilt. She isn't hungry. She could force herself to eat something, but it would only give her indigestion. It's cold under the quilt, and she huddles into a ball. That phone call just now would have been from the office; perhaps the boss would come over. She would have to answer his questions. *I'm okay, it's just that they hit me. No, only slaps. I can still come to work. I'm okay, I don't need to go to the hospital. My face is a bit swollen, that's all.* Good thing she'd pulled the cord out.

As the quilt's cocoon starts to warm up, she cautiously straightens out. Outside the window, it is six o'clock and already dark. The light from the street lamp glows dully orange through a section of the glass. Once her tension has dissipated a little thanks to the warmth and her comfortable position, she turns her mind to the task at hand.

Now, how am I going to forget the first slap?

When the man struck her the first time, she didn't make a sound. Neither did she cringe away in anticipation of the next slap. Rather than jumping up from her seat, hiding under the interrogation room's table, or running to the door, she waited quietly, holding her breath. Waited for the man to stop, to stop hitting her. The second time, the third time, even the fourth time she told herself would surely be the last. Only when the palm of his hand came flying towards her face for the fifth time did she think, *he's not going to stop, he's just going to keep on hitting me*. After the sixth time, she wasn't thinking anything any more. She'd stopped counting. But when the last slap had been delivered and the man plumped down across the table from her, lolling against the back of the folding chair, she silently added another two to her mental tally. Seven.

His face was utterly ordinary. Thin lips, no noticeable irregularities to his features. He wore a pale yellow shirt with a wide collar, and his grey suit trousers were held up by a belt. Its buckle gleamed. Had they met by chance in the street, she would have taken him for some run-of-the-mill company manager or section chief.

'Bitch. A bitch like you, in a place like this? Anything could happen, and no one would find out.'

At this point, the force of the slap had already burst the capillaries in her cheek, and the man's fingernails had broken her skin. But Eun-sook hadn't known that yet. She stared blankly across at the man's face. 'Listen to what I'm telling you, if you don't want to die in some ditch where not even the rats and crows will find you. Tell me where that bastard is.'

Conceptual Questions

1. How does the concept of "forgetting" the slaps function in Eun-sook's coping mechanism, and what does this reveal about her psychological state?
2. What does the description of Eun-sook's routine after the interrogation suggest about her struggle to reclaim normalcy in her life?

Stylistic Questions

3. How does the author use imagery, particularly related to Eun-sook's physical pain, to convey the lingering effects of violence? Provide examples.
4. What is the effect of the author describing the interrogator as "utterly ordinary," and how does this contribute to the critique of power and violence?

Message and Broader Implications

5. In the context of this extract, how does the text critique power structures and the dehumanization involved in interrogation?

Bonus Discussion Question

Why does Eun-sook consciously avoid answering the phone, and how does this detail symbolize her attempt to maintain control amidst chaos?