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## The Jumping Festival

Joseph Han

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### The Jumping Festival

Tae-woo stood on the ledge behind the Dora Observatory's row of binoculars. No one paid him any mind since he was long dead. Tae-woo looked more like an outline, his body becoming opaque, waning like his spirit. Had he not found a living relative, Tae-woo could only get this far. A European tourist standing right under him, using the pair of binoculars between his legs, yelped when he found the propaganda village. Tae-woo swung his foot through the tourist's head. He bent over and farted in his face. The tourist crinkled his nose and waved his hand, probably wondering where the odd smell came from, perhaps it was the wind coming from the landscape ahead. Tae-woo hated the people who visited the DMZ. Folks from all around the world who got a cheap thrill from the proximity of being so close to North Korea. Tae-woo was close too. He couldn't fall forward. He could never breach the DMZ no matter how many occasions he tried.

When he died, Tae-woo woke up outside of his body, panting and clutching his heart after having fallen through the chair in his booth. In the final years of his life, he worked as a parking attendant in a lot for a nearby megachurch where people paid weekly for their tickets into heaven, a fare to get out of the garage. Tae-woo's body slumped over the controls for the gate arm. A driver nearest the booth screamed at Tae-woo, believing he had fallen asleep while drivers in the far back honked at the hold up. Dying was painful, if only for that moment. He tried to slip back into his body by molding his new form into its former. He swatted at his head—his hand passed through. He would have preferred nothing to this.

Tae-woo exited the booth and walked through the gate arm, figuring this meant he could walk back home to the north which, upon first arriving to the DMZ, proved false. At the border, his face smacked right into an invisible wall.

In a second attempt, he generated some momentum from a far enough distance, believing he could run right through.

A magnetic force repelled him upon impact, in a burst that sent him flying further back each time he tried to run faster.

He pounded on the wall and sobbed. The wall only invisible until he came into contact with it, vibrating with an electric ripple from each impact that seemed to sting the wall and Tae-woo both. Tae-woo wondered if the family he left behind all that time ago had ever tried to do the same: if they ever went down, near where he stood then, to find him. Tae-woo knew he had been long forgotten, and rightly so.

This didn't deter him from trying. After all, he believed they were all dead at this point, and if not, he could at least spend his time searching for an indication of how they had lived.

His first wife. His son.

But he was weak. Most ghosts from South Korea, their spirits fed, could interact with the physical



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world if strong enough. Tae-woo spent months walking along the DMZ to get acquainted with the wall. When light hit the wall from a certain angle, it shimmered the faintest blue. On the day Tae-woo could've sworn he saw a bird fly right over what looked like a line at the top of the wall, he asked a new friend, Young-sik, to join him on an excursion. Young-sik was from South Korea. Moved by Tae-woo's determination, he entertained Tae-woo's theory that the wall had its limit.

Young-sik picked up a rock, Tae-woo's eyes widening as it lifted off the ground. Young-sik braced himself to throw it like a shot put as high as he could.

The rock barely made it above their heads and landed with a thump, dropping like Tae-woo's heart.

After years of trying to find an entry point, after years of convincing more of the dead—those from the north, who had similar aspirations to return, and those from the south, who had relatives in the north and wanted to help—assembled as a group at the DMZ. The dead gathered around Tae-woo, whispering among themselves, nodding. They looked up to Tae-woo, their faces bright with hope; the sun shined through them. At the end of his speech, Tae-woo explained, as Young-sik stood firm and held him high:

They needed to get as tall as possible—and assemble a tower.

The dead men sitting on the shoulders of men, wobbling at first until they found balance. Five huddled in a circle at the base, and another five climbed onto their shoulders. Five more, and so on. The dead women came along to watch, wondering how the stacking was even possible. They laughed as they watched the dead men struggle, all led by the biggest dead fool of them all, the King Fool, they joked, admiring Tae-woo's conviction.

No one believed it would work, but they also hoped for a miracle, a sign that it would be possible. Tae-woo climbed the tower of dead men, who grunted as he stepped on their shoulders, mumbling and cussing to themselves about why they weren't the ones climbing.

Tae-woo reached the top of the stack and steadied himself on the shoulders of Young-sik, who stuck with him from the beginning—who got on his knees to help his friend. At first, they thought Tae-woo would just fall right through Young-sik, but when Tae-woo lifted off and they stood at the height of two, they ran around laughing like boys.

He would just need to jump over to the other side. The wind howled around him. Tae-woo leaped forward. The whole tower fell backward, the dead tumbling over the dead as they piled and cussed on the ground.

For a moment, Tae-woo felt that he would make it.

He hit the wall, a loud zap, and crashed below.

What became known as the Jumping Festival took place every year; Tae-woo was convinced the tower just needed to be taller.

Every year the dead came to watch, marveling at how much taller the tower became, spectators leaning forward in anticipation as Tae-woo made his long climb. The more the dead fell, the more annoyed festival participants felt about this foolish plan, and the shorter the tower became until even his closest friend walked away, shaking his head after tossing a rock to Tae-woo that slipped right through his hand.

Most of the dead ceased being dead when they were forgotten down to the bone, by the living and themselves. They tried to hold meetings where the dead could tell their stories with hopes that the

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dead could remember one another. Every story felt familiar, familial, down to the bone until they were forgotten down to dust.

The reality was that Tae-woo died on this side; by the politics of the living and the laws of the dead, he could not be dead on the other side and return home. Tae-woo was not a bird at all.

