

# *The Möbius Strip*

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Translated by

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THE MATHEMATICS TEACHER entered the classroom. The students noticed that he hadn't brought the textbook. They trusted this teacher. In this school he was the only teacher to have won the students' trust.

"Gentlemen," he began. "This has been a challenging year. You've really put your heart into your studies, all of you. And so for this last class I'd like to talk about something that's not related to the college entrance exam. I've been looking through some books and I found something I'd like to share with you. Let me start by putting it to you in the form of a question: Two boys have just finished cleaning a chimney. One of them comes down with his face black as night. The other comes down without a trace of soot. Now, gentlemen, which of the boys do you suppose will wash his face?"

The students looked up at their teacher standing on the podium at the head of the classroom. None was quick to answer.

After a momentary silence one of the students rose.

"The one with the dirty face."

"I'm afraid not," said the teacher.

"Why not?" asked another student.

The teacher explained. "Two boys come down the chimney, one

with a clean face, one with a dirty face. The boy with the dirty face sees the boy with the clean face and decides his face is clean, too. And the boy with the clean face sees the boy with the dirty face and decides his face is dirty, too.”

The students gasped in surprise. Every pair of eyes remained fixed on the teacher standing on the podium.

“Let’s try it a second time: Two boys have just finished cleaning a chimney. One of them comes down with his face black as night. The other comes down without a trace of soot. Now, gentlemen, which of the boys do you suppose will wash his face?”

The very same question. This time a student immediately rose.

“Now we know. The boy with the clean face.”

The students waited expectantly for the teacher to respond.

“No, that’s wrong.”

“Why?”

“You won’t have to answer that question again, so please listen carefully. Two boys, together, cleaned the very same chimney. And so it’s not possible that one of them had a clean face and the other a dirty face.”

The teacher now took up some chalk and wrote “Möbius strip” on the chalkboard.

“Gentlemen, this is something you know from your textbook. But it’s not related to the college entrance exam either, so just relax and listen to what I’m about to say. Now a surface can be inner or outer. For example—paper has a front and a back; the earth has an interior and an exterior. If you take a plain sheet of paper and cut away a long rectangular strip, then paste the two ends of that strip together, you get the same thing—an inner and an outer surface. But if you give that strip of paper a twist and *then* paste the ends together, you can no longer distinguish inner from outer. What you have now is a single curved surface. And this, gentlemen, is the Möbius strip you know so well from your textbook. Now I’d like you to think about this curved surface that has no separate interior and exterior.”

Squatlegs entered the bean field. In the lingering daylight he was able to pick several fully ripe stalks. There were weeds everywhere. Holding

the stalks in his armpit, Squatlegs scooted along between the furrows on hands and crippled legs. It was so quiet he could almost hear the seeds falling from the weeds. Bean field? More like a weed field. Squatlegs came out on the ocher-colored dirt road and took the beanstalks in his hand. He smelled the burning wood, a good smell. The sky had begun to darken. The wood he had set ablaze before venturing into the bean field now burned bright red. He placed a piece of sheet metal over the fire, then shelled the beans and roasted them. The wood was bone dry and burned with scarcely a wisp of smoke. Just a few hours before, this wood had been part of Humpback's veranda.

They had torn down Humpback's house, the men with the sledgehammers. They had pulverized one of the walls, then stepped back, and the north-facing roof had simply collapsed. That was all they had to do to his house. Humpback had been sitting where the prince's-feather grew beside the poplar tree. He had risen and gazed at the sky. His wife and their four children were picking the ears of corn left for seed on the cornstalks bordering their yard. Before the men with the sledgehammers moved to the next house they had watched the woman and children in silence. The woman and children hadn't opposed the men, they hadn't cried. The men had found this disturbing.

Night was falling. Squatlegs heard from the fields the whisper of wings—a spiraling flock of goatsuckers hunting insects. He continued to shell beans onto the piece of sheet metal. He enjoyed the smell of the wood burning, the beans roasting. People passed along the other side of the lake—a group of laborers working on the new apartments. Squatlegs watched as their silhouettes cut across the field beside the lake and on toward the bus stop.

Listening for Humpback's footsteps he removed the piece of sheet metal from the fire. Still no sign of him. Humpback's wife, their oldest boy, the other children—they'd exercised self-restraint, all of them. Squatlegs chewed on a cooked bean. Humpback's veranda was burning briskly. The others in the neighborhood hadn't restrained themselves. They had clutched at the men with the sledgehammers and wailed. They believed they wouldn't be held responsible if they acted as a group. They had seized one of the men with the sledgehammers and

had kicked and butted him. Minutes later the man rose, bleeding. He shook his fist at them and spit the blood collecting in his mouth. His front teeth were broken and bloody.

When the men with the sledgehammers had approached, Squatlegs had made way for them, pointing out his house. He had withdrawn to the side of the road where the cosmos were in full bloom and there he had sat. His wife and children hadn't been as composed as Humpback's family. His wife had squatted behind their pump and shielded her face with the hem of her soiled skirt. Beside her the children had kept rubbing their teary eyes. In no time the roof and walls were leveled, leaving only dust.

Squatlegs heard Humpback's footsteps. Humpback appeared with a plastic container and set it down away from the fire. The container was filled with gasoline. He had toted this heavy container for two or three miles along the darkening road. Where the road ended at a vacant lot, people were peddling worm medicine wrapped in aluminum foil.

The tonic peddlers drove around in an old junker purchased from an auto graveyard. Inside were lauan timbers, hard rocks, beer bottles, spikes, knives with long blades honed to a fine edge. These were the tools of trade of the man they called The Master. This man could break a rock or a beer bottle with the chop of a hand, he could snap a lauan timber in two, with his teeth he could draw out a spike driven so deep into wood that the head was bent. When he strapped the blade of one of the knives to his palm with nylon cord, pressed the tip to his stomach, and then released it, people had the sensation that their body tissues, skin and all, were being shredded by the blade. But The Master was unscathed.

The Master's strength was awesome. Humpback had obtained the gasoline from The Master. He had closely observed the interior of the car. Squatlegs noticed Humpback looking back toward their village, now veiled in darkness. Humpback hunched down and Squatlegs pushed the piece of sheet metal toward him. Humpback put a bean to his mouth but instead of eating it he spoke in an undertone.

"What's that?"

"Hmm?"

“I thought I heard something.”

For a second the two of them held their breath.

“Birds,” said Squatlegs. “Goatsuckers flying around for food.”

“At night?”

“They sleep during the day. Stick to the trees and sleep.”

Humpback put back the bean he was about to eat. Squatlegs watched as he lit a cigarette with trembling hands.

“What’s the matter?” asked Squatlegs.

“Nothing.”

“Scared?”

“Nothing to be scared of.”

“If you don’t feel up to it, go on back.”

Humpback shook his head. His children were asleep in the tent. Before going to sleep they had made a fire in front of the tent. Squatlegs’ children had contributed their kitchen door to the flames. The door was in pieces, couldn’t be sold.

It was pitch black inside the tent. The village people standing in front of the fire had gone their separate ways and the troubled land where once their houses had stood was draped in darkness. Some of the grown-ups had made their way toward a hazy column of light.

A car was parked in the vacant lot in front of the checkpoint manned by the night guards. Inside the car a man looked over some documents along with notarized impressions of personal seals. The man passed money out through the window. The people who had given him the documents squatted in front of the car and counted the money.

Squatlegs returned the piece of scrap metal to the fire and shelled more beans onto it. He would have been happier if Humpback had at least eaten some of them. These last few days he hadn’t seen Humpback eat a thing.

“About time he left, isn’t it?” Humpback asked. The cigarette, mostly ash, hung from his fingertips.

“Yeah,” said Squatlegs. “Don’t let him kill me. This guy is fat as a pig. If he gets on top of me, he’ll smother me.”

“Then why did you tell me to go home?”

“If you go home, I’ll have to come up with another plan.”

“Another plan?”

“Forget it.”

Squatlegs looked around. His field of vision was screened by the apartments. The dark skeletons of the buildings filled the expanse from east to west. Humpback scooped sand onto the fire. Squatlegs removed the piece of sheet metal, then looked on, mute, until the other had put out the fire. With the last ember covered, gloom enveloped the surroundings.

Humpback said, “His lights are on.”

Squatlegs looked toward the village. The car’s headlights swirled in the evening sky, then slowly moved toward them.

Squatlegs pushed the piece of sheet metal toward Humpback.

“Eat.”

Humpback kicked it into the bean field. Container of gasoline in hand, he started walking. Squatlegs followed quickly. Water had gathered in a large hollow in the road. There were two stepping stones, and Humpback hopped across, feeling his way. He waited. Squatlegs avoided the puddle, scooting over the roadside weeds until he came to where Humpback was standing. He sat himself squarely in the middle of the road. He produced a length of electric cord from each pocket and displayed them both to his friend. Humpback nodded, crossed to the right side of the road, and hid himself in the bean field. Silence lay in every direction and Squatlegs grew fearful. He felt like talking to his friend.

“Did you find out the going price today?”

“Yeah,” came Humpback’s disembodied voice.

“How much?”

“Three hundred eighty thousand *wŏn*.”

Squatlegs no longer felt like talking.

“Look there,” came Humpback’s voice from the bean field.

Squatlegs saw two columns of light approaching, churning the evening sky. He closed his eyes. All that remained of the bright lights was thick gloom on his retina. He didn’t budge—not when the car entered the puddle, not when the horn sounded. The bumper pushed up

against his chin and finally the car stopped. Curses poured out from the man inside.

Humpback hugged the ground.

The man emerged from the car. Still blinded by the headlights, Squatlegs pivoted to the side and squinted up at the man.

“What do you think you’re doing!”

Squatlegs mumbled something in a small voice.

The man bent down.

“What?”

“I want to die,” said Squatlegs. “Run me over—pretend I’m not here.”

The man had to hunch down beside Squatlegs to make out what he was saying.

“What the hell for? There has to be a reason.”

“You remember me?”

“Sure. You sold me your right of possession.”

“Yes. For a hundred and sixty thousand *wǒn*.”

“You have a problem with that? I gave you ten thousand more than you would have gotten from the city.”

“No. No problem at all,” said Squatlegs. “We used it to pay back the deposit to the people who rented from us.”

The man said, “Fine. Now get out of the road.”

Squatlegs turned his face away.

“Now that we’ve given away that money, there’s nothing left.”

“You didn’t have enough money for an apartment, so you sold your right of possession. What’s the point?”

“Did you see what happened to our house?”

“Yeah, I saw.” The man’s voice now had an edge to it.

“Our house is gone.” Still the same small voice. “You owe me another two hundred thousand, mister.”

“What!”

“Just because I don’t know much doesn’t mean you can get away with what you did. You bought something worth three-eighty for one-sixty, then sold it for a two-twenty profit. You can’t do that. Give me two hundred thousand, and you’ve still got twenty thousand for yourself. And don’t forget—you bought up everyone’s right of possession.”

The man rose.

“Move! Or else I’ll do it for you.”

“Be my guest.”

For the briefest instant Squatlegs lost his presence of mind. The man’s shoes had struck him in the chest. Instinctively, Squatlegs clutched and hung to the shoes that kept coming at him. But he was too weak. The man pummeled his face with heavy fists, then hurled him easily into a patch of grass.

Knocked practically upside down, Squatlegs tried to crawl back onto the road. The man noticed and turned toward his car. He would have to get by this obstacle before it regrouped.

He bent over to climb inside. And then a dark shadow slammed into the pit of his stomach. The man’s large body slumped to the ground. Humpback, emerging from his hiding place in the field, had kicked the man with murderous force.

“I’ll give you the money!” the man wanted to say. But he couldn’t speak. Humpback had already taped his mouth shut. Nor could he move. He was tied fast with the electric cord. The man watched Humpback help Squatlegs past the front of the car. Squatlegs’ face, revealed in the headlights, was a bloody mess. Humpback wiped it for him. Squatlegs was weeping.

“Was it fun watching me get laid out like that?” said Squatlegs. “What took you so long? You wanted to see me get laid out, didn’t you?”

“Knock it off,” said Humpback as he turned and walked toward the car. “We have to get this guy into the car. And we need to find his briefcase.”

“All right, load him in.”

The man thrashed about, then lay quiet, exhausted.

Humpback climbed in and the two columns of light slanting across the evening sky vanished. He cut the engine. The black briefcase was beneath the seat on the driver’s side.

Outside, Squatlegs had propped the man up in a sitting position. Humpback emerged from the car, took the man around the waist, and stood him up. The two friends walked the man to his car and sat him in the driver’s seat.



Squatlegs said, "Let me sit next to him."

Humpback lifted Squatlegs and set him in the passenger seat. He himself climbed in back and opened the black briefcase. The man watched silently.

Humpback said, "Money and papers."

"Let me see."

The man realized that Squatlegs and Humpback had found everything.

Squatlegs rummaged through the briefcase. "He's already sold ours."

The man blinked.

"Look some more."

"He's got our names written down in a notebook. And some of the names are crossed out—must be the ones he sold."

Squatlegs looked hard at the man. The man nodded.

"For three hundred and eighty thousand—right?"

Again the man nodded.

Humpback said, "Count the money."

Squatlegs began counting. He produced two piles of exactly two hundred thousand *wõn* each.

"Our money," he said.

The man nodded once more. He watched as Squatlegs passed one of the piles to his friend in the back seat.

Squatlegs' hands trembled. As did Humpback's. Their hearts pounded.

Squatlegs unbuttoned his shirt, put the money in an inside pocket, then buttoned the shirt and tidied it. Humpback put his share in the outer right-hand pocket of his shirt. His clothes had no inner pockets.

With the money accounted for, Humpback recalled what he had to do the following day. Likewise with Squatlegs. His children were asleep in the tent.

Squatlegs said, "Fetch me that container." In his hand was the remaining length of electric cord.

Humpback found the plastic container in the bean field. He watched the face of his friend. Watched it to the exclusion of everything else. Then he set off toward the village. The night was unusually quiet. Not

a point of light could be seen. He couldn't even tell where the village lay. By and by he paused and listened hard, wondering if Squatlegs was scooting along behind.

Squatlegs ought to be curling himself up and dropping out of the car. He ought to be closing the door with a *thunk*, putting his hands quickly to work, and scooting out onto the other soil of the road now layered with darkness.

As he walked along, Humpback thought of his own normal pace and of how fast Squatlegs could go when his hands worked quickly.

Arriving at the village, Humpback proceeded to what remained of an out-of-the-way house and pressed down on the handle of a pump. He cupped the water in his palms and moistened his lips. He felt the outside pocket of his shirt. Squatlegs was scooting toward him, breathing hard. Humpback met him, looked into his face; it was hard to make out in the gloom.

Squatlegs reeked of gasoline. Humpback worked the pump and washed Squatlegs' face. Face smarting, Squatlegs closed his eyes. But the pain was nothing. He thought about the money inside his shirt and what he had to do the following day. From the far end of the dirt road flames shot up. His friend tried to rise and Squatlegs sat him back down.

Humpback's family certainly had restrained themselves when the men with the sledgehammers arrived. His own family hadn't been as composed. Squatlegs didn't like his friend jerking up like that. He himself was startled by the explosion. But presently it was over. The distant flames subsided, the boom of the explosion died out.

Darkness, silence enveloped the two men. Humpback set out. Squatlegs followed.

"Lots of things to buy," said Squatlegs. "A motorbike, a pull-cart, and a popper. All you have to do is drive. Then nobody has to see me scooting around anymore."

Squatlegs waited for his friend's reaction. But Humpback had nothing to say.

"What's up?" Squatlegs caught up with Humpback and grabbed his pantleg. "Hey, what's up with you?"

“Nothing.”

“Scared?” Squatlegs asked.

“No way,” said Humpback. “But it’s weird. I’ve never felt like this before.”

“Then everything’s fine.”

“No, it isn’t.”

Squatlegs had never heard his friend speak in such calm tones.

“I’m not going with you,” said Humpback.

“What!”

“I said I’m not going with you.”

“What’s this all of a sudden? Look, tomorrow we’ll go to Samyang-dong or Köyö-dong. Lots of vacant rooms there. We get the families settled and then we go around with the popper. Once we buy the motorbike we can go anywhere. Remember the time we went to Karhyön-dong? All the families who turned out with stuff to pop? We had the popper working nonstop till nine o’clock. It wasn’t the popcorn they wanted. They just got to thinking about the old days and decided to bring the kids out. All we need to do is find a place like that. Every few days we’ll bring home a pile of money that’ll make the little woman’s mouth drop. So what’s on your mind?”

“I reckon I’ll go with The Master.”

“That tonic peddler?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You’re out of your mind. How much peddling you figure to do at your age?”

“Not too many people are perfect. He’s one of them. He does that scary routine with the knife to draw a crowd, works himself to the bone peddling, and lives on the proceeds. That worm medicine he sells is the real thing. And he knows my physical condition is an added attraction.” And after a pause: “The thing that scares me is your state of mind.”

“I get the message. Go, then. I’m not going to stop you. But remember, I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Sooner or later, though,” Humpback said, turning back, “we have to find a solution.”

Squatlegs heard only footsteps as darkness enveloped his friend. Before long the footsteps were gone as well. He scooted off in search of the tent where his children were sleeping. He clenched his jaws so he wouldn't cry. But tears streamed unchecked from his eyes. Another long night—when would it end?

The teacher rested his hands on the lectern. He spoke to the students.

“Ask yourselves whether there exists a solid whose inner and outer parts can't be distinguished. Imagine a solid where you can't divide inner and outer—a Möbius-type solid. The universe—infinite, endless—we can't seem to tell its inside from its outside. This simple Möbius strip conceals many truths. I'm confident, gentlemen, that you'll give some thought to why I brought up the chimney story and the Möbius strip in this, your last class. It will gradually become clear to you that human knowledge is often put to extraordinarily evil uses. Soon you'll be in college and there you will learn much more. Make absolutely sure, gentlemen, that you never compromise your knowledge for the sake of self-interest. I've tried to teach you according to the standard curriculum, but I've also tried to teach you to see things correctly. I think it's time now for you to test yourselves on how my efforts have turned out. So how about a simple goodbye and let's leave it at that.”

The class monitor sprang to his feet.

“Attention! . . . Salute!”

The teacher returned the students' bows, stepped down from the podium, and left the classroom.

The winter sun slanted down and the classroom grew dark.