

A close-up, profile photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a vibrant red long-sleeved shirt. She is resting her chin on her hand and looking off to the side with a contemplative expression. The background is a soft, out-of-focus greyish-blue.

**STARS
BETWEEN
THE SUN
AND MOON**

ONE WOMAN'S
LIFE IN
NORTH KOREA
AND ESCAPE
TO FREEDOM

**LUCIA JANG AND
SUSAN McCLELLAND**

STARS *between*
the **SUN** *and* **MOON**

ONE WOMAN'S LIFE IN NORTH KOREA
AND ESCAPE TO FREEDOM

LUCIA JANG *and* SUSAN McCLELLAND



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For my three sons, so that they may understand their history and their mother's love for them.

For Soohyun Nam, who sat between Susan McClelland and me nearly every Saturday morning for a year, to translate my story.

And finally, for the numerous, nameless North Koreans who attempted to escape to freedom and life, and perished on their journey before they could reach their destination, each with a story filled with as much heartache and pain as well as hope and love as my own.

—Lucia Jang

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Prologue

DEAR TAEBUM,

I am looking at you now, as you sleep in the crib in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. My eyes are trained on your stomach as you inhale and exhale. I have never prayed before, but now I feel compelled to do so. I raise my hands the way I saw a South Korean man do in China, a man who wore a cross around his neck and whose home smelled of lavender incense and melting candle wax. I close my eyes, then stop before I can say a single word. You've made a strange sound. I fix the thin sheet around your weak and tired body, and then relax. Your face is calm again.

Taebum, there is so much I want to tell you. You are only a few months old, and I want you to grow wise so that these memories I have decided to place in a diary reach you. I want you to understand the forces that nearly destroyed us, and the force that I now know has kept us alive: love. You were never supposed to live. From the moment you were conceived, no one wanted you: your father, his family, China, the country where you were conceived or Chosun, the country where you were born. There was a forest of people trying to prevent your coming into this world. Even my mother, my *umma*, wanted me to be rid of you.

Back before you knew life, when I was in the prison camp and I knew the Party would force me to abort the child I was carrying, I began to sing a song. A light snow had begun to fall, but when I stood close to the window in my cell, I saw sun on a cloudless day. Through the chill that had consumed my body since I fled Chosun, I felt heat. I closed my eyes. "*Jjanghago haeddulnal Doraondanda*," I sang softly. "A bright sunny day is to come back."

I sang another song in my mind when I lifted you above my head in that plastic bag Abuji, my father, had made for you: the song of the Flower Girl, from the film I had loved so much in my youth. The bag protected you from the cold water and concealed you from the border guards who would have shot us both if they had seen. Only your face was visible, so you could breathe. I carried you across the Tumen River to China. I carried you in my arms here to Mongolia.

I have no idea what life will bring you, my son. We are about to be sent to South Korea, where we will be given an apartment and a new, safe existence. When you are older, I want you to read these words, even though they reveal many things about your mother. I will not hide the truth from you. In the midst of all that I endured I saw the sun, I felt its warmth. You will likely never set foot on the soil of your homeland. Nevertheless, I want you to understand the Chosun that is your soul.

Part One

Chapter One

MY MOTHER RARELY smiled. But when she did, her head would tilt to one side, her crimson-coloured lips parted slightly and her black pupils danced against the pearls of her eyes.

One time when this happened, we were sitting in our front yard, overlooking the crops of corn, beans and potatoes near our home in the small city of Yuseon.

“Daughter,” she whispered, pulling me into her arms. The smell of her body mixed with the chamomile scent from the *deulgukhwa* that had bloomed early and through which we had been walking. It was my fourth birthday, on the fifth day of the fifth month. As was customary, I had had a bowl of white rice for my morning meal to celebrate.

My mother stroked her belly, which was swollen. Her second child was due, she had told me, in the tenth month of this year.

“I am all yours for a little while longer, then you will have to share me,” she said. Her eyelashes reminded me of the wings of the tiger butterflies I saw in the mornings as they floated around the azaleas in the garden. “I want to tell you many things,” she continued. “I just don’t know where to begin.”

“Umma, I want to know what ‘I love you’ means.” I smiled, relaxing into her arms, feeling her hard stomach against my back. “I heard Abuji say this to you once.”

“Hmm. I will tell you. But before I begin, I beg you not to tell others,” she said quietly.

“I promise,” I said, my gaze falling on some sparrows nearby.

I can’t remember all of what my mother said next, Taebum, since I was only a small child at the time. But she told me many stories from my childhood years later and as I grew older, and I will recount some of them for you here.

“MY FAMILY, YOUR ancestors, come from a northern province in Chosun,” my mother began. “I grew up in a small cement house with my two sisters and three brothers. I was the eldest. I was the bravest. I was . . .” her words trailed off for a moment. “The most outgoing. I danced my way to school. I sang songs not only about our great father and eternal president, Kim Il-sung, but about flowers and cloud smiling children. Of course I sang songs from the Soviet Union, too. We all did.”

She smiled. “The darkness comes over the garden,” she sang for me in her perfect soprano voice. “Even the light has gone to sleep. The night in the suburbs that I love. The nights in the suburbs of Moscow.” I loved to sit with my mother and listen to her in this way.

“By the time I was twenty,” she continued, “I was a much sought after bride in the city of Hoeryong, where we lived. Men from all over Chosun came to Hoeryong to find their wives because Kim Il-sung’s first wife, Lady Kim Jeong-suk, was from there.”

“Like Abuji!” I said eagerly. I knew my father had been born in Yuseon. “He went all the way there to find you!”

“Yes,” my mother hissed softly, like I imagined one of the tiny green snakes I’d seen in the hills might do. “But there was another man before your father. A military man. With a straighter back than mine and thick shoulders. He was so handsome in his uniform, but he left me with a sinking feeling. I knew we would always remain apart.”

“Umma, what is the matter?” I asked, seeing the sadness in my mother’s face.

She ignored my question. “I was always called a pretty girl. I had many friends and I loved to sing but I was never interested in boys. I sang and played the flute at the community centre. After one of my performances, a military man came backstage and said his friend wanted to meet me.

“The year was 1960. I met that military man, and he and his friend and I continued to meet every night following my performances for many months. The man told me I sang like a nightingale. After some time, I knew the day was approaching when he would ask his family if he could marry me. I also knew that before they could say yes, I would have to submit to them a full list of my relatives to show that I came from a patriotic family. A good man, like this man, could only marry a woman loyal to the regime. But I would never be that woman, Sunhwa. I had family members, an uncle and my grandfather, who had fled to the south by ship at the end of the war. My grandfather had helped some American army men who came to the north in search of communists. After the war, the regime started killing anyone who sympathized with the Americans, the enemy. My uncle and grandfather went south to save themselves.”

Having a relative leave Chosun for South Korea was the worst thing that could befall a family, she explained seeing my puzzled look.

“I learned this the day I decided to join the political Party and become a *dangwon*. I believed that would show the military man that I was dedicated to the regime and ready to marry him. That day, I put on my best white *jeogori* along with a black *chima* and *pyunlihwass*, and powdered my face. I planned to meet the military man that night after my performance and tell him what I had done.

“On my way out the door, my father stopped me. ‘Ah, Hyesoon,’ he moaned. ‘Sit down.’ He waved to the floor beside the table, where his morning rice was still steaming in a bowl. ‘We need to talk.’”

“He sat facing me, wringing his hands. His forehead was perspiring, I noticed, despite it being cool inside our home. I was impatient, my fingers tapping my knees.

‘You cannot become a Party member, a *dangwon*,’ he said stiffly.

“In that moment, hearing his words, I felt as if I had been thrown a thousand *li* backwards.

“‘You have relatives in the south,’ my father said, hanging his head. ‘The Party won’t let you join. Why do you think we live here, in a house with no heat, so far from the capital, sharing two rooms among all of us? It’s all because your uncle and grandfather fled and are no longer here.’”

My mother sighed, looking off into the distance. “I understood then that only a man who also had a relative disloyal to the regime would take me as a wife. This military man would never be my husband. In this land, where snows blanket the earth for five months a year, choosing a husband for love was a gift that would never warm me.”

My mother stopped suddenly. She clasped my hand and pulled me to my feet. We stood watching my father walk up the road toward us in his dark cotton shirt, buttoned at the collar, and matching pants, the same outfit my mother and all our adult neighbours wore. His big black boots made his legs appear heavier than they really were. As he drew near, I could see that his cheeks were red from the wind. His coarse hair was tangled, as if a bird had used it for a nest.

“Remember, what I have told you is our secret,” my mother said as she brushed off grass stuck to my navy-blue cotton pants.

“I want to know the ending, Umma,” I begged.

“Later. Now we must go. Your grandmother is visiting. She may have brought some extra rice with her.”

“CHANGWOON, UH WATNYA?—Are you here?” my grandmother called out, hearing the door open to our house.

I was stopped in the hallway by her cool stare as she and my grandfather approached. My father stepped up beside me.

“*Abuji, nae wassugguma*,” he said. “Father, I am here.” This is how we greeted people in Chosun.

I looked into my grandmother’s well-lined face. Her lips were so tiny that whenever she wore lipstick, part of the paint bled onto her yellowing skin. “Can I have a candy?” I blurted.

My grandmother reached into her canvas bag, passed my mother a head of cabbage and some white rice, then held her empty hands out in front of her. "I don't have any," she said.

My father's sister and her family lived nearby and now, as I peered around my grandmother and grandfather, I could see my cousin Heeok. Heeok had big brown eyes and a square body that made him look like a cement block. Like me, like all the children we knew, her hair was cut short by her mother who trimmed it each month with heavy iron scissors.

Heeok's eyes grew large when she spotted me, and she made a show of chewing. She had a candy I could see it when she opened her mouth.

"But what about her? What is she eating?" I asked my grandmother, defiantly pointing at Heeok.

"I only had one candy, and we visited her first," my grandmother said. I looked pleadingly into Heeok's eyes as she stepped up beside me.

"Why do you always get things I don't?" I whispered.

She just smirked.

That afternoon, for our main meal of the day, we had a few extra spoonfuls of rice with our kimchi. I shovelled the food into my mouth, not stopping until my bowl was empty. I knew my behaviour was not polite and my father might hit me with the broom as later punishment for being rude to visitors. But I was starving. My stomach grumbled even in its sleep. Often, on the day my mother brought home our sparse government rations of white rice, mixed brown rice and other grains, sugar, noodles, and vegetables, I would sit on the floor and devour the noodles uncooked. My mother would squint her eyes, pucker up her lips and shake her head, meaning I was in trouble. She assumed that expression now.

When we were finished our meal, my grandmother announced that her youngest daughter, my father's sister, Youngrahn, would be arriving at our home the next day. "She will stay for a few months, to help you until the baby is born," my grandmother told my mother sternly.

My mother's shoulders slumped, and her eyelids drooped. "I am honoured that Youngrahn will stay here," she replied. It was the polite response, but I knew she was not happy. Even at my young age I had seen on earlier visits Youngrahn was spoiled and demanding.

YOUNGRAHN BREEZED INTO our house the next morning. She threw her coat on the floor in the room where my parents and I slept on cotton mats. "When I start university in a few months, I will get lots of food. The government knows I will need more food than to help me think," she boasted to my mother and me. "Speaking of food, I'm hungry now."

My mother hung my aunt's coat on a hook on the wall, then headed outside. I heard the creak of the wooden lid that covered the hole in the ground where we stored goat's milk and vegetables. When my mother returned, she began preparing some porridge.

My aunt dug a small mirror from her black leather purse and started to apply cream and pink powder to her face.

"Can I do that too?" I asked, placing one of my hands on her shoulder. She flinched and pushed me away.

"No," she snapped. "This is for grown-ups. But I'll tell you a secret," she said, lowering her voice so my mother wouldn't hear. "Your mother was the most beautiful woman anyone had ever seen when she was young. You might be beautiful too, when you get older."

My body warmed at the thought.

"I'm going out to the movies tonight," my aunt continued. "Maybe I'll meet my future husband there." Her voice grew harsh again. "But no matter how beautiful you become, you will only be eligible for the men women like me reject."

I turned away, my face hot, my palms perspiring, as my mother placed bowls of porridge in front

of us.

~~My mother ate slowly. I followed my auntie's lead and cleared my bowl in a few spoonfuls. My stomach wanted more. I glanced pleadingly at my mother, trying to imagine what she had looked like when she was younger, her face round and soft, her eyebrows perfectly arched. I lifted my spoon and placed it in my mother's bowl.~~

"You naughty child," my auntie snapped, grabbing my hand and tossing it roughly to the side. "Little one has a gigantic stomach! You are only allowed three hundred grams of food a day. You eat so much. You are a *pig!*"

"It's fine," my mother said calmly, pushing her half-empty bowl toward me.

THAT AFTERNOON, MY mother and I left my auntie alone in the house to nap. We headed to the hills, looking for cabbage or potatoes left behind on the farms following last year's harvest.

"Umma," I said, when we sat down to nibble on some weeds, which on that day were all that we could find. "Can you finish your story? What happened when you told the military man about your uncle and grandfather?"

She sighed. "I didn't tell him at first. He asked me to marry him, and I agreed. I don't know what got into me. I was living in some dream. When he finally announced that his family needed the name of all my relatives, I stopped performing. When he came in search of me, I refused to meet him ever again."

"Did you ever see him again, Umma?"

"I did," she said, twirling a strand of hair in her long fingers. "It was after I had moved here with your father. I was walking you in the pram, with your grandmother and auntie. We bumped into the military man on the sidewalk. I was so shocked, I let go of the pram and ran away in a panic.

"When he caught up to me, he was crying. 'Why did you leave me?' he sobbed.

"'Because I have an uncle and grandfather who defected to the south,' I told him, looking around first to make sure your father's mother and sister were nowhere in sight. As you know, it's not right for a married woman ever to speak alone to an unrelated man.

"'I don't care about that,' he said, his eyes locked on my own. 'If only you had told me.'

"I didn't know what to say. All my breath had left me. 'You are in the military,' I eventually said. 'How could you hold such a position and be married to me?'

"'I would have left the military to be with you,' he replied. 'I know you have a child now but run away with me. Both of you.'"

My mother turned to face me. "I thought of you, Sunhwa. I thought of the moment when I first felt you stir inside me. I thought of your tiny fingers and how they curled around my own when I held you at night as we slept side by side. I thought of your soft hair and sweet, sticky smell. Then I thought of your father, who had married me despite my past.

"'I have a little girl,' I told the man. 'I am happy with my life now. I don't want to change it. Goodbye.' Then I ran back to find you."

My mother was crying quietly now, her tears dampening my hair. "'I love you' means many things," she said. "It is like that sparrow." She pointed to a tiny bird flying across the path of the setting sun into the pine trees. "If love comes to us, we must let it land. But we must also be prepared to let it go."

Chapter Two

YOUNGRAHN WAS SENT to help my mother because my father had recently been transferred to a factory in Suhdoosoo, a small village in the mountains. He came home every few weeks to check on my mother. As she neared the end of her pregnancy, she was suffering from cramps in her legs. She napped several times a day. Youngrahn didn't prepare meals or sweep the kitchen floor after we ate, however. She spent all her time applying powder and lipstick, going to the cinema and eating our food. While my mother grew larger around the middle, the rest of her body got thinner. The baby hung in her stomach like a big ball. Youngrahn, on the other hand, grew rounder in her face, belly and legs. "Your father is my oldest brother," she said to me when I asked for a spoonful of her noodles. "What is his is mine."

My mother did the laundry in big metal pots in the backyard. I was too little to do more than watch as she lugged the wet cotton blankets to the clothesline and threw them over it. She grimaced from the exertion.

My auntie Youngrahn looked on as my mother stood me naked in the kitchen, except for an undershirt and my panties and washed my shivering body with cool water from the well, scrubbing my hair with our white laundry soap. Whenever Youngrahn mentioned food, my mother would stop what she was doing and cook white rice or porridge. Umma seldom talked to me now except to issue orders and she never sang anymore.

On a cool day in the tenth month, as the clouds whistled across the ice-blue sky, my auntie announced she was leaving. By then, I was wearing all three pairs of my pants and all four of my shirts to keep warm while I played in the leaves outside. My aunt packed up all the white rice in our cupboards, as well as her nail file, white face powder, *chima* and hair curlers. She wrapped them in some *bojagi* fabric and then tied it all together into a bundle, the traditional Korean *bottari*.

WITH THE FIRST layer of snow covering the ground and the trees standing bare against the howling wind, my mother woke from her sleep screaming. The sky was still black. I threw off my covers, ran to the window and placed a wooden board over the glass, thinking that the chill seeping in had caused my mother's night terrors.

My mother screamed even more loudly, though, and I knew she was in labour. She had shown me on several occasions what I was to do when this time came. Now I went into action. I dug out the sheets and towels she had washed and folded, then threw on my coat and boots to fetch some wood from the shed. I piled the wood in the stove in the kitchen, just the way my mother had shown me: twigs and pinecones on the bottom, thicker pieces of wood over that and more twigs on top. I stepped back and lit the bottom layer with a long match.

Each time my mother and I had rehearsed this, we would stand watching the flames as they rose and enjoy the feeling as the warm air began to move through the stovepipes underneath the kitchen floor. Tonight, though, I went back out into the dark to get the *ajummas*, married women, the wind slapping my cheeks raw. These women would help my mother bring her baby into the world.

In the early hours of the morning, the house finally became quiet. One of the married women told me my sister had arrived. I stepped gingerly toward the baby, hands over my eyes, afraid to see what the screaming had produced.

I peeked through my fingers to see the tousled black hair of the baby, who was swaddled in a white sheet and suckling at my mother's breast. My father had chosen the name Sunyoung if it was a girl. My mother's face was wet and swollen. Her hair was wet, too. The sheets around her were stained with

blood. But when she looked over at me, smiling, her eyes shone like a full moon over the snowy corn fields in midwinter.

One of the married women said next that my mother needed to eat and asked me to fetch some food. My mother groaned and said there was not even a grain of rice in the house. The married women sighed to one another, showing their dismay.

MY MOTHER TOLD me that when the baby was a few months old, we would all move to the mountains to be closer to my father's work. My mother said I would like living in Suhdoosoo. The air there was so clean, she told me, that my lungs would feel as if they had been washed with cool water from the well. The mountains would be covered with thick snow in the winter, perfect for tobogganing, and with *jindalae* blooms in the springtime.

"You know," my mother said, bending down low so our eyes were level, "your name means first flower. You were born in the fifth month and at the beginning of that month, the *jindalae* begins to blossom. By the middle of the month, it is at its fullest. *Jindalae* paves the way for all the other flowers to come."

My sister's presence in the house promised friendship. It promised someone who would remain close, unlike my cousins, who were smug about getting all of my grandmother's pampering. At night my mother slept with little Sunyoung on one side and me on the other, her green and white duvet covering us.

I liked the way my sister's tiny fingers curled around mine. I lay beside her during the day as my mother packed our belongings into wooden crates.

I would sing a lullaby that my mother had once sung to me. "Sleepy, sleepy, my baby, sleeping well, my baby. Dogs, don't bark! And don't cry, roosters! *Jajang, jajang, oori aga, jaldo janda, oori aga, muhng muhng gae-ya, jitji mara, ggo ggo dakdo, oolij mara.*"

Sometimes my mother joined in. I was happy that song had returned to our home once again.

My grandparents came with us to the train station the day we were scheduled to leave. Summoning my courage, I boldly asked my grandmother: "Why do you get so many candies but never give one to me?"

She folded her arms angrily across her heavy chest. "We have a relative, a son-in-law, who works in the mine. He breathes in lots of metal dust, so he is given the candies and sometimes finger cookies as *youngyangjeh*—vitamins." My grandmother clicked her tongue. "Won't you learn? These are not the things for you to ask."

I felt my face burn as I took a step backwards. I need vitamins too, I protested silently. And why did my cousin get candies when I didn't. Accidentally, one of my heels landed on my grandfather's toe.

"Watch where you are going next time." He spoke in a slow, expressionless voice that made me feel cold, even on a hot, sticky day. I looked away as his tiny eyes bored into me. But as I began to move away from my grandfather, he grabbed my arm, pinching the flesh underneath with his strong fingers, then leaned in close.

"Take this," he whispered, placing something in the pocket of my navy-blue wool coat. His face was so close to mine that I could smell cigarettes on his breath. "Don't tell anyone," he said, letting go of my arm and patting me on the head. "It's our little secret and it's the only one I'll ever give you."

I nodded nervously.

I reached inside my pocket and wrapped my fingers around two hard rectangular objects. My eyes lit up. It was candy.

AT THE STATION in Suhdoosoo, my father met us with another man. The man was much older than my

father, and his big head and crooked bowlegs made him look like a frog. The man collected our things and piled them into a box-shaped automobile with a smoke stack on top. It was a "gasoline car," the man explained. He drove the four of us to our new home, a long and narrow cement house attached like a train compartment to a row of similar dwellings. The houses had been built for workers at the power generator station where my father was an engineer helping to design a tunnel system.

My mother set to work instantly, building a fire with wood she found in our new shed. I helped as best I could, unpacking pots and pans, but my attention wandered. Out the window, I could see the winter sun setting behind the snowy mountains. In the fenced-in yard next door, I spied a circular contraption. "A *baeguneh!*" I exclaimed at the sight of the merry-go-round. The wind was shaking it ever so slightly back and forth.

As I watched, some children tumbled out of a large black door into the fenced-in area. They climbed aboard and hung onto the silver bars on top. One boy ran alongside, pulling on the bars to make the whole thing turn. The children spun so fast that their navy-blue hats flew off. Their laughter made me eager to join them.

"If I can go to school," I told my mother that night as I ate my rice and she nursed Sunyoung, "I'm going to like this place a lot."

BUT AS THE days passed, I found myself more alone than ever. The weather was too cold for us to go for walks, and my mother was busy with the baby. Whenever my sister slept, so did my mother. There was no talk of my going to school. I had an eye infection and had to be quarantined at home until I was better. I was left to gaze at the garden next door through the cracks in the ice-glazed window.

Before I knew it, I was celebrating my fifth birthday. It was much like my fourth, with a bowl of white rice for my morning meal. My mother tied my sister onto her back with a piece of fabric, and the three of us went walking in the mountains amidst the fragrant *jindalae*. I found a piece of string just as my feet hit the cement road to our house on the way home. For the next month, that string would be my one and only toy. I wound it around my fingers, twisting it into all sorts of shapes, including snowflakes and goats, until it finally broke.

I dreamed of three things: my sister being old enough to play with me, going to school and riding on the circular contraption and my mother's periodic returns from the food ration centre with the next fortnight's worth of food. Whenever she brought the rations, my sister and I feasted on the raw noodles right on the kitchen floor.

Sadly, my sister was not growing up fast enough, and my eye was not getting better and the food rations were never quite enough. I did find some unexpected playmates: lice. The little bugs nestled in my sister's soft, fine hair. Placing her between my legs, I used a small stick to remove them. It passed the time until my sister got bored, climbed up on her chubby legs and wobbled over to the cupboards where she always found pot lids to bang together.

Sometimes my mother would sneak up behind me while my sister was playing. She'd slide me in between her legs and remove the lice from my head. "I want to tell you a story," she said one winter day as we sat together. It was our second year in the mountains. I settled in eagerly to listen.

"There once was a brother and a sister who were left at home while their mother went to work. Their mother wanted them to lock the door and not to let anyone in. The brother and sister did as they were told, but one day a tiger snuck its paw in through a window and said in a high-pitched voice: 'Open up. This is your mother. Unlock the door.'

"'I do not believe you are my mother,' said the little girl.

"'Feel my hands,' said the tiger, who was wearing soft white gloves. Its hands indeed felt like the mother's. The brother and sister ran to the window. The tiger was wearing a cotton dress similar to their mother's, but its tail was sticking out the back.

“‘What do we do?’ asked the little boy.

“‘Run,’ said the little girl.”

My mother held me closer, changing her voice whenever she changed characters.

“The brother and sister ran outside and climbed a tall oak tree, all the way to the top, where they sat and watched the tiger. The tiger chased them but found it difficult to climb the tree.

“‘Put sesame oil on your hands. It will help you grip the bark better,’ the little girl called down to the tiger. But of course, the tiger could not grip the tree with oil on its paws.

“The little boy, who was not as clever as his sister, called down to the whimpering tiger, ‘Use an axe.’ The tiger ran to the children’s home and grabbed their father’s axe. When it returned, it started carving out footholds in the tree and began climbing. As the tiger neared the children, the little girl called out to the sky. As she did, she spied a magpie, a lucky bird.

“‘Dear sky, if you want us to live,’ she called, ‘send down a brand-new rope. If you want us to die, send down a rotten rope that makes us fall.’

“A brand-new rope slipped down from a cloud, and the little boy and girl climbed all the way up to the sky and became the sun and the moon.”

“What happened to the tiger?” I asked, hugging my knees in suspense.

“The tiger, who had heard the little girl’s plea, also called out to the sky. It wanted to become the stars in between the sun and the moon. The sky dropped down a rotten rope. The tiger, which was even less clever than the little boy, had got the girl’s words mixed up, and it thought that it could climb the old rope. It gripped the rope tightly and heaved its body around the rope with all its might, only to fall into the middle of a field of millet stalk.”

“Oh,” I sighed. “Poor tiger!”

“That is why,” my mother continued, “in some parts of Chosun, whenever someone cuts into millet, the inside of the millet stalk is red, representing the tiger’s blood.”

I settled my chin on my knees and thought about the story. “If you are good and have a kind heart, I said slowly, “all your struggles and pain will be rewarded with what you want most. But if you are mean-hearted, you will fall to earth. I think that is what the story means.”

“Do you?” asked my mother, her eyes flooded with tears. She wiped her damp cheeks, got up to make some rice and did not say another word to me.

Chapter Three

ON A DREARY afternoon in the sixth month of our second year in the mountains, as spring rain pounded like cows' hooves on our wooden plank roof, my father announced he was taking me somewhere.

It was a Wednesday, the one day he didn't go to the factory. Usually even when he was home, it was as if he wasn't there. He stayed in his room doing engineering sketches, wearing a face like stone whenever he emerged. What was conveyed through his silence was that my sister and I were our mother's responsibility, not his.

But this Sunday was different.

"Where are we going, Abuji?" I asked eagerly. Once I'd put on my navy-blue wool coat and red boots, my father slipped a plastic bag over my head. He'd cut holes in it for my nose and mouth, so I could breathe, and for my eyes, so I could see.

"Somewhere special," he said, his tone serious.

Water from the puddles in the road seeped through the holes in my plastic boots, soaking my feet. My toes were numb by the time we reached our destination.

Taking my hand, which he had never done before, my father pulled me around the corner and we emerged in front of a store. We stepped inside and took off our rain gear. When I looked up, a woman older than my mother and wearing a floral shirt and pants, gestured for us to enter.

My eyes moved to clotheslines stretching from one beam to another. T-shirts, slacks and wool sweaters hung from wooden clothes pegs. I noticed a pretty blue dress with a white lace collar that looked as if it would fit me. My heart beat faster. Was this why we had come? But the woman was unpacking things from some boxes in the corner and setting them on the floor.

My father picked up a box of red pencils. "Abuji, do you need these for sketching?" I whispered, as the woman put the other items away.

"No," my father said, handing the box to me. "I thought you might want to draw pictures when you listen to Chunbok and Manghil." He smiled. I smiled too. I had listened to the popular talk show at my grandparents' house since no one there ever paid me any attention.

"First thing though, as soon as I get home, I need to replace the speaker for the PA system so we don't miss a government broadcast," he explained. "Then, we can listen to Chunbok and Manghil."

My father pulled a small wad of won from his pants pocket and handed it to the old woman.

She wrapped the box of pencils in some paper.

"Where did you get the money in your pocket?" I asked my father as we put on our boots.

He winked. "You are a smart little girl. How do you know about money?"

"Well, I sometimes see Umma putting coins into a wooden box underneath the stove. She also showed me some won."

"I get some money from my job," my father explained. "I can use it to have your mother buy extra clothes or food items at government-approved stores like this one. The profits made at the store are given to the government. If anyone sells things privately, then they would be a capitalist."

BACK AT HOME, after my father and I had changed into dry clothes, he motioned for us all to gather around. He had replaced the old speaker with the new one. At first, all we heard was static. But soon there were sounds: a car horn, a train whistle, a man talking in a gruff voice about the Japanese. Finally, a lone, deep male voice came through as clear as day. I mouthed the word to Umma: "Manghil!"

Manghil: We are on the farm. The time is monaegi, rice planting, season. Ladies and gentlemen,

hello. You're all really hard at work.

Chunbok: Can we finish all the work today?

Manghil: Of course, we can finish the whole plot in just half a day.

THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN Chosun's top personalities unfolded, with Chunbok and Manghil performing a little skit about how wonderful it was to feed the people of Chosun. I sat completely still, my heart full. They ended with a song. "*May is upon us, it is a beautiful season, let's go and plant rice, let's go and plant some rice.*"

"When will I be old enough to plant rice, chili peppers and sweet potatoes?" I asked Umma as my father had turned the radio off. Scattered on the floor in front of me were my new pencils. On a piece of my father's white sketching paper, I had drawn pictures of vegetables.

"When you are at school," she replied.

"But when will that be?" I had been pestering my mother with this question since we arrived in the mountains but she had always changed the subject. Now she moved to sit beside me.

"I was a kindergarten teacher before you came into this world," she said quietly. "I will go back to being a schoolteacher when we return to Yuseon. But not until after..." My mother stroked her stomach. "After I have another baby."

"But we no longer have a home in Yuseon," I exclaimed, jumping up. "The government gave it to that other family when we moved here. Where will we live?" I didn't want to leave. I wanted to go to school in the building with the playground next door and ride on the *baeguneh* with my schoolmates. I had watched them with envy for so long.

"We'll live with grandma," my mother said.

I gasped. "Do you want that?" I asked, leaning in so my father wouldn't hear.

My mother blanched at my directness. "Whatever you feel about your grandparents," she answered after a long pause, "they are good, good people. Your grandfather is a leader, carrying out his revolutionary responsibilities. You must never say anything bad about them, ever."

MY BROTHER HYUNGCHUL was born in the late fall, just before Chunbok and Manghil announced on the radio that the harvest season had finished. Not long afterwards, my sister and I started packing up our pots, pans, bedding and pillows. On a chilly day in the twelfth month, when I could see my breath in the crisp air and my fingertips tingled in my thin woollen mittens, the gasoline car and the frog man returned to take us to the train station.

The journey went quickly. When we arrived at Yuseon, my father instructed my sister and me to stay where we were, nestled beside each other on the vinyl seats in the compartments. Out the window I could see people in dark factory clothes, their pace stiff and quick. Their drawn faces and heavy eyes revealed their exhaustion. In the mountains, everything had seemed to sparkle, even when charcoal clouds filled the sky. But everything in Yuseon was grey.

My eyes filled with tears. I didn't want to live with my grandmother. I didn't want to see my cousin Heeok. My sister, sensing my distress, touched my hand with her own sticky palm. "Big sister," she said. "You sad?"

I squeezed her hand and nodded. "Don't tell Abuji," I said softly, my spirits lifting.

My sister finally was growing up.

MY GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE was one of the eight houses built together, with a front door painted the pale blue of a planting-season sky and sliding doors dividing the long and narrow house into three sections. While my mother unpacked our things in the room where we would sleep, I washed my grandmother

dishes, scrubbed the floors underneath the yellow paper and then swept the rooms reserved for her other sons and daughters when they came to visit. There were so many rooms, and my job, my grandmother told me, would be to clean them once a week. I wouldn't have time to play with my sister, I soon discovered. All I did was work.

When I was in the rooms farthest away from the main room, where my grandmother read the serials in the newspaper, I felt as if I was lost in a forest before dawn, with the mist drifting off the river. Every small noise on the streets outside made me jump. I swept slowly, alert to anything alive, including in the cobwebs I had to remove.

Although my mother and I did most of the cooking, my grandmother was clearly in charge. My halmuni had only to rub her stomach and my mother would put the new baby down and start boiling some rice with cabbage underneath. I dropped what I was doing to slice the cucumber while the white rice cooked. When she finally ate, she did it slowly, taking breaks to savour every bite. I watched with wide hungry eyes. My portions were smaller than they had ever been, and I could barely finish a few spoonfuls before my grandmother would order me to do another chore.

At night, my insides growled, keeping me awake. Pain ricocheted through my body. My stomach swelled from starvation. During the day, my head felt fuzzy, and my movements slowed. But I wasn't allowed to lie down. My grandmother would spank my bottom with the broom handle if she saw me doing anything except completing her list of chores.

After some time had gone by, my mother went back to her job as a kindergarten teacher, taking Hyungchul with her. She left him in the daycare located down the hall from her classroom. "Your school is not built yet," she told me. "When it is, then you will go."

One day, I followed Umma to the corner of the street, not wanting her to leave me alone with my grandmother. Sunyoung trailed behind me. My mother saw us out of the corner of her eye, stopped and turned.

I could see, even at a distance, that her lips were quivering, as if she was about to cry. Sunyoung gripped my shirt. Our bodies shook in the cool air.

"Come back," I yelled, raising my right arm toward her. But she turned away and resumed her walk to school.

WHENEVER MY GRANDPARENTS headed out to visit my cousins during the day, they would lock Sunyoung and me inside the house. Halabuji always locked the pantry, too, leaving Sunyoung and me with no food. As I listened to them walk away, I would bang my head against the door. My sister tugged on my tights, asking me what was wrong.

On those days when my grandparents were gone, often from morning until early evening, I'd race through my chores, my sister helping as best she could. Then we would lie down together on the ground and I would re-tell stories Umma had told me while my sister picked lice from my hair.

"There once were seven brothers who were left alone, a lot like you and me," I told her one day, and we pressed our bodies together under the duvet to keep warm. "One brother could see for a thousand *li*," I said, stretching my arms as wide as they would go. "The second brother could hear a whisper from a thousand *li* away. The third brother could lift an entire train with one hand. The fourth brother could travel a thousand *li* in a few footsteps. The fifth brother could breathe fire, and the sixth brother could smell fire from a thousand *li* away. The seventh brother could make himself small like an ant or as large as the biggest giant.

"These brothers were locked in their home all alone while their Umma and their Abuji worked. They were lonely. They didn't know what to do, until one day the strong brother ripped the door from its frame, and the brothers went out into the world.

"From that day on," I told Sunyoung, as she hung on every word, "the brothers helped the other

villagers. The brother who could see such a distance spied on the rich, to learn who was greedy and who was a capitalist. He reported to the fast brother, who would race over to get the rich, greedy people's rice or cabbage and give it to those working hard in the factories, who needed more food for energy to work even harder. The brother who could smell fire alerted the strong brother, who would then fetch water from the well to put the fire out. The brother who could breathe fire made fires in the middle of the village to keep everyone warm in winter. The brothers worked together to help others."

"I like that story, big sister," Sunyoung said when I was done.

"We're like those brothers," I whispered, snuggling into her warm neck. "We just don't know yet how to get outside."

"I fly," Sunyoung said, flapping her arms. "Like sparrow."

MY COUSIN HEEOK had contracted rickets due to a vitamin D deficiency, my mother told me one evening. I was glad, though I concealed it. I hated Heeok so much for the candy and gifts she got from my grandmother that I no longer played with her. But I had noticed how she limped when she visited my grandmother's house. Her legs were starting to resemble those of the frog man who drove the gasoline car. "Heeok is an *angibal*," I heard Halmuni say to Halabuji one night. "We need to help her so she does not bring us shame."

"*Angibal* means a person with crooked feet," my mother explained when we were alone. "If Heeok doesn't get better, she won't be able to work when she is older. The Party won't hire her. She'll be too slow, too weak, too broken. No one will want to marry her, either. Her rations will never grow because she will never get to work."

For the next few months, my grandmother paid a young man in the neighbourhood to go to a nearby city to buy walleye pollock. My mother would boil the fish, and at least three times a week my grandparents would spend the afternoon at my cousin's house, making sure she ate it. Their hope was that the oil in the fish would contain enough vitamin D to straighten out Heeok's legs.

One afternoon in the middle of the fifth month, just before my seventh birthday and just after the birthday of our great father and eternal president, Kim Il-sung, my grandmother forgot to turn the key in the metal latch. I scurried over to the window and watched as my grandparents waddled down the street like the geese I'd see in the summer by the river. When they turned the corner, I grabbed my sister's arm and told her to put on her pants, and a jacket. Once we were dressed, we headed outside.

The ground was wet from planting-season rains. As my sister drew lines in the mud, I ran to the storage shed beside the house. My grandmother had left some of last season's cucumbers in a bucket of water. They had been frozen for the winter and the water was still icy cold, despite the warmer temperatures outside. I reached my bare hand in and pulled one out, yelling with pain as I bit into the skin. The cucumber was ice cold. But the shooting pain in my teeth and gums was not enough to stop me from eating it. I gave my sister one, too. After the cucumbers were gone, I lifted the plank of wood that covered the hole in the ground where my grandmother kept vegetables in summer and milk in winter. With my teeth, I pried open the cap on a bottle of goat's milk. I gulped down three quarters of it before handing the rest to my sister to finish. Just as I did so, a woman called out from the house next door, asking what I was doing. My body began to shake. The muscles in my legs and arms pulsed as if my body wanted me to flee.

"Come here, child," she called out. "And bring your sister too."

I had never been inside anyone else's home, except that of a relative.

"Come with me," the woman repeated. But this time her tone was kind, and her two children had appeared and they were smiling. Sunyoung ran to them and was inside the house before I could decide what to do. I had to follow. I couldn't leave my little sister alone.

After the woman had taken off her jacket and helped her children out of their shoes, which I

noticed were shiny and new, with not a single hole in the soles, she invited Sunyoung and me to sit. We crossed our legs and huddled together, enjoying the warmth from the *ondol* floor, the traditional heated floor with slabs of stone underneath warmed with hot air from the kitchen fireplace. As one of the boys unfolded the legs of a small wooden table, the other brought us steaming bowls of corn rice, followed by some noodles.

The two boys made shadow puppets with their hands on the wall. When she was done eating, Sunyoung joined them.

“Why are you not in school?” the woman asked me, sitting down and slipping on a pair of round spectacles.

“My umma said I was to start in the ninth month,” I replied timidly.

She opened the large, red, leather-bound book she was holding. “It’s by our eternal leader,” she said, catching me looking at the cover. “It’s about his life as a child. You must have a copy at your house,” she continued as I nodded. “Would you like me to read you a story?”

I shook my head. I’d never had a conversation with anyone other than family members. I didn’t know what to say or do.

When the light inside grew dim, and our neighbour’s overhead light came on, I knew Sunyoung and I needed to head home. As soon as we were back in our yard, we each felt a hand swoop down and grab our coats. My grandmother hauled us inside the house.

“Where have you been?” she shouted. She didn’t wait for a response. Instead, she grabbed me by the ear and dragged me into the second room, where she snatched a ruler. She hit me across the back of the legs so hard and so many times that I screamed out in terror.

I begged her to stop, but she aimed the ruler at my hands next. Soon my palms were covered in bloody scratches. Sunyoung sat in the corner of the room, her eyes tightly closed, rocking her body back and forth. She had covered her ears to block out the sound of my cries.

“I never wanted you here,” my grandmother yelled, her spittle landing in my hair. “You bring me shame by stealing my food. You and that mother of yours, your sister and you, you all bring me shame.”

My halmuni stopped suddenly. I turned my head to see what she was staring at. My mother stood in the doorway, her face white, her body shaking like the ruler my halmuni held in the air.

Chapter Four

THINGS CHANGED AFTER that incident. One cloudy afternoon, my grandmother told my sister and me to put on our sweaters. Heook's energy was slowly improving, and apparently she had asked grandmother if I could come and play tag with her in the backyard. The air was crisp, filled with the scent of fresh rain and damp leaves unearthed by the melting snow.

My grandmother still ordered me to do chores. But she didn't leave us alone or lock us up anymore. She gave my sister and me a little extra corn rice or kimchi during mealtimes. In the afternoons, while she read, we were allowed to lie on our duvets and play hand-shadow puppet games. When spring fully emerged, we even went outside and made mud pies.

After work one night, my father announced that he had requested a new house, a home just for us. My grandparents, sitting off to the side, lowered their heads as we packed up our duvets and pots and pans and moved yet again.

Our new house was not far from my grandmother's place. Sunyoung and I would still spend our days alone, my mother informed us. I would be in charge of looking after my sister and making our meals. In the mornings, before she set off with Hyungchul, Umma would put the rice and some water on the stove for me to cook. She then locked us inside when she left.

Sunyoung and I spent our days making music with the pots and pans, dancing and singing at the top of our lungs. One afternoon, I dug a long piece of cloth from my mother's chest. I tied one end to the door handle of my father's drawing room and the other end to the pantry door. When we shut one door, the other would pop open. *Open, close, open, close . . .* we did this for hours.

By the end of the third week, though, these activities had lost their initial attraction. My sister would lie on a cotton mat and stare at the ceiling, while I looked out the window at the shed where my father kept our wood.

When my parents were at home, I was allowed to play in the shed. Through the holes in the wall, I would spy on the other neighbourhood children running around in their yards. I learned their games, including one where they tried to outsmart each other by shaping their hands like rocks, paper or scissors. I taught these games to Sunyoung, and we sometimes played them during our days locked indoors. But the fun lasted only a little while, and then we would fall idle again.

Sometimes my sister and I would amuse ourselves by playing ration shop. Sunyoung play-acted as my mother, holding a blanket in her arms as if it were a real baby. I played the ration officer who checked the ration card and made sure that the correct amounts of food were handed out.

"I came to get the rations," Sunyoung would say.

"Here comes the rice—also pick up the potatoes," I said.

"Your family of five gets four kilograms of rice for a fortnight," I replied stiffly, just like I imagined the real ration officer would do. "But because you are a new mother and are breast-feeding, you can also get two kilograms of grain powder as well."

I also liked to look through my father's drawings, which were strewn across his desk or rolled into cylinders that stood upright in the corner of the room. In the shed were also various machine parts. I asked my mother what they were. She said Abuji was good at building machines. Indeed, in the evenings and on the holidays he would spend hours in the shed making things like a rice harvesting machine and a corn popper. Ships were his favourite subject to draw. I had never seen a ship in real life. My mother had explained that to the east was an ocean with water so deep that if I fell into it, I would never be seen again.

“HOW DID YOU and Abuji meet?” I asked Umma on one of her days off from teaching.

“A friend of mine had a husband who was a cousin of your father’s. I was teaching school by then. Our friends introduced us.”

ONE AFTERNOON IN my father’s room, I picked up his fountain pen, grabbed a piece of scrap paper from the garbage and began drawing. The ink flowed from the pen tip onto the paper, reminding me of swallows’ wings touching the sky. I drew a picture of my little sister, then did some of the alphabet letters my mother said I would be learning in school. Soon after, though, the pen broke.

I was so engrossed in what I was doing that I did not hear my father’s footsteps as he came home from work early, suffering from a flu that made him feverish. I was trying to fix the pen but it was no use. I stopped only when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

My father stood, red-faced and still in the grey uniform he’d worn ever since I could remember. I didn’t even wait for his words. I stood up on wobbly legs and turned around.

“Roll up your pants,” he ordered.

With trembling hands, I rolled them up.

My father took the broomstick handle and smacked the backs of my legs three times hard.

A few days later, my mother announced that she’d now be taking Sunyoung to the daycare at her school. I was to spend my days now with my father, at his work. I’d be there until I started school in the ninth month.

AND SO I adopted a new daily routine. I would wake and dress immediately, eat a bowl of corn rice, and then hurry with my father to the train station. We travelled three stops to get to his factory, which was located on the outskirts of the city. The factory building was a simple white building with a dark metal roof. The workers were stiff looking, their eyes piercing forward, their shoulders proud, all wearing the same uniform as my father.

Abuji led me inside the building and through to the main area. He pointed at the high voltage warning signs next to the electric wires inside. A person who worked at the factory had gotten too close to those wires and been injured here, he warned me. “You need to listen, Sunhwa. You must never come into the factory floor on your own.”

My father left me sitting in his supervisor’s office. I had to wait there until break-time, he said, when he could join me. I sat down on the floor in the corner, pulled my legs tight against my chest and slowly scanned the barren room. It was large, with a furnace in the middle and a photo on the wall of our great father and eternal president, Kim Il-sung, wearing a black suit. We had the same photograph at home.

In my head, I told myself stories. After what seemed like a whole day, but was really just a few hours, my father returned.

“Come sit beside me,” he said, patting a chipped wooden bench that at one point had been painted the Party’s favourite colour, sky blue.

I crouched beside him as some Party members joined us. I felt shy. I had never been alone with a group of men.

My father, whom I had only seen smoking in our shed, took a package out of the breast pocket of his grey work shirt. I watched as he scraped pieces of tobacco into a piece of paper and then wrapped it into a small cylinder.

My father remained silent as the other men talked about the Party and the government. I chewed on some chives I had picked at a farm my father and I passed on the way to the train station. “Kim Il-

sung is like the eternal flame of our stove fires,” one man said. “A fire that never goes out and remains strong, despite the weather.”

“Thank you, General,” another man added, turning to the portrait of our leader on the wall. “Thanks to you we have such a good life.”

I spent weekdays for the next few months in my father’s supervisor’s office, playing games in my mind. I often pretended to be the little girl in Umma’s story, calling up to the sky for a rope so she could escape the tiger. “If I am meant to be anywhere but here,” I chanted silently, “send me a good rope that I can climb.”

I longed to be with the children I saw through the dusty window, chasing each other with their coats undone, their cheeks flushed, their faces bright with laughter. They attended the factory’s kindergarten class. “Oh, sky,” I thought to myself. “I won’t ask so much as to become the sun or the moon, just one of the stars in between, if you send me a rope to help me escape this room.”

Chapter Five

FOOD WAS SCARCER than ever for my family. My grandfather, my father told me, had retired from his position as a biology teacher, and my grandmother had stopped working as a music teacher when her own children were young. Their sons and sons-in-law supported them now.

One balmy summer day, my mother and I sat together on the ground while my father and sister tended the small patch of ground we had tilled, stretching from behind our house to a nearby river. My parents had planted potato and cabbage seeds soon after we moved in. That afternoon, Hyungchul toddled after the goat and the sheep my grandfather had lent us. My grandfather had raised the animals in his yard, but there was little grass left there for them to eat. They were both females and we would be allowed to keep their offspring.

“The Party gives extra rations to people like you and Abuji, who toil long and hard for our great father and eternal president,” I said to my mother, who was picking burrs out of a sweater.

She nodded, not looking up from what she was doing.

“But Halabuji and Halmuni have so much more than we do because their sons also give them food.”

“We share our food with them sometimes, but not always,” my mother said matter-of-factly. “When your grandfather is in good health, he has work watching the melon fields. He gets extra food from the farms when he does this. It’s our duty to help look after them when they are weak.”

“But then we go hungry ourselves!” I blurted.

My mother spoke sharply. “Don’t be disrespectful!” She stood up wiping earth from her navy-blue skirt.

“Wait,” I said, tugging on the back of her tights. I was determined that day, whatever the cost, to get some answers. “Why is Halmuni so mean to us? Please tell me!”

My mother looked out over the field for a moment. I glanced at my shoes, covered in mud, and was ashamed of my boldness. But she surprised me by sitting back down.

“Your father has never told me much about his life,” she began. “But he did confide that his umm was very spoiled. Your grandfather did everything for her, even sharpening her teaching pencils at night. Your grandfather did the housework, too, with the help of your father and his brothers and sisters. Your grandmother was the daughter of a corner-store owner. Your grandfather’s father was a farmer, so when your grandparents wed, it was considered a good marriage for him. Back then, before our eternal father was in charge, farmers were not respected as they are today. Back then, capitalists were respected instead. Today, your grandmother’s family would be seen as capitalists who take advantage of others. Your grandfather’s family would be the virtuous ones for serving the Party.”

I kept my head lowered as I pressed on. “But Halmuni is not mean to Heeok. She gives her candy and makes her fish oil. Why does she not like me?”

“Because you were my firstborn child and you weren’t a son. Heeok has an older brother,” my mother replied, after a long pause. “During Chosun’s war with the puppet army of the Americans and their allies, your father’s father was a member of the Labour Party, which later became the North Korean Workers Party. But there was a rumour on the street that members of the Party were going to be killed by security forces backed by the Americans. Your grandfather buried his membership card rather than wearing it around his neck. He didn’t want to be identified. When the puppet army made it to Yuseon, where they lived, your grandmother fled with your father and his five siblings to another city, where they stayed in the home of a Party supporter. After the war ended, the family returned to Yuseon.”

“I’ve seen the photos of Halabuji posing in his uniform,” I said excitedly.

“Your grandfather went to find his card,” my mother continued, “but he couldn’t remember where he had buried it. Because of that, your father and your aunts and uncles all had trouble when they tried to register for membership in the Party. Your father received his Party membership card only when we moved to Suhdoosoo.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed in shock. I had always assumed my father and his siblings were Party members.

“So that is why Abuji married me. Both our families had problems with the Party,” she concluded. “Your father and I met only twice before we wed and your grandmother never liked me. She has always felt your father should have married better. Then, when you were born a girl, and not a treasured firstborn son, she cut off completely any feeling she might have had for you or me.” My mother got to her feet, signalling the end of our conversation.

EVERY SATURDAY MORNING, my parents, like all workers, took part in *saenghwalchonghwa*, or total life retrospective. Each person present had to face their peers and document all the things they felt they had done wrong that week. My mother would confess that she had not pressed her skirts or shirts as well as she could have or shown enough respect to our great father and eternal leader. My father might admit to taking an extra-long cigarette break, as he sometimes liked to do. For their transgressions, my mother explained to me, people were forced to stand at the front of the main meeting room, heads lowered, hands by their side, backs flush against the wall, while their colleagues stared at them.

My mother was always quiet and withdrawn when she returned. She would spend the rest of the afternoon by herself, reading one of the serials from the newspaper or mending the holes in our clothes.

Two Saturdays before school was due to start, however, my mother returned from *saenghwalchonghwa* in an upbeat mood. She got my brother ready and told Sunyoung and me that we were all going for a walk. She hummed a song as my sister and I skipped along beside her, something I had not heard her do since Sunyoung was a baby.

Our destination turned out to be someone’s house. Inside, the walls of one room were lined with shelves piled with boxes of food, including biscuits and candies. Clotheslines dripped with shirts, dresses, pants and skirts. In another room, bookshelves and racks bulged with stationery items, cleaning supplies and make-up.

Umma asked the storekeeper, an older woman with a crooked smile, to bring out some skirts and tops she thought would fit me. My mother held them up to my body to gauge the size. She picked out a green plaid wool skirt, a white blouse, a solid green vest and a matching blazer. “For school,” she said as she handed the lady some won she had tucked in her pocket.

By the time we left the shop, I also had two new pairs of underwear, a pair of thick green socks, a handful of pencils and a red backpack, something my mother said all the children carried. I had never had so many things that were just mine before, and when we got home, I tore a piece of paper from the pad my mother had bought for herself and practiced my letters with one of my new pencils. That night, I slept holding the letters in my hand.

IN THE LAST few weeks before school started, the train to my father’s factory seemed more crowded than ever. Every family, including ours, was receiving smaller food rations as we waited for the government to stock the shelves with vegetables from the autumn harvest. I didn’t have to worry about teetering backwards and forwards with the motion of the locomotive since there were adults packed in all around me, holding me rigid like one bean sprout in the midst of many.

I was so hungry by the third day of accompanying my father to his work that my head felt light.

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