

I moved to the side of the market and sat down on a piece of cardboard. I then spent hours thinking, looking out at nothing through dazed, disbelieving eyes, trying to make sense of all that was happening to me. I eventually gave up and focused on the market instead. Almost all the vendors, who had set up tables and were selling goods from dried fish to electronics, were men, often with a woman, perhaps a wife, helping them. Women without men walked around, in and out of the stalls, selling prepared foods, such as fried tofu, twisted bread sticks, and hard-boiled eggs, from baskets they held close.

About midmorning, I spied some boys around my age, but some older. While their clothes were grease-stained, tattered, and dirty like those of the merchants, their skin and hair were healthy. Their bodies were filled out, too, not skeletal. They walked in and out of the market stalls with a confidence that I sure didn't feel.

I studied them closely and saw that they moved around the

market like a wolf pack. One member of the group, a boy not much taller than me, reached up and opened a bag a woman wore draped down her back. Without her knowledge, he slipped his slender fingers inside and withdrew a small pouch.

My eyes trailed the boy as he walked at a normal pace out of the market until he eventually disappeared, heading in the direction of the train station. I turned my attention back to the woman. She still had not noticed she'd been robbed.

It was the aroma of baking bread that lured me to get up and walk around. I made my way behind a small table, on which some fresh bread had been placed underneath a fishing net. Blackflies fought one another on top of the netting.

"Please, may I have one?" I turned to ask the woman. But no words came out. I had never begged before. I lowered my head in shame and blushed. I wanted to tell this woman that I was from Pyongyang, to assure her that if she knew me, I would pay her back if she would feed me now. I wanted her to know that I was a good son, a future general, and that I needed someone to help me, as the Koreans had helped our eternal leader on his childhood march from Manchuria back to his hometown, Mangyeongdae.

She stared at me through lost eyes, waiting, I guess, for me to speak. Instead, I turned and skulked away, back to the side of the market where other boys like me, their faces downcast and their bodies disappearing in their oversize clothes, sat on cardboard boxes or on the bare ground and waited for someone to help them.

People walked in front of me, back and forth. I looked up and into their faces, hoping that someone would give me something to eat. But no one even looked at me. I had never felt so ashamed in my life as I sat there waiting for a handout that never came. At dusk, I gave up, closed my eyes, and prayed silently for Chilseong and *shan-shin-ryong-nim* to help me.

Then I smelled it again: the scent of fresh baked bread, and it was drawing near. I opened my eyes to find the woman standing in front of me, holding out a twisted bun. "Here," she said, pushing it toward me.

"Thank you," I said, trying to pull myself up to bow. But she pushed my shoulders and me back down.

"I want you to leave," she said, kneeling down and leaning in real close. "You're scaring customers away. Don't come back tomorrow, dirty *kotjebi*."

I tried to tell her that I didn't know what a *kotjebi* was. But she was gone, fast, just as Young-bum had left me, turning quickly and escaping back to a safer life than mine.

WHEN NIGHT FELL, BRINGING WITH IT HEAVY CLOUDS AND a cool wind, I looked around for some plastic sheeting I could pull over on top of me to keep me warm. There was nothing. Some of the merchants were from out of town, so they slept in the market. As these merchants lit their fires, I lay my head down on the

dusty ground. Tiny pebbles dug their way into my cheeks, but I was too tired and hungry to care. I fell asleep.

About midnight, I felt a sharp kick and then a deep, gruff voice chortled right up and into my ear: "Get out of here."

I pulled open my eyes, which were still swollen and sticky with puss, and stared up into the faces of two old men, both reeking of alcohol and urine. The men began pinching and poking me, telling me to get up. For a few seconds I didn't move. Then I coughed up some phlegm.

"At least he's alive," the huskier of the two men said. The other man was stick-thin, all bones.

"Where is your house?" the bone-man asked. He was now leaning down and feeling my forehead to see if I was sick. I slapped his hand away.

"You can't stay here," he growled. "Go home or else the *Shangmoo* will take you away. Only merchants are allowed to be here at night."

"Just take me to the *guhoso*. Don't wait for the *Shangmoo*," I hissed, tired and fed up.

The men stood back and laughed. "The *guhoso* is a killing field," the skinnier of the two said. "Kids go in and never come out."

"It's full of disease and death," the huskier man said. "Go home . . . go anywhere except stay here. *Kotjebi* can't sleep in this market."

There was that word again. *Kotjebi*. "What does *kotjebi* mean?" I asked, trying to pull myself up. The slimmer of the two men saw me struggling and gave me a hand.

"A *kotjebi* is a boy who lives on the street, stupid," the huskier man snapped. He then pinched my earlobe hard to get me to turn around and start walking away. I planted my feet.

"I'm not a street boy," I mumbled. "My parents have gone away to find food. I am from a good family, party members. Can you help me?"

The men put their hands on their hips and started laughing again. "Every *kotjebi* has the same story," the heavysset man finally said.

"Here is the hierarchy out here," the slim man said. "Army is on the top. You'll only see them if you try to steal from certain government farms. Then the police, followed by the *Shangmoo*. Then there are workers, followed by merchants, followed by you, *kotjebi*. There is only one group of people lower than you."

"What is that?" I asked nervously.

"The nightflowers," he hissed. The two men then started howling and laughing again, loudly, like wolves, a cacophony that moved across the market.

"I have nowhere to go," I said shyly.

The men suddenly stopped laughing. For a moment I felt as if everyone were staring at me, like on the first day of school. Then

they started howling again, along with a bunch of other market men.

I staggered away from the men at that point, out of the market and along the gravel road, tripping every so often on my tired feet, as if it were I who was drunk. I was halfway up a small hill, panting, keeling over from nausea and a sharp cramp in my side, not really sure where I was going, when I stopped. There was a bend in the road that overlooked a clearing. I walked up to it and looked down a sharp rock face. *I could fall off here*, I thought. *And die.* "Death will solve all my problems", I whispered out loud.

My feet inched toward the edge of the precipice. I took a deep breath and counted to ten.

But then I couldn't do it. I couldn't jump.

I looked up at the waning moon poking out from behind a rain cloud. "Why?" I yelled as some rays caressed the fields of the government potato farm, the same farm where my mother once worked.

I felt so far away from beauty, stuck in the shadows of a nightmare, unable to find my way into the light.

"Why?" I shouted again.

I couldn't go back to my house. There was no food. I could die there. Worse, no one would know I was dead, and I wouldn't have a proper burial.

I had no choice. I headed back to the only place I knew.

Young-bum kicked me hard in my left leg when I pushed the door open and fell into his house like a bouncing ball for the second time in less than three days.

"Don't be angry. Don't be cross," I spluttered as I crumpled to the floor. "I've nowhere to go except the *guhoso*, where the men in the market say diseases run rampant."

"I told you that kids die there," he snapped. "Not that you ever listen to me."

"I do, I do! I do now," I pleaded. "Please let me stay here, and I will help you look after your grandmother," I said, thinking fast, hoping to convince Young-bum that if I stayed, I could be an asset. "I'll help you steal."

Young-bum crossed his arms and glared at me. “At least some of your swelling has gone down,” he growled at me.

“Look,” I pressed on. “I’ve spent the past day observing the market. The only people who pass through who look at all like they’re surviving are the *kotjebi* . . . the *kotjebi* who work in teams. The *kotjebi* who are alone, like me, move like *yu-ryeong*, along the sides . . . We don’t have much of a chance, as we’re all just waiting for people to help us, and, of course, no one does. But those *kotjebi* who join forces—they seem to thrive. They are strong and healthy. Together we can make a team and care for each other and your grandmother.”

Young-bum sighed, threw his hands in the air, and walked to where his grandmother lay. Still looking at me, he lowered his head and whispered something into her ear.

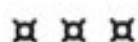
She raised her head and mumbled something back. Young-bum nodded.

“Okay, we’ll try,” he said to me. I exhaled. “My grandmother says we don’t have extra food, so you feed yourself,” he continued. “Here’s the deal. If we only have enough food for one person, my grandmother comes first, always. Agreed?”

“Yes,” I replied with a weak smile.

“There’s more,” he added. “If you die, I leave you out on the street.”

I had no choice. I had to agree to that, too.



"I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE SAYING ABOUT FORMING A TEAM . . . a gang," Young-bum said the next morning as we shared the last remaining potato, which we ate with a broth he had made from dandelion roots. "I joined a gang after my mother died. The *Jjadari-pa* gang. My gang taught me how to steal, but I got beaten up. That's how I lost my tooth—remember?—and kicked out for keeping some of the money I stole for myself. I was supposed to share everything with them. That is the gang rule. I needed the money to buy my grandmother's pills. Look." He pulled out a small leather pouch from his back pocket. He placed it on the ground and slowly spread it open. Inside was a *ring-nal*, a razor blade, like the one my father used to shave himself.

"Where did you get that?" I gasped. Since we arrived in Gyeong-seong, razors were hard to find. My father had shaved with a sharp knife.

"Stole it . . . when I was part of the gang." Young-bum picked it up. "*Woosh woosh*," he said as he flung it through the air. "I go up behind women in the market, cut a small hole in their bags, and steal their wallets and purses."

I thought of the *kotjebi* I'd seen at the market stealing. I then thought of the woman he stole from. When I put a face to the victim, my heart sank. "Young-bum," I whispered. "The people *kotjebi* steal from are starving, too. They might have children at home like us. They could be mothers—our mothers—and by stealing from them, their own children might go hungry."

Young-bum fell quiet. "If I think about that, I'll die," he finally said in a contemplative tone. "Morality is a great song a person sings when he or she has never been hungry. You can walk the noble road, Sungju. But if you die because of it, nobody will remember you were a noble person. Just a fool. Our enemy is death now. You know how Kim Il-sung said that children are the kings and queens of the nation?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"I think this is not true. If it were true, we wouldn't be starving."

"You shouldn't say such things about the regime," I warned, still fearful of defying my government, including by speaking bad about it in public.

Young-bum laughed. "This is why those fat cats in Pyongyang liked you so much," he said, tickling me. "You're a coward. You're . . . What's the word? Compliant. Easy. If your life hadn't taken a different turn, you would have made a perfect general. You'd do whatever they asked of you, without thinking twice."

I stared at him for the longest time, my face growing hot as anger bubbled up inside me. He was right, of course. Even now, if my government asked me to do something, I would do it. I'm not sure exactly with whom I was most upset: Young-bum or the regime.

Young-bum stopped smiling. "Look, those Pyongyang people care only about their own power," he continued. "You were being raised to be one of their military officers, not because you were

good but because you obeyed. But whether you saw it or not, your job, if you had been successful in becoming a general, would have been to protect their interests, no doubt about it. And one of their interests is to suppress people like me.”

I didn't want to think anymore. I had a pounding headache.

“Let's go to the market,” I said with a sigh. “Let's just get on with it.”

I SKIRTED AROUND VENDORS AND THE WOMEN HAWKING their steamed bread and candies, struggling to follow Young-bum through the market. He was very quick on his feet.

At midmorning, when the market was at its most crowded and the din of people bartering over prices was at its loudest, Young-bum stopped and flicked his fingers, indicating for me to stand back. I did and then followed him with my eyes. He was on the tail of a middle-aged woman carrying a plate of steaming buns. A fabric bag, similar to my own and stitched together from old clothes, was slung over her shoulders and fell low by her side.

I didn't move as Young-bum stalked her like a wolf does a wapiti. When he was right behind her, he used that double-bladed razor to slice a hole in the front of her bag. He then slipped his slender fingers into the bag and drew out some contents, including a small purse. He then spun around on his heels and walked back toward me. As he passed me, he didn't make eye contact, but I could see the corners of his lips go up in a weak smile. He

kept right on walking like the other *kotjebi* thief had, out of the market, nonchalantly, as if he hadn't just stolen from someone.

My mouth watered looking around at all the food: dried pollock from the East Sea, kimchi laid out in paper bowls, and rice cakes with sesame seeds, the aroma of which made me remember my recurring dream of *abeoji's* return from China. I soon started to feel weak again, this time not from my illness but from hunger. I'd learned something about hunger in the past year. After a certain point, I didn't feel it as a burning ache anymore. Rather, my body just didn't do what I asked it to do.

I slapped my cheeks to stop myself from passing out. "Get a grip," I scolded myself. I took a few deep breaths to get the energy moving through me. I then imitated Young-bum's steady, swift walk through the market, confident, as if I were either selling or buying, not about to steal. I approached an older, toothless man displaying electrical wires. On the table, off to the side, were candies placed in small envelopes.

The man was engrossed in fixing what looked like a radio. I moved toward his table as if I were just passing by.

He didn't look up. He didn't even notice me.

Not even slowing down, I slid my hand out to the side and whisked the candies into the pockets of my pants, Young-bum's old school uniform. I didn't turn around to see if the man had seen. I kept moving, not fast, just steady, to where I had spent most of my first day at the market; the cardboard I had sat on

still remained on the ground. I bent over to collect my breath and steady my nerves, all the while scanning the crowd for my next victim.

The woman who had given me the bun and told me I was *kot-jebi* was at the same spot.

I started to move toward her, hoping now that my swelling had gone down a bit, she wouldn't recognize me. As my luck would have it, just as I reached her table, another woman approached her to buy some eggs. I snuck around the back as the two women argued over the price. I lifted the netting with the flies gripping the top, grabbed three buns, and stuffed them into the fold of my shirt.

I was nearly back to the cardboard box on the ground when I felt a heavy hand come down on my back, nearly knocking the wind out of me. The hand spun me around quickly, making me feel dizzy. I looked up and into the cold stare of a middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair. He wrapped his long crooked fingers around my throat. "Put them back," he said, sticking his foul-smelling mouth up close to my face.

I shook my head no.

His fingers dug hard into my flesh, and I felt my feet lifting off the ground. I saw stars and moving lights, and I began to gag. I heard the sound of running feet and then saw the female vendor's face and her wild, bloodshot eyes. She slapped at me with her calloused hands, ripping into my bare skin. I knew I was about to black out from lack of air when all of a sudden a force grew up

from inside me. I saw myself not in the market but facing my tae kwon do master.

I kicked the man in his groin and then butted his head hard against mine. He tumbled backward, letting go of me as he fell to the ground. I started to trip, too, but I quickly found my footing, jumped up, and kicked the woman in the stomach. She fell backward and to the ground, too.

I then walked out of the market toward Ha-myeon Bridge, looking back as I did to make sure I wasn't being followed.

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While I held a damp cloth, which I had dipped in the river, on the swollen nose I got from head-butting the man, Youngbum discussed strategies for my stealing the next time around. The first rule was to never return to the same safe spot, which I had done when I went back to the cardboard box. He criticized me. "Merchants know where you're headed when you do that. Go toward the train station. After you steal, walk normally, as if you haven't done anything wrong, and surround yourself with lots of people."

As we talked, another idea came to me, which I told Youngbum after he finished laying into me about my mistakes.

The next day, when we headed to the market, we decided to try it to see if it would work.

At midmorning, when the market was at its busiest, Youngbum and I sauntered up close behind a woman who had a bag

slung over her shoulder. Young-bum cut a hole in the bottom of her sack—not on the side, as he had been doing. The contents of the woman's bag fell into his own, contents that included not just her wallet or small purse but also small packages of food. I then slipped a brick into the woman's bag and fastened the fabric back together with safety pins ever so carefully so she wouldn't feel any pressure and catch me in the act. The victim, who was talking to a vendor, didn't even catch on that she'd been robbed.

"It works," I whispered as we crossed Ha-myeon Bridge. I felt both pride as well as sadness at our success, for I was now a thief, having stolen not just a piece of bread but won.

Young-bum glowed like the sun. "It really does! Now I can take twice as much, if not three or four times more than I ever could before. We'll be rich!" he said, jumping up and down as I had done at my birthday parties in Pyongyang when *eomeoni* served cake. "We can eat the food and sell what we don't need. You're brilliant!"

"So . . . we're a team, then?" I asked, holding my hand out for him to shake.

"We're a team," he said, taking it.

EVERY EVENING FOR THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, AFTER Young-bum and I had finished at the market, he returned to his home to feed his grandmother. I went to my own house to check in, hoping—no, daydreaming—that when I opened the door,

someone would be there, praying over her bowl of fresh well water. Every day, though, I'd find the house empty, growing lonelier, like an abandoned amusement park, hollow and haunted like some of the people I'd see in the market. The house was collecting dust, cobwebs, a family of field mice, and lots of cockroaches.

Every day, Young-bum and I stole twisted bread sticks, candies, *dububab*, and won. With the won, we bought his grandmother's medicine and then white rice and soybean paste, which he would cook into meals for his grandmother. With all the food she was now eating and the proper doses of medicine she was getting, her health slowly improved. By the start of harvest season, she started spending her days sitting up, and soon she was standing. By the middle of the fall, she'd even awake before Young-bum and me and prepare us a meal of corn rice and vegetable porridge. As we'd eat, she'd tell us stories about what Joseon was like before Kim Il-sung. "It was a terrible time when the Japanese made slaves of us all. If you think now is tough . . .," she would always say, ending her sentence by clicking her tongue: "*Tsk, tsk.*" While she didn't come right out and say it, Young-bum and I both knew she was saying we should bear our hardships the way our eternal leader had borne his. Hunker down like Kim Il-sung did in the *Learning Journey of a Thousand Miles*.

Young-bum and I pretended to listen, but we'd heard enough of these stories in school. "The past doesn't feed us," Young-bum would say as we'd walk the road to the market.

I realized after spending nearly all my time with Young-bum that when he had chanted for the prisoners to be executed, he wasn't doing so because he believed they should be killed. He was putting on a show so the principal and the *so-nyon-dan* manager wouldn't think he was a criminal, too. Truth: I don't think Young-bum believed in anything anymore, least of all in Joseon. He believed in survival, plain and simple. His grandmother's and his own.

I was in the middle somewhere between them, trying to find my way out of a murky bog, no longer believing in a lot that our eternal leader, his son, or our country had ever told me, but also not wanting to believe yet that life was the survival of the strongest street boy. I wanted to believe in my mother's prayer bowl, in Chilseong, *shan-shin-ryong-nim* . . . that something higher and good was also at play.

THE HARVEST MOON CAME AND WENT. AS THE COOLER weather moved around us, Young-bum and I began to worry about the winter. We both felt we should try to steal more money and more vegetables to store in his grandmother's underground cooler, as well as blankets and firewood. Young-bum suggested we pick the pockets of passengers at the train station, from the few people who still had jobs and earned won. "The people working will certainly have more won than those poor women at the market," he said. "We should try."

At first, I resisted the idea, fearful of running into a *kotjebi* gang, like the one I'd watched on my very first day in the market. I didn't want to get beat up as Young-bum had.

"I'm afraid, too," Young-bum replied when I voiced my concern. "My old gang, the *Jjacdari-pa*, worked out of the train station, and yeah, if they saw me there stealing, they'd try to kill me. They've moved on to another city, though—at least, the last I heard. I think we're safe. I promise if I see any of my former gang members . . ."

I had stopped listening. Something was playing over and over again in my mind. "Young-bum," I finally interrupted him, "what do you think about you and me joining a gang? I mean, if we formed our own gang, found some other *kotjebi*, and made our own rules, then we'd be in control."

Young-bum looked at me as if it were Kim Il-sung's birthday and pork was being rationed out to everyone. He patted me on the back. "Great idea. I may even know the guys who can do this with us," he said with a grin.

WE HEADED STRAIGHT TO THE TRAIN STATION'S WAITING room. There were about two hundred people, true enough, but most of them were *degeori*, merchants who sold their goods from town to town, and other *kotjebi*. The merchants were just as poor as we were, and we *kotjebi* gave each other the evil eye, hoping to intimidate one another. A few of the harder, bigger *kotjebi* belted

their fists into the palms of their hands, indicating they wanted to fight Young-bum and me. They'd make a move as if they were about to pounce on us, but then the police would arrive to check the room. The policemen's ice-cold eyes would linger on each *kotjebi*. While no words were exchanged, I knew what the police were thinking: *Try anything, steal, fight . . . and off to the guhoso you will go.*

As morning slipped its way into the afternoon, Young-bum's patience began to wear. He started to pace back and forth and sigh. Finally, he took a deep breath and bravely approached one of the police officers, asking when the train was due in. The officer looked away, wanting nothing to do with him, which was better than his wanting to arrest Young-bum.

Young-bum pressed on, however, explaining that he was waiting for his grandmother, who was coming in on the next train. "I'm not like these other boys," Young-bum said to the man, his eyes moving around the room. "I think they're *kotjebi*," he whispered, and then scrunched up his face, as if he had just eaten something sour. "I just want to see my grandmother and take her to my mother, who is sick."

"You'll have a long wait," the officer snapped, and then stormed off without giving an explanation.

We were still waiting when the room grew darker and the cream marble floor became streaked in long shadows. Twilight had begun to wrap itself around us.

I was frustrated now, too, with no food or money to show for our day.

Just as I was about to drag Young-bum out of there and to the market to at least find some bread sticks for dinner, the policeman with whom Young-bum had spoken moved to the center of the room. He cupped his hands together to act as a bullhorn and announced that the train wasn't coming today. "There's no electricity," he said. "The train is stuck somewhere between Kimchaek and Gilju."

I kicked Young-bum hard in the shin. "This was such a bad idea," I said with a scowl, watching as the crowd of *kotjebi* began to disperse. If we didn't hurry, they'd get to the market before us and steal whatever was still out, leaving us and Young-bum's grandmother hungry.

We took a shortcut, heading along the platform to try to get to the market before the other *kotjebi*. As we neared the end, I heard "The sound of thunder at Jong-Il peak" lines from the *Boy General* song, sung by that voice with the cascading falsetto that I knew belonged to Sangchul.

Young-bum and I pushed our way through the crowd that had gathered around Sangchul on the grassy knoll at the end of the platform, a crowd full of odors of unclean clothes, hair, and bodies. When we reached the front, we could see Sangchul standing in the middle of this circle of people. Min-gook and two boys I

recognized from our class but whose names I didn't know were collecting won and food from the audience.

"That's Myeongchul and Unsik," Young-bum whispered to me. "Sangchul and Myeongchul are street performers. They put on plays and sing songs. Myeongchul is the actor. He won competitions in theater."

"Did you know they were here?"

"I thought they might be here," he hummed. He then turned, started tapping his foot, and looked at me with wide eyes.

"Are we thinking the same thing?" I asked.

"I hope so," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"Here's our gang!"

The six of us sat on the ground with our backs against the chipped stone wall, facing the empty platform. We had just gone to the market with the money they'd earned performing and bought a dinner of noodles made from corn as well as some food for Young-bum's grandmother.

Night had now fallen, and all around us were drunken men and a few women. The men would shout at one another, slurring their words. The women skulked around and asked in hushed voices: "Anyone want a nightflower? A nightflower?"

I made a mental note to ask Young-bum what *nightflower* meant, as this was the second time I'd heard the word.

Sangchul and the others didn't seem to care about the chaos around them. We began to talk about our parents. Those who hadn't died were missing, having gone in search of food like my mother and father. The boys had found a way to earn enough

money to buy food by performing on the street. Myeongchul, who took over the talking from Sangchul, explained that he put on skits based on Kim Il-sung's books. After Myeongchul performed, Sangchul would sing, usually partisan songs such as "We Are Kid Scouts."

"We are brave because we're kid scouts.

*Even though there are storms out there blocking us,
we are brave.*

We pay back our enemies, a thousand times . . ."

We all sang together.

Min-gook and Unsik were the heavies, as Myeongchul described them, collecting money from the spectators. The boys all slept at the train station in the waiting room when it was really cold or outside when it was warmer.

"Chulho thinks our fathers are stuck in China," Myeongchul said.

"Chulho thinks they'll come back in the winter," Sangchul jumped in, "when the river turns to ice and it's too cold for the guards to be out for long and our parents can run across the river, rather than swim."

Chulho, Chulho, Chulho. He might not have been there in person, but he sure didn't feel that far away, either. "Where is the infamous Chulho?" I finally cut in.

"Ah, he's mushroom hunting," Myeongchul said with a laugh. "He's somewhere in the hills, picking the government's prized mushrooms and selling them to smugglers who take them into China to sell. Chulho has seen and done it all."

"Chulho told us that most adults now need permits to take trains, even for single stops, and the government isn't giving out many anymore," Sangchul added. "Kids, of course, have to be with their parents and have their birth certificates on them all the time to prove that their parents really are their parents. So I figure my parents are stuck right where they are, waiting for permits."

"Yeah," I said wistfully, looking off into the flames of a fire that some men were tending near the grassy knoll where Sangchul sang earlier in the day. "I bet my mom is waiting for a permit." I could see her now in my mind's eye, stuck in Wonsan with Aunt Nampo, waiting to return to me. Instead of focusing on my own suffering, I realized for the first time that *comeoni* must be worried sick about me.

I left Young-bum and the others as they arranged to meet again the next day and ran at full speed back to my house, making a list as I went of all the chores I wanted to do, including sweeping the cobwebs away and scrubbing the dust that had caked the floor. I'd spend the night, and in the morning I would wash the few remaining blankets and sheets. When *comeoni* returned, the house would sparkle. I wanted her to be proud of me.



WHEN I TURNED THE CORNER AND MY HOUSE CAME INTO view, I stopped. There was a light streaming out from the front window. My hands started to shake, and my heart pounded. "*Eomeoni* and *abeoji* are home!" I exclaimed out loud.

I crept toward the door, staring at the light, afraid that if I looked away, I'd discover it to be just a dream.

As I stepped into the house, a gust of warm air from the cooking fire rolled over me. "*Eomeoni?*" I called out.

Silence.

I looked around the room, at blankets I didn't recognize piled in one corner, tin bowls we didn't have scattered on top of a new table and shoes lined up on the mat, including several pairs of men's sneakers and two pairs of women's slippers. I blinked and felt so happy inside. "My parents are home, and they've come with lots of new things."

When I opened my eyes, though, instead of seeing *eomeoni* and *abeoji*, I was staring at the bewildered faces of two men, one my father's age, the other my grandfather's age. A middle-aged woman emerged from the back room, gripping hard the hands of two small children, a girl and a boy. In their free hands, each child was holding a children's story written by Kim Il-sung.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"Who are you?" the older man with graying hair said, taking a giant step toward me. His tone of voice was forceful but not unkind.

"I—I—I live here," I stammered.

The man replied, "Son, this house is ours. We bought it."

I clenched my fists and bit my lip to stop myself from crying. "This is my house," I said. "I . . ." I stopped suddenly. There was no more echo. The house now had things—but not my family's things. "Where are my family's belongings?" I asked.

"There wasn't much," the woman said in a sympathetic voice.

"But where are those *few* things?" I demanded.

"They've been sold," the older man said.

"You sold my things!" I exclaimed. My mind ran over all the items that were special, that I wanted, including my mother's wedding chest and her photographs.

"Where?" I said, my voice now hoarse. "Where were they sold?" *Eomeoni's* prayer bowl. I wanted that, too. And her bedding. It might still smell like her. Thoughts crashed into my mind like metal shovels hitting concrete.

"We don't know," the older man continued. "The *binjibpali* took it all away."

"*Binjibpali*?" I asked, puzzled. I'd never heard that word before, like *kotjebi* and *nightflower*.

"The broker said that it was his house and that the items belonged to him. *Binjibpali* is a person who finds empty houses like this and then sells them," the woman explained. "But in this case, the man said this was his house."

I looked down. I hadn't done a good job at holding back my

tears. They now stained my shirt, Young-bum's white button-down shirt that once had been his school uniform. "You have to get out," I said under my breath. "My parents are coming home soon. I want to clean for them."

The younger man now moved toward me. "No," he said sternly. His speech was spitting, like Chulho's. I stepped back from the force.

"We're not leaving." He faced me squarely, clenching his fists. "This is not your house, not anymore. We bought it from the owners. Now get out. And pretend you never even came here."

"I can't do that," I said, looking pleadingly into his eyes, hoping that I could get through to this man that *this was my house*.

This man, though, was colder than the police officers at the Gyeong-seong train station earlier that day.

"We have papers," he continued, "papers that say we bought this house legally."

I shook my head slowly. "But th-th-there's been a mistake," I said, stuttering again. My head throbbed. I felt both hot and cold at the same time.

The younger man started pushing me toward the door. "Get out," he spat. "Don't make us call the *Shangmoo* and have you thrown in prison."

"How . . .," I began, my voice quivering. "How will my parents find me if I'm not here?" I tried to push back, but I didn't have the strength.

The man grabbed the collar of my shirt with one hand, and with the other my waist, and heaved me out the open door. I landed on my stomach on the hard ground. He then slammed the door shut, locking it behind him.

I COULD FEEL THE *YU-RYEONG*, WHO I KNEW THRIVED IN lonely places, including those parts inside us, breathing down hard on me, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, as I walked up the road toward the forest where my father and I had hunted chipmunks and snakes.

I turned onto the dirt path leading into the woods. It was dark under the canopy of evergreen boughs and leaves, almost pitch-black the farther I went into the forest, in part because of the moonless night and the clouds rolling in. My feet sank into the mud of a shallow swamp, letting me know I had taken a turn off the path. Branches of evergreen trees ensnarled me, and burrs dug their way into my clothes and scratched my skin.

My body felt heavy. My head spun. I eventually collapsed beside a large oak tree and fell asleep.

I was awakened sometime in the middle of the night by the throaty call of a wood owl. I started to tremble from the chill of the mist moving up from the river and the dampness that seeped up from the ground. I also tingled all over from the feeling that I was not alone.

My father had told me once that owls guarded the realm where

the spirits of our ancestors now lived. I curled my body into a tight ball, my back flush against the knots of the tree trunk, and listened to the night walk of beetles and bugs.

Then I saw it. Tiny, floating soft blue and warm white lights hovering in front of me. I strained my eyes, at first thinking these were fireflies. But then I saw they weren't. They seemed to be attached to the trunk of a decaying tree that stood near me. I felt wind brushing my cheek, and the lights moved with the breeze, like a feather on top of a calm river.

"Is that you, *shan-shin-ryong-nim*?" I whispered.

My body stiffened as the sounds of the forest faded, replaced by an almost celestial silence and then the sound of distant bells.

I was dead. I had died. There was no other explanation, I thought to myself.

I exhaled and relaxed, knowing that if I were dead, there would be nothing to worry about anymore.

I tilted my head up toward the top of the tree and prayed to Chilseong.

"Please watch over *eomeoni* and *abeoji*. I know they're alive," I said out loud. "If I do manage to survive this place of the dead, have my family look for me, reunite me with them. Let us be one again. Guide me."

When I opened my eyes, I saw shadows around me. Day was beginning to win its battle against night.

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A LIGHT DRIZZLE SOON PATTED MY FACE. IGNORING MY sore joints and aching back, and with an energy I certainly didn't have the night before, I hopped up and ran back through the ferns, swamp, and thornbushes to the road and then to Young-bum's house.

I barged through the front door, huffing and excited, just as he was preparing to get an early start at the market.

"I . . . I . . .," I spluttered. I wanted to tell him about the lights, about *shan-shin-ryong-nim*. But as I stood in front of him, I changed my mind.

"Spit it out," Young-bum said. He sounded annoyed. "I thought you were meeting us at the train station, not coming here first."

"I changed my mind," I told him. "I changed my mind about everything. I want to live," I exclaimed, throwing my arms into the air.

Young-bum tilted his head to the side and eyed me suspiciously. "Have you been drinking *sool* with the men?"

"Nahhh . . . Just forget it," I chortled, waving him off. "You wouldn't understand."

Young-bum's grandmother shuffled up beside me and handed me a piece of candy. "I understand," she whispered. I looked into her eyes, which had a blue-gray smoky coat over the irises. Young-bum said she was suffering from an eye disease that a lot of old people in the countryside had. As a result of the eye disease, she couldn't see that well. I took the candy from her and bowed.

"My grandmother is going to stay with Aunt in Shang-gi-ryeong," Young-bum said as he slipped the pouch containing his razor blade into the front pocket of his bag. He then poured fresh well water into a dented tin bottle that he and I would drink from throughout the day.

"Have a good trip," I said to Young-bum's grandmother, who wouldn't stop looking at me. "Are you okay?" I finally asked her. Her intense gaze was making me feel uncomfortable.

She smiled. "I'm perfect," she said, her voice raspy, still heavy with fluid.

She then turned her stare to Young-bum. "I have something for you." She shuffled up beside him.

She passed him a package, what looked like an envelope, which he slipped into his back pocket. Then she whispered into his ear. Young-bum's eyelids drooped, and his lips trembled the way I'd seen them do when he was scared.

"Go," his grandmother said to both of us, grinning and gesturing for us to leave. "See you in Shang-gi-ryeong," she called out from the doorway as she pushed us out.

FOR A WHILE, YOUNG-BUM WAS SILENT. HE WALKED WITH his head down, his shoulders slumped, breathing heavily, as if he were carrying a great weight. I whistled "*Dondolari*," my mother's favorite folk song, as I watched some black kites swoop over the harvested fields.

“What is it?” I finally asked. I was annoyed at his moroseness when I was so happy.

“I don’t think my grandmother is coming back,” he said in a quiet voice.

“Maybe it will be better for her at your aunt’s house. We can visit her, and you can stay there, too, I’m sure.”

“No,” he said, stopping and pulling me to the side of the road. He sat down cross-legged on the ground and had me do the same. He then laid out the items from the envelope his grandmother had given him: photographs of people who I assumed were his mother, father, grandmother, and aunt.

“My grandmother said that if she and I didn’t see each other again, she wanted me to have these,” Young-bum said, floating a hand over the pictures. “She said she wanted me to be strong and look at these when I felt weak.”

I had been sailing that day, but now I was sinking again. All I could think about as Young-bum droned on was that I wished I had photographs of my family, too.

persuaded Young-bum to turn around and go to Shang-gi-ryeong with his grandmother. "She's not going to die," I repeated several times, and while Young-bum seemed reassured, by the time we parted ways he was eager to be with her.

"You're going to be the *srikoon* today," he said with a laugh, handing me the leather pouch with the razor in the front pocket.

"A *srikoon*?"

"Yeah, a *kotjebi* who steals by cutting open someone else's bag. Didn't you know that's what I was?" Young-bum chortled.

"I think all these words are make-believe. *Srikoon*, *kotjebi*, *nightflower* . . .," I said, ruffling his hair.

He winked. "On the street, we have names for everything. Good luck," he called over his shoulder. "I don't want to return to find I have to break you out of the *guhoso*."



I WENT TO THE TRAIN STATION TO SEE THE BOYS, AND WHEN I rounded the bend in the road, I found them all sitting on the chipped concrete stairs leading up to the platform. As I neared, I saw that their hair was tousled, like their clothes, and their eyes were glossy and red, as if they'd just woken up. Min-gook was stretching his legs, while Unsik and Sangchul brushed off dirt and sand from each other's shirts.

"It's always darkest under the lamp," Myeongchul announced when he saw me.

I cocked an eyebrow. "What?"

"Old Korean proverb meaning it always looks brighter somewhere else."

"And how does that pertain to me?" I quipped.

"I bet you thought we had a great life," he replied with a laugh. "But see . . . things aren't so great." He held up one of his legs to reveal a big tear in the side seam of his pants. "I got this being chased by a *Shangmoo* who thought I was homeless."

"You are homeless." I laughed. "And you like proverbs!"

"And folk stories and myths, too," he replied with a wide smile. "They say a lot about a culture."

"And what do Korean proverbs say about us?"

"Hmm," he said, scratching his chin. "That we're not airy-fairy whimsical. We're very practical. And we're very hard workers."

"Okay," I replied. "Maybe. Hey, I meant to ask you yesterday. Why do you all sleep in the train station? Why don't you go to

your homes?" I asked no one in particular as I sat down on the steps.

"Because other people live in our houses now," Sangchul answered. "Brokers sold our places to other people."

"Mine, too," I whispered, shaking my head and biting my lip as it started to quiver. I was thinking of *eomeoni* returning to find someone else in her house.

Myeongchul stood up and spread out his arms as if hugging the sun. "People are waiting for my acting, followed by Sangchul's fantabulouso singing," he announced in a deep, manlike character voice, like Cheokcheok-hal-abeoji, who narrated the stories of Kim Il-sung's childhood on TV. Sangchul stood up, slipped off his dusty loafers, and banged them against one of the concrete steps to remove some sand and small pebbles.

"Make way for the greatest singer. He's nearly ready!" Mingook shouted.

People started handing Min-gook and Unsik money as Myeongchul and Sangchul walked toward the grassy knoll by the platform. "People pay," Unsik leaned over and whispered, "just to be in the front row to watch them. You know, both Sangchul and Myeongchul were invited to perform at the Mangyeongdae Children's Palace in Pyongyang."

"Did they go?"

"No. They both had to stay here to make won for their families." Then he added, "Dreams are only for Pyongyang people."

Overhearing, Myeongchul snapped: "You only dream when you sleep. We must reap what we've sown in daylight. You watch!"

As he stepped into the middle of a circle that was forming around him, he called out, "I'm tilling the land right now for great things to happen!" He did a few steps of the shoulder dance. "The greatest art is born from adversity."

"He certainly is happy," I mused.

"He's just a fool with all his sayings," Unsik said with a sigh. "One day he'll take those blinders off his eyes and see the truth of his life."

"I think, when we stop dreaming, we're just as good as dead," I said in such a hushed voice Unsik didn't hear, which was fine by me.

Myeongchul's skit that day was about the brothers Heungbu and Nolbu. Next, Sangchul sang "We Are Kid Scouts" followed by "Let's Make Impregnable Village." When the applause for their performances had died down, but the audience remained clapping for an encore, Sangchul dragged me into the center of the circle.

"Here is the best tae kwon do performer in the country," he announced, pointing to me. "If you want to see him do very difficult kicks, donate five won to us."

"No," I protested. I hadn't done any tae kwon do patterns since I left Pyongyang. "I'm not prepared," I said, trying to move back into the crowd. But Sangchul grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

Min-gook waved a fistful of five-won notes that the audience had given him to watch me perform.

I took a deep breath.

I settled my scattered thoughts by focusing on the spot in between, but directly behind, my eyes. I then did the jump front kick, followed by the back side kick, then the jump side kick, and finally the jump turn kick. For a few seconds, I actually forgot where I was. I felt I was in a place where time didn't exist. When I neared the end of my patterns, I heard the *swoosh, swoosh* of my hands and legs slicing through the air.

When done, I bowed to such a huge applause that my ears pounded. I blushed at the attention but was also pleased, for I had found something else I could do to earn won other than be a *srikoon*.

"JOIN US," SANGCHUL SAID AS WE SAUNTERED TO THE market to buy some food with the won we'd all just earned.

"Well, I . . . I . . . I . . . actually . . . hmm," I hemmed and hawed.

"Why not?" Myeongchul asked. "And Young-bum can join us, too, if that's what you're worried about. We'd never leave him behind."

"Actually, Young-bum and I were going to ask all of you if you wanted to join us," I said with a chuckle. "You know, form a gang together."

"There are no original ideas," Myeongchul said, patting me on

the back. "At least two people somewhere in the world are thinking the same thing at the same time."

"So it's a done deal!" Unsik exclaimed.

I nodded. I then explained to them that Young-bum was caring for his sick grandmother and that he and I had to buy medicines and steal food for her, too. I also told them that Young-bum and I would sleep at his house, not at the train station. "Young-bum needs to be near his grandmother when she comes home from Shang-gi-ryeong," I said. "Her lungs sound like a forest stream, and she coughs up blood."

"I know this disease, tuberculosis. We all know someone who has died from it," Myeongchul said with a groan.

"It is the sickness of the poor and weak," Sangchul added.

We grew quiet after that, eventually spreading out when we reached the market to buy fried bread sticks and candies.

After we ate, we returned to the train station and performed three more times that day. At the end of the day, as we watched the sun set, I counted my share. I had earned more won than on my best days stealing with Young-bum. I decided to walk to Shang-gi-ryeong to tell Young-bum about our new gang.

IT WAS NEARING MIDNIGHT WHEN I REACHED THE OUTSKIRTS of Shang-gi-ryeong. I could tell by the position of the moon and Ursa Major, or Chilseong.

Shang-gi-ryeong was a strange town. A slate film, visible even

in the night, coated everything. Young-bum had told me Shang-gi-ryeong was a coal town, which explained the thick, dark cloud that it seemed to sit in. When I turned onto the main street, I stopped and looked up at a large mural of Kim Il-sung, which like the one in Gyeong-seong, was clean, like a lily floating in a bog. Lit by the moon, I could read some of the red lettering underneath: OUR GREAT LEADER IS ALWAYS WITH US.

“Indeed, he is,” I whispered out loud.

There was no sign of life; no bike against the side of a house, no rake, no broom, not even a candle set in the windowsill of one of the houses.

Young-bum’s aunt lived in a brick house off the third road to the right past the mural. I counted my steps out loud because I wanted to hear my own voice, to remind me I was still in the world of the living.

Young-bum’s aunt’s place wasn’t difficult to find; it was the only building that had a light coming from inside.

I knocked on the door, and it creaked open. Young-bum was sitting on the floor, hunched over, rocking back and forth and gripping the gray scarf his grandmother had worn around her neck when she was sick. I started to move toward him to take it, in case it contained her disease and made Young-bum sick, too. I then stopped.

Young-bum didn’t look up, and he didn’t need to tell me. His grandmother had died.

I bent down and pulled him into my arms, the way my *comeoni* had done when I scraped a knee or bruised an elbow. He buried his head in my shoulder, and we both cried like newborn babies.

I fought hard not to feel my own pain, but I couldn't. I missed *comeoni* and *abeoji*. I couldn't avoid that ache inside me that was harder to bear than even hunger. We were alone now. Our loved ones had left, taking a big hole out of us with them when they departed. At twelve years old, I now had to look after myself. I had no one to rely on to guide me to make the best decisions for my life. I had no one to come home to who would hold me and make me feel the world was safe.

"It was her heart," Young-bum coughed out. "My grandmother's heart just stopped."

"When?" I asked.

"Within a few hours of her arriving here. She just collapsed on the ground, and Aunt and I couldn't wake her."

FOR THE NEXT THREE DAYS I STAYED CLOSE TO YOUNG-BUM while Sangchul, Min-gook, Unsik, and Myeongchul worked harder than ever, performing twice as much as they usually did, to earn won to give Young-bum's grandmother a proper funeral. This included greeting all mourners with dishes of food such as fried tofu with vegetable side dishes and *sool*.

Young-bum's aunt, Mi Shun, and I set up the funeral table in the center of the main room. On top of it, Mi Shun placed a

photograph of Young-bum's grandmother, her wedding picture, in which she wore a traditional dress with *Strobilanthes oligantha* made from white tissue paper in her hair. Her cheeks, I could tell even in the black-and-white photo, had been powdered until they were white like snow. She looked beautiful.

Not many mourners came. Mi Shun told me Shang-gi-ryeong had recently had a coal-mining accident in which many workers had died. Lots of families were left without fathers, she said, and the widows moved to other towns in search of work and food. Those few who remained were mostly the old and too frail to travel. They now dug the earth for coal, which they sold at the markets.

The few mourners who did come placed below Young-bum's grandmother's picture a small white envelope containing a few won, which Mi Shun used to pay the neighbors to make a wooden coffin.

On the morning of the third day, we boys, a neighbor, and Mi Shun placed Young-bum's grandmother in the casket and then the casket in a wheelbarrow, which we pushed to the foot of a nearby mountain. We found some land overlooking the Gyeong-seong River that hadn't been used as a grave yet and dug a hole in the earth, using metal spades. Mi Shun burned the few belongings Young-bum's grandmother had, including her clothes and wedding chest. As I placed rice and kimchi around the grave so that Young-bum's grandmother would have food in the afterlife, I remembered

something else about Pyongyang. I had asked my mother after we visited Mansudae Hill after Kim Il-sung's death where we went when we died.

"The afterlife," she replied, "where there is no fear, no hunger, no sickness."

I was glad, as I bowed the customary three times, that Young-bum's grandmother was going to that place.

WE RETURNED TO YOUNG-BUM'S HOUSE IN GYEONG-SEONG, and just as all of us boys, who were now living there, were talking, Chulho showed up carrying a bouquet of wilting orange osmanthus, which he said he got from a smuggler crossing the Duman River. "For your grandmother's grave," he said, handing them to Young-bum. "I'm sorry they're not white," he said so politely I was startled for a moment. I had never heard Chulho be soft or kind before. "And these are also for you," he continued, handing Young-bum a small white paper box.

Perhaps surprised, too, at Chulho's sudden gentleness, Young-bum opened the box slowly and with shaking hands, as if expecting something like a snake to pop out.

When he peered in at the contents, his face opened into a wide grin. He squealed and jumped up and down.

We huddled around him and looked, too. Inside were moon cakes.

"Where did you get these?" I asked, stepping away.

"In China, cakes like these are sold at bake shops," he replied. "Can you believe it? The Chinese eat cake every day!"

Young-bum passed around the box. We each picked out a moon cake to eat.

"They have so much food in China they give rice with pork and chicken to their dogs to fatten them up to eat," Chulho continued, sitting down and uncorking a bottle of *sool* that had been left over from Mi Shun's house. He then started drinking it right from the bottle.

"What are you going to do next?" Myeongchul asked, sitting down beside Chulho. Chulho passed him a cigarette, which Myeongchul lit and smoked.

I looked on with disbelieving eyes. Boys don't drink alcohol or smoke.

Chulho shrugged. "I don't know what I'll do next," he said, leaning back. "Mushroom season is over . . . What are you all going to do?"

No one spoke.

I sat down on the other side of Chulho. "Well . . .," I began slowly, my eyes circling the others. I wanted for one of them to jump in, but no one was volunteering. I took a deep breath. "Well, I guess, even though we don't have any blood relationship, we're brothers and family now . . ."

Chulho tilted his head to the side to get a better look at me and then cocked an eyebrow. "Go on," he said.

"I guess . . . as brothers . . . we have to protect and trust one another and share everything, even a small piece of bread," I continued, again looking into the eyes of the others to see if any of them, particularly Myeongchul, wanted to take over. "If one of us falls sick, we have to take care of him until he gets better," I said. "If one of us is left alone somewhere, we have to find him. We will never fight against each other. These," I finished, "are the rules."

"So you're a gang?" Chulho said matter-of-factly.

The others all nodded. I breathed a sigh of relief, for I had made up the rules on the spot, hoping everyone would agree.

"Then I'm in," Chulho said, thrusting his fist in front of him and into the middle of the circle we had formed. We all did the same until our knuckles were flush up against one another's. "You need someone like me," Chulho added. "Every gang has to have the wild card. The guy who doesn't care whether he lives or dies."

"As the old Korean proverb says: We all scratch where one itches," Myeongchul said.

We laughed.

Chulho passed the *sool* to Myeongchul, who took a long swig and then passed the bottle to Sangchul. When it got to me, I picked up the bottle and held it to my mouth.

"Drink, drink," Young-bum and Chulho chanted.

I gingerly took a sip. The liquid burned my throat as it went down and made my head feel as if it were on fire. I felt for a moment like I was going to vomit.

Chulho grinned. "The first time is always hard," he said.

"Like watching the first execution," Young-bum had to remind me.

"It gets easier," Chulho said, taking the bottle back.

As the bottle, and then another, made itself around the room that night, that hole inside of me seemed to fill up with something. I began to laugh, feeling carefree, like a butterfly flitting from one flower to another. For a bit, I didn't feel so alone.

My brothers and I drained the last two bottles of *sool* from Young-bum's grandmother's funeral. We saw the sun come up on the tail end of our day. I was staggering, slurring my words, and hugging my new brothers, not wanting to let them go or to surrender to sleep and find that the night had become day again, a gray day in which I burned inside not from *sool* but from knowing that my parents were gone and I was a *kotjebi*, a street boy with no home.