

wasn't allowed to switch classes to be exposed to a harder curriculum. For one, this class was apparently the most difficult in the school and had the top students, which I found hard to believe. My father said he would discuss with our block party leader if there were some activities I could do outside of school to further my studies. In the meantime, I stayed away from these Young-bum and Chulho characters, reading my textbooks during breaks and running right home from school at lunch and at the end of the day. I was sure the boys were not serious about what they had said to me. Yet why would they lie? Was it to test me? To see if I was strong and would continue to support the regime under interrogation?

While I waited for *comeoni* to return from her job on a government farm, I collected wood and twigs for the fire, and water, in a large metal bucket, from the well. I had food every day, good food, from sticky rice with kidney beans and vegetables to fried tofu

and kimchi. Life up here was just fine, I thought on some days, although I missed watching *Boy General* on television because we didn't have a TV. Even if we did, the electricity was turned on only for special occasions. I missed Bo-Cho and my *sojo*. *Our eternal father sacrificed much more than I am*, I reminded myself when I felt sad. *This is all a test of my willpower, and I will be strong.*

Spring soon came. The hills and fields became dotted with red and yellow azaleas, and geese called out to me from above, announcing that they were on their way home from their own winter vacations.

Just before biology class a few weeks after Kim Il-sung's birthday, Young-bum skidded his chair and jumpy body beside mine and whispered, "We're going to an execution tomorrow."

I stared at him for the longest time, not sure if I had heard him correctly. I wondered if he was just testing me again.

"A what?" I finally asked, deciding I'd feign that I hadn't quite made out what he'd said.

"An execution. Where the government kills people." Chulho joined us, squeezing his thin frame in between Young-bum's and mine. "Don't tell me you proper people in Pyongyang don't execute people who commit crimes?"

"No!" I wanted to shout out at him. But I didn't. I said nothing.

"Or maybe no one in Pyongyang does anything wrong?" Young-bum interrupted, cocking his head and smiling, revealing a newly missing tooth.

“It’s because they have the amusement park. People in Pyongyang don’t do anything wrong because they’re always happy,” Chulho said with a scowl. “Isn’t that right, fancy-pants Pyongyang boy?”

“What happened to your tooth?” I asked Young-bum, hoping to change the subject. I knew there was no way we would go to an execution. Joseon didn’t kill people. The government just sent people who were bad to labor or political prison camps.

“Got in a fight. Lost it,” he said matter-of-factly, drawing his tongue over the gap in his teeth. He seemed actually proud to have lost a tooth.

“Oh,” I replied. I wanted to ask him more. Boys also don’t fight unless it was in the *sojo*, and I knew from my father that there were no tae kwon do clubs in Gyeong-seong. Nothing these two boys said made sense.

“You still don’t get it,” Chulho said. “Life isn’t good here. Ask your dad where he goes every day. Ask him what it’s like in that factory of his.”

“I’ll do that,” I snapped. What I really wanted to say to this guy was “Leave me alone.”

I ARRIVED AT SCHOOL THE NEXT MORNING AND TOOK MY place at the front of the assembly. As school captain, my job was to ensure that the entire student body stood in straight lines and at attention, saluting the national flag of Joseon, followed by

pledging allegiance that we would always be prepared to fight for our country. Beside me stood Young-bum, holding a pole with the school flag tied to the end. On our left arms, he and I wore bands indicating our school ranks. My band had three red lines and three stars because I was student president. His had three red lines and one star because he had a lower ranking.

As school captain, I was responsible for many things, including taking attendance. I walked down the lines of students, stiff-backed and knees bending high as if I were marching in a military parade, collecting the number of students from each class's leader, or *boon-dan-we-won-jang*. Then I returned to my place at the front of the assembly and called out: "All students' attention to the manager."

Then, to the *so-nyon-dan* manager, I said: "So-nyon-dan, two hundred students out of a total of three hundred are gathered in front of you."

"Stand at ease," the *so-nyon-dan* manager said to me.

"Stand at ease!" I hollered to the classes.

"Young-bum," I leaned toward him and whispered. "Where have all the students gone? This week we've lost another twenty."

"Hmm," he hummed, watching his flag droop. There was no wind. "I think they're trading their textbooks and clothes at markets in nearby towns or they've moved to another city so their parents can find food."

"Oh." I laughed out loud. I got it finally. "I guess these children

and their families must have done something wrong against the government, like give military secrets to the South. That's why they've been abandoned and have no food. That's why some people up here have to eat squirrel. Thank you for clarifying," I said to Young-bum.

I turned my attention back to the students standing in front of me, smug in the knowledge that I'd finally figured out why Chulho and Young-bum say life is so terrible up here. It's because people outside Pyongyang *are bad*.

"Psst! Psst!" Young-bum hissed. I turned slowly and looked at him. "Do you really believe that?" he asked with real surprise in his voice.

"Yes," I replied with a nod, my tone of voice confident and assured.

"Today, students, we are going to an execution," the *so-nyon-dan* manager announced into a bullhorn with no emotion, almost casually, as if an execution were something the students went to regularly.

I jumped, both at the sudden noise of the bullhorn and at what was said.

Young-bum leaned over and whispered to me, "Today, your real-life education begins."

The *boon-dan-we-won-jang* called the classes to attention. When we set off on our march, I trailed behind the *so-nyon-dan* manager, and in order of age, from youngest to oldest, the rest of

the school followed me. As we marched, the students sang songs about the great leader, Kim Il-sung, and Kim Jong-il. They sang loudly, sometimes shouting, so much so that my ears began to ring. Every now and then I could hear Sangchul's voice above the others. Surprising me, though, I could also hear Young-bum belting out the lyrics in a contralto octave, as if he were the *buk* in an off-tune symphony orchestra.

THE SO-NYON-DAN MANAGER HAD ME STOP ON THE BANK of the Gyeong-seong River, not far from the Ryongcheon railroad bridge. We joined hundreds of students from other schools as well as adults, many standing on tiptoe and facing what appeared to be two poles. A policeman had me lead my school to the front, where he instructed me to tell the others to sit on a dry patch of ground that was covered in pebbles and dust.

To the left was a white tent, on the front of which was Joseon's national emblem, which included pictures of Sup'ung Dam and Baekdu Mountain, a beam of light, and a five-pointed red star. The two long poles were in front of me. On the right was a table, on top of which were photographs framed in gold of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. When the sun's rays hit the picture frames, beams of light fanned out into the crowd, making me feel as if our eternal leaders were there with us, watching.

"Be a man!" Young-bum, still beside me, mumbled into my ear. "Don't look away. The first execution will be the hardest. After

that, you'll get used to seeing death." He then laughed under his breath, a sinister cackle, as if he were the village idiot laughing at his own joke.

I remained stone-faced. I had no idea what was going on.

A gruff-looking police officer called us to attention by speaking into the bullhorn, introducing the judge, who walked to the center of the makeshift stage. The judge took the bullhorn from the police officer and called out a name.

My eyes moved to some fluttering behind the white tent. Two police officers finally emerged, each holding an arm of a middle-aged man whose hands were tied together by a piece of rough-looking rope. The man, who I guessed was the criminal, had skin the color of rock, and his legs were no bigger than a small child's. His body trembled as the policemen used more rope to tie him by his torso and legs to the pole. When the policemen stepped away, the man stared into the sky, and urine dripped down one of the legs of his pants and onto his bare feet.

The judge listed the man's crimes, the main one of which was that he had stolen copper and electrical wire from a local factory and was caught trying to cross the Duman River into China with the goods. The judge said the man had committed high treason, and for that, the prisoner was sentenced to death.

Bang, bang, bang.

Bang, bang, bang.

Bang, bang, bang.

The nine gunshots came from out of nowhere, fired by three police officers who I hadn't even noticed had taken positions close to me. Each of them shot the prisoner three times. The first pistol was aimed at the man's chest, the second at his abdomen or legs, the third at his head.

I jumped so high Young-bum reached over and held me down so I wouldn't do it again. I pinched my eyes tightly shut, but Young-bum said I needed to watch. "The police and the *so-nyon-dan* manager will think you're a traitor if you don't," he hissed.

I stared at this so-called criminal, his head hanging on his chest, his body crumpling under his weight, pools of blood bubbling up under his clothes and spreading out at his feet like a tide creeping in.

"See, even in death, the criminal has to bow down to the government," Young-bum whispered to me. "It's a lesson to us all: Don't commit crimes."

I looked at the three policemen who had shot him. They were reloading their pistols.

Next, police officers dragged a woman with shorn hair who looked about my mother's age toward the other pole. A dirty white cloth was dangling from her mouth, and her eyes were wild, darting back and forth, as if she were the tiger at the Pyongyang zoo. Someone in the crowd shouted, "Traitor!" and soon Chulho and Young-bum led a chorus of students chanting, "Traitor. Spy. We have to kill you! Kill you! All of you!"

The judge called into the bullhorn to get the crowd to quiet down. I wanted to cover my ears so I didn't have to hear these words or the bullets crack and whiz through the air again. I wanted to wake up and find myself back in Pyongyang, under my cotton sheets, knowing Bo-Cho was asleep in his doghouse—which wasn't much smaller than the house I lived in now. I wanted to return to my home city, with its palaces that glittered in the sunlight; its theaters, bronze monuments, skating rinks, hotels, and exhibition halls that rose up from the ground and lifted us all up, too—a city in the sky, that's what I thought of Pyongyang. Pyongyang, with its fountains, amusement park, forests . . . and silver escalators in the metro, polished every day by workers. In Pyongyang, everything about life was precise and known. And in Pyongyang, I had been taught that treason meant a person had sold Joseon secrets to the South or to the Americans, secrets that could put us all back to where we were under the Japanese: ruled by foreigners and oppressed. Treason meant the person and his or her family had to live in a labor or political prison camp. Our government didn't kill people . . .

“. . . met a South Korean Christian missionary in China, who was helping her plan to escape to the South.” The judge's words dug into me, his words about this woman slumping now in front of me, tied to the second stake, this woman with saliva frothing from her mouth, this woman wearing torn and dirty pants and a top that was just a darker shade of her dirty and malnourished

skin. "Chinese police discovered her before she could leave and deported her to Joseon, where she stands before you . . ."

"Treason!" someone called out from the crowd.

This time, the sound of the guns' aftershock dug deep into my eardrums, causing a buzzing in my head. Sounds became muffled. I could see Young-bum's and Chulho's lips moving, but their voices sounded as if they were underwater.

I felt dizzy and sick.

By the time I flung open the front door to my house, I was short of breath, still dizzy and nauseous, and feeling as though I was about to pass out. At least my hearing had come back. I knew this because I heard my classmates shouting goodbye and “Great execution” to one another as we went to our various homes for lunch.

I lay down on my mat, gasping for air.

“What happened?” my mother asked.

I jumped, despite her voice that cooed softly like a dove’s.

“Shush, shush,” she said, sitting down beside me and rubbing my forehead.

“Y-y-you’re home early,” I spluttered.

“What’s the matter? You’re upset about something?”

“I . . . at school . . . I . . . ,” I began, but I wasn’t clear. I was

struggling to breathe, taking in big gulps of air. "We went . . . to . . . an execution . . .," I somehow eventually managed to get out.

My mother moaned and knelt down beside me. "Your father and I wanted to protect you from that," she said, her voice heavy, as if a rain cloud had moved on top of her.

"Why didn't we see these things in Pyongyang?"

My mother shook her head.

"Why didn't you tell me people were being executed out in public like this, for crimes . . . that seem so . . ."

"Petty?" she asked. I nodded. "Your father and I wanted to protect you," she repeated.

"What else are you protecting me from?"

My mother shook her head again. "Nothing," she whispered, but I didn't believe her.

"Is it true what the boys at school say? Is Joseon starving? Are people doing things—wrong things—because they're desperate to eat?"

My mother's eyes filled with tears. She tried to look away, but I touched her face ever so lightly, enough to force her to look at me.

"Tell me the truth."

"Yes," my mother muttered.

"But we have food!" *Lots of food*, I thought.

"Only because we have won that your father has saved from Pyongyang." I could hear the knot in her throat as she talked. I

could feel the knot in mine forming. I wanted to believe Chulho and Young-bum were the ones lying, not my parents.

I studied my mother's face: her eyes, which were lined in dark circles and creased in the corners with wrinkles she didn't have a few months earlier; her cheeks, which were sinking into her mouth, making her cheekbones look severe. She was no longer young or like that sunset. Something about her was changing.

"Your father didn't want you to know," she said slowly, covering her mouth and talking in a low voice. "He wanted you to feel safe. He's buying food at the markets with won he saved from his job in Pyongyang."

I heard heavy footsteps approaching the front door. "*Abeoji!*" I exclaimed. "*Eomeoni*, I need to know. Please tell me. We're not on vacation. Why did we leave Pyongyang?"

"Don't tell him we spoke," my mother whispered, ignoring my question. She jumped up, wiped her eyes, and smoothed down her black cotton top and slacks. "Men in Joseon are measured by their position and loyalty to the government," she said as she pulled me to my feet and brushed my hair with her fingers. "Your father is seen as a failure now. But he can bear all those bad looks and all the gossip . . . He can bear it all, except for one thing."

"What?" I whispered as we heard the door latch.

"The thought of you thinking of him as a failure, too," she whispered back.



EVERY TIME I NEARED SLEEP, THE IMAGE OF ONE OF THE dead prisoners popped into my head. I'd hear the gunshots as if I were still on the execution field, and I'd sit bolt upright. All I could think about was what my father could have possibly done to lead to his fall from a very tall ladder. He didn't travel, at least not in the past few years, so there was no way he could have told our enemies military secrets. He went to work every weekday; he took part in all his required party activities. He loved and was devoted to Joseon.

"What did he do?" I found myself asking out loud.

The next day at school, I was so tired I wanted to slip under my desk and sleep. I pinched my legs hard to wake myself up. Young-bum noticed, leaned over, and asked me if I was all right. I waved him off. I didn't want him to know that I was confused and upset and that, well, maybe he and Chulho had been telling me the truth all along.

AS THE WEEKS WORE ON, I BEGAN TO SIT AND LISTEN TO Chulho, Young-bum, and their friends during our breaks, hearing about their struggles to find food. Chulho talked about how the forests were a great place to catch chipmunks. "There are so many," he said, "that no matter how many hungry people trample the ground up there, there are always more chipmunks."

"And they taste like chicken," Young-bum said, beaming.

I shuddered.

I was pretending to read my book when I overheard Youngbum tell some of the boys at school that his mother had died and that his father had left a few months earlier in search of food. He hadn't returned.

Every week when I took attendance as student council president, at least five more children had disappeared. Some I saw return a few days or weeks later. Most never showed up again, though.

One day, when the azaleas had begun to wilt and the begonias now colored the grasses, Chulho and I found ourselves alone together under a giant weeping willow on the school grounds. I put down my textbook about Kim Il-sung's childhood that I wasn't really reading anyway and asked him haphazardly if he knew where the students were going.

"Some of the girls are being married off to old Chinese men—some old enough to be their grandfathers," he replied in a tone of voice that made me feel as though I were the only one who didn't know this.

"Why?" I asked. I was finally going to take his bait. I was finally prepared to hear his stories. Believe them, though? That was something else.

"Families can get a lot of won for selling girls to Chinese men. The family might even get food sent back across the border if the husband is good."

Chulho then spat a huge gob of saliva as far as he could.

“And what about the boys?” I asked, spitting, too, trying to act cool.

“They become slave laborers on farms or in mines in China . . . farms and mines owned by Koreans—Koreans who have lived in China since before the Japanese army invaded the Korean Peninsula.”

“Huh,” I said, scratching my forehead. I was thinking to myself, *Shouldn't these Korean people in China be nicer to Koreans coming from here?*

“You do know that there are many Koreans in China, families and descendants of people who moved there during the Japanese era, right? Kim Il-sung started his guerrilla army in China, you know. Those Korean people the Chinese government considers citizens,” Chulho pressed on, as if reading my mind and knowing what I was thinking. “But Koreans coming from Joseon . . . the Chinese view them as criminals. Chinese police hunt us down, beat us up, and then send us back to Joseon, where we're beaten again and sent to jails and . . .” His voice trailed off. He pursed his lips and shook his head slowly. “The Chinese hate us,” he eventually continued. “We're like rats to them. They do everything they can to exterminate us if we step over onto their side of the border. In fact, everyone hates us—the West, the South, even Pyongyang. Those fat people in the capital would like to pretend everyone outside the city doesn't exist.”

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. I was book-

smart. But the truth? If what Chulho said was half true, I knew nothing.

“Lots of people outside of Pyongyang are now trying to go to China to connect with family who have lived there since before liberation,” Chulho continued, as if somehow he knew to just keep talking, to give me more information, that he was my new teacher. “Joseon people trade things, like dried pollack and squid from the coast, dried herbs, mushrooms, and metal. If they can sell enough, earn enough won in China, they can live a good life in North Korea, bribing police and border guards to let them go back and forth across the river. They can even start regular businesses. It’s only the poor who are doomed in Joseon. The poor who can’t afford to bribe officials. It’s the poor we see executed. Never the rich.”

Chulho and I sat for a long while in silence. At one point I closed my eyes and tilted my head up to catch the warm rays of the sun. As I did so, I listened to the calls of some thrush and starlings. I thought of *eomeoni* and *abeoji* and when they took me to the State Symphony Orchestra at the Grand Theater in Pyongyang. As I drifted further into my thoughts, I could even hear the violin concerto dedicated to our eternal father that played that night.

For a moment, just a brief moment, I forgot where I was and realized I didn’t remember much of Pyongyang, except things like going to the symphony. In fact, I wondered if I’d ever lived there at all, even though I’d been here, in Gyeong-seong, for only a few

months. But then I remembered something about Pyongyang, making it real again. One midsummer, when I was maybe six, my maternal grandfather, *hal-abeoji*, stayed with us. One afternoon, when the sky turned black and the air suddenly stopped moving, he said to me: "Have you not noticed that right before a storm, the leaves stop wrestling against the wind, the birds no longer sing their lullabies, and time stops moving forward?" Before I could answer, thunder groaned in the distance, and lightning flashed across the sky.

THE WISTFUL, HAZY DAYS OF SUMMER SOON FELL OVER Gyeong-seong. At first, I was too intoxicated by the heat and humidity and the country scents of leaves and fresh-cut grasses to notice that our meals had largely become cheap corn rice.

I realized for the first time that I was hungry when the August full moon hung low in the sky. I was on school holiday, not doing much of anything except listening to Chulho and Young-bum. My father had taken a break from work, too, and I went with him as he met with neighbors and hiked the forest paths.

An ache had formed in my stomach, a wanting, a yearning, a desire that could not be filled. As I'd lick my bowls dry of all broth, my insides were still crying out for more. For entire mornings, I'd sit under the willow tree in the school yard and watch the swallows skirting from tree branch to tree branch. Other times, though, I'd have so much energy I'd run up and down the moun-

tains, getting exercise to replace the tae kwon do I was no longer doing. Every third or fourth day, Young-bum and I would slink off into the fields and lift rocks as weights, hoping to become like our classmate Min-gook, whose body was agile and strong.

One night just days before school was to start again, I made a bonfire outside our home. *Abeoji*, *eomeoni*, and I roasted some corn, fresh and still in its husk. Afterward, *abeoji* and I lingered behind, watching the embers turn blue.

"I'm only going to work two days a week to make sure I am there for self-criticism and to take part in party meetings," he said just as I was about to call it a night and head to bed. I stopped dead in my tracks and turned slowly. My father was still staring into the fire. But he must have known I was looking at him, for he pressed on.

"There are no rations. It's a waste of time for me to even show up."

I swallowed hard as I sat back down beside my father on a dead tree trunk we had pulled up together from the riverbank earlier in the day.

Eomeoni sat down beside me and told me next that she, too, was only going to work two days a week.

"What are we going to do?" I asked when they had both finished speaking. I suddenly remembered something else from Pyongyang. *Hal-abeoji* had also told me during that visit when I was about six that inside ourselves we already know the things

that will happen to us in life. We spend our days just waiting for them to be revealed. I felt that now more than ever. I had been expecting this conversation.

“On the days we don’t work, your mother and I are going to the forests to pick and hunt for food, like small animals and herbs, fungus and wild vegetables,” *abeoji* continued. I thought of the squirrel Chulho was eating the day I met him. I felt a chill.

“I want to come with you,” I said, surprising even myself.

I waited for my father’s response. Nothing.

“There’s no point in my going back to school,” I continued. “I’ve already learned everything they teach there.”

“You need to study,” my mother finally cut in.

“No,” I said quietly. “I need food, not knowledge.” I was shaking now, for I had never defied my parents before.

My mother began to sob, and my father breathed heavily. I started to tremble. But I wasn’t going to back down. “*Eomeoni. Abeoji,*” I began, this time slowly and trying to remain calm. “The boys at school—they come and go. They earn won with their families. They catch their own squirrels, mice, and, well, anything, *anything*, that they can eat. Take me with you. I want to help us find food.”

THE NEXT DAY, I HEADED TO THE MARKET WITH MY KOREAN language and geometry textbooks under my arm. My plan was to trade the books for tofu, cabbage, and corn oil.

As I crossed the Ha-myeon Bridge onto the gravel road that led into the market, I saw Chulho sitting off to the side. As I neared, he looked up at me with bloodshot eyes, his face lined in dark shadows and peppered with stubble.

“I’ve never asked,” I said, stopping in front of him. “Do you sleep outside?”

“Yeah, sometimes,” he said, rubbing his head. “My mom and dad—well, same story as everyone else. They left to find food . . . didn’t come back. What are you doing, Pyongyang fancy-pants?” He pointed to my books.

“Selling these,” I said, sitting down beside him. We faced the road, looking out at the merchants heading into the market to sell their goods.

“So the fancy-pants Pyongyang family has finally fallen on hard times,” he said dryly.

I shrugged. “I guess so.” No point escaping the truth anymore. “Chulho, my friend,” I said, wrapping an arm around him. “We’ve been on hard times since we left that fancy-pants city.”

We both laughed.

“Why did you leave Pyongyang?” he asked next. “I mean, the entire town has their ideas, but none of us knows for sure.”

“I don’t know,” I said with another shrug. I really didn’t know.

“Someone will use the pages of those books for toilet paper or fire kindling or women will plug up their monthly cycles,” Chulho explained, pointing to my books again.

"Imagine that," I said, holding up my Korean language book. "Our mamas can study while they go to the washroom."

"School is a luxury for the kids who are fat," Chulho added.

Just then I spied Min-gook trudging up the road like a tank. He was whistling "We Are Kid Scouts," the song from the cartoon *Squirrel and Hedgehog*. I shook my head. "No matter how much Young-bum and I try, we will never be in shape like this guy," I said with a groan as Min-gook spied us, waved, and started heading our way. "How does he keep so fit?"

Chulho grunted. "He used to make money as a pull-cart operator. He also carried his mother, who just died from a hunger disease. For more than a year, his mom couldn't walk, and he would carry her everywhere."

Min-gook sat down and pulled out from underneath his shirt a twisted bread stick. My mouth began to water.

"Where did you get that?" I asked. He broke the bread into three pieces and handed one to me. I popped it into my mouth and sucked on it, letting it dissolve slowly. I hadn't tasted anything so good in a long time.

"At the market," Min-gook replied with a wide smile. "I sold some of my mother's pots and pans. After I bought corn rice and eggs, as well as some alcohol for my father, I, well . . . I got me some dessert." He ate his piece more slowly, dotting the front of his shirt with bread crumbs.

Chulho turned away from the road and lit up a smoke.

“Don’t,” I said, swatting the cigarette away from his hand. “You’ll get into trouble for being a kid smoking in public.”

“Trust me,” he said, rolling his eyes and picking up the cigarette. “The party leaders in Gyeong-seong have way more to worry about than me smoking in a public place.”

“But what will people think?” I asked, truly aghast. I mean, what could come next up here?

“Trust me,” Chulho repeated, using the same sarcastic tone. “People have a lot more to worry about than me smoking in a public place. Nobody, fancy-pants Pyongyang boy, cares! Now leave me to smoke alone in peace.”

I sighed and turned back to Min-gook. “How did you sell your things? I mean, do you just walk into the market and hold the items up, waiting for someone to approach you?”

“No,” Min-gook replied. “You go up to people and ask them if they want to buy what you’re selling. But be careful not to hold what you’re selling too loose. Someone will grab them from you. Lots of thieves in the market. What are you selling?” he then asked.

I held up the books. He hummed. “I sold mine last winter. The school doesn’t seem to care that students don’t hand the books back anymore at the end of the school year. Everyone kind of knows where they’re going. I didn’t buy the bun,” he then added, as if I had asked. “I lifted it from the woman who’d sold me the eggs.”

I gasped. "Aren't you afraid of stealing? I mean, you could go to prison," I said.

Min-gook and Chulho looked at each other and then sighed.

"People expect stealing now," Chulho said in that voice again, as if I were a small child and not very bright. "Sure, if we're caught, we could be in trouble. But . . . well . . . what else are we supposed to do?"

Too many thoughts were swimming around in my head: kids smoking, kids stealing . . .

"I've quit school," I said, feeling I had to change the subject or else I'd end up with one major headache.

"We all knew it was just a matter of time," Chulho said, patting me on the back, as if welcoming me to his club. "I have, too. May as well enjoy what time we have left on this planet. Walk on the wild side before you die."

"We're not going to die," I scoffed. But as I said this, I had that sinking feeling again that I already knew this wasn't true.

Chulho chuckled. "You think so? I buried my younger brother a week ago," he said with no emotion, no sadness, no regrets. It just was.

"Why didn't you tell me—us—your classmates?" I exclaimed. "I would have come by and paid my respects."

"Are you joking?" Chulho said, blowing rings of smoke into the air. This time he wasn't laughing.

"No. I'm not," I said in a low voice.

“Every day we’re burying kids at the foot of the mountain,” Chulho said. “Soon there won’t be any space left in the ground. My brother was just one ceremony of about forty you’ve missed.”

THAT EVENING, AFTER I SOLD MY TEXTBOOKS, *ABEOJI* AND I made backpacks by sewing together old pairs of pants.

On the days *abeoji* didn’t go into work, we’d head out at dawn, with the mist still covering the fields, and collect arrowroot, dandelions, and pine and elm tree bark, which my mother would make into broth for our soup or sell at the market. My father and I cut down small trees for firewood that we piled inside the house, because a neighbor had warned *abeoji* that thieves were taking anything that was left outside at night. Soon there was so much wood in the house there was little room for us to walk around.

In the forests, *abeoji* and I caught chipmunks by pouring water from the river into their holes. The little creatures would scamper out to avoid being drowned. As they did, we would strike their heads and torsos with our knives. When they were dead, we’d skin them, cut off the meat, skewer some of the flesh onto sticks, and roast it over the fire. My mother would smoke the rest and then store the meat in an underground cupboard my father and I dug.

The first time I saw a snake, I jumped into some ferns, screaming so loudly I scared a couple of magpies, which squawked at me before flying away. My father was stone-faced and shaking his

head, waving for me to come back. He pointed at the brown snake that had tiny yellow and green flecks, then to a rock about the size of my head. He motioned for me to throw it.

I held the rock up high over my head, the way Young-bum and I had been lifting weights. I then crept up behind the snake, which was nearing a decaying log that was covered in moss and armies of ants. If the snake got inside the log, I would never be able to catch it. I closed my eyes and threw the rock as hard as I could.

Thump.

My father had to pry open my eyelids to make me look. The rock had nearly split the snake in two. I had killed it.

My father and I decided to stay in the forest for the night so that we could get a jump start in the morning collecting wild vegetables and *deodeok* root. For our bed, we laid a sheet of plastic on top of some dead leaves in a clearing. For dinner, we roasted the snake meat on skewers over the fire. Afterward, we both tried to sleep but couldn't. My father moved in close beside me and wrapped his arms around me. I rolled onto my back, and the two of us looked up at the stars. "On an island called Jeju, people feared snakes," he started to tell me. "They would never kill them, for they are seen as symbols of wealth."

"*Abeoji*, don't tell me that now, when all the snake has been eaten," I scolded. I already felt bad enough for having killed it. I didn't want to see its death as a sign that I'd be poor for the rest of my life.

“There is more,” he continued. “It’s believed that if you cut off the tail of a snake that’s still alive, it will come to kill you at night when you’re sleeping, seeking revenge.”

I shivered. “I don’t like these stories, *abeoji*. Tell me a happy story.”

“Okay, how is this, then? In Jeju, they believe in a goddess named Chilseong, who by some accounts had seven daughters. Others say she had seven sons. Some believe Chilseong came from China, cast ashore in a metal box. Others say she was a star who wanted to experience being human, so she and her children, also stars, were born as snakes. One thing both sides believe is that when their human lives came to an end, Chilseong and her children returned to the sky. They’re the seven stars of the Ursa Major, or the Big Dipper. Chilseong is considered the brightest star in the constellation. Look,” he said, pointing. “Chilseong and her children shine the brightest of all the stars and are thought to protect the Korean people from misfortune and pain. Chilseong, being a mother, watches over children. Whenever you feel lost or in pain, *adeul*, find Chilseong and call out for her help.”

“*Abeoji*,” I said after a while. “What do people believe in Joseon?”

“Well,” he started slowly, “I’ve heard that some people, especially in the villages, believe in spirits, the *shan-shin-ryong-nim*, which live in caves. These are good spirits, not spirits of unhappy people looking to hurt the living.”

“Like the *yu-ryeong*,” I cut in.

“Yeah, like the *yu-ryeong*—ghosts who are cursed. People take clear water in big jugs and food and lay it before these caves where they believe the *shan-shin-ryong-nim* live. It’s an offering, to ask the *shan-shin-ryong-nim* for things such as food and maybe better jobs, a good marriage for their son or daughter or good school results for their smaller children.”

I thought hard about *abeoji*’s words. It struck me as odd that starving people would offer up food to the *shan-shin-ryong-nim*. “*Abeoji*, what do people believe in Pyongyang?”

“In Kim Il-sung and now the general, Kim Jong-il,” he replied a little too stiffly, as though he were annoyed.

“That’s all?” I continued.

“Pretty much,” he said.

I wanted to touch his face then, have him look at me, and tell me what he did that forced us to leave Pyongyang. I wanted to know what he believed in. But I heard him sigh. I could tell he felt defeated now, and I decided against the idea. Instead, I slipped my left hand into his and laid my head on his shoulder.

The winter of 1998 was hard. My mother stored dried vegetables as well as radishes and potatoes in our underground cupboard in the backyard. On top of that, I had used evergreen boughs to hide the location of the freezer from thieves. But while no thieves found our stash, our stored food had to be rationed nonetheless.

I was hungry every day.

I was also bored.

When the animals hibernated and the ground was frozen, I'd wake before my mother and father, shimmy to the window, and peer out at the snow. I'd long since sold my sketchbook at the market. Now my only canvas was the thin layer of ice on the inside of the windowpane. Using a fingernail, I'd sketch pictures of the 105 army tank and combat airplanes. I'd do this for a while and then slump back down onto my mat, light-headed, with my

feet and hands pricked by pins and needles. *Eomeoni* said these were symptoms of malnutrition.

By the end of January our supply of squirrel, chipmunk, rabbit, and snake had all gone. We had one meal a day of corn rice and some cabbage or pickled radish.

I wasn't the only one suffering from hunger. The neighbor men would visit our home sometimes with bottles of alcohol, *sool*, that they would drink with my father. It took only a glass for the men to begin slurring their words. "Drunk" was the word *eomeoni* used to describe them as she shooed me into the other room away from them. But I would press my ear up to the wall and listen to them. As the men got drunk, they would hound my father for information from Pyongyang, including what General Kim Jong-il was going to do next about this thing called a famine.

My father would answer their questions as if he were one of the government representatives who delivered information to us on Joseon's Central TV station back in Pyongyang: formal and evasive. He always skirted around the men's questions and toed the party line, which in the case of this famine thing was that Joseon's enemies were responsible and that all of us had to be strong and consider what we were going through as an Arduous Walk, like what Kim Il-sung did when he ousted the Japanese.

Over time, the neighbor men shrunk before my eyes until two of them were no bigger than their own sons, who were just a little older than me. The skin on the men's faces sagged, mak-

ing them appear years older than I knew they actually were. As they withered away, their eyes remained the same size and began to stick out like saucers. Looking at them made me think of the *yu-ryeong*—legless, floating ghosts that people left on earth after they died because they hadn't completed some mission, like protecting a family member or seeking revenge on someone else.

At least now I knew why the principal and teacher swam in their suits. Now I, too, had to use a rope to tie my pants around my waist to keep them from falling down. So did Young-bum. The few times we got together, he and I would look out my window at the smaller children, many now bowlegged like frogs. We called out to them: "*Gae-gu-ri*."

Eomeoni would slap us across the back of the heads and tell us not to be so rude.

"They're sick," she'd admonish. "They're suffering from rickets. They need the oil from pollack fish to help them get better." Her own hair was dry and splitting, her fingernails cracking. Before my eyes, she was wasting away, too. But then she'd sing in a soft voice "*Dondolari*" or "*Shagwa-poongnyon*," a bumper year of apples, and I'd be reminded all over again of the time I saw her do the fan dance.

IN MARCH 1998, A WEEK BEFORE MY ELEVENTH BIRTHDAY, at night as we kept warm by the wood fire before bedtime, my father announced that he was going to China.

As he spoke, images flashed across my mind of executed prisoners wilting on the posts after having been shot nine times. Images of the blood, of their frantic eyes . . . "No!" I finally screamed, cutting him off midsentence as he explained how he was getting in and out of China. "You can't go. You'll be killed."

Both *eomeoni* and *abeoji* crawled up beside me. They stroked my back and told me everything would be all right. "Lots of people are going to China," *eomeoni* explained. "The border guards can be bribed."

"The neighbors and I have a plan," *abeoji* cut in.

I pulled myself into a tight ball and covered my ears with my hands. I started to rock back and forth on my haunches, humming to myself. I didn't want to hear. But I did.

"The neighbors and I are going to pay the guards to let us cross over the river at the lowest point, where it's still frozen. One of the neighbors has done it before. We're going to pay the same guards to let us come back a week later, just before spring thaw. It's safe."

I rolled onto my back and looked up at him. "What are you going to do in China? Steal? Work for a Korean on his farm as a slave?"

"No," he said with a laugh.

"I have my medals," he went on, his voice lower. "While I don't want to sell them, they're made of precious metals. They should fetch enough won for me to start a business buying white rice,

sugar, and oil, which I'll bring back with me and sell here. I'm going to start trading goods back and forth."

"You agree to this?" I asked, looking to *eomeoni*.

She nodded.

"But it's illegal!"

"I also want to get you something special for your birthday . . . a cake . . . a candy . . .," he said, ignoring my statement. "No—a rice cake?"

"We'll get through this," my mother added, leaning over and kissing my cheek. "Abeoji will be back in one week, promise."

"One week!" my father said. "Just one week."

WHEN ABEOJI WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR, A WAVE OF fresh, pine-scented air came, too, swirling around the room the way Sangchul's voice did at the train station. His face was rosy, wind-touched, and his eyes sparkled as if he were a young man again.

He lugged a large blue duffel bag. Like a child unwrapping a birthday present, eomeoni began pulling items out of the bag: white rice, a block of tofu, some dried fish, cabbage, peppers, sugar, oils . . . While she did this, abeoji reached under his coat and handed me a paper bag. "Happy birthday," he whispered, ruffling my hair.

He didn't need to tell me what was in the bag. I knew. Rice cakes, sweetened and with sesame sprinkles, and a serving of mashed red beans.

As I ate, my eyes moved up and down abeoji. He wore a new pair

of black wool pants and a warm gray sweater underneath a new navy-blue wool coat with big gold buttons. Eomeoni held up a dress in soft yellow, like the color of a canary; it was a dress she would have worn to the military parade on the Day of the Sun.

I woke then and patted down my bedding, hoping that it wasn't a dream and that *abeoji* was lying beside me. Then I saw it, the ice inside the windowpane, the dull walls, and my mother's bedding, blankets of which were scattered across the floor. *Abeoji* was not home.

I crept out of bed and crawled to the wall where I had tacked a piece of paper. On the paper I had drawn squares, each of which represented a day of the week. I took my pencil, now a stub, and put an *X* through Monday. This was the fourth day *abeoji* was gone. He had left on Friday.

I turned around, my stomach aching for food, and saw my mother sitting on her knees in the other room, her back facing me. She was mumbling words I couldn't quite make out. I felt, despite her nearness, that she was very far away.

"Eomeoni," I said softly, trying to get her attention.

I moved toward her on tiptoe until I was standing at her side. Her eyes were closed. Her features seemed softer, and her eye-lashes glistened in the sun shining through the window. She looked as if she had been kissed by a cloud.

A weak smile crossed her face.

"What are you doing?" I asked, sitting down beside her.

“I’m praying,” she said with her eyes still closed. “But shush.” She put her finger to her lips. “You can’t tell anyone.”

“What does *praying* mean?”

Eomeoni took my hands into hers. For the first time since we left Pyongyang, she felt warm. “Some people talk to a higher power, a universal power, an energy, where our ancestors go to live after they die,” she said. “That higher power listens and answers what we ask of it. We speak to that power in the form of prayers.”

“Like asking Chilseong or *shan-shin-ryong-nim* to watch over us?”

“How do you know about these things?” she said, opening one eye and looking at me.

“*Abeoji*,” I answered. “What do you pray for?” Whatever this prayer thing was, it made her look as she did when we lived in Pyongyang: like a butterfly.

“I pray for *abeoji* to be safe and to come home quickly,” she said, closing her eyes again.

“I dreamed he came home,” I whispered, “with rice cakes and nice clothes and . . .” My voice trailed off. A knot had formed in my throat. I didn’t want to share my hopes and dreams, even with my mother. It seemed to me that as soon as I told anyone what I wanted, it was taken from me.

“What is that?” I asked her, pointing to a bowl by the wall in which she had placed fresh water.

My mother opened both her eyes this time. “Water is pure, and

in offering it up to the power, we are showing it that we give to it, surrender, our most pure souls. The water represents us.”

“Oh,” I exclaimed, dipping a finger into the water. “If we’re so clean, though, how come we get so dirty?”

My mother started to giggle then, the first time she’d laughed in months.

MY MOTHER AND I DID NOT SPEAK OF WHAT COULD HAVE happened to *abeoji*. We sat in silence at night, alone while together, listening to each other’s breathing. *Abeoji*’s absence lay like a heavy wool blanket between us that neither of us could lift. I looked to *eomeoni*’s hope as a light leading me down a dark tunnel.

“Trust” was all she would whisper, as if in our silence I was speaking my worries to her. “Trust” was her answer, always, but I wasn’t quite sure whom I was supposed to trust.

One morning after I awoke screaming from a nightmare in which I saw a strange white creature, half man, half monster, with fire for wings, I asked my mother to teach me how to pray.

She placed my hands together and raised them until they were the level of my chest. “Close your eyes and then talk in your head to that universal power. Tell it your fears and ask for guidance.

Chilseong and shan-shin-ryong-nim . . ., I began. *Abeoji is lost. Can you bring him home? Eomeoni and I need him. I miss him. I . . .*

I stopped on the word I wanted to say next. It just hurt too

much to think it. But somehow my mother knew and finished the sentence for me. "I love him, too."

As the days wore on, I repeated my prayer to Chilseong and *shan-shin-ryong-nim* over and over again, slowly and then more quickly, silently, methodically, much as I once did in school with the sayings of our eternal leader, Kim Il-sung.

ON THE LONGEST DAY OF THE YEAR, AS MOSQUITOES AND blackflies attacked me while I picked berries near the Gyeongseong River with *eomeoni*, she said that she was going to visit her sister, Nampo, in Wonsan. "There is nothing left to sell," she said in a low voice, sitting down on a large flat rock and dipping her toe into the water. I sat on the rock beside her. The frogs croaked around us.

"For how long?" I asked as a woodpecker knocked at a nearby tree.

"A week. Nampo's husband is in the navy. She will have food."

"When do we leave?"

"I want you to stay here," she said after a long pause. Her voice was drawn and tired.

I shook my head. "No," I said. "You're not leaving me."

"I'll be gone only a few days." She was fighting back tears. I could tell.

"What are you not saying to me?" I demanded so harshly I regretted asking the question as soon as I spoke it.

Eomeoni began to shake. I reached out and pulled her into my arms.

"Nothing," she said as I rocked her back and forth. "I'm keeping nothing from you. We need food, and Aunt will have it. I will be gone just a couple of days."

"Like *abeoji*," I spat out. I was hot and angry again. I wanted to punch something, anything I could find, except *eomeoni*. I couldn't let her leave me. I gripped the bottom of her shirt. "I'm coming with you no matter what," I cried out as tears started to fall.

It took a while to convince her I had to go with her. She kept shaking her head and saying, "No. It's too dangerous to come with me." But she wouldn't tell me what those dangers were, so I pressed and pressed on, determined not to be left alone.

Finally, she nodded and whispered yes.

I stayed awake well into the night, listening to the crickets strumming their lullabies and the occasional hooting of an owl. I refused to close my eyes. Even when my mother went to the out-house, I followed. I wanted to make sure she didn't leave without me.

I felt guilty. I was a bad son. But the truth was, I didn't trust her.

A *deul,*" I heard my mother say as I slipped in and out of waking and dreaming.

Then I remembered the day before: my mother's plan to go to Nampo for food.

I remembered my vow not to fall asleep.

But I had.

My eyes popped open, and I sat bolt upright. My heart raced. I was perspiring, and my hands were clammy with nervousness. Light streamed in through the window, illuminating the dust and casting a long shadow across the floor. It was about midday.

I'd slept all morning.

I patted the bedding beside me where my mother's mat was still laid out. It was warm, as if she had just gotten up.

But she wasn't in the other room praying in front of her bowl.

I leaped up and ran outside.

"*Eomeoni!*" I shouted, heading first to the outhouse and throwing open the wooden door.

Not a sound. Not even the scampering feet of mice.

Barefooted, I walked around our tiny house and then down the dirt road. As my pace quickened, stones dug into the soft flesh of my soles. But I didn't care. I searched the train station, peering into the haggard faces of people waiting for trains. Frantically, zig-zagging, I crossed the Ha-myeon Bridge and searched the market. I walked up to several women, thinking that from the back they were my mother. But when I tugged on their sleeves and they spun around, they were someone else's mother.

I then headed home, hoping that my mother had just gone to the fields to catch grasshoppers we could roast.

I pushed open the front door.

Inside was vacant.

Cold.

As the sky slid into twilight, I limped back to the road and collapsed on a small mound of earth off to the side. I then began to sob . . . I had lost Bo-Cho, my dreams of becoming a general, my schooling, Pyongyang, my piano, my doghouse, my father . . . my mother. I didn't stop crying until the day songs of the cicadas faded and the cooler melodies of the night insects took over. That's when I crawled back into the house, pushing open the front door with the palm of my hand and dragging myself to *eomeoni's* bedding, where I wrapped myself in her scent.



WHEN I AWOKE, IT WAS LIGHT AGAIN.

I didn't want to move, but then a flash moved through me, a hope that my mother was there, doing her prayers.

"*Eomeoni, Eomeoni . . .*" My voice echoed against the bare walls. Then I saw it, a letter, poking out from underneath her prayer bowl.

Son, it started, there's some porridge in the pot. Have it when you are hungry.

I pulled off the lid of our last remaining pot and, using my hands, began shoveling into my mouth the porridge made from ground vegetables and cornstarch. After I had finished and burped, I looked at the letter again.

Eomeoni had written more.

I'm going to Aunt's house to get food, and I will return home in seven days. You must stay at home. If there's no food, you must eat salt and drink water.

Mom

I skulked outside and drew enough water from the well to fill the empty pot. Then I put it and the small box of salt beside my mat. I lay back down and stared up at a daddy longlegs crawling on the ceiling. "For a week, I will not move—to save energy," I told the creature, which paid me no attention.

I then closed my eyes and imagined eating pork and tofu fried with seaweed and the fried fish that *eomeoni* would make when she returned from Wonsan. I then thought of *abeoji* arriving home at the same time with bags full of new clothes and rice cakes. I would go back to school. Whatever *abeoji* had done, he would be forgiven, and we'd go back to Pyongyang, where I would return to the tae kwon do *sojo*. For the first time in a very long time, I dreamed of being a general, leading my unit in the Day of the Sun military parade.

ON THE MORNING OF THE SEVENTH DAY, I AWOKE SWIMMING in perspiration. I pushed off my covers and, desperate for some water, tried to open my eyes to find the pot. But my eyelids were glued shut. I patted my face and discovered that my cheeks and eyelids had swelled up like a puffer fish. I sat up quickly and screamed.

"I'm blind. Help. *Help!*" But of course no one came. No one could hear me, or if they could, as Chulho would say, "They have enough problems of their own."

I crept toward where I hoped was *eomeoni's* wedding chest. For a few seconds I fumbled with the lock, which I couldn't see because my eyes were still glued shut. Finally, I got the chest open and felt inside. There was nothing left of the sheets, towels, and gowns—even my father's army uniform that we had brought with us from Pyongyang was gone. We'd sold almost everything.

But the broken mirror I was looking for was there, on the bottom.

I took it out and lifted it toward where I thought my face would be.

I then used my fingers to jimmy open my eyes.

At first I saw shadows, and then streaks of light, and finally my reflection. Although I wasn't blind, what stared back at me wasn't good.

This time my scream was so shrill I scratched my vocal cords.

I was round and shiny like the balloons released on parade days. My face looked as if it were coated in candle wax. I realized with a jolt that the salt I had eaten for a week had made me retain so much water that I had become a beached whale. "I'm sick," I moaned. "I can't stay here like *eomeoni* asked me to do."

I pulled myself up by digging my fingernails into the wall. My legs were wobbly, and blood rushed to my head. I was going to faint. "You can't," I admonished myself.

I knew I stank of my own waste as I finally made it out the front door and headed down the road. I knew I looked like something dug up dead from the river. I knew I scared the children, as their mothers draped them in their arms and hastened them into their houses. But I knew I would die if I didn't press on.



y legs ached. I had chest pains, and my throat burned. An out-of-tune orchestra played in my head, *bang, clonk, dunk*, with the cymbal player as the soloist. Many times I stumbled and nearly fell, but something lifted me up, maybe those universal forces to whom I now prayed, and pushed me onward. Finally, I made it to Young-bum's door, newly painted a light blue, like the sky the day after a summer storm. Before I pushed it open, I thought: *How odd this country is. We're all starving, but the government still forces people to paint their houses.*

"What are you doing here?" Young-bum asked, his voice faltering when I fell into his house like a bouncing ball that didn't stop until it hit the far wall.

"Help me," I croaked as saliva dripped from the corners of my

mouth. "I've had nothing to eat for a week but salt. I am carrying too much water."

Young-bum's lips trembled, and he eyed me suspiciously. "Who are you?" he asked, grabbing the shovel he and I used to dig up herbs. His hands trembled as he waved it in front of my face.

"It's me," I tried to call out, but I had little voice left from all my screaming. "It's me," I repeated. "We lift stones together as weights . . ."

"What happened to you?" Young-bum gasped, lowering the shovel.

I grunted. I moaned.

I tried to tell him that my mother had left and that I had nothing to eat. But before I could, I fell into his arms and passed out.

YOUNG-BUM HELD A CUP OF COOL WELL WATER TO MY LIPS. I took a few sips, spilling more on my shirt than I managed to swallow. He then placed in my hand a soft-boiled potato. "I stole it from the storage box next door," he explained. "I've got a pile."

I sat in the corner and tried sucking on the potato, because, in addition to everything else, my gums hurt and my throat was so damaged that swallowing felt like nails scratching a blackboard. I looked around Young-bum's house. I'd never been inside it before. The main room was smaller than mine, and it was just as sparse because most of his family's furniture, dishes, and clothes

had been sold, too. My eyes landed on a lump on the ground beside the cooking fire. It was shaped like a small person. But it wasn't moving. I dug my heels into the ground and pushed my oversize body as far away from it as I could, until my back was flush up against the wall.

"It's my grandmother," Young-bum said, sitting down beside me. "She's sick. She's not dead," he assured me. "She has tuberculosis. She . . ." His voice trailed off. I stretched my swollen neck to look at him. He was crying. "She doesn't sleep much. She has night sweats and coughs. But when she does sleep, she is so peaceful, and I don't want to wake her," he said.

I forced myself to eat the potato, knowing it was the only way I could get rid of my swelling, and then drank more water.

When I was done, Young-bum grumbled something about going out for a while and that I should rest.

PROPPED UP AGAINST THE WALL, I LISTENED TO TWO women outside bickering over tofu. I could make out that one of the women had tried to sell it, but a *kotjebi*—a word I had never heard before—had stolen it. The way the women went on, I imagined this *kotjebi* to be some kind of wild, rabid dog with foam frothing from its mouth. "Kind of like what I must look like right now," I said to myself. I then started chuckling. But it hurt to laugh, so I stopped. I heard crying followed by scuffling and then slapping sounds. The two women were fighting.

I pulled myself up and looked around. Young-bum had placed his old school uniform beside me. As I reached to touch it, Young-bum came crashing in through the front door, breathing heavily, carrying a black bag made from an old shirt. He slammed the front door shut and slid to the floor. "*Shush*," he whispered to me.

The sound of running feet drew near. Then men's voices calling out to each other: "He's gone down this way!"

"No, this way!"

"What did you do?" I mouthed to Young-bum, who flicked his hand at me, which I interpreted as meaning that this wasn't a great time to ask.

After the voices and footsteps disappeared, Young-bum crawled to his grandmother's side and gently shook her shoulders. She moaned, then coughed up blood that splattered down her chin. Young-bum wiped it away with a towel. As he propped her head up on a pillow, she whimpered like a small child. Young-bum pulled some bottles from his black bag, clanking them together as he set them on the ground. He then poured some pills from one of the bottles and counted five in the palm of his hand.

Young-bum drew a cup of water from a pail and put it to his grandmother's lips so she could swallow the pills.

I could hear liquid swimming around in her lungs as she breathed. When Young-bum set her gently back down on her mat, she coughed up more blood into a cloth. The room filled with the stench of her illness, sweet and sour at the same time.

Young-bum made some porridge by grinding together corn, rice, soybean paste, and a watery, almost rotten, cucumber. He spoon-fed his grandmother, as if she were the child and not he.

After Young-bum had washed her down with another cloth, he told her what his day at school was like.

"I'm so far ahead in math that teacher said I should enter a math contest," he told her. All the while I was thinking that his school uniform was at the bottom of my mat and it seemed to me that he had spent the day in the market stealing instead.

"Teacher says if I keep up the good work, next year I might even become school captain . . ."

I didn't want to hear anymore. I pulled myself up, which was hard because I was still so bloated it was like heaving a large boulder over my head to get myself even to a standing position. I then headed outside to the outhouse.

When I finally plopped myself down on the toilet seat, I sat and listened to the bugs scampering around me, the twigs falling on the roof, and the wind stirring the long grasses in the nearby field. Eventually I just dozed off.

I AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING TO YOUNG-BUM'S PUNCHING my shoulder. "Get up," he said loudly, hurting my eardrums.

"What is it?" I asked, clamoring to sit up straight, which was now even harder since my body was cramped in addition to being

swollen from sleeping in the outhouse all night. "Is Joseon being invaded?"

"Don't be stupid," he hissed, pulling me up. "No one is trying to invade us. Look, I can't tell my grandmother I'm not at school," Young-bum explained. "It would kill her to know I've quit. Come with me," he said.

I groaned. While I could tell the potassium in the potato had helped rid my body of some of its excess water, I was still pretty sick. My clothes were too tight, for one. I had torn the seam in the back of my pants, and two buttons had popped on my shirt. "I don't feel well," I moaned.

Young-bum helped me walk inside the house. "Here, put this on," he said, passing me his school uniform.

"I'm not going to school," I protested. "I quit last fall. I thought you had, too." I was whispering just in case his grandmother was awake and could hear.

"You're not going to school," he replied. "But your clothes are ripped. Wear my uniform. It was from before we had food problems . . . Before, when I was fat." He then began to tug off my pants.

I was too tired to even make a joke about his former weight or to protest his undressing me.

"Where are we going?" I asked instead as he zipped up the fly of my new pants. The length was okay, but they were tight.

"To your new kitchen," Young-bum answered, slipping a pair of his sneakers onto my feet. He tried to do up the laces but couldn't. I strained to look over my protruding stomach to see my feet, which seemed bigger than my head.

"Here, wear my father's old shoes," Young-bum said, handing me a pair of brown running shoes with holes in the soles. Before I could ask if there were any other shoes, Young-bum was heading out the front door.

For a while, we walked the road in silence, Young-bum having to slow his pace to match mine, which was not much faster than a turtle's crawl.

"Why were those men chasing you?" I finally asked, more just trying to fill the air between us with conversation than wanting an answer. I kind of guessed already he had stolen those pills for his grandmother.

"I couldn't afford grandmother's medicine yesterday," Young-bum said. "So I took it from the market."

"You mean you stole it," I said.

He grunted.

"What happened to your parents?" I asked next. He had never told me directly.

"My aunt took my mother away in an oxcart. My aunt said she was taking my mother to the doctor to fix her tuberculosis," he said, his voice distant, as if he were straining to remember something he had forgotten or maybe wanted to forget. "But we

couldn't afford the medicine, and back then, I wasn't stealing, so she died before she got there . . . Well, we all died a bit then, I guess."

"I'm sorry," I whispered, and I really was.

"My father left to find food, said he was going to China, and he hasn't come back yet," he added.

"My mother went to Aunt's house to get food, too," I said after another long silence. "She told me she would be gone a week and to eat salt and drink water until she got back. That was, I think, about ten days ago." I wasn't keeping track this time. I guess, after my father, I was scared to.

Young-bum mumbled that he was sorry, too. I believed him.

"Are you taking me to the hospital?" I then quipped. "Is the hospital my new kitchen?"

Young-bum laughed. "What would be the point? The hospital doesn't have any medicines anymore, either. You have to buy what you need or steal it, and then take it to the doctor, who will make you pay him to tell you how much to take. It's just a waste of time. You get sick here, you fend for yourself—not like in Pyongyang, where I'm pretty sure they make sure their future generals never get sick. I bet your hospitals in Pyongyang are made out of silver, just like your metro's escalators."

I laughed then, too, not because what he said was funny, but because it was sort of true, except that our escalators weren't made out of silver. "My maternal grandfather is a doctor," I said in

a weak voice. "Maybe," I added after a short pause, "you can help me find a way back to Pyongyang to find him."

Young-bum stopped suddenly and turned to face me. "You're joking, right?" he asked, studying my eyes.

I shrugged. "Yeah, maybe, kind of. No."

"Chulho and I believed you were just acting dumb when we told you about things going on in Joseon. But really . . . you don't know! Your family was *kicked out* of Pyongyang, fancy-pants," he said, "because Pyongyang people don't come here to live unless the government has told them to get out. And when Pyongyang fancy-pants people are asked to leave, they're stripped of everything. Everyone knew about your family the moment you arrived in that train station, all polished like those shiny metal escalators in the metro in the capital. Everyone talked behind your father's back about how a great star of the regime must have done something really bad to have fallen into a garbage heap like this."

I felt the knot in my throat grow tight. My father hadn't wanted me to know these things. I felt I was betraying him just by listening. But Young-bum was right. I had known everything he said all along, from the moment the light flickered and then went out and I saw the dead bird of prey on my way home from the tae kwon do *sojo*.

"You can't go back to Pyongyang," Young-bum continued, his voice light and soft as if he genuinely wanted to comfort me. "And even if you found a way, your grandfather isn't there anymore."

When someone does something against the government, the entire family is usually penalized. Your doctor grandfather has been kicked out, too. Or if he hasn't been kicked out, he's been stripped of all his things and likely left on his own to survive. You'll never find him."

"But what if my grandfather is looking for me?" I looked up, my heart racing as if the electricity had just come on inside me. I knew I had to find him. He would help both my sickness and me.

"Good luck with that, fancy-pants Pyongyang boy. Unless he's looking for you, unless he knows you are here, you won't find him."

"But he would never abandon us. I know that."

"Then how come he hasn't come yet?"

Young-bum was right. We'd been in Gyeong-seong for nearly a year and a half. *Hal-abeoji* hadn't come. I lowered my head, feeling all hope drain, like on a hot steamy day being given a glass of water with holes in it. I swallowed hard so as not to cry.

"Why do you think my mother didn't take me with her?" I asked timidly. Another question I didn't really want the answer to, but I felt I needed to know.

"Because it's too dangerous. She'd have to hitch rides with farmers. She was afraid, as she should be, that you might be caught by the *Shangmoo*."

"*Shangmoo*?"

"You've never heard of the 9.27 *Shangmoo*?" he asked, staring at

me wide-eyed. I grunted no. "On September 27, the government formed the *Shangmoo*, a band of police to collect people who are not at home or at school and take them to shelters. Every city has a force of these 9.27 *Shangmoo*, except maybe Pyongyang, because you're like the golden perfect city in the sky, with golden perfect people who all have homes and who never do anything wrong. But everywhere else, there are so many kids not at school, adults hunting for food . . . the *Shangmoo*'s job is to clean the streets of these people. The *Shangmoo* send the people they find to so-called shelters—the adults to one place, the kids to another. But these are not nice places. They're *guhoso*, jails. On the streets, we call the *Shangmoo* the *cleaners*, because that's what they do. They rid Joseon of its dirty people."

"Where are you taking me?" I demanded, afraid he was taking me to the prison. Maybe he was one of these so-called cleaners.

"Here," he said, stopping. We were standing at the edge of the market.

"Look," he then said, speaking slowly and softly, as if he were the one in pain, not me, "it's just my grandmother and me now. Aunt lives a few towns away from here, and her husband left for China and never came back, just like our dads. Aunt sells coal, and when she sells enough, she brings food for my grandmother. But that's not often. I have to steal food to sell to buy medicine to keep my grandmother alive. I can't . . .," he began, then stopped.

"You can't what?"

“I can’t look after you. This is your kitchen now,” Young-bum said, waving an arm around the market. I followed his hand and looked into the tired eyes of the vendors, eyes that no longer reflected light. The men were wrinkled, sunken, and walking around on bowlegs; the children had runny noses, swollen stomachs, and open sores; the women, who like my own *comeoni*, I could tell from their fine features and graceful movements, had been beautiful once like swans, until their skin became first pallid from malnutrition and then blue from dirt and their hair began to fall out.

“At least you’re alive,” Young-bum whispered.

“Am I?” I grunted, then added: “My grandfather, *that grandfather who isn’t looking for me*, told me when I was little that our nightmares always seem real. Maybe . . .,” I whispered, but Young-bum didn’t hear. He had already left.

I finished my sentence anyway. “Maybe I died a long time ago, and this is just my nightmare.”