

THE TRUE STORY OF HOW I SURVIVED
AND ESCAPED NORTH KOREA

EVERY
FALLING
STAR



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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO THOSE I LEFT BEHIND
IN NORTH KOREA.

—Sungju Lee

Some family names have been changed to protect relatives still living in North Korea. The names of my brothers, though, are real, in the hope that they are still alive and will read this book.

Until we meet again.

—Sungju Lee

A BRIEF HISTORY OF 20TH-CENTURY KOREA

For thousands of years, successive dynasties and monarchs ruled the Korean Peninsula. The last and most influential dynasty was the Joseon. In 1876, the Japanese coerced Korea to sign a treaty that eventually ended the Joseon Dynasty. Under the Japanese, the Korean people were largely oppressed. Former landowners were pushed off their properties, and others were forced to work as slave laborers for Japanese overlords. Many of the houses, monuments, and buildings built during the Joseon Dynasty, and most of its traditions, were destroyed. Japan, which occupied the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945, sought to integrate the region into its own empire.

With the defeat of Japan at the end of World War II, Japan's territories were taken away. The Korean Peninsula was divided into two separate, yet temporary, governments and economic zones: the North, which was overseen by the Soviet Union, and

the South, which was overseen by the United States. The plan was to unite the two regions into one with a general democratic election. The Soviet Union placed guerrilla army leader Kim Il-sung, who had returned from exile in China in 1945, as head of the North's temporary government. He managed to persuade the Soviets not to take part in any election. He clung to socialism and rejected American-style democracy. He felt the entire region should be communist.

In 1948, the South was granted independence from the United States, becoming the Republic of Korea. Shortly thereafter, the North became the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea. North Koreans refer to their country as Joseon, after the last dynasty. Like its namesake today, the Joseon Dynasty was dubbed the "Hermit Kingdom" because it sealed itself off from the world in an attempt to ward off invasion.

The political and economic systems of the two nations couldn't be more different. The South has a democratic government and a capitalist, free-market economy. North Korea, on the other hand, is a communist state, with one political party and no elections. Most things, including property, are publicly owned. Until the breakdown of the state's food-ration program in the early 1990s, all food, clothes, and necessities—including housing—were allocated by the state, based on an individual's need and standing within the Communist Party.

Kim Il-sung believed that it was only a matter of time before

the ideology of the North swept the South. He believed that the two regions would unite under communism. He was convinced that South Korea was funded by—indeed, was a “puppet nation” of—the United States. The Korean War, from June 1950 to July 1953, involved a United States–backed South Korea vying to unify the entire peninsula under its government versus the Soviet-backed North Korea aiming to do the same.

Aside from the war, which resulted in few geographical changes but a dramatic increase in tensions between the South and the North, the early years of Kim Il-sung were not that bad for North Korean people. There was a revival in the arts; the creation of monuments, museums, buildings, hotels, and theme parks; work, including an increase in farming and industry; and plenty of food through the centralized ration system.

Kim Il-sung gained a cult following during his years as leader of North Korea, largely because of the dissemination of books, films, radio, and television shows that made the people distrust Westerners, China, and Japan and revere, almost like a god, their leader and his life and government. All television and news outlets were monitored by the government; the result was that the state and Kim Il-sung were described only in positive terms. Deniers and critics of the regime were sent to political and/or labor camps, often with their entire families.

In the 1990s, North Korea suffered several blows. First there was the breakdown of the communist state of the Soviet Union

in 1991. The many countries under its rule were allowed to form their own governments. (The Soviet Union itself became the pseudo-democratic country of Russia.) As a result, North Korea lost its main trading partner and its primary source of aid. Then a series of weather anomalies resulted in devastating floods, which caused a shortage of domestically grown products. If this wasn't enough to drive the nation into famine, the breakdown in the central ration system certainly did. On July 8, 1994, Kim Il-sung died. His son, Kim Jong-il, became his successor. Kim Jong-il was poorly equipped to deal with these strains.

The country plummeted into a famine that some estimate killed more than a million of its approximately twenty-four million people. In a desperate attempt to save their lives, North Koreans began to leave the country. It's nearly impossible to escape North Korea by heading directly to South Korea because the border between the two countries is heavily mined with explosives. Therefore, the main escape route is through China to Mongolia, Laos, or Thailand. China, however, does not recognize North Koreans as refugees but, rather, as illegal work migrants. Any North Koreans found in China are returned, where they face prison for trying to escape.

North Korea is indeed a Hermit Kingdom: a true-to-life dystopian nation.

It's against this backdrop that my story takes place.

PROLOGUE



y toy soldier peers over a mound of dirt not far from where my father, *abeoji*, my mother, *comeoni*, and I have just finished our picnic, near the Daedong River in Pyongyang.

My father and I are setting up the toy soldiers to reenact one of the decisive battles in which our eternal leader, Kim Il-sung, ousted the Japanese army from our country, Joseon—or, as most in the West know it, North Korea. My father is in charge of the Japanese troops. My own troops are separated, with part of my army standing behind my general. The rest are hidden in a bush near the river. My father's army is positioned in the middle.

I am carrying a wooden pistol that my father carved and painted for me. My mother is playacting as my army nurse. The blanket on which we had our picnic is now the hospital.

My father has drawn a thick Hitler-like mustache on his general using my *comeoni*'s eyebrow pencil. She's not happy because he broke the pencil's tip. In fact, every time my father and I play war games, he uses—and ruins—her makeup to decorate his toy soldiers.

“Okay, your general will be our eternal leader, Kim Il-sung,” my mother snaps. She is very testy today. She really wants to defeat my father. “Since we don't have telephones or walkie-talkies, our troops need a way to communicate with each other. So take these.” She slips some smooth stones into my hand. I know what she is about to say next. She is going to use my father's own military tactics, which he taught me during other war games, against him.

“Designate one of your soldiers to be in charge of relaying your general's orders to your troops who are trapped on the other side of the Japanese. This soldier must sneak through the forest and, at the big rock,” my mother says, pointing, “lay stones so that your other troops know what the eternal leader wants them to do. The stones are codes. One stone means stand down, it's too dangerous to attack; two stones mean get ready; three stones mean attack the Japanese when the moon hits the sky at the highest point in the night.”

I bow to my mother and pick up one of my sergeants. I make him my guerrilla messenger. He will steal through the pine and oak trees, leaving my coded stone orders by the big rock.

I can feel it in the air. *Victory*. After all, Joseon always wins. We are the best country on earth!

I'm six years old.

Little do I know this military tactic will one day come to save my life.

CHAPTER

1

dream. And in my dream, I'm a general in the army of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. I'm leading my unit in the April 25 parade celebrating the foundation of the Korean People's Army. Our leader, Kim Il-sung, formed the army in 1932. Well, back then, the army was really nothing more than bands of guerrillas. Today, it's one of the largest armies in the world, with nearly nine million members. Our country's population is only about twenty-five million, so that's a lot of our people in the military.

Okay . . . back to my dream. The main road in the nation's capital, Pyongyang, in front of Kim Il-sung Square, is lined with people cheering and waving white magnolias and long cherry blossom stems. The entire city has come out for the parade. They always do.

Wearing the uniform of the North Korean army, my chest held high and showcasing line after line of my badges, I march, my

sword by my side. My gun, the semiautomatic Baekdu, named after the birthplace of my eternal leader's son, Kim Jong-il, is held stiffly across my body. My eyes are focused, like lasers, in front of me. My knees swing high as the band behind me performs the song "Parade of Victory."

While I don't look at them directly, the women in the crowd wear traditional North Korean dresses in colors reserved for such special occasions: floor-length puffy dresses with ribbons in soft pinks, baby blues, and rich creams. I also know that yellow, orange, and white balloons dance across the cloudless azure sky.

I turn my face only when we pass the stage at Kim Il-sung Square, where our supreme leader, Kim Il-sung, stands. I salute. I know he is looking on with pride. My entire unit is polished, walking in precision, servants to him, our eternal father, protecting our nation from South Korean invasion, ruthless Japanese expansion, and the American culture of excess that threatens our way of life.

Joseon is the best nation in the world, and in my dream I am so proud of being able to give back and make North Korea even safer.

That dream was long ago, when I lived in a large apartment not far from Kim Il-sung Square. My father was in the army. It was my destiny to follow in his footsteps. I was being raised to be a military officer in the Korean People's Army just like him. He held a high position, and I would, too.



OUR APARTMENT HAD A REFRIGERATOR THAT WAS ALWAYS stocked with meats and fresh vegetables. We had a color television and a baby grand piano on which my mother played the folk songs “*Arirang*” and “*So-nian-jang-soo*.”

Our home had three bedrooms, but while I had my own room, every second or third night I would creep into my parents’ room and snuggle in between my mother and father. I liked smelling my mother’s lavender and rose perfume, faint on her clothes and pillow, and feeling my father’s musk-scented breath on my cheek. Lying between them made me feel safe from the monsters that I learned at school were always wanting to invade my country and enslave me: the Americans, the Japanese, and the South Korean army, which, of course, is controlled by the United States.

In a small house right beside our apartment building lived my dog, Bo-Cho, which means “guard.” Bo-Cho was a Pungsan, bred in the mountains of Ryanggang Province. Pungsans are rare, and only special boys got them as pets, or so my mother told me. On summer nights, when the crickets chirped and I fanned my face with my hands to keep cool, I would sneak down and curl up beside Bo-Cho, nestling in close to his soft white fur. With our heads poking out the front door of his doghouse, his facing down and resting on his paws, mine looking up at the stars, I’d talk to him about *Boy General*, the best television cartoon in Joseon. “The show is set during the Goguryeo Dynasty, which, so you know,

ran from about 900 to 1400," I would explain. "The boy general's father passed away in the battlefield. When the father was killed, his sword went to his son, who became a great boy general and defeated many invaders. The story means that boys can be strong and protect their country, too."

I'd awake in the mornings with the soft dew dampening my face and clothes, and I'd return to my bedroom before my mother and father knew I was even gone.

My father had a big important job. But exactly what he did in the military I never knew then, and I don't want to say now, because we may still have relatives in Joseon who could face imprisonment if the government found out I was sharing my story. When my father wore his uniform, I'd stare at all his badges, particularly the stripes and stars indicating his rank, and his awards for bravery. In the mornings, I would imitate him, sipping black tea and reading the *Rodong Sinmun*, the newspaper of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, followed by the *Joseon Inmingun*, the newspaper of the Korean People's Army.

When the humid summer air turned fresh again, I knew school was just around the corner. On those mornings, I'd don my school uniform and leave the apartment with my father, holding his hand as I skipped down the stairs. We'd say goodbye outside; then he went his way and I went mine. But I would often stop and watch him as he walked down the road. His gait was crisp. His man-

ner was polite to those he passed, friendly but official. Everyone bowed to him.

“I want to be like you when I grow up,” I had told him.

He had smiled.

“Good. You’re learning how to obey and be a good citizen.”

MY SCHOOL, A LONG CONCRETE BUILDING, WAS CO-ED AND for students between the ages of seven and eleven. We always began our day with a bow and by listening to stories about our eternal leader, Kim Il-sung. My favorite was the *Learning Journey of a Thousand Miles*. It’s about our eternal leader as a small child, living in exile with his family in Manchuria. When he was about ten, Kim Il-sung was sent by his father back to his Joseon hometown, Mangyeongdae. Our eternal leader had to journey alone and was given no food and no clothing other than what he wore on his back. Traversing winter storms, mountains covered in ice, and jagged crags, and encountering attacking falcons and hawks and predators, including tigers, he passed through many valleys full of death. He made it safely to Mangyeongdae, mostly because of the help of strangers, other Koreans.

After storytelling, we would quote sayings from our eternal leader and occasionally from Kim Jong-il. “The first priority for students is to study hard,” our class would call out in a loud voice, standing up, our backs straight, our eyes glued to the wall in front

of us. "We must give our all in the struggle to unify the entire society with the revolutionary ideology of the Great Leader Kim Il-sung. We must learn from the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-sung and adopt the communist look, revolutionary work methods, and people-oriented work style."

History—or what I now call propaganda—was often the first, fourth, and final subject of the day, and the lessons almost always began with the same introduction.

NORTH KOREA WAS FOUNDED IN 1948 AFTER A LONG BATTLE between our Japanese oppressors and the liberation army of Kim Il-sung. Our fearless leader braved battles with no food, in the chill of deep winter, walking thousands of miles to lead his armies to rid this land of the foreigners who had taken our natural resources for themselves and turned our people into slaves. Our eternal leader made rice from sand on the shores of the Duman and Amnok rivers to feed his armies and turned pinecones into grenades when his armies were weaponless . . .

WOW! THIS MAN WAS, OF COURSE, MY IDOL! I WANTED TO be brave and magical, just like him. He was everyone's idol.

When I was a small child, my mother told me the Myth of Dangun. Dangun is said to be the grandson of heaven. His story began when his father, Hwanung, wanted to live on earth. Hwanung fell to Baekdu Mountain, where he built a city in which,

aided by heavenly forces, humans advanced in the arts, sciences, and farming.

A tiger and a bear told Hwanung that they wanted to be human, too. Hwanung ordered them to eat only cloves of garlic and mugwort for one hundred days. The tiger gave up, but the bear pressed on. When the bear became human, she was pregnant and husbandless. Hwanung married her. The bear's son, Dangun, became the leader of the heavenly kingdom on earth and moved the capital to outside Pyongyang.

In my imagination, Kim Il-sung was a descendant of Dangun. He was part god, too.

After history, we moved on to geometry, biology, algebra, dance and music, the last of which I hated, for I felt these were subjects for girls.

After school, I would go to tae kwon do lessons at the most rigorous *sojo* in all of Pyongyang. "It's where the boys who will become military leaders start their training," my father told me each and every time he came to watch me do my tae kwon do patterns.

My mother would look away whenever my father talked of my plans to be in the military because she didn't want me to become a career soldier. She once told me that my father was never home and that she didn't want my future wife to feel the heaviness she did in her own heart whenever he was away. Her eyes drooped at the sides, reminding me of a doe I had once seen at the petting zoo at the amusement park Mangyeongdae Yuheejang. Mother's

irises were a soft brown, like the coat of a meadow bunting, and her speech was like a love song I might hear on my father's radio.

My mother performed the traditional fan dance. I saw her do it only once, when I was nine, at the home of my paternal grandfather. She circled the room in the traditional dress of a white skirt with a red top and a long gold ribbon that stretched from her chest to the floor. She also wore a headdress that matched the gold and red in the fans she made float around the room like the wings of a swift. On a nearby stereo, someone had put on a record of flute and *gayageum* music.

My mother reminded me of midsummer sunsets.

MY BIRTHDAY IS IN MARCH. I WON'T TELL YOU THE EXACT Western year and month or the year by the Juche calendar we use in North Korea, the first year of which is 1912, when Kim Il-sung was born. But I can tell you that my birthday falls about a month before the biggest celebration of all in North Korea: our eternal father's own birthday, April 15, also known as the Day of the Sun. On this day, every year, lots of stories were published in the newspapers about our supreme leader's childhood.

On my birthday, I had all my friends to my apartment—friends from school and friends from the tae kwon do *sojo*. My birthday meal, like that of most boys in Pyongyang, was always eggs and pork, both of which represented, my mother would tell us as she passed around our bowls, "prosperity and good fortune."

I'd always end my birthday by playing in the park, even if the ground was still covered in snow. My friends and I would reenact war battles, and I was the general of the Joseon army. I'd go first, picking one boy to be part of my unit. Another boy would be leader of the American imperialists. He'd pick next, and then me again, and so on until all the boys were chosen. We'd then hunt each other down, using sticks as guns. If my unit caught a member of the opposing army, we'd lock him up in the makeshift prison of the twisted iron of the jungle gym. My side, naturally, always won, as we represented the greatest country on earth. Then my unit would march, with me leading it, as in my dream, past my father, whom I would salute, as if he were our great eternal father standing on a platform in the center of Kim Il-sung Square.



ost people in the United States remember where they were on September 11, 2001. For people in Joseon, the day everyone remembers is July 8, 1994, or year 82 in the Juche calendar.

It was a Friday. I came home from school to find our apartment empty. My mother was still at her job as a teacher.

I stretched out on the floor underneath the baby grand piano and played with my toy soldiers. Because it was a regular school day, there were no television signals and so I couldn't watch *Boy General*. I was bored.

While I was very much content fulfilling my obligations as a child to attain the goal of being a military leader, the truth was that I was also lonely. I was going for my white belt in tae kwon do and practicing every second day. I was also studying at the top elementary school to gain entrance to an engineering program at

the university, as my father said that being a general who is also an engineer meant I could help the regime better. I could build tunnels for our armies to hide in, for instance. But I was an only child. I wanted a sibling, a brother. And so, in quiet moments, like then, when only the tick-tock of the clock in the foyer could be heard, a loneliness grew out of me like a rose aching to bloom.

On this day, I was particularly sad because some of my friends had planned during the August school break to visit the sea. I'd never been, but wanted to. My father's work kept him in Pyongyang, and, therefore, my mother and I weren't going anywhere—like every other August holiday.

Then I heard it. A song? No, a wail, followed by another, and soon several voices were crying, almost howling, in unison.

I pushed myself up against the wall, my entire body shaking. Dread filled me. "We've been invaded," I whispered out loud, tossing my army figurines onto the floor.

"*Eomeoni!*" I called out, hoping maybe, just maybe, she was somewhere in the apartment. Silence, at least inside. Outside, the noise grew louder.

I pulled myself up and out from underneath the piano and crept to the window. As I neared, my heart started to beat wildly, as if my insides already knew something that my eyes were just getting ready to see. I reached up to open the window and discovered my hands were shaking.

"*Eomeoni,*" I stammered, hearing the latch of the door. "You

need to come!" I was unable to look away from the scene below me.

"*Adeul*," my mother called out, her feet a soft pitter-patter on the hardwood floor that was protected by a mustard-colored sheet of paper.

She pulled me into her arms and held me tight around the waist. "*Adeul*, we haven't been invaded," she whispered in my ear. "Something else has happened. The eternal leader has died."

I looked up. Her eyes were red, and tears dripped down her cheeks and stained her white silk blouse.

"*Eomeoni*," I said, choking on my words.

My mother fell to the floor then, with me still in her arms. We remained huddled together like this, so lost in some mist that we didn't even get up to bow to my father when he arrived home. All I remember is *abeoji* sliding to the ground, joining us, too.

MY MOTHER'S PARENTS—MY GRANDFATHER, *HAL-ABEOJI*, and my grandmother, *hal-meoni*—found the three of us in this position when twilight pulled itself over the city.

My mother's father was a doctor and had a busy practice, so I never saw him much. I didn't recognize him at first because his hair was thinning and graying at the temples and the lines on his face had deepened. But he had the same droop in the corners of his eyes as my mother and the bushiest eyebrows of anyone I had ever met. My grandmother carried a basket of white magnolias,

which she said we would offer as a family at the foot of the statue of our supreme leader on Mansudae Hill. "To show how grateful we all are for the abundance our eternal father has shown us," she whispered.

I tried to eat some kimchi and pork with *abeoji* and my grandfather, but not much made it to my stomach. I picked at the food with my chopsticks and looked down into my bowl the entire time. My mother had opened the windows wide so we could share in the mourning, which came in big waves, as I imagined the sea would do against a rugged, sharp shoreline. Inside, we were all quiet, like the family of mice I had once stumbled upon nesting in a tiny hole where the wall ended and the floor in the hallway of our apartment building began.

That night, we went as a family to the monument. Walking, we melted into the crowd, shuffling our feet and moving so slowly that crawling on all fours would have got us to Mansudae Hill faster. We were in a sea of bodies, crying and swaying from side to side on the heels of their shoes as if the world itself had ended. When it was finally my family's turn to lay down the white magnolias and show our respect, my father bowed three times and then wailed like all the others, shocking me, for I'd never seen him cry before. As I started to move toward the monument, my mother pulled me back. Red-faced and perspiring from the heat of so many people, she pinched my arm hard and ordered me to cry, too.

“But I can’t,” I said in such a low voice even she couldn’t hear. “I thought Kim Il-sung was a god. Gods don’t die.”

WHEN WE GOT HOME, I WAS SENT RIGHT TO BED. BUT I tossed and turned on my mat in my room, listening to the wailing outside, which eventually retreated, like a swarm of bees following their queen to a new home, until our apartment was silent again . . . except for the tick-tock of the clock and the chime announcing the coming of the hour . . . *one, two . . . three*—that’s when I pulled myself up and crept to the front door.

Unlike other times when I snuck out to be with Bo-Cho, on this night my feet moved as if I were wearing socks made of lead. I kept thinking that when I stepped outside I would meet the spirit of our eternal leader, and he would be cross with me for not crying. For the first time, I was also conscious that my nights with Bo-Cho did not make me a good son of the government. But I was more lonely than afraid, so I pushed on, tiptoeing down the concrete staircase.

Just as I pushed open the side door to our apartment building and felt the warm night air embrace me, a strong hand grabbed the collar of my shirt and pulled me through. I pinched my eyes shut, convinced I was about to face the ghost of the eternal leader.

“Open your eyes, my little *yaeya*,” a familiar voice said.

I looked into my grandfather’s wrinkled face, lit by the match he was using to light a cigarette.

My legs shook. Boys I knew, when they did something wrong, got beatings from their fathers. I was sure that was coming my way. Adding to my fears was my grandfather's cold stare as he puffed on his cigarette in silence.

"Where are you going?" he finally asked, putting out his cigarette and taking another from his shirt pocket. His voice was thick and smooth, like honey, which I'd only ever had with my grandfather. "Honey's very hard to get," he had told me as he dipped a spoon into the syrupy, sweet liquid and then poured it into some hot water. "My dream"—he had winked—"is to one day look after the bees that make the honey."

I was defeated. I didn't want to lie to my grandfather. I'd face my punishment. "To see Bo-Cho," I said after a long pause and with a sigh. "I'm going to see Bo-Cho."

My grandfather's laugh was first low and then rose, eventually erupting like a volcano, scaring me with its force, for I thought for sure he was going to awaken the entire building.

Then he stopped, put a finger to his lips, and said, "Shush," as if I were the one making all the noise, not him. "Show me what you do when you sneak out at night," he said.

I nodded nervously and pointed with a shaking hand at Bo-Cho's home.

"Do you just stand there and look at it?" my grandfather asked.

"No," I admitted, digging a toe into the ground. "I usually . . .," I started and then stopped. "I'm embarrassed to say."

“You usually what?” he probed.

“I usually go inside,” I said with another sigh.

“Inside what?” he asked, startling me because he ended his question with a laugh. In history class, I had learned that the best way to get political prisoners to reveal their secrets was to make them laugh and trust their interrogators. I couldn’t tell whether my grandfather was goading me, getting me to admit to him what I did at night so he could decide the best way to punish me.

“Inside what?” he asked again, cocking an eyebrow.

I groaned. “I usually go inside Bo-Cho’s house and lie beside him.” I then got down on my knees, lowered my head, and started to plead with him to have mercy on me. “I’m only a child, only a decade old. I’m sorry I made such a mistake not crying over our eternal father’s death and by sneaking out to be with Bo-Cho.”

My grandfather’s fingers spread out on top of my head like an octopus’s tentacles. “I’m not angry,” he whispered, tilting my head up so I had to look right at him. For once, he was not smoking. “Let’s go in together,” he said. “Do you think we’ll both fit?”

It was a tight squeeze, but somehow the three of us managed to lie down, with our heads outside the door. Bo-Cho rested his head of soft, short fur on my chest while my grandfather and I looked up at the stars. For a while, we remained quiet, listening to the crickets. Then my grandfather asked if I wanted to hear a story.

“Yes, *hal-abeoji*,” I said, beaming. I sure did.

"THERE WERE ONCE TWO BROTHERS, HEUNGBU AND NOLBU. Nolbu was very greedy, whereas Heungbu was compassionate and kind. When their father died, the boys were told to split their father's fortune in two. But Nolbu refused. He took it all, and Heungbu and his family became very poor.

"One day a snake was climbing up a tree near Heungbu's house, wanting to eat a swallow. Heungbu chased the snake away and helped the swallow heal from its injuries. The swallow's family gave Heungbu a seed as a thank-you. That seed grew into gourds that, when opened, were full of jewels that brought Heungbu and his family great wealth.

"On hearing of Heungbu's good fortune, Nolbu wanted a gourd, too. So he broke a swallow's leg and then fixed it, hoping the swallow would repay the kindness with a magic seed. But when Nolbu split open his gourds, great pain came out, leaving his family now very poor."

"THE MORAL OF THE STORY," MY GRANDFATHER TOLD ME, stroking my forehead in much the same way my mother did when I had a fever, "is that good deeds lay a foundation for a house of great wealth and luck. Greed and ego, however, lay a foundation of destruction. The house that is built on such a foundation, one day, no matter what, will be torn down."

A dark blanket pulled itself over Pyongyang, a blanket that hugged us tight from the day our eternal leader died until . . . well, two and a half years later. People talked in whispers on the streets when they moved from work to home. In our house, *abeoji* was always tired. He no longer tutored me in math or lectured me to practice more tae kwon do or to study harder. It was as though he no longer cared if I did well or not. My mother said that part of mourning was being quiet and sad. It was our way, she said, of honoring the loss of our eternal leader.

I believed her at first and thought this was why the people on the streets looked like deflating balloons as they drooped down from the sky after the Day of the Sun. But as the creases on my mother's forehead darkened and she stopped playing the piano,

I began to wonder if something else was going on that she and *abeoji* weren't telling me.

I felt emptier than I ever had.

IT WAS A SCHOOL DAY IN JANUARY 1997, ABOUT TWO months before my tenth birthday. I was returning from the tae kwon do *sojo*, walking home on a sidewalk layered with an icing of powdered snow. I held my mouth open, catching snowflakes on my tongue. As I approached my apartment building, two things happened that were omens that my life was about to take a drastic turn—for the worse.

The first: Just as I passed under the streetlamp, the light flickered and then went out. The second was when I discovered a bird of prey, a falcon or a hawk, dead on the walkway, its white stomach held high, as if it were a king, even in its afterlife. I didn't have to step through our door and be engulfed in the thick air of sadness to know. Seeing *comeoni's* tear-streaked face, with *abeoji* behind her, shaking his head and rocking back and forth on his heels, repeating, "No, no, no," I burst into tears and fell to my knees. Had the school called and said I failed an examination? Had I not graded well enough to receive my first belt in tae kwon do? Had someone else died? "Have I failed you, *abeoji*?" I cried in despair.

My mother pulled me into her arms and rubbed my back. "We're going on a long vacation," she whispered. "Your father . . ."

"My father what?"

"Your father has been asked to go away for a while . . . to take a holiday," *eomeoni* said, squeezing me so tight, it hurt.

"Why?" I said, pulling myself loose.

"Because America is blocking our imports and exports. America threatens our most peaceful land." Her voice was wavering, so she paused and cleared her throat. "We're going on a long vacation," she then repeated. She tried to smile to reassure me.

"I don't understand," I said, staring at her, so many thoughts flooding my head I didn't know which question to ask first. "If America is threatening us, we need to be *here*," I finally said. My father and I would be needed to help defend the country.

"We're going on a holiday to the north . . . near the sea," my father said in a hoarse voice. I turned to him. He was wearing his work clothes from the day before, including a khaki wool Mao jacket that was rumpled, as if he'd slept in it.

"What should I do?" I asked in a desperate voice, looking back to my mother. Her soft brown eyes wilted at the corners, like a rose just past full bloom.

"I'll bring you a chest to put your clothes in."

"And my books and comics?"

My father coughed. I looked over. He shook his head.

"You can't take everything," my mother whispered. "There won't be room. I'll help you choose what you can bring."

My father moved in beside *eomeoni*. "You'll be going to a new school while we're on holiday," he said.

I just stared at him. I didn't even blink. I wanted him to answer my question about why we were leaving when we were needed here, but in Joseon, a son never demands explanations from his elders. I had to wait.

"And Bo-Cho?" I asked instead.

My father looked down and bit his lip as if he were trying not to weep.

"Who will look after him?" I cried out.

"Someone will," he said.

I turned quickly and ran to the front door, my father not far behind me, calling my name and telling me to stop. But I didn't stop until I was outside, where I saw one of my father's colleagues leading Bo-Cho away on a leash.

I willed my feet to move faster than they've ever moved in my life.

I chased after the man, but as I turned a corner, I ran right into a lady pushing a baby in a pram. I landed on the hard concrete with a thud. I lay on the ground wailing, as my mother had wanted me to do when Kim Il-sung died, blood from my wounds reddening the snow underneath me, people and more snow collecting around me.

A week later we headed to the train station for our so-called northern holiday. My father and I plopped our bags down on the platform, as well as the oak wedding chest that had been made especially for my mother to take new linens, fine china, and silverware from her parents' house to *abeoji's* when they married. My mother gripped my hand hard, and we stood off to the side as we watched my father hand a policeman our papers giving us permission to travel. The papers said that we were going to a city called Gyeong-seong and that, while on vacation, my parents would serve the country by working as laborers.

The police officer ran his eyes up and down my father and then turned and did the same to my mother and me. *Eomeoni* blushed and looked down. I stood up straight, as if I were about to salute the man. The policeman huffed some words to my father, passed the papers back, and then stomped off.

As my father and I heaved the chest toward the edge of the platform to wait for the train, my eyes landed on the policeman, who had stopped to talk to some colleagues. They were all looking at my father, with expressions on their faces that sent a shiver through me. I'd seen that look before, on my classmates' faces when we talked about the Japanese colonialists and the evil Americans. It was that look that said "We're better than you."

ON THE TRAIN, MY FATHER LEANED BACK IN HIS SEAT AND closed his eyes. I sensed he wanted to escape as much as I did. I opened my sketchbook and, with the one pencil that my mother had said I could take with me, drew a BTR-40, also known as a Bronetransporter tank, which the Soviet Union built and our armies used in the 1950s to try to free the South from American control.

After a while, the constant sway of the train made me dizzy, so I closed my eyes like *abeoji*. The clickety-clack sound of the train lulled me into a fitful sleep in which I felt my muscles twitch. I dreamed I was at Mangyeongdae Yuheejang. I saw myself on the Ferris wheel, looking down at the purple and white lilac blossoms and at *abeoji* and *eomeoni* smiling and waving. I heard music from the nearby merry-go-round. I felt light and carefree, knowing that when I got off my ride, I would be enjoying a drink of sweet water.

I woke up with a jolt, perspiring and breathing heavily. I looked over at *abeoji* and *eomeoni*, who were both asleep. I caught my

breath and then brushed my messy hair using some spit and the palms of my hands. I closed my sketchbook, tucked the pencil into my shirt pocket, and looked out the window.

I wished I hadn't.

The train was starting to slow, its brakes screeching us to a halt. Our carriage eventually stopped with the window facing the end of the platform. I leaned my face up to the window, so close my breath caused it to steam. I wiped the window clean and then looked out. Lines of people stretched out before me, but people unlike any I'd seen in Pyongyang. Their skin sagged, their eyes were sinking into their faces, and their complexions were bluish, almost gray, like the clouds that rolled off the East Sea in February. The men didn't wear Mao jackets but dirty dark gray or blue pants and matching tops. The women weren't in skirts, nor did they wear their hair neat on top of their heads in buns. They also wore pants and jackets, and their hair was messy. Some of the children wore shoes with big holes in them through which I could see their toes. These children's faces were covered in scabs and a white coating, like patches of snow on the grasses of the parks in early spring.

Like the barricades that kept spectators off the roads on parade days, policemen blocked the steps up to the train. Some people were slipping won, North Korean currency, to the policemen along with their papers that looked, at a distance, like ours. The policemen wouldn't take the documents, though. They shook

their heads, their facial expressions cold, their gaze looking out beyond the train station, over to some sloping mountains.

People fell to their knees, wailing . . . *wailing*, as if our eternal leader had passed away a second time. I could make out some of the words they shouted to the policemen: "Please, I need to see a dying relative! . . . Please, my children are starving and waiting for me! . . . Please let me on the train!"

Tears flowed down the wrinkled cheeks of an old woman who had managed to push her way to the front using her pointy elbows. Some of her gray hair was missing, exposing red-chaffed skin on her scalp. The policeman in front of our carriage, a stiff young man, tossed the papers she tried to give him into the air like confetti. The old woman crumpled to the platform as if she were lying down for a nap. The crowd moved in on top of her.

The day that started off sunny and winter-crisp turned cloudy. As we moved north, sleet slapped at the windowpanes.

I was glad for that, for I couldn't see out the window anymore.

INSIDE THE GYEONG-SEONG TRAIN STATION, I BECAME very aware of my clean clothes and clean body amid all the dirty faces and the dirty floor and walls, which I took to have once been white but were now covered with a dull yellow film. I shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot under the gaze of the people, who must have noticed, too. I stood out, I thought, like *comeoni's* gold wedding band on a black piece of fabric.

I shifted my eyes to my father as he approached a young man, about the same age as me, standing in the center of the room. The boy was singing the "Spring of Hometown." His shrill voice moved around the room like a warm summer wind and made me smile for the first time that day.

Still singing, the boy turned his head to listen to something my father asked him. He pointed to another boy standing nearby. This boy was small, with red eyes that circled the room, like the singer's voice. He was bone-thin, like a newly planted cherry tree, and his hair was bushy, wild, and dull-looking, not short and shiny like the hair of the boys in Pyongyang. My father spoke to him and then waved for *comeoni* and me to come.

Once outside, the boy grabbed hold of my mother's wedding chest and, despite his frail appearance, hoisted it without any help onto the back of a pull-cart. My father handed him our papers and some won, and we followed on foot as he wheeled the cart away from the station and through the town. The only light was from tiny lamps set in the windowsills of the houses, which were wooden and small. There were no apartment buildings. But there was a mural in the middle of town with a saying from Kim Il-sung underneath it. In the dim light, I couldn't read it, though.

I listened to the soles of my mother's loafers crunch the snow. I lowered my head and watched my feet as snowflakes drifted down around me like cherry blossoms falling in Pyongyang's Daedong River. Tonight I didn't want to try to catch them in my mouth.

Tonight the snowflakes reminded me of large pieces of dust that collect in the corners of rooms and underneath furniture.

THE PULL-CART DRIVER TOOK US TO THE PARTY OFFICIAL who was responsible for overseeing Gyeong-seong. This man was thin, too, like the boy, with stubble on his face and slits for eyes. He had my mother and me sit in an outer room beside a wood-burning heater while he and my father talked behind a closed door. When my father emerged, his face was red, and he looked weary, as if he were losing a military battle but wasn't quite ready to surrender. *Eomeoni* went to him and touched his shoulder. Over the years, he and my mother had become like one, moving as if a symphony played between them. I had, at times, studied their unspoken language, and I knew my mother was now asking if everything was fine. *Abeoji*, stone-faced, waved her away.

No, I thought, nothing is fine.

We headed back into the cold, *eomeoni* and me following the cart while *abeoji* walked in front, beside the boy. We finally stopped by a dark gray house with a door painted royal blue. I dropped the bags I was carrying and ran, pushing open the door, which wasn't locked. I flipped on the light switch. It didn't work. *Eomeoni* rushed past me and with some matches she carried in her purse lit one of two kerosene lamps placed in the middle of the floor. I looked around. Paint was peeling from the walls, and in

some places the walls weren't even painted—just bare concrete. The front room was a kitchen, with three black iron pots sitting on the woodstove. There was a sink, with tubes coming from it and leading to the outside. “Our vacation home!” *abeoji* said, faking a smile. He then patted me on the back. “A little smaller than our apartment in Pyongyang, but it’s only for a short while.”

“I was hoping this was my new dog’s home,” I said, sighing.

“*Adeul*,” my father began. “I’m sorry. You’ll get used to the small size. I know it.”

I inspected the room off the kitchen. The lamps that my mother lit, while dim, still revealed all the house’s dirt, and its yellow walls—like the train station and the oil—and the foot stains on the paper flooring. It felt like an old home, a dying home.

I turned and asked my father, “Why did we really leave Pyongyang?”

MY FATHER AND I SAT CROSS-LEGGED ON THE GROUND, watching *eomeoni* put wood in the stove and boil water that she had pumped in through those long tubes that led, she explained, to an outside well. In Pyongyang, we had faucets and pipes that were connected to the city’s water and sewage system. “Here we have an outhouse for a toilet,” she explained. “When you have to go, I’ll show you where.”

My father cleared his throat. “I want to answer your question about why we left Pyongyang as best I can,” he said. “What you’re

learning in school isn't everything there is to know about Joseon," he continued slowly, as if thinking hard about every word. "There are problems . . . The country is facing problems. Here in the countryside"—he waved his hand around the room as if all of it represented rural Joseon—"life is different. I mean, Pyongyang's great monuments, museums, hotels, and theaters were all built in the 1960s and 1970s—everything is new and efficient. Here . . . well, here all the buildings owned by the Japanese were destroyed, but those built in their place are not as state-of-the-art as in Pyongyang. It will be a hard vacation, but one designed to test your strength and open your eyes to how the rest of the country lives."

I didn't say anything, but with every word my father spoke, my shoulders slumped a little more. "*Abeoji*, are we really on vacation?" I eventually asked, looking deep into my father's eyes. But then, as I studied his eyes, which were the color of varnished oak, I felt guilty. *A good son trusts his parents*, I lectured myself. My shoulders slackened again, and my head drooped. I had betrayed my father and my role as his son by even hinting that I didn't believe him.

"We're on holiday," he repeated, tilting my head up with his hand and forcing me to look at him.

Eomeoni sat down with a sigh. "Look, *adeul*," she started, "Joseon is facing some problems."

Okay. I had heard that. "What kind of problems?" I asked.

"I can't fully say, but it's all due to the evil Americans," she said.

I bowed to show I agreed. But I didn't understand. I wasn't getting enough information to understand. At least in school when the teacher says the Japanese did terrible things, the teacher also lists everything the Japanese did when they occupied our land.

"Look at this holiday as a test, a test of your courage," *abeoji* repeated.

"And strength to lead an army one day," *esomeoni* added.

I looked at her with surprise. It was the first time she had ever acknowledged my future dreams to be a military leader.

"Like when our eternal leader set off on foot from Manchuria to Mangyeongdae?" I whispered to her. "*The Learning Journey of a Thousand Miles?*"

She nodded. "Yes, *adeul*. Like that time."

I awoke early the next day. I sat up quickly and looked over to the window. Dirt filtered the sunlight that was trying to stretch itself into the one room where we now all slept side by side on the floor.

Still in that fog between wake and sleep, I crept out from underneath my covers and crossed the icy-cold floor. Our vacation house had no central heating, unlike our apartment in Pyongyang. Now only the stove in the main room warmed us. Like the sun, the stove's warmth also struggled to spread itself into the house. I could see my breath steaming up the air.

The lower part of the inside of the window was covered in a thin layer of ice. Using a fingernail, I chipped at it, creating a small pile of snow powder on the floor and a clear patch of window, which I could peer through. Snow—all I could see was white snow that sparkled like jewels in the sunlight.

My father and I ate a bowl of noodles and broth in silence,

partly because I was still ashamed of myself for questioning him the day before. Also, I was freezing. My teeth chattered and my fingers shook when I lifted my bowl to my lips.

“I have a trick for you,” my father finally said.

I smiled. I liked tricks.

“In the army, when men are sent out for long marches and it’s cold like this and they’re hungry, we get them to play a game in which they think about their favorite foods and eating these foods in the warmest places they know. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” I said, closing my eyes. My mind drifted to my birthday: tender pork in a special sauce that *eomeoni* alone in this world knew how to make, hard-boiled eggs, and steamed bread with red bean paste. “Nampo’s wedding!” I then shouted. “Remember, *abeoji*? Aunt Nampo’s wedding?”

I heard him say, “Uh-huh.”

“Sugar candies shaped like flowers,” I continued. “I ate a yellow tulip and a peach rose. It was summer, and we wore short-sleeved shirts. I was warm . . .”

I then thought of a long, hot bath.

It worked.

My father was right.

When I opened my eyes, I felt full and warm. I pulled myself up and changed into a pair of slacks, with tights underneath to keep the chill out. I then headed with my father to my new school.

❖ ❖ ❖

MY FATHER SAT IN A STIFF FOLDING WOODEN CHAIR FACING the principal's long wooden desk. The principal appeared small sitting behind a mound of Kim Il-sung books and swimming in an oversize thick woolen coat, which I wondered why he wore, given his tininess. He looked at us through lost gray eyes, the color of which matched his salt-and-pepper hair. He didn't wear a Mao suit, like the principal at my school in Pyongyang, and he spoke with an accent that I found hard to understand at first. It was rough, like the barking of a large dog.

The *so-nyon-dan* manager came in and introduced himself. He explained to my father that, like the *so-nyon-dan* manager in Pyongyang, he taught the anti-imperialist courses and oversaw biweekly revealing sessions, in which the class lists the things they had not done right. Back in Pyongyang, my answer was almost always that I had skipped studying to watch *Boy General*. In these sessions, we also had to condemn our peers for what they did wrong. The goal was to help us become good citizens, of course, and follow the rules of the country, the *so-nyon-dan* manager explained to my father, as if we didn't know this already. "If we reveal our problems and point out to others where they need to improve, we won't repeat the wrongs in the future," he said. I could tell he was trying to impress my father. At least he wasn't acting like the policemen at the Pyongyang train station.

Then the *so-nyon-dan* manager told me to follow him to my new classroom. "We will be having an election to decide the stu-

dent council president soon," he said as we trudged back through the snow, past some low buildings that he waved a hand toward and said were other classrooms. "I'm sure you know from your schooling in Pyongyang that part of our education is to learn to agree with the decisions made by those in authority. We've discussed it and decided that, because you are from Pyongyang and attended such a distinguished school before coming here, we would like you to be the student council president."

I bowed to show that I agreed. I knew that my elite upbringing destined me to be a leader. Part of my education was to accept my responsibility.

He led me onto a cobblestone path that had recently been shoveled. We followed it as it wove around several more low wooden buildings, which I figured were outhouses. Finally, the *so-nyon-dan* manager stopped in front of a building that he said was my new classroom. He led me inside. With me standing nervously behind him, he introduced me to the students.

The room had no electricity, but there was a long window that let in lots of light. The room was heated, I could see, by a small wood-burning stove in the corner. I shivered, and not just from the cold. All the students were staring at me with shocked expressions.

In Pyongyang, my classmates had always been the same since I was seven. No one ever left, until, well, me, and no new students

ever came. I guessed it must be the same up here. My face suddenly felt flushed, and I wrung my hands together.

The teacher, who asked me to call him *seon-saeng-nim*, or simply “teacher,” moved a student from the front of the class to the back. “You’re from Pyongyang,” he said to me. I was getting that this fact alone granted me privileges the others didn’t have, including sitting close to him. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to, though. His body odor filled the room, and he spoke in a harsh, gruff voice that, when he recited Kim Il-sung sayings, pounded at my ears like a *buk*. This man, too, swam in his suits. I looked down and saw that his shoes were large, like flippers a military diver wears. I shrugged. Maybe men in the countryside just like wearing clothes that are too big for them.

I WAS QUICKER THAN ANY OF MY CLASSMATES IN SOLVING geometry questions, so I made a mental note at afternoon break to ask my father if I could move to a higher class.

As I reached under my desk to pull out the container of noodles my mother had given me for a snack, a strong hand grabbed my elbow. I looked up quickly into the round black eyes of another boy. “I’m Young-bum,” he chirped like a bird. His hair was short and choppy, as if he had cut it himself with dull scissors and without a mirror.

I nodded back. Like his eyes, Young-bum had a round, glowing

face. He also had high cheekbones. He was tall—that much I could see, as his legs spread out underneath his desk like tree roots. He had long fingers, and when he caught me looking at them, he informed me with a big grin that he played the accordion. “I’m also the best fighter in the school,” he boasted. “So what’s it like in Pyongyang? Have you been to Mangyeongdae Yuheejang?” He ran his tongue over the name of the amusement park as if he were hungry. “Did you ride the Ferris wheel?”

“Yes,” I replied, sadly remembering the amusement park. I felt as if I were sinking. I wanted to go home.

“What was it like?”

“Fun,” I replied.

I studied Young-bum. He was peppy, like Bo-Cho when he saw me rounding the corner on my way home from school. Young-bum was unable to keep still in his chair, tapping his foot and moving around, like some red candy *abeoji* once gave me that popped when I put it in my mouth. “What’s the name of the amusement park here?” I finally asked.

“We don’t have amusement parks,” another boy said. He plopped himself down on the edge of Young-bum’s desk and introduced himself as Chulho. I gasped and tried hard not to show my dismay. Boys in Pyongyang would never be this informal.

“Umm . . .,” I started, turning my attention from Young-bum to Chulho. Everything about him seemed sharp, from his pointy nose and lips, which were like two long sticks, to his eyebrows,

which looked like the mustache my father painted on my general figurine. His lanky body reminded me of a flagpole.

“We have nothing in Gyeong-seong,” he spat out with such force that his tone of voice was like an acid I once used for an experiment in science class. “But you in Pyongyang are rich and get good food and Ferris wheels.”

“Don’t forget roller coasters and swimming pools,” Young-bum said, bouncing in his seat. These two couldn’t have been more opposite, I thought. Like sweet-and-sour sauce my father brought home once, saying it was a gift from a man who traded Joseon goods in China.

Suddenly a boy sitting behind Chulho caught my attention.

“I know him,” I said, pointing. “But I can’t remember . . .”

“Oh,” Young-bum said, turning. “That’s Sangchul.”

“For the past three years, he’s won the regional singing competition performing ‘*So-nian-jang-soo*,’” Chulho jumped in. “He’s a singer.”

“You probably saw him at the train station,” Young-bum added.

“Yeah, that’s Sangchul, all right,” Chulho continued. “He goes there to sing, to make won for his family.”

I tilted my head and blinked. “What?” I asked in disbelief.

“Sangchul can earn more won than anyone in his family—well, more than any of us put together—with his singing,” Young-bum said, beaming.

I shook my head. “I don’t understand,” I said. “I mean, what

does he need won for? The government provides for everything, and surely if his family wants extra, they're earning won at their places of work."

Chulho's laughter drowned out my words. "There are no rations here," he finally said, folding his arms across his chest. "Surely you know that. The government isn't providing for anything anymore."

"I . . . I . . ." I was stammering now.

"Look," said Chulho, leaning toward me and opening a brown bag. He then motioned for me to take a look inside. All I could see were strips of some kind of reddish meat covered in crystals of gray salt. I shrugged, trying to act cool, as if I knew what was going on. But I sure didn't.

"It's squirrel meat. I caught a squirrel in the forests last fall," he said.

"Okay," I said, playing along.

He cocked an eyebrow. "It's all I'm going to eat today?" he said, the end of his sentence rising as if it were a question instead of a statement.

A laugh spilled out of me now. For sure, Chulho was playing with me. No one ate squirrel.

The room fell silent, and so did I. I slowly looked around and saw that every eye was on me again. I swallowed hard and chewed the inside of my mouth.

“What were you told about your move to Gyeong-seong?” Chulho asked as Young-bum pulled his chair up beside mine and stuck his big head close to me.

I wiped my sweaty forehead with the sleeve of my shirt. I remembered the mock interrogations we would do in class in Pyongyang. This felt like one of those times—but different. I wasn’t sure if this interrogation was real or not.

I took a deep breath and kept looking down. I refused to answer, which was what I was told most prisoners of war do, at least at first, before the torture starts.

“I don’t know what you were told, but I’ll tell you the truth,” Chulho said, leaning in close, too, so close I could smell that he smoked, which startled me. Children don’t smoke in Pyongyang, only adults. “The factories up here may be open, yet no one is working in them, because what’s the point?” he said. “People don’t get paid won for the hours they put in. The food-distribution centers are empty, so their ration tickets are useless. There’s no hope here, fancy-pants Pyongyang boy.”

Nervous perspiration dripped down my forehead, making my eyes itch. I wished—I wished so much—that *seon-saeng-nim* would return from his break and start lessons again.

“Soon you’ll be out in those forests looking for food,” Young-bum said more gently. “And when you do, I’ll come with you. It won’t be that scary.”

At that moment, *seon-saeng-nim* burst through the front door, sending a blast of cold air around the already cold room. I exhaled, never so happy in my life to see a teacher.

As *seon-saeng-nim* went on about Japan's expansion into Joseon over the 1900s, Chulho passed me a note.

Trust me, those yummy noodles you just ate will soon run out. Then you'll be just like us.