

# PACHINKO

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Home is a name, a word, it is a strong one; stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit answered to, in strongest conjuration.

—Charles Dickens

# I

## Yeongdo, Busan, Korea

History has failed us, but no matter.

At the turn of the century, an aging fisherman and his wife decided to take in lodgers for extra money. Both were born and raised in the fishing village of Yeongdo—a five-mile-wide islet beside the port city of Busan. In their long marriage, the wife gave birth to three sons, but only Hoonie, the eldest and the weakest one, survived. Hoonie was born with a cleft palate and a twisted foot; he was, however, endowed with hefty shoulders, a squat build, and a golden complexion. Even as a young man, he retained the mild, thoughtful temperament he'd had as a child. When Hoonie covered his misshapen mouth with his hands, something he did out of habit meeting strangers, he resembled his nice-looking father, both having the same large, smiling eyes. Inky eyebrows graced his broad forehead, perpetually tanned from outdoor work. Like his parents, Hoonie was not a nimble talker, and some made the mistake of thinking that because he could not speak quickly there was something wrong with his mind, but that was not true.

In 1910, when Hoonie was twenty-seven years old, Japan annexed Korea. The fisherman and his wife, thrifty and hardy peasants, refused to be distracted by the country's incompetent aristocrats and corrupt rulers, who had lost their nation to thieves. When the rent for their house was raised again, the couple moved out of their bedroom and slept in the anteroom near the kitchen to increase the number of lodgers.



The wooden house they had rented for over three decades was not large, just shy of five hundred square feet. Sliding paper doors divided the interior into three snug rooms, and the fisherman himself had replaced its leaky grass roof with reddish clay tiles to the benefit of his landlord, who lived in splendor in a mansion in Busan. Eventually, the kitchen was pushed out to the vegetable garden to make way for the larger cooking pots and the growing number of portable dining tables that hung on pegs along the mortared stone wall.

At his father's insistence, Hoonie learned to read and write Korean and Japanese from the village schoolmaster well enough to keep a boarding-house ledger and to do sums in his head so he couldn't be cheated at the market. When he knew how to do this, his parents pulled him out of school. As an adolescent, Hoonie worked nearly as well as a strong man twice his age with two well-shaped legs; he was dexterous with his hands and could carry heavy loads, but he could not run or walk quickly. Both Hoonie and his father were known in the village for never picking up a cup of wine. The fisherman and his wife raised their surviving son, the neighborhood cripple, to be clever and diligent, because they did not know who would care for him after they died.

If it were possible for a man and his wife to share one heart, Hoonie was this steady, beating organ. They had lost their other sons—the youngest to measles and the middle, good-for-nothing one to a goring bull in a pointless accident. Except for school and the market, the old couple kept young Hoonie close by the house, and eventually, as a young man, Hoonie needed to stay home to help his parents. They could not bear to disappoint him; yet they loved him enough not to dote on him. The peasants knew that a spoiled son did more harm to a family than a dead one, and they kept themselves from indulging him too much.

Other families in the land were not so fortunate as to have two such sensible parents, and as happens in countries being pillaged by rivals or nature, the weak—the elderly, widows and orphans—were as desperate as ever on the colonized peninsula. For any household that could feed one more, there were multitudes willing to work a full day for a bowl of barley rice.

In the spring of 1911, two weeks after Hoonie turned twenty-eight, the red-cheeked matchmaker from town called on his mother.

Hoonie's mother led the matchmaker to the kitchen; they had to speak in low tones since the boarders were sleeping in the front rooms. It was late morning, and the lodgers who'd fished through the evening had finished their hot suppers, washed up, and gone to bed. Hoonie's mother poured the matchmaker a cup of cold barley tea but didn't break from her own work.

Naturally, the mother guessed what the matchmaker wanted, but she couldn't fathom what to say. Hoonie had never asked his parents for a bride. It was unthinkable that a decent family would let their daughter marry someone with deformities, since such things were inevitable in the next generation. She had never seen her son talk to a girl; most village girls avoided the sight of him, and Hoonie would have known enough not to want something he could not have—this forbearance was something that any normal peasant would have accepted about his life and what he was allowed to desire.

The matchmaker's funny little face was puffy and pink; black flinty eyes darted intelligently, and she was careful to say only nice things. The woman licked her lips as if she was thirsty; Hoonie's mother felt the woman observing her and every detail of the house, measuring the size of the kitchen with her exacting eyes.

The matchmaker, however, would have had great difficulty in reading Hoonie's mother, a quiet woman who worked from waking until bed, doing what was needed for that day and the next. She rarely went to the market, because there was no time for distracting chatter; she sent Hoonie for the shopping. While the matchmaker talked, Hoonie's mother's mouth remained unmoving and steady, much like the heavy pine table she was cutting her radishes on.

The matchmaker brought it up first. So there was that unfortunate matter of his foot and broken lip, but Hoonie was clearly a good boy—educated and strong as a pair of oxen! She was blessed to have such a fine son, the matchmaker said. She deprecated her own children: Neither of her boys was dedicated to books or commerce, but they were not



terrible boys. Her daughter married too early and lived too far away. All good marriages, the matchmaker supposed, but her sons were lazy. Not like Hoonie. After her speech, the matchmaker stared at the olive-skinned woman whose face was immobile, casting about for any sign of interest.

Hoonie's mother kept her head down, handling her sharp knife confidently—each cube of radish was square and certain. When a large mound of white radish cubes formed on the cutting board, she transferred the load in a clean swipe into a mixing bowl. She was paying such careful attention to the matchmaker's talking that privately, Hoonie's mother feared she would begin to shake from nerves.

Before stepping into the house, the matchmaker had walked around its perimeter to assess the financial condition of the household. From all appearances, the neighborhood talk of their stable situation could be confirmed. In the kitchen garden, ponytail radishes, grown fat and heavy from the early spring rain, were ready to be pulled from the brown earth. Pollack and squid strung neatly across a long clothesline dried in the lacy spring sun. Beside the outhouse, three black pigs were kept in a clean pen built from local stone and mortar. The matchmaker counted seven chickens and a rooster in the backyard. Their prosperity was more evident inside the house.

In the kitchen, stacks of rice and soup bowls rested on well-built shelves, and braids of white garlic and red chilies hung from the low kitchen rafters. In the corner, near the washbasin, there was an enormous woven basket heaped with freshly dug potatoes. The comforting aroma of barley and millet steaming in the black rice pot wafted through the small house.

Satisfied with the boardinghouse's comfortable situation in a country growing steadily poorer, the matchmaker was certain that even Hoonie could have a healthy bride, so she plowed ahead.

The girl was from the other side of the island, beyond the dense woods. Her father, a tenant farmer, was one of the many who'd lost his lease as a result of the colonial government's recent land surveys. The widower, cursed with four girls and no sons, had nothing to eat except for what was gathered from the woods, fish he couldn't sell, or the occasional charity from equally impoverished neighbors. The decent father had begged the

matchmaker to find grooms for his unmarried daughters, since it was better for virgins to marry anyone than to scrounge for food when men and women were hungry, and virtue was expensive. The girl, Yangjin, was the last of the four girls and the easiest to unload because she was too young to complain, and she'd had the least to eat.

Yangjin was fifteen and mild and tender as a newborn calf, the matchmaker said. "No dowry, of course, and surely, the father could not expect much in the way of gifts. Perhaps a few laying hens, cotton cloth for Yangjin's sisters, six or seven sacks of millet to get them through the winter." Hearing no protest at the tally of gifts, the matchmaker grew bolder, "Maybe a goat. Or a small pig. The family has so little, and bride prices have come down so much. The girl wouldn't need any jewelry." The matchmaker laughed a little.

With a flick of her thick wrist, Hoonie's mother showered the radish with sea salt. The matchmaker could not have known how hard Hoonie's mother was concentrating and thinking about what the woman wanted. The mother would have given up anything to raise the bride price demanded; Hoonie's mother found herself surprised at the imaginings and hopes rising within her breast, but her face remained collected and private; nevertheless, the matchmaker was no fool.

"What I wouldn't give to have a grandson of my own one day," the matchmaker said, making her closing gambit while peering hard at the boardinghouse keeper's creased, brown face. "I have a granddaughter but no grandsons, and the girl cries too much."

The matchmaker continued. "I remember holding my first son when he was a baby. How happy I was! He was as white as a basket of fresh rice cakes on New Year's—soft and juicy as warm dough. Tasty enough to take a bite. Well, now he's just a big dolt," feeling the need to add a complaint to her bragging.

Hoonie's mother smiled, finally, because the image was almost too vivid for her. What old woman didn't yearn to hold her grandson when such a thought had been inconceivable before this visit? She clenched her teeth to calm herself and picked up the mixing bowl. She shook it to even out the salt.



"The girl has a nice face. No pockmarks. She's well mannered and obeys her father and sisters. And not too dark. She's a little thing, but she has strong hands and arms. She'll need to gain some weight, but you understand that. It's been a difficult time for the family." The matchmaker smiled at the basket of potatoes in the corner as if to suggest that here, the girl would be able to eat as much as she wanted.

Hoonie's mother rested the bowl on the counter and turned to her guest.

"I'll speak to my husband and son. There's no money for a goat or a pig. We may be able to send some cotton wool with the other things for the winter. I'll have to ask."

The bride and groom met on their wedding day, and Yangjin had not been scared by his face. Three people in her village had been born that way. She'd seen cattle and pigs with the same thing. A girl who lived near her had a strawberry-like growth between her nose and split lip, and the other children called her Strawberry, a name the girl did not mind. When Yangjin's father had told her that her husband would be like Strawberry but also with a crooked leg, she had not cried. He told her that she was a good girl.

Hoonie and Yangjin were married so quietly that if the family had not sent out mugwort cakes to the neighbors, they would have been accused of stinginess. Even the boarders were astonished when the bride appeared to serve the morning meal the day following the wedding.

When Yangjin became pregnant, she worried that her child would have Hoonie's deformities. Her first child was born with a cleft palate but had good legs. Hoonie and his parents were not upset when the midwife showed him to them. "Do you mind it?" Hoonie asked her, and she said no, because she did not. When Yangjin was alone with her firstborn, she traced her index finger around the infant's mouth and kissed it; she had never loved anyone as much as her baby. At seven weeks, he died of a fever. Her second baby had a perfect face and good legs, but he, too, died before his *baek-il* celebration from diarrhea and fever. Her sisters, still unmarried, blamed her weak milk flow and advised her to see a shaman.

Hoonie and his parents did not approve of the shaman, but she went without telling them when she was pregnant for the third time. Yet in the midst of her third pregnancy, she felt odd, and Yangjin resigned herself to the possibility that this one, too, may die. She lost her third to smallpox.

Her mother-in-law went to the herbalist and brewed her healing teas. Yangjin drank every brown drop in the cup and apologized for the great expense. After each birth, Hoonie went to the market to buy his wife choice seaweed for soup to heal her womb; after each death, he brought her sweet rice cakes still warm from the market and gave them to her: "You have to eat. You must get your strength."

Three years after the marriage, Hoonie's father died, then months after, his wife followed. Yangjin's in-laws had never denied her meals or clothing. No one had hit her or criticized her even as she failed to give them a surviving heir.

At last, Yangjin gave birth to Sunja, her fourth child and the only girl, and the child thrived; after she turned three, the parents were able to sleep through the night without checking the pallet repeatedly to see if the small form lying beside them was still breathing. Hoonie made his daughter dollies out of corn husks and forsook his tobacco to buy her sweets; the three ate each meal together even though the lodgers wanted Hoonie to eat with them. He loved his child the way his parents had loved him, but he found that he could not deny her anything. Sunja was a normal-looking girl with a quick laugh and bright, but to her father, she was a beauty, and he marveled at her perfection. Few fathers in the world treasured their daughters as much as Hoonie, who seemed to live to make his child smile.

In the winter when Sunja was thirteen years old, Hoonie died quietly from tuberculosis. At his burial, Yangjin and her daughter were inconsolable. The next morning, the young widow rose from her pallet and returned to work.

BOOK II

# Motherland

1939-1962

I thought that no matter how many hills and brooks  
you crossed, the whole world was Korea and every-  
one in it was Korean.

—Park Wan-suh



## 2

Each morning, Sunja walked to the police station and handed over three *onigin* made with barley and millet. If there was money in the budget for a chicken egg, she'd hard-boil it, soak the peeled egg in vinegary shoyu to supplement Isak's modest bento. No one could be sure if the food ever reached him, but she couldn't prove that it didn't. Everyone in the neighborhood knew someone who'd gone to jail, and the wildly varying reports were at best troubling and at worst terrifying. Yoseb wouldn't speak about Isak, but Isak's arrest had altered him considerably. Patches of gray smudged his once jet-black hair, and he suffered from intense stomach cramps. He stopped writing to his parents, who couldn't be told about Isak, so Kyunghee wrote to them instead, making excuses. At meals, Yoseb put aside much of his food for Noa, who sat beside him quietly. Yoseb and Noa shared a kind of unspeakable grief over Isak's absence.

Despite numerous personal appeals, no one had been allowed to see Isak, but the family believed he was alive, because the police had not told them otherwise. The elder minister and the sexton remained in jail as well, and the family hoped that the three of them sustained each other somehow, though no one knew how the prisoners were being housed. A day after the arrest, the police had come to the house to confiscate Isak's few books and papers. The family's comings and goings were monitored; a detective visited them every few weeks to ask questions. The police padlocked the church, yet the congregation continued to meet secretly in

small groups led by the church elders. Kyunghee, Sunja, and Yoseb never met the parishioners for fear of putting them in danger. By now, most of the foreign missionaries back home and here had returned to their native countries. It was rare to see a white person in Osaka. Yoseb had written the Canadian missionaries about Isak but there'd been no reply.

Under considerable duress, the decision-making authority of the Presbyterian Church had deemed that the mandatory Shinto shrine ceremony was a civic duty rather than a religious one even though the Emperor, the head of the state religion, was viewed as a living deity. Pastor Yoo, a faithful and pragmatic minister, had believed that the shrine ceremony, where the townspeople were required to gather and perform rites, was in fact a pagan ritual drummed up to rouse national feeling. Bowing to idols was naturally offensive to the Lord. Nevertheless, Pastor Yoo had encouraged Isak, Hu, and his congregation to observe the Shinto bowing for the greater good. He didn't want his parishioners, many of them new to the faith, to be sacrificed to the government's predictable response to disobedience—prison and death. Pastor Yoo found support for such ideas in the letters of the apostle Paul. So whenever these gatherings at the nearest shrine took place, their frequency varying from town to town, the elder pastor, Isak, and Hu had attended when necessary along with whoever else was in the church building at the time. However, with his weakened vision, the elder pastor had not known that at every Shinto ceremony, the sexton Hu had been mouthing *Our Father* like an unbroken loop even as he bowed, sprinkled water, and clapped his hands like all the others. Isak had noticed Hu doing this, of course, but had said nothing. If anything, Isak had admired Hu's faith and gesture of resistance.

For Sunja, Isak's arrest had forced her to consider what would happen if the unthinkable occurred. Would Yoseb ask her and her children to leave? Where would she go, and how would she get there? How would she take care of her children? Kyunghee would not ask her to leave, but even so—she was only a wife. Sunja had to have a plan and money in case she had to return home to her mother with her sons.

So Sunja had to find work. She would become a peddler. It was one



thing for a woman like her mother to take in boarders and to work alongside her husband to earn money, but something altogether different for a young woman to stand in an open market and sell food to strangers, shouting until she was hoarse. Yoseb tried to forbid her from getting a job, but she could not listen to him. With tears streaming down her face, she told her brother-in-law that Isak would want her to earn money for the boys' schooling. To this, Yoseb yielded. Nevertheless, he prohibited Kyunghee from working outdoors, and his wife obeyed. Kyunghee was allowed to put up the pickles with Sunja, but she couldn't sell them. Yoseb couldn't protest too much, because the household was desperate for cash. In a way, the two women tried to obey Yoseb in their disobedience—they did not want to hurt Yoseb by defying him, but the financial burdens had become impossible for one man to bear alone.

Her first day of selling took place one week after Isak was jailed. After Sunja dropped off Isak's food at the jail, she wheeled a wooden cart holding a large clay jar of kimchi to the market. The open-air market in Ikaino was a patchwork of modest retail shops selling housewares, cloth, tatami mats, and electric goods, and it hosted a collection of hawkers like her who peddled homemade scallion pancakes, rolled sushi, and soybean paste.

Kyunghee watched Mozasu at home. Nearby the peddlers selling *gochujang* and *doenjang*, Sunja noticed two young Korean women selling fried wheat crackers. Sunja pushed her cart toward them, hoping to wedge herself between the cracker stall and the soybean-paste lady.

"You can't stink up our area," the older of the two cracker sellers said. "Go to the other side." She pointed to the fish section.

When Sunja moved closer to the women selling dried anchovies and seaweed, the older Korean women there were even less welcoming.

"If you don't move your shitty-looking cart, I'll have my sons piss in your pot. Do you understand, country girl?" said a tall woman wearing a white kerchief on her head.

Sunja couldn't come up with a reply, because she was so surprised. None of them were even selling kimchi, and *doenjang* could smell just as pungently.

She kept walking until she couldn't see any more *ajummas* and ended up near the train station entrance where the live chickens were sold. The intense funk of animal carcasses overwhelmed her. There was a space big enough for her cart between the pig butcher and the chickens.

Wielding an enormous knife, a Japanese butcher was cutting up a hog the size of a child. A large bucket filled with its blood rested by his feet. Two hogs' heads lay on the front table. The butcher was an older gentleman with ropy, muscular arms and thick veins. He was sweating profusely, and he smiled at her.

Sunja parked her cart in the empty lot by his stall. Whenever a train stopped, she could feel its deceleration beneath her sandals. Passengers would disembark, and many of them came into the market from the entrance nearby, but none stopped in front of her cart. Sunja tried not to cry. Her breasts were heavy with milk, and she missed being at home with Kyunghee and Mozasu. She wiped her face with her sleeves, trying to remember what the best market *ajummas* would do back home.

"Kimchi! Delicious kimchi! Try this delicious kimchi, and never make it at home again!" she shouted. Passersby turned to look at her, and Sunja, mortified, looked away from them. No one bought anything. After the butcher finished with his hog, he washed his hands and gave her twenty-five sen, and Sunja filled a container for him. He didn't seem to mind that she didn't speak Japanese. He put down the kimchi container by the hogs' heads, then reached behind his stall to take out his bento. The butcher placed a piece of kimchi neatly on top of his white rice with his chopsticks and ate a bite of rice and kimchi in front of her.

"*Oishi! Oishi nee! Honto oishi,*" he said, smiling.

She bowed to him.

At lunchtime, Kyunghee brought Mozasu for her to nurse, and Sunja remembered that she had no choice but to recoup the cost of the cabbage, radish, and spices. At the end of the day, she had to show more money than they had spent.

Kyunghee watched the cart while Sunja nursed the baby with her body turned toward the wall.

"I'd be afraid," Kyunghee said. "You know how I'd said that I wanted



to be a kimchi *ajumma*? I don't think I realized what it would feel like to stand here. You're so brave."

"What choice do we have?" Sunja said, looking down at her beautiful baby.

"Do you want me to stay here? And wait with you?"

"You'll get in trouble," Sunja said. "You should be home when Noa gets back from school, and you have to make dinner. I'm sorry I can't help you, Sister."

"What I have to do is easy," Kyunghee said.

It was almost two o'clock in the afternoon, and the air felt cooler as the sun turned away from them.

"I'm not going to come home until I sell the whole jar."

"Really?"

Sunja nodded. Her baby, Mozasu, resembled Isak. He looked nothing like Noa, who was olive-skinned with thick, glossy hair. Noa's bright eyes noticed everything. Except for his mouth, Noa looked almost identical to a young Hansu. At school, Noa sat still during lessons, waited for his turn, and he was praised as an excellent student. Noa had been an easy baby, and Mozasu was a happy baby, too, delighted to be put into a stranger's arms. When she thought about how much she loved her boys, she recalled her parents. Sunja felt so far away from her mother and father. Now she was standing outside a rumbling train station, trying to sell kimchi. There was no shame in her work, but it couldn't be what they'd wanted for her. Nevertheless, she felt her parents would have wanted her to make money, especially now.

When Sunja finished nursing, Kyunghee put down two sugared rolls and a bottle filled with reconstituted powdered milk on the cart.

"You have to eat, Sunja. You're nursing, and that's not easy, right? You have to drink lots of water and milk."

Kyunghee turned around so Sunja could tuck Mozasu into the sling on Kyunghee's back. Kyunghee secured the baby tightly around her torso.

"I'll go home and wait for Noa and make dinner. You come home soon, okay? We're a good team."

Mozasu's small head rested between Kyunghee's thin shoulder blades,

and Sunja watched them walk away. When they were out of earshot, Sunja cried out, "Kimchi! Delicious Kimchi! Kimchi! Delicious kimchi! *Oishi desu! Oishi kimchi!*"

This sound, the sound of her own voice, felt familiar, not because it was her own voice but because it reminded her of all the times she'd gone to the market as a girl—first with her father, later by herself as a young woman, then as a lover yearning for the gaze of her beloved. The chorus of women hawking had always been with her, and now she'd joined them. "Kimchi! Kimchi! Homemade kimchi! The most delicious kimchi in Ikaino! More tasty than your grandmother's! *Oishi desu, oishi!*" She tried to sound cheerful, because back home, she had always frequented the nicest *ajummas*. When the passersby glanced in her direction, she bowed and smiled at them. "*Oishi! Oishi!*"

The pig butcher looked up from his counter and smiled at her proudly.

That evening, Sunja did not go home until she could see the bottom of the kimchi jar.

Sunja could sell whatever kimchi she and Kyunghee were able to make now, and this ability to sell had given her a kind of strength. If they could've made more kimchi, she felt sure that she could've sold that, too, but fermenting took time, and it wasn't always possible to find the right ingredients. Even when they made a decent profit, the price of cabbages could spike the following week, or worse, they might not be available at all. When there were no cabbages at the market, the women pickled radishes, cucumbers, garlic, or chives, and sometimes Kyunghee pickled carrots or eggplant without garlic or chili paste, because the Japanese preferred those kinds of pickles. Sunja thought about land all the time. The little kitchen garden her mother had kept behind the house had nourished them even when the boardinghouse guests ate double what they paid. The price of fresh food kept rising, and working people couldn't afford the most basic things. Recently, some customers would ask to buy a cup of kimchi because they couldn't afford a jar of it.

If Sunja had no kimchi or pickles to sell, she sold other things. Sunja roasted sweet potatoes and chestnuts; she boiled ears of corn. She had



two carts now, and she hooked them together like the cars of a train—one cart with a makeshift coal stove and another just for pickles. The carts took up the better part of the kitchen because they had to keep them inside the house for fear of them getting stolen. She split the profits equally with Kyunghee, and Sunja put aside every sen she could for the boys' schooling and for their passage back home in case they had to leave.

When Mozasu turned five months old, Sunja also started selling candy at the market. Produce had been getting increasingly scarce, and by chance, Kyunghee had obtained two wholesale bags of black sugar from a Korean grocer whose Japanese brother-in-law worked in the military.

At her usual spot by the pork butcher's stall, Sunja stoked the fire beneath the metal bowl used to melt sugar. The steel box that functioned as a stove had been giving her trouble; as soon as she could afford it, Sunja planned on having a proper stove made up for her cart. She rolled up her sleeves and moved the live coals around to circulate the air and raise the heat.

"*Agasshi*, do you have kimchi today?"

It was a man's voice, and Sunja looked up. About Isak's age, he dressed like her brother-in-law—tidy without drawing much attention to himself. His face was cleanly shaven, and his fingernails were neat. The lenses of his eyeglasses were very thick and the heavy frames detracted from his good features.

"No, sir. No kimchi today. Just candy. It's not ready, though."

"Oh. When will you have kimchi again?"

"Hard to say. There isn't much cabbage to buy, and the last batch of kimchi we put up isn't ready yet," Sunja said, and returned to the coals.

"A day or two? A week?"

Sunja looked up again, surprised by his insistence.

"The kimchi might be ready in three days or so. If the weather continues to get warmer, then it might be two, sir. But I don't think that soon," Sunja said flatly, hoping he would let her start with the candy making. Sometimes, she sold a few bags to the young women getting off the train at about this time.

"How much kimchi will you have when it's ready?"

"I'll have plenty to sell you. Do you know how much you want? Most of my customers like to bring their own containers. How much do you think you need?" Her customers were Korean women who worked in factories and didn't have time to make their own *banchan*. When she sold sweets, her customers were children and young women. "Just stop by in three days, and if you bring your own container—"

The young man laughed.

"Well, I was thinking that maybe you can sell me everything you make."

He adjusted his eyeglasses.

"You can't eat that much kimchi! And how would you keep the rest of it fresh?" Sunja replied, shaking her head at his foolishness. "It's going to be summer in a couple of months, and it's hot here already."

"I'm sorry. I should have explained. My name is Kim Changho, and I manage the *yakiniku* restaurant right by Tsuruhashi Station. News of your excellent kimchi has spread far."

Sunja wiped her hands on the apron that she wore over her padded cotton vest, keeping a close eye on the hot coals.

"It's my sister-in-law who knows what she's doing in the kitchen. I just sell it and help her make it."

"Yes, yes, I'd heard that, too. Well, I'm looking for some women to make all the kimchi and *banchan* for the restaurant. I can get you cabbage and—"

"Where, sir? Where do you get cabbage? We looked everywhere. My sister-in-law goes to the market early in the morning and still—"

"I can get it," he said, smiling.

Sunja didn't know what to say. The candy-making metal bowl was hot already, and it was time to put in the sugar and water, but she didn't want to start now. If this person was serious, then it was important to hear him out. She heard the train arrive. She had missed her first batch of customers already.

"Where's your restaurant again?"

"It's the big restaurant on the side street behind the train station. On the same street as the pharmacy—you know, the one owned by the skinny



Japanese pharmacist, Okada-san? He wears black glasses like mine?" He pushed his glasses up on his nose again and smiled like a boy.

"Oh, I know where the pharmacy is."

This was the shop where all the Koreans went when they were really sick and were willing to pay for good medicine. Okada was not a friendly man, but he was honest; he was reputed to be able to cure many ailments.

The young man didn't seem like anyone who was trying to take advantage of her, but she couldn't be sure. In the few short months working as a vendor, she'd given credit to a few customers and had not been repaid. People were willing to lie about small things and to disregard your interests.

Kim Changho gave her a business card. "Here's the address. Can you bring your kimchi when it's done? Bring all of it. I'll pay you in cash, and I'll get you more cabbage."

Sunja nodded, not saying anything. If she had only one customer for the kimchi, then she'd have more time to make other things to sell. The hardest part had been procuring the cabbage, so if this man could do that, then the work would be much easier. Kyunghee had been scouring the market with Mozasu on her back to track down these scarce ingredients and often returned home with a light market basket. Sunja promised to bring him what she had.

The restaurant was the largest storefront on the short side street parallel to the train station. Unlike the other businesses nearby, its sign was lettered handsomely by a professional sign maker. The two women admired the large black letters carved and painted into a vast wooden plaque. They wondered what the words meant. It was obviously a Korean *galbi* house—the scent of grilled meat could be detected from two blocks away—but the sign had difficult Japanese lettering that neither of them could read. Sunja grasped the handlebar of the carts loaded with all the kimchi they'd put up in the past few weeks and took a deep breath. If the kimchi sales to the restaurant were steady, they'd have a regular income. She could buy eggs more often for Isak's and Noa's meals and get heavy wool cloth for Kyunghee, who wanted to sew new coats for Yoseb and Noa.

# 4

May 1942

Noa Baek was not like the other eight-year-olds in the neighborhood. Each morning before he went to school, he'd scrub his face until his cheeks were pink, smooth three drops of oil on his black hair, then comb it away from his forehead as his mother had taught him to do. After a breakfast of barley porridge and miso soup, he'd rinse his mouth and check his white teeth in the small round hand mirror by the sink. No matter how tired his mother was, she made certain that Noa's shirts were ironed the night before. In his clean, pressed clothes, Noa looked like a middle-class Japanese child from a wealthier part of town, bearing no resemblance to the unwashed ghetto children outside his door.

At school, Noa was strong in both arithmetic and writing, and he surprised the gym teacher with his adept hand-eye coordination and running speed. After classes ended, he tidied the shelves and swept the classroom floors without being asked and walked home alone, trying not to draw any undue attention to himself. The boy managed to look unafraid of the tougher children while setting himself apart with a perimeter of quiet privacy that could not be disturbed. When he got home, Noa went directly into the house to do his schoolwork without lingering on the street with the neighborhood children who played until dinnertime.

When his mother and aunt moved the kimchi-making business to the restaurant, the house no longer smelled relentlessly of fermenting cabbage and pickles. Noa hoped he'd no longer be called garlic turd. If anything,



lately, their house smelled less of cooking than the others in the neighborhood, because his mother and aunt brought home cooked food from the restaurant for their family meals. Once a week, Noa got to eat tidbits of grilled meat and white rice from the restaurant.

Like all children, Noa kept secrets, but his were not ordinary ones. At school, he went by his Japanese name, Nobuo Boku, rather than Noa Baek; and though everyone in his class knew he was Korean from his Japanized surname, if he met anyone who didn't know this fact, Noa wasn't forthcoming about this detail. He spoke and wrote better Japanese than most native children. In class, he dreaded the mention of the peninsula where his parents were born and would look down at his papers if the teacher mentioned anything about the colony of Korea. Noa's other secret: His father, a Protestant minister, was in jail and had not been home in over two years.

The boy tried to remember his father's face, but couldn't. When asked to tell family stories for class assignments, Noa would say that his father worked as a foreman at a biscuit factory, and if some children inferred that Uncle Yoseb was his father, Noa didn't correct them. The big secret that he kept from his mother, aunt, and even his beloved uncle was that Noa did not believe in God anymore. God had allowed his gentle, kindhearted father to go to jail even though he had done nothing wrong. For two years, God had not answered Noa's prayers, though his father had promised him that God listens very carefully to the prayers of children. Above all the other secrets that Noa could not speak of, the boy wanted to be Japanese; it was his dream to leave Ikaino and never to return.

It was a late spring afternoon; Noa returned home from school and found his snack, left out by his mother before she went to work, waiting for him on the low table where the family ate their meals and where Noa did his homework. Thirsty, he went to the kitchen to get some water, and when he returned to the front room, he screamed. Near the door, there was a gaunt and filthy man collapsed on the floor.

Unable to rise, the man leaned the weight of his torso on the crook of his left elbow and tried to push up to sitting, but couldn't manage it.

Should he scream again? Noa wondered. Who would help him? His mother, aunt, and uncle were at work, and no one had heard him the first time. The beggar didn't seem dangerous; he looked ill and dirty, but he could've been a thief, too. Uncle had warned Noa about burglars and thieves who could break into the house looking for food or valuables. He had fifty sen in his trouser pocket; he'd been saving it for an illustrated book on archery.

The man was sobbing now, and Noa felt bad for him. There were many poor people on his street, but no one looked as bad as this man. The beggar's face was covered with sores and black scabs. Noa reached into his pocket and pulled out the coin. Afraid that the man might grab his leg, Noa stepped just close enough to place the coin on the floor near the man's hand. Noa planned to walk backward to the kitchen and run out the back door to get help, but the man's crying made him pause.

The boy looked carefully at the man's gray-bearded face. His clothes were torn and grimy but the shape of them resembled the dark suits that his principal at school wore.

"It's *appa*," the man said.

Noa gasped and shook his head no.

"Where's your mother, child?"

It was his voice. Noa took a step forward.

"*Umma*'s at the restaurant," Noa replied.

"Where?"

Isak was confused.

"I'll go now. I'll get *umma*. Are you okay?" The boy didn't know what to do exactly. He was still a bit afraid, though it was certainly his father. The gentle eyes beneath the jutting cheekbones and scaly skin were the same. Perhaps his father was hungry. His shoulder bones and elbows looked like sharp tree branches beneath his clothing. "Do you want to eat something, *appa*?"

Noa pointed to the snack his mother had left for him: two rice balls made from barley and millet.

Isak shook his head, smiling at the boy's concern.

"*Aga*—can you get me some water?"



When Noa returned with the cup of cold water from the kitchen, he found his father slumped to the ground with his eyes closed.

"*Appa! Appa!* Wake up! I have your water! Drink your water, *appa*," Noa cried.

Isak's eyes fluttered open; he smiled at the sight of the boy.

"*Appa* is tired, Noa. *Appa* is going to sleep."

"*Appa*, drink your water." The boy held out the cup.

Isak raised his head and took a long drink, then closed his eyes again.

Noa bent over, close to his father's mouth, to check his breathing. He retrieved his own pillow and tucked it beneath Isak's bushy gray head. He covered him with the heavy quilt and closed the front door behind him quietly. Noa ran to the restaurant as fast as he could.

He burst into the dining room, but no one in the front area noticed him. None of the grown men working there minded the well-mannered boy who never said much beyond yes and no. The toddler, Mozasu, was sleeping in the storage room; when awake, the two-year-old tore through the dining room, but asleep, he looked like a statue of an angel. The manager, Kim, never complained about Sunja's children. He bought toys and comic books for the boys and occasionally watched Mozasu while he worked in the back office.

"*Uh-muh.*" Kyunghee looked up from her work, alarmed at the sight of Noa, breathless and pale, in the kitchen. "You're sweating. Are you okay? We'll be done soon. Are you hungry?" She got up from her crouching position to fix him something to eat, thinking he'd come by because he was lonesome.

"*Appa* came home. He looks sick. He's sleeping on the floor at home."

Sunja, who'd been quiet, waiting for Noa to speak up, wiped her wet hands on her apron. "Can I go? Can we leave now?" She'd never left early before.

"I'll stay here and finish. You go. Hurry. I'll be right there after I'm done."

Sunja reached for Noa's hand.

\* \* \*

Halfway down the street, Sunja shouted, "Mozasu!" and Noa looked up at her.

"*Umma*, Aunt will bring him home," he said calmly.

She clutched his hand tighter and walked briskly toward the house.

"You ease my mind, Noa. You ease my mind."

Without the others around, it was possible to be kind to her son. Parents weren't supposed to praise their children, she knew this—it would only invite disaster. But her father had always told her when she had done something well; out of habit, he would touch the crown of her head or pat her back, even when she did nothing at all. Any other parent might've been chided by the neighbors for spoiling a daughter, but no one said anything to her crippled father, who marveled at his child's symmetrical features and normal limbs. He took pleasure in just watching her walk, talk, and do simple sums in her head. Now that he was gone, Sunja held on to her father's warmth and kind words like polished gems. No one should expect praise, and certainly not a woman, but as a little girl, she'd been treasured, nothing less. She'd been her father's delight. She wanted Noa to know what that was like, and she thanked God with every bit of her being for her boys. On the days when it felt impossible to live another day in her husband's brother's house—to work through the whole day and night, then to wake up again before the sun to start again, to go to the jail and hand over a meal for her husband—Sunja thought of her father, who had never said a cross word to her. He had taught her that children were a delight, that her boys were her delight.

"Did *appa* look very ill?" Sunja asked.

"I didn't know it was him. *Appa* was usually so clean and nicely dressed, *nee*?"

Sunja nodded, having told herself long ago to expect the worst. The elders in her church had warned her that the Korean prisoners were usually sent home just as they were about to die, so that they would not die in jail. The prisoners were beaten, starved, and made to go without clothing to weaken them. Just that morning, Sunja had gone to the jail to drop off his meal and this week's clean set of undershirts. Brother had been right then; her husband must not have received any of these things. As she and



Noa walked down the busy street, oblivious to the crowds, it occurred to her that she'd never thought to prepare her son for Isak's return. If anything, she had been so busy preparing for his death by working and saving money that she had not thought about what the boy might think of his father's return, or worse, his death. She felt so sorry for not having told him what to expect. It must have been a terrible shock for Noa.

"Did you eat your snack today?" she asked him, not knowing what else to say.

"I left it for *appa*."

They passed a small throng of uniformed students streaming out of a confectionery, eating their treats happily. Noa looked down, but didn't let go of his mother's hand. He knew the children, but none were his friends.

"Do you have homework?"

"Yes, but I'll do it when I get home, *umma*."

"You never give me any trouble," she said, feeling his five perfect fingers in hers, and she felt grateful for his sturdiness.

Sunja opened the door slowly. Isak was on the floor, sleeping. She knelt by his head. Dark, mottled skin stretched across his eye sockets and high cheekbones. His hair and beard were nearly white; he looked years older than his brother, Yoseb. He was no longer the beautiful young man who had rescued her from disgrace. Sunja removed his shoes and peeled off his holey socks. Dried crusts of blood covered his cracked, raw soles. The last toe on his left foot had turned black.

"*Umma*," Noa said.

"Yes." She turned to him.

"Should I get Uncle?"

"Yes." She nodded, trying not to cry. "Shimamura-san may not let him leave early, Noa. If Uncle can't leave, tell him that I'm with him. We don't want Uncle to get in trouble at work. Okay?"

Noa ran out of the house, not bothering to slide the door fully shut, and the incoming breeze woke Isak; he opened his eyes to see his wife sitting next to him.

"*Yobo*," he said.

Sunja nodded. "You're home. We're so glad you're home."

He smiled. The once-straight white teeth were either black or missing—the lower set cracked off entirely.

"You've suffered so much."

"The sexton and the pastor died yesterday. I should've died a long time ago."

Sunja shook her head, unable to speak.

"I'm home. Every day, I imagined this. Every minute. Maybe that's why I am here. How hard it must have been for you," he said, looking at her kindly.

Sunja shook her head no, wiping her face with her sleeve.

The Korean and Chinese girls who worked at the factory smiled at the sight of Noa. The delicious scent of freshly baked wheat biscuits greeted him. A girl packing biscuit boxes near the door whispered in Korean how tall he was getting. She pointed to his uncle's back. He was crouched over the motor of the biscuit machine. The factory floor was long and narrow, designed like a wide tunnel for the easy inspection of workers; the owner had set up the imposing biscuit machine by his office with the conveyor belts moving toward the workers, who stood in parallel rows. Yoseb wore safety goggles and was poking about inside the service panel with a pair of pliers. He was the foreman and the factory mechanic.

The din of the heavy machine blocked out normal speaking voices. The girls weren't supposed to talk on the factory floor, but it was nearly impossible to catch them if they whispered and made minimal facial gestures. Forty unmarried girls, hired for their nimble fingers and general tidiness, packed twenty thin wheat biscuits into wooden boxes that would be shipped to army officers stationed in China. For every two broken biscuits, a girl was fined a sen from her wages, forcing her to work carefully as well as swiftly. If she ate even a broken corner of a biscuit, she'd be terminated immediately. At the end of the day, the youngest girl gathered the broken biscuits into a fabric-lined basket, packed them into small bags, and was sent out to the market to sell



them at a discount. If they didn't sell, Shimamura sold the biscuits for a nominal amount to the girls who packed the most boxes without error. Yoseb never took broken biscuits home, because the girls made so little money, and even the biscuit crumbs meant so much to them.

Shimamura, the owner, was sitting in his glassed-in office, the size of a utility closet. The plate glass window allowed him to check the girls' work. If he found anything amiss, he'd call Yoseb in and tell him to give the girl a warning. On the second warning, the girl was sent home without pay even if she'd worked for six days. Shimamura kept a blue, cloth-bound ledger with warnings listed next to the names of the girls, written in his beautiful hand-lettering. His foreman, Yoseb, disliked punishing the girls, and Shimamura viewed this as yet another example of Korean weakness. The factory owner believed that if all Asian countries were run with a kind of Japanese efficiency, attention to detail, and high level of organization, Asia as a whole would prosper and rise—able to defeat the unscrupulous West. Shimamura believed he was a fair person with perhaps a too-soft heart, which explained why he hired foreigners when many of his friends wouldn't. When they pointed to the slovenly nature of foreigners, he argued how could the foreigners ever learn unless the Japanese taught them to loathe incompetence and sloth. Shimamura felt that standards must be maintained for posterity's sake.

Noa had been inside the factory only once, and Shimamura had not been pleased then. About a year ago, Kyunghee was sick with a high fever and had fainted in the market, and Noa was sent to fetch Yoseb. Shimamura had reluctantly allowed Yoseb to attend to his wife. The next morning, he explained to Yoseb that there would be no repeat of this incident. How could he, Shimamura asked, run two machine-based factories without the presence of a competent mechanic? If Yoseb's wife were to get sick again, she would have to rely on a neighbor or family member; Yoseb could not just leave the factory in the middle of the day. The biscuits were war orders, and they had to be met promptly. Men were risking their lives fighting for their country; each family must make sacrifices.

So when Shimamura spotted the boy again, only a year after that un-

comfortable speech that he had not wanted to make, he was furious. He snapped open his newspaper, pretending not to see the boy tapping his uncle's lower back.

Yoseb, startled by Noa's light touch, turned around.

"*Uh-muh*, Noa, what are you doing here?"

"*Appa's* home."

"Really?"

"Can you come home now?" Noa asked. His mouth made a small red O. Yoseb removed his goggles and sighed.

Noa closed his mouth and looked down. His uncle would have to get permission, the way his mother had to ask Aunt Kyunghee or Mr. Kim—the same way he had to ask his teacher to go to the bathroom. Sometimes, when it was sunny outside, Noa dreamed of not telling anyone and going to Osaka Bay. He'd been there once with his father on a Saturday afternoon when he was very small, and he always thought it would be nice to go back.

"Is he all right?" Yoseb studied Noa's expression.

"*Appa's* hair turned gray. He's very dirty. *Umma's* with him. She said if you can't come, it's okay, but she wanted you to know. To know that *appa* is home now."

"Yes, that's right. I'm glad to know."

Yoseb glanced at Shimamura, who was holding up his newspaper, pretending to read, but was no doubt watching him very carefully. His boss would never allow him to go home now. Also, unlike when Kyunghee fainted, Shimamura knew Isak had gone to jail because the sexton had refused to observe the Shinto ceremony. Periodically, the police came by to question Yoseb as well as to speak with Shimamura, who defended Yoseb as a model Korean. If he left, Yoseb would lose his job, and if the police picked him up for questioning, he would lose his character reference.

"Listen, Noa, work will be done in less than three hours, and then afterwards, I'll hurry home. It's irresponsible for me to leave now without finishing my work. As soon as I'm done, I'll run home faster than you can run. Tell your *umma* that I'll come home right away. And if your *appa* asks, tell him that Brother will be there very soon."



Noa nodded, not understanding why Uncle was crying.

“I have to finish, Noa, so you run home. Okay?” Yoseb put on his safety goggles and turned around.

Noa moved quickly toward the entrance. The sweet scent of biscuits wafted out the door. The boy had never eaten one of those biscuits, never having asked for one.

## 5

Noa burst through the doors of the house, his head and heart pounding from the breathless run. Gulping in deep lungfuls of air, he told his mother, "Uncle can't leave work."

Sunja nodded, having expected this. She was bathing Isak with a wet towel.

Isak's eyes were closed but his chest rose and fell slightly, punctuated now and then by a series of painful coughs. A light blanket covered his long legs. Ridges of scar tissue furrowed diagonally across Isak's shoulders and discolored torso, making haphazard diamond-shaped intersections. Every time Isak coughed, his neck flushed red.

Noa approached his father quietly.

"No, no. Move back," Sunja said sternly. "*Appa* is very sick. He has a bad cold."

She pulled the blanket up to Isak's shoulders, though she wasn't nearly finished with cleaning him. In spite of the strong soap and several changes of basin water, his body emitted a sour stench; nits clung to his hair and beard.

Isak had been alert for a few moments, his violent coughs waking him, but now when he opened his eyes, he didn't say anything, and when he looked at her, he didn't seem to recognize her.

Sunja changed the compress on Isak's feverish head. The nearest hospital was a long trolley ride away, and even if she could move him by

herself, an all-night wait wouldn't ensure that a doctor would see him. If she could tuck him into the kimchi cart and wheel him to the trolley stop, she could possibly get him into the car, but then what would she do with the cart itself? It wouldn't pass through the trolley door. Noa might be able to push it back home, but then how would she get Isak from the stop to the hospital without the cart? And what if the driver wouldn't let them board? More than once, she'd witnessed the trolley driver asking a sick woman or man to get off.

Noa sat by his father's legs to keep away from his coughing. He felt an urge to pat his father's sharp knee bone—to touch him, to make sure he was real. The boy pulled out his notebook from his satchel to do his homework, keeping close watch on Isak's breathing.

"Noa, you have to put your shoes back on. Go to the drugstore and ask Pharmacist Kong to come. Can you tell him that it's important—that *umma* will pay him double?" Sunja decided that if the Korean pharmacist wouldn't come, she'd ask Kyunghee to plead with the Japanese pharmacist to come by the house, though that was unlikely.

The boy got up and left without a murmur. She could hear him running down the street in his even, rapid steps.

Sunja wrung out the hand towel she was using to bathe Isak above the brass basin. Fresh welts from recent beatings and a number of older scars covered his wide, bony back. She felt sick as she washed his dark and bruised frame. There was no one as good as Isak. He'd tried to understand her, to respect her feelings; he'd never once brought up her shame. He'd comforted her patiently when she'd lost the pregnancies between Noa and Mozasu. Finally, when she gave birth to their son, he'd been overjoyed, but she'd been too worried about how they'd survive with so little money to feel his happiness. Now that he was back home to die, what did money matter, anyway? She should've done more for him; she should've tried to know him the way he had tried to know her; and now it was over. Even with his gashed and emaciated frame, his beauty was remarkable. He was the opposite of her, really; where she was thick and short, he was slender and long-limbed—even his torn-up feet were well shaped. If her eyes were small and anxious, his were large and full of ac-



ceptance. The basin water was now gray, and Sunja got up to change it again.

Isak woke up. He saw Sunja wearing farmer pants and walking away from him. He called out to her, "*Yobo*," but she didn't turn around. He felt like he didn't know how to raise his voice. It was as if his voice was dying while his mind was alive.

"*Yobo*," Isak mumbled, and he reached for her, but she was almost in the kitchen already. He was in Yoseb's house in Osaka. This had to be true because he was, in fact, waking from a dream where he was a boy. In the dream, Isak had been sitting on a low bough of the chestnut tree in his childhood garden; the scent of the chestnut blossoms still lingered in his nose. It was like many of the dreams he'd had in prison where, while he dreamed, he was aware that the dream itself wasn't real. In real life, he'd never been on a tree. When he was young, the family gardener would prop him below that very tree to get some fresh air, but he'd never been strong enough to climb it the way Yoseb could. The gardener used to call Yoseb "*Monkey*." In the dream, Isak was hugging the thick branches tightly, unable to break from the embrace of the dark green foliage, the clusters of white blossoms with their dark pink hearts. From the house, cheerful voices of the women called to him. He wanted to see his old nursemaid and his sister, though they had died years ago; in the dream, they were laughing like girls.

"*Yobo*—"

"*Uh-muh*." She put down the washbasin at the threshold of the kitchen and rushed back to him. "Are you all right? Can I get you something?"

"My wife," he said slowly. "How have you been?" Isak felt drowsy and uncertain, but relieved. Sunja's face was different than he remembered—a little older, more weary. "How you must've struggled here. I am so sorry."

"Shhh—you must rest," she said.

"Noa." He said the boy's name like he remembered something good. "Where is he? He was here before."

"He went to fetch the pharmacist."

"He looks so healthy. And bright." It was hard to get the words out, but his mind felt clear suddenly, and he wanted to tell her the things he'd been saving up for her.

"You're working at a restaurant now? Are you cooking there?" Isak began to cough and couldn't stop. Pindots of blood splattered on her blouse, and she wiped his mouth with a towel.

When he tried to sit up, she placed her left hand beneath his head and her right over his chest to calm him, fearful that he might hurt himself. The coughs wracked his body. His skin felt hot even through the blankets.

"Please rest. Later. We can talk later."

He shook his head.

"No, no. I—I want to tell you something."

Sunja rested her hands on her lap.

"My life wasn't important," he said, trying to read her eyes, so full of anguish and exhaustion. He needed her to understand that he was thankful to her—for waiting for him, for taking care of the family. It humbled him to think of her laboring and earning money for their family when he wasn't able to support them. Money must've been very hard with him gone and with inflation from the war. The prison guards had complained incessantly of the prices of things—no one had enough to eat, they said. *Quit complaining about the bugs in the gruel.* Isak had prayed constantly for his family's provision. "I brought you here and made your life more difficult."

She smiled at him, not knowing how to say—*you saved me*. Instead, she said, "You must get well." Sunja covered him with a thicker blanket; his body was burning hot, but he shivered. "For the boys, please get well." *How can I raise them without you?*

"Mozasu—where is he?"

"At the restaurant with Sister. Our boss lets him stay there while we work."

Isak looked alert and attentive, as if all his pain had vanished; he wanted to know more about his boys.

"Mozasu," Isak said, smiling. "Mozasu. He saved his people from slavery—" Isak's head throbbed so intensely that he had to close his eyes again. He wanted to see his two sons grow up, finish school, and get married. Isak had never wanted to live so much, and now, just when he wanted to live until he was very old, he'd been sent home to die. "I have



two sons," he said. "I have two sons. Noa and Mozasu. May the Lord bless my sons."

Sunja watched him carefully. His face looked strange, yet peaceful. Not knowing what else to do, she kept talking.

"Mozasu is becoming a big boy—always happy and friendly. He has a wonderful laugh. He runs everywhere. So fast!" She pumped her arms to imitate the toddler's running, and she found herself laughing, and he laughed, too. It occurred to her then that there was only one other person in the world who'd want to hear about Mozasu growing up so well, and until now, she'd forgotten that she could express a prideful joy in her boys. Even when her brother- and sister-in-law were pleased with the children, she couldn't ignore their sadness at their lack; sometimes, she wanted to hide her delight from them for fear that it could be seen as a kind of boasting. Back home, having two healthy and good sons was tantamount to having vast riches. She had no home, no money, but she had Noa and Mozasu.

Isak's eyes opened, and he looked at the ceiling. "I can't go until I see them, Lord. Until I see my children to bless them. Lord, let me not go—"

Sunja bowed her head, and she prayed, too.

Isak closed his eyes again, his shoulders twitching in pain.

Sunja placed her right hand on his chest to check his faint breathing.

The door opened, and as expected, Noa had returned home alone. The pharmacist couldn't come now but promised to come later tonight. The boy returned to his spot by Isak's feet and did his sums while his father slept. Noa wanted to show Isak his schoolwork; even Hoshii-sensei, the hardest teacher in his grade, told Noa that he was good at writing his letters and that he should work hard to improve his illiterate race: "One industrious Korean can inspire ten thousand to reject their lazy nature!"

Isak continued to sleep, and Noa concentrated on his work.

Later, when Kyunghee arrived home with Mozasu, the house felt lively for the first time since Isak's arrest. Isak woke briefly to see Mozasu, who didn't cry at the sight of the skeletal man. Mozasu called him "Papa" and patted his face with both hands, the way he did when he liked someone. With his white, chubby hands, Mozasu made little pats on Isak's sunken



cheeks. The toddler sat still in front of him briefly, but as soon as Isak closed his eyes, Kyunghee removed him, not wanting the baby to get sick.

When Yoseb returned home, the house grew somber again, because Yoseb wouldn't ignore the obvious.

"How could they?" Yoseb said, staring hard at Isak's body.

"My boy, couldn't you just tell them what they wanted to hear? Couldn't you just say you worshipped the Emperor even if it isn't true? Don't you know that the most important thing is to stay alive?"

Isak opened his eyes but said nothing and closed his eyes again. His eyelids felt so heavy that it was painful to keep them open. He wanted to speak with Yoseb, but the words would not come out.

Kyunghee brought her husband a pair of scissors, a long razor blade, a cup of oil, and a basin of vinegar.

"The nits and lice won't die. He should be shaved. It must be so itchy for him," she said, her eyes wet.

Grateful to his wife for giving him something to do, Yoseb rolled up his sleeves, then poured the cup of oil over Isak's head, massaging it into his scalp.

"Isak-ah, don't move," Yoseb said, trying to keep his voice normal. "I'm going to get rid of all these itchy bastards."

Yoseb made clean strokes across Isak's head and threw the cut hair into the metal basin.

"*Yah*—Isak-ah." Yoseb smiled at the memory. "You remember how the gardener used to cut our hair when we were kids? I used to holler like a crazy animal but you never did. You sat there like a baby monk, calm and peaceful, and you never once complained." Yoseb grew quiet, wanting what he saw in front of him not to be true. "Isak-ah, why did I bring you to this hell? I was so lonesome for you. I was wrong, you know, to bring you here, and now I'm punished for my selfishness." Yoseb rested his blade in the basin.

"I will not be all right if you die. Do you understand? You cannot die, my boy. Isak-ah, please don't die. How can I go on? What will I tell our parents?"

Isak continued to sleep, oblivious to his family encircling his pallet.

Yoseb wiped his eyes and shut his mouth, clamping down on his jaws. He picked up the blade again, working steadily to take off the bits of gray hair remaining on his head. When Isak's head was smooth, Yoseb poured oil over his brother's beard.

For the remainder of the evening, Yoseb, Kyunghee, and Sunja rid him of nits and lice, dropping the bugs into jars of kerosene, only stopping to put the boys to bed. Later, the pharmacist came to tell them what they already knew. There was nothing a hospital or a doctor could do for Isak now.

At dawn, Yoseb returned to work. Sunja remained with Isak, and Kyunghee went to the restaurant. Yoseb didn't bother complaining about Kyunghee going to work alone. He was too tired to argue, and the wages were badly needed. Outside the house, the street was filled with the morning bustling of men and women heading to work and children running to school. Isak slept in the front room, his breathing fast and shallow. He was clean and smooth like an infant—all the hair from his body shaved.

After Noa finished breakfast, he laid down his chopsticks neatly and looked up at his mother.

"*Umma*, may I stay home?" he asked, never having dared to ask for such a thing, even when things were awful at school.

Sunja looked up from her sewing, surprised.

"Are you feeling ill?"

He shook his head.

Isak, who was half-awake, had heard the boy's request.

"Noa—"

"Yes, *appa*."

"*Umma* told me that you're becoming a fine scholar."

The child beamed but, out of habit, looked down at his feet.

When Noa received high marks in school, he thought first of his father.

Yoseb had told the boy several times that his father had been a prodigy, having taught himself Korean, Classical Chinese, and Japanese from books with scant tutoring. By the time he went to seminary, Isak had already read the Bible several times.



When school felt difficult, knowing that his father was a learned man had strengthened the boy's resolve to learn.

"Noa."

"Yes, *appa*?"

"You must go to school today. When I was a boy, I wanted to go to school with the other children very much."

The boy nodded, having heard this detail about his father before.

"What else can we do but persevere, my child? We're meant to increase our talents. The thing that would make your *appa* happy is if you do as well as you've been doing. Wherever you go, you represent our family, and you must be an excellent person—at school, in town, and in the world. No matter what anyone says. Or does," Isak said, then paused to cough. He knew it must be taxing for the child to go to a Japanese school.

"You must be a diligent person with a humble heart. Have compassion for everyone. Even your enemies. Do you understand that, Noa? Men may be unfair, but the Lord is fair. You'll see. You will," Isak said, his exhausted voice tapering off.

"Yes, *appa*." Hoshii-sensei had told him that he had a duty to Koreans, too; one day, he would serve his community and make Koreans good children of the benevolent Emperor. The boy stared at his father's newly shaved head. His bald pate was so white in contrast to his dark, sunken cheeks. He looked both new and ancient.

Sunja felt bad for the child; he'd never had a day with both his parents and no one else. When she was growing up, even when there were others around, it had been just the three of them—her father, mother, and her—an invisible triangle. When she thought back to her life at home, this closeness was what she missed. Isak was right about school, but it wouldn't be much longer. Soon, Isak would be gone. She would have given anything to see her father again, but how could she go against Isak's wishes? Sunja picked up Noa's satchel and handed it to the boy, who was crestfallen.

"After school, come home straight away, Noa. We'll be here," Isak said.

Noa remained fixed to his spot on the floor, unable to take his eyes off his father for fear that he'd disappear. The child hadn't realized how much

he'd missed his father until he returned. The ache of missing him had surfaced in his small, concave chest, and he felt anxious about the pain that was sure to return. If he remained home, Noa felt certain that his father would be okay. They wouldn't even have to talk. Why couldn't he study at home the way his father had? Noa wanted to ask this, but it was not in his nature to argue.

Isak, however, didn't want Noa to see him like this anymore. The boy was already afraid, and there was no need to make him suffer any more than he already had. There were many things he hadn't told the child yet about life, about learning, about how to talk to God.

"Is it very hard at school?" Isak asked.

Sunja turned to look at the boy's face; she'd never thought to ask him this.

Noa shrugged. The work was okay, not impossible. The good students, who were all Japanese, the ones he admired, wouldn't speak to him. They wouldn't even look at him. He believed that he could enjoy going to school if he were a regular person and not a Korean. He couldn't say this to his father or to anyone else, because it was certain he'd never be a regular Japanese. One day, Uncle Yoseb said, they would return to Korea; Noa imagined that life would be better there.

Carrying his book bag and bento, Noa lingered by the front door, memorizing his father's kindly face.

"Child, come here," Isak said.

Noa approached him and sat on bended knees. *Please God, please. Please make my father well. I'll ask this just once more. Please.* Noa shut his eyes tightly.

Isak took Noa's hand and held it.

"You are very brave, Noa. Much, much braver than me. Living every day in the presence of those who refuse to acknowledge your humanity takes great courage."

Noa chewed on his lower lip and didn't say anything. He wiped his nose with his hand.

"My child," he said, and Isak let go of his son's hand. "My dear boy. My blessing."



# 15

Tokyo, 1960

It took some time, but after two years at Waseda, Noa finally felt comfortable about his place there. Always an excellent student with good habits, after a few hiccups and several thoughtful attempts, Noa learned how to write English literature papers and take university-level exams. University life was glorious in contrast to secondary school, where he had learned and memorized many things he no longer valued. None of his requirements even seemed like work; Waseda was pure joy to him. He read as much as he could without straining his eyes, and there was time to read and write and think. His professors at Waseda cared deeply about the subjects they taught, and Noa could not understand how anyone could ever complain.

Hansu had procured for him a well-appointed apartment and gave him a generous allowance, so Noa did not have to worry about housing, money, or food. He lived simply and managed to send some money home each month. "Just study," Hansu had said. "Learn everything. Fill your mind with knowledge—it's the only kind of power no one can take away from you." Hansu never told him to study, but rather to learn, and it occurred to Noa that there was a marked difference. Learning was like playing, not labor.

Noa was able to buy every book he needed for his classes, and when he couldn't find one at the bookstore, all he had to do was go to the immense university library, which was deeply underutilized by his peers. He didn't

understand the Japanese students around him, because they seemed so much more interested in things outside of school rather than learning. He knew well enough from schools past that the Japanese didn't want much to do with Koreans, so Noa kept to himself, no different than when he was a boy. There were some Koreans at Waseda, but he avoided them, too, because they seemed too political. During one of their monthly lunches, Hansu had said that the leftists were "a bunch of whiners" and the rightists were "plain stupid." Noa was alone mostly, but he didn't feel lonely. Even after two years, he was still in thrall with just being at Waseda, with just having a quiet room to read in. Like a man starved, Noa filled his mind, ravenous for good books. He read through Dickens, Thackeray, Hardy, Austen, and Trollope, then moved on to the Continent to read through much of Balzac, Zola, and Flaubert, then fell in love with Tolstoy. His favorite was Goethe; he must have read *The Sorrows of Young Werther* at least half a dozen times.

If he had an embarrassing wish, it was this: He would be a European from a long time ago. He didn't want to be a king or a general—he was too old for such simple wishes. If anything, he wanted a very simple life filled with nature, books, and perhaps a few children. He knew that later in life, he also wanted to be let alone to read and to be quiet. In his new life in Tokyo, he had discovered jazz music, and he liked going to bars by himself and listening to records that the owners would select from bins. Listening to live music was too expensive, but he hoped that one day, when he had a job again, he would be able to go to a jazz club. At the bar, he would have one drink that he'd barely touch to pay for his seat, then he'd go back to his room, read some more, write letters to his family, then go to sleep.

Every few weeks, he saved some of his allowance and took an inexpensive train ride home and visited his family. At the beginning of each month, Hansu took him for a sushi lunch to remind Noa of his mission in the world for some higher purpose that neither could articulate fully. His life felt ideal, and Noa was grateful.

That morning, as he walked across campus to his George Eliot seminar, he heard someone calling his name.



"Bando-san, Bando-san," a woman shouted. It was the radical beauty on campus, Akiko Fumeki.

Noa stopped and waited. She had never spoken to him before. He was, in fact, a little afraid of her. She was always saying contrary things to Professor Kuroda, a soft-spoken woman who had grown up and studied in England. Though the professor was polite, Noa could tell that she didn't like Akiko much; the other students, especially the females, could barely tolerate her. Noa knew it was safer to keep his distance from the students that the professors disliked. In the seminar room, Noa sat one seat away from the professor, while Akiko sat in the very back of the room below the high windows.

"Ah, Bando-san, how are you?" Akiko asked, flushed and out of breath. She spoke to him casually, as if they had talked many times before.

"Well, thank you. How are you?"

"So what do you think of Eliot's final masterpiece?" she asked.

"It's excellent. Everything by George Eliot is perfect."

"Nonsense. *Adam Bede* is a bore. I almost died reading that thing. *Silas Marner* is barely tolerable."

"Well, *Adam Bede* was not as exciting or developed as *Middlemarch*, but it remains a wonderful depiction of a brave woman and an honest man—"

"Oh, please." Akiko rolled her eyes, and she laughed at him.

Noa laughed, too. He knew she was a Sociology major, because everyone had had to introduce himself or herself on the first day of class.

"You have read everything by George Eliot? That's impressive," he said, never having met anyone else who had done so.

"You're the one who's read absolutely everything. It's sickening, and I'm almost irritated at you for doing so. But I admire it, too. Although, if you like everything you read, I can't take you that seriously. Perhaps you didn't think about these books long enough." She said this with a serious face, not in the least bit concerned about offending him.

"*Soo nee*." Noa smiled. It had not occurred to him that any book that a professor would choose and admire could be inferior even in relation to that author's own works. Their professor had loved *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*.

"You sit so close to the professor. I think she's in love with you."

In shock, Noa halted.

"Kuroda-san is sixty years old. Maybe seventy." Noa moved toward the building door and opened it for her.

"You think women want to stop having sex just because they're sixty? You're absurd. She's probably the most romantic woman in Waseda. She's read far too many novels. You're perfect for her. She'd marry you tomorrow. Oh, the scandal! Your George Eliot married a young man, too, you know. Although her groom did try to kill himself on their honeymoon!" Akiko laughed out loud, and the students who were walking up the staircase to their classroom stared at her. Everyone seemed puzzled by their interaction, since Noa was almost as famous as the campus beauty, but for being aloof.

Once in their classroom, she sat at her old seat in the back, and Noa returned to his seat by the professor. He opened his notebook and retrieved his fountain pen, then looked down at the sheet of white paper lined in pale blue ink. He was thinking about Akiko; she was even prettier up close.

Kuroda-san sat down to give her lecture. She wore a pea-green sweater over her Peter Pan-collar white blouse and a brown tweed skirt. Her tiny feet were shod with a childish pair of Mary Janes. She was so small and thin that she gave the impression that she could almost fly away like a sheet of paper or a dry leaf.

Kuroda-san's lecture was primarily an extensive psychological portrait of the heroine in *Daniel Deronda*, the self-centered Gwendolen Harleth, who changes as a result of her suffering and the goodness of Daniel. The professor put great emphasis on a woman's lot being determined by her economic position and marriage prospects. Unsurprisingly, the professor compared Gwendolen to the vain and greedy Rosamond Vincy of *Middlemarch*, but argued that in contrast, Gwendolen achieves the Aristotelian anagnorisis and peripeteia. Kuroda-san spent most of the lecture on Gwendolen, then right before the period ended, she spoke a little about Mirah and Daniel, the Jews of the book. Kuroda-san gave some background on Zionism and the role of Jews in Victorian novels.



"Jewish men are often seen as exceptionally brilliant, and the women are often beautiful and tragic. Here we have a situation where a man does not know his own identity as an outsider. He is like Moses, the infant in Genesis who learns that he is Jewish and not Egyptian—" As Kuroda-san was saying this, she glanced at Noa, but he was not aware of it, because he was taking notes.

"However, when Daniel learns that he is indeed a Jew, Daniel is free to love the virtuous Mirah, another talented singer like his Jewish mother, and they will go east to Israel." Kuroda-san sighed quietly, as if she was pleased by Eliot's ending.

"So are you saying that it is better for people to only love within their race, that people like the Jews need to live apart in their own country?" Akiko asked, without raising her hand. She did not seem to believe in that formality.

"Well, I think George Eliot is arguing that there is great nobility in being Jewish and wanting to be part of a Jewish state. Eliot recognizes that these people were often persecuted unfairly. They have every right to a Jewish state. The war has taught us that bad things happened to them, and that can't happen again. The Jews have done no wrong, but the Europeans—" Kuroda-san spoke more quietly than usual, as if she was afraid that someone might overhear her and she would get in trouble. "It's complicated, but Eliot was far ahead of her contemporaries to think about the issue of discrimination based on religion. *Nee?*"

There were nine students in the class, and everyone nodded, including Noa, but Akiko looked irritated nonetheless.

"Japan was an ally of Germany," Akiko said.

"That is not part of this discussion, Akiko-san."

The professor opened her book nervously, wanting to change the subject.

"Eliot is wrong," Akiko said, undeterred. "Maybe the Jews have a right to have their own state, but I see no need for Mirah and Daniel to have to leave England. I think this nobility argument or a greater nation for a persecuted people is a pretext to eject all the unwanted foreigners."

Noa did not look up. He found himself writing down everything Akiko

said, because it upset him to think that this could be true. He had admired Daniel's courage and goodness throughout the book, and he had not thought much about Eliot's political design. Was it possible that Eliot was suggesting that foreigners, no matter how much she admired them, should leave England? At this point in the course, everyone in the room despised Akiko, but suddenly he admired her courage to think so differently and to suggest such a difficult truth. He felt lucky to be at a university and not in most other settings, where the person in charge was always right. Nevertheless, until he really listened to Akiko disagree with the professor, he had not thought for himself fully, and it had never occurred to him to disagree in public.

After class, he walked home alone, deep in thoughts of her, and he knew that he wanted to be with her, even if it would not be easy. The following Tuesday, before the seminar began, Noa went early to class to claim the chair next to hers. The professor tried not to show that she was hurt by this defection, but of course, she was.



BOOK III

# Pachinko

1962-1989

I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion...

The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations...

It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm...

Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly die for such limited imaginings.

—Benedict Anderson



“Papa, it doesn’t matter. None of it matters, *nee?*” Solomon had never seen his father like this before.

“I worked and made money because I thought it would make me a man. I thought people would respect me if I was rich.”

Solomon looked at him and nodded. His father rarely spent on himself, but he had paid for weddings and funerals for employees and sent tuition for their children.

Mozasu’s face brightened suddenly.

“You can change your mind, Solomon. You can call Phoebe when she gets home and say you’re sorry. Your mother was a lot like Phoebe—strong-willed and smart.”

“I want to live here,” Solomon said. “She will not.”

“*Soo nee.*”

Solomon picked up the ledger from his father’s table.

“Explain this to me, Papa.”

Mozasu paused, then he opened the book.

**[BEGIN READING BELOW]**

It was the first of the month, and Sunja had woken up upset. She had dreamed of Hansu again. Lately, he had been appearing in her dreams, looking the way he did when she was a girl, wearing his white linen suit and white leather shoes. He always said the same thing: “You are my girl; you are my dear girl.” Sunja would wake and feel ashamed. She should have forgotten him by now.

After breakfast, she would go the cemetery to clean Isak’s grave. As usual, Kyunghee offered to come with her, but Sunja said it was okay.

Neither woman performed the *jesa*. As Christians, they weren’t supposed to believe in ancestor worship. Nevertheless, both widows still wanted to talk to their husband and elders, appeal to them, seek their counsel. They missed their old rituals, so she went to the cemetery regularly. It was curious, but Sunja felt close to Isak in a way that she hadn’t when he was alive. Then she had been in awe of him and his goodness. Dead, he seemed more approachable to her.

When the train from Yokohama reached Osaka Station, Sunja bought ivory-colored chrysanthemums from the old Korean woman’s stall. She had

been there for years. The way Isak had explained it, when it was time to be with the Lord, your real body would be in heaven, so what happened to your remains didn't matter. It made no sense to bring a buried body favorite foods or incense or flowers. There was no need for bowing, since we were all equal in the eyes of the Lord, he'd said. And yet Sunja couldn't help wanting to bring something lovely to the grave. In life, he had asked for so little from her, and when she thought of him now, she remembered her husband as someone who had praised the beauty that God had made.

She was glad that Isak had not been cremated. She had wanted a place for the boys to visit their father. Mozasu visited the grave often, and before Noa disappeared, he had come with her, too. Had they talked to him, too? she wondered. It had never occurred to her to ask them this, and now it was too late.

Lately, every time she went to the cemetery, she wondered what Isak would have thought of Noa's death. Isak would have understood Noa's suffering. He would have known what to say to him. Noa had been cremated by his wife, so there was no grave to visit. Sunja talked to Noa when she was alone. Sometimes, something very simple like a delicious piece of pumpkin taffy would make her sorry that now that she had money, she couldn't buy him something that he had loved as a child. *Sorry, Noa, sorry.* It had been eleven years since he'd died; the pain didn't go away, but its sharp edge had dulled and softened like sea glass.

Sunja hadn't gone to Noa's funeral. He hadn't wanted his wife and children to know about her, and she had done enough already. If she hadn't visited him the way she had, maybe he might still be alive. Hansu had not gone to the funeral, either. Noa would've been fifty-six years old.

In her dream last night, Sunja had been happy that Hansu had come to see her again. They met at the beach near her old home in Yeongdo to talk, and recalling the dream was like watching another person's life. How was it possible that Isak and Noa were gone but Hansu was still alive? How was this fair? Hansu was living somewhere in Tokyo in a hospital bed under the watchful gaze of round-the-clock nurses and his daughters. She never saw him anymore and had no wish to. In her dreams, he was as vibrant as he had been when she was a girl. It was not Hansu that she missed, or even Isak. What she was seeing again in her dreams was her youth, her beginning, and



her wishes—so this was how she became a woman. Without Hansu and Isak and Noa, there wouldn't have been this pilgrimage to this land. Beyond the dailiness, there had been moments of shimmering beauty and some glory, too, even in this *ajumma's* life. Even if no one knew, it was true.

There was consolation: The people you loved, they were always there with you, she had learned. Sometimes, she could be in front of a train kiosk or the window of a bookstore, and she could feel Noa's small hand when he was a boy, and she would close her eyes and think of his sweet, grassy smell and remember that he had always tried his best. At those moments, it was good to be alone to hold on to him.

She took the taxi from the train station to the cemetery, then walked the many rows to Isak's well-maintained grave. There was no need to clean anything, but she liked to wipe down the marble tombstone before she spoke to him. Sunja fell to her knees and cleaned the flat, square tombstone with the towels she'd brought for the purpose. Isak's name was carved in Japanese and Korean. 1907–1944. The white marble was clean now and warm from the sun.

He had been such an elegant and beautiful man. Sunja could recall how the servant girls back home had admired him; Bokhee and Dokhee had never seen such a handsome man before. Mozasu took after her more and had her plain face, but he had his father's straight carriage and steady stride.

"*Yobo*," she said, "Mozasu is well. Last week, he called me, because Solomon lost his job with that foreign bank, and now he wants to work with his father. Imagine that? I wonder what you'd make of this."

The silence encouraged her.

"I wonder how you are—" She stopped speaking when she saw Uchida-san, the groundskeeper. Sunja was sitting on the ground in her black woolen pants suit. She glanced at her handbag on the ground. It was an expensive designer bag that Etsuko had bought for her seventieth birthday.

The groundskeeper stopped before her and bowed, and she returned the bow.

Sunja smiled at the polite young man, who must have been about forty or forty-five. Uchida-san looked younger than Mozasu. How did she look to him? Her skin was deeply grooved from the years of sun, and her short

hair was bright white. No matter—seventy-three did not feel very old to her. Had the groundskeeper heard her mumbling in Korean? Ever since she'd stopped working at the confectionery, her limited Japanese had deteriorated further. It was not terrible, but lately she felt shy around native speakers. Uchida-san picked up his rake and walked away.

Sunja put both hands on the white marble, as if she could touch Isak from where she was.

"I wish you could tell me what will happen to us. I wish. I wish I knew that Noa was with you."

Several rows from her, the groundskeeper cleared wet leaves from stone markers. Now and then he would glance up at her, and Sunja felt embarrassed to be seen talking to a grave. She wanted to stay a little longer. Wanting to look like she was busy, Sunja opened her canvas bag to put away the dirty towels. In the bottom of her bag, she found her house keys on the key ring with thumbnail-sized photographs of Noa and Mozasu in a sealed acrylic frame.

Sunja started to weep, and she could not help her crying.

"Boku-san."

"*Hai?*" Sunja looked up at the groundskeeper.

"May I get you something to drink? I have a thermos of tea in the cottage. It is not very fine tea, but it is warm."

"No, no. Thank you. All time, you see people cry," she said in broken Japanese.

"No, actually, very few people come here, but your family visits regularly. You have two sons and a grandson, Solomon. Mozasu-sama visits every month or two. I haven't seen Noa-sama in eleven years, but he used to come on the last Thursday of each month. You could set a watch to him. How is Noa-sama? He was a very kind man."

"Noa come here? Come before 1978?"

"*Hai.*"

"From 1963 to 1978?" She mentioned the years he would have been in Nagano. She said the dates again, hoping that her Japanese was correct. Sunja pointed to Noa's photograph on the key ring. "He visit here?"

The groundskeeper nodded with conviction at the photograph, then looked up in the sky like he was trying to see some sort of calendar in his mind.



"*Hai, hai*. He came in those years and before, too. Noa-sama told me to go to school and even offered to send me if I wished."

"Really?"

"Yes, but I told him I have an empty gourd for a head, and that it would have been pointless to send me to school. Besides, I like it here. It's quiet. Everybody who comes to visit is very kind. He asked me never to mention his visits, but I have not seen him in over a decade, and I'd wondered if he moved away to England. He told me to read good books and brought me translations of the great British author Charles Dickens."

"Noa, my son, is dead."

The groundskeeper opened his mouth slightly.

"My son, my son," Sunja said quietly.

"I am very sad to hear that, Boku-san. Truly, I am," the groundskeeper said, looking forlorn. "I'd been hoping to tell him that after I finished all the books he'd brought me, I bought more of my own. I have read through all of Mr. Dickens's books in translations, but my favorite is the first one he gave me, *David Copperfield*. I admire David."

"Noa loved to read. The best. He loved to read."

"Have you read Mr. Dickens?"

"I don't know how," she said. "To read."

"*Maji*? If you are Noa's mother, you are very smart, too. Perhaps you can go to night school for adults. That is what Noa-sama told me to do."

Sunja smiled at the groundskeeper, who seemed hopeful about sending an old woman to school. She remembered Noa cajoling Mozasu to persevere with his studies.

The groundskeeper looked at his rake. He bowed deeply, then excused himself to return to his tasks.

When he was out of sight, Sunja dug a hole at the base of the tombstone about a foot deep with her hands and dropped the key ring photograph inside. She covered the hole with dirt and grass, then did what she could to clean her hands with her handkerchief, but dirt remained beneath her nails. Sunja tamped down the earth, then brushed the grass with her fingers.

She picked up her bags. Kyunghee would be waiting for her at home.

**[END OF NOVEL]**