

Chapter: 1 Hamhung

My first memories were of two sensations. One with my body and one with my eyes.

The first memory was an evening after a day of work on the farm.

The cool spring breeze carried the scent of the most recent rainfall only hours before. The sky was still a milky grey. Clouds wrapped themselves such as a hanbok around the lush mountains. In spring they look like they were covered in a green fluffy carpet. I don't get to experience lush carpets often but my friend Shin Su-Kyung tells me about them from the films her older sister, Shin Hye-jin shares with her. Like those carpets I never went up on those mountains. They were forbidden. The only thing that dared to go up there were trucks and cars. Heavy trucks filled with people.

Once our neighbors, The Chos, were supposedly pulled out of their homes by men in uniforms or so my father told me. They barreled down the dirt road from the mountains just for the Chos. I could hear the roaring of their engines such as a wolf chasing its prey. Once the trucks pounced, blood curdling screams were carried by the icy breeze of the night. My brother, Yong-hwa, tried to shield my shivering body by cupping my hands in his and wrapped his toes around mine so our bodies wouldn't give way. My cheeks were wet from his silent cries. I don't know what pierced my body more the Cho's screaming or the cold.

The Cho's faces were a blur now. Only their silhouettes toiling their field of white flowers. Flowers that turned crimson after the night of their disappearance. I saw the flowers with my two eyes walking to school. My brother shielded my eyes moving us along quickly down the dirt road. Despite his willingness to protect me there were moments that his good intentions paved a road to hell. The start of that road began when I saw a charred figure. Very small like me on a stake in the field of the freshly blossoming crimson flowers on what was the Cho's land. I never told him about how he should learn to close his fingers when covering someone's eyes.

Like the Chos we also had a field of similar flowers called poppies though they never suddenly turned red. Whenever my legs refused to budge and every movement was painful, I would distract myself by watching the flowers sway. I watched them mingle and dance as if one of those movies Su-Kyung goes on about. But secretly I knew nothing can match this view.

It was all I had to distract myself from my body cannibalizing itself from the lack of food. Sometimes I wish Pa was a farmer of corn or soy so we can eat our harvest. My father said these flowers were worth more than any crop. But what is more valuable than something you can put between your lips and savor? Food so plentiful and flavorful you had to share it with people beyond your doors. Laughter spilling out of the doors and windows. Echoing through ramshackled wooden buildings of the countryside. The imaginary

laughter was so infectious my brother would ask what I was smirking about. He never had a sense of humor; I don't think I had ever seen his lips curl upwards once. The fear and hunger imprinted itself into my flesh, scarring my organs and muscles rather than my skin.

My second memory was of loss. Which would be a lesson that would follow me by the heel wherever I fled.

When I was 7 my father insisted I go to the local school despite my mother's wishes.

Memories of her say things like “ We needed more hands on the farms.” or “ We need to meet their quota.” were plentiful. Even more abundant was my Pa's dismissal insisting that his children must learn about the might of our great leaders and strength of our nation. So Yong-hwa and I would walk the dirt road hand in hand to the school yard. He would complain about how sweaty and grimy my hands were but he never let go of my tiny hand when I offered it to him. I think he secretly liked how sweaty my hands were. It meant that I was alive and he wanted to hold on to dear life to keep me on this earthly plane. Maybe it made him feel alive and real perhaps. Whenever we came across the school yard the group of kids would dwindle by the day. Some of my classmates were taken out of school to work on the farms with their families or to become a laborer. Some died from hunger. Some just never to be heard from again...perhaps taken up to the mountains. My mom would say Kim Jong Il had blessed them by stealing them away from the poverty of the country. A light feeling arose in my chest when she reminded me of this when one after the other the children's names would fall off the attendance list. Maybe Kim Jong Il stole them away to a place where no one was hungry, where kids can watch those K-dramas Su-Kyung had shown me.

Sometimes in those movies you see kids wear things other than hand-me-downs that were riddled with holes. They wear sparkly, colorful, patterned clothes that suit each person wearing them. They all looked like their own person. Thankfully Su-Kyung's family was well off enough that she stayed in school. Her father was supposedly a laborer though Su-Kyung never told me where. Her home had no fields, only a small flower garden her mother tended to. Most of the time her father was gone for weeks at a time for which I heard rumors that he worked on a base in the mountains. You would know her husband was arriving home because Su-Kyung's mother, Yoon-hee, would wear her hanbok that reminded me of the sun setting adorned with embroidered cherry blossoms and white flowers. While her hair pinned back and styled meticulously she wore her dress while watering her flowers. She would ansley shuffle around the house preparing for the man of the hour, her husband: cooking, cleaning, priming. This was quite abnormal as every woman I knew worked, but if Yoon-hee worked I never noticed as she was on top of all the chores in the household. There were many times she was too preoccupied to watch Su-Kyung and I. So we took advantage of our freedom and opened up the dvd player and watched the most popular shows in South Korea. It was a severe crime to possess these dvds and even more so watching them,

but it never deterred us as this small act of rebellion brought us closer. Sometimes Hye-jin would join us and make us swear to not tell anyone. To prepare for each movie session we would look out the windows to make sure no one was passing by anytime soon then we pulled the curtains shut and closed the bedroom door. It was imperative that no one saw or heard as it was prevalent for people to rat out their own family members. I suppose that day came when I went to Su-Kyung's house on a warm sunny day as we planned to fulfill our pochi together. I knocked on the door, though no one answered. I went around back and the door was open. I walked all over the house looking for anyone, but to no avail. That house remained silent and still for days and no one could give me an answer.

Loss was a normal thing in North Korea as everyone dies or disappears eventually. I try to not get attached anymore and learn to rely on myself and my family. They were the only thing that brought what felt like a sense of normalcy in life.

When the last of the breadcrumbs left our cupboards and the money ran dry Pa would gather the family around a lantern. The flame brought life to his hollowed cheeks accentuating his protruding cheekbones and his almond shaped eyes seemed to command the flames. He would tell us stories of his time in the military; the fate of all men in North Korea. Even my feeble brother whose body was long and wiry. It was hard to imagine him adorned in the earth green uniforms the warriors of our country wore. Despite his weak body his eyes would fixate on our father as he spoke with grandiosity. Pa would go on about his heroic battles against the Americans during the reign of The Great Leader Kim Il Sung. Sometimes he would even put on his tattered uniform. The only aspect of the uniform that commanded attention were 2 large bronze stars hooked to the right lapel. His shy and loner persona melted away in the flames of the lamp. His posture became erect once dressed in uniform. He would shoot, slash, and punch imaginary enemies. Fully immersed in his heroic character, we owed and awed his resolve and strength. Even ma looked like she was falling in love all over again watching a ghost of a man possess my father. To this day that was all I can remember of him before the Day of the Shining Star that year when I was 13. Despite the celebration that year the cupboards were close to barren and our pockets filled with holes. Father managed to retain some money to buy kimchi, rice, and potatoes. I figured the harvest was good that year for him to splurge like he did. We gathered around the radio that evening. The radio static pierced our ears as the overly excitable presenters detailed the events in Pyongyang. Apparently a beautiful women in colorful hanboks danced elegantly for the gaze of the Shining Star. Men in their military garb displayed their physical prowess and pride for their country's leader Kim Jong Il. Every year on his birthday February 16th we worshiped him as the divine figure we saw him to be. Nothing less for a man of his stature and prestige as he was bred for greatness. At least that was how everyone spoke at school and even at home. We honor our leader despite him not knowing our names or faces, but most importantly he doesn't know how the kids were frail from the widespread famine. He does not know of the blood curdling cries that erupt during the night. He had never seen the bodies of their neighbors on stakes and sprawled on the side of dirt roads. People forgotten in life and death. He doesn't know or maybe he was going

through the same trials as us. My mind sinks further and further into the raging waves of “What ifs” and questions that I try to barricade. My sense of reality was held feebly by what felt like a rice paper wall. A strong hand clutches my shoulder reminiscent of a guide through my foggy mind. Leading me out of the depths of skepticism. I grabbed onto it feeling myself becoming centered. The radio presenters continue on with no care in the world. My ears adjust to their shouting and enthusiasm. My eyes fixated on the hand and then to my surprise I was confronted with my father’s face. His gaze was stern, borderline angry as his deep brown eyes burrowed into mine. He raised a finger to his lips, a sign to be silent though no words uttered from either of our mouths. He moves his finger from the gesture of silence to one that points to the heavens. I forgot that Kim Jong Il was always said to be listening and watching his people, even their thoughts.

“Your mind must not waver from the truth” said father.

Little did I know that was the last thing Pa said to me before the cars barreled down the road to claim their next prey.

I remember that day as if cemented into my mind. Yong-hwa didn’t go to school that day so I walked myself to and from school on the dirt road. When I embraced the memory the sky was a dull grey, mountains standing against the dull sky lush as ever. Though the buildings were several colors that were usually washed out pinks, yellow, blues, and greens were electric today. I had never recalled them at any time being so brightly colored. I basked in the vibrancy allowing it to lift my spirits higher and letting the ends of lips curl upward into a smile. I skipped home actually counting how many pink buildings there were. For some reason it reminded me of my mothers lips and cheeks. Despite her being deathly skinny she retained part of her feminine allure and beauty. As I happily skipped down the road passing what was left of the Cho’s farm my mood was disturbed by the revving of engines and rubber tires on gravel. The stench of diesel invaded my lungs, suffocating them. The air suddenly became so heavy I tried to block the odorous beasts with my sleeve but with no avail. They came closer and closer till they rolled past me. Soldiers eyeing me staring at them. I don’t remember when my skips turned into a jog and then a sprint, but prey is no match for a predator. My bony legs carried me as fast as they could despite my empty stomach protesting against it. The mechanical beasts roared and growled in front of my home as if their hunt was coming to a close.

I see a woman...ma in fact on her knees quivering in front of a soldier.

“Please, we have made our quotas for the past 5 harvests. How could I have known what he was doing with the...” said Ma frantically.

Before she could utter another word the sound of bone crunching giving way from a massive blow finished her sentence. I crawled into the field hoping the beatings would stop. I laid my body as close to

the ground as I could pulling my legs into my chest. I guess the one blow didn't satiate the soldiers bloodlust as the sound of bone breaking continued to carry over the poppy field. After every hit Ma's voices retreated further into her chest until I could only hear her gasping.

Tears filled my eyes and to prevent my cries from escaping, I bunch my shirt into my mouth. Soon the sound of heavy metal doors began to close and the smell of diesel became fainter. I finally inhaled letting the fresh country air fill my chest. I was afraid there wouldn't be enough. Slowly crawling from in between the rows of flowers my hands reached the gravel road unbeknownst to me. Only the pain of the gravel jabbing my hands and knees alerted me. There was air all around me but my lungs couldn't get enough. My head was pounding and circling. I decided to let my body give way to the shock. Dusted sandals appeared before my eyes, though I couldn't bring myself to feel startled by bony toes.

"Mi-rae?" asked Yong-hwa who had a curious expression.

I looked up to see the confusion on my Yong-hwa face that looked dirtier than his feet miraculously. Despite opening my mouth no words escaped. I just stared into his eyes and his perplexion turned into horror. All I could see was the dust following him after each step. His screams echoed over the valley but I could only hear my ears ringing..

That night of the Shining Star was the last time I saw my father. His pronounced cheekbones, malnourished body toiling away on the field, sweat dripping down into his almond eyes. Despite our hardships his brown eyes glimmered with playfulness and excitement. I suppose his playfulness and easygoingness soon became his weakness.

From that day on our family was followed by a cloud of darkness.