

Chapter: 2 Kaesong

After Pa's disappearance, staying on the farm became increasingly more dangerous. We had no choice but to be squatters in what was our house which is technically government land. Many of the farms in North Korea belonged to the state; everything from the poppy seeds to the house was possessed by Kim Jong Il and we were trespassing.

Yong-hwa and I had no choice but to drop out of school like many other kids in our predicament. We needed money and every hand and foot had to be utilized for our family to be able to buy the smallest scraps from the market. Regardless if Pa had been taken away or not I would have had to leave school to fulfill my mandated pochi. Kids as young as 10 have forced their malnourished bodies into the streets to scavenge for iron, collect paper, work on farms, and do construction. Since rain has replaced the snow it was primetime to scavenge. When the sun was high enough in the morning I went out on my own into the streets to see if I could find anything. Sometimes while searching I will see a pack of kids roaming together searching like me. Seeing this brought up memories of Su-Kyung and I laboring together. My heart sinks at the thought of her and part of me pulls me toward them desperate for connection. Despite my feelings I continue to search alone. The more people trying to fulfill their pochi together could mean none would meet their quotas. I couldn't afford to share my bounty with anyone. By the time the sun was setting my plastic bags will be half empty filled with mostly paper and measly scraps of metal that may or may not be iron. Since we pride ourselves on self sufficiency in North Korea new metals and machinery hardly ever seeps through the borders. Making these metals even more precious, but even more hard to find. My heart sinks every time I have to turn over my deflated plastic bag. Waiting in line at the distribution center is agonizing with each step getting closer to the fate all of us children will face. There was one boy I recognized from school who frequently played volleyball around town with the other kids during the warmer months. His skin was bronzed from the sun and stained with mud. On a first glance he looks like the healthiest out of us. His jawline defined and eyes looked upon the officers with a sense of defiance and his expression nonchalant. He acts as if his turn with the cane isn't quickly approaching, especially since he only has a few pieces of paper clasped in his hands. After the girl ahead of him limps away the soldiers forcefully push him forward sneering at him. They seem eager to toy with such an unusually strong boy.

"Is that all you have?" says an officer while snatching the paper out of his hand.

Chul-soo, despite the atmosphere, remains silent tilting his head upward sizing up the officer.

I couldn't help, but chuckle to myself. He was never the brightest student and always arrogant so who could expect him to practice humility in a time such as this. Why couldn't he keep his head down and do what is expected. That is the philosophy I try to live by as that is just life. That is our life and fates

according to our songbun as the hostile class. We are the scum of society because our ancestors decided to betray North Korea. The least you could do is bow your head. My body is becoming hot and tense so much so I didn't realize I was wringing my plastic with my hands. Soon enough Chul-soo receives a beating from the equally arrogant officer.

"You're not as strong as you appear. Your bones are soft like a woman's."

Chul-soo wheezed in pain trying to stand, but continuously collapsing while doing so. The soldiers laughed at his misfortune and I couldn't help, but lift my head this once. This once to see the arrogance beaten out of him. To hopefully see the lesson that we all have learned countless times over.

The officer was right despite his wide chest and thick arms you can see his ribs protruding through his sleeveless shirt. With his condition he would easily be able to beat down on. Soon his eyes lock with mine and to my dismay the strength that he portrayed still lingers within him. He is oddly persistent, perhaps that will make him a good soldier. Staring into the eyes of a person like that will have you shifting your own posture. I was unaware of how often I slouched due to subside hunger pains. Though once the soldiers stopped cackling and noticed Chul-soo gazing in my direction I immediately oriented myself back to my more docile posture. The fear of getting beat harder because of my perceived association with their most recent victim sends electricity to my heart. The adrenaline excites and scares me. The officer gazes provokes me to want to stare at them as well. Is this what drives Chul-soo to stand tall as he does?

The nightly breeze pierces the gash on my skull from the daily beating that seems inevitable. There is hardly anything to find and with so many children looking for iron parts it makes things sparser. But, it is an inescapable task. The colorful pastel buildings lining the streets of Hamhung become flushed in the occasional dim street light. At this time the streets are fairly empty with the occasional bicycle rolling down the street. Crime was not rare and especially common against women. Sexual Assault was rampant due to sexism so night strolls were ones I tried to avoid. I tried to walk confidently down the street trying to take a page out of Chul-soo's book so I wouldn't seem like an easy target, but my 13 year old body has barely hit puberty and my growth had been stunted from malnourishment. All in all I resembled an emancipated boy especially with my short bob. If anyone truly wanted to take advantage of me there wouldn't be anything stopping them. Chills went down my spine when I considered this. There were mostly men on the street as the sun had set. Moving my feet faster I tried to hurry home. While power walking down the sidewalk an older man with his hairline at the crown of his head fixes his eyes on me.

"Where are you going, little one?" said the man drunkenly.

I didn't respond and my power walk turned into a jog.

"Why are you avoiding me, yeobo?" said the drunk man. He continued to pursue me with a jog. My own jog became a sprint. Looking back to see where the man went I ran into someone, knocking the both of us over. While trying to get my bearings I glanced at the person to see that it was Chul-soo. He groans as he tries to get his eyes to focus on my face.

"Mi-rae?" he said, shocked.

"Sorry I wasn't looking where I was going. There was someone chasing me..." I said frantically

"Someone chasing you?" Chul-soo said, raising a brow.

The old man caught up with me, surprised to see I was on top of another boy.

"I guess you are a loose girl. Will you make room for another man?" the pervert said while jeering at Chul-soo

My cheeks became hot with what he was insulating. I quickly pulled myself off the ground and so did Chul-soo.

"She isn't interested." said Chul-soo aggressively. He then stood in front of me blocking any path the pervert may have to get to me.

The pervert scoffed and walked away disinterested.

"All you alright?"

"I am fine Chul-soo. No need to fuss. Thank you...for what you did." I was embarrassed for accidentally dragging someone into my problems. Chul-soo and I were never friends, but he was easy-going and got along with everyone. I never knew him well enough for him to do me a favor like this.

"You should learn to stand tall and strong in the face of predators like that. Running only makes them want to hunt you more." said Chul-soo. His face was concerned.

I could only laugh at this comment as him standing still and strong got his head bashed in harder if he submitted.

"It is best to know when to run and hide then fight every battle." I remarked back.

"If you never fight, nothing will ever change. To face the difficult things in life you must fight. 실패는 성공의 어머니"

Speechless, I considered his words. 실패는 성공의 어머니 means failure is the mother of success. Though there is a difference between failing to fight for survival and being brave.

"Bye Chul-soo. Thank you again." I said wearily

I didn't know what else to say, but he looked like he was brimming with things to say, but I would rather head home than consider my philosophy about life.

"At least let me walk you home." Chul-soo instead.

I agreed and we walked the rest of the way in silence.

Carrying Chul-soo's words in my mind we finally reached the farm and exchanged goodbyes.

"Be brave Mi-rae." He said looking into my face as if he could see something that I couldn't. I bowed my head and headed "home" in the agriculture complex. Hard to call this place our home when the only home I knew had been ripped away from us. Home had beautiful flowers, and a view of the lush countryside, but now we live in a gated agricultural zone. A cooperative farm that specializes in corn. Mom luckily found this job after asking around and now she and (brother's name) have become laborers here. At least we get a little bit more food than we did before tending to the poppy farm. The complex is vast and more industrial than I am used to. The machinery rusted and metal tarnished parked around the complex. Industrial sheds for processing the corn are the size of the poppy fields back home packed with people at every hour cleaning and milling the corn. Though at night the complex is relatively quiet.

The house that we now live in is far more structurally superior to our previous ramshackled home. The walls are insulated with bright orange and yellow paint adorning them. With such a nice house there is hardly any furniture to fill it. Maybe a mattress on the floor or two with the occasional chair. Even with the nicer provisions we don't have access to the nicer items due to our poverty and songbun.

Surprisingly both Yong-hwa and my mother are sitting together in the living room. Usually one or the other is on the farm working at any given time. Despite having coinsiding times off, Yong-hwa looks dejected while my mother looks optimistic. I suppose the opening and the closing of the front door was enough to announce my presence for them to be staring at me. I can feel their eyes following the trickling of blood down my face. My mother gestures for me to sit down with them; no words, no excitement, no disdain, just an invitation.

“ Mi-rae, we are moving to Kaesong.”

“We will be leaving tomorrow so pack what you want.” says Yong-hwa coldly. He excuses himself from the conversation heading out into the night.

What is there to pack? The only thing I have are the clothes on my back and maybe another pair of pants that I outgrew years ago.

“ Why Keasong?” I ask my ma.

Her eyes softened drawing me into her frail frame.

“ I overheard some ladies talking about factory jobs there plus the last time I heard your Aunt Jang lived in Kaesong.”

I never thought it would be a possibility to move out of Hamhung. It is where we had everything: our farm and our family. Though now that Pa is gone I have lost any attachment to this city. I assume it is the same for Ma and Yong-hwa. Ma and Pa were hardly affectionate, but they always relied on each other. For Yong-hwa he is resilient and can make any environment work as long as it means survival.

By the morning we packed the little we had and journeyed to Keasong which is a little over 318 kilometers by foot. The trip would be at least four days of us walking and hitchhiking. (maybe add more to this section)

The moment we got into Kaesong my feet finally gave way, but the journey had just begun as we still needed to find a place to sleep for the night. Before we could rest we had no choice, but to follow Ma around interviewing for jobs. Jumping from factory to factory from sunrise to sunset we walked around the industrial district. Despite Hamhung being the second largest city in North Korea, Kaesong was far more industrious and bustling. The streets were filled with people at work or on their way to work.

The last place we arrived at was a factory dedicated to textiles for clothes which seems to be a common business here.

On arrival it was apparent that this company was vast with the compound stretching for what seemed like a couple kilometers. As we got closer to the entrance a woman with her hair immaculately pulled into a bun and her posture stiff awaited by the front doors. She looks like an older version of Ma from a

distance, but up close her cheekbones are flatter and face more oval compared to Ma's heart shaped face. She embraces my mother, basically suffocating her.

"Welcome, Na-young! It is pleasant to see you, especially after..."

The woman clenches her jaw awkwardly, hesitant to finish her sentence. I figured immediately that she was referring to my father. It is irritating when people don't say what they mean, but I have never dared share my true thoughts with anyone so who am I to have judged. Ma quickly changed the subject anticipating the subject of my father being a topic.

"There is nothing we can do now about that man; he made his choice." says Ma. She tried to force a smile, but the scar on her head is still prominent. Yong-hwa seemed offended by Ma's remark, but I shrugged it off because there was no lie in it. Pa made his choice and now we have to live with it. If he is still alive then he is living in the consequences of his choices as well.

"Well never mind that you and your children are here now."

The woman looks at me and Yong-hwa saying, "Call me Aunt Jang."

Aunt Jang guides us through the large warehouse where workers toiled away on massive machines creating various colorful fabrics. The ceilings were so high that every creek from the machines echoed throughout the facility that made me uncomfortable. The workers were predominantly women who were silently working at their stations working efficiently. This made the factory feel hollow and lifeless despite 100s of people filling it. Aunt Jang invited us to sit down in a room fitting to be a closet, leaving us there to fetch her employer. The employer came and the interview was swift as Ma had a strong recommendation from her sister. Before we knew it she got the job as long as both Yong-hwa and I worked in the factory with her.

That night we were set up in one of the group homes next to the factory for the workers. All 3 immediately started enjoying the comforts of a shower and a warm bed. While in my cot I glanced toward Ma in hers. She was snoring so loudly I thought we would get kicked out of the place. Though my brother continued to lay in bed staring at the ceiling. He seemed to be taking Dad's disappearance the hardest. There was no amount of comforting and lies I could tell to take his mind off it. So I turned away and went to bed.

The next day was the start of the new job. We were given uniforms the day prior though the set I received hung loosely on my frame as there were only adult sizes. From 7 to 18 in the evening in the evening we worked making textiles on the massive industrial machines 6 days a week. Leaving our Sundays to be free from factory life. Despite having a designated free day we still did chores around the

facility and petitioned for labor around Kaesong as needed. For weeks during the winter months we were petitioned to work in various greenhouses throughout the city to grow potatoes. At the time we thought it was an honor to delicately handle these plants that Kim Jong Il graciously bestowed into the country. A way to stop the famine once and for all with each potato plant at the time. I ate so many potatoes back then the sight of them makes me nauseous. During what they called the Arduous March we ate those potatoes desperately as there was hardly any food to be sold or made. In Kaesong our lives revolved around work 24/7 for minimum pay. Despite working there for 4 months we only had 30000 won to our name. A majority of our earnings were requisitioned by the North Korean regime. At the time we thought that it was honorable to sacrifice our wages to help Kim Jong Il to transform the country for the better. In hindsight I can't help but allow my anger to rise inside me at the thought of forcibly being starved for the convenience of the regime. I had abandoned myself to be a cog in the machine in the factory. Keeping my limbs moving so I won't be reprimanded by the factory overseers; they watched us as if we were prisoners making sure productivity was efficient. Despite them watching we were free to leave the factory whenever we wished, but where would we go? Especially since the industrial jobs in Kaesong were sought after due to the pay and accommodations. There was school, but school didn't pay you to go so my education went by the wayside. I continued to work despite not being physically strong or skilled. There were other kids working in the factory alongside me, but we hardly ever uttered a word to each other. Frequently the kids and myself would get injured on the job. Thankfully these injuries were minor enough such as gashes, cuts, bruising from equipment hitting us or us hitting the machine. Occasionally there would be accidents that would disable people or wounds would get infected making one of the workers too sick to work. For these people their fates at the factory were sealed. They would be discarded by the company as dead weight leaving these people to fend for themselves. I supposed it was only fair as we were there to work and to be utilized like tools. Once Aunt Jang's hand was severely mutilated by a machine accidentally getting her hand caught. I was not with her when this happened but Ma was there to comfort her and soon took on the role of caregiver for her sister.

When I saw Aunt Jang laying in her cot while ma changed the makeshift bandaging made out of shirts, the word careless ran through my mind. I didn't try to shove the thought away as it was the truth. How could someone be so distracted to allow her hand to get stuck in the machine she uses everyday? There was no excuse for someone with her skill level to make such an error. While thinking this I glanced at my own hand and the new found scars embellishing my palms and fingers. I vowed to myself to never be as careless as her. "I will keep my hands and survive" I thought to myself that night. Soon Aunt Jang's wounds become infected and there was no amount of caregiving my mom could do to fix it. Sepsis finally caught up with her and she died two weeks after her injury. After Aunt Jang's death Mom was never the same. Death and loss are normal in our country so I never understood why Ma would spend her off time by Aunt Jang's cot. Holding her clothes in her hands weeping into them in the night. She wept so loud one night my annoyance became devastation. I got up from my cot to hug her as she did when our father disappeared. I tried to hug her as tightly as Aunt Jang did, but I am afraid that my arms were too weak to

do so. We held each other and cried in each other's arms. Death comes for us all and mortality would soon come for my Ma and brother. Maybe for me first. Tears fell down my cheeks as I buried my face into my mother's jet black hair. Making sure to take all of her in before it was too late like for Aunt Jang.

The following months after Aunt Jang's death Ma deteriorated further at work. Losing her sister seemed like a battle she could not win. She frequently made errors on the job such as stitching a shirt poorly or not printing the patterns on shirts properly. She quickly and continually caught the eyes of our supervisors. If she didn't shape up she would surely be discarded as dead weight. That left me to fix her errors before they were found. Even working later to fulfil her duties when Ma couldn't bring herself to get out of bed. Yong-hwa from the time we got to Kaesong avoided our mother as if she was a contagious disease. Sometimes I would notice him looking at me while I continued to work when everyone else clocked out. His expression was sour and filled with disdain. This perplexed whenever I saw him look at me that way. As I was the one who was giving their all for the family.

I soon got my answer to why his demeanor had shifted late one night after finishing Ma's and I work. On opening the door to the group home my brother stood over our mother as if she was a child being reprimanded. His face was contorted by anger and his body stiff while Ma could barely hold herself up as she sat in her bed. Her head bowed with what looked like shame.

"You are the plague on this family. If it weren't for you opening your dirty mouth Pa would still be here.", said Yong-hwa

Dumbfounded, I turned my gaze to Ma and she didn't fight back, but slouched further into her body.

In a weak voice Ma uttered, "I did what I had to do to protect our family just like you with that Su-Kyung girl"

Ma lifts her face allowing her long hair to be pulled back like a curtain to reveal a hollowed and lifeless face. Even Yong-hwa was taken aback by her emaciated appearance. We have always struggled with finding food, but she has never looked like she was on the brink of death as she does now.

She stood slowly and stood only a few inches from Yong-hwa's face. The tension between them was thick enough for me to feel across the room.

"Were you protecting Mi-rea or were you protecting yourself when you called those soldiers to the Shin home?" mom retorted coldly.

Yong-hwa stood still unable to utter a word. I was still myself anticipating his response. My only friend is gone because of him potentially being a coward!

"Which was it Yong-hwa?," my voice hoarsely

He stood there silently avoiding my gaze. I had no intentions of getting dragged into their qualms, but at that moment I don't think I would've been able to let what was said go.

" Which was it?" I questioned him frantically raising my voice..

All he could do was chuckle to himself.

Losing Su-Kyung was no special event, Yong-hwa ratting her out for possessing foreign films was commonplace, but I couldn't help but feel the betrayal.

" I am not a coward like you.",Yong-hwa said as he pushed past Ma. Approaching the door where I still stood. He considered me looking at my wet cheeks, but pushed past me as well into the night.

I sat on my cot and faced Ma fully taking in her lifeless body.

"Is it true?" I asked

" You have always been comfortable with the truth Mi-rae. Never stop chasing it. You will only regret allowing yourself to feast on lies until the lies have in turn begun to devour you."

While I tried to grapple with Ma's words she went back to her newfound past time of rotting in bed. Leaving this weight on my chest that I was too weak to lift. I don't remember how I went to sleep that night, but like all the lost people before me, I wished they would take me away with them. The last of the family that I had that I had laughed, cried, and suffered with suddenly became strangers who I couldn't wrap my head around. The sting of desolation had my body in flight mode but there was nowhere to run. What I knew had been lost.

Morning came but Yong-hwa and Ma were not in bed. They could've gotten up early. Since it was a Sunday it was our duty to perform labor around Kaesong. I was assigned my usual position of street cleaner and I headed into the city for my cleaning route. By afternoon I finished half of my work load exhausted from the idea of cleaning. While sitting on the pavement a woman catches my eye. A trail of long black hair flowing behind her reminiscent of my mother. The woman looked at her surroundings cautiously as if making sure no one was following her. Before I knew it, suspicion had gotten the better of me and I started trailing her. There was no harm in stretching my legs so I thought innocently to myself. If it was Ma wouldn't she have some trust in me? I made sure to stay at least 8 meters behind her. The woman winded in and out of streets to then stop near an open field near a factory. The place was secluded or so I thought. A man appears with what looked like two of his lankies. The way they dressed

and carried themselves were unremarkable except the leader of the 3 had a tattoo that resembled a snake slithering up neck.

Their chatter was indistinguishable as I was out of ear shot. Despite this the woman was unmistakably my mother. Her heart shaped face draped with her dark hair and flat nose gave her away. I inched closer hoping to hear more of the conversation.

"Are you sure that you're competent enough?" says Ma while she shifts her feet

" Your name is Na-young right? Those Chinese bastards would fetch me a pretty penny for you. I must be competent if I mean to live well." said the leader who gave her a cold look while lighting a cigarette.

"Fine when can you...get me out?" grumbled Ma cautiously.

The word "out" echoed in my mind. Out where?

"Here tonight at 12am or I will leave your ass here," snorted the leader.

Ma hands him over a small pouch and they went their separate ways. While I was dumbfounded, I was still attempting to wrap my head around the situation.

Back at the group home the workers started piling in after their days of work. I didn't even bother finishing my route accepting whatever consciousness came of it. Soon Ma walked into the dormitory smelling like cigarettes.

Smelling this on her had my speculations resurfacing of what she was planning. It was obvious that Ma was planning on leaving the factory, but there is nowhere else better to go. The only thing that might change her situation was...crossing the border into China. It was the path for women to take if they were going to defect. I don't know much about the path to China but the fact that women over themselves as workers so that they would be transported to the bordering country. Considering the sketchy man from earlier Ma trafficking herself doesn't seem too far off, but this was all conjecture on my part. I couldn't begin to understand Ma's fate and why she chose it. Did she consider taking Yong-hwa and I? Were we going to start over once again in China?

Ma prepared herself for bed sliding in between her sheets. Suddenly a feeling of longing filled my heart watching her position herself to bed. I embraced her for what might be the last time stroking her hair.

"Mi-rae? What's wrong?", Ma dismissed. She tried to awkwardly hug me back though her bony arms had the strength to hold me. I held her enough for the both of us for so long and she is just going to up and leave.

" Take me with you" I cried into her ear. Her body stiffened as if she was in shock.

"What do you mean Mi?" as she began to play the curled ends of my bob.

" I saw you with those men today. I wasn't going to say anything, but..." I said allowing grief to catch in my throat.

Ma was still in a bowl of water. She seemed to be unmoved by me bringing up her dealings with strange men.

" Whatever happens to me Mi don't let your heart become infertile like the land and don't let it shatter like glass. I am always with you and I will do anything for both you and Yong-hwa." said Ma. She kissed my forehead gently while tears continued to flow. Her eyes were hollowed, but they were brimming with hope as if she was already witnessing a brighter future.

That night I slept in her cot nuzzling her neck as she pulled me into her chest. I couldn't stand the thought of sleeping alone when I knew I would wake up living the rest of my days absent of the only parent I had left. There was little comfort in that anticipation. Discarding those thoughts I tried to remain in the moment until I soon fell into a deep sleep.

By morning the only thing I was cuddling was the comforter with the cigarette smoke still embedded in its fabrics. Yong-hwa was still nowhere to be found. There was nothing else to do, but to operate as normal: put on my baggy uniform, clock in from 7 in the morning, sit at my sewing station, clock out at 18 o'clock, sleep, and repeat. At least I didn't have to work two shifts just to cover for Ma anymore. Sitting at my station I examined the cuts on my hand from the long evenings sewing on the machine. I am sure the factory will hire someone new by the end of the week. I began sewing in an attempt to return to normalcy. Though the eerie noises of the machines emphasized my uneasiness. All of a sudden I wished someone would say something to cut the silence. My body craved human contact and my mind a conversation. While sewing the hem of a shirt I spotted Yong-hwa across the room. He was carrying patterned fabrics under his arm heading to his station. He didn't acknowledge me if he even noticed me. Did he notice Ma leaving last night? Did he consider where she might be? Did he even care if she was alive or dead? I never associated Yong-hwa with cruelty or indifference. He was introverted like Pa, but walked around with a stoic demeanor. He was overprotective and sentimental. He was a warm place to hide into, but his warmth has become uncontrollable. Allowing him to sear anyone who attempts to get close to his flame.

Days passed and not even a “hello” had been exchanged between us. Even his dormitory cot hasn’t been laid in. I heavily considered that he found somewhere else to sleep, though we have no living family nor had I seen him befriending people enough to sleep at their homes. The solitude was caving in on me leaving me only a week and half after Ma’s disappearance. I lay at night staring at my family’s empty cots imagining their bodies and faces peacefully sleeping. I hugged my pillow as if it was Ma longing for her to return so I could tell her about the fashionable new patterns that were recently brought in and how I nicked my hand with another needle while sewing. Each night I would imagine Pa, Ma, and Yong-hwa on those nights where we used to watch Pa act out his military days. When Yong-hwa would hold my hand as if it was a reminder that he would be by my side no matter what. How ma would brush my short hair and in turn she would let me brush her waist length hair; allowing me to style it anyway I thought would suit her. My memories soon became delusions that I would relive while laying in bed at night as if I was transported to the past.

While at work I began awkwardly making small talk with the other children around my age. A girl about the same age as me, 14, started humoring my attempts. She mentioned her name being Eun-Ji. The only reason I remembered her name was because her name meant kind and in my life I was indeed of some niceties. She lived up to her name as we began to eat our dinners together in front of the group home. She even taught me how to sear potatoes to get a crispy coating and a salted interior. She mentioned that her mother taught her how to cook before both of her parents died when she was only 10 leaving her with no one to turn to by herself. I suppose we bonded over being separated from family. She apparently lived in Kaesong her entire life surviving off of the small pay she would receive from street cleaning and eating scraps from the market. Her collar bones jutted out of her chest accentuating her frail ribs that were only protected by skin. Her hands and feet were plagued by calluses and blisters from strenuous work. It was hard to look away from her appearance as it visually displayed her life. Our times together usually consisted of gossiping about co-workers, eating crispy potatoes, and talking about our past lives.

On the 15th day since my mothers disappearance, Eun-ji and I sat under the clear night sky eating potatoes. She gobbled her portion, finishing her plate in what seemed like seconds. Today I only pushed my potatoes around on my plate as my stomach was filled to the brim with what felt like insects crawling around my insides. The sickness began whenever the sun set leaving my mind to stray to my painful memories.

“ Are you going to finish that? You never know when the next shipment of potatoes will come....if ever” lectured Eun-jin.

“Do you ever get tired of stuffing your face with potatoes?” I jeered back.

She glances at me playfully “ Oh so she talks? You have had more to do with your potatoes than with me tonight. Maybe the more potatoes I eat I will turn into one so you could acknowledge me for once.”

I rolled my eyes, confessing, “I can’t stop thinking about where she went.”

Eun-jin considered this setting down her plate.

“ You said you saw the man she was talking to, right? What did he look like?” pried Eun-jin

I couldn’t help but chuckle at her question as it wasn’t relevant.

“ I don’t know. He looked like any ordinary man...he did have a snake tattoo. It looked like it was slithering up his neck. What type of freak has a tattoo like that?” I replied.

Upon hearing about the tattoo her eyes widened as if she had an epiphany.

“What is it? Do you know this snake man?” I pressed, turning my body closer to Eujin.

Eun-jin looked over her shoulder and then mine before she dared to speak. Selective with her words she confessed, “ I know of him and what he does. He sex trafficked desperate women over the border in China.”

I recoiled at the word desperate; especially with the negative connotation she said it with. “She couldn’t have fully known what she was getting herself into with that man”, I thought to myself shifting my body on the concrete.

“ Do you want to follow your mother? To China I mean.” whispered Eun-jin leaning in closer.

Exhaustion at the thought of moving once again to inevitably to lose more of myself and the people I love. What if I went to China, then what? Ma and I would be slaves. At least we get food, pay, housing, some semblance of freedom to move around, but as a slave my body would be worth no more than the sewing machine to sit at every day. But I guess I will be a tool no matter where I flee. Maybe in each country or city I go to, suffering will follow me like my shadow. Suddenly Ma’s face evades my thoughts, halting them with her somber smile. The insects in my stomach scrambled within my guts faster and my breaths quicker. Maybe we could at least suffer together, I thought; Ma and I.

“He has helped a few women from this factory defect and is frequently seen by...” ramble Eu-jin

The idea of defecting hardly ever crossed my mind nor was it a word people casually threw around. It was blasphemous to leave the country as it was a sign of ungratefulness to the Kim family and their rule. Their

sacrifices for their people would be in vain if people up and left just because they were uncomfortable with their life. Despite believing that I would be forsaking my country for trivial familial affairs, my country won't kiss my head when the hunger becomes too hard to bear. My country won't brush my hair and pull me close into her bosom.

"Take me to him! As soon as possible.", I demanded grabbing Eun-jin's shoulders.

Her eyes widened, reminiscent of a deer in headlights, taken aback by my sudden persistence.

"I can ask around to arrange it. Do you know what type of hell that will await you if you travel with the 'snake man'?" probed Eun-jin, regaining her bearings and loosening herself from my grip.

Thoughts of a prospective life being trafficked evaded me. My hope brimmed brighter than it had in over two weeks trumping any fear of being a dismembered body for a man. The insects that filled my belly subsided allowing me to inhale deeply. I reveled in the calmness in my body.

I knew what I must do at that moment despite the consequences. Staring sternly into her eyes I declared, "I will go to China."

The ending of the conversation with Eun-jin had me anxious to hear from her again. With any news about who the "snake man" was and how long would it take to reunite with Ma. When I opened the door to the group home I felt the door hit something or someone preventing it from widening. Apologetic I frantically apologized to the person to notice that it was Yong-hwa. He was dressed in what resembled a uniform that was earthy green in its tone. Taken aback I stepped back to get a fuller look at him. His face didn't give away any shock, longing, nor anger. Though he remained in the doorway blocking my path.

"We need to talk.", Yongwha demanded sternly.

After weeks of ignoring me he finally decided to acknowledge my presence. At the time when my spirits have never been higher. Frustrated, I tried to plow past him to get into the building, but he was resistant to my shoving, rooted in the ground like a tree. His already short hair was buzzed close to his skull revealing scars that were hidden.

"I am leaving to join the military so don't bother searching for me.", He coldly divulged

I was rendered speechless by this news. There was nothing to say that could make the situation a sentimental goodbye, nor was there a way to convince Yong-hwa to stay. I suppose my long silence gave my astonishment away. Not giving me anymore time to consider a goodbye he finally moved out of the doorway pushing past me as he tried to leave.

“Do you remember when you used to hold my hand when we went to school or when you attempted to shield me from the harsh world?” I said my back turned toward him. The sound of his heavy boots on concrete halted.

“Maybe it’s time for you to learn to be a woman instead of a girl. I shouldn’t have reported Su-Kyung...”

My heart skipped a beat when he mentioned Su-Kyung and at the truth that he did take my friend from me.

Yong-hwa continued, “...I should have let you get taken away with her. You would’ve been one less mouth Pa had to pay for.”

He continued onwards leaving the compound and leaving me sick to my stomach once again. The peace I had was replaced with a wave of anxiety that was bigger than the last. I couldn’t contain it anymore and vomited in the shrubs next to the group home. I had no more tears to cry, but only a realization that defecting was the only option I had left.