PACHINKO

Min Jin Lee

National Bestselling Author of
Free Food for Millionaires

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Table of Contents

Free Food for Millionaires

For Christopher and Sam

1910–1933

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

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 boardinghouse 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.

2

November 1932

The winter following Japan's invasion of Manchuria was a difficult one. Biting winds sheared through the small boardinghouse, and the women stuffed cotton in between the fabric layers of their garments. This thing called the Depression was found everywhere in the world, the lodgers said frequently during meals, repeating what they'd overheard from the men at the market who could read newspapers. Poor Americans were as hungry as the poor Russians and the poor Chinese. In the name of the Emperor, even ordinary Japanese went without. No doubt, the canny and the hardy survived that winter, but the shameful reports—of children going to bed and not waking up, girls selling their innocence for a bowl of wheat noodles, and the elderly stealing away quietly to die so the young could eat—were far too plentiful.

That said, the boarders expected their meals regularly, and an old house needed repairs. The rent had to be paid each month to the landlord's agent, who was persistent. In time, Yangjin had learned how to handle money, deal with her suppliers, and say no to terms she did not want. She hired two orphaned sisters and became an employer. She was a thirty-seven-year-old widow who ran a boardinghouse and no longer the shoeless teenager who'd arrived on its doorstep clutching a set of clean undergarments wrapped in a square bit of fabric.

Yangjin had to take care of Sunja and earn money; they were fortunate to have this business even though they didn't own the house. On the first of every month, each lodger paid twenty-three yen for room and board, and increasingly, this was not enough to buy grain at the market or coal for heat. The lodging fees couldn't go up, because the men were not making any more money, but she still had to feed them the same amount. So from shinbones, she made thick, milky broths and seasoned the garden vegetables for tasty side dishes; she stretched meals from millet and barley and the meager things they had in the larder when there was little money left at the end of the month. When there wasn't much in the grain sack, she made savory pancakes from bean flour and water. The lodgers brought her fish they couldn't sell in the market, so when there was an extra pail of crabs or mackerel, she preserved them with spices to supplement the scantier meals that were sure to come.

For the previous two seasons, six guests took turns sleeping in the one guest room: The three Chung brothers from Jeollado fished at night and slept during the day shift, and two young fellows from Daegu and a widower from Busan worked at the seaside fish market and went to sleep in the early evening. In the small room, the men slept beside each other, but none complained, because this boardinghouse was better than what they

were used to back at their respective homes. The bedding was clean, and the food was filling. The girls laundered their clothing well, and the boardinghouse keeper patched up the lodgers' worn work clothes with scraps to make them last another season. None of these men could afford a wife, so for them, this setup was not half bad. A wife could have given some physical comfort to a workingman, but a marriage could beget children who would need food, clothing, and a home; a poor man's wife was prone to nagging and crying, and these men understood their limits. The rise in prices accompanied by the shortage of money was distressing, but the lodgers were almost never late with the rent. The men who worked at the market were occasionally paid in unsold goods, and Yangjin would take a jar of cooking oil in place of a few yen on rent day. Her mother-in-law had explained that you had to be very good to the lodgers: There were always other places for workingmen to stay. She explained, "Men have choices that women don't." At the end of each season, if there were any coins left over, Yangjin dropped them into a dark earthenware crock and stowed it behind a panel in the closet where her husband had put away the two gold rings that had belonged to his mother. At meals, Yangjin and her daughter served the food noiselessly while the lodgers talked brashly about politics. The Chung brothers were illiterate,

but they followed the news carefully at the docks and liked to analyze the fate of the country at the boardinghouse dining table.

It was the middle of November, and the fishing had been better than expected for the month. The Chung brothers had just woken up. The evening-shift lodgers would soon be heading home to sleep. The fishermen brothers would eat their main meal before going out to sea. Well rested and feisty, the brothers were convinced that Japan couldn't conquer China.

"Yes, the bastards can take a nibble, but China will not be eaten whole. Impossible!" exclaimed the middle Chung brother.

"Those dwarves can't take over such a great kingdom. China is our elder brother! Japan is just a bad seed," Fatso, the youngest brother, cried, slapping down his cup of warm tea. "China will get those sons of bitches! You watch!"

The poor men mocked their powerful colonizer within the shabby walls of the boardinghouse, feeling secure from the colonial police, who wouldn't bother with fishermen with grandiose ideas. The brothers boasted of China's strengths—their hearts yearning for another nation to be strong since their own rulers had failed them. Korea had been colonized for twenty-two years already. The younger two had never lived in a Korea that wasn't ruled by Japan.

“*Ajumoni*,” Fatso shouted genially. “*Ajumoni*.”

“Yes?” Yangjin knew he wanted more to eat. He was a puny young man who ate more than both his brothers combined.

“Another bowl of your delicious soup?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

Yangjin retrieved it from the kitchen. Fatso slurped it down, and the men left the house for work.

The evening-shift lodgers came home soon after, washed up, and ate their suppers quickly. They smoked their pipes, then went to sleep. The women cleared the tables and ate their simple dinner quietly because the men were sleeping. The servant girls and Sunja tidied the kitchen and cleaned the dirty washbasins. Yangjin checked the coal before she prepared for bed. The brothers’ talk of China lingered in her mind. Hoonie used to listen carefully to all the men who brought him news, and he would nod, exhale resolutely, and then get up to take care of the chores. “No matter,” he would say, “no matter.” Whether China capitulated or avenged itself, the weeds would have to be pulled from the vegetable garden, rope sandals would need to be woven if they were to have shoes, and the thieves who tried often to steal their few chickens had to be kept away.

The dampened hem of Baek Isak’s woolen coat had frozen stiff, but at last

Isak found the boardinghouse. The long trip from Pyongyang had exhausted him. In contrast to the snowy North, the cold in Busan was deceptive. Winter in the South appeared milder, but the frosty wind from the sea seeped into his weakened lungs and chilled him to the marrow. When he'd left home, Isak had been feeling strong enough to make the train journey, but now he felt depleted again, and he knew he had to rest. From the train station in Busan, he had found his way to the small boat that ferried him across to Yeongdo, and once off the boat, the coal man from the area had brought him to the door of the boardinghouse. Isak exhaled and knocked, ready to collapse, believing that if he could sleep well for the night, he would be better in the morning.

Yangjin had just settled onto her cotton-covered pallet when the younger servant girl tapped on the doorframe of the alcove room where all the women slept together.

"*Ajumoni*, there's a gentleman here. He wants to speak to the master of the house. Something about his brother who was here years ago. The gentleman wants to stay. Tonight," the servant girl said, breathless.

Yangjin frowned. Who would ask for Hoonie? she wondered. Next month would mark three years since his death.

On the heated floor, her daughter, Sunja, was asleep already, snoring

lightly, her loose hair crimped by the braids she'd worn during the day and spread across her pillow like a shimmering rectangle of black silk. Beside her remained just enough space for the maids to turn in when they finished their work for the evening.

"Didn't you tell him that the master passed away?"

"Yes. He seemed surprised. The gentleman said his brother had written to the master but hadn't heard back."

Yangjin sat up and reached for the muslin *hanbok* that she'd just removed, which was folded in a neat pile by her pillow. She put on the quilted vest over her skirt and jacket. With a few deft movements, Yangjin put her hair into a bun.

At the sight of him, it made sense that the maid hadn't turned him away. He was formed like a young pine, straight and elegant, and he was unusually handsome: slender smiling eyes, a strong nose, and long neck. The man had a pale, unlined brow, and he looked nothing like the grizzled lodgers who yelled for their food or teased the maids for being unmarried. The young man wore a Western-style suit and a thick winter coat. The imported leather shoes, leather suitcase, and trilby were all out of place in the small entryway. From the looks of him, the man had enough money for a room downtown in a larger inn for merchants or tradespeople. Nearly all

the inns of Busan where Koreans could stay were full, but for good money, it was possible to get something. He could have passed for a rich Japanese in the way he dressed. The maid stared at the gentleman with her mouth slightly agape, hoping he would be allowed to stay.

Yangjin bowed, not knowing what to say to him. No doubt, the brother had sent a letter, but she did not know how to read. Once every few months, she asked the schoolmaster in town to read her mail, but she hadn't done so this winter for lack of time.

"*Ajumoni*"—he bowed—"I hope I didn't wake you. It was dark when I got off the ferry. I didn't know about your husband until today. I am sorry to hear the sad news. I am Baek Isak. I come from Pyongyang. My brother Baek Yoseb stayed here many years ago."

His northern accent was mild, and his speech was learned.

"I'd hoped to stay here for a few weeks before going to Osaka."

Yangjin looked down at her bare feet. The guestroom was already full, and a man like this would expect his own sleeping quarters. At this time of night, to find a boatman to take him back to the mainland would be hard.

Isak withdrew a white handkerchief from his trousers and covered his mouth to cough.

"My brother was here almost ten years ago. I wonder if you remember

him. He had admired your husband very much."

Yangjin nodded. The older Baek stood out in her memory because he wasn't a fisherman or someone who worked in the market. His first name was Yoseb; he'd been named after a person in the Bible. His parents were Christians and founders of a church up north.

"But your brother—that gentleman didn't look like you very much. He was short, with round metal spectacles. He was headed to Japan; he stayed for several weeks before going."

"Yes, yes." Isak's face brightened. He hadn't seen Yoseb in over a decade. "He lives in Osaka with his wife. He's the one who wrote to your husband. He insisted that I stay here. He wrote about your stewed codfish. 'Better than home,' he said."

Yangjin smiled. How could she not?

"Brother said your husband worked very hard." Isak didn't bring up the club foot or the cleft palate, though of course, Yoseb had mentioned these things in his letters. Isak had been curious to meet this man who'd overcome such difficulties.

"Have you had dinner?" Yangjin asked.

"I'm all right. Thank you."

"We could get you something to eat."

“Do you think I could rest here? I realize you were not expecting me, but I’ve been traveling now for two days.”

“We don’t have an empty room, sir. This is not a big place, you see.…”

Isak sighed, then smiled at the widow. This was his burden, not hers, and he did not want her to feel bad. He looked about for his suitcase. It was near the door.

“Of course. Then I should return to Busan to find a place to stay. Before I head back, would you know of a boardinghouse around here that might have a spare room for me?” He straightened his posture, not wanting to appear discouraged.

“There’s nothing around here, and we don’t have an empty room,” Yangjin said. If she put him with the others, he might be upset about the smell of the men. No amount of washing could remove the fish odors from their clothes.

Isak closed his eyes and nodded. He turned to leave.

“There’s some extra space where all the lodgers sleep. There’s only one room, you see. Three guests sleep during the day and three at night, depending on their work schedule. There’s just enough space for an extra man, but it wouldn’t be comfortable. You could look in if you like.”

“It will be fine,” Isak said, relieved. “I would be very grateful to you. I

can pay you for the month.”

“It might be more crowded than you are used to. There weren’t as many men here when your brother stayed with us. It was not so busy then. I don’t know if—”

“No, no. I would just like a corner to lie down.”

“It’s late, and the wind is very strong tonight.” Yangjin felt embarrassed suddenly by the condition of her boardinghouse, when she had never felt this way before. If he wanted to leave the next morning, she would give him back his money, she thought.

She told him the monthly rate that had to be paid up front. If he left before the end of the month, she’d return the remainder. She charged him twenty-three yen, the same as a fisherman. Isak counted out the yen and handed them to her with both hands.

The maid put down his bag in front of the room and went to fetch a clean bedroll from the storage cabinet. He would need hot water from the kitchen to wash. The servant girl lowered her eyes but she was curious about him. Yangjin went with the servant girl to make up the pallet, and Isak watched them quietly. Afterward, the maid brought him a water basin filled with warm water and a clean towel. The boys from Daegu slept side by side neatly, and the widower slept with his arms raised over his head. Isak’s

pallet was parallel to the widower's.

In the morning, the men would fuss a little about having to share the space with another lodger, but it wasn't as if Yangjin could have turned him out.

3

At dawn, the Chung brothers returned from their boat. Right away, Fatso noticed the new lodger, who remained asleep in the room.

He grinned at Yangjin. "I'm glad to see that a hardworking lady like you is so successful. The news of your great cooking has reached the rich. Next, you'll be taking in Japanese guests! I hope you charged him triple what we poor fellows pay."

Sunja shook her head at him, but he didn't notice. Fatso fingered the necktie hanging by Isak's suit.

"So is this what *yangban* wear around their necks to look important? Looks like a noose. I've never seen such a thing up close! *Waaaah*—smooth!" The youngest brother rubbed the tie against his whiskers. "Maybe this is silk. A real silk noose!" He laughed out loud, but Isak did not stir.

"Fatso-ya, don't touch that," said Gombo sternly. The eldest brother's face was covered in pockmarks, and when he was angry, his pitted skin turned red. Ever since their father had died, he had watched over his two

brothers by himself.

Fatso let go of the tie and looked sheepish. He hated upsetting Gombo.

The brothers bathed, ate, then all three fell asleep. The new guest continued to sleep beside them, his slumber punctuated now and then by a muffled cough.

Yangjin went to the kitchen to tell the maids to look out for the new lodger in case he woke up. They were to have a hot meal ready for him.

Sunja was crouched in the corner scrubbing sweet potatoes, not looking up when her mother entered the room or when she left it. For the past week, they had been speaking only when necessary. The servant girls couldn't figure out what had happened to make Sunja so quiet.

In the late afternoon, the Chung brothers woke up, ate again, and went to the village to buy tobacco before getting on the boat. The evening lodgers had not yet returned from work, so the house was still for a couple of hours. The sea wind seeped through the porous walls and around the window edges, causing a considerable draft in the short hallway connecting the rooms.

Yangjin was seated cross-legged nearby one of the hot spots on the heated floor of the alcove room where the women slept. She was mending a pair of trousers, one of the half dozen in the pile of the guests' well-worn

garments. The men's clothes were not washed often enough, since the men owned so little and didn't like to bother.

"They'll only get dirty again," Fatso would complain, though his older brothers preferred them clean. After laundering, Yangjin patched up whatever she could, and at least once a year, she'd change the collars of shirts and jackets that could no longer be repaired or cleaned. Every time the new lodger coughed, her head bobbed up. She tried to focus on her neat stitches rather than on her daughter, who was cleaning the floors of the house. Twice a day, the yellow wax-papered floors were swept with a short broom, then mopped by hand with a clean rag.

The front door of the house opened slowly, and both mother and daughter looked up from their work. Jun, the coal man, had come for his money.

Yangjin rose from the floor to meet him. Sunja bowed perfunctorily, then returned to her work.

"How is your wife?" Yangjin asked. The coal man's wife had a nervous stomach and was occasionally bedridden.

"She got up early this morning and went to the market. Can't stop that woman from making money. You know how she is," Jun said with pride.

"You're a fortunate man." Yangjin pulled out her purse to pay him for

the week's coal.

"*Ajumoni*, if all my customers were like you, I'd never go hungry. You always pay when the bill is due!" He chuckled with pleasure.

Yangjin smiled at him. Every week, he complained that no one paid on time, but most people went with less food to pay him, since it was too cold this winter not to have coal. The coal man was also a portly gentleman who took a cup of tea and accepted a snack at every house on his route; he would never starve even in such lean years. His wife was the best seaweed hawker in the market and made a tidy sum of her own.

"Down the street, that dirty dog Lee-seki won't cough up what he owes __"

"Things are not easy. Everyone's having troubles."

"No, things are not easy at all, but your house is full of paying guests because you are the best cook in Kyungsangdo. The minister is staying with you now? Did you find him a bed? I told him your sea bream is the finest in Busan." Jun sniffed the air, wondering if he could grab a bite of something before his next house, but he didn't smell anything savory.

Yangjin glanced at her daughter, and Sunja stopped cleaning the floor to go to the kitchen to fix the coal man something to eat.

"But did you know, the young man had already heard of your cooking

from his brother who stayed ten years ago? Ah, the belly has a better memory than the heart!”

“The minister?” Yangjin looked puzzled.

“The young fellow from the North. I met him last night, wandering around the streets looking for your house. Baek Isak. Sort of a fancy-looking fellow. I showed him your place and would have stopped in, but I had a late delivery for Cho-seki, who finally found the money to pay me after a month of dodging—”

“Oh—”

“Anyway, I told the minister about my wife’s stomach troubles and how hard she works at the stall, and you know, he said he would pray for her right then and there. He just dropped his head and closed his eyes! I don’t know if I believe in that mumbling that people do, but I can’t see how it can hurt anyone. Very nice-looking young man, don’t you think? Has he left for the day? I should say hello.”

Sunja brought him a wooden tray holding a cup of hot barley tea, a teapot, and a bowl of steamed sweet potatoes and set it before him. The coal man plopped down on the floor cushion and devoured the hot potatoes. He chewed carefully, then started to speak again.

“So this morning, I asked the wife how she felt, and she said things were

not so bad and went to work! Maybe there's something to that praying after all. Ha!—"

"Is he a Cath-o-lic?" Yangjin didn't mean to interrupt him so frequently, but there was no other way to speak with Jun, who could have talked for hours. For a man, her husband used to say, Jun had too many words. "A priest?"

"No, no. He's not a priest. Those fellows are different. Baek is a Pro-tes-tant. The kind that marries. He's going to Osaka, where his brother lives. I don't remember meeting him." He continued to chew quietly and took small sips from his teacup.

Before Yangjin had a chance to say anything, Jun said, "That Hirohito-seki took over our country, stole the best land, rice, fish, and now our young people." He sighed and ate another bite of potato. "Well, I don't blame the young people for going to Japan. There's no money to be made here. It's too late for me, but if I had a son"—Jun paused, for he had no children, and it made him sad to think of it—"I'd send him to Hawaii. My wife has a smart nephew who works on a sugar plantation there. The work is hard, but so what? He doesn't work for these bastards. The other day when I went to the docks, the sons of bitches tried to tell me that I couldn't—"

Yangjin frowned at him for cursing. The house being so small, the girls

in the kitchen and Sunja, who was now mopping the alcove room, could hear everything, and they were no doubt paying attention.

“May I get you more tea?”

Jun smiled and pushed his empty cup toward her with both hands.

“It’s our own damn fault for losing the country. I know that,” he continued. “Those goddamn aristocrat sons of bitches sold us out. Not a single *yangban* bastard has a full set of balls.”

Both Yangjin and Sunja knew the girls in the kitchen were giggling at the coal man’s tirade, which didn’t vary from week to week.

“I may be a peasant, but I’m an honest workingman, and I wouldn’t have let some Japanese take over.” He pulled out a clean, white handkerchief from his coal dust–covered coat and wiped his runny nose. “Bastards. I better get on with my next delivery.”

The widow asked him to wait while she went to the kitchen. At the front door, Yangjin handed Jun a fabric-tied bundle of freshly dug potatoes. One slipped out of the bundle and rolled onto the floor. He pounced on it and dropped it into his deep coat pockets. “Never lose what’s valuable.”

“For your wife,” Yangjin said. “Please say hello.”

“Thank you.” Jun slipped on his shoes in haste and left the house.

Yangjin remained by the door watching him walk away, not going back

inside until he stepped into the house next door.

The house felt emptier without the blustering man's lofty speeches. Sunja was crawling on her knees finishing up the hallway connecting the front room with the rest of the house. The girl had a firm body like a pale block of wood—much in the shape of her mother—with great strength in her dexterous hands, well-muscled arms, and powerful legs. Her short, wide frame was thick, built for hard work, with little delicacy in her face or limbs, but she was quite appealing physically—more handsome than pretty. In any setting, Sunja was noticed right away for her quick energy and bright manner. The lodgers never ceased trying to woo Sunja, but none had succeeded. Her dark eyes glittered like shiny river stones set in a polished white surface, and when she laughed, you couldn't help but join her. Her father, Hoonie, had doted on her from birth, and even as a small child, Sunja had seen it as her first duty to make him happy. As soon as she learned to walk, she'd tagged behind him like a loyal pet, and though she admired her mother, when her father died, Sunja changed from a joyful girl to a thoughtful young woman.

None of the Chung brothers could afford to marry, but Gombo, the eldest, had said on more than one occasion that a girl like Sunja would have made a fine wife for a man who wanted to go up in the world. Fatso

admired her, but prepared himself to adore her as an elder sister-in-law, though she was only sixteen years old, the same age as he. If any of the brothers could marry, Gombo, the firstborn, would take a wife before the others. None of this mattered anymore, since recently Sunja had lost all of her prospects. She was pregnant, and the baby's father was unable to marry her. A week ago, Sunja had confessed this to her mother, but, of course, no one else knew.

"*Ajumoni*, *ajumoni*!" the older servant girl shrieked from the front of the house, where the lodgers slept, and Yangjin rushed to the room. Sunja dropped her rag to follow her.

"There's blood! On the pillow! And he's soaked with sweat!"

Bokhee, the older sister of the two servant girls, breathed deeply to calm herself. It wasn't like her to raise her voice, and she hadn't meant to frighten the others, but she didn't know if the lodger was dead or dying, and she was too afraid to approach him.

No one spoke for a moment, then Yangjin told the maid to leave the room and wait by the front door.

"It's tuberculosis, I think," Sunja said.

Yangjin nodded. The lodger's appearance reminded her of Hoonie's last few weeks.

“Get the pharmacist,” Yangjin told Bokhee, then changed her mind. “No, no, wait. I might need you.”

Isak lay asleep on the pillow, perspiring and flushed, unaware of the women staring down at him. Dokhee, the younger girl, had just come from the kitchen, and she gasped loudly, only to be hushed by her sister. When the lodger had arrived the night before, his ashen pallor was noticeable, but in the light of day, his handsome face was gray—the color of dirty rainwater collecting in a jar. His pillow was wet with numerous red pindots where he had coughed.

“*Uh-muh*—” Yangjin uttered, startled and anxious. “We have to move him immediately. The others could get sick. Dokhee-ya, take everything out of the storage room now. Hurry.” She would put him in the storage room, where her husband had slept when he was ill, but it would have been far easier if he could have walked to the back part of the house rather than her attempting to move him by herself.

Yangjin pulled on the corner of the pallet in an attempt to jostle him awake.

“Pastor Baek, sir, sir!” Yangjin touched his upper arm. “Sir!”

Finally, Isak opened his eyes. He couldn’t remember where he was. In his dream, he had been home, resting near the apple orchard; the trees were

a riot of white blooms. When he came to, he recognized the boardinghouse keeper.

“Is everything all right?”

“Do you have tuberculosis?” Yangjin asked him. Surely, he must have known.

He shook his head.

“No, I had it two years ago. I’ve been well since.” Isak touched his brow and felt the sweat along his hairline. He raised his head and found it heavy.

“Oh, I see,” he said, seeing the red stains on the pillow. “I’m so sorry. I would not have come here if I had known that I could harm you. I should leave. I don’t want to endanger you.” Isak closed his eyes because he felt so tired. Throughout his life, Isak had been sickly, his most recent tuberculosis infection being just one of the many illnesses he’d suffered. His parents and his doctors had not wanted him to go to Osaka; only his brother Yoseb had felt it would be better for him, since Osaka was warmer than Pyongyang and because Yoseb knew how much Isak didn’t want to be seen as an invalid, the way he had been treated for most of his life.

“I should return home,” Isak said, his eyes still closed.

“You’ll die on the train. You’ll get worse before getting better. Can you sit up?” Yangjin asked him.

Isak pulled himself up and leaned against the cold wall. He had felt tired on the journey, but now it felt as if a bear was pushing against him. He caught his breath and turned to the wall to cough. Blood spots marked the wall.

“You will stay here. Until you get well,” Yangjin said.

She and Sunja looked at each other. They had not gotten sick when Hoonie had this, but the girls, who weren’t there then, and the lodgers would have to be protected somehow.

Yangjin looked at his face. “Can you walk a little to the back room? We would have to separate you from the others.”

Isak tried to get up but couldn’t. Yangjin nodded. She told Dokhee to fetch the pharmacist and Bokhee to return to the kitchen to get the supper ready for the lodgers.

Yangjin made him lie down on his bedroll, and she dragged the pallet slowly, sliding it toward the storage room, the same way she had moved her husband three years before.

Isak mumbled, “I didn’t mean to bring you harm.”

The young man cursed himself privately for his wish to see the world outside of his birthplace and for lying to himself that he was well enough to go to Osaka when he had sensed that he could never be cured of being so

sickly. If he infected any of the people he had come into contact with, their death would be on his head. If he was supposed to die, he hoped to die swiftly to spare the innocent.

4

June 1932

At the very beginning of summer, less than six months before the young pastor arrived at the boardinghouse and fell ill, Sunja met the new fish broker, Koh Hansu.

There was a cool edge to the marine air on the morning Sunja went to the market to shop for the boardinghouse. Ever since she was an infant strapped to her mother's back, she had gone to the open-air market in Nampo-dong; then later, as a little girl, she'd held her father's hand as he shuffled there, taking almost an hour each way because of his crooked foot. The errand was more enjoyable with him than with her mother, because everyone in the village greeted her father along the way so warmly. Hoonie's misshapen mouth and awkward steps seemingly vanished in the presence of the neighbors' kind inquiries about the family, the boardinghouse, and the lodgers. Hoonie never said much, but it was obvious to his daughter, even then, that many sought his quiet approval—the thoughtful gaze from his honest eyes.

After Hoonie died, Sunja was put in charge of shopping for the boardinghouse. Her shopping route didn't vary from what she had been taught by her mother and father: first, the fresh produce, next, the soup bones from the butcher, then a few items from the market *ajumma* s squatting beside spice-filled basins, deep rows of glittering cutlass fish, or plump sea bream caught hours earlier—their wares arrayed attractively on turquoise and red waxed cloths spread on the ground. The vast market for seafood—one of the largest of its kind in Korea—stretched across the rocky beach carpeted with pebbles and broken bits of stone, and the *ajumma* s hawked as loudly as they could, each from her square patch of tarp.

Sunja was buying seaweed from the coal man's wife, who sold the best quality. The *ajumma* noticed that the new fish broker was staring at the boardinghouse girl.

"Shameless man. How he stares! He's almost old enough to be your father!" The seaweed *ajumma* rolled her eyes. "Just because a man's rich doesn't give him the right to be so brazen with a nice girl from a good family."

Sunja looked up and saw the new man in the light-colored Western suit and white leather shoes. He was standing by the corrugated-tin and wood offices with all the other seafood brokers. Wearing an off-white Panama hat

like the actors in the movie posters, Koh Hansu stood out like an elegant bird with milky-white plumage among the other men, who were wearing dark clothes. He was looking hard at her, barely paying attention to the men speaking around him. The brokers at the market controlled the wholesale purchases of all the fish that went through there. Not only did they have the power to set the prices, they could punish any boat captain or fisherman by refusing to buy his catch; they also dealt with the Japanese officials who controlled the docks. Everyone deferred to the brokers, and few felt comfortable around them. The brokers rarely mixed socially outside their group. The lodgers at the boardinghouse spoke of them as arrogant interlopers who made all the profits from fishing but kept the fish smell off their smooth white hands. Regardless, the fishermen had to stay on good terms with these men who had ready cash for purchases and the needed advance when the catch wasn't any good.

"A girl like you is bound to be noticed by some fancy man, but this one seems too sharp. He's a Jeju native but lives in Osaka. I hear he can speak perfect Japanese. My husband said he was smarter than all of them put together, but crafty. *Uh-muh*! He's still looking at you!" The seaweed *ajumma* flushed red straight down to her collarbone.

Sunja shook her head, not wanting to check. When the lodgers flirted

with her, she ignored them and did her work, and she would behave no differently now. The *ajumma* s at the market tended to exaggerate, anyway.

"May I have the seaweed that my mother likes?" Sunja feigned interest in the oblong piles of dried seaweed, folded like fabric, separated in rows of varying quality and price.

Remembering herself, the *ajumma* blinked, then wrapped a large portion of seaweed for Sunja. The girl counted out the coins, then accepted the parcel with two hands.

"Your mother is taking care of how many lodgers now?"

"Six." From the corner of her eye, Sunja could see that the man was now talking to another broker, but still looking in her direction. "She's very busy."

"Of course she is! Sunja-ya, a woman's life is endless work and suffering. There is suffering and then more suffering. It's better to expect it, you know. You're becoming a woman now, so you should be told this. For a woman, the man you marry will determine the quality of your life completely. A good man is a decent life, and a bad man is a cursed life—but no matter what, always expect suffering, and just keep working hard. No one will take care of a poor woman—just ourselves."

Mrs. Jun patted her perpetually bloated stomach and turned to the new

customer, allowing Sunja to return home.

At dinner, the Chung brothers mentioned Koh Hansu, who had just bought their entire catch.

“For a broker, he’s okay,” Gombo said. “I prefer a smart one like him who doesn’t suffer fools. Koh doesn’t haggle. It’s one price, and he’s fair enough. I don’t think he’s trying to screw you like the others, but you can’t refuse him.”

Fatso then added that the ice broker had told him that the fish broker from Jeju was supposed to be unimaginably rich. He came into Busan only three nights a week and lived in Osaka and Seoul. Everyone called him Boss.

Koh Hansu seemed to be everywhere. Whenever she was in the market, he would turn up, not concealing his interest. Although she tried to overlook his stares and go about her errands, her face felt hot in his presence.

A week later, he spoke to her. Sunja had just finished her shopping and was walking alone on the road toward the ferry.

“Young miss, what are you cooking for dinner at the boardinghouse tonight?”

They were alone, but not far from the bustle of the market.

She looked up, then walked away briskly without answering. Her heart

was pounding in fear, and she hoped he wasn't following her. On the ferry ride, she tried to recall what his voice had sounded like; it was the voice of a strong person who was trying to sound gentle. There was also the slightest Jeju lilt to his speech, a lengthening of certain vowels; it was different from how Busan people talked. He pronounced the word "dinner" in a funny way, and it had taken her a moment to figure out what he was saying.

The next day, Hansu caught up with her as she headed home.

"Why aren't you married? You're old enough."

Sunja quickened her steps and left him again. He did not follow.

Though she had not replied, Hansu didn't stop trying to talk to her. It was one question always, never more than that and never repeated, but when he saw her, and if Sunja was within hearing distance, he'd say something, and she'd hurry away without saying a word.

Hansu wasn't put off by her lack of replies; if she had tried to keep up a banter, he would have thought her common. He liked the look of her—glossy braided hair, a full bosom bound beneath her white, starched blouse, its long sash tied neatly, and her quick, sure-footed steps. Her young hands showed work; they were not the soft, knowing hands of a teahouse girl or the thin, pale hands of a highborn one. Her pleasant body was compact and rounded—her upper arms sheathed in her long white sleeves appeared

pillowy and comforting. The hidden privacy of her body stirred him; he craved to see her skin. Neither a rich man's daughter nor a poor man's, the girl had something distinct in her bearing, a kind of purposefulness. Hansu had learned who she was and where she lived. Her shopping habits were the same each day. In the morning, she came to the market and left immediately afterward without dawdling. He knew that in time, they would meet.

It was the second week of June. Sunja had finished her shopping for the day and was going home carrying a loaded basket on the crook of each arm. Three Japanese high school students with their uniform jackets unbuttoned were heading to the harbor to go fishing. Too hot to sit still, the boys were skipping school. When they noticed Sunja, who was going in the direction of the Yeongdo ferry, the giggling boys surrounded her, and a skinny, pale student, the tallest of the three, plucked one of the long yellow melons out of her basket. He tossed it over Sunja's head to his friends.

"Give that back," Sunja said in Korean calmly, hoping they weren't getting on the ferry. These sorts of incidents happened often on the mainland, but there were fewer Japanese in Yeongdo. Sunja knew that it was important to get away from trouble quickly. Japanese students teased Korean kids, and occasionally, vice versa. Small Korean children were warned never to walk alone, but Sunja was sixteen and a strong girl. She