



THE GIRL WITH

SEVEN NAMES

A North Korean Defector's Story

HYEONSEO LEE

with David John



THE GIRL WITH SEVEN NAMES

A North Korean Defector's Story

Hyeonseo Lee

With David John



[Copyright](#)

William Collins

An imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers*

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

WilliamCollinsBooks.com

This eBook first published in Great Britain by William Collins in 2015

Copyright © Hyeonseo Lee 2015

Hyeonseo Lee asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Maps by John Gilkes

Cover photograph by kind permission of the author.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins.

Source ISBN: 9780007554836

Ebook Edition © July 2015 ISBN: 9780007554867

Version: 2015-05-15

[Praise](#)

‘I have spoken with countless numbers of defectors over the years. When I first met Hyeonseo Lee, the unflinching manner in which she told her story, although full of sadness and hurt, was inspirational. That is the story now written in this book.

As a young girl living on the North Korea–China border, she had grown

up aware of two different worlds – the monochrome of her homeland and the bright, vibrant colours of another world just across the river. Her act of escape marked a new chapter in her life. But once she crossed the border, she learned that the warm glow of China's alluring lights was not meant for her.

She experienced hunger, coldness, fear, terror, threats and pursuit. All this she had to endure simply for being a North Korean refugee. Every time she navigated treacherous terrain and overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles, she had to change her name to protect her new identity. She became the Girl with Seven Names.

But one thing that she held on to was her humanity, ever stronger as she continuously sublimated her hardships into hope. This is a sad and beautiful story of a girl who could not even keep her name, yet overcame all with the identity of what it is to be human.'

Jang Jin-sung, founder of New Focus International and author of *Dear Leader: Poet, Spy, Escapee – A Look Inside North Korea*

'This is a powerful story of an escapee from North Korea. In the hallowed meeting rooms of the United Nations in New York, ambassadors from North Korea recently sought to shout down stories like this. But these voices will not be silenced. Eventually freedom will be restored. History

will vindicate Hyeonseo Lee and those like her for the risks they ran so that their bodies and their minds could be free. And so that we could know the truth.’

The Honourable Michael Kirby, Chair of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights Abuses in North Korea, 2013–14

CONTENTS

[COVER](#)

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[COPYRIGHT](#)

[PRAISE](#)

[MAPS](#)

[AUTHOR’S NOTE](#)

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[Part One: The Greatest Nation on Earth](#)

[1. A train through the mountains](#)

[2. The city at the edge of the world](#)

[3. The eyes on the wall](#)

[4. The lady in black](#)

[5. The man beneath the bridge](#)

6. The red shoes

7. Boomtown

8. The secret photograph

9. To be a good communist

10. 'Rocky island'

11. 'The house is cursed'

12. Tragedy at the bridge

13. Sunlight on dark water

14. 'The great heart has stopped beating'

15. Girlfriend of a hoodlum

16. 'By the time you read this, the five of us will no longer exist in this world'

17. The lights of Changbai

18. Over the ice

Part Two: To the Heart of the Dragon

19. A Visit to Mr Ahn

20. Home truths

21. The suitor

22. The wedding trap

23. Shenyang girl

24. Guilt call

25. The men from the South

26. Interrogation

27. The plan

28. The gang

29. The comfort of moonlight

30. The biggest, brashest city in Asia

31. Career woman

32. A connection to Hyesan

33. The teddy-bear conversations

34. The tormenting of Min-ho

35. The love shock

36. Destination Seoul

Part Three: Journey into Darkness

37. 'Welcome to Korea'

38. The women

39. House of Unity

40. The learning race

41. Waiting for

42. A place of ghosts and wild dogs

- [43. An impossible dilemma](#)
- [44. Journey into night](#)
- [45. Under a vast Asian sky](#)
- [46. Lost in Laos](#)
- [47. Whatever it takes](#)
- [48. The kindness of strangers](#)
- [49. Shuttle diplomacy](#)
- [50. Long wait for freedom](#)
- [51. A series of small miracles](#)
- [52. 'I am prepared to die'](#)
- [53. The beauty of a free mind](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

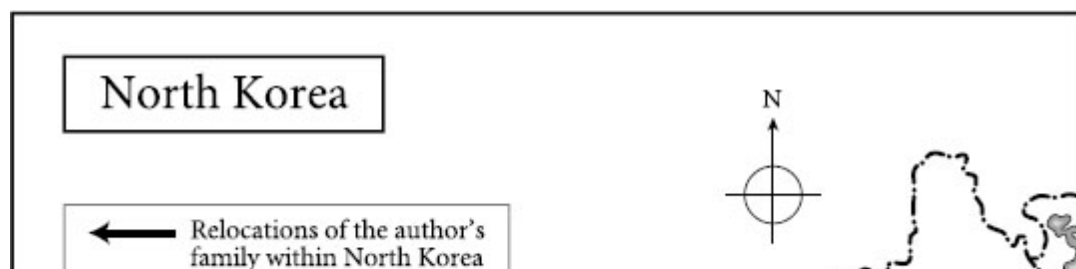
[LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS](#)

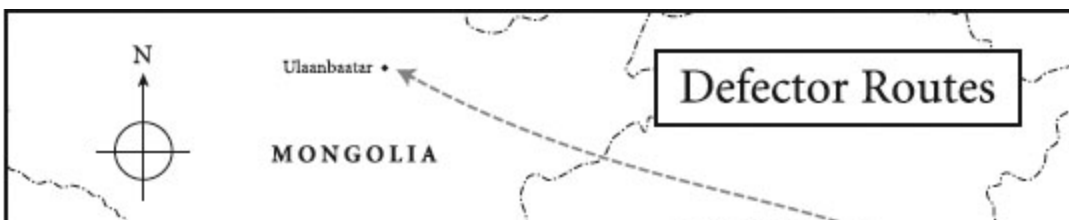
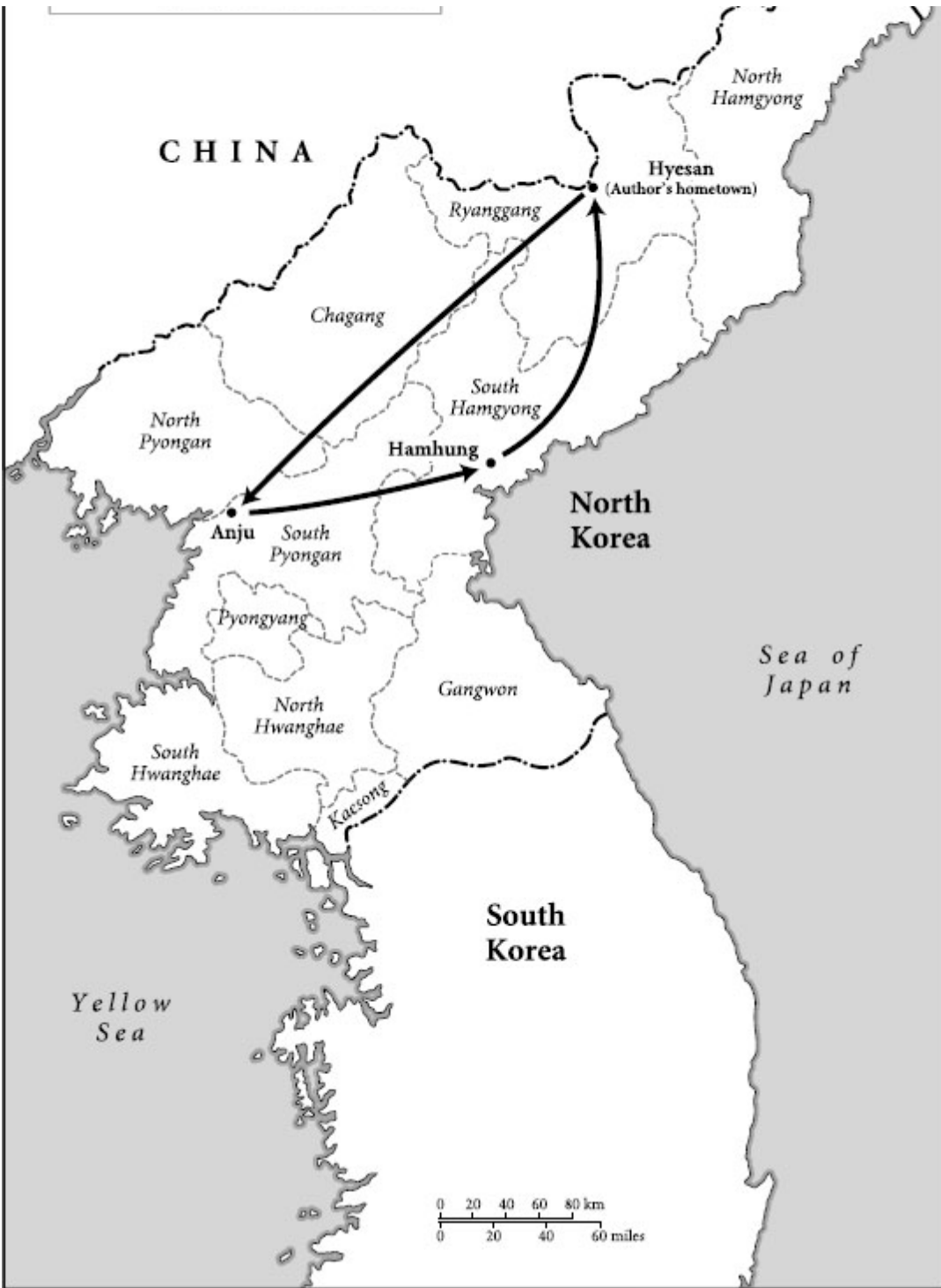
[PICTURE SECTION](#)

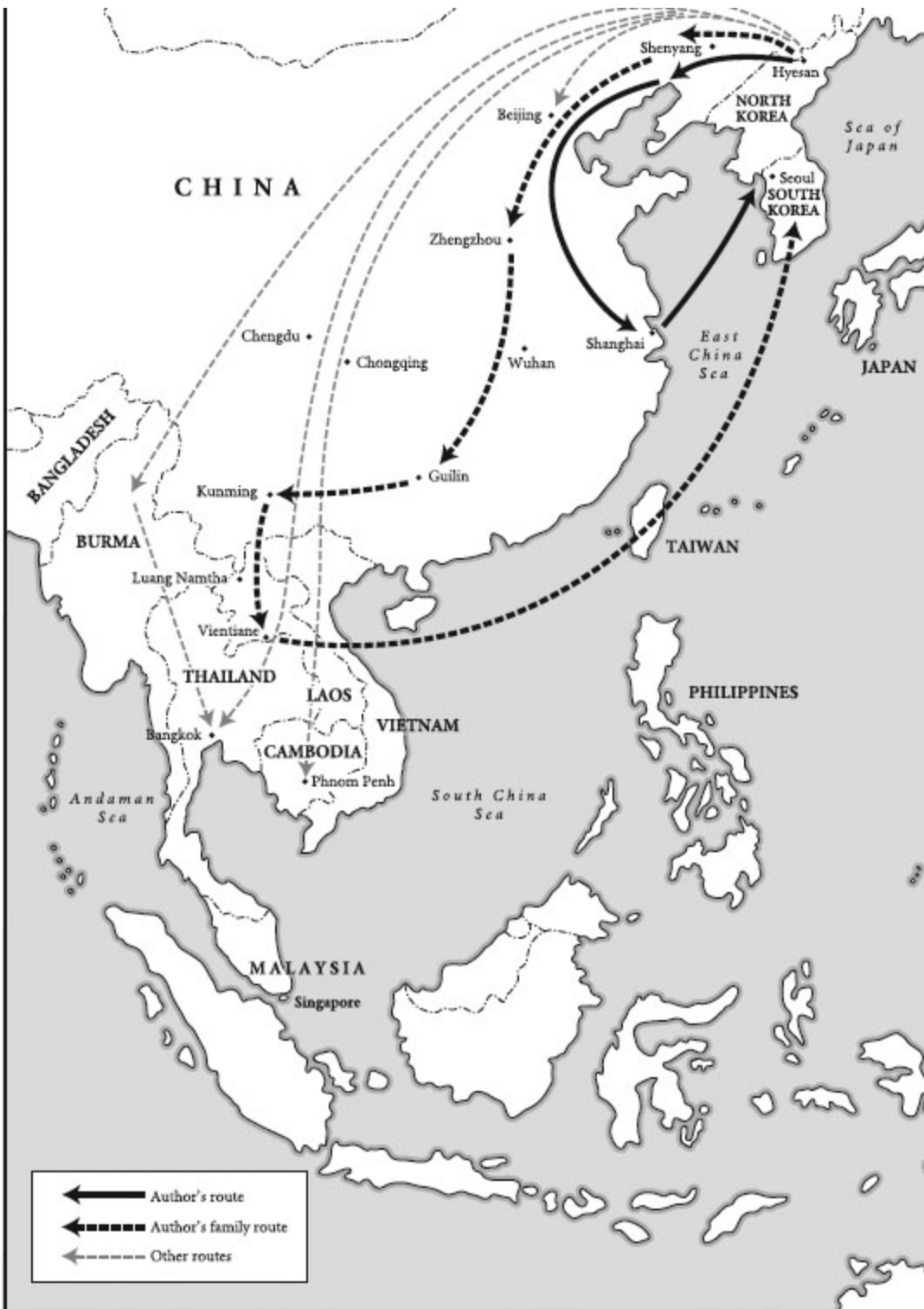
[INDEX](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE PUBLISHER](#)







[Author's Note](#)

To protect relatives and friends still in North Korea, I have changed some

names in this book and withheld other details. Otherwise, all the events described happened as I remembered or was told about them.

Introduction

13 February 2013

Long Beach, California

My name is Hyeonseo Lee.

It is not the name I was born with, nor one of the names forced on me, at different times, by circumstance. But it is the one I gave myself, once I'd reached freedom. Hyeon means sunshine. Seo means good fortune. I chose it so that I would live my life in light and warmth, and not return to the shadow.

I am standing in the wings of a large stage, listening to the hundreds of people in the auditorium. A woman has just blushed my face with a soft brush and a microphone is being attached to me. I worry that it will pick up the sound of my heart, which is thumping in my ears. Someone asks me if I'm ready.

'I'm ready,' I say, though I do not feel it.

The next thing I know I'm hearing an amplified announcement. A voice is saying my name. I am being introduced.

A noise like the sea rises in the auditorium. Many hands are clapping. My

nerves begin to flutter wildly.

I'm stepping onto the stage.

I feel terrified suddenly. My legs have turned to paper. The spotlights are faraway suns, dazzling me. I can't make out any faces in the audience.

Somehow I motion my body toward the centre of the stage. I inhale slowly to steady my breathing, and swallow hard.

This is the first time I will tell my story in English, a language still new to me. The journey to this moment has been a long one.

The audience is silent.

I begin to speak.

I hear my voice trembling. I'm telling them about the girl who grew up believing her nation to be the greatest on earth, and who witnessed her first public execution at the age of seven. I'm telling them about the night she fled across a frozen river, and how she realized, too late, that she could never go home to her family. I describe the consequences of that night and the terrible events that followed, years later.

Twice I feel tears coming. I pause for an instant, and blink them back.

Among those of us who were born in North Korea and who have escaped it, the story I am telling is not an uncommon one. But I can feel the impact it is having on the people in the audience at this conference. They are

shocked. They are probably asking themselves why a country such as mine still exists in the world.

Perhaps it would be even harder for them to understand that I still love my country and miss it very much. I miss its snowy mountains in winter, the smell of kerosene and burning coal. I miss my childhood there, the safety of my father's embrace, and sleeping on the heated floor. I should be comfortable with my new life, but I'm still the girl from Hyesan who longs to eat noodles with her family at their favourite restaurant. I miss my bicycle and the view across the river into China.

Leaving North Korea is not like leaving any other country. It is more like leaving another universe. I will never truly be free of its gravity, no matter how far I journey. Even for those who have suffered unimaginably there and have escaped hell, life in the free world can be so challenging that many struggle to come to terms with it and find happiness. A small number of them even give up, and return to live in that dark place, as I was tempted to do, many times.

My reality, however, is that I cannot go back. I may dream about freedom in North Korea, but nearly seventy years after its creation, it remains as closed and as cruel as ever. By the time it might ever be safe for me to return, I will probably be a stranger in my own land.

As I read back through this book, I see that it is a story of my awakening, a long and difficult coming of age. I have come to accept that as a North Korean defector I am an outsider in the world. An exile. Try as I may to fit into South Korean society, I do not feel that I will ever fully be accepted as a South Korean. More important, I don't think I myself will fully accept this as my identity. I went there too late, aged twenty-eight. The simple solution to my problem of identity is to say I am Korean, but there is no such nation. The single Korea does not exist.

I would like to shed my North Korean identity, erase the mark it has made on me. But I can't. I'm not sure why this is so, but I suspect it is because I had a happy childhood. As children we have a need, as our awareness of the larger world develops, to feel part of something bigger than family, to belong to a nation. The next step is to identify with humanity, as a global citizen. But in me this development got stuck. I grew up knowing almost nothing of the outside world except as it was perceived through the lens of the regime. And when I left, I discovered only gradually that my country is a byword, everywhere, for evil. But I did not know this years ago, when my identity was forming. I thought life in North Korea was normal. Its customs and rulers became strange only with time and distance. Thus I must say that North Korea is my country. I love it. But I want it to

become good. My country is my family and the many good people I knew there. So how could I not be a patriot?

This is my story. I hope that it will allow a glimpse of the world I escaped. I hope it will encourage others like myself, who are struggling to cope with new lives their imaginations never prepared them for. I hope that the world will begin, finally, to listen to them, and to act.

Prologue

I was awoken by my mother's cry. Min-ho, my kid brother, was still asleep on the floor next to me. The next thing I knew our father came crashing into the room, yelling 'Wake up!' He yanked us up by our arms and herded us, pushed us, out of the room. My mother was behind him, shrieking. It was evening and almost dark. The sky was clear. Min-ho was dazed from sleep. Outside on the street we turned and saw oily black smoke pouring from our kitchen window and dark flames licking the outside wall.

To my astonishment, my father was running back into the house.

A strange roar, a wind rushing inward, swept past us. We heard a *whumpf*. The tiles on one side of the roof collapsed, and a fireball like a bright orange chrysanthemum rose into the sky, illuminating the street. One side of the house was ablaze. Thick, tar-black smoke was belching from the other windows.

Where was my father?

Our neighbours were suddenly all around us. Someone was throwing a bucket of water – as if that would quench this blaze. We heard the groan and splitting of wood and then the rest of the roof went up in flames.

I wasn't crying. I wasn't even breathing. My father wasn't coming out of the house.

It must only have been seconds but it seemed like minutes. He emerged, running toward us, coughing his lungs up. He was blackened by smoke, his face glistening. Under each arm he was holding two flat, rectangular objects.

He wasn't thinking of our possessions, or our savings. He'd rescued the portraits. I was thirteen, old enough to understand what was at stake.

Later my mother explained what had happened. Some soldiers had given my father a large can of aviation fuel as a bribe. The can was in the kitchen, which was where we had an iron stove that burned *yontan* – the circular charcoal cakes used for heating everywhere in North Korea. She was in the act of decanting the fuel into another container when it slipped from her hands and splashed onto the coals. The combustion was explosive. The neighbours must have wondered what on earth she'd been cooking.

A wall of intense heat was advancing from the blaze. Min-ho began to

wail. I was holding our mother's hand. My father put the portraits down with great care, then hugged the three of us – a public display of affection that was rare between my parents.

Huddled together, watching the remains of our home collapse in a rippling glow, the neighbours might have felt sorry for us. My father looked a sight – his face was filthy and his new civilian suit ruined. And my mother, who was house-proud and always made an effort to dress nicely, was seeing her best bowls and clothes go up in smoke.

Yet what struck me most was that neither of my parents seemed that upset. Our home was just a low, two-room house with state-issue furniture, common in North Korea. It's hard to imagine now how anyone would have missed it. But my parents' reaction made a strong impression on me. The four of us were together and safe – that was all that mattered to them.

This is when I understood that we can do without almost anything – our home, even our country. But we will never do without other people, and we will never do without family.

The whole street had seen my father save the portraits, an act of heroism that would win a citizen an official commendation. As it turned out, matters had gone too far for that. We did not know it, but he was already under surveillance.

PART ONE

The Greatest Nation on Earth

Chapter 1

A train through the mountains

One morning in the late summer of 1977, a young woman said goodbye to her sisters on the platform of Hyesan Station and boarded the train for Pyongyang. She had received official permission to visit her brother there. She was so excited she'd slept little the night before. The Capital of the Revolution was, to her mind, a mythic and futuristic place. A trip there was a rare treat.

The air was still cool and smelled of fresh lumber from the nearby mill; the humidity was not yet too high. Her ticket was for a window seat. The train set off, creaking slowly southward along the old Hyesan Line through steep pine-clad mountains and over shaded gorges. Now and then a white-water river could be glimpsed far below. But as the journey progressed she found herself being distracted from the scenery.

The carriage was full of young military officers returning to the capital in high spirits. She thought them annoying at first, but soon caught herself smiling at their banter, along with the other passengers. The officers invited everyone in the carriage to join them in playing games – word games and

dice games – to pass the time. When the young woman lost a round, she was told that her forfeit was to sing a song.

The carriage fell quiet. She looked down at the floor, gathered her courage, and stood up, keeping herself steady by holding on to the luggage rack. She was twenty-two years old. Her shiny black hair was pinned back for the journey. She wore a white cotton frock printed with small red flowers. The song she sang was from a popular North Korean movie of that year called *The Story of a General*. She sang it well, with sweet, high notes. When she finished, everyone in the carriage broke into a round of applause. She sat back down. A grandmother was sitting on the outside seat and her granddaughter sat between them. Suddenly a young officer in a grey-blue uniform was standing over them. He introduced himself with great courtesy to the grandmother. Then he picked up the little girl, took the seat next to the young woman, and sat the little girl on his lap.

‘Tell me your name,’ was the first thing he said.

This was how my mother met my father.

He sounded very sure of himself. And he spoke with a Pyongyang lilt that made my mother feel uncouth and coarse with her northern Hyesan accent. But he soon put her at her ease. He was from Hyesan himself, he said, but had spent many years in Pyongyang and was ashamed to admit to

her that he had lost his accent. She kept her eyes lowered but would steal quick glances at him. He wasn't handsome in the conventional way – he had thick eyebrows and strong, prominent cheekbones – but she was rather taken with his martial bearing and his self-assurance.

He said he thought her frock was pretty and she gave a shy smile. She liked to dress well because she thought this made up for plain and ordinary looks. In fact she was prettier than she knew. The long journey passed quickly. As they talked she noticed him repeatedly look at her with an earnestness she had not experienced before from a man. It made her face feel hot and flushed.

He asked her how old she was. Then he said, very formally: 'Would it be acceptable to you if I were to write you a letter?'

She said that it would, and gave him her address.

Later my mother was to recall little of the visit to her brother in Pyongyang. Her mind was filled with images of the officer on the train, and the dappled light in the carriage, of sun shining through mountain pines. No letter came. As the weeks went by my mother tried to put him out of her mind. He had a girlfriend in Pyongyang, she thought. After three months she'd got over the disappointment and had given up thinking about him. On an evening six months later, the family was at home in Hyesan. It was

well below freezing but the skies had been clear for weeks, making a beautiful autumn and winter. They were finishing dinner when they heard the clip of steel-capped boots approaching the house, and a firm knock on the door. A look of alarm passed around the table. They were not expecting anyone so late. One of my mother's sisters went to open the door. She called back to my mother.

‘A visitor. For you.’

The power in the city had gone off. My mother went to the door holding a candle. My father was standing on the doorstep, in a military greatcoat, with his cap tucked under his arm. He was shivering. He bowed to her, and apologized, saying that he had been away on military exercises and had not been permitted to write. His smile was tender and even a little nervous.

Behind him the stars reached down to the mountains.

She invited him into the warmth. They began courting from that evening.

The next twelve months were dreamlike for my mother. She had never been in love before. My father was still based near Pyongyang, so they wrote letters to each other every week and arranged meetings. My mother visited his military base, and he took the train to see her in Hyesan, where her family got to know him. For her, the weeks between their encounters were filled with the sweetest planning and daydreaming.

She told me once that everything during that time acquired a kind of lustre and magic. People around her seemed to share her optimism, and she may not have been imagining it. The world was at the height of the Cold War, but North Korea was enjoying its best years. Bumper harvests several years in a row meant that food was plentiful. The country's industries were modern by the standards of the communist world. South Korea, our mortal enemy, was in political chaos, and the hated Yankees had just lost a bruising war against communist forces in Vietnam. The capitalist world seemed to be in decline. There was a confidence throughout the country that history was on our side.

When spring came and the snow on the mountains began to recede my father made a trip to Hyesan to ask my mother to marry him. She accepted with tears. Her happiness was complete. And to cap it all, both his family and hers had good *songbun*, which made their position in society secure.

Songbun is a caste system that operates in North Korea. A family is classified as loyal, wavering or hostile, depending on what the father's family was doing at the time just before, during and after the founding of the state in 1948. If your grandfather was descended from workers and peasants, and fought on the right side in the Korean War, your family would be classified as loyal. If, however, your ancestors included landlords, or

officials who worked for the Japanese during the colonial occupation, or anyone who had fled to South Korea during the Korean War, your family would be categorized as hostile. Within the three broad categories there are fifty-one gradations of status, ranging from the ruling Kim family at the top, to political prisoners with no hope of release at the bottom. The irony was that the new communist state had created a social hierarchy more elaborate and stratified than anything seen in the time of the feudal emperors. People in the hostile class, which made up about 40 per cent of the population, learned not to dream. They got assigned to farms and mines and manual labour. People in the wavering class might become minor officials, teachers, or hold military ranks removed from the centres of power. Only the loyal class got to live in Pyongyang, had the opportunity to join the Workers' Party, and had freedom to choose a career. No one was ever told their precise ranking in the *songbun* system, and yet I think most people knew by intuition, in the same way that in a flock of fifty-one sheep every individual will know precisely which sheep ranks above it and below it in the pecking order. The insidious beauty of it was that it was very easy to sink, but almost impossible to rise in the system, even through marriage, except by some special indulgence of the Great Leader himself. The elite, about 10 or 15 per cent of the population, had to be careful never to make mistakes.

At the time my parents met, a family's *songbun* was of great importance.

It determined a person's life, and the lives of their children.

My mother's family possessed exceptionally good *songbun*. My grandfather was distinguished for his deeds during the Second World War, becoming a hero for infiltrating the Japanese imperial police when Korea was a Japanese colony, passing intelligence to the local communist partisans in the mountains, and freeing some of them from police cells.

After the war he was decorated and widely admired in his community. He kept an old photograph of himself wearing the Japanese police uniform and had written a manuscript telling his story, but after he died my grandmother burned it all in case the story should one day be misunderstood and bring disaster upon the family.

My grandmother had become an ardent communist when she was a college student. She had studied in Japan in the 1940s, and had returned to Korea as part of a small intellectual elite, bringing with her educated ways and refinements that were rare among Koreans at that time, when most people did not even finish elementary school. She joined the Party when she was just nineteen. My grandfather, after marrying her, moved to her hometown of Hyesan, instead of taking her to his own province, as was the custom. He became a local government official. In the autumn of 1950,

when American troops entered the city in the first year of the Korean War, he fled to the deep mountains to avoid capture. The Americans were conducting house-to-house searches for members of the Party. My grandmother, who at the time was carrying a baby on her back, one of eight she was to have, hid their Party membership cards between bricks inside the chimneystack.

‘If they’d found the cards, the Americans would have shot us,’ she told me.

Her safekeeping of the cards ensured the family’s high *songbun*. Those who destroyed their cards as the Americans approached were later to fall under suspicion. Some were purged violently and sent to the gulag. For the rest of her life, my grandmother wore her Party card on a string around her neck, concealed beneath her clothing.

After their twelve months of courtship my parents should have been married. But that was not how events turned out.

The problem was my mother’s mother. My grandmother refused to give permission for the marriage. She was unimpressed with my father’s prospects and his career in the air force. She thought my mother could do better, and marry a man who could provide her with a more comfortable life. For all her education in Japan and her progressive communist

credentials, my grandmother belonged to a generation that saw love as a secondary matter when it came to a suitable match. Financial security came first. With luck, the couple could fall in love after the marriage. She saw it as her duty to find my mother the best candidate. In this, my mother could not go against her will. It was unthinkable to defy one's parent.

My mother's blissful year began to turn into a nightmare.

Through connections my grandmother had met a glamorous woman who had a career as an actress in Pyongyang's booming film industry. The woman's brother was an official at the National Trading Company in the capital, and it was arranged for my mother to be introduced to him. My mother could not believe what was happening to her. She had no interest in this official, pleasant though he was. She was in love with my father. Before she knew it a marriage was being arranged for her.

My mother suffered an emotional breakdown, and for weeks her eyes were sore from crying and lack of sleep. Her pain took her to the edge of despair. She was made to break off relations with my father. When she wrote to tell him the news, he said little in return. She knew she had broken his heart.

My mother married the official from Pyongyang on a bright cold day in spring 1979. It was a traditional wedding. She wore an elaborately

embroidered red silk *chima jeogori*, the national Korean dress – a long skirt wrapped high on the body, and a short jacket over it. Her groom wore a formal, Western-style suit. Afterwards, wedding photographs were taken, as was customary, at the feet of the great bronze statue of Kim Il-sung on Mansu Hill. This was to demonstrate that however much a couple might love each other their love for the Fatherly Leader was greater. No one smiled.

I was conceived during the honeymoon, and born in Hyesan in January 1980. My birth name was Kim Ji-hae.

It would seem that my mother's future, and mine, was sealed.

Love, however, was setting a course of its own, cutting through my grandmother's best-laid plans, like water finding its way to the sea.

My mother was born and brought up in Hyesan, the capital of Ryanggang Province in the northeast of the country – a mountainous region of spruce, larch and pine. There is little arable land there, and life can be rugged. In Korean folklore, the character of Hyesan people is tenacious and stubborn. They are survivors. A proverb has it that if you drop them in the middle of the ocean, they will find their way to land. Like all such sayings they are simplifications, and yet I recognized these traits strongly in my mother. In time, Min-ho and I would display similar characteristics – especially the

stubbornness.

My mother could not live with the official, my biological father, and left him just after I was born. In the Korean way of measuring age, a child is one year old at the beginning of its first year and not, as in most countries, at the end of the first year. I was age one.

A divorce came soon after. Now it was my grandmother's turn to suffer sleepless nights. A divorced daughter was shameful enough, but a divorced daughter with a baby on her back would make her chances of making a successful match with someone else almost impossible. My grandmother insisted that I be given up for adoption.

One of my mother's brothers succeeded in finding a young highborn couple in Pyongyang who were seeking to adopt. The couple made the long journey to Hyesan to meet me and to take me back with them. They brought with them a box of toys and good-quality clothes.

There followed a terrible scene at the house. My mother tearfully refused to give me up. She would not let my grandmother wrest me out of her arms. I began to wail loudly. The couple from Pyongyang watched aghast as my grandmother vented her fury at my mother, then began to panic and implore her. Soon the couple became angry themselves and accused my family of misleading them.

Not long after this, my mother travelled to the military base of my father the officer. In an emotional reunion he accepted her straight away. Without even hesitating he also accepted me as his daughter.

They were so much in love that my grandmother conceded defeat, and she changed her mind about my father from then on. He had an air of authority that struck everyone who met him, yet he was gentle and kind. He never touched alcohol, or lost his temper. The strength of my parents' feelings for each other, however, was a worry to my grandmother. She warned them that if a couple loved each other too much it would condense all the affection that should last a lifetime into too short a period, and one of them would die young.

My mother and father were finally to marry. But now they had a new problem – this time, his parents. They would strongly have disapproved of the match if they'd known that my mother already had a child by another man, so my parents attempted to keep my existence a secret. In a city like Hyesan, however, where so many people knew each other, such a secret was not easily kept. Word got out, and just a few days before my parents' wedding my grandparents learned the truth about my existence. They withdrew their permission for my father to marry my mother. My father implored them with passion. He could not bear it if his marriage to my

mother were thwarted a second time.

With great reluctance, therefore, my grandparents gave their consent, but on one condition: that my name be changed altogether to symbolize my joining a new family. In North Korea, as elsewhere, it was common for a child's surname to change if a mother remarried, but it was highly unusual for the first name to change, too. My mother was given no choice in the matter. And so, I was four years old when my identity was changed the second time, just after my parents married. My new name was Park Min-young.

The wedding was a quiet affair in Hyesan. This time there was no elaborate *chima jeogori*. My mother wore a smart dress suit. My father wore his uniform. His parents made little effort to hide their disapproving faces from my mother's family.

I was too young to be aware of these tensions. Nor was I aware of the truth of my own parentage. I would not discover the secret until several years later, when I was at elementary school. There is a part of me that still wishes I had never found out. In time, the discovery would have heartbreaking consequences for me, and for the kind and loving man I'd known until then as my father.

[Chapter 2](#)

The city at the edge of the world

For the first four years of my life, I grew up among a large extended family of uncles and aunts in Ryanggang Province. Despite the nomadic life that was to come after my parents married, moving with my father's career to various cities and military bases around the country, these early years formed the deep emotional attachment to Hyesan that has remained with me all my life.

Ryanggang Province is the highest part of Korea. The mountains in summer are spectacular. Winters are snowy and extremely cold. During the colonial period (1910–45), the Japanese brought the railroad and the lumber mills. On some days the air everywhere smelled of fresh-cut pine. The province is home both to the sacred revolutionary sites surrounding Mount Paektu, North Korea's highest peak, and, conversely, to the hardscrabble penal region of Baekam County, where families that have fallen foul of the regime are sent into internal exile.

When I was growing up Hyesan was an exciting place to be. Not because it was lively – nowhere in the country was noted for its theatre scene, restaurants or fashionable subcultures. The city's appeal lay in its proximity to the narrow Yalu River, Korea's ancient border with China. In a closed country like North Korea, Hyesan seemed like a city at the edge of the

world. To the citizens who lived there it was a portal through which all manner of marvellous foreign-made goods – legal, illegal and highly illegal – entered the country. This made it a thriving hub of trade and smuggling, which brought many benefits and advantages to the locals, not least of which were opportunities to form lucrative partnerships with Chinese merchants on the other side of the river, and make hard currency. At times it could seem like a semi-lawless place where the government's iron rule was not so strong. This was because almost everyone, from the municipal Party chief to the lowliest border guard, wanted a share of the riches.

Occasionally, however, there were crackdowns ordered by Pyongyang, and they could be brutal.

People from Hyesan were therefore more business-minded and often better off than people elsewhere in North Korea. The grown-ups would tell me that we were fortunate to live there. It was the best place in the whole country after Pyongyang, they said.

My earliest memory is from Hyesan, and it was very nearly my last.

Strangely, I remember the dress I was wearing. It was pretty and pale blue. I had wandered alone down the grassy bank behind our house and was sitting on a wooden sleeper, gathering stones into my lap. The dress and my hands became filthy. Suddenly there was a noise so loud it split the air and

echoed off the mountains. I turned and saw a vast, blackened mass the size of a building coming around a curve in the track between the pine trees. It was heading straight at me. I didn't know what it was.

I have a series of confused images – blazing headlights, screeching metal, a sharp, burning smell. Voices shouting. The horns blasting again.

The black mass was in front of me, over me. I was underneath it. The noise and burning smell were tremendous.

The train driver later told my mother that he'd spotted me on the curve, about a hundred yards up the track, too short a distance to brake and avoid hitting me. His heart nearly stopped, he said. I crawled out from under the fourth carriage. For some reason, I was laughing. There were now many people on the bank. My mother was among them.

She picked me up by my arms and yelled: 'How many times have I said it, Min-young? Never – go – down – there!' Then she clutched me to her waist and began weeping uncontrollably. A woman in the crowd came over and told her that this was a good omen. To survive such a disaster so young meant that I would have a long life. For all her common sense, my mother was a superstitious person. Over the years she would repeat this woman's saying. It became a kind of deliverance myth, and I would remember it in moments of danger.

My mother was one of eight siblings – four daughters and four brothers – all of whom possessed the characteristic Hyesan stubbornness. They were to have curiously diverse careers. At one extreme was Uncle Money. He was an executive at a successful trading company in Pyongyang and could obtain luxurious Western goods. We were very proud of him. At the opposite end was Uncle Poor, who had sunk in the *songbun* system after marrying a girl from a collective farm. He was a talented artist and could have been one of the elite few permitted to paint the Leaders, but instead lived out his days painting the long red propaganda placards that stood in fields, exhorting tired farmworkers to ‘unleash the transformative phase of economic growth!’ and so on. The other brothers were Uncle Cinema, who ran the local movie theatre, and Uncle Opium, a drug dealer. Uncle Opium was quite an influential figure in Hyesan. His high *songbun* protected him from investigation and the local police welcomed his bribes. He would sit me on his knee and tell me fabulous folktales of the mountains, of animals and mythical beasts. When I remember these stories now, I realize he was probably high.

Family was everything to my mother. Our social life took place within the family and she formed few friends outside. In that way she was like my father. They were both private people. I would never see them hold hands or

catch them cuddling in the kitchen. Few North Koreans are romantically demonstrative in that way. And yet their feelings for each other were always clear. Sometimes, at the dinner table, my mother would say to my father: ‘I’m so happy I met you.’ And my father would lean towards me and whisper, loud enough for my mother to hear: ‘You know, if they brought ten truckloads of women for me and asked me to choose someone else, I would reject them all and choose your mother.’

Throughout their marriage they remained smitten. My mother would giggle and say: ‘Your father has the most beautiful ears!’

When my father was away on military business, my mother would take me to stay with my grandmother or with one of my aunts. The eldest sister was Aunt Old, a melancholy and solitary woman, whose tragic marriage I was not to learn about until years later. The youngest was a generous woman known as Aunt Tall. The most beautiful and talented of my mother’s sisters was Aunt Pretty. As a girl, she’d had hopes of becoming an ice-figure skater, but after a slip in which she’d chipped a tooth, my grandmother put paid to her dreams. Aunt Pretty had a real head for business – a talent my mother also possessed – and made a lot of money sending Chinese goods for sale in Pyongyang and Hamhung. She was tough, too, and once underwent an appendectomy by candlelight when the

hospital had neither power nor enough anaesthetic.

‘I could hear them cutting me,’ she said.

I was horrified. ‘Didn’t it hurt?’

‘Well, yes, but what can you do?’

My mother was a born entrepreneur. This aspect of her was unusual for a woman of high *songbun*. Many such women during the 1980s and early 1990s would have regarded making money from trade as immoral and beneath their dignity. But my mother was from Hyesan, and had a nose for a deal. Over the years ahead she would run many small, profitable ventures that would keep the family alive through the worst imaginable times.

‘Trade’ and ‘market’ were still dirty words when I was growing up, but within a few years attitudes would change radically, when it became a matter of survival.

She was strict with me, and I was brought up well. She had high standards for everything. She taught me it was rude to bump into older people, talk too loudly, eat too quickly, and eat with my mouth open. I learned that it was vulgar to sit with my legs apart. I learned to sit on the floor with my legs folded and tucked underneath, Japanese-style, and my posture bolt upright. She taught me to say goodbye to her and my father in the mornings with a full, ninety-degree bow.

When one of my girl friends dropped by once and saw me do this, she said: ‘What d’you do that for?’

The question surprised me. ‘You don’t do it?’

My friend became weak with laughter. I was teased after that with extravagant, mock-formal bows.

In the house my mother hated untidiness and could be obsessively orderly. In public she always looked her best – she never wore old clothes and had an eye for the fashion trends, although she was seldom satisfied with her appearance. In a society where round-faced women with large eyes and almond-shaped lips are considered beautiful, she bemoaned her narrow eyes and angular face, usually in a way that made fun of herself: ‘When I was pregnant I was worried you’d look like me.’ I acquired my liking for fashion from her.

I was expecting to start kindergarten in Hyesan, but it was not to be. One evening in December my father returned home from work grinning broadly. It was snowing hard outside and his cap and uniform were powdered white. He clapped his hands together, asked for some hot tea, and told us he had received a promotion. He was being transferred. We were moving to Anju, a city near North Korea’s west coast.

[Chapter 3](#)

The eyes on the wall

At the beginning of 1984, the three of us arrived in Anju. I was four years old. My mother's heart sank when she saw the place. The region's main industry is coal mining, and the Chongchon River, which runs through the city centre to the Yellow Sea, was black with silt and coal slag. We were informed that it smelled badly in summer and was prone to flooding the city in the rainy season. As with other cities in North Korea, much of Anju was rebuilt after the Korean War. All share a similarly drab, colourless look. Concrete blocks of flats lined the main roads in the centre. There were a few Soviet-style state buildings and a public park with the obligatory bronze statue of Kim Il-sung. Squat, tiled-roof houses made up the rest of the city. Hyesan, it has to be said, was not much different, but the mountain backdrop and our colourful family life there made it a magical place to us. My mother had severe regrets about leaving Hyesan, knowing that she would not be able to visit her mother and siblings easily or often, but at the same time she knew that we were leading a privileged life. Most North Korean families never got to go anywhere. They stayed in the same place all their lives and needed a travel permit even to leave their local county. My father's job gave him access to goods most other people didn't have. We ate fish or meat with most meals. I did not know then that many North

Koreans ate fish or meat so seldom that they could often remember the dates on which they did so – usually the birthdays of the Leaders, when extra rations were distributed.

We did not like our new house, which was on my father's military base.

It had a wall-mounted radio with a speaker. It could not be turned off, and had no volume control, and would occasionally blast instructions and air-raid drill announcements from the *banjang* – the head of our neighbourhood people's unit. The *banjang* was usually a woman in her fifties whose job it was to deliver warnings from the government, check that no one was staying overnight without a permit, and to keep an eye on the families in her block. The day we moved in she presented us with the two portraits for our home. These were identical to the portraits in our house in Hyesan, and we hung them on the wall before we'd even eaten our first meal there.

Our entire family life, eating, socializing and sleeping, took place beneath the portraits. I was growing up under their gaze. Looking after them was the first rule of every family. In fact they represented a second family, wiser and more benign even than our own parents. They depicted our Great Leader Kim Il-sung, who founded our country, and his beloved son Kim Jong-il, the Dear Leader, who would one day succeed him. Their distant, airbrushed faces took pride of place in our home, and in all homes.

They hung like icons in every building I ever entered.

From an early age I helped my mother clean them. We used a special cloth provided by the government, which could not be used for cleaning anything else. Even as a toddler I knew that the portraits were not like other household items. Once, when I pointed a finger at them, my mother scolded me loudly. ‘Never do that.’ Pointing, I learned, was extremely rude. If we needed to gesture towards them, we did so with the palm of the hand facing upward, with respect. ‘Like this,’ she said, showing me.

They had to be the highest objects in the room and perfectly aligned. No other pictures or clutter were permitted on the same wall. Public buildings, and the homes of high-ranking cadres of the Party, were obliged to display a third portrait – of Kim Jong-suk, a heroine of the anti-Japanese resistance who died young. She was the first wife of Kim Il-sung and the sainted mother of Kim Jong-il . I thought she was very beautiful. This holy trinity we called the Three Generals of Mount Paektu.

About once a month officials wearing white gloves entered every house in the block to inspect the portraits. If they reported a household for failing to clean them – we once saw them shine a flashlight at an angle to see if they could discern a single mote of dust on the glass – the family would be punished.

Every time we took them down for cleaning we handled them with extreme caution, as if they were priceless treasures from Koryo tombs, or pieces of enriched uranium. Damage to them due to humidity, which could make spots of mould appear on the paper in summer, was acceptable. Damage from any other cause could get a homeowner into serious trouble. Each year, stories of portrait-saving heroics would be featured in the media. My parents would hear a radio report commending a grandfather who'd waded through treacherous flood water holding the portraits above his head (he'd saved them, but sacrificed his own life in the attempt), or see a photograph in the *Rodong Sinmun*, the national daily, of a couple sitting precariously on the tiled roof of their hut after a catastrophic mudslide, clutching the sacred portraits. The newspaper exhorted all citizens to emulate the example of these real-life heroes.

This intrusion of the state into our home did not seem oppressive or unnatural to me. It was unthinkable that anyone would complain about the portraits. On the biggest dates in the calendar – the birthdays of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il – the three of us would line up in front of them and make a solemn bow.

That small family ceremony was the only time politics entered our house. When my father came home from work, and the table was laid with rice,

soup, kimchi and pickles, which we ate with every meal, my mother waited for me to say: ‘Thank you, Respected Father Leader Kim Il-sung, for our food’ before we picked up our chopsticks. But over dinner my parents chatted only of personal matters, or family. There was usually plenty of innocuous family news from Hyesan to talk about.

Serious topics were never discussed. I learned to avoid them in the way children acquire a sense for the dangers of the road. This was for my own protection, and we were no different from other families in that respect. Since there was no aspect of life, public or private, that fell outside the authority of the Party, almost every topic of conversation was potentially political, and potentially dangerous. My parents would not risk an incautious remark that might be repeated innocently by me, or misunderstood.

Growing up, I sensed this danger. I knew it was out there, but at the same time it was normal, like air pollution, or the potential for fire to burn. I didn’t worry about it, and neither did Min-ho, when he came along. We seldom even mentioned the Leaders whose eyes shone upon us from the wall. Saying Kim Il-sung’s name, for example, and forgetting to affix one of his titles – Great Leader, Respected Father Leader, Comrade, President or Marshal – could result in serious punishment if anyone reported the offence.

I played and quarrelled with other children, just like children anywhere else in the world. My parents did the worrying for me. My mother, in particular, seemed to have a talent for warding off trouble. Part of this came from the self-confidence of being a woman of high *songbun*. But she also possessed a natural tact in dealing with people, which would save us from disaster several times. She was good at managing the *banjang*, and would go out of her way to befriend her at the weekly block meetings, and give her small gifts. Most of the *banjang* women we knew were tough, reasonable types my mother could relate to. But she was always careful about what was on view in our house so as not to draw the state's attention or cause envy.

If my mother couldn't solve a problem with reason and good will, she'd try to solve it with money.

The week after we arrived in Anju she was stopped in a city-centre street by five volunteers wearing red armbands. These vigilantes would prowl the city looking for violators of North Korea's myriad social laws – anyone in jeans, men whose hair was a touch too long, women wearing a necklace or a foreign perfume – all of which were unsocialist and symbolic of moral degeneracy and capitalist decadence. The volunteers could be aggressive and arrogant in their zeal. Their nastiest trick was to catch people during the

morning rush hour who had left home forgetting to wear their pin of the Great Leader's face, a small round badge worn by all adult North Koreans over their hearts. Those caught could find themselves with a delicate problem. No one could say they had 'simply forgotten' the Great Leader. My mother's crime that morning was that she happened to be wearing trousers in public, not a skirt. This was prohibited, since the leadership had decreed that trousers were unbecoming of the Korean woman. The volunteers surrounded her and demanded to know why she was wearing them. To avoid a scene, she paid the fine, then slipped them a bribe so that the offence would not be entered in her ID passbook.

My mother bribed people confidently. There was nothing unusual in this, as long as you weren't caught. In North Korea, bribery is often the only way of making anything happen, or of circumventing a harsh law, or a piece of nonsense ideology.

Gradually we got used to life on the military base. Military life, I found, was not so different from civilian life. Everyone knew each other, and there was little security. My father joked that the whole country was a military base. None of us made friends easily at that time.

Like my father, my mother avoided being sociable. She knew how to keep her distance from people. This reserve served her well in a country

where the more people you knew the more likely you were to be criticized or denounced. If I brought a friend home to the house, she would be hospitable rather than welcoming. But this was not really the person she was. One of the tragedies of North Korea is that everyone wears a mask, which they let slip at their peril. The mask my mother presented to people outside the family was of a hardened, no-nonsense woman of high *songbun*. In truth, it hid a sense of fun and a deep compassion for others. She would risk everything for those she loved. She regularly helped out siblings who were not so well off, especially Uncle Poor and his family on the collective farm, with food, clothes and money – so much so that I am ashamed to say that I resented it and complained. And for all her practicality she had a spiritual nature. She felt strongly in touch with her ancestors and would honour them with food and offerings at their gravesides at the lunar New Year and at *Chuseok*, the autumn harvest festival. At such times she would speak in a hushed voice and tell me: ‘Careful what you say.’ The ancestors were listening.

My closest friend at this time was my tiny pet dog – it was one of the cute little breeds that people in other countries put frocks on. I wouldn’t have been allowed to do that, because putting clothes on dogs was a well-known example of capitalist degeneracy. The Yankee jackals care more

about dogs than people. This is what the teachers in my kindergarten told me. They even dress them up in clothes. That's because they are like dogs themselves.

I was six when I entered kindergarten in Anju. And although I was far too young to notice it, this marked a subtle change in my relationship with my parents. In a sense, I no longer belonged to them. I belonged to the state.

[Chapter 4](#)

[*The lady in black*](#)

The school year started in September, with a long vacation in the winter, not the summer, due to the difficulty of keeping the schools warm in North Korea's harsh winters. My kindergarten had a large wood-burning stove in the middle of the classroom and walls painted with colourful scenes of children performing gymnastics, children in uniform, and of a North Korean soldier simultaneously impaling a Yankee, a Japanese and a South Korean soldier with his rifle bayonet.

Ideological indoctrination began on the first day.

The teachers read us stories of child heroes who'd fought the Japanese during the period of colonial rule in Korea, and legends from the boyhood of Kim Il-sung – of how he'd suffered for the people's happiness even as an infant, giving away his own food and shoes to children less fortunate.

Whenever the Leaders were mentioned, the teachers adopted low, tremulous voices, as if they were intoning the names of living gods. The walls displayed photographs of Kim Il-sung as a young guerrilla; Kim Il-sung surrounded by smiling orphans; Kim Il-sung in his white marshal's uniform, as the father of our nation. He was tall and striking, and his brave wife, Kim Jong-suk, who had fought alongside him, seemed like a lady from a folktale. It was not difficult to adore them.

The story of the nativity of their son, the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il, brought me out in goose bumps. His birth was foretold by miraculous signs in the heavens – a double rainbow over Mount Paektu, swallows singing songs of praise with human voices, and the appearance of a bright new star in the sky. We listened to this and a shudder of awe passed through our small bodies. My scalp tingled. This was pure magic. The teachers encouraged us to draw and paint the snow-covered wooden cabin of his birth, with the sacred mountain behind it, and the new star in the sky. His birthday, on 16 February, was the Day of the Bright Star. The kindergarten also had a little model of the cabin, with painted-on snow, beneath a glass case.

This was a very happy time for me. We were the children of Kim Il-sung, and that made us children of the greatest nation on earth. We sang songs

about the village of his birth, Mangyongdae, performing a little dance and putting our hands in the air on the word ‘Mangyongdae’. His birthday, on 15 April, was the Day of the Sun, and our country was the Land of the Eternal Sun.

These birthdays were national holidays and all children were given treats and candies. From our youngest years we associated the Great Leader and Dear Leader with gifts and excitement in the way that children in the West think of Santa Claus.

I was too young not to believe every word. I believed absolutely that this heroic family had saved our homeland. Kim Il-sung created everything in our country. Nothing existed before him. He was our father’s father and our mother’s father. He was an invincible warrior who had defeated two great imperial powers in one lifetime – something that had never happened before in five thousand years of our history. He fought 100,000 battles against the Japanese in ten years – and that was before he’d even defeated the Yankees. He could travel for days without resting. He could appear simultaneously in the east and in the west. In his presence flowers bloomed and snow melted. Even the toys we played with were used for our ideological education. If I built a train out of building blocks, the teacher would tell me that I could drive it to South Korea to save the starving children there. My mission was

to bring them home to the bosom of Respected Father Leader.

Many of the songs we sang in class were about unifying Korea. This was a matter close to my heart because, we were told, South Korean children were dressed in rags. They scavenged for food on garbage heaps and suffered the sadistic cruelty of American soldiers, who used them for target practice, ran them over in jeeps, or made them polish boots. Our teacher showed us cartoon drawings of children begging barefoot in winter. I felt desperately sorry for them. I really wished I could rescue them.

The teachers were nice to us, in accordance with the Great Leader's oft-repeated view that children are the future and should be treated like royalty. There was no corporal punishment in schools. We sang a song called 'We Are Happy' and meant every word of it. We felt loved, confident and grateful.

My parents never dared criticize our schooling in front of me, or later, in front of Min-ho. That would have been dangerous. But neither did they comment on it, or reinforce what we learned. In fact they never mentioned it. My mother did, however, teach me to praise the Great Leader and the nation for anything good that came our way. This came from her acute sense of caution. Not to do so would have reflected on her, and might have been noticed by an informer. And there were informers everywhere – on the

military base where we lived, in the city streets, in my kindergarten. They reported to the provincial bureau of the Ministry of State Security, the *Bowibu*. This was the secret police. The translation doesn't convey the power the word *Bowibu* has to send a chill through a North Korean. Its very mention, as the poet Jang Jin-sung put it, was enough to silence a crying child.

The *Bowibu* didn't watch from street corners or parked cars, or eavesdrop on conversations through walls. They didn't need to. The citizenry did all that for them. Neighbours could be relied upon to inform on neighbours; children to spy on children; workers to watch co-workers; and the head of the neighbourhood people's unit, the *banjang*, maintained an organized system of surveillance on every family in her unit. If the authorities asked her to place a particular family under closer watch, she would make the family's neighbours complicit. Informers often received extra food rations for their work. The *Bowibu* weren't interested in the real crimes that affected people, such as theft, which was rife, or corruption, but only in political disloyalty, the faintest hint of which, real or imagined, was enough to make an entire family – grandparents, parents and children – disappear. Their house would be roped off; they'd be taken away in a truck at night, and not seen again.