

1

GYONG-HO FED ANOTHER PANT leg into a powerful, old cast iron machine, counting the stitches as she ran a perfect inseam. She watched intently as the needle danced across the rough fabric, plunging in and out of the cloth with methodic violence—she was amazed the fabric did not bleed. It was a paradox of sewing, that such brutality could bind two things together. A distant cloud shifted, liberating a pocket of sunlight that had been building up behind it, flooding the dirty windows high on the factory wall and illuminating her work station in smeared and spotted light. Now the needle glinted as it stabbed. Gyong-ho felt grateful for the light because of its illusion of warmth—she could still see her breath, and her dry fingers ached. The factory was a cold concrete cavern, full of fabric scraps and echoes, a container for damp and chilly air.

She glanced up only momentarily. The Great Leader, Kim Il-sung, and his son the Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il, looked down on her from behind their golden frames. They perched on the wall, smiling, like they did on every wall, looking down on her, watching and weighing her every move. Reflexively she prostrated from within, bowed her head and worked harder. She was not good enough. The portraits filled her with awe and fear. *It is by the grace of the Dear Leader that I live so well*, she recited to herself mechanically.

Gyong-ho was in a nest of sound. The air around her hummed and stuttered with the staccato of one hundred sewing machines starting and stopping at random. Electricity buzzed from lights and machines, and seemingly from the factory women themselves, who were plugged into the walls by unseen tethers. Scissors snipped and clipped at threads in punctuating chops, sharp steel sliding on sharp steel. Holding the sounds together, corralling them, was the shuffling step of the foreman pacing his vengeful circuit of the factory floor, dragging his mangled foot as he walked—thump, slide . . . step; thump, slide . . . step. The sounds were a kind of music to Gyong-ho, helping her focus, occupying a busy part of her mind that was always looking to distill order from chaos.

The pained and lumbering gait of the foreman drew nearer, and Gyong-ho tensed. His powerful body odor preceded him, pinning her to her chair. He was both sour and flammable. He stopped in front of her, and she could hear his raspy breathing, could smell the smoke on his breath. Without looking up at him, she could see his scarred and slanted face, lined with disapproval. He grunted and then labored onward, shuffling away. Gyong-ho exhaled. She knew that his obvious pain was an example of his impeccable citizenship: He walked all day in spite of it for the glory of the Republic.

Foreman Hwang would tolerate no disruption to production, and even restroom emergencies were met with heavy scorn and public humiliation. There was a sign on the wall that read, Eat No Soup. It was a campaign designed to increase production by curbing restroom visits. Unfortunately for Gyong-ho, thin soup had been the only food available that morning at the orphanage. She had tried not to eat too much of it, but she had been hungry; so she danced around her straining bladder, working her hips back and forth in coordination with her sewing.

She worked in rhythm, fast and precise, feeding legs and waists and cuffs into her hungry machine as fast as it could chew them. She worked to outpace a memory that was pursuing her, reaching for her, breathing on her. She was afraid that if she slowed down for even a moment, it might

catch up with her, grasping the back of her neck with a black-gloved claw. It was a demon chasing her down a long corridor, his hard shoes echoing, his stride longer than hers, leather hands grazing the little hairs on the back of her neck as they snatched for her, always catching up with her. She kept up a mental race in an effort to evade the memory, her mind in overdrive to distraction.

She chanced a brief look to her right. Her best friend, Il-sun, was finishing a cuff. The seam staggered drunkenly, and one of the trouser legs appeared a little longer than the other. It was a wonder how she could get away with it; but then, she was the pretty one. Sunlight, whenever it shone, seemed to cling to her. Most days it condensed right on her, running in bright rivulets down her body, drawing eyes down the length of her. She was even beautiful with dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep, and her lethargic motions were fluid—seemingly an open invitation to caress. Her heart-shaped face was set off by pouting red lips and eyes that gazed mischievously from the corners of their sockets. Her skin was flawlessly smooth and her pin-straight hair hung in a black curtain just below her shoulders. In just the last year her body had taken on a new shape that made her hips and shoulders move in hypnotic opposition as she walked. People turned to watch her whenever she glided by, their gaze causing her to radiate even more, to be even more beautiful. Men in particular were affected by her presence, losing their ability to speak, looking both fearful and hungry. Gyong-ho did not like the change.

She worried that Il-sun would again not meet the day's quota. This would make the fifth day in a row. How long could she go on like this, so indifferent to authority? It was as if she did not understand the consequences of being so . . . individualistic.

They had been working at the factory for less than a year. At seventeen years old, they had been excited to join the ranks of working adults—the novelty of going to the factory every day was a welcome break from the tedium of school. They had felt a sense of maturity as they left the orphanage each morning in their factory uniforms—bright red caps, pressed

white shirts, and navy blue trousers—the younger girls gazing at them with awe and respect. Their heads had been filled with images of going to the factory with a feeling of pride and purpose, as if every day was going to be more exciting and fulfilling than the last; after all, this was called the Worker's Paradise. In a short time, however, all the basics of sewing were mastered, and the job itself did not require much more than that—cut, match, sew, snip, cut, match, sew, snip. Every day, day in and day out, it was the same pair of trousers over and over again. The work transformed quickly from excitement to drudgery, especially under the thumb of the fearsome and cranky foreman.

Finally, a whistle blew and the foreman announced, as if it were against his better judgment, that lunch was being served in the cafeteria. Gyong-ho and Il-sun stood up and, in rigid military fashion, filed out the factory door. Gyong-ho wondered if there really would be lunch, or just the sawdust gruel that was served most days.

The women splintered into small groups as they exited the workroom, and the air filled with chatter. It seemed an odd contrast between the martial atmosphere of the workroom and the casual muddle of the lunch room, as if they were ants that morphed into women and then back into ants again. Occasional laughter could be heard, and a Party anthem played in the background on tinny speakers. Gyong-ho made a break for the latrine. When she returned, she and Il-sun queued up in the cafeteria, waiting for the day's ration, which turned out to be a small scoop of rice and a slice of boiled cabbage. On the wall behind the service counter was a poster with a drawing of stout *Chosun* citizens handing food across a barbed wire fence to the emaciated and rag-clad *Hanguk*. American soldiers with long noses and fierce, round eyes were holding the *Hanguk* down with their boots, the hands of the *Hanguk* outstretched in desperation. The poster said, simply, Remember Our Comrades to the South. Gyong-ho and Il-sun received their bowls and sat down at a corner table.

"How long do you think we will have to stockpile food for the *Hanguk*?" Il-sun asked, looking despondently at her meager ration.

“Until the Americans stop starving them, I suppose,” Gyong-ho answered. It was widely known that the imperialist Americans were harsh overlords to the oppressed *Hanguk* people, who craved reunification of the Korean peninsula under the Dear Leader. That is why the Dear Leader was stockpiling food for them, asking his own people to sacrifice much of their daily ration to aid the unfortunate people of the South.

“Yeah, but what I wouldn’t give for a bite of pork,” another woman at the table chimed in, not quite under her breath. The whole table fell into a tense, uncomfortable silence. The cold of the concrete room drilled bone deep. Nobody dared inhale. Such a statement was as good as slapping the Dear Leader—it could leave the stain of treason on anyone who heard it.

“But it is worth it for the benefit of our dear comrades to the south,” she added quickly, forcing a smile at the rice balanced on her chopsticks. “It is by the glory of the Dear Leader that we eat so well.”

Conversation resumed. It was a broom sweeping dust under the corner of a rug. Such talk was dangerous.

Twenty minutes later a whistle blew, signaling the end of the midday break. It ended all too soon for the weary Gyong-ho and Il-sun, who were ants once again, marching back into the workroom. They stood next to their sewing stations, feet apart, hands behind their backs. Not all factory foremen demanded such military strictness of their workers, but Foreman Hwang was decidedly old-guard. The shift began with a song in praise of the country’s founder, then the foreman spoke.

“Comrades, I do not need to tell you that there is no higher purpose than serving our Dear Leader.” His voice was low and gravelly, like stones rolling around in a tin can. “It is an honor that he has bestowed upon you, allowing you to serve him in the People’s garment factory. But sometimes I think you do not fully appreciate this gift. Every day I see complacency and laziness.” His eyes landed on Il-sun, and Gyong-ho tensed. “These must be stamped out!” He punctuated the statement by slamming his fist into the palm of his hand, sending a shock wave down Gyong-ho’s spine. She nearly gasped out loud. “We must be prepared for the day when the

imperialist dogs, the American bastards and their flunky allies, attack us. Even though we no longer hear their bombs or feel their bayonets in our hearts, we are still at war. They are afraid of the Dear Leader and the mighty *Chosun* army. They are afraid like cornered animals; and like cornered animals they must eventually strike at us, even as hopeless as they know it will be to do so. So we must be prepared for that day. Each of you must ask, "What can I do for the Dear Leader?" He let the question hang in the air for a moment to collect drama. "You must do exactly what is asked of you, without question, without complaint." He paced thoughtfully for a moment.

"We are falling short of our quotas. Each of you must work harder, sew faster, and make no mistakes. Errors have become quite a problem on this floor. Every time you have to restitch an inseam . . ." He paused, looking to the dirty ceiling for words that seemed to be eluding him. "For every stitch you have to redo, a good *Chosun* man or woman pays for it with blood." He laid heavy emphasis on the word "blood," probing the room with heartless, accusing eyes.

The room was captivated in breathless, guilty silence. Gyong-ho felt as if she were solely to blame for the imperialist scourge and wondered how she could possibly work any harder to rout it out. She stole a glance toward Il-sun, whose eyes were closed with her head pitching forward. It could have been humble introspection in response to the foreman's speech, but Gyong-ho saw it for what it was: sleep. She was amazed, offended, and, in spite of herself, impressed by the way her friend could so casually flaunt her disrespect for authority. That she could fall asleep standing up was impressive in its own right. Il-sun was always on the edge of trouble, just skating by without suffering any real consequence for her insubordination. Gyong-ho felt deeply fearful for her safety. For Il-sun, the dangers lurking around every corner and under every rock were impotent, imaginary shadows; for Gyong-ho they were real. Il-sun did not understand what she was risking by being impetuous, rebellious, and unique. *If only she knew what I have been through.*

With that thought, Gyong-ho bumped into an unspoken boundary of her consciousness, treading accidentally into an area where she dared not go. A memory flared in brilliant colors, growing on the dry tinder of her fear, and the factory began to fade around her. Suddenly she was hearing again the footsteps she had been evading. They were catching up with her swiftly from behind: hard soles echoing down a long, bare corridor, muffled voices, rough laughter, the light of a naked bulb, cold, wet feet, an electric shock.

In desperation, to fight off the sensation, she began counting things. Anything.

She counted needles in a pincushion—*forty-eight*.

She counted bare lightbulbs—*sixteen*.

She counted buttons on the foreman's shirt—*seven*.

She multiplied lightbulbs by buttons, and then divided them by needles—*two point three, recurring*.

*Two point three, recurring, multiplied by itself is five point four, recurring.*

*Five point four, recurring, multiplied by two point three, recurring, is twelve point seven zero three seven zero three, recurring . . .*

With each number her mind gained ground, her demon receded, inky black thoughts fell further and further behind. She was once again ahead of the echoing footsteps, could hear them falling back.

*The square root of twelve point seven zero three seven zero three, recurring, is three point five six four two—*

“Comrade Song!” the foreman barked loudly, shocking her back into the room. He was standing toe to toe with her, bathing her in a cloud of sour kimchee breath. Kimchee was a luxury of his rank that the times did not afford for the likes of Gyong-ho. “Comrade Song Gyong-ho! Is there something you would like to say?” It was more of a threat than a question.

She looked around to see that the other seamstresses were already sitting at their machines, looking fearfully at her. She had been lost in counting and had missed the command to sit. She felt very much like an errant nail in a wooden deck that had worked its way upward, standing

out, begging to be struck with a hammer until its head is again flush with the wood. In any moment of uncertainty, she had learned, there is only one safe course of action. As if by reflex she brought her hands together in front of her chest, hoisted a gleaming tear into her eye, and, with a catch in her voice, said, "I am so very grateful, comrade foreman, sir. It is by the grace of the Dear Leader that I am here. I am not worthy to be here. I am lower than mud. Lower than pond silt. Even so, our Dear Leader has had the grace to allow me to work in his garment factory. I am just so grateful." She bowed her head, but remained standing.

"Very good, Comrade Song," rasped the foreman. "I hope that the others here will learn from you." He turned to address the room, seeming to relish the pain shooting up his damaged leg. "You see? Comrade Song knows that she was given a rare second chance. She knows that she is unworthy. This makes her grateful. You may sit, Comrade Song. Everyone, get to work!"

Relieved, Gyong-ho sat and began sewing.



2

WHEN IL-SUN FIRST WALKED through the front door of the Home for Orphan Girls, she sneered at the portrait of the Dear Leader. His frozen smile only confirmed for her that his omnipotence was a lie—he was only made of paper. Either the orphanage mistress did not see the offense or she chose to ignore it. Il-sun had certainly made no attempt to hide it. She was thirteen years old and had just watched her mother crumble, piece by piece, before her eyes, and she was in no mood to be placatory.

Il-sun had grown up in relative luxury, with extra food rations, almost new clothes, and in a nice apartment in the middle of the city. These were her birthright, handed to her through her father's good *songbun*. She did not belong in the orphanage; not with lowly girls who had no home—that was not her. Her mother had been dotting and kind, her greatest ambition being to raise her children well. Her social position afforded her the ability to do just that. Less fortunate women had to trudge off to the factories and farms each day, leaving their children to raise themselves. Il-sun dearly loved her mother.

Il-sun's father had been in the army, and his military uniform hung in the small family closet throughout her childhood. It was the only thing she knew of him. He had been an old man when he married her mother,

and then died shortly after Il-sun was born. Some days, when she was in a particular mood, she would glide her fingers on the fabric of the uniform, and smell it for any trace of the man who had worn it. Sometimes she thought she could detect a masculine scent around the collar, but other times it was only mildew.

Her father had been loyal to Kim Il-sung, had fought for him in the war, and had been decorated with medals. These were kept in a special box on a high shelf, and Il-sun would sometimes ask to hold them. They were a comforting weight in the palm of her small hand, and they were a tangible reminder of her own privilege and duty. For his dedication, her father had been awarded the apartment in the center of the city and enjoyed an elevated social standing. His first wife had died of something; of what, Il-sun did not know or really care. The children from that marriage had already grown and had families of their own. She never even knew their names. As soon as Il-sun's mother reached marrying age, her father took her for his second wife. Even though he was already an old man, his excellent *songbun* made him a desirable husband, at least from the parents' point of view. Il-sun hoped no one would make her marry an old man, when her time came.

It was generally known that times were hard, and yet a person could disappear just for saying so out loud. That had happened to Il-sun's older brother; or at least she believed so. She could never be sure. He had been an angry young man who tended to say whatever dangerous thought was on his mind. Their mother tried punishing him, reasoning with him, and then finally pleading with him to change his thoughts; or, at the very least, to keep his heretical ideas to himself. He never listened. One day he simply did not come home. During Il-sun's more upbeat moments, she liked to think that he had made a run for the northern border into China. Late at night, when their mother was asleep, he had whispered tales of people who braved crossing the frozen Tumen River, risking their lives for the opulence and endless feasts awaiting them on the other side. Il-sun had idolized her brother, even if she thought his ideas were a little crazy.

He was the only person she ever heard speak that way. It was known that *Chosun* was the wealthiest, most prosperous nation—the envy of all the world. Why would anyone want to leave it? In her more realistic moments she knew that her brother had been picked up by the police and taken away forever, as so many other people had, and nobody ever talked about it. Why else had the authorities not come asking for him when he did not show up for his Party Youth meeting? She missed him terribly.

Her brother's disappearance had been too much for her mother to bear. It first broke her spirit, and then it broke her body down. It was not the grief of losing him that did it; it was having to pretend that he had never existed. It was having to get up the same way each day, doing the exact same routine, trying to convince herself that she had never had a son, had never suckled him, had never watched him grow handsome and strong. Neighbors and friends likewise pretended, as if by unspoken consensus, that there had never been a son, a brother, a friend. They never asked about him, never offered consolation, or even a knowing nod. To acknowledge him would be to acknowledge some guilt by association. Such smudges were hard to polish off a person's badge of loyalty.

Il-sun watched it all with the clear eyes of childhood.

Shortly afterward, her mother became ill. It came on gradually. At first she became clumsy, dropping things and tripping over nothing. Over months it became increasingly difficult for her to stand up and walk across the floor, which she eventually had to do using a cane. Then her body trembled uncontrollably and she could no longer operate chopsticks, or even a spoon. Il-sun had to feed her, and help her bathe and use the toilet. A doctor came and went, shaking his head and avoiding Il-sun's eyes. A year and a half after the symptoms appeared, her mother could no longer move from her sleeping mat. She could not speak, but only roll her eyes and make helpless grunts. Her mother ached, and Il-sun tried with all the force of her imagination to bring the affliction into her own body instead. Her mother suffered all the same.

The hardest part was knowing that her mother was still aware inside

her broken and useless body, looking through the scuffed and milky windows of her eyes, aware that it was the futile end of her life. The *Chosun* were not allowed an afterlife—it was against the law—and nor was there any solace given to the survivors. Life was service to the Republic, and nothing more. Life was service to the Dear Leader, and everything outside that was forbidden. The very words for those things were rubbed out of the language until all that was left of them were impressions under the eraser marks where the first pencil had originally scratched them into being. Only the brave or the stupid dared to exhume them. Truth was an agreement, in *Chosun*, not an absolute. For the first time Il-sun fully understood her brother's anger.

One by one, her mother's organs shut down. Her skin became a sickly, pale green and her breath came in short gasps. Her body jerked in uncontrollable fits, with less force each time. She was a tire deflating. In one moment she took her last breath, and then gave up the thin tether of control over her lungs. Il-sun watched, powerless, as her mother slowly suffocated.

The jerking stopped. Il-sun had thought they had been fighting a disease—an unseen, unknowable enemy—but then realized they had actually been fighting against death itself. Unavoidable, inescapable death. It was then she realized that, no matter what, death would always triumph; and that death's victory, after the struggle of life, is liberation. Il-sun had not allowed herself to cry since her mother had fallen ill: She had needed to stay strong. Sitting in front of her mother's empty shell, as understanding came to her in waves, she wept—not from grief, but from relief. The sweet release of death. An insupportable weight had been lifted from her, and, in spite of herself, she was glad that it was over. And she hated herself for being glad: It felt like betrayal. With nowhere else to cast her blame, she blamed . . .

No. There would be no talking about who she blamed.

THE HOME FOR Orphan Girls was not a comfortable place to grow up, especially after having lived in a private apartment with her

family in a nice part of the city. Still, it was better funded and less crowded than its counterparts outside the city; and even if she did not recognize it at the time, she was lucky to be there. It was set up specifically for orphans from good families loyal to the Party.

Il-sun did not adjust well to life in the orphanage. She developed a reputation for being vindictive, sly, and cunning in her abuses. Many girls tried to befriend her, but she shunned them all. She had been accustomed to better food, cleaner conditions, a doting mother, and more privacy. Now she was just one of many girls in the care of a lone, overworked state employee. She had been told all her life that, with her excellent *songbun*, she would be able to find a good husband high in the Party ranks, that she would always enjoy greater comforts and privilege than most. All that was gone now. Now she was a castoff, a throwaway, a burden to the Republic—an undesirable.

Her pique found its sharpest focus on one girl in particular, who had arrived at the orphanage under mysterious circumstances a few months after her. To Il-sun, Gyong-ho looked more like a half-starved rodent than a thirteen-year-old girl. She was a skeletal wisp with long arms and a lopsided posture. Her spine was twisted and her left arm hung lower than her right, as if she were perpetually carrying a heavy sack of rice over her shoulder. Her wavy hair was matted and dirty, and she made no effort to straighten it. Her skin was pale and cold, made all the more so by the contrast with her black hair. Her wretchedness was exacerbated by her name: Gyong-ho was a boy's name, a souvenir from a bygone era when parents, wishing for a boy, gave their girls masculine names. Gyong-ho refused to speak, instead only shaking or nodding her head. She had a wide, blank look in her eyes that seemed a permanent part of her features.

Gyong-ho arrived at the orphanage in the middle of the night in a big black automobile. It was an unusually opulent arrival for an orphan, especially considering her soiled state. The first thing Il-sun noticed about her was her smell, which filled the entranceway of the orphanage and assaulted Il-sun at the top of the stairs from where she was spying. She

smelled filthy, but not in the way of a person who has worked hard between regular baths. She smelled as if she had crawled out of a sewer in which she had wallowed for months or years. Grime streaked her face and stained her hands. The orphanage mistress scolded Il-sun for being out of bed, and then whisked the girl off to the bath. Il-sun had never seen a face before that was completely blank, that showed absolutely nothing; but that was the only way to describe Gyong-ho's face on the night of her arrival. She was empty, devoid of feeling—devoid of self—and that scared Il-sun.

For the first few weeks Il-sun ignored Gyong-ho because she looked and behaved oddly, stuck as she was in a state of near catatonia. But after a while something about her began to eat away at Il-sun's patience. She hated her for her weakness. She hated her for being collapsed. She feared Gyong-ho for showing her how low the human spirit can be degraded and still not die. Gyong-ho was pathetic, broken, useless, and yet still alive. It meant that Il-sun herself could be broken further—things could get worse. Gyong-ho's wretchedness stimulated such anger that Il-sun felt compelled to strike out at her. She tripped her, and shoved her when the mistress was not looking, and threw pebbles at the back of her head. She called her names and tried to rally the other girls into the cause of ostracizing her. Gyong-ho became the focus of a deep, stirring rage about the weakness of humankind and the apparent lack of any accountable or benevolent overseer.

One day, a few months after Gyong-ho's arrival, the girls were given a rare treat of pork with their vegetables and rice. The portion was small, as usual, but the sliver of meat put a smile on Il-sun's normally scowling face. Some of the other girls had never even tasted meat before. Il-sun ate hungrily until her bowl was empty, and then scraped it with her finger to make sure none of the valuable juices would go to waste. When she was finished, she looked up to see Gyong-ho staring blankly at her bowl of untouched food. It was an affront. Life was precious and hard, and the meat was such a rare opportunity to gather strength that Gyong-ho's inability to respond to it provoked Il-sun's fury. She walked over to her, stripped the

bowl of food from her hands, and said, "If you're not going to eat it, stupid cow, I will." She then shoveled the food into her mouth, greedily scraping it out of the bowl with her fingers, making exaggerated sounds of pleasure. When the food was finished and the bowl licked clean, she forced it back into Gyong-ho's hands and stood over her, waiting for a response. What she most craved was for Gyong-ho to protest, to yell at her or fight back. She wanted her to stand up and hit her, or scream obscenities—that would have meant she was alive. But none of that came. Instead, Gyong-ho kept her head down, a silent stream of tears running down each cheek and falling into her empty bowl.

"I hate you!" shouted Il-sun. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!" With each time she yelled it, something capped and frozen moved and dissolved inside of her. With each time she screamed, she realized more deeply that it was not Gyong-ho she hated; it was herself. She had failed her mother, had failed her brother, had even failed the father she had never known. "I hate you!" she said to herself, more softly. "I hate you!" She fell to her knees, saying, "I hate you." A torrent of grief rushed up from a dormant pool and erupted from her eyes. The relief she had felt after her mother's death had been a thin crust over a well of sadness that she had not allowed herself to feel. But she was feeling it now in full. She missed her mother more than words could say. It ached from every organ and every limb, and it all came out through her eyes and the shaking of her shoulders as she sobbed.

She felt a hand on her head. In her collapse she had laid her cheek, without realizing it, on Gyong-ho's lap. Gyong-ho had placed her small, hollow hand caringly on Il-sun's head; and when Il-sun looked up, for the first time Gyong-ho's face was not a void. It never really had been, not completely. It was then that Il-sun could see the flicker of Gyong-ho underneath the empty-looking husk. The pilot light had not gone out. She was a girl with a beating heart who had fully capitulated to some unseen suffering, but whose essence still throbbed beneath the surface. She saw how alone Gyong-ho was, how she had laid herself down to a demon

whose torture of her never ceased; and yet she kept soldiering on, albeit damaged, every day. What must she have gone through to be reduced as she was? She was still fighting back, in the small way that she could, just by being alive. She was a person to be admired for her strength, not despised for her weakness.

In that moment an understanding was born between them that was the foundation of a friendship—two halves finding unexpected completion. Gyong-ho's broken state gave Il-sun a constructive focus. She nursed Gyong-ho's enfeebled spirit with the irrepressible quest for girlish fun and mischief. Slowly, Gyong-ho's catatonia melted away as Il-sun, day after day, brushed her hair and chatted idly with her. Having someone to care for kept Il-sun from seeking the kind of trouble that would have led her to her brother's fate, and being cared for gave Gyong-ho a sense of safety that allowed her to come, at least a little bit, out of her shell.

"My name is Gi-Gi-Gi-Gi-Gyong-ho," she said to Il-sun, stuttering her name as they formally met each other. She often had difficulty saying her own name.

"Why don't you just tell people your name is Gi? It would be simpler," Il-sun joked. From that point on she called her Gi.

Once cleaned up, Gi was not exactly pretty, but she had a quirky personality that Il-sun enjoyed. She looked at the world in a completely different way from anyone Il-sun had ever met, reducing it in her mind to its fundamental pieces and the forces that acted on them. Where Il-sun was almost entirely focused on the people in her life and how they related with each other, Gyong-ho seemed to care only about the physical construction of the world around her. She cared little for social grace, or perhaps she had simply never been trained; and so, in the rare moments when she would speak to anyone other than Il-sun, she often came across as brusque and insensitive. She did have a subtle sense of humor that would emerge at unexpected moments, making Il-sun laugh. Il-sun was a bridge to the outside world for Gi, showing her that many of the dangers she feared were imagined: Gyong-ho startled easily at loud noises and sudden



movements, as if at any moment she was expecting a great calamity to come upon her. She was shy and reticent where Il-sun was forward and often spoke out of turn.

Gi never spoke about her past, and anytime Il-sun pressed her for information she became evasive and sometimes hostile. It was as if she was fighting a lengthy and gruesome battle not to remember it; and when she came too close within her own mind, she would race away on another topic until she seemed to have forgotten what it was she was avoiding. If she got too close to her memory, her eyes would roll back in her head and her face would become a blank stone for minutes, sometimes for hours. Then, quite suddenly, she would return, maybe cheerful, maybe sullen, but as if nothing at all had happened.

One of the odd things that made Gyong-ho so puzzling and special was her obsession with numbers. It was eerie how she could do large and complicated computations instantly in her head. It was as if she could simply see the numbers floating in front of her eyes, as if they drifted weightlessly, borne on the dust churned upward by the turning of her mind. Il-sun was lost when it came to numbers, so it seemed particularly miraculous to her whenever Gi showed off her talent. It was the only time she didn't look quite so afraid. It seemed to Il-sun that Gi clung to numbers in the same way Il-sun clung to her anger—it was the only thing of which she could be absolutely certain. At times, when they were bored, Il-sun would try as hard as she could to make a calculation too complex or the numbers too large, lofting a string of numbers at Gi, all the while checking answers on a calculator she had stolen from their school. Gyong-ho never made a mistake. This was nothing more than amusement for both girls. It never occurred to them, being orphans and therefore having bad *songbun*, that Gi's talent could be used for anything practical. They would never qualify for anything more than manual factory labor.

Il-sun could not muster much enthusiasm for her factory job. Had her mother lived and her life stayed on course, Il-sun would have been given a first-rate education and lived in their fine family apartment until she left to

make a life, and a family, with her undoubtedly well-connected husband. She had never gotten over the sense that she was meant for a better life, married to a man who would shield her from the common drudgery that afflicted most of *Chosun*. That dream was dashed, but she was still determined to climb, any way she could, out of the mire of mediocrity that her life had become. She still believed that her way out was through a man. Perhaps she had already found him.