

5 The day before the National Day celebrations, Pyongyang was decked out in all its finery. The past three months of tireless preparation had paid off in spectacular fashion.

10 When the subway train pulled into Pungnyeon station, Han Gyeong-hee only just managed to jump on, shoulder her way through to the back of the carriage, and grab the last available space. Underground, it was every bit as thronged with people as the streets on the surface. At each station, a tide of people surged into the carriage: soldiers, university students, middle-school pupils, young farmers hefting models for the ceremony, ordinary citizens bearing armfuls of flowers, Boy Scout leaders gripping cudgels. Their appearance, and particularly the things they were carrying, showed that they were on their way to the rehearsal for tomorrow's mass games, in
15 which a million people would take part.

As more and more people piled on, Gyeong-hee was forced to wriggle her sturdy frame from side to side to keep herself from being mercilessly squeezed. Still, she kept her eyes on her son the whole time. The two-year-old boy was practically glued to her, sandwiched between her ample chest and her office bag. He seemed to cling
20 ever closer to his mother, his wide eyes darting nervously around. The air in the carriage, a stifling fug of heat and noise that had worsened once the train pulled out of the station, seemed to cool off just a little, and Gyeong-hee could breathe a little more freely. As she did, she was able to hear again the voice of the nursery governess, ringing out clear above the babble of conversation and the train's clattering motion.
25 In the nursery at the end of the working day, seeing each child safely into the arms of a parent, the governess had singled Gyeong-hee out for one of her lengthy spiels.

“Ah, Comrade Manager! I wonder, have you been scaring your son with stories of the Eobi, the fearsome creature who stuffs disobedient children into his sack and tosses them down a well? I ask because he was just having a nap earlier — your son, of
30 course, not the Eobi, haha — when all of a sudden he jerked awake, covered in sweat and screaming as if he would burst. ‘Eobi, Eobi!’ Extraordinary to think someone like you could have produced such a delicate constitution.”

“You’re right — he must get it from his father’s side. If he was anything like me it’d take more than a fairy tale to frighten him!”

Gyeong-hee forced a laugh. Though something of a celebrity when compared with the other mothers— manager of a marine products shop at the age of thirty-six, with a forceful personality that matched her strapping frame — she couldn't help being unsettled by the mention of Eobi. Of course, the governess had likely been speaking in innocence, mildly annoyed at having to deal with such a sensitive child and wondering how to prevent similar outbursts in the future. But Gyeong-hee wasn't the type to take such comments at face value. Has the governess picked up on something? She wondered. Why else would she ask about the Eobi, of all things? How much does she know? It was a futile train of thought, and she knew it. She berated herself for such spineless fretting.

And yet, after she'd got off at Seungri station and made her way back up to street level, the same thoughts began to crowd back in. Only when she arrived at Kim Il-sung Square, where an army drill was taking place, did a new realization come to her, one that trumped all her previous worries. Over the sea of heads and fists raised in salute, the window of her apartment was clearly visible, on the fifth floor of their building. All she had to do was cross the square to find herself at home. Today, though, this wasn't an option. Not because of the drill, but because entering the square would bring her son —already alarmed by the thousand-strong cries of "Long live Kim Il-sung! Long live North Korea!" — face-to-face with the terrifying Eobi.

"This kid!" Gyeong-hee muttered under her breath, barely aware that she was speaking. "A wet rag just like his dad..."

Abandoning her usual route home, Gyeong-hee turned instead to a nearby shop which specialized in children's clothes. Her son really was the spitting image of his father, with a body as feeble as his mind. What else but a congenital weakness could account for a child's throwing a fit at the sight of a mere picture! If it hadn't been for her husband, Gyeong-hee would have gone to the hospital days ago and demanded some kind of treatment. But no, it had to be kept hushed up. So the child was still a baby —what did that matter?

He was the son of a supervisor in the propaganda department, and having a tantrum at the sight of Marx's portrait had serious implications. And besides, now that the preparations for National Day were coming to a head, people were at such a level of excitement they'd be liable to mistake a dropped spoon for a grenade. The event itself would be followed by a strict review, and woe betide any participant who had demonstrated less than revolutionary fervor. No, it wouldn't do to step out of line just now. There were only a few days left, after all — they just needed to keep their heads down.

This was all Gyeong-hee's husband had to offer by way of a remedy.

The child she was carrying seemed to grow twice as heavy, and the sky, whose clear blue had been such a welcome contrast to the gray clouds of the past few days, began to stir with an unseasonal southerly wind. As they turned out of the alley where the clothes shop was situated, the contrast could not have been greater: from a lonely
5 place where gusts of wind pursued fallen leaves and scraps of plastic lay idle in the gutter, to the vast expanse of the central road.

There, where the mass celebrations would soon be taking place, the street looked like some fierce wild beast, shaking its mane and roaring. Bristling with posters and placards, strong sharp lines of red writing that made the eye wince to look at them;
10 lined on both sides with innumerable flags, their fabric snapping taut in the wind; pierced by shrill whistles, underlining each new announcement or command; rent down the middle by a dark blue broadcast car, blaring slogans through its loudspeaker, again and again so that the whole street rang with them. Punctuated every so often by a plane looming low in the city's skies, rising from take-off or
15 coming onto land; even their engines seemed to explode into an unprecedented roar, agitating the figures who moved below, causing them unconsciously to quicken their step.

As soon as Gyeong-hee arrived home, she spread her son's toys out over the floor.

"Look, my little Myeong-shik, don't these look fun? How about a little playtime?
20 Beep-beep, ring-ring..."

Leaving him to his own devices, Gyeong-hee moved quickly to the windows and drew the curtains she'd put up. Their apartment was at the very front of the block, with one window facing south and another west. The south-facing window looked out onto the portrait of Karl Marx hung on the wall of the military department building,
25 while the west-facing window framed a similar portrait of Kim Il-sung, hung near the VIP balcony of the Grand People's Study House. Gyeong-hee had to keep Myeong-shik from seeing those portraits.

But the white nylon under-curtain, provided as standard and kept drawn during the day, wasn't there to block the portraits out, and if anything the hazy shapes created
30 by the curtain's thin gauze were even more frightening than the solid reality. Myeong-shik's initial terror had come from a face-to-face encounter with Marx's portrait, and with his stressed mind and active imagination, the picture loomed larger by the day.

It was getting on toward evening the previous Saturday when it had first happened. A
35 citizens' rally was taking place in Kim Il-sung Square, with the aim of encouraging people to be ever more energetic in preparing for the celebrations. Everyone was pushed for time, so the rally had been organized at an hour when most workers

would normally be heading home for the day. Myeong-shik had had a cold, and as Gyeong-hee, reluctant to leave him in that state, couldn't very well absent herself from the rally, in the end she'd strapped him to her back and gone into the square. Myeong-shik was prone to colds, seemingly a product of his weak constitution, but
5 this was something different — his tiny body was burning hot against her back, telling Gyeong-hee that his fever wasn't to be dismissed as a mere sniffle.

Her group had been at the head of the square's far-left column, directly beneath the glowering gaze of Karl Marx. In the haze of dusk, before the square's electric lighting was switched on, that reddish-black face with its great swath of hair would have sent
10 shivers down the spine of even the most stolid Party cadre. Perhaps it was that which accounted for Gyeong-hee's unwonted recollection — a line from the first passage of The Communist Manifesto, which she'd read at some point during college.

"A specter is haunting Europe — the specter of Communism."

Had Marx inadvertently been writing his autobiography? The phrase was a
15 mysteriously fitting description of how his portrait had appeared just then: closer in form to some spectral presence than an actual human being, plucked from some ghastly legend. Gyeong-hee's practical mind would never have normally entertained such speculations, but she was already anxious about Myeong-shik, worrying that he might somehow disturb the rally.

20 These fears had soon proved to be well founded; his nerves already set on edge by the mass of people around him, when the opening address boomed from the loudspeaker the boy was so startled that his vague snuffling transformed into harsh, desperate sobs. Gyeong-hee was sure she could hear people scolding her for bringing a bawling child to such an important rally, hissing at her to shut him up. She'd hastily swung
25 him around to her front and rocked him gently in her arms, making soothing noises as loudly as she dared. But the boy just kept on crying.

Glancing around her, as a last resort she'd brought her face close to his. "Eobi! Eobi! The scary Eobi will get Myeong-shik if he's bad," she muttered. Still no luck. And then an idea struck her. This time, she held the boy up so that his gaze would fall
30 directly on the portrait of Marx, muttering "Eobi!" in his ear all the while.

Myeong-shik had abruptly swallowed his sobs, and Gyeong-hee let out a sigh of relief. But the very next moment, the little lump of fire in her arms, who was pressing his face into her chest as though trying to tunnel inside her, became racked with the most extraordinary convulsions.

35 "Myeong-shik, Myeong-shik, no! This child..."

Gyeong-hee had been appalled. The corners of his mouth were flecked with foam, and his eyes were glassy and unfocused. Had a doctor happened to be at hand, the incident might well have ended in disaster. In the past week, Myeong-shik had had similar fits on two other occasions, terrified by the Eobi as seen through the apartment window. These convulsions could have been easily prevented if Gyeong-hee had been more scrupulous in her care — she'd drawn the double curtains only over the west-facing window, when she should have known to cover both. Myeong-shik was shaken from his senses by that initial terror; in his eyes the portrait of Kim Il-sung had worn the countenance of the menacing Eobi.

Now, though she had ensured that both sets of curtains were fully closed, Gyeong-hee was far from reassured as she watched her son find what little amusement he could in his toys. At any moment, she was expecting to hear the words "Fifth floor, apartment No. 3!" rapped out from the street below, in the chilling voice of the local Party secretary. If it happened, it would be the third time, and this time, she knew, he would not be fobbed off with an excuse and an apology.

"Fifth floor, apartment No. 3!" Had she imagined it?

"Fifth floor No. 3!"

"Ah, yes." Even after she admitted to herself that the voice was real, it took Gyeong-hee a few moments before she was able to get the words out, and her casual tone sounded forced in her ears.

"Please come down."

So this is it... Gyeong-hee lifted Myeong-shik up and carried him out of the apartment, descending the stairs with heavy feet.

"Again, Comrade Manager? After everything I've told you?"

Though well past forty, the local secretary's lips still bore the flush of youth, and her white-framed glasses contained no prescription. Her voice, on the other hand, was cold and colorless.

"The thing is, Comrade Secretary — "

"That's enough. Do I really have to spell it out for you a third time?" This appeared to be a rhetorical question, as the woman launched straight into her usual speech before Gyeong-hee had the chance to question its necessity. "Comrade Manager, do you have something against the white nylon undercurtain with which the Party has been good enough to provide you? Provided, indeed, as a special consideration for the

houses in our street, which have the honor of being at the city's heart, a place where many foreigners will soon be visiting to see the celebrations. Do you perhaps resent the fact that they were not donated free of charge?"

"That's not it, it's just — "

- 5 "Look. Every other house has those same curtains, so the street can look neat and uniform. Which it would, if it your apartment wasn't sticking out like a sore thumb!"

Jabbing a rigid finger in the direction of the offending curtains, the secretary scowled first at them and then at Gyeong-hee herself.

"Well, as I said, it isn't that I — " Once again, Gyeong-hee found herself interrupted.

- 10 "It's the same story every time. Why do you persist with this obstinacy, Comrade Manager? You might throw your weight around in your job, but collective life is another matter!"

"You go too far..."

- 15 "Too far?" the secretary thundered, though Gyeong-hee's protest had been couched in the mildest terms. She began to flip through the red notebook she'd had tucked under her arm.

- 20 "Given your family's loyalty to the Party, I'll tell you frankly how things stand. I received a report, dated the sixth of September. 'In apartment 3 on the fifth floor of Building 5, every day from around six in the evening until the next morning, blue double curtains are drawn in both windows. I find this extremely suspicious. It could be some kind of secret code, to communicate with spies.'" Clapping the notebook briskly shut, the secretary glanced sharply up at Gyeong-hee. "Such a report will have reached other ears than mine, Comrade Manager. And you dare to tell me that I'm the one who is going too far?"

- 25 Gyeong-hee's eyes were wide with shock — at first. Almost immediately, she felt something bubbling up inside her, moving through her body with real heat and substance. Those who have boldness — who are undaunted, even, in their endurance — know how to hold themselves in check when they have to. But there comes a point when that endurance reaches its limit, and when it does, the full force of their
30 character will manifest with double intensity.

"A secret code? Spies?" Gyeong-hee's laughter finally burst forth, a hearty guffaw that she could not control. She laughed so long and so loud that Myeong-shik whimpered in alarm, and the secretary began to look somewhat cowed.

“Okay,” Gyeong-hee said, still chuckling to herself, “I’ll tell you.” As she drew herself up to her full height, and shifted Myeong-shik higher in her arms, her imposing stature was matched once again by a dignified, commanding air. The laughter had acted as a coarse sieve, straining out her niggling concerns until all that was left was
5 sheer brazen nerve. What could she possibly have to fear?

Even when she trotted off to school as a child, with her bowl cut and satchel, the red arm band awarded to those whose character and comportment marked them out for a glittering career in the Party was a near-permanent fixture of her uniform, and it stayed on her arm through to her college days. After graduating and securing an
10 enviable position, she steadily maintained her rank as a Party cadre and was entrusted with ever-greater responsibilities. Having a father who was martyred in the Korean War meant her standing was sufficiently secure to not be threatened by the minor slip-ups that were inevitable now and then.

Her husband, though the graduate of a distinguished revolutionary academy, lacked
15 her confident, decisive outlook. Congenital timidity was the only reason to quail before the business of a child’s nervous disposition! So their son found Marx’s portrait frightening; did it follow that his parents opposed the man’s ideology?

“After all,” she continued, her voice made husky by a rumble of amusement, “can the full story be worse than what you think, that I should be denounced as a spy?”
20 Beginning with the incident during the rally, Gyeong-hee rattled through the whole history of Myeong-shik’s condition, ending with the business of the double curtains.

The secretary frowned.

“But why cover the window on this side, too? Marx’s portrait isn’t visible from there.”

25 “No, but the Great Leader’s is.”

“So?”

“You know the saying: The child who fears turtles will flinch at a manhole cover.”

“What? Your son is frightened by the portrait of our Great Leader?” The secretary’s gaze seemed to sharpen suddenly behind her glasses, but Gyeong-hee was past being
30 deterred by such things.

“In any case,” she finished, “now that I’ve explained everything, I’d appreciate your understanding. I can’t shut my child up in a cupboard, or watch him every minute of

the day, so what else am I to do? But tomorrow, during the ceremony, I promise I'll keep the curtains open."

"That is not acceptable," the secretary insisted, her clipped tone rising as she delivered her final remarks. "This isn't some petty quarrel over home furnishings.

5 The review due to take place after the ceremony is intended to weed out any deviance from Party ideology — you are aware of this, Comrade Manager? I've nothing more to say."

By the time Gyeong-hee had come up with a response, the secretary had vanished around the corner of the street, like a black hawk flying away with its prey.

10 Less than two hours later, both sets of double curtains were taken down in apartment No. 3 on the fifth floor of Building 5, though not by Gyeong-hee herself.

She was in the kitchen getting dinner ready, with a great banging of pots and pans and a slamming of cupboard doors, remembering the contempt that had laced the secretary's words. So when her husband entered the apartment, she didn't even
15 realize it — he wasn't due home for another hour.

"Why have you drawn the double curtains?" Startled, Gyeong-hee looked up to find her husband standing there in the kitchen doorway, still clutching the handle of the door, as though reluctant to commit himself to entering. His eyebrows, two vivid black slashes that contrasted with his pallid complexion, curved up toward the middle
20 of his forehead like the character for the number eight. "Well? Why have you drawn them again?"

Three vertical furrows appeared in Gyeong-hee's forehead as her hand paused in chopping the aubergine, producing the character for "stream" to match her husband's "eight."

25 "Answer me!"

Watching her husband dash over to both sets of windows and tear down the double curtains, Gyeong-hee left what she was doing and came out of the kitchen, picking up Myeong-shik from where he'd been playing on the floor.

30 The curtains dealt with, Gyeong-hee's husband turned back to her. "I've told you time and time again to get rid of those damned curtains. As far as I can see, it just goes in one ear and out the other. If you were still a new bride fresh from the provinces then perhaps you'd have an excuse, but you've had more than enough time to get to know Pyongyang by now. How can you still not understand the way things work in this city?"

Suddenly deflated, he slumped down in his usual spot near the wall, still staring at Gyeong-hee in apparent disbelief.

“Wasn’t I telling you only yesterday about the ‘Rabbit with Three Burrows’? Like the rabbit who keeps three burrows to hurry into as needed, you can never be too careful.

5 That’s the moral of the story. Always stamp on a stone bridge before crossing, to check that it will bear your weight. Those are the rules for living in Pyongyang. So what on earth possessed you, today of all days?”

When no answer was forthcoming, Gyeong-hee’s husband fished his cigarettes out of his pocket, stuck one between his lips, and lit it. He drew on it several times in quick
10 succession, with a noisy smacking of his lips, released a lungful of smoke as a long sigh, and roused himself, somewhat revived.

“What’s the most important theory in all of Marx’s thought?” he asked, raising his arm to point to the man himself.

15 “Oh! First you talk about how long it’s been since I was a new bride, and now you expect me to go back to the classroom?”

“The dictatorship of the proletariat. To which the theory of capital and the construction of scientific communism are both related, of course, but secondary. If capital is the weapon of capitalism, the weapon of socialism, which governs all our lives here, is the proletarian dictatorship. A dictatorship of the people! Yes, the
20 people of this city understand all too well the reality of that idea. That’s why they live according to the principles of the ‘Rabbit with Three Burrows.’ But you go about without a care in the world, thinking your martyred father puts you beyond reproach. What do you think that will be worth, the day you slip up and find the people against you? You think the Eobi is just a fairy tale?”

25 His eyes were burning with passion. When had her meek and mild husband ever shown such fervor before? But Gyeong-hee was too impatient to waste time wondering about this change.

“That’s enough!” she snapped as soon as she had the chance. “I don’t know what went wrong at work that’s put you in this mood, but I haven’t the time to stand here
30 and be lectured at.”

“For goodness’ sake, how can you be so naïve?” Her husband stamped his foot in frustration. “‘A bad day at work’? I’ve just come from the department of information!”

“The department of information?” Blanching, Gyeong-hee narrowed her eyes and studied her husband more closely. Then she laughed, relieved, as it all became plain. “Ah! I get it. Because of the ‘secretcode,’ right?” She laughed again.

“What? You were called there too?”

5 “No, but our street secretary was just here, telling me all about this report that had been filed against us. She did hint that it might have gone higher up.”

“And what did you tell her? About the reason for the curtains?”

“The truth, of course. You think that’s worse than being accused of spying? A ‘secret code’ — ha!”

10 “There’s nothing to laugh about, I tell you! I tried to explain that Myeong-shik must have inherited my feeble constitution, that that’s why he has this condition, and do you know what the department chief said?”

“No, what?”

15 “That our physical constitution isn’t all we inherit — that our mind-set comes from our parents too.”

“He really said that?”

“Yes! And what would it say about you or me, if we’d passed on to our son a fear of the Great Leader’s portrait? Well?”

“But that’s ridiculous...”

20 “Is it? It’s as simple as two times two.”

Outside the window, something glittered like the flash of a knife, followed by an almighty clang, as though a metal barrel were crashing down all five flights of their building’s stairs. The wind slammed their front door shut, which Gyeong-hee’s husband had left open in his haste; no sooner had the echodied away than it was
25 replaced by the gentle drumming of rain against the window pane.

The rain carried on late into the night, repeatedly dropping to a murmur only to return to a fresh crescendo. Myeong-shik’s sleep was so fitful it barely warranted the name, and Gyeong-hee had to sit by him all through the night, soothing each bout of tears.

It was the night before National Day, a day of celebration which the entire city had been anticipating for months, and Gyeong-hee was so exhausted that she nodded off time after time as she sat by her son. Each time the rain slackened, the electric lanterns festooning the streets flickered back on again, their light causing
5 multicolored flowers to bloom on the windowpanes. Had it been a different holiday, the Lunar New Year or Harvest Festival, the sight would have lightened Gyeong-hee's spirits, but these lights just seemed to mock her.

As she'd drop off, then startle herself awake again, her hand would automatically feel for Myeong-shik. But then her head would resume its jerky nodding, like a pestle
10 pounding rice flour.

The surge of the rain, the sighing of the wind, the night lying otherwise silent in the streets —eventually, all these disjointed elements came together to form a single dissonant chord, unfurling an alien cityscape in Gyeong-hee's exhausted mind. A drawn-out cry blew in from somewhere, reverberating throughout the sleeping city.
15 "Eo-bi."

"What are you doing hanging around when you should be asleep at home? Planning to spoil tomorrow's celebrations?"

But what was this? A monstrous, hairy figure straddling two of the tallest apartment buildings, a foot on each roof? It was! None other than the Eobi himself!

20 So horrified that her wits deserted her, Gyeong-hee turned and ran for her life. But the tense little faces peering out of each window, as densely as the cells in a hive, scrutinizing the movements in the street below, belonged not to people but to rabbits! They were the rabbits from the fable, the one her husband had learned by heart as a child. But how had Gyeong-hee become trapped inside it?

25 Frantically scanning her surroundings — she was back in her apartment now, but the nightmare was ongoing — she spotted another of the rabbits lying stretched out on the bed over there, a particularly pathetic-looking specimen. Its mouth formed a pitiful O of surprise, but it was fast asleep and snoring thunderously. It must have been the Eobi's harrying roar that had left it so drained! But what was that row of
30 small white teeth she glimpsed inside its gaping mouth? Why, it wasn't a rabbit at all — it was her husband!

"Ma-ma!"

"Oh, oh! Sleep, sleep, Myeong-shik..."

Even in the grip of her trance, Gyeong-hee had been mechanically going through the motions of soothing the restless Myeong-shik, but now her movements began to slacken again, little by little. She slipped into that same sleep in which, in spite of the howling wind, the exhausted city was readying itself.

5 As soon as the next day dawned, people rushed to their windows to peer anxiously upward. Young or old, man or woman, there couldn't have been a single person in the whole city who wasn't examining the sky, trying to second-guess the weather. The signs were far from promising — the sky was covering itself with ink-black clouds, threatening an escalation in the already steady rain.

10 Around six o'clock in the morning, though, it appeared that this was a false alarm — the rain petered out, and the sky showed its face as though nothing had ever happened. In the barracks, schools, and factories, the hundred thousand ceremony participants began to stir themselves, all according to plan.

But not even 30 minutes had gone by before the sky put on another bombastic
15 display. This time the rain went well beyond a mere shower, pouring down in great, vigorous sheets, enough to throw the whole city into turmoil. Sewers overflowed into seething gutters, and people sought refuge anywhere they could — in subways and apartment buildings, in underground stations and bus stop shelters, beneath the awnings of public buildings or the lintels of front doors — watching the raging
20 torrent with dismay.

Eight o'clock went by, then nine o'clock... Only when the clock hand showed a scant 45 minutes remaining before the ceremony's scheduled start time of ten o'clock did the rain abruptly cease, as though the sky were giving its reluctant permission for everything to go ahead as planned. A rainbow strung itself between Yanggak Isle and
25 Moran Peak, like a banner that might have read "Impossible to Hold Ceremony at Scheduled Time." Patches of clear blue began to show through, and all the signs pointed to a day of glorious sunshine.

Now the ceremony would be able to go ahead as planned, with the cleanly washed city as a stylish backdrop — if the hundred thousand people scattered throughout the
30 city center could manage to converge on Kim Il-sung Square within the next 45 minutes. But that would have been like expecting new leaves to sprout from withered trees. In place of the rain, the sky began to crackle with innumerable radio broadcasts, including transmissions from the chief broadcasting offices of certain Western countries. "North Korean National Day celebrations, three months in the
35 planning, postponed due to torrential rain!" Thus the foreigners displayed their ignorance of Pyongyang.

“Citizens, your attention. The ceremony will proceed as planned. All participants must, without exception, present themselves at their designated assembly point.”

5 This broadcast on radio channel 3 shrilled its message into the city’s collective eardrum. From the subways and apartment buildings, underground stations and bus stop shelters, beneath the awnings of public buildings or the lintels of front doors, people dashed out like bullets fired from a gun. Only Gyeong-hee remained where she was, alone but for Myeong-shik in her hushed apartment. She heard the broadcast along with everybody else, understood the emphasis implicit in the words “without exception,” but she knew she was exempt from her unit’s roll call — she had a sick
10 child to take care of. At least her apartment’s enviable location meant she’d have a prime view of the ceremony. Moving to the window, she looked out over the vast expanse of the square — still deserted, despite the repeated broadcasts, and with only thirty-five minutes left on the clock.

Thirty minutes, twenty-five...

15 And then a miracle began to unfold. One by one, columns began to form in the square, neatly divided like blocks of tofu. Each column accumulated new blocks in rapid succession, as though the phrase “without exception” were a long steel spit pushing through the city, skewering people in bunches and delivering them promptly to the square. Eventually, with only five minutes to go, the entire square was a sea of
20 color, with columns stretching out on both sides of Department Store 1, passing in front of the Children’s Palace, and continuing all the way to the Yangcheon crossroads.

Senior state functionaries began to make their way out onto the VIP platform. A hushed silence descended on the square, which quivered with palpitations like the sea
25 after a storm has just subsided.

“Informing the citizens. We have created a miracle here today, which has made the people of the world shudder with awe. One hundred thousand citizens have assembled here in Kim Il-sung Square. One hundred thousand citizens within forty-five minutes...”

30 Unbeknownst to herself, Gyeong-hee pressed her hands together in front of her chest at this new broadcast from radio channel 3. For some reason, her heart began to shudder.

“Shudder”! Yes, that was the exact word for it. What had just taken place in front of Gyeong-hee’s eyes was a spectacle inducing the awe of terror rather than the wonder
35 felt in witnessing a miracle. Not even the threat of immediate death could have

induced such unconditional obedience. What terrifying force had caused this city to give birth to such an incomprehensible upheaval?

As it turned out, Gyeong-hee did not have to wait long for an answer.

5 The post-ceremony review went on for a week in various cities throughout the country. At each unit's review hall, the Party secretary's sharp tone was punctuated by a strike of the hand on the rostrum. Those on the receiving end of this tongue-lashing would stand with their heads bowed, pressing their lips together to swallow stinging tears and stifle their cries of despair.

10 Anything deemed to have marred the celebrations, even down to a so-called lack of fervor, was exhaustively accounted for. The most severe punishment tended to be expulsion from the capital — “banishment” was the official term. This was effected with ruthless efficiency. The banished were not even permitted to pack their own belongings. Once the verdict had been handed down — “Comrade, your behavior at the time of the celebrations has been judged as unacceptable; according to Party
15 regulations, your household will be relocated to the countryside” — the punishment was discharged immediately.

Under the careful scrutiny of a representative from the department of information, several officials arrived with straw bags and knotted rice sacks, into which
20 belongings were packed so swiftly that the offenders never had time to react. Things were arranged so as to leave as little time as possible before the train bound for their new home departed. The representative stayed by the offenders' side the whole time, in the truck to the station and then onto the train, so deeply concerned to see them to their destination — which was so far from Pyongyang in every sense that it seemed an alien land — that he never once let them out of his sight.

25 All of which was exactly what happened to Gyeong-hee and her family. The verdict was just as her husband had predicted: “Neglecting to educate their son in the proper revolutionary principles, with a negative effect on the National Day ceremony; further, making coarse remarks about the portrait of Karl Marx, the father of communism, and comparing the portrait of our Great Leader to a manhole cover. The
30 accused are therefore guilty of jeopardizing the preservation of our Party's ideology...”

There were four passengers in the truck, which left close to midnight, the icy chill of mid-September biting down to the bone: Han Gyeong-hee, her husband Park Sung-il and son Park Myeong-shik, plus the representative from the department of
35 information, crouching in the cargo space among the family's belongings. The seat next to the driver was free, but the representative, ever solicitous of his charges, had elected to stay next to the family.

The baby cried and cried. His exhausted, monotonous sobs, and the hemp hood that had been tied under Gyeong-hee's chin, created a vivid picture of the family's suffering. Her husband chain-smoked throughout the journey, and when a spark from his pipe landed on one of the bundles of clothes, burning a small hole through the fabric, no one moved to brush it off.

Before he left, the driver had to bend over the engine, coaxing the sputtering machine into life. Even that brief space of time was enough for a multitude of thoughts to come piling into Gyeong-hee's mind. They popped up one after another, a bewildering procession of disjointed fragments. There were the potsherds she'd used to serve up a meal of sand, when she was still young enough to play at keeping house, and the time she'd scrapped with the neighbor's son, who'd dared to call her a tomboy. Or that winter vacation in her first year of college, when she arrived home after taking the night train alone across the country, a distance of some thirty ri. "Look at this girl!" her grandmother had exclaimed. "Does she know no fear? She must be possessed by the spirit of some general!" And it was true — with a martyred father to give strength to her own inherent daring, up until now Gyeong-hee truly had lived in ignorance of what it was to fear.

Yet now fear seemed to govern her entire existence.

The door to the driver's cab banged shut and the engine roared into life. The sound scattered Gyeong-hee's thoughts, and her field of vision narrowed to take in only the window to her side, brightly lit as though someone were seeing them off. Gyeong-hee shifted and coughed as the vehicle jerked forward, trying to dislodge the column of water vapor that seemed to burn behind her breastbone.

Was it the knife-sharp glance of the representative that made her feel that burning sensation inside her? Or the decorative lanterns strung from the roof of the state department building, which seemed to command her to marshal her thoughts along the proper channel? Her blank gaze shifted, and the square's two portraits loomed into view: Karl Marx, his features buried in a bristling sea of beard; and Kim Il-sung, his lips set in a stern, disapproving line. Two red "specters" bellowing at Gyeong-hee: "Stop this useless brooding, Comrade! You dare to think your punishment unjust? When you're given an order you follow it, without exception. Without exception, do you hear? Don't you know to whom this city belongs?"

Those menacing, pitiless specters kept Gyeong-hee's grief inside her and crushed any hope of a reprieve.

Her limbs began to tremble, and not only because of the September chill. Fear swelled inside her — fear, something which had to be instilled in you from birth if you were to survive life in this country. Now, at last, she had the answer to the riddle,

understood the force that had moved a hundred thousand people like puppets on a string. If her husband were to quiz her now on Marx's most significant theory, how much more seriously, rigorously, confidently she could have answered.

5 The truck raced on to the station. On both sides of the road, the clusters of apartment windows mysteriously recalled to her dream from the night before National Day: the "Rabbit with Three Burrows"... Though it was close to midnight, Gyeong-hee sensed hundreds of figures hovering at those windows, peering out like rabbits from their burrows, eyes narrowed in accusation. If the Eobi were to give the order, the figures said, they would flock to the square in even less time than before, without exception!