

THE UNDERGROUND
VILLAGE

SHORT STORIES BY KANG KYEONG-AE

Translated by ANTON HUR

Introduced by SANG-KYUNG LEE

saying you are a product or a thing, quite the opposite. But these are the two ways that we as human beings create our character in this world.
Which will you choose?

February 1935

SALT

Peasants

Word came that the Chinese landowner Fang Tong had come to the village.

The woman's husband took his good overcoat down from its peg and went out the door. The woman could not help being agitated at the sight of her husband disappearing into the distance. Was it really Fang Tong this time? Or the vigilantes again, luring her husband out with a lie? She wanted to cry. Her husband put up with their terrorizing day after day without a word of complaint. It broke her heart. And there he went again, into who knew what sort of danger! She sighed. There was nothing to be done for poor people like them; the only way out of their suffering was death. What could they do except die? She found herself scratching at the wall in agitation. She looked down at her fingernails, cracked and ugly. It was so easy to be killed, yet so difficult to die. Such was life.

Years ago, they had been forcibly driven from their homeland without much more than a basket of goods to their name, and it had felt as if they faced a voyage over a vast ocean towards certain death. At least they managed to rent a patch

of farming land from a Chinese landowner, but Chinese soldiers constantly threatened their lives, and the woman and her husband only survived from day to day. Every morning when they set out for the fields, they looked towards the sky and prayed they would be safe.

The soldiers, unable to survive on their pay, went around extorting the peasant farmers. This had gone from happening rarely to being a common occurrence, often in broad daylight. The peasants realized they needed to prepare bribes of money and rice if they wanted to live and had them ready even if it meant going hungry. Then the communists came, which scared the landowners and soldiers off into the city, forcing the soldiers to limit their forays into lands unoccupied by the communists. But when the communists were driven out, the militia arrived.

The woman continued to stare at her fingernails and thought about the many times she had almost died at the hands of Chinese soldiers. That she was alive today was a miracle. She looked up. Her husband was already out of sight; she gazed at a fluttering banner above a distant wall and wondered whether he had reached the next village yet. The anxiety that she had forgotten for a moment filled her heart once more. Her husband had told her he had already paid the vigilantes, so it may be true that Fang Tong had come. It was planting season; it made sense for him to visit. But if he were here, her son Bongshik, who was away, would miss Fang Tong, and Bongshik would not be able to bring back his share of the crops. She kept staring at the faraway wall. Her husband and some other peasants had built it over a period of a whole year. It looked like the fortress walls of their old home.

The wall reminded her of a night five years ago. Chaos had erupted, the sound of guns and shouting coming from all directions. They had hid in the foxhole they had secretly dug near the kitchen hearth. When they emerged days later, Fang Tong had fled, his family slaughtered. Fang Tong went on to

buy a house in Yongjing, take another wife, and sire more children, ending up living almost exactly as he did before.

Since Fang Tong fled to town, the house the woman was staring at now belonged to the militia. It was their banner that flew and their guard who stood watch.

She looked elsewhere into the distance. The fields were flooded with sunlight, and birds flew high and unfettered in the blue sky. When would she and her husband get to have land like that? She sighed and stared out at the land they had managed to purchase, a plot on the red mountain. They had tamed the harsh earth of the slope, and now it was arable, but they could not plant anything other than sweet potatoes for the time being.

They could try planting millet, maybe sorghum ... She did not mean to, but she began thinking of her homeland again. Her field by the young pines that brushed her knees! Her coffin would be pelted with soil before she forgot that field! How every crop took root in it and thrived! *That bastard*, she thought as she imagined Old Man Chambong walking up to that field. Her heart throbbed, and her hands and feet trembled. She tried with all her might not to think of her homeland, to keep from flying apart in anger. She found herself standing in the yard and listening to the loud twitter of the sparrows hopping on a pile of hay in the corner.

She turned and went back into the house. Everything in the room called out for her touch. She took up the broom and swept the floor. She caressed the holes in the straw mat as she thought of how they had to have a good life and show that horrible Old Man Chambong ... She held back tears. No matter how determinedly they worked the land, their only rewards turned out to be hunger and poverty. What a fate this was, and how cruel was it that God blessed some but cursed others! She carefully swept each room. A sweet potato rolled away from her broom. She picked it up, put it in a basket of them, and started to snap off their sprouts. Most

of the peasant houses had the kitchen and the main room in the same space, with a cauldron installed in the corner. She prepared her food beside it. When they first arrived, more than anything else she hated the houses, which felt like caves or cowsheds at best. There was nowhere for her to go when they had a visitor, so she had no choice but to sit while silently facing the guest. But now the presence of a male visitor did not bother her, and the house was more or less tolerable. They never forgot to keep a secret foxhole dug near the mouth of the earthen oven. Whenever they heard gunshots, the family would leap into the hole and stay inside for days on end. They kept their clothes and crops in it, taking out what they needed for their daily lives. They had to do all of this because of the soldiers and the bandits.

She finished handling the sweet potatoes and started sorting through the red beans. The sound of the beans bouncing and rolling soon echoed through the quiet house. Her eyes felt tired, and the sparrows grew louder. She began to think. If they were going to start sowing tomorrow, they needed rice for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and if Bongshik did not meet Fang Tong then he would not be able to bring the rice, but he ought to bring home the other food for side dishes ...

Her thoughts faded as she grew sleepy. She rubbed her eyes and went outside. Her eyes came to rest on the hardened bricks of fermented bean paste hanging from ropes on the wall. That's right, she needed to hang up the rest of the bricks. She brought out a basket of the blocks and started hanging them one by one outside the door, brushing the dust off the older ones and lifting each of them from the wall for inspection. She should make some soy sauce and a jar of chilli paste ... but then, she would need some salt ...

She sighed and sat down, thinking of home once more. They used to brush their teeth with salt because it was so common ... One could flush out an upset stomach with just a handful of salt ... Compared to some of the things they

had had to do without since their banishment, salt seemed like such a small thing, but she had cried many times over their lack of it. Twenty won and ten jeon for a *mal* of salt! A peasant farmer could never afford an entire *mal*, buying it instead in smaller packets. They could only afford to preserve things whenever they had some salt, and when the bean paste would rot instead of fermenting they had to make do with the sparsely-seasoned preserves, but because the preserves were so bland, any dish she made from them would be bland as well.

During meals, her habit now was to look closely at her husband's expression and feel as if she were at fault. Her husband never said a word, but there were times when he would take a bite and grimace, and resignedly put down his spoon. She would feel the rice turn to sand in her mouth, put her spoon down too, and look away. Not even able to serve up a hearty broth for her husband who came home drenched and stinking of sweat and hard work ... she was worthless! Could she truly call herself a wife?

Sometimes, her husband would dump a spoonful of chilli flakes into his bowl to stimulate his appetite. His eyes would tear up, their capillaries fit to burst, and beads of sweat would form around his mouth. Why are you adding so much dried chilli, she would almost say before catching herself. And here she was, responsible for the family's meals ... what was she to do?

She sighed again, looking down at the remaining bean paste blocks, wondering what she was going to serve for dinner. She heard footsteps and looked up. Her daughter Bongyeom was back from school, carrying her book bag.

'Why have you brought your book bag?'

'It's a half day. Oh, you've taken out the bean paste blocks.' Bongyeom beamed as she picked up one of the blocks and inhaled its aroma.

'Did you see your father on the way home?'

'Yes, Fang Tong is here.'

'Fang Tong? You're sure?' She let out a sigh of relief, only now realizing how nervous she had been all morning. 'Where did you see your father?'

'Fang Tong's house. He was sitting with the militia. I don't know what they were doing.'

The tension spreading to the woman from Bongyeom's sudden frown! 'Was Fang Tong with them?'

Bongyeom nodded. Then, she smiled. She took out shal-lors from her book bag. 'So many shallots growing behind our school!'

'Enough for a whole meal!' The woman fondled them in approval before choosing one of the bigger ones, twisting off its stem, peeling it, and eating it. Bongyeom also popped one in her mouth.

'Mother, if only I had some exercise shoes ...'

The words had escaped her by accident, and Bongyeom fearfully looked away from her mother to the shallots on her lap. She could almost see, between the shallots, the lovely exercise shoes that her classmate Yong-ae wore as she ran as light as a sparrow.

'You crazy child and your wants!' The woman rubbed her nose and glared at her sideways.

Bongyeom felt the weight of the shallots turn into that of new exercise shoes. She mumbled, 'Mother, every single want to you is crazy.'

The woman turned to her. 'What else can your wants be? When we can barely afford to educate you, and you're going on about exercise shoes! Look, child, it's only thanks to the Enlightenment that you're getting an education at all. When we were growing up, where would we have gone to learn? We had to fetch the water, weave hessian, tend the fields, and the only thing we could wish for was a pretty pair of straw sandals ... Your father and mother are breaking their backs on the fields, but you're going on about exercise shoes! Be glad

you're not starving. If you want to go on about your crazy wants, don't go to school!'

'You're not the one sending me to school!' Bongyeom felt slightly scared by her own rebellion, but she persisted.

The woman's face turned red with fury. 'Fine, even if it were your father sending you to school, I would've told you to quit. What kind of a daughter are you? Talking back just because she has some learning in her head instead of being silent when she's spoken to! Yapping away with her jaw hanging loose! Fine, we have no money ... If we had the money to buy you those silly shoes, we would've given Bongshik more schooling.'

Bongyeom could barely keep down the raw shallots she had been eating without any rice or water. Her eyes filled with tears. 'Why don't we have any money? Why can't we send Big Brother to school?'

Then Bongyeom remembered something that her teacher had talked to her about, and she realized it was not her mother who was at fault for their poverty. But she could not help resenting her mother whose first instinct was always to castigate her daughter.

'How do I know why we don't have money! Why were you born to beggars instead of rich parents! You useless child, I'd be better off without you.'

Bongyeom stared at her mother. She was reminded of what happened at last autumn's threshing, how her mother and father's harvest of rice was all taken away by Fang Tong. Her mother's face then was the same as it was now. Mother and Father, who knew nothing of resisting, nothing of fighting back! Her mother, who was so wretched it was almost pathetic!

'Mother, you have to know why we don't have any money. Why can't we afford exercise shoes? Why can't we afford Big Brother's education? You must see the reason why!'

She realized as she was shouting this that there was nothing

wrong with her desire for exercise shoes. She began to recall a thing or two that her teacher had said to her ...

'You stupid girl, why else would we be poor? We have no land. If only we had some land ...' The woman's heart was so full of sorrow that she closed her mouth. But she could not stop her memories of the field by the young pines, her eyes tearing up. She could almost see it through her tears, a wavering mirage.

The sound of gunshots! Mother and daughter bolted upright, their eyes wide. The dog that had been napping by the pile of hay was huddled to them in no time, barking.

Exile

They frantically went from imagining the bandits to the communists and back as they stared out at the next village. The sound of dogs barking made them feel more nervous than ever. The wind, so soothingly cool until a moment ago, turned into pure fear itself as it brushed against their skirts.

'Oh, if only your father would come ... Why are we just standing here, something seems to have happened, something has come ...'

The woman's face was contorted, and she could not keep still. More gunshots. They fled into the house. Now they were certain something had happened in the next village. People had been shot and killed, the woman reckoned, and a fire danced inside her that she could barely contain. But she dared not leave the house. She kept getting the feeling that something was coming towards them.

'What are we going to do?' the woman mumbled. 'Bongshik hasn't come home.'

Her husband was not safe, either. And what if the gunshots had something to do with him meeting Fang Tong and the militia?

'You said you saw Father sitting with Fang Tong? With your own eyes?' Her mouth was dry, and she could barely breathe. Bongyeom could not answer with her voice, so she answered with her eyes instead.

They heard the sound of footsteps. They jumped into the foxhole in the corner of the kitchen, clinging to each other as they stood over a sack of potatoes. Someone was coming to kill them!

A while later they heard, 'Mother?'

The sound of her son's voice brought the woman back to her senses, but despite shouting back to him, she could not bring herself to leave the foxhole right away. When she finally could, she was found herself speechless again. Bongshik stood before her, covered in blood, and her husband seemed to have collapsed beside him with blood running like a stream from his neck.

'Oh!' The woman let out a shriek and fell to her knees. All she could do was stare at her husband.

Bongshik's heart went out to her. 'Mother, you must be strong! It was a communist bullet. Please help me.'

He tried to raise her to her feet, but the woman sank to the floor again. All she could do was mumble, 'Your father, your father ...'

It was only when dawn was about to break when the woman could speak again, between bouts of loud, uncontrollable crying.

'How was it you came to meet your father? Was he alive then? What did he say to you?'

Bongshik only smacked his lips as if he had tasted something bitter. 'What's the point in carrying on with this life! he spat.

Then, he sighed. He was only venting, as his mother's expectant face made him uncomfortable. It had infuriated him that his father would act all grateful to Fang Tong and the militia, and he knew it would only come back to hurt his

father someday. He had argued about this with him before, but his father was adamant. In truth, his father had little choice in the matter; as his life would have been made unbearable otherwise.

Bongshik had thought a hundred times that his father was on the wrong side, but once he heard from Yong-ae's father that his own father had been shot, his rage at the injustice of the thing made his head hurt too much to tell right from wrong.

The next day, after his father's funeral, Bongshik said he would be going for a walk. He never came back.

Mother and daughter waited fervently for him to return but come spring, they had not received so much as a letter. Unable to wait, they went off looking for Bongshik. They searched for him for a month but never found him. They came to Longjing, remembering how he would mutter about trying to work his way through school someday every time he had visited that town. But they did not find a single student who looked like Bongshik at any of the school grounds they lurked beside. After their visit to the last school there, the woman found herself going back and forth between resentment and worry over her child's disappearance. What if something happened to him? Where was he? Had he fallen in with some bad men? Where would he be sleeping tonight? Her worries only deepened.

Around sunset, they paid a visit to Fang Tong. They had thought of visiting his house since they first came to Longjing. The plan was to ask him for help if they could not find Bongshik on their own. Fang Tong came to greet them as they entered the main gate of his house.

'You're here. When did you come into town?'

He seemed glad enough to meet them. Bongyeom's mother observed his expression closely and let out an inaudible sigh of relief that at least he was not throwing them out.

Fang Tong parted Bongyeom's head. 'Where were you? I visited your house once. I was sorry to have missed you.'

'We've been looking for our Bongshik. Where might he be? The woman's heart pounded as she waited for his answer.

'I haven't seen him. I don't know.'

She lowered her head. Fang Tong took them into the hall with a long *kang* bed-stove where a young woman who seemed to be his wife sat and eyed both mother and daughter with suspicion. Fang Tong introduced them.

His wife said, 'Come up and sit.'

They went up and sat on the heated floor. Fang Tong poured tea for them. The mother and daughter took in the scent of the light tea and glanced around. The room was wide, with the *kang* running down its length. The floor under the *kang* was paved with sparkling stone. There was a marble table by a window, and on it a goldfish swimming in a bowl and a few objects they did not know the purpose of. On the wall above the window was a framed photograph of Fang Tong and his family, along with a dizzying array of slightly faded paintings. On the wall opposite the table was a painting of Butlasan Mountain done in thick brushstrokes, and on the next wall was a mirror as large as a door. Outside the window was a flower bed, so blue it cooled the eye.

They were delirious, as if they had come into a field of stars. They became so ashamed of how their poor appearances looked in comparison that they could scarcely draw breath.

Fang Tong sat back and lit a cigarette. 'You have family in this town?'

Bongyeom's mother lifted her head. 'No.'

She felt a wave of loneliness hit her at his question. How pitiful she was to come to Fang Tong for help. She stared out the window to the flowerbed. What beautiful spring colours! The millet must have sprouted from the earth by now! She should be tending the fields, how strange not to be working. What were they to eat in the autumn ...

She looked into the patch of perfect blue sky beyond, and it was like looking into that well-watered rice paddy she used

to own back home. How she loved even the waters of that field! How tall the stalks would have grown by now! And was that sky not the same one that sheltered her old field? Where her husband's solid legs, thick with black hair, had sloshed through the water as he worked ... Her heart hurt as she turned to Fang Tong again. The thought of her husband being dead while Fang Tong was so alive and well made her head heavy with her rising sorrow.

'You have no family. Where are you staying?' Fang Tong asked after a long pause.

The woman's sorrow and anger turned into tears that began to spill before Fang Tong. She lowered her head and wiped her eyes with a corner of her skirt. Bongyeom could not help but tear up too at the sight of her mother's distress.

Fang Tong was dismayed. He was quickly beginning to realize they wanted something from him, a place to stay perhaps. What a mess. If he wanted to send them away before dinner, he would have to give them some money. But what if he let them stay for a while and work? A smile crept on to Fang Tong's lips. 'You have no family here. Stay with us. Bongshik knows this place.'

Hearing Bongshik's name fall from Fang Tong's lips added resentment to the woman's sorrow and anger. When was Bongshik going to give word about his whereabouts? Had he met the same fate as his father, struck down by some bandit? She began to cry even louder. After that, mother and daughter stayed at Fang Tong's house, living from day to day doing work about the place.

Fang Tong became friendlier by the day. On some evenings, he did not leave their room until late as they talked into the night. He sometimes brought them fabric or things to eat. Whenever that happened, Bongyeom's mother was so moved that she would not be able to sleep until very late.

It was the night after Fang Tong's wife had left to go to her mother's home. The woman was mending Fang Tong's

underclothes that his wife had washed and laid out to dry. There was no telling when his wife would be back, but she would want the mending work to be done by the time of her return. The woman had to work the sewing machine day and night. She had only learned how to use the machine since coming to that house, so she was still unused to it. She was anxious should the needle break or she somehow harm the machine.

She heard the sad strains of Fang Tong's reed flute coming from his room. Fang Tong usually played the flute or the zither at night. The zither sounded like a puppy scratching at the door and whining for its mother. But the flute was somewhat tolerable.

She sighed as the end of the needle energetically sprang up and down against the fabric.

'Oh Bongshik, why aren't you looking for your mother ...' she mumbled. She thought about her son all the time. Whenever someone visited the house, she listened in as much as she could in case they came bearing news of him. Her diligence was unrewarded as there was no news of him that day either. Fang Tong seemed grateful to them, but his wife made her dislike of them very clear. This made the woman resent and miss Bongshik more, and cry more times than she could count. The longer they stayed, the more she was sure that they would have to move on from this house. But she kept her anxious thoughts to herself as she could not think of a better situation. Should she get Fang Tong alone and ask him to get her a rented house? She thought of his fat face blowing the flute in his room. But how could she ask him for such a thing, and even if she did find a house, what about bows and other household goods? How was she to run a house with nothing? She stared into the light of the candlelit lamp.

The sound of the flute stopped, and the house became silent. The only thing she could hear was Bongyeom's breathing as she slept. Sometimes, as she gazed at a cloud of mayflies

tenaciously holding on to life by the light of the lamp, she thought of her husband's short life. He never once got to eat a good meal, all he had were chili flakes that made him sweat profusely ... Why was salt so expensive here? Although this house seemed to use it liberally enough. Of course, that was because they had money. Money? Money can help you do anything. Money could buy all the expensive salt she had so longed for. Why had they not managed to save any of theirs?

She heard the sound of heavy footsteps, and the door slid fully open with a crash. Fang Tong entered, wearing black trousers and a white tunic, smiling. She quickly stood up with her sewing in her hands.

'Sit down! Have you been working?' Fang Tong's gaze moved from her face to her sewing.

The woman came and sat down by the lamp, wondering if she should ask him to find her a rented house or not. She clamped down on the words that threatened to leak from her lips as she tried to discern his mood, watching his face.

'Whose clothes are these? Mine?' Fang Tong fondled the clothes and said, 'Mine, I see ... Are you hungry? I have tea and sweets in my room.'

He pulled at the sewing. Any other time she would have followed him, but the fact of his wife's absence made her hesitate.

'I'm not hungry.'

She felt a strange shame that seemed to brush against the ends of her eyebrows. Fang Tong snatched her sewing away from her.

'Let's go. Come on, come on.'

Staring at her sewing, she felt trapped. Should she ask him about the rental now or not ...?

'Are you coming?'

Fang Tong had raised his voice. She jumped to her feet. But as she looked at the fold of flesh over the back of Fang Tong's collar, she felt a sudden distaste, and her feet refused to follow

him. Fang Tong turned around at the door. His face then had a fearful anger that she could not put into words. Defeated, she came down from the *kang*.

Looking back at the sleeping Bongyeom, her heart was so heavy that she wanted to weep loudly.

Leaving

It was sunset one late summer day. The woman looked up from her sewing, rubbed her eyes. The shadow of the roof awning fell long over her red door. Was Fang Tong coming tonight? Where had he gone all day? She wanted to ask Fang Tong's wife this whenever she saw her, but his wife always seemed listless now. She dared not disturb her. But whenever it got to this time of day, she wondered whether he would visit her that night. Not that she was happy when he visited, but somehow, she missed him when he did not come. How nice it would be if he came... *I must say something to him this time, but what?* Her ears turned red. Did he even know how she felt about him? Of course not, men were like that; they were not interested in her feelings. She imagined Fang Tong's face, and in her mind, she gazed at it with resentment.

Ever since that night, Fang Tong's attitude, no matter how she considered it, had gone cold. At first, she thought it was because he was a stately older man and his finicky wife was by his side, but as the days passed, jealousy began to rear its ugly head. On the other hand, she felt an affection towards him that was careening down a path into the unknown. She sighed and wiped the sweat from her forehead. When would she be able to talk to Fang Tong comfortably and receive his love? The more she thought about him, the worse she found herself wanting him. The thought brought tears to her eyes. She envied his wife no end.

Her thoughts then fell to the fact she was with child. Her

head dropped in silent despair. That night seemed to conjure itself up from the point of her needle. Did not Fang Tong jump on her like an angry tiger? And was she not so afraid that she had accidentally tipped the tarp over the windows of that dark room, and was that not why she was with child now? She had committed no sin. But why was it so difficult to talk to him? She could not even ask for the noodles in icy broth that she so wanted. Everything felt like it was her fault. Why could she not talk to him, why was she hesitating? She would talk to him this time for sure. She would! She was going to ask for a bowl of noodles, too. Her mouth watered at the thought. This was all just a fantasy, she thought as she gave out an empty laugh. It was almost funny that despite the mountains of difficulties that lay ahead, all she could think of were cold noodles. But she wanted them badly. Her throat itched at the thought of them, and she could barely sit still.

When she had first realized she was with child, she tried to do everything in her power to miscarry. She punched her belly, tripped over her own feet, and beat herself against a wall. When that did not work, she thought of drinking the caustic soda used for laundry, and almost did so several times, sitting up in her bed in the middle of the night. Even in those moments, she wanted cold noodles. She kept feeling as though people were hiding them from her nearby. In the end, it would just be too sad to die without having had the noodles she wanted so much. That and the thought of Bongyeom made her throw the bowl of water mixed with caustic soda away from her lips.

The rounder she got, the more she was unable to think of what to do. She wrapped her stomach as tightly as she could and ate only one or two meals a day. She tried to avoid others as much as possible and worked alone when she could.

Suddenly, she heard the sound of a carriage. Then she heard Fang Tong's children run out of his room, all shouting, 'Baba, baba!' He was here! Her heart beat so quickly that the baby

in her belly kicked her. She pressed down on the folds of her skirt that were skipping to the baby's kicks. She heard footsteps, and quickly stood up, thinking it was him.

Bongyeom popped her head through the door. 'Mother, Fang Tong is here. He wants to see you.'

Relieved yet disappointed at the same time that it was not Fang Tong himself, the woman suddenly felt a wave of shame hearing that he wanted to see her. She could not speak, and her hands and feet shook.

'Mother, are you sick?'

Bongyeom had cut a neat fringe into her hair like a Chinese girl. She blinked at her mother through the fringe, starting.

The woman turned her head away. 'I'm fine.'

Bongyeom seemed to think for a while. 'Mother, I think Fang Tong is angry about something.'

'About what?'

'I wish I knew.'

Bongyeom thought of Fang Tong's face a moment before as she stared at her fingernails that were in a bad state from tending the stove.

Fang Tong's wife shouted, 'What's keeping you! Come this instant!'

They went into Fang Tong's room together. The tone of Fang Tong's wife's voice was not a good sign. Fang Tong was surrounded by his children. He frowned at the Korean mother and daughter.

Fang Tong's wife poured her lips. 'Hmph, so it seems that you've raised your son a communist. Ten deaths aren't enough for such scum. We don't associate ourselves with communists. They are our sworn enemies. You can't live in our house anymore. Get out.'

Her eyes were like daggers. The woman and Bongyeom were completely taken aback. Their minds turned blank.

'My husband and Zhang were in town today. They saw Bongshik being publicly executed.'

The woman and her daughter heard a ringing as if they had been struck with a steel bar. The woman slowly turned her head to Fang Tong. Fang Tong avoided her gaze and looked down at his children, but he seemed to agree with what his wife was saying. A shock ran through her body. *It can't be true*, she screamed inwardly.

'Get out! In Manchuria, communists are put to death!' Fang Tong's wife's earrings jiggled as she pushed the woman and her daughter out of the house. The two still could not believe what they had heard, and the woman still wanted to hear it from Fang Tong himself, but Fang Tong only felt distaste when he looked at her. From the moment he had satisfied himself with her, he had felt a strange compulsion to kick her behind. He avoided her as much as he could. They needed help around the house because his wife was not good at housekeeping, but that would have meant providing board and wages, so the woman and her daughter had presented a temporary solution that he had delayed replacing until now. Simply put, there had not been a good excuse to kick them out.

Then he saw Bongshik's public execution. The police would be after all the family members of a convicted communist, which would mean danger for him. The other thing was, the mere mention of communists made him shudder with absolute disgust.

As he watched his wife push mother and daughter out of the house, he thought of the scene of Bongshik's death.

He had been in town with a friend when he heard there was to be a public execution of communists. By the time they got there, ten or so had already been killed, and only one was left. Regretting he had come so late, he pushed his way through the crowd for a better view. Just then, a man was being led before them by a policeman – it was Bongshik! He rubbed his eyes several times, not believing what he saw. He cursed Bongshik loudly enough for him to hear. Fang Tong

despaired at the loss of his hope that Bongshik would repay his pitiful act of charity when he made some money and returned for his mother and sister.

The yellow-uniformed executioner poured water over the blue steel of his blade. The sword shone as the clear water dripped off it like pearls. Examining his blade, the executioner grinned. He turned to Bongshik. Bongshik's face was white, but he stood tall and calm. There was a hint of a sneer on his lips. Fang Tong found it more than a little disturbing. He thought of the time his life had been threatened by communists, and he was suddenly sure beyond all doubt that Bongshik was one of them. Bongshik shouted as the blade swung towards him. His head fell to the ground and the crowd, feeling a chill as if they had been splashed with cold water, took a step back as his blood spurred out into the air.

The memory made Fang Tong shudder as he drew his children closer to him and wished the mother and daughter were gone.

The woman had thought Fang Tong would come to her defence, even as she was now over the threshold and out the door. But even as they stepped out with their bundles hugged to their chests, Fang Tong did not appear. Enraged, the woman turned around and glared at the back of Fang Tong's head through the window. Just as she was about to shout at him, Fang Tong's wife and a strange man turned her around and pushed her out of the main gate.

They wandered the streets before leaving the town and came upon the banks of the Hailan River. The river seemed to block their path. Where could they go? The question refocused their thoughts, scattered by anger. The sun was about to set over the mountains, and the willow grove by the nearby village resembled the one by their own old hamlet. The woman felt if she went back there, Bongshik and her husband would be waiting for them. But she only rubbed her eyes and collapsed to her knees where she stood. She stared at

the river flowing noisily before her and thought of throwing herself down into it. The news of Bongshik's death was sinking in; her heart was cracking in two. She did not want to believe it. Bongshik was a clever child. He would never join the communists, whom his father had hated so much when he was alive.

It was all a lie to drive them out of the house!

The woman whipped around and glared at the town behind them, gritting her teeth. 'That bitch, saying my son is a communist. Huh, they'll get struck by lightning someday ... Who are you calling a communist? The day will come when you'll die for your words. Who are they calling a communist!'

All those houses in that town, and not a single one they could go to. No doubt, they were each filled with terrible people like Fang Tong. The woman despaired. Despite her hatred, every time she saw a faraway figure approaching, her heart ached with the hope that it was Fang Tong coming to take them back.

When twilight descended, they were more dismayed than ever. Bongyeom sobbed and said, 'Where are we going to sleep tonight, Mother?'

The woman wanted to run into Fang Tong's house and stab everyone and then kill herself. She jumped to her feet. But when she looked down at the wide road they had walked down, she thought of Bongshik coming to find her, his plodding footsteps echoing on this very pavement ... But what if he was dead like Fang Tong said? She had to fight down tears again. Should she go into town and ask around if it was true? If it was, she would kill everyone and then herself! Determined, she started on her way.

They spent that night in a shed owned by a Chinese family living on the banks of the Haitan. They were allowed a night there only after mother and daughter begged them and did some work preparing spinach and leeks for the family to sell in the market. The woman's belly felt worse as the night

wore on. She realized the baby was about to come and hoped Bongyeom would go to sleep soon. But Bongyeom was too busy cursing Fang Tong and his wife to go to sleep. She and her mother should never have worked so hard for them, she grumbled.

Finally, Bongyeom muttered, 'I wonder what Yong-ae is doing. I wonder what's going on in school.' She fell asleep.

Her mother sighed once more and decided that if she had the baby while Bongyeom slept, she would kill it and throw the body into the Haitan. She pressed down on her belly.

Drops of rain fell at the sound of the wind.

Good, she thought. There would be fewer people about when she went out to throw the body away. She caressed her daughter and covered her up with more of their old clothes. She moved her to a part of the shed that was not leaking and lay down underneath a leak herself. The rain began coming down in torrents. Her pain intensified.

She bit down on her lip, trying hard not to make a sound and wake Bongyeom. But her cries threatened to leak through her nose, jumping up from inside her like flames. Rainwater fell on her hair and into her collar and lips.

'Mother! Bongyeom sat up and touched her mother. You're drenched.'

The mother only realized it was still raining when she felt the touch of her daughter.

'The roof is leaking, Mother, what are we to do?'

The woman could barely hear what her daughter was saying. She kicked and groaned, 'Uhh! Uhh!' She banged her head against the wall, but when even this would not allay the pain, she ripped at her hair.

Bongyeom could only shake her mother in wonder and collapse into tears.

The woman pushed her daughter away and pushed with all her might – and a long time later, they heard the cry of a baby. Bongyeom crept up to her mother and shouted, 'A baby?'

The woman groped in the dark, finding the baby's neck. In that moment, the mother's eyes lit up like a pair of blue flames.

The maternal instinct that ran through her like electricity! It stifled her, and her grip on the baby loosened.

Her sweat flowed like a waterfall, and she turned to her side.

'*Aigo!*' she cried. She sobbed aloud.

Wet Nurse

She had overcome the horror of childbirth and failed to kill her baby. Now she felt a profound hunger. How much lighter her body would feel if she could have a bowl of seaweed stew! Her husband had made seaweed stew himself with some white rice, lading it into a bowl for her ... She closed her eyes. She was drenched, and the wet floor stank of earth and blood.

What was she to do? She had to eat before she could work for her children's food, but she had to have a bowl of boiled water at least to get herself on her feet. But unless she picked up a handful of earth, there was nothing to put in her mouth. Should she wake Bongyeom and get her to ask the household for a meal? She could not bear it in her shame, having birthed an illegitimate child. Then what? It was going to be light soon, she was going to have to beg them herself ...

She opened her eyes and looked around the shed again. It was still dark. When would the sun rise? Did this house not have a rooster? She listened. All was completely silent, save for the sound of insects, chirping in the vegetable patch outside, like starlight against the black of night. She held her baby against her beating heart and felt determined to live whatever the cost. She was not going to die, she would live! She was going to live for the sake of her children. She kept muttering this over and over. Talk of death had constantly passed

her lips before she experienced this childbirth, this pang, and she had often wished that she would die. Now that she had stood before the threshold of death, she found herself no longer wanting it. If anything, she felt a strange joy towards life. She had experienced difficulty many times before, but until her husband was taken from her, she had never truly realized what death was like. She was no longer so mindless about death.

That morning, the mother shook Bongyeom awake. Bongyeom immediately sat up.

'Go wash these. You only have to rinse them.' The woman handed over her bloodied underwear and rags to her daughter. She felt ashamed before Bongyeom and detected a feeling of disgust in her gaze.

Bongyeom's heart was still trembling, everything seemed like a dream, and her mind was full of questions and fears that felt like cobwebs in the dark. She quickly left the shed.

She must be so cold, thought the mother as she watched her leave, and she felt filthy sitting in the gloom.

Bongyeom's footsteps faded away, and the woman looked down at the baby's face. Her love grew the more she looked, and she could not bear to not put her nose against the baby's. She heard sounds coming from the house. Were they making breakfast? Surely, they would spare them some. She thought of seaweed stew again, and a bowl of it seemed to waver before her like a mirage. She grew hungrier by the minute. She had to eat; she could not live on determination alone. The thought made her fearful. She looked around the shed again. It was still dark in there, but she spotted something in the corner. A pile of leeks! The woman of the house had stacked them in the shed to take to the market. She would feel more like herself once she had some. She quickly went over and picked out a leek. She brought it several times to her mouth but put it down, in fear that the owners would come bursting in. Finally, she took a bite of the green stalk. She felt an electric shock go

through her teeth. She grimaced and kept her mouth open for a long time, in pain.

If she wanted to live, she should at least swallow the saliva coming down her chin. She put the leek into her mouth and did not chew, instead poking around with the tip of her tongue as she moved bits of it down her throat. How stiff the stalks were, and her throat was in such pain she was about to cry. Could one survive on leeks? She grimaced again, staring out at the blue sky through the crack in the shed door.

The door flew open.

'Mother! I met Yong-ae's mother at the washing place on the river, she's coming!'

Yong-ae's mother immediately followed Bongyeom into the shed. Bongyeom's mother got up, clasped the other woman's hands and started to cry. The two families had lived in the same village and were close. Yong-ae's mother had been glad at first to see Bongyeom, but now that she saw how pitifully Bongyeom's family had fallen, she wished she had not come. She could not think of anything to say to comfort them.

'Oh my, what happened to you!' Yong-ae's mother said after a long pause.

Bongyeom's mother reined in her sobs and replied, 'It's only my terrible fate. My fate to live instead of die ... But why are you in town?'

'We moved here last year. The village is abandoned. The fighting was too much, so everyone left in the night. No one could make a living growing crops. But things are no easier here.'

Bongyeom's mother was glad to see her and realized in a flash that she must not lose this opportunity. She decided to tell her everything that happened and beg for help.

'I gave birth to a baby last night. This thing ... what am I going to do? Please save my life. Let us stay with you for a few

days. I am sorry to ask. How terrible for you to have met a woman like me ...'

She collapsed into tears again. Meeting Yong-ae's mother made her think of both her husband and Bongshik at the same time. Others had their husbands and children and lived normal lives, why did she end up with such a terrible fate?

Yong-ae's mother hesitated for a long time, but in the end, she sighed. 'All right. Stay with us.'

She was so reluctant the words had to be forced out of her mouth. Standing behind her, Bongyeom felt she had been saved and let out a sigh of relief.

'Thank you! How can we ever repay this kindness ...?'

The woman tied the baby to Bongyeom's back. Yong-ae's mother led the way, anxious about what her husband would say. *Are we going to have to take them in forever?* Her footsteps were heavy with worry.

Four days passed without incident at Yong-ae's house. Yong-ae's mother worked as a laundress and would leave before sunrise for the washing place, and her husband likewise was out all day on account of his working to build the new railway. Their hard-up lives made Bongyeom's mother ashamed of having to impose on them. She tried to spend as little time recovering as possible.

That day, she met Yong-ae's mother when she came back from the washing place.

'I can take in laundry, too. Find me some work.'

Yong-ae's mother's eyes grew wide. 'You should be lying down! Heavens ... don't worry about us.'

Then she seemed to remember something and turned to Bongyeom's mother again, blinking. They were in the kitchen and could hear Bongyeom playing with the baby in the other room.

'You know, one of the houses I do laundry for, they're looking for a wet nurse ... They said it's all right if the nurse has a

child, as long as she can give enough breast milk. The money will be less because of it, but ... What do you think?

Bongyeom's mother's ears perked up. 'Really? It's all right if I bring my child?'

Yong-ae's mother hesitated. 'Well ... if they give you about twelve or thirteen won a month, you can get a room for Bongyeom and the baby. You'd only be able to visit them occasionally to feed the baby, and maybe use some cow's milk, too. You'll be paid less if they learn your own baby is still so young. So lie to them and tell them your child is past feeding. Then you ought to have enough money.'

Bongyeom's mother was overjoyed at the thought of possible work. 'Then please let them know about me.'

She was determined to make money and pay back Yong-ae's mother's kindness, but at the same time, she looked at her own baby and wondered if she could really leave it to feed another.

Bongyeom's mother regained her strength after a few days. She was hired as a wet nurse and had to live away from Bongyeom and the baby, who were put into a small room. Bongyeom took care of the baby from then on. The baby cried every night as if set on fire and refused to sleep. Bongyeom would carry the baby on her back and pace around the room, pinching herself to keep from falling asleep. Sometimes, she would cry right along with the baby, and look out into the darkness for her mother.

A year passed this way, and the baby cried less but still had not learned to use the toilet. The baby was given half of Bongyeom's name and was called Bonghee. Bongyeom did her best to care for the child, but she would hit the baby if Bonghee scattered her toys or cried too much when Bongyeom's friends had come over. Bongyeom hit the baby especially hard when Bonghee went to the bathroom on the floor. This was not because she hated the baby, but because she was too tired and miserable to do anything else. Bonghee did not drink

cow's milk anymore, and only occasionally drank from her mother's breast. She could just about crawl. Sometimes, she stood on her legs and took a few steps. She was oddly bright. Sometimes she would go to the bathroom on the floor and cry loudly before her sister could even hit her. Other times, when Bongyeom had friends over, she would pretend to sleep so that Bongyeom would not bear her for making a sound, and she would lie sweating with her eyes closed. She did not gain much in flesh and bone, but did in such tricks and the size of her head, which was as big as a small gourd and hard as a rock. The hair on top of her big head was as light-coloured as the day she was born. The only thing alive about her was this head, and sometimes it seemed that it was too big for the rest of her body and that she could die early from being crushed by the weight of it.

Bonghee recognized her mother. She cried every time she left. Whenever this happened, the three would hold each other and cry for a long time before parting.

In summer, Bongyeom caught a fever and spent her days lying in bed, unable to even eat. Her body was so hot she could hardly tell where she was sick. Bonghee kept crying beside her. Wishing her mother would come, Bongyeom gave Bonghee her leftover rice. The baby stopped crying and began to eat. Bongyeom closed her eyes and brought her arm to her forehead. She thought she heard footsteps and quickly opened her eyes, but it was only Bonghee dragging the rice bowl.

Bongyeom was furious. 'You stupid girl! Why can't you eat in one place!'

Bonghee's mouth twitched with the effort it took to hold back her cries. She turned to the door. Bongyeom thought Bonghee was also waiting for their mother, and she wanted to shout out, 'Mother!' with all her heart. She gritted her teeth and fought back tears as she looked back at Bonghee.

'You want to see Mother, too, right? Shall we go see her?' She had spoken without thinking. Bonghee stared at her,

pushed the bowl aside and ran to hug her. She should not have spoken so soon! Bongyeom hugged her sister tight. She realized that two hot trails of tears were coming down her face.

'Why won't Mother come! It's time for her to come. Isn't it, Bonghee?'

Bonghee, not really understanding her, answered, 'Yes ...'
'Come on, Bonghee. Be a good girl. Finish your supper.'

Bongyeom gave Bonghee's head a pat and put her down. Bonghee picked up her spoon again and began to eat. Bonghee stared at the ceiling. Her mother used to come often and sweep the room, but now there were cobwebs on the rafters. How could she not come, even when enough time had passed for new cobwebs? She could barely remember when she had last come to see them. Bongyeom turned on her side and wondered if her mother would come out of that house after breakfast with her charge, the baby boy Myoungsu, on her back ... Surely she must be past the Chinaman's store by now. She could be right outside the door. Bongyeom stared at the door again, but there was no sound of footsteps, only the sound of Bonghee's spoon scraping the bowl.

Bongyeom sprang up and flung open the door. Bonghee, not understanding what was going on, stared at her sister for a while and crawled towards her.

Bongyeom felt out of breath and collapsed on to the floor. The sound she had heard was of the woman next door flinging her white laundry on to the fence to dry in the sun. The tips of the neighbour's fingers that Bongyeom could see over the fence reminded her of her mother's kind hands, and it made her think her mother, with her breast-milk stink, was standing on the other side. Sitting in that stink made her feel more at peace than anything else in the world.

She yearned to throw herself at her mother and be held. She was thirsty, so she drank the water that she had mixed with Bonghee's rice, but she was then somehow thirstier than ever. She fell into an uneasy sleep.

Bongyeom awoke with a start.

Bonghee was gone. Had her mother come and taken her out somewhere?

She quickly got up and ran outside. But her mother and Bonghee were nowhere to be seen. The sun was so hot it looked as if it would bake the lawn red. Where was Bonghee? And her mother? She ran outside the fenced area and bumped into the woman next door.

'Have you seen my mother?'

'I haven't seen her ... Are you ill? Hey!'

Bongyeom ran off, only caring about what had happened to her mother. She ran around until her eyes were bloodshot red, and she returned to the room. Then, she heard a sound from the backyard. She jumped up and ran to it.

There in the corner, where the water used to wash the rice was stored in a bucket, Bonghee had dropped her large head and was sucking at the surface as if it were a breast. In the sunlight, her hair was as red as flame.

The Heart of a Mother

Bongyeom died four days later. Her mother had to quit her position and left Myoungsu's house. Bonghee also became sick and died not long after. The landlord, furious that she had brought disease into his house, ordered her to move out. The woman was so angry that she fought loudly with the landlord's wife. She declared they would have to drag her out of that room and spent her days lying in it doing nothing. There was a time when she was too shy to even give excuses to the landlord when her rent was late, but now she surprised herself at her new daring.

She had fought with the landlord's wife long and hard the day before. If the wife had carried the argument on any longer, Bongyeom's mother had been ready to stab her. Thankfully,

as if detecting a line was about to be crossed, the landlord's wife had stood down.

'Huh! How dare she try to make me leave. I'm not going anywhere.' The woman glared at the door as she said this to herself. It was unsatisfying that the landlord's wife had retreated so soon. She felt enough fury to till a hundred fields.

Once her anger subsided, she again thought of Bongyeom and Bonghee, and of little Myongsu. The more she thought about them, the more she thought she had killed her own children. If only she had been with them, they would not have become sick, and even if they had, they would have survived. She beat her chest.

'I killed my own children while looking after someone else's ... You stupid girls, how could you leave without your mother. Take me with you.'

She cried so loudly that soon her throat closed up and she could not make a sound. Her throat felt torn. She coughed, stared out the door, and thought about the events of the past few days.

It had been raining hard. The woman, having seen Bongyeom so sick, had scarcely been able to sleep. She sneaked out of her employer's house in the middle of the night. When she first moved in there, she had gone to sleep in her clothes and crept out to feed Bonghee as soon as everyone in the house had fallen asleep. But once Myongsu's mother realized what was happening, she watched the woman like a hawk. The woman had dared not sleep in her clothes again and ended up running back and forth in her bedclothes. That night, knowing that Myongsu's mother would never let her go having already allowed her to visit her daughters during the day, the woman had crept out as soon as the family was asleep and ran home. It was so dark she could barely see in front of her, and the rain had beat down on her bare shoulders. The thunder and lightning made her hair stand on end with

booms, crashes, and flashes of light that seemed to split the very sky in two.

None of it had mattered. All she cared about was her daughters, and the storm only seemed to be an expression of her own fears.

When she reached the room, the sight of a white lump by the door had surprised her. Her daughter, Bongyeom! She hurriedly embraced her.

'You stupid child! Why are you lying out here, you'll kill yourself!'

Bongyeom's wet body had been as hot as fire. She had trembled so fiercely that it frightened the woman. What use was her wet nurse position now? She must quit. Once she laid the girl down in the room, her head had filled again with troubles. Myongsu must be crying so loud as to raise the roof, his parents awake and grimacing, determined to ask her to leave, nay, already having thrown out her things. The thoughts had flitted through her mind as she stroked her sick daughter.

She had stood up. Bonghee, whom she thought was asleep, had ran to her and grabbed her breast. 'Mommy!' she had cried. Bongyeom did not have the strength to ask her mother to stay. She had cried instead, gripping the edge of the woman's skirt. 'Just a little longer ...'

That trembling voice ... the woman felt she could still hear it. She would remember it forever.

She stood up. She paced the room, trying to clear her thoughts, but the memories leapt at her like sparks. She remembered Myongsu's face. That beautiful, smiling baby ... 'I wonder if he's crying right now.'

The words had slipped out of her before she knew it. Then she forced herself to say what she did not really feel.

'It's because of that bastard child that Bongyeom and Bonghee are dead! Be off with you!'

But Myoungsu's face persisted in her memory. She could just about touch his hair... She bit her hand. The pain from the bite hurt as much as her longing for the child. She restrained her own steps from going towards the house again by forcing herself to recall how Myoungsu's mother had turned her away at the door. 'Huh! You foolish woman, you killed your own children, but you want to take care of mine? Why are you even alive, still? If you die now, you won't suffer so much!'

It reminded her of the time she had wanted to kill herself after her husband was murdered. This terrible misfortune was all because she had not followed through on that urge. And the communists who had killed her husband, they were the worst of them all. Fang Tong would never have done what he did to her if her husband was still alive. Yes, this was all because of the communists! She thought of Bongshik, who supposedly had been executed for being a communist. Fang Tong's face sprang up in her memory.

'You bastard, my son is no communist ... If you wanted to kick us out, you should have just kicked us out! Dirty bastard ... But is my son alive or dead?'

Saying her son's name out loud gave her a sliver of hope. She was going to go into town to look for Bongshik, but first, she thought she should go to see Myoungsu.

'Oh, Myoungsu!' she called out and squeezed her nipple. He must be calling for her at this very moment ... She ran out of the room. But then, the face of Myoungsu's mother suddenly loomed large in her mind, and she stood up tall.

'You bitch! How dare you stop me from seeing Myoungsu; you only gave birth to him, but it was me who raised him! Of course that baby loves me more. Myoungsu is mine.'

Her eyes bulged in determination. But she realized in the next moment that she would never get to touch even a single hair on Myoungsu's head again, and the sad thought made her hunch over.

It was a silent night. The silence weighed heavily on her

heart, threatening to crush it. But she could smell roasting sweet potatoes! It was the season after all. She looked about, trying to find the source of the smell. If only she could have a warm sweet potato ... *Hmph!* How ridiculous of her to want to eat something, to go on living! She leaned on a wall and stared up at the sky. The moon floated high above, and the stars twinkled. Some twinkled like Bongyeom's eyes, others winkled like Bonghee's eyes. And there were ones like the clear eyes of little Myoungsu. The eyes she would gaze into as she massaged her breast.

'No, get away from me!'

She banished the memory again. She thought of Bonghee and Bongyeom's eyes, swollen from crying and missing their mother. She would never see those eyes again!

She visited the cemetery. There were countless graves spread out before her. She did not like this. She shivered with cold fear as if she were drowning in a roaring torrent. She was afraid of remembering Myoungsu's moon-like face again. She thought of death, thought about how frightening it really was, and gazed into the distance. Suddenly, she broke into a run as if she had been startled by something.

The moonlight shining like snowfall between the awnings of two distant houses had reminded her of the white blanket Myoungsu would be lying on right now as he called for her. But it was only the moonlight after all, which struck her face like a slap. She held her cheeks as she stepped into the light, and restrained herself from crying out, 'Oh, Myoungsu!' by staring up at the utterly unperturbed moon. Love was such a shameful thing!

She stared down at her shadow and pondered whether she should live or die. She felt that dying and forgetting everything that had happened to her was the last happiness she had left in this world. Her body felt so heavy that death seemed the only way to rid her of its weight. How should she die? Caustic soda ... No, that melted the organs, it would be too

painful ... Jumping into the river... She imagined the swirling blue currents and it scared her. She shivered and leaned against a wall. No, she would live as long as she was able. Then she would be reunited with Bongshik and watch those bastard communists die by their own swords. They would never prosper, not when God watched over all. *Let's see how well they do.* She gritted her teeth. She heard the sound of footsteps and thought it must be the landlord's wife, coming for round two. She turned her head towards the room, but heard a voice coming from the opposite direction.

'Why are you standing here?'

She turned around and was glad to see Yong-ae's mother. She must be bringing news from Myoungsu's family. 'Have you seen Myoungsu?'

'Myoungsu? In the morning, for a moment.'

'Does he cry? He must be crying all the time!'

Yong-ae's mother gave her a sympathetic look and thought of how Myoungsu had indeed thrown a tantrum that morning. She could tell immediately how much Bongyeom's mother wanted to see Myoungsu.

'I heard you went to their house yesterday.'

'Yes, that woman, that horrible woman wouldn't let me see him! Huh! That useless bitch.'

Yong-ae's mother hesitated before saying, 'Don't go there anymore. I don't know how she found out, but she was livid that your daughters died of typhoid. You shouldn't go.'

Bongyeom's mother felt a wave of resentment at her friend. 'Typhoid! What typhoid? My children are dead, anyway. What is the use of crying over someone else's child? So what if I never see Myoungsu again! It's not like I would die!'

She was shouting as if Myoungsu's mother was standing before her. Yong-ae's mother tried to calm her down. 'Enough talk about this. Have you had your supper?'

Yong-ae's mother, crouched down with her skirt wrapped around her legs, smelled faintly of herring. It suddenly

occurred to Bongyeom's mother that her hunger was making everything feel even worse. She asked Yong-ae's mother for some leftovers, if she had any.

'You've starved all day,' said Yong-ae's mother, 'and I knew you would. I was just about to bring you something. Wait inside, I'll be right back.'

Yong-ae's mother stood up and left. Bongyeom's mother, so hungry that the lower half of her body felt like it was about to break off, crept back into the house.

Yong-ae's mother returned. 'Come, try this. Get yourself together. You've got to figure out how you're going to live from now on ... Do you know what you might do?'

Bongyeom's mother stopped her hasty eating and stared at her.

'I might have something for you,' Yong-ae's mother went on. 'It's good work, lots of profit. My husband just left to do it himself.'

'What kind of work?'

Yong-ae's mother lowered her voice. 'Selling salt.'

Bongyeom's mother's eyes grew wide. 'But what if you get caught?'

'You have to be ever so clever. Making money isn't easy, after all.' Despite her resigned words, Yong-ae's mother became worried again about her husband. They sat in silence for a while.

'Anyway, you should try it too, when you've got your strength back. In Korea, salt is thirty jeon for one *mal*, but here, it's two won and thirty jeon! Think of the profit.'

The prospect of work breathed new life into Bongyeom's mother, but her spirits deflated once she remembered her dead daughters. Others were smuggling salt for the sake of feeding their sons and daughters but for whom was she struggling? When she realized it was for herself alone, she was awash with melancholy. Still, if she did not try with all her might to live, who would so much as lift a spoonful of rice-wash water to

her lips? Starving scared her more than dying. It was harder to bear. Was she not despondent before she ate, and so different now that she had something in her stomach? Was not the air that seemed to press down on her chest much lighter for it? In this life, one absolutely had to eat ... She remembered the leak she tried to chew when she gave birth to Bonghee in the Chinese family's shed. The memory made her shudder. She had to acknowledge that despite her suffering during her time with Myoungsu's family, at least she had never gone hungry. She thought of Myoungsu's face again and wondered whether his constant crying would convince Myoungsu's mother to take her back. She put down her spoon.

'What, finished already? Have some more. You've got to get your strength up.'

'My strength ... such is a person's greed ... my husband is dead, my son, daughters ...' Her voice trembled as she stared towards the door. Her face looked so gaunt in the moonlight that Yong-ae's mother sighed.

'If you can't die, then you should at least keep your strength up. Don't even think about the past.' Yong-ae's mother approached her and began tidying up her hair. This reminded Bongyeom's mother of Myoungsu's fat little baby hand grabbing at her, and her calmed heart suddenly beat wildly again. She unconsciously grabbed Yong-ae's mother's hand.

'Do you think Myoungsu is asleep right now?'

Then, she buried her face in Yong-ae's mother's lap and cried loudly. Yong-ae's mother also shed a tear or two at her friend's distress.

'Don't cry. Don't think about other people's babies! There's no use.'

'If I could see him just once ... Could you take me there? Please, my friend.' She was convinced she would be allowed to see Myoungsu if her friend accompanied her.

Yong-ae's mother felt uncomfortable, thinking of the curses Bongyeom's mother had shouted about her former employer

only a moment ago. She did not answer. Bongyeom's mother leapt to her feet and grabbed Yong-ae's mother's hand, urging her up.

'Look here, you must calm yourself! We'll go to see them tomorrow.' Yong-ae's mother sat her back down.

The moonlight continued to illuminate their faces.

Smuggler

The autumn of the northern country was bleak. On a night when the wind blew as loudly as thunder, Bongyeom's mother put four *mal* of salt into her sack and followed the others. They were a group of six, and Bongyeom's mother was the only woman. The ageing tracker who headed the group had smuggled salt for the past ten years and was able to find the route with his eyes closed. The rest of the group had to be completely obedient to him. They had to maintain absolute silence during the time they carried the salt, even if that meant days with only gestures to communicate with each other.

They walked in a line through the unrelenting wind, paying close attention to the person in front of them. Sometimes, the wind sounded like footsteps or the shouting of a policeman, which made them hold their breath. They would remember rumours about a smuggler being shot on this very route the day before. The dread blackened their hearts to the very shade of the darkness that surrounded them.

The others wore padded clothes, but Bongyeom's mother wore layers and rubber shoes her toes protruded out of. The weight of the salt carried on her head banished all thoughts of the cold. It was like being hit on the top of her skull by a steel pipe, and sometimes as painful as carrying a ball of flame. She had taken on six *mal* of salt at first like the others, but the men had managed to convince her that it would be too much. Now, not even ten *li* into their journey, her head already hurt.

She grimaced and tried to lift the load slightly with her hands, but it was no use, and now her arms felt like they would fall off from fatigue. She was seized with a compulsion to throw down her load and just die there in the middle of the route. But that was just a feeling. Her feet continued to follow the men. If only she could carry as much as the men ... Perhaps she would be able to if she used her back instead of her head ... But she would need rope, and there was none ... How about resting for a while? She almost said the last part out loud but bit down on her words. Her hands continued to try to lift the sacks and sooth her pain.

Her forehead and back sweated so much that she could feel wetness on the soles of her feet. Her shoes were so soaked in sweat she was afraid she might slip and fall. She had to concentrate on not stumbling, which made her fall further behind the others. Running after them made her lose her breath, and her side would hurt. She should have taken on just two *mal* ... Should she spill it? Should she? Gripping the sacks in her hands, she knew she could not do it.

Soon, she heard the sound of the river. It soothed her heart. They could put down their salt and rest for a moment and drink all the water they wanted. But what if something lurked on the other side of the river? Her anxiety grew with the increasing sound of the water. Even this happy sound had turned into needles pricking her eardrum. She felt she would die of exhaustion soon. Then, the man walking in front of her stood still, and she stopped, too. The sound of insects mixed with the sound of the water. The man in front of her seemed to have sat down. She also dropped her salt sack and collapsed. Then, she forced her eyes closed; they had been opened wide from her exertions. At the same time, she kept an ear out on the men lest she be left behind.

Now that the immediate pain had subsided, her whole body trembled from exhaustion. Just as she leaned forward, hugging her stomach, the man in front of her gave her a poke.

She quickly got up. The sound of the men taking off their clothes made her more nervous than ever. She hesitated for a moment before taking off her own clothes and making them into a bundle to tie around her neck. Rubbing her neck, she wondered if her head would still be attached to her body by the time they reached Longjing. She hoisted the salt on her head again and began to walk.

The splashing sound made her think the men in the front had entered the water. She felt her feet touch sand and soon she was in the river. The water was a cold, rushing black void, its sound so loud it filled her ears. The water lapped about her, and she felt her hair stand on end from the icy cold. She took a deep breath, close to a sob.

The deeper the water became, the rougher the ground got beneath her feet, from sand to pebbles to large stones. Their slick surface made her mind go white with fear every time she almost slipped. The water came up to her breasts now.

Just then, her foot slipped, and her body fired up as she tried with all her might not to let the salt drop from her head. Her foot kept slipping, and her legs were getting wider and wider apart. She wanted to shout to the men in front of her for help, but she was too out of breath, and something in her chest blocked her voice. The tiny yelp that slipped out was drowned by the wind and the gushing of the water. She used her last remaining strength to keep her left foot steady. All thoughts of death or fear were distant from her mind; the thought of the salt dropping into the water and melting kept her ramrod straight from the tips of her toes to the ends of her hair.

The men had almost reached the other side of the river when they realized Bongyeom's mother was not behind them. The tracker had to retrace their steps, and luckily, he found her. The tracker knew that if he had arrived even a moment later, the woman would have perished. He steadied her with his hand and shouldered her burden of salt. Prodding the riverbed, he found the rock that she had almost slipped on and

wondered why she had gone that way when he had taken care to go around it. He gripped her hand as they made their way to the others.

Bongyeom's mother regained her wits bit by bit as they continued to walk. She was still dizzy and wanted to vomit, but the salt was still on her head, so she gritted her teeth to keep it in.

When the two finally reached the riverbank, the others waiting all stood up and embraced them both. A few of them even shed quiet tears. As pitiful as their own lives were, somehow the life of this poor woman was even more unfortunate. They also sighed as they thought of their wives, children, and parents who were waiting for them, sleepless, hungry, and worrying.

The night was too fearful for them to rest long, and soon they were off. This time, they put Bongyeom's mother in the middle of the line. They seemed to be walking in an irrigation ditch as dried stalks cut her feet through the torn soles of her shoes. Several times she had wanted to take off her shoes, but she could not bear to throw them away. She always had trouble making decisions. Even now, she hesitated. Her shoes were so ripped that the soles kept getting caught in the millet and sorghum roots, but she still could not throw them away.

Then, when they reached the summit of the hill, they heard a loud voice shout, 'Who is that? Freeze, with your hands up! Or we'll shoot!'

A blue light flashed in their faces. The group shielded their eyes with their hands as if the light was a sharp blade or a bullet flying towards them. *We're going to lose our salt!* They despaired at this shared thought. They hoped the people with the light were communists or bandits; these were the two groups who were not interested in salt and would let them go if they begged them.

Their bodies were searched. The light went off and there was some low-voiced talking. The darkness made the woman

shiver all over again, and she wondered if they were being threatened with swords or guns in the dark.

Then, a voice spoke from the shadows.

'Comrades! Do you know why you are forced to smuggle salt under cover of darkness?'

The steady voice boomed as it spoke on through the surging of the wind. They were communists! Their salt was safe. The woman thought of ways she might beg them to let them be on their way. The voice continued to speak. She wished they would stop speaking and just let them go. She was worried there were patrols that would hear the communists' speech in the hills ahead. The voice reminded her of a speech that she had heard when she visited Bongyeom's school; it had been delivered by her daughter's teacher. She raised her head and tried to see who was speaking, but all she could see was pitch blackness. She wondered if her Bongshik was among them. No, her clever boy would never be stupid enough to join such a gang. Now that she had been reassured about her son, she began to wonder if their talk was a ploy to steal their salt.

The voice in the dark finished talking and even bade them good luck on their way. The smugglers began walking again. The woman hurried, afraid they would be followed by guns and swords regardless of the words they had just heard. Only when they came down the hill and into a field did she manage to give out a sigh of relief.

They really had been communists! She thought of herself as the most pitiful person in the world, to quake in her shoes before them like that. They killed her husband and ruined her life, but she could not say a word as she faced her greatest enemy! She could barely muster the courage to even think of her hatred before them! Even she, the most pathetic creature, was carrying salt to save her own life. She realized then, the more stupid and pitiful a creature, the more it strove to save itself. Her only question was: why had not the communists

taken the salt from them? When they kill people like flies ... Now she had no trouble cursing them in her mind.

During the following days, they hid in the mountains or among reeds and reached Longjing only on the fourth night. Bongyeom's mother did not know where to hide her salt, but after a long hesitation, she put it in a box and shoved the box into a corner. She collapsed on the floor. The room had a draught and the floor was like ice. She rubbed her head and feet and broke into loud sobs. Having returned home, she was confronted again with the memories of Bongyeom, Bonghee, and Myoungsu. She cried for a long time and twisted in agony thinking of everything she had gone through in the past four days. She realized that even the tears she was shedding now were a luxury. She calmed herself and lay down, thinking of how she was going to sell the salt. The others would have sold theirs by now, but who would come to buy from her? No one knew she had salt yet, should she go around the houses and tell them? What if she met a policeman on the way? She tried to stand again but cried out as her legs gave way beneath her. She stayed still for a long time before making her way to the box.

She listened to be sure that no one was approaching and put her hand in the box and stroked the salt. How much would this make her ...? Eight won and eighty jeon! She could clear off her unpaid rent ... and what remained would last only another month. She ought to use it to fund a new business. But what could she sell? She absentmindedly put a little salt in her mouth and her appetite came back in a rush of saliva. She crawled a bowl of rice. No food tastes good without a bit of salt.

That was it! She remembered her family and how she had dreamt of making preserved side dishes if she had just a little salt. That she would think of this only after having lost her husband and children! She simply had to continue living, only because she could not die. She sighed. The life she had lived was like meals without salt. A terrible life. So terrible ... She

touched the top of her head. It was so sore that the slightest graze of her fingertips pained her. She leaned her face against the box of salt.

'Oh Bongshik, whether you're alive or dead, please come find your mother ... I cannot bear this life!'

A while later, she woke up to bright morning light and was shocked to see two men in uniform and her salt box at her feet. The sack of salt had been removed and the men's eyes were boring into her. Policemen! She trembled like a leaf.

'Where is your salt licence!'

She did not have one. She could not breathe, and her eyes went dark. She felt a sudden sharpening of all her senses, just like that time in the river when she strained against the currents, trying not to drop the salt into the water. The tracker had saved her that time, but who would save her now against these men with guns and swords?

The policemen knew very well she had no licence. 'You despicable woman! Selling private salt! Get up!'

One of them grabbed her arm. She felt a jolt of electricity run through her as she remembered the words spoken by the voice on the hill, the voice she had listened to with contempt.

'You are our comrades! Only when we work as one can we fight against the rich bastards who are our real enemies!'

Those words thrown at her from the dark! Her heart was fit to burst. The communists had not taken her salt. She felt that if they were by her side right now, they might even help her. Surely, they would help her! And the real enemies were the rich bastards who were stealing her salt! She was shouting this aloud before she even realized. All the resentment she had harboured until now was blasting from her like flames.

She sprang to her feet.

May–October 1934