
MiJa

By Mark Atkinson

Mukho: 29 February 1960



Mukho is a great place to hide if you don't mind the smell of dried squid permeating your life. If you catch the slow train up the east coast of the South Korean peninsula until you can go no further and walk ten miles or so towards the Eastern Ocean, you will arrive at the small fishing village. It borders the demilitarised zone with North Korea, so not many people go there, and the few that do are either lost or running away from something. That was the route I took in the summer of 1954, although I was unaware of it at the time.

This winter has been the coldest in living memory. I don't know how we survived. A sudden and irreplaceable loss plunged me into a dark depression that was difficult to escape but, somehow, I managed it. The last thing I want to do now is go outside, but I have no choice. The charcoal won't last the night. I must go to the market or we will freeze to death. I strap my son to my back with my podaegi, a small, quilted blanket, and take the last of the money from its hiding place under the vinyl floor. I stare at it before scrunching it into a ball in my fist. If my husband doesn't come back soon, I don't know what we'll do. His threadbare coat still hangs where he abandoned it,

so I throw it around the both of us so that it rests on the top of my head and fasten the top button under my chin. It still smells of him.

The market is only a brisk hour's walk away, but today it feels much longer; perhaps it's because of the biting cold that cuts like a whetted knife or the fact that I've been housebound for so long. I pull the old coat closer to my body to keep out the groping icy fingers of air and, eventually, we arrive. The market is the usual bustle of activity. The hawkers yell in my face and urge me to try their wares; they thrust free samples of steamed silk-worm larvae, roasted chestnuts and rice cakes under my nose. Huge aluminium cooking pots boil vigorously under hissing propane burners, filling the air with steam and the aroma of anonymous pig parts, garlic, ginger and cinnamon. The cloying smell reminds me of better times and sets my stomach grumbling. Temptation calls, but I ignore it and head over to the charcoal seller.

'Azuma. It's your lucky day,' he shouts. I wince. He is as black and dusty as the pile of briquets stacked in front of him. Lucky day, indeed. That will be a first. I have no husband, no money, and a young child to raise. And where did all the years go? Not that long ago, I would have been addressed in public as a young woman, not an old mama. I'm only thirty-three years old. The upsetting part is that I know he is telling the truth, but I could do without the reminders.

The hawker beckons me to come closer and whispers, 'I have a special offer. Just for you. Forty-five hwan for ten briquets. You can't beat that. Top quality charcoal. How many would you like?'

I pick up one of the heavy cylinders, the size of a paint tin, and inspect the holes drilled radially around the centre. 'It's not that imported Chinese rubbish, is it?'

The hawker pulls a face as though deeply offended. 'Of course not. As I said, this is top quality. It's made right here, in this very town.'

'It feels damp. That last lot I bought from you crumbled before I even got home, took ages to dry out, and when I finally did manage to light it, it hardly gave off any heat.'

‘There’s plenty of other customers.’

‘I’ll give you twenty hwan for six briquets.’

He flashes his best salesman’s smile. ‘Has old age made you deaf, Azuma? Do you have dementia? If you remember, I have just told you that it’s forty-five hwan for ten briquets.’

‘Well, I’ve only brought twenty hwan with me. I left the rest of my cash at home in case I was robbed. It looks like I made the right decision.’

The charcoal seller laughs. ‘I won’t be able to feed my children if I sell at that price. I can let you have four briquets for fifteen hwan. Take it or leave it. That’s the best I can do.’

We both know I have no choice. ‘If that’s the best you can do for a poor old Azuma, Then I guess I’ll have to take it,’ I say, knowing full well that I can only manage to carry four briquets anyway.

The hawker stacks two cylinders on top of each other and threads some twine, made from plaited rice straw, through the holes. He makes a loop in each end so I can carry one in each hand, and I hobble over to the Hae-nyeo. The Hae-nyeo, or Sisters of the Sea, make a living free-diving for octopus, conch and abalone. They had taken me under their wing when I first arrived in Mukho, and I knew I’d never be able to repay their kindness. I would pay my respects and maybe, just maybe, they would have something left over.

I find them huddled around a brazier, trying to keep out the evening chills. Their faces are lit up in the glow, each one the texture of wrinkled leather that had been used hard and put away wet. Faces never lie; they always reflect the type of life you lead. There’s a row of large plastic buckets, the colour of a shiny terracotta, standing along the quayside and one of the women breaks off from the group to pour fresh seawater into it.

‘Sisters, look who is here,’ she says. The other Hae-nyeo wave. Most are in their sixties or seventies, and all had outlived their husbands by a good many years. They have been diving and harvesting the sea for decades, and their fitness and steely determination have been the stuff of

legends. It was rumoured, mainly by fishermen who never left the safety of their boats, that even the sharks feared them.

The matriarch stretches out her arms and says, ‘Come on. Give him here.’

‘He’s sleeping.’

‘Give him here. You need to rest after all you have gone through.’ She unties my podaegi and takes my son over to the brazier. I can smell the aroma of fish stew bubbling away on the top. One of the sisters is still in her wetsuit. She is squatting on the ground, and she suddenly grasps a writhing eel, pushes its head onto a nail set into a wooden board, skins it alive with a sharp knife and chops it into bite-size pieces. She puts the still squirming mass of pink flesh on the grill. The sound and smell of searing fish waft my way, and I deeply inhale the aroma.

I already know the answer, but I ask anyway: ‘Do you have any live fish left?’

The Hae-nyeo laugh, ‘Of course not. Not at this time.’

My son is fully awake now and starts whining. The head Hae-nyeo digs around in the coals and retrieves a soot-blackened sweet potato. She peels back the charred skin, breaks off small pieces, and blows on them until they are cool enough to feed to him.

‘You are more than welcome to join us for dinner,’ says the woman in the wet suit, and she nods to the pot. ‘There’s plenty.’

‘I would love to, but I have to get home before it gets too dark. Besides, my husband will be back tonight. Can I have five hwan of whatever shellfish you have left?’

One of the sisters takes a plastic bag and puts a generous scoop of whelks into it.

‘That’s far too much,’ I say, embarrassed by their generosity.

‘How are you feeling? Back to normal?’

‘Yes, I think so. Thank you for all you have done for us. I don’t know what happened to me. It must have been the sudden shock of —’

‘Hush. Don’t say another word. We understand.’

‘I’m sorry I can’t stay any longer, but I will come back soon. I really must get going.’

The head Hae-nyeo helps me to strap my son to my back, and as I bend down to pick up a charcoal bundle in each hand, she slips a large, fat flounder into a plastic bag and ties it to my podaegi. It flutters in protest, and my heart does the same. As I’m leaving, she whispers into my ear, ‘I hope he’s there when you get home.’

‘Come back soon,’ they urge.

‘I will,’ I reply, but I know I will not. Not until I have some money, and who knows when that will be? I glance back at the harbour. The first electric lights flicker into life, and their soft light diffuses through the orange soju tents that fringe the quayside.

The journey home seems much quicker, and my son falls asleep on the warmth of my back. I can hear him gently breathing over the crunch of my snowy footsteps. The flounder flutters on my breast until its protests grow feeble and they eventually stop altogether. It freezes in an icy patch over my heart. It’s only then that it occurs to me that the head Hae-nyeo must have been saving the flounder for her dinner but decided to give it to me instead. Maybe the charcoal seller was right: perhaps this is my lucky day? I feel sure my husband will be waiting for me when I get home. I could make sashimi for him or even a fish stew now that I have plenty of charcoal. He always likes that.

It’s dark when I arrive home, and the snow starts to fall in a fierce flurry. The temperature plummets, and my exposed hands feel frozen solid from carrying the charcoal. But, even in the dark, there is no mistaking my home: a rough stone shack that had once been thatched but now has a rusty corrugated iron roof that gives it a unique silhouette against the night sky. There’s no light on inside, and my heart sinks. I put down the charcoal to avoid breaking it, and I catch sight of something out of the corner of my eye: a parcel wrapped in rags that somebody has left on my doorstep. There’s a label attached to it with the words, *Up to You? Feb 29, 1960*, scrawled on it. I decide to leave it on the doorstep.

The shock of finding the parcel has taken the edge off my appetite so I put the flounder and the whelks into a bowl of cold water and put a new briquet on the heater with the charcoal tongs. My head is spinning. What should I do? The neighbours must have seen somebody leave it so I couldn't just abandon it. I bring the bundle in and place it on the floor. I remove an old rag from a crack in the wall, and an icy blast of air whistles in. That should be cold enough, I think.

I hug my son under my yo, a thin mattress topper, and press my body against the warmth of the floor. Once or twice, my son wakes up, and I let him have my breast until he nods off again, but the sleep I crave will not come. My mind is a jumble of thoughts, and every time I nod off I am stabbed awake by a prick of conscience. I feel betrayed and abandoned with only my silent sobs and salty tears for company. Occasionally, my anger gets the better of me and I stick my foot out of the yo and nudge the bundle closer to the icy draught.

That night seems the longest of my life, as if the morning would never come. And sometimes I hoped that it never would, but of course it did. I must have dozed off at some point because when I awake, all is silent. A fresh batch of snow has fallen and cast a blanket over the world that soaks up all the sounds of humanity. It's a bright, eerie morning and I'm so scared I keep my eyes tightly shut and listen. The only sounds I can hear are the sounds of my son softly snoring and my pounding heart reverberating off the hard floor. There's no sound coming from the bundle in the icy corner of the room. Not a whimper. The silence of the dead. Good, I think. It worked. Anyway, there's nothing I can do about it now. It's too late. The foundling must have frozen to death in the night.

Chapter 1 - MiJa

Mun-gyeong: 06 March 1935

Choi MiJa was born in Korea, in 1927, with a gold spoon in her mouth, but it was her fate to be burdened by the old Chinese curse, ‘May you live in interesting times.’ Nobody could remember who actually muttered the curse but, many years later, when the curse was proven beyond all doubt, everybody agreed that it was probably her mother, Park Bok-nam.

Her father, Choi Gil-soo, was the nineteenth generation of the high-born Yangban caste that owned large tracts of arable land around Mun-gyeong. He had inherited the fruit orchards, barley fields, a ginseng farm and numerous rice fields from his father, but he made most of his money when he ventured into trading rice. To make sure nobody would underestimate his wealth, he extended the ancestral home until it was a sprawling complex of ninety-nine rooms arranged around a central courtyard. A high wall made from rough, undressed stone surrounded the entire complex. He hired the finest craftsmen and used only natural, local materials to build in the traditional wooden post-and-beam frame style. Each building had wattle and daub walls, coated with fine kaolin clay that dried to a natural off-white colour, and an upswept roof made from intricately carved slate-grey tiles — the expensive kind, usually reserved for temples. He was quite sure that things were settled forever and that his wealth and name would last another 500 years.

In the female quarters, Bok-nam sat on the edge of her bed and stroked her swollen belly. In her hand she held the letter from the local Japanese governor. He wanted to know why MiJa had not registered for school yet. She had been putting it off for as long as possible, but now she had no choice. She cursed under her breath, folded the letter and put it back into the envelope. What was

the world coming to? she thought. She didn't believe in educating girls. *She* hadn't received any education and look how well she had done. All a girl had to do was learn how to count money, write her name, marry well and bear healthy sons. But the Japanese had mandated it, so that was that. It didn't make any sense to her. Sons need educating; that much is evident to all, but why girls? Her eldest daughter, Mi-soon, had received an education, and all she ever got from her was backchat.

Bok-nam felt a kick in her belly. It was a strong kick, a boy's kick. It had better be, she thought. Two girls are enough for any family, and her husband would think about taking a concubine if she bore him another daughter. She stroked her belly and said under her breath, 'Good morning, my precious son.' Something she did every morning without fail. Then she yelled to the out-of-sight servants, 'You can wake MiJa now and give her a bath.'

A few moments later, the head of the female servants appeared and kowtowed. Bok-nam handed her a bar of soap that she kept under lock-and-key. 'Make sure that she is scrubbed clean, but don't use too much of it,' she said. 'It's from Italy and made from olive oil.'

'Yes, Ma'am,' said the servant and headed off to repeat her orders to the kitchen staff. 'And don't forget to bring it back as soon as you've finished. It's expensive,' yelled Bok-nam.

The kitchen staff had been up since dawn preparing breakfast and fetching water from the well. The water was heated in a vast cast-iron pot on the kitchen stove. When it was hot enough, two of the servants scooped up the water and poured it into a huge bathtub, made from a series of oak staves held together with black iron hoops, like a truncated beer barrel.

'Why do I have to get a bath anyway?' said MiJa, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. 'I had one last month. For the Lunar New Year. Don't you remember?'

'Ma'am insists. You are to go to school today.'

'Really?' asked MiJa, now wide-eyed and fully awake. She had been nagging her mother for months to go to school. She wanted to be smart like her elder sister, Mi-soon. She tentatively

dipped a big toe into the water to test the temperature and jerked it back out. 'It's still too hot,' she said, so the servants scurried back to the well to draw more cold water and pour it into the bath until it was to MiJa's liking. MiJa closed her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut as the two servants poured water over her head, washed her hair, and tried to scrub her skin off, armed with only rough cotton flannels and the expensive Italian soap.

'Can I wear my favourite dress again? The pink one I wore for the Lunar New Year?'

'Yes, we are getting it ready.'

The servants brought more hot water to rinse the soap off MiJa. They wrapped her in a warm towel, dried her hair and combed oil, made from the seeds of camellia flowers, through it then tied it in braids. The servants dressed her in her casual house clothes and led her across a gravel courtyard. Outside the kitchen area, an army of dark-brown earthenware pots stood guard against hunger. Each was large enough to fit MiJa inside and contained different vintages of kimchi, assorted pickles, soy sauce, chilli paste and fermented bean paste that would meet their needs for many years. Bunches of dark-red chillies and Chinese cabbage leaves hung from the exposed rafters to dry out over the bone-dry winter. MiJa let her hand trail in the ornamental pond and hoped that one of the koi carp would nibble at her fingertips. She liked the sensation of their soft leathery mouths and still imagined them to have been somehow accidentally splashed with red and orange ink.

'You have just had a bath. And don't dawdle. Your mother wants her breakfast,' said the servant.

When they passed the reception hall, MiJa glanced up at the enormous wooden sign that hung from it. It was the house name, *Mae-jook-dang*, carved in Chinese characters. She tried to remember the meaning of each of the characters. One represented plum blossom, another was bamboo, and the last character meant house. Mi-soon had explained to her that it was how the family had managed to survive for so many generations. Plum blossom could survive the harshest

of winters, bamboo always grew straight, was evergreen, and more importantly would yield to the wind instead of resisting it and breaking.

When MiJa arrived at the female quarters, her mother and her older sister were waiting for her.

‘Serve the breakfast now,’ Bok-nam shouted to the servants. She glowered at MiJa. ‘You took your time. I thought you wanted to go to school? You really should be more considerate, MiJa. Especially to your *mother*. Especially in *my* condition.’

‘Sorry, Mother,’ said MiJa.

‘Good morning Little Sister,’ said Mi-soon.

‘Good morning, Elder Sister. I’m going to school today. I’m going to be smart like you.’

Bok-nam laughed and looked around, anxious for her breakfast to arrive. Two servants brought in a heavily lacquered zelkova wood table laden with plates of fried fish, bowls of steaming white rice, a bowl of hot soup made from freshly picked dandelion greens, and side dishes of bean sprouts with toasted sesame seeds, assorted pickles and a plate of fermented kimchi.

Mi-soon was hungry, but she knew she could not start eating until her mother picked up her spoon.

‘When is Father coming back?’ asked MiJa.

Mi-soon kicked her sister under the table, taking care that her mother could not see her.

‘Soon,’ said Bok-nam, much to Mi-soon’s relief. ‘Now, let’s eat.’

Bok-nam’s husband, Gil-soo, had been summoned to the Korean capital, Kyongsung, to discuss important business with Japanese land officials. All the Korean landowners had been ordered to the capital by the Governor General of Cho-sen. Gil-soo should have returned yesterday but had sent a message that he would be late.

After breakfast, Bok-nam ordered the servants to dress MiJa for school. ‘Make sure you bring her to me, so I can inspect her before she steps out of the door.’

In MiJa's room a maid was ironing MiJa's hanbok: a traditional Korean dress made from a pink, full-length bell-shaped skirt. On top of this, she would wear a dark green bolero jacket with multi-coloured hooped sleeves. When the servants had finished dressing MiJa they tied long pink ribbons at the end of her braids, made sure that her silk shoes were fitted correctly, and took her to her mother for the inspection.

Bok-nam looked her daughter up and down and asked MiJa to turn around. Then she said, 'She is acceptable. Dol-soi will take you to school.'

'Thanks. See you later, Mother,' said MiJa and bowed. Her mother nodded back.

'See you later, Little Sister,' shouted Mi-soon. 'Enjoy your first day at school.'

Dol-soi, the head servant, led MiJa through the courtyard and down a set of granite steps, across a manicured lawn, to a large wooden gate that was reinforced with black iron bands and set between two stone pillars. On one of the pillars, MiJa noticed that the plaque, engraved with her father's name, was slightly crooked; she asked Dol-soi to straighten it. They joined the Great North Road, an ancient route that started in Pusan on the southern coast and finished in Kyongsung. The town of Mun-gyeong was located about halfway and formed part of the mountain pass that cut its way through the Sobaek mountain range; local legend said that the mountain pass was so high that even the birds could not reach the summit. The town had grown fat from the bounty of the traders, scholars and pilgrims that followed the road north in their quest for money, knowledge and spiritual enlightenment.

It was a beautiful clear spring day, and MiJa delighted in watching the flycatchers dart in and out of the hedgerows, busy making their nests and singing a song about the promise of summer. She looked down the road in both directions and was pleased that her long shadow cast on the road made her look taller, but the butterflies in her stomach would not settle.

'What if nobody likes me?' she asked Dol-soi.

'I'm sure they will.'

‘What if nobody wants to be my friend?’

‘Of course they will.’

Then a few moments later, ‘Are you sure they will like me?’

‘I’m sure.’

About thirty minutes later, they arrived at the town entrance. A fortified wall, the colour of pale honey, encircled the town and was initially built to keep out brigands and strangers. Above an archway stood a guardhouse with the swept-up eaves of a temple roof.

‘It’s not far now,’ said Dol-soi as they slipped through the archway. MiJa noticed how cool and shadowy it was in the tunnel, and when she emerged into the bright sunshine at the other end she gasped. She had never seen anything so beautiful in her life. Ahead of her lay a long avenue of cherry trees, in full blossom. She let go of the servant’s hand and ran towards them, straining her neck backwards to stare at the solid canopy of pink-tinged clouds, with sunlight poking through. Suddenly, a gust of wind fractured the cloud into a million pieces, and the spring sky filled with a flurry of pink blossoms, each fluttering in the breeze like a tiny butterfly. MiJa was afraid they would vanish forever, so she ran like crazy with her pink dress billowing in the wind and her hair ribbons fluttering erratically in the wind until she was indistinguishable from the clouds of blossom. She leapt with feline grace, clutching at the petals, with both hands, until she could hold no more. She opened her hands, expecting to have captured their delicate beauty and faint perfume, something she could always keep and treasure: instead, all she found was a crushed brown mess. She sniffed at them, but their delicate bouquet had vanished, replaced with something acrid and bitter. She threw them on the ground, disappointed that something so beautiful could be lost so quickly.

The sign above the school gate read: *The Good Citizen Elementary School*. MiJa was excited about her first day at school and full of pride that she was almost a schoolgirl, nearly an

adult in her mind, so she pushed back her shoulders, marched through the gate, and stepped into a different world.

Chapter 2 - The Good Citizen Elementary School

A large crowd had gathered on the packed-earth courtyard outside the school and slowly shuffled towards the registration hall: a modern, squat, brick building designed for functionality rather than aesthetics. MiJa had never seen such a crowd and felt nervous. She had seen large gatherings before at birthday parties, and Chuseok when the harvest was celebrated, but this was different: all the social castes had been thrown together. It was as if the Japanese had swept away a thousand years of tradition.

Members of the Yangban class — civil servants, politicians and landowners — rubbed shoulders with the scientists, engineers, doctors and musicians from the Jungin caste. The craftsmen, fishermen and labourers of the Sangmin class mingled freely with the Baekjong caste, the untouchables — the butchers, funeral directors, leather makers, shoemakers, entertainers, prostitutes and shaman priests; anybody who dealt in death or was unclean.

Everybody seemed to be talking at once, and when they became frustrated at not being heard, they raised their voices even louder. MiJa was confused by their coarse, thick accents and wasn't sure if they were even speaking Korean. She was shocked by their strange attire, but most shocking of all was the smell.

Nearly everybody was clothed in rough, undyed and unwashed hempen cloth. Bare limbs poked out of the ragged arm and leg holes and these, too, were unwashed and streaked with mud. Had these people no shame? White was the colour associated with death; it was worn at funerals.

MiJa glanced around nervously, looking for anybody that looked normal, and was relieved to see a small splash of colour against the enormity of the dirty blank canvas. She saw two girls in traditional hanboks; one was in aquamarine, the other purple. A handful of boys wore their traditional garb: grey baggy pants, pastel-coloured silk waistcoats and black hats. There was even

one in a jacket and tie, western style. MiJa whispered an incantation under her breath, ‘I hope I am in the same class as those girls,’ and repeated it ten times to make sure it came true. She wasn’t worried about being in the same class as the boys because that was simply unthinkable.

The registration hall opened, and as the crowd surged forward MiJa was nearly shoved into the girl in front of her. She backed up slightly and smoothed her dress by her side to fill as small a space as possible. She stared at the girl in front of her. She wasn’t wearing any shoes, and her hair looked like it had never been washed or combed. She had mud caked on the back of her neck that looked so deep, you could plant mooli radishes in it. When the crowd moved forward again, MiJa grabbed Dol-soi’s hand and pulled on it to lift herself slightly so she could walk on tiptoe and avoid soiling her shoes, and with her other hand, she held her perfumed braid under her nose and inhaled the sweet camellia oil.

As they got closer to the registration hall, MiJa peeked inside. A short, thin man with a balding head, spattered with beads of sweat, sat behind an oversized mahogany desk as if he was trying to compensate for his lack of stature. He beckoned them forward with a slight wave of his hand.

‘Name?’

‘Dol-soi, sir.’

The registrar took off his glasses and looked up at the servant as if he was the village idiot. He grimaced, shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and said, ‘What is your family name?’

‘I don’t have one.’

The man interlocked his fingers and sat up straight. It was going to be a long day. ‘Are you her father?’ he said and nodded to MiJa.

MiJa covered her face to hide her blushes. She had never heard anything so ridiculous. How could a servant be her father?

‘No sir. She is my master’s daughter.’

‘Why didn’t her father bring her? Is he ashamed of her?’

‘No sir. He had to go to the capital, Kyongsung —’

‘Yes, I know what the capital is called,’ said the registrar, and he shook his head in disbelief.

He turned to MiJa and asked, ‘Can you tell me your father’s name?’

‘Choi Gil-soo,’ said MiJa. She watched the registrar sort through a pile of papers on his sweat-stained desk until he found the right one. He read through it, nodded, and gave it the official stamp.

‘Welcome to our school,’ he said to MiJa and handed her the stamped paper. ‘Please wait over there with the others. You will see the nurse next.’

As they turned to go, the registrar said, ‘Not you, servant. You can wait outside the school gates until we have finished, er processing them.’

The nurse was an elderly, stout woman, as broad as she was tall, with her hair tied in a severe bun that pulled her sagging skin taut over her face. Her mouth had lost its fight with gravity and drooped downwards giving her the impression that she was in a permanent sulk; she was. ‘Stand up tall,’ she said to a boy as she measured his height and squinted through her Coke-bottle glasses. ‘You’re not very tall for your age are you?’ she said to the boy as if it was his fault. The boy didn’t answer. ‘Does your mother feed you?’

‘Yes, Nurse.’

‘Well, obviously, she doesn’t feed you enough, or you would be taller. But don’t worry. We will feed you well.’ She wrote something on a piece of paper, handed it to him, and shouted, ‘Next.’

MiJa handed the nurse her registration paper.

‘Stand up against the wall. Back straight.’ MiJa stood on tiptoes under her dress, and the nurse wrote her height and ‘uniform size 3’ on her registration paper. ‘Join those over there,’ she said and pointed to where MiJa should stand. ‘You will get your name next.’

MiJa joined the queue and wondered why she needed a new name. She already had the one that her father had given her. She watched as the children were taken one by one into a room, only to emerge a few moments later with a smile on their face and a piece of yellow cotton cloth clutched in their hand.

Standing in front of MiJa was a boy with a parcel wrapped in waxed paper, tied with string, tucked under his arm. Something that looked like blood seemed to be dripping from it. He was holding hands with a girl who had protruding teeth. They were called into the room together and MiJa strained her ears to listen. She could only just make out the voices inside the room.

‘Name?’

‘Baek Un-yeon, sir,’ the girl replied.

‘Wrong.’

The girl hesitated. ‘That is what my father calls me.’

‘That may well be, but from now on, your name is Usagi.’

‘Usagi? What does that mean?’

‘It’s Japanese for Bunny.’

There was a slight delay, and the girl said, ‘This is my younger brother.’

MiJa heard the boy say, ‘My father asked me to give you this, sir.’ She could hear the rustle of a parcel being unwrapped.

‘Ah, you must be the butcher’s son. Can you tell me your name?’

‘Baek So-dong, sir.’

The man put down his pen. ‘Please thank your father for the gift. He must be quite a comedian. He calls your sister Un-yeon (No Name) and he calls you So-dong (Cow’s Arse).’

The man laughed, not understanding that the poor had no reason to name their offspring. Instead, they gave them self-deprecating nicknames in the hope that the jealous gods would overlook their children and spare them the worst.

‘I think you will like your new Japanese name much better. It is Gomasuri.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said the boy and he slowly repeated, ‘Go-ma-suri.’ Japanese for ass kisser.

They left the room a few moments later, clutching their cotton name tags and repeating their names over and over so they didn’t forget them.

The registrar summoned MiJa next.

‘Stand there, on the yellow cross, with your arms by your side.’

MiJa did as she was told and straightened her back for good measure.

‘What is your name?’

‘I don’t know sir.’

The man put down his pen and stared up at MiJa. ‘You don’t know your name?’

‘No sir.’

‘Why not?’

‘You haven’t given it to me yet, sir.’ MiJa noticed that his left eye gave an involuntary tic.

He smiled.

‘What is your Korean name?’

‘Choi MiJa, sir.’

‘You are Yoshiko from now on. It means beautiful girl. The same meaning as your Korean name.’ He wrote her new Japanese name onto a yellow cotton label. ‘Ask your mother to sew this onto your school uniform, then everybody will know who you are. Without a Japanese name, you are nobody. Understand?’

‘Yes sir,’ said MiJa, and she bowed deeply to show that she did understand.

The lobby was buzzing with excitement as the children discussed their new names. MiJa heard one girl tell a group of children that she was delighted with her new Japanese name.

‘My name is Shimai,’ she said with a puffed-out chest like a pigeon. ‘I’m the youngest of six girls. My oldest sisters are called Geum-ju (Gold), Eun-ju (Silver), and Dong-ju (Bronze). Then

came Soon-ju (Not So Bad) and Geut-ju (Last Daughter). I think my father had had enough of girls when I was born because he called Mal-yeon (No More Fucking Girls), but now I'm Shimai.' She proudly waved her name label above her head, not knowing that Shimai means, The End.

'And you still don't have any brothers?' asked one of the boys.

'Last year a baby brother arrived.'

'And what's his name?' asked the boy.

She grabbed her crotch and said, 'Bo-seok, of course, because he has got the crown jewels.'

Some of the children laughed but most didn't understand. MiJa blushed and followed them to the next stage of the process. She could hear a faint buzzing behind the closed door that sounded like a distant wasps' nest, but there was so much talking going on it was hard to make out what it was. MiJa noticed that many children went into that room, but nobody ever came out. Suddenly the door opened, and a man dressed in a white coat emerged, accompanied by a strong whiff of disinfectant. He yelled, 'Next!'

MiJa entered a long corridor, harshly lit by fluorescent lights. A row of chairs stood on either side, facing the wall. On the left sat the boys, all with military-grade buzz haircuts. On the right, the girls with identical short bobs. There wasn't a single mirror in the room, but most of the children were crying. They saw the severe haircuts on the other children and could imagine them on themselves.

'Sit in the chair,' said the man with the white coat and slicked-back oily hair. He wrapped a large cloth around MiJa's neck and fastened it with a clothes peg. MiJa took a sharp intake of breath as she felt the press of cold metal against the nape of her neck. She heard the snipping of shears behind her, and then suddenly, she felt lighter, as if a huge weight had been removed from her shoulders. She felt herself rise in her chair, caught the faint whiff of camellia oil, and then everything went dark, as her hair fell around her face like a pair of black velvet curtains.

A short while later, the barber removed the cloth, shook the hair out of it, and moved on to his next victim. MiJa stared at her bunched-up silky braids lying on the floor, still tied with her pink ribbons. She bit her tongue, determined not to cry in front of the other children. They reminded her of the camellia flowers that her father grew in his garden and had often wondered why they fell as complete flower heads and not petal by petal. She stooped down, picked up the braids, and sniffed at them; the perfume had faded already. She gently stroked them as if saying goodbye to a lifelong pet, removed the pink ribbons from the braids and let the dead hair fall to the floor.

‘You look like a mop,’ said a voice behind her. MiJa wiped her eyes and turned around. It was the boy she had seen in Western dress.

‘Well, you look like a monk,’ she said.

‘All the boys look like monks, but I think I’m the most handsome. I’m Kim,’ he said. ‘Kim Jung-sik.’

MiJa ignored him. She was too embarrassed to talk to a boy she didn’t even know.

‘Don’t worry. It’ll grow back,’ he said.

‘Then they’ll cut it again. Won’t they?’

Eventually the children were disgorged back into the schoolyard dressed in their school uniform. The boys wore a military uniform: black trousers and a black tunic with gold buttons and a mandarin collar. They hid their crew cuts under a peaked military cap emblazoned with the school badge. The girls were less fortunate and had to wear white long-sleeved blouses, fastened with a ribbon tied in an asymmetric bow, and black skirts that only came down to mid-calf. The girls tugged at their skirt hems, trying to make them longer and MiJa blushed at the thought of revealing her bare ankles in public. She was glad she had stood on tiptoes because her skirt was longer than the others. Some of the girls were embarrassed that they hadn’t washed their once hidden limbs and were now trying to wipe off the dirt with spit and frantic rubbing.

On the way home, Dol-soi carried MiJa's traditional silk dress over his arm. She looked at her beautiful hanbok and compared it to her plain school uniform. She had traded her beautiful braids for a mop haircut, but she was a schoolgirl now and would learn about all the wonders in the world. It was a price worth paying, she decided.

When they were almost home, Jung-sik, who had been following behind, shouted, 'I will see you tomorrow morning. We can walk to school together.' He pointed to his house and said, 'I live over there. What's your name?'

MiJa ignored him. She was staring at the gatepost outside her house. The plaque engraved with her father's name was missing.

Chapter 3 - Jung-sik

‘Ichi, ni; san, shi; go, roku; shichi, hache; kyuu, juu.’

MiJa heard them before she could see them, but soon a red flag tied to a bamboo stick fluttered over the horizon, followed by a cloud of dust and a column of children marching in 2:4 time. It was the first day back at school for the older children, and the column had been arranged in rank and file, boy, girl, boy, girl, with the tallest at the front.

‘Fall in at the back,’ bellowed the head boy with the flag.

MiJa did as she was told, the order to advance was given, and the children marched along the dusty road like a uniform multi-legged organism.

‘We will learn to count to ten in Japanese, one number for each step. Repeat after me: Ichi — Ni.’

‘Ichi — Ni,’ replied the children.

‘San — Shi,’ said the leader and so on until he got to ten and returned to the beginning. It was effective, and by the time they got to Jung-sik’s house, MiJa had already memorised how to count to ten in Japanese.

‘Good morning,’ said Jung-sik. MiJa rolled her eyes and pretended something interesting had caught her eye and looked the other way.

‘No talking in the ranks,’ shouted the leader, and he gave the command to set off marching again.

After a while, he got fed up counting to ten and moved on to the Japanese National anthem.

‘Repeat each line after me after me.’

*May your reign
Continue for a thousand,
Eight thousand generations,*

*Until the pebbles
Grow into boulders
Lush with moss.*

MiJa mimicked the other children and repeated the words parrot-fashion. She didn't understand their meaning, but she could feel her spirits sink as the lively bouncing marching rhythm was replaced with a solemn dirge, devoid of any emotion, and she felt more like she was going to a funeral than school.

At the school gate they were confronted by a platoon of prefects who checked that each pupil had their Japanese name tags sewn onto their uniforms in the correct place and turned away those that didn't. The boys were told to stand up straight, button their tunics and straighten their caps. MiJa focussed on the two girl prefects, armed with wooden rulers and scissors. She could hear one of them say, 'Hair should be four centimetres below the ear and skirt hems should be ten centimetres below the knee.'

MiJa watched them check the girls with their rulers. If the hair was too long, they cut a notch out of it with the scissors, at the regulation length, and told them to get it cut after school. MiJa rolled up the waistband of her skirt to shorten it.

A temporary wooden stage had been erected in the playground, with stairs on either side. Centre stage was a man dressed in the gown of a schoolmaster, with iron-grey hair that stood erect like the bristles on a wild hog. When he held the megaphone up to his mouth, he revealed that far

too many yellow teeth had been crammed into far too small a mouth. He held onto the podium with his free hand and addressed the school with a high-pitched nasal whine.

‘Good morning, children. I am your headmaster, and my name is Kitamura. I would like to welcome you all to The Good Citizen Elementary School.’

MiJa copied the other children and said, ‘Good Morning, Kitamura san,’ and bowed deeply. Some of the children were slow to respond, so their form teachers gave them a tap on the head with a long stick as a timely reminder.

The headmaster continued, ‘We have much to do on our first day, but before we separate you into your form classes, I want to say something about why you are here. I come from the Glorious Empire of Japan. The head of our country is Emperor Hirohito, and he has decided to educate the people of Korea, for free. The first duty of a good citizen is to worship the Japanese Emperor.’

His voice cracked, and one of the teachers handed him a glass of water. He took a drink and cleared his throat before continuing. ‘When I first arrived here, I was shocked to see how backwards Korea was. Your farmers still rely solely on the weather, so we decided to build a series of irrigation canals and drag Korea into the twentieth century. Even now, we have a team of Agricultural Officers mapping the country and making a list of who owns all the land. The survey will allow us to manage the land more efficiently, which means more food for you to eat.

‘We will help Korea build the first factories and construct the first railway system, and soon this part of Japan will have a modern economy, just like the Motherland. That is where you come in. We need workers to achieve all of this. If you work hard and listen to your teachers, you will learn much here, and when you graduate you will become productive citizens and perform an important job for the Empire of Japan.’

When they were sure the headmaster had finished speaking, the prefects started a round of applause. This was followed by a rousing rendition of the national anthem before the pupils were led to their allocated classrooms.

The form teacher opened the sliding door to the classroom and read out the names from a list. MiJa noticed that the shortest girls were called in first and allocated seats at the front of the room. Each desk seated two students, and the desks were arranged in three rows.

MiJa looked for the girls she had seen dressed in the traditional dress, but now everybody looked the same in their uniforms. The girl with protruding teeth was there, and she was called in next. MiJa was very pleased with herself for having the foresight to stand on tiptoes. At least she wouldn't have to sit next to a butcher's daughter. When MiJa's name was finally announced, she was allocated a seat in the middle row. The seat next to her was vacant, so she turned to her left and smiled at Bunny.

The boys were called in next and started filling up the right-hand row of desks. When that row was filled, they started occupying the central row, and it slowly dawned on MiJa that she was going to be seated next to a boy. This was an outrage. She felt nauseous and tried her best to ignore the stares and jeers thrown her way, and just when she was thinking it couldn't possibly get any worse, a familiar voice said, 'I think it's our destiny to be together.'

It was Jung-sik. Not him again, thought MiJa. Maybe I can ask to be moved, or he will sit somewhere else tomorrow? She didn't know what to say to him, so she just smiled, blushed, and looked away. At least he looked smart dressed in his school military uniform, and when he sat down, he didn't smell too bad either.

'Settle down, children. Settle down. I am your class teacher, and my name is Yamamoto.'

The teacher wrote his name on the blackboard in large Japanese letters.

‘When I say good morning class, you will say, good morning, Yamamoto San and bow like this.’ He demonstrated how the children should bow to a superior, with the body bent at ninety degrees.

‘Now, let’s all give it a try. Good morning class.’

The children all stood and said, ‘Good morning, Yamamoto san,’ and bowed deeply.

‘Good, now all sit down and take a long look at the person sitting next to you. They will be your study partner for the entire year.’

Jung-sik gave MiJa a broad smile, and her heart sank.

The teacher scrawled three headings in Japanese characters on the blackboard. ‘These are the subjects you will learn this term.’ He tapped the first heading and said, ‘First, the Japanese language. It is essential to learn the Japanese language to fit into cultured society and find useful work when you leave here. The second topic is Japanese history. You will learn about our common history so that you can understand where our people come from and what makes us special. Finally, you will learn about the Shinto religion. The Shinto priest will teach you directly at the Shinto shrine every Friday. Does anybody have any questions?’

A murmur of excitement filled the classroom, and everybody started talking about visiting a temple.

‘Any questions?’ asked the teacher. ‘No? Good. Then we will start our first lesson and learn about the Japanese alphabet. Quiet!’

The morning seemed to drag on forever, and MiJa was glad when the bell rang for the lunch break. In the afternoon, they had their first history lesson.

‘Does anybody know where our great Emperor came from?’ said the teacher.

The class remained silent until MiJa raised her hand and said, ‘From Tokyo, sir?’

‘That’s correct, Yoshiko,’ said the teacher straining his eyes to read her name tag. ‘That’s where he lives now. But where did he come from originally? How was he created?’

Total silence.

‘Nobody? Then I will tell you,’ said the teacher, and he sat down on the desk and began his story.

‘A long time ago, a God called Izanagi took a wife called Izanami, and together they created the islands of Japan. Unfortunately, Izanami died in childbirth and was taken to hell, which the Japanese call Yomi.’

Jung-sik raised his hand, and the teacher said, ‘Yes, Ryosuke. What is it?’

‘Why did she go to hell, sir? What did she do wrong?’

‘The Japanese believe that everybody goes to hell. But Yomi is not like the hell you may have heard of. There is no punishment in Yomi. We believe that there is no punishment in the afterlife for any sin committed on earth.’

The teacher continued with his story. ‘Izanagi was greatly upset by this, so he tried to bring his wife back from the underworld, but he failed in this task, and when he got back from hell, he felt dirty and polluted. You see, Yomi is a very grimy and filthy place, a bit like Korea.’ The teacher paused for the laughter, but when nothing happened, he continued.

‘Whilst washing his eyes and nose, he created three gods. From his left eye, he washed out Amaterasu, the sun goddess, and she illuminated the whole of heaven. From his right eye, he washed out Tsukuyomi, the moon god. And from his nose sprang Susanoo, the god of storms and the sea.’

‘Ugh,’ groaned the class in unison.

‘All was not well in the kingdom. As I am sure you know already, brothers are jealous of their sisters and fight all the time. The constant bickering tried the patience of Izanagi, so he

banished Susanoo from heaven. But before Susanoo left, he paid a visit to his sister, Amaterasu, and set her a challenge. Each would take a possession of the others and make something from it. Whoever made the best thing would win. Amaterasu made three women from Susanoo's sword, and Susanoo made five men from Amaterasu's necklace. Amaterasu claimed that the men were hers because they were made from her necklace, and since men are superior to women, she had won the contest. From that moment on, all her children would rule Japan until the end of time.'

'Is that why you have a sun on your flag?' asked MiJa. 'To represent Amaterasu?'

'That is correct, Yoshiko. But it is *our* flag. Korea is part of the Japanese Empire.' The teacher explained that Emperor Hirohito is directly descended from the Sun God, Amaterasu, and the Emperor rules according to her wishes. Anybody who challenges him will be struck dead by the sun goddess.

When the school bell rang to mark the end of the day, the children formed their marching column and paired off with their study partners. Jung-sik was surprised when MiJa asked, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

Jung-sik thought about it for a while and said, 'I don't know. I haven't thought about it. Maybe an emperor.'

MiJa started laughing. 'He was made from snot, wasn't he?'

The two set off on a giggle fit and, after a while, MiJa told him her Korean name.

'Well, MiJa. What do you want to be when you grow up?'

'That's why I want to go to school. So, I can find out what I want to do. I want to be smart like my sister. Girls just seem to get married and have children, but I want to be somebody.'

'My father says Japan is a great country,' said Jung-sik. 'He said Korea will be great too, one day. What do you think?'

‘I don’t know,’ said MiJa, and she shrugged her shoulders. ‘But I will ask my sister, Mi-
soon. She knows everything.’

Chapter 4 - Mi-soon

MiJa found her sister squatting on the floor in front of a traditional cob oven made from mud and straw, shaped like four mini-igloos melted together. A large black iron cauldron was set into the top of each one so that only the top third protruded. Mi-soon was placing kindling wood into the arches, underneath.

‘What are you doing, Elder Sister? Where are the servants?’

‘Oh good, you’re back.’ Mi-soon’s eyes grew as wide as saucers, and her dilated pupils were flecked with the flickering orange from the fire. ‘Word arrived that Father will be home tonight. I’ve sent the servants away because I want to cook his favourite meal.’

‘Can I help?’

‘Yes. In fact, I’ve been waiting for you to come home. I have got just the job for you.’

She led MiJa to a shady corner of the courtyard and handed her a bamboo pole that was at least twice as tall as MiJa. A net was attached to one end.

‘Which one?’ asked MiJa.

‘How about the ohgolgae?’ said Mi-soon and she pointed to a large, black chicken that had puffed up its feathers in annoyance at their intrusion.

‘I don’t know,’ said MiJa. ‘It looks a bit fierce. Let’s pick another one.’

‘No. I want that one,’ said Mi-soon

‘Why that one?’

‘Because we use that type of chicken for special occasions ... and it’s also the biggest ... and it’s also the tastiest.’

‘Let’s get it,’ said MiJa.

‘Here’s the plan. I’ll wave my arms up and down like this,’ said Mi-soon and demonstrated the movement. ‘When we corner the chicken against the fence, *all* you have to do is catch it in the net. Got it?’

‘Yes,’ said MiJa, but she didn’t feel too confident. ‘I don’t like the way it’s looking at me.’

Mi-soon laughed, pushed her little sister into the coop first, and shut the gate behind her.

Any onlooker that day would have been amazed to see two young Korean girls, one dressed in school uniform and the other dressed in traditional dress, chase an angry black chicken all over the coop. The chickens scattered everywhere, and the air filled with clucks and squawks, screams and shouts, angry feathers and flying limbs. The taller girl ran around like a crazy woman, waving her arms in the air, whilst the smaller one swung an unwieldy net through the air as though she was trying to catch butterflies. Once, the girls had it cornered, but the smaller girl was too slow with the net, and there was an angry exchange of words. Then, the taller girl stumbled into a pothole and fell over. The younger one tripped over her, and both got entangled in the net. Eventually, by chance or poultry fatigue, they netted the ohgolgae.

‘I’ve got it! I’ve got it!’ shrieked MiJa, and when everything quietened down, she said, ‘What do we do now?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Mi-soon. ‘When we take it out of the net, you hold its legs, and I’ll hold its head.’

‘Hurry up,’ said MiJa. ‘Its claws are sharp.’ She hated the scaly roughness of its legs and its violent struggles to free itself.

‘Hold on tight.’

‘I am. I am,’ said MiJa, and she looked away and screwed her eyes tightly so that she didn’t have to look. But her ears were open to every squawk and every crack of the neck bones. The

chicken twitched for a while, but a few moments later it went limp in her hands, and she opened her eyes with relief. ‘That wasn’t so bad, was it?’

Mi-soon was speechless and just stared at her sister. She didn’t want to let MiJa see her gut and pluck the chicken, so she sent her to get the key for the storeroom. Ownership of the storeroom key was one of the few powers entrusted to a woman in a male-dominated Confucian society and was passed down the generations, as precious as any heirloom. Their mother hid the key, but Mi-soon knew that she kept it in her jewellery box.

When MiJa returned, she stared at the naked chicken perched on the table. ‘Ugh. Its skin is black too. Has it gone bad?’

‘Oh, no. That is the way it is. Its bones are black as well.’

‘I don’t believe you. You’re fibbing.’

‘I’m not. You wait and see.’

‘Did you get the key?’

‘No. Mother wants a list of the ingredients you want to take from the storeroom,’ said MiJa.

Their father’s favourite dinner was samgyetang: poached chicken with ginseng and medicinal herbs. Mi-soon wrote out the list of ingredients she needed for the recipe and said under her breath, ‘I don’t know why she wants this. She can’t even read.’ She handed the list to MiJa, ‘Give this to Mother.’

‘Why do I have to do all the running about?’

‘Because I am nearly fourteen and you are only eight, but before you go, you can help me with the lid.’ They could not lift the heavy cast-iron lid, so they slid it aside. The escaping steam stung their faces, and they instinctively pulled them away with a jerk of the head.

When MiJa returned with the key, her sister was ladling boiling water onto the chicken skin and removing the last of the stubborn feather shafts with a pair of heavy-duty tweezers.

‘Some girls use these to pull the hairs out of their eyebrows,’ said Mi-soon.

‘I don’t believe you. You’re lying,’ said MiJa with a bewildered look on her face. She tugged on her eyebrow hair. ‘It hurts.’

‘It’s true. I read all about it in *Brand New Woman* magazine. They do it to make themselves look beautiful.’

MiJa laughed. ‘You’re crazy. I’m not ever going to do that.’ She pulled on her eyebrows again. ‘It hurts, a lot.’

‘I’ll try it on you,’ said Mi-soon and snapped the tweezers open and closed in front of MiJa’s face.

‘I’ll tell.’

Mi-soon stuck her tongue out, handed her sister a large bowl, and said, ‘Right, Little Sister. Let’s go and get what we need.’

The storeroom was the size of a small grocery store. Mi-soon unlocked the door, and the girls entered silently and tried to think only pure thoughts as though they were entering a cathedral. The room was crammed full of tables that bowed with the weight of the fresh produce piled on top, enormous earthenware containers full of rice, and cupboards stuffed with every available exotic ingredient. Mi-soon went over to a collection of wooden boxes labelled with their vintages. She found one marked *Ten Years* and removed the layer of damp moss from the top. An earthy aroma of freshly dug soil, dampened by fresh April showers, filled the air.

‘Do you know what this is?’ said Mi-soon. She held up a large, gnarled root, still caked in its original soil.

MiJa snorted in disgust. ‘Ginseng. I’m not stupid. Father grows it.’

Mi-soon put some ginseng roots into the bowl, and they moved over to a lacquered Chinese medicine box that smelled like an apothecary's shop. She opened one of the drawers. 'How about this?'

'I don't know,' said MiJa.

Mi-soon smiled. 'Really? I am surprised because it's written on the front of the door.'

'Yes, in Chinese.'

Mi-soon smiled. 'It's called astragalus, and it boosts your energy levels, just like ginger.' She added the astragalus, a stem of knobbly ginger root, and a choice piece of liquorice root to the bowl. 'To cleanse the blood,' she explained.

'It smells like medicine,' said MiJa.

'That's because it is, but over time people have learned to like the taste of the medicine.'

They moved over to a bank of shelves stacked with earthenware ginger jars, and Mi-soon foraged for the dried fruits she needed. 'These help you to sleep,' she said and added jujube and goji berries to the bowl, handling each ingredient as though it was a priceless holy relic.

'I need ginkgo fruit too,' said Mi-soon. 'Ah, here it is.' She removed the lid from the jar and sniffed it. 'Yuk. Disgusting.' She handed the jar to her sister. 'Here, what do you think?'

'It smells like the poo hut in the back garden,' said MiJa. 'I don't want any if you're going to put that in.'

'I think it has gone bad, so we'll leave it out,' said Mi-soon, not realising that it was the natural aroma of fresh ginkgo fruit.

'The bowl's getting heavy,' said MiJa. 'Have we got everything?'

'Nearly. Ah, here is what I was looking for.' She put a prickly branch with a bulbous head and a stem full of evil-looking thorns into the bowl.

'What is that for?' asked MiJa.

‘To scare away ghosts.’

‘I have never seen a ghost.’

‘It proves it works then, doesn’t it?’ Mi-soon added some garlic cloves, sweet rice and dried chestnuts to MiJa’s bowl. ‘That’s it,’ said Mi-soon. ‘Just let me check the list one more time ... Oh, I nearly missed something. Don’t worry, it’s not heavy.’

‘What is it?’

‘A magic ingredient.’ Mi-soon opened another cupboard and brought out a packet. ‘This is very expensive and has magic powers.’

‘Magic?’

‘Yes, magic. And precious.’

‘What is it?’ asked MiJa again.

Mi-soon read from the packet, ‘Mono. Sodium. Glutamate. The cook said it makes everything taste better.’

‘It must be magic, with a name like that. I can’t even say it.’

‘That’s why everybody calls it MSG.’

When they got back to the kitchen, Mi-soon washed the sweet rice to remove any small stones. Then she stuffed it into the chicken cavity along with some dried chestnuts, and tied its legs up with strong cotton thread. She put the chicken into the pot with the other ingredients and made sure that its head and feet were fully submerged in the liquid. Mi-soon showed her sister how to regulate the oven heat by adding more kindling sticks, and they both squatted in front of the ovens and let the warm glow from the fire slowly spread across their faces.

‘How was school?’ asked Mi-soon.

‘Survived, so far.’

‘Well, that’s a start. I think short hair suits you.’

'I like it because I look like you. I've got a Japanese name too,' said MiJa and pointed to her name badge on her uniform. 'It says, Yoshiko.'

'Yes, I know. I can read Japanese.'

'What's your Japanese name?'

'I don't have one.'

'Why not?' asked MiJa.

'When I went to school, I had a Korean teacher and he refused to give us Japanese names. One day he disappeared and was replaced by a Japanese teacher and I haven't been back since. But before he left, he gave me something. Something precious.'

'More precious than MSG?'

'Far more.'

'What? What is it? Tell me,' said MiJa and tugged on her sister's skirt.

'I'll tell you later. I might even show it to you at bedtime.'

'I can't wait that long. Tell me. Please.'

'Give me a hand with this lid,' said Mi-soon, and they slid the lid aside, taking care not to get steam-cleaned this time, and the delicious aroma of stewed chicken and medicinal herbs filled the kitchen. Mi-soon scooped the scum off the top of the stew and checked the seasoning.

'Did you make any friends?' asked Mi-soon.

'Not yet. I've only just started.'

'Who are you sat next to?'

'Jung-sik.'

'A boy!' Mi-soon stared at her sister and made a scandalous face.

'I know,' said MiJa, 'and it looks like I will be stuck with him all year.'

The sisters chatted for the next two hours. MiJa told her sister all about the emperor-God who lived in Japan, the headmaster's speech, her teacher, what the other children were like and about her upcoming visit to the Shinto shrine. Mi-soon listened patiently and regulated the heat of the fire so that the liquid barely simmered because she didn't want to make the chicken tough. Their timing was perfect because when the samgyetang was ready, they heard the head servant announce their father's return.

Thank you for reading this sample

About the Author

MARK ATKINSON was born and raised in York, England but has spent much of his life living, studying and working in Southeast Asia, and has spent over a decade in South Korea. It took him four years to research and write his first novel, *MiJa*. You can find more about the author, join his book-club, and download a Korean language version by visiting:



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