

any predicament. As long as you weren't caught cursing Kim Jong-il, you could get out of a death sentence with enough money. So she went to the black market and bought ten cartons of cigarettes at 50 won each. Then she asked around until she found the national security office in charge of Nongpo, all the while muttering under her breath that her wayward daughter had cost her a week's income.

A few days later, Oak-hee appeared at her front door and collapsed into her mother's arms.

Mrs. Song shrieked when she saw her. It was October, already cold, and Oak-hee was nearly naked and barefoot. Her shoes had been cut apart by the security guards at Nongpo, who thought she might be concealing money in the soles. She'd torn off her shirt sleeves to use as menstrual rags. She'd given away her underwear. What remained of her clothing was in shreds. Her hair crawled with lice. But when Mrs. Song gave her a bath, she could see that Oak-hee was healthier than she'd been before she left the country. Even after weeks of eating only gruel and the kernels of raw corn she picked in the fields, Oak-hee had good muscle tone. Her complexion was pink, glowing.

Oak-hee talked incessantly. In a torrent of manic energy, she spoke about everything in China—the white rice they ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, the markets, the fashions. Her discourse was part travelogue and part political screed. Mrs. Song and her two younger daughters gathered around to listen.

"What's life like in South Korea?" they asked.

Oak-hee didn't know firsthand, but she'd watched plenty of South Korean television while in China.

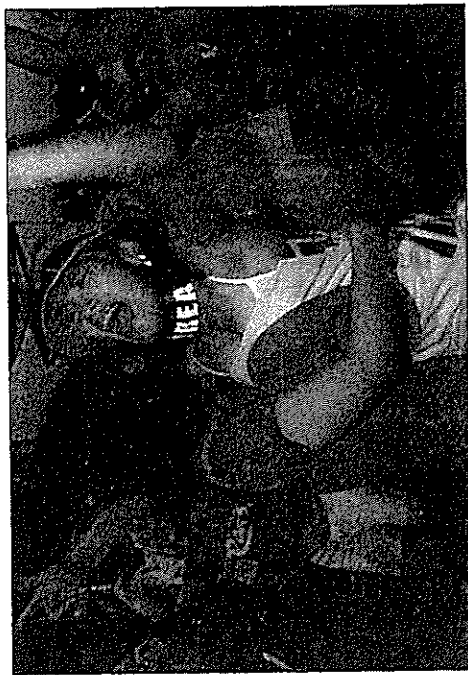
"South Korea's a rich country. Even the Chinese can't dream of the riches in South Korea," Oak-hee told them. "I swear I'll go to South Korea before I die."

The sisters sat crossed-legged on the floor as Oak-hee held forth. At times they were fascinated, at other times horrified. The middle sister, who was married to a railroad security guard, was the most straitlaced of the three. Her big eyes opened wider and wider as Oak-hee went on. Hesitantly, because she'd always been intimidated by Oak-hee, she interrupted.

"But our general has worked so hard for us . . ." She pointed to

## CHAPTER 17

# OPEN YOUR EYES, SHUT YOUR MOUTH



World Cup celebration, Seoul, 2002.

**M**RS. SONG WAS NOT SURPRISED TO LEARN THAT OAK-HEE WAS at Nongpo. She'd thought it was only a matter of time before her daughter landed in prison. She hadn't heard anything from Oak-hee since she'd run away from her husband three years earlier, but Mrs. Song had assumed she was in China with the rest of those whores and traitors. If she'd betrayed the fatherland, she deserved to be in prison. But a daughter is a daughter. Mrs. Song couldn't let her first-born languish in Chongjin's most notorious detention center.

After so many years spent surviving on the edge, Mrs. Song had swallowed many of her scruples. She'd also developed street smarts. She learned long ago that you could bribe your way out of almost

the father-and-son portraits her mother had dusted just that morning.

"Can't you see? Your general has turned you all into idiots," Oak-hee snapped.

The youngest sister, Yong-hee, divorced and living with their mother, was more sympathetic to Oak-hee's opinion, but she worried about her sister's outspokenness. The family had gone through enough heartbreak; they didn't need more trouble. Although Mrs. Song's house was freestanding, someone might be lingering outside.

"Just be careful. Let's all be careful what we say, okay?" she warned Oak-hee.

After her mother and sisters had heard their fill of her stories, Oak-hee started talking to other people. The *ajummas* who lived in the neighborhood clucked their tongues, but were curious just the same. They dropped by in the afternoon to welcome Oak-hee back and gathered around to listen.

"Open your eyes. You'll see our whole country is a prison. We're pitiful. You don't know the reality of the rest of the world."

Whenever an image of Kim Jong-il came on the television, Oak-hee flew into a rage. "Liar! Cheat! Thief!" she would scream at the television.

Mrs. Song finally lost her temper. Oak-hee's loose talk put the family at risk—it was treacherous. If it wasn't her own daughter speaking like that, Mrs. Song would have felt compelled to report her under her obligations to the *inminban*. Despite all that had happened, Mrs. Song remained a believer.

"Shut up. You're a traitor to the country," Mrs. Song screamed at Oak-hee.

Oak-hee was startled—her mother rarely raised her voice—but she was not about to shut up. She taunted her mother in return.

"Why did you give birth to me in this horrible country?" Oak-hee shouted. "Who do you love more? Kim Jong-il or me?"

Mother and daughter fought incessantly. After forty days at her mother's house, Oak-hee was sufficiently recovered from her ordeal in the prison camp to move on. She told her mother and sisters that she had learned from her earlier mistakes and would try again to make money in China. Only this time she wouldn't get caught. Mrs.

Song grudgingly loaned Oak-hee more money. She was sick with worry, but at the same time relieved to see her daughter go.

EIGHT MONTHS PASSED without word from Oak-hee. Then, in June, a woman came to Mrs. Song's door claiming to have news of her daughter. Mrs. Song braced herself. Oak-hee must be back in prison, she thought. She would have to bail her out again. But no, the woman said Oak-hee was working near the Chinese border and was doing very well indeed. She wanted to repay her mother and had some clothing and gifts for the family, but she feared she might get arrested if she came back to Chongjin. Wouldn't Mrs. Song please come to visit her instead?

Mrs. Song hesitated. She didn't know this woman. She hadn't traveled since the accident in 1995 that had unleashed so much grief on her family. She didn't really need money; her cookie business was doing well. The Songpyeon market now had stalls for the vendors and a roof. She paid rent and had a license. She felt like a proper businesswoman. She had remarried, too—sort of. It was more of an arrangement with an elderly widower who needed somebody to help keep house, but the man was kind and relatively well-to-do. Mrs. Song was living more comfortably than ever before. She had no reason to make a risky trip to the Chinese border, but she was still smarting over the 500 won she'd spent bailing Oak-hee out of prison. The strange woman promised Mrs. Song she wouldn't have to take the train—Oak-hee had arranged for a private car. Mrs. Song was impressed. She accepted.

On a hot, rainy day in June 2002, Mrs. Song left for Musan. She packed just an overnight bag. She would spend the night and ride back in the morning. But when they arrived there was no sign of Oak-hee. Mrs. Song had been told only that Oak-hee was working at the border. The woman hadn't specified which side of the border, but now she made it clear: Oak-hee was in China.

"You'll have to go to China to get the money and clothing. Your daughter is waiting for you," the woman told her. She introduced Mrs. Song to a man she said was her husband. "Don't worry. He'll take you over."

Mrs. Song had come so far. Could she turn back? They took another car up a road toward Hoeryong, another border town. Then they waited for dark.

By the time they arrived at the river, it was ten o'clock and still raining. The river was swollen, sloshing over its banks and turning them into slippery mud. Mrs. Song could barely tell where land ended and the river began. Two men in the uniforms of North Korean border guards had joined them. One lifted her like a child onto his back and the other took the arm of the first to balance them as they teetered across the river. They stumbled a few times and nearly lost their footing. Mrs. Song was sure she would be dropped and swept away by the currents. Like most North Koreans of her generation, Mrs. Song couldn't swim. But before the scream building within her could surface and give voice to her wishes—*take me back, take me home*—they were climbing out of the river. One guide gave the border guards some money and then disappeared into the water to cross back to North Korea. Mrs. Song and the other guide made their way through the darkness into China. They climbed a hill through the night and by daybreak were walking into a small village.

Then they got into a taxi, something Mrs. Song had never done before. Cars, trucks, scooters, and carts converged down narrow streets heading toward the market. Horns blared. It was 8:00 A.M. and the shops were opening. The security gates over the display windows rolled up with the screech of metal against metal. The shopkeepers switched on music that rang out from big speakers over the doorways. Loud, horrible music, Mrs. Song thought. She wanted to put her fingers in her ears. If this was capitalism, she didn't like it. Too noisy. How could Oak-hee live in such a terrible place?

Mrs. Song's guide stopped to buy eggs, sausage, and pigs' feet for their breakfast. They headed out of town and drove down a dirt road to a cluster of houses that made up a village. They went inside one of the houses. The guide introduced Mrs. Song to the owner of the house and his teenage daughter. They were ethnic Koreans of Chinese citizenship and spoke in virtually the same dialect as Mrs. Song. They showed her around. The house wasn't anything remarkable—redbrick walls, a tile roof, a homemade wooden fence that

formed a courtyard out front—but it was crammed with all sorts of appliances: a stereo, a water purifier, a color television, a refrigerator. The man kept opening the refrigerator door, pulling out different things to eat and drink. Beer, fruit, kimchi. When they laid out the food the guide had brought, there was more to eat on that table than Mrs. Song had ever seen outside of a wedding feast. Everything she might possibly desire was here, everything but Oak-hee.

"Where's my daughter?" Mrs. Song asked.

The man looked at her and mumbled something unintelligible. Mrs. Song asked again, this time more sharply.

"She's gone to look for work," he answered. Mrs. Song wasn't sure that she believed him. Her hosts were nice, maybe too nice: Mrs. Song thought they were hiding something, but she was too exhausted to push further. She fell into a fitful sleep. When she woke up and there was still no sign of Oak-hee, she was gripped by a terrible suspicion: I've been kidnapped.

MRS. SONG DIDN'T KNOW if she should try to run away. Where would she go? She didn't know where she was. The original guide had left. Should she confront her hosts with her suspicions? And what had happened to her daughter? The couple kept reassuring her that Oak-hee had been delayed and would be back soon. The next day Oak-hee finally called. She spoke over a scratchy line and it sounded like she was far away. She tried to reassure her mother that everything was fine, that she would see her very soon, that she should rest.

"Where are you anyway?" Mrs. Song asked suspiciously.

"In Hanguk," Oak-hee answered.

Mrs. Song had never heard of the place.

"Where is that? Near Shenyang?" asked Mrs. Song, referring to one of the largest cities in China's northeast, about three hundred miles from where she was staying.

"Farther. I'll call you tomorrow to explain."

North Koreans call their country Chosun and their estranged neighbor Nam Chosun, literally South Korea. The South Koreans use an entirely different name for their country. They call it Hanguk.

In the next telephone call, Oak-hee clarified that she was actually in South Korea. Mrs. Song couldn't believe it. She was so angry she shook with rage. She worried she was having a heart attack. Of all the bad things that Oak-hee had done in her life, from her childhood pranks to her foul mouth to her stint in prison camp, this was over the top. She had crossed over to the side of the enemy. She had paid these people to trick her mother into defecting. Mrs. Song had never been so angry in her life.

"You traitor! You're no daughter of mine," she screamed into the phone before slamming down the receiver.

Over the next three days, Oak-hee called repeatedly. Mrs. Song refused to take the calls. Finally she relented.

Oak-hee sobbed into the telephone.

"Mother, I love you. I want you to come live with me here." Oak-hee told her a little bit about her life. She had a job. The South Korean government had given her money when she arrived to get settled.

"If it's so wonderful in Seoul why are you crying?" demanded Mrs. Song.

Mrs. Song figured that the South Koreans, puppets of the Yankee imperialist bastards, had corrupted her daughter with money. Once they'd extracted enough information from Oak-hee, they'd torture and kill her. That's what Mrs. Song had heard about South Korea's treatment of North Korean defectors. She had no reason not to believe it.

"It's not like that, Mom," Oak-hee protested. "I'm crying because I miss you. I want you here."

Mrs. Song didn't want to listen. She told Oak-hee she wanted to return to North Korea as soon as she recovered from the journey. She would rest up for a few more days and build her strength.

She lounged around the house, napping, eating, and watching television. The house had a huge white satellite dish that received South Korean television. South Korea's soap operas were very popular and Mrs. Song quickly got hooked on one called *Glass Slipper*, about two orphaned sisters separated as children. When that wasn't playing, she'd flip through the channels to look for the soccer tournament.

The 2002 World Cup was being co-hosted by South Korea and Japan. Not since 1988, when South Korea hosted the Olympics, was there so much footage from Seoul. Mrs. Song wasn't that interested in soccer, but she was intrigued by the glimpses of South Korea she saw in the background. She couldn't help but notice the cars, the high-rises, the shops. During the commercial breaks, there were advertisements for mobile telephones and other things that Mrs. Song had never heard of.

When the South Korean team beat Poland, tied the United States, and beat Portugal, Italy, and Spain to reach the semifinals—the first Asian team to do so—millions poured out into the streets to celebrate. They wore red T-shirts and horns with little red lights for the team's fan club, the Red Devils. There they were, Koreans just like her, speaking the same language, but looking so beautiful, so happy, and so free.

It was hard for Mrs. Song to trust anything she saw on television. She knew well enough from a lifetime in North Korea (not to mention twenty-five of those years married to a journalist) that images could be manipulated. The Workers' Party lectures had warned her that foreign television broadcasts were designed to undermine the teachings of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. ("The South Korean puppets under the control of the U.S. CIA wickedly connive to use these specially made materials to beautify the world of imperialism," read one such lecture.) She suspected (correctly) that her generous hosts were being paid by Oak-hee to brainwash her into going to South Korea.

But it couldn't all be made up. And she couldn't dispute what she saw for herself in China—the abundant foods, the cars, the appliances.

Her hosts had an automatic rice cooker with a sensor that turned it off when the rice was done. Most of their appliances confused her, but the rice cooker was an endless source of fascination. Long ago, she'd owned a crude rice cooker, nothing like this one. It had been confiscated by the police because you weren't supposed to use electricity for cooking.

Every morning when she heard the beeping of the rice cooker, signaling that breakfast was ready, Mrs. Song marveled at the tech-

nology. It was true, she thought, North Korea was years, maybe decades, behind China. And who knew how far behind South Korea? She wondered what her poor late husband would have thought of all she was seeing here in China. Although she hadn't left the house since she'd arrived, she felt like she was having a great adventure just exploring the kitchen and turning on the television. She would have liked to share it with her husband. She thought of Chang-bo especially when she was eating. How that man loved to eat! He would have so enjoyed the sausage. Her eyes watered at the thought. Then her thoughts drifted to her son. Her memories were so tinged with guilt and shame that she couldn't even speak about him. So strong, so handsome—such a tragedy to have lost him at twenty-five. How much life he had missed. How much they had all missed, herself too, her daughters, locked away in North Korea, working themselves to death. For what? We will do as the party tells us. We will die for the general. We have nothing to envy. We will go our own way. She had believed it all and wasted her life. Or maybe not. Was it really over? She was fifty-seven years old, still in good health.

These were the thoughts drifting through her head one morning as the thin light of dawn seeped into her room. As she stirred to consciousness, she heard the chirp of the rice cooker in the kitchen. She sat up with a start. This was her wake-up call. She was ready to go.

## CHAPTER 18

## THE PROMISED LAND



Mrs. Song at the market in Seoul, 2004.

**O**N A TUESDAY MORNING IN LATE AUGUST 2002, MRS. SONG WAS buckled into the seat of an Asiana Airlines flight from Dalian to Incheon, the international airport in South Korea. She was traveling under a false name and carrying a forged passport. She knew only one other person on the plane—a young man sitting a few rows away. He'd come to her hotel room at 6:00 A.M. to give her the passport, which had been stolen from a South Korean woman of about the same age, the original photos extracted with a razor blade and replaced by Mrs. Song's. If questioned, she was to say she was a South Korean tourist who had spent a long weekend in Dalian, a popular seacoast resort just across the Yellow Sea from Korea. To support her cover story, Mrs. Song was outfitted in new clothes that would have looked outlandish in North Korea—capri-style jeans and

bright white sneakers. She carried a sporty backpack. Her handlers had pierced her ears—something women in North Korea didn't do—and her hair had been cut short and permed in a style favored by South Korean women of a certain age. Mrs. Song had spent two weeks in China being fattened up and groomed so that she wouldn't look like a refugee. The only thing that might give her away was her guttural North Korean accent. She was advised not to make small talk. To avoid striking up a conversation with a fellow passenger, she was told to remain in her seat for the duration of the eighty-minute flight.

She sat perfectly still, her hands folded on her lap. She wasn't nearly as nervous as one might expect under the circumstances. Her serenity came from the certainty that she was doing the right thing. She was at peace with her decision to defect: The morning at the farmhouse when she awoke to the sound of the rice cooker, her confusion had lifted. She had decided to accept Oak-hee's invitation to South Korea. She wanted to see with her own eyes the world she had glimpsed on television. Her daughters, her grandchildren would have their chance—the situation in North Korea couldn't last forever—but she had only so many years left. She would seize this opportunity, but first she wanted to go back to Chongjin to say a proper good-bye to her younger daughters. She wanted to explain her decision and give them the money that Oak-hee had left for her in China—almost a thousand dollars. "I can't let your sisters think I'm dead," she told Oak-hee. Oak-hee argued against it, worrying that her mother would lose her nerve or that her younger sisters would dissuade her, but Mrs. Song was insistent.

Her stay in Chongjin lasted one month because the Tumen River flooded during the rainy season; still Mrs. Song did not for a moment waver. She maintained a sense of purpose that carried her through the riskiest moments in her defection. The smugglers that Oak-hee had hired to bring her to South Korea were astounded that this sweet little grandmother carrying a doctored passport could board an international airliner without breaking into a sweat.

Getting out of China and onto the plane was the most dangerous part of the journey. Had the Chinese immigration authorities detected her forged passport, she would have been arrested and sent

back to North Korea to face prison camp. Only one hurdle remained after the plane landed in South Korea. Her passport wouldn't be convincing enough to fool the South Koreans, who would quickly discover it had been reported stolen. In fact, the young man on her plane would reclaim it before they landed and disappear into the crowd.

"Pretend you don't know me," he told her. She would have to wait in the ladies' room until he was safely out of the airport. Then she would go to the immigration counter and tell them the truth.

She was Song Hee-suk, fifty-seven years old, from Chongjin. She had lost half her family during the famine and was now seeking a new life for herself with her daughter in South Korea. There was nothing more to hide.

IN ARTICLE III OF its constitution, South Korea holds itself out as the rightful government of the entire Korean peninsula, which means that all of its people—including North Koreans—are automatically citizens. The right of North Koreans to citizenship was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1996. The reality, however, is more complicated. In order to exercise the right of citizenship, North Koreans must get to South Korea by their own volition. A North Korean cannot demand the right at the South Korean embassy in Beijing or at one of the various consular offices. Out of residual loyalty to its Communist ally and also to prevent millions of North Koreans from streaming across the border, China will not permit asylum seekers to present themselves at these diplomatic offices. The Chinese are aware that an exodus of East German defectors through Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1989 forced the opening of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the East German government.

The South Korean government, too, is content to keep the number of refugees down to manageable levels. A flood of defectors coming south would be a great financial and social burden.

Those who make it into the country use various subterfuges. If they have money or connections, they can get fake passports and fly to South Korea. Alternatively, they can slip out of China into neighboring countries such as Mongolia or Vietnam, where the embassies

with a very tall man whose badge and photo ID were at Mrs. Song's eye level. She bowed low, as one does when beseeching an official, and spoke her rehearsed line.

"I have come from North Korea. I am requesting asylum here," she said.

The man was a janitor. He looked startled, but he knew what to do. "How many of you are there?" he asked, knowing that most defectors arrived in groups. She told him she was alone. He steered her to an office next to the immigration counter. Telephone calls were made and within minutes agents arrived from the National Intelligence Service (NIS), South Korea's equivalent of the CIA.

Mrs. Song's interrogation lasted for nearly a month. She was transferred from the airport to a dormitory set up for newly arrived defectors by the intelligence service. She wasn't allowed to leave the premises, but Oak-hee was permitted to visit her. The NIS's first task was to ascertain that Mrs. Song was neither a spy nor a fraud, as undercover North Korean agents whose mission was to monitor the population of defectors had been caught over the years. The NIS was also screening for Korean-speaking Chinese posing as North Koreans to obtain South Korean citizenship and resettlement benefits that were worth more than \$20,000. Mrs. Song was debriefed for two hours every morning, after which she had to write out notes of what had been discussed. She was asked to detail the location of major landmarks in Chongjin—the offices of the Workers' Party, the security offices, the boundaries of the *gu* and *dong*, the districts and neighborhoods into which all Korean cities are organized. She found that she actually enjoyed the debriefing sessions: they gave her a chance to reflect on her life. In the afternoon, she would nap and watch television. The smallest creature comforts delighted her—the refrigerator stocked with complimentary juice boxes, each individually wrapped with its own straw.

She would later recall her stay with the NIS as the first real vacation of her life. After that, the hard work would begin.

IT IS NOT EASY for people earning less than a dollar per month to be integrated into the world's thirteenth-largest economy. South

are not as restrictive about accepting defectors. A small number have made it into European embassies or U.N. offices in China and requested asylum.

Only a small fraction of the 100,000 or more North Koreans in China are able to make it to South Korea. In 1998, there were just 71 North Koreans who requested South Korean citizenship; in 1999, the number rose to 148; in 2000, there were 312 defectors; and in 2001, there were 583. In 2002, 1,139 North Koreans were admitted. Since then, anywhere from 1,000 to 3,000 have been arriving steadily each year.

By the time Mrs. Song arrived, South Korean officials were accustomed to North Koreans showing up unannounced without documents at the airport. Her arrival at Incheon would set off a flurry of activity, but no panic.

MRS. SONG WAS disoriented the minute she stepped off the plane. She had been in an airport only once before—boarding the plane that morning in China—and it was nothing like this. The \$5.5 billion Incheon airport had opened the year before, not far from the beach where General Douglas MacArthur's troops landed in 1950. It is one of the largest airports in the world, a colossus of glass and steel. Sunlight streamed through the glass panels of the long arrivals corridor. People glided effortlessly along a moving walkway from the gates. Mrs. Song didn't know where to go, so she fell in step with the other passengers while keeping a safe distance from the man who had been her escort. When the other passengers queued up at the immigration counter, she ducked into the ladies' room, which she found as confusing as the rest of the airport. She couldn't figure out how to flush the toilet. The faucets over the sinks turned on and off automatically, without a touch. She poked her head out of the ladies' room to see if the man had gone, but she spotted him from behind, waiting to go through immigration, so she stayed put. She arranged her newly permed hair and freshened her makeup, gazing into the mirror at the unfamiliar face staring back at her.

The next time she checked, he was gone. She ventured out in search of a security official to approach. She practically collided