

1. *Sun-fee* (1940)

“It’s only a rumour,” Abuji said as I cleared the table. “They’ll never carry it out.”

My father wasn’t talking to me, of course. He was talking to Uncle and my brother, Tae-yul, as they sat around the low table after dinner, drinking tea.

I wasn’t supposed to listen to men’s business, but I couldn’t help it. It wasn’t really my fault. Ears don’t close the way eyes do.

I worked slowly. First I scraped the scraps of food and dregs of soup into an empty serving dish. Then I stacked the brass bowls – quietly, so they wouldn’t clang against one another. Finally, I moved around the table and began putting the bowls through the little low window between the sitting room and the kitchen. The kitchen was built three steps down from the central courtyard, and the sitting room three steps up. From the window I could reach a shelf in the kitchen. I put the bowls on the shelf one at a time, arranging them in a very straight line.

The longer I stayed in the room, the more I’d hear.

Uncle shook his head. “I don’t know, Hyungnim,” he said, disagreeing respectfully. “They’re masters of organisation – if they want this done, you can be sure they will find

a way to do it. And I fear what will happen if they do. Our people will not stand for it. I am afraid there will be terrible trouble—”

Abuji cleared his throat to cut off Uncle’s words. He’d noticed me kneeling by the table with the last of the bowls in my hands; I was listening so hard that I’d stopped moving. Hastily, I shoved the bowl through the window and left the room, sliding the paper door closed behind me.

What rumour? What was going to happen? What kind of trouble?

When I asked Tae-yul later, he said it was none of my business. That was his answer a lot of the time. It always made me want to clench my fists and stamp my foot and hit something.

Nobody ever told me anything. I always had to find out for myself. But at least I was good at it.

You had to do two opposite things: be quiet and ask questions. And you had to know *when* to be quiet and *who* to ask.

When was easy. I was supposed to be quiet most of the time. The youngest in the family was never supposed to talk when older people were talking. And girls weren’t supposed to talk much anyway, not when men or boys were around. So listening was easy for me; I’d done it all my life.

But lots of times I didn’t learn what I wanted to know by listening. That was when I had to ask questions.

I could have asked my mother, Omoni, when we were doing housework together. But I’d learned that it was useless

to ask her most questions. Either she didn't know the answer or she wouldn't tell me. Men's business, she'd say.

Abuji knew almost all the answers. I was sure of that. But I hardly ever asked him. He always said exactly what he wanted to say, and no more.

That left Uncle and Tae-yul. Usually, I tried Uncle first. He was quite cheerful about answering me most of the time. And when he wasn't around, I'd ask my brother. Firstborn son, only son – the men usually included him in their talks.

Tae-yul was thirteen, three years older than me. He was often impatient when I asked questions, and acted as if I were stupid for asking in the first place. But that was better than not knowing things.

Listening and asking weren't enough, of course. After that came the hard part – the figuring out.

They'll never carry it out . . . They're masters of organisation . . . I knew who "they" were. The Japanese. Whenever there was talk that I wasn't supposed to hear, it was almost always about the Japanese.

A long time ago, when Abuji was a little boy and Uncle just a baby, the Japanese took over Korea. That was in 1910. Korea wasn't its own country anymore.

The Japanese made a lot of new laws. One of the laws was that no Korean could be the boss of anything. Even though Abuji was a great scholar, he was only the vice-principal of my school, not the principal. The person at the top had to be Japanese. The principal was the father of my friend Tomo.

All our lessons were in Japanese. We studied Japanese language, culture and history. Schools weren't allowed

to teach Korean history or language. Hardly any books or newspapers were published in Korean. People weren't even supposed to tell old Korean folktales. But Uncle did sometimes – funny stories about foolish donkeys or brave tigers, or exciting ones about heroes like Tan-gun, the founder of Korea. Tae-yul and I loved it when Uncle told us stories.

We still spoke Korean at home, but on the streets we always had to speak Japanese. You never knew who might be listening, and the military guards could punish anyone they heard speaking Korean. They usually didn't bother older people. But my friends and I had to be careful when we were in public.

Every once in a while another new law was announced, like the one when I was little that required us to attend temple on the Emperor's birthday. I decided that this must be the rumour – Abuji and Uncle had heard about a new law.

I was right.

2. *Tae-yul*

Sun-hee is a real pain sometimes. Always asking questions, always wanting to know what's going on. I tell her it's none of her business, which is true. Abuji would tell her if he wanted her to know.

But *I* don't know what's happening either. Why hasn't he told me? It's not like I'm a little kid anymore – I'm old enough to know stuff.

One day I get home from school and Uncle comes in right after me. He's early, it's way before dinnertime. He's got a newspaper in one hand, and he walks right past me without even saying hello. "Hyungnim!" he calls.

Abuji is in the sitting room. Uncle goes in and closes the door behind him. I listen hard, but I can't hear anything – until Uncle raises his voice. "I won't do it!" he shouts. "They can't do this – they can't take away our names! I am Kim Young-chun, I will never be anyone else!"

Omoni and Sun-hee come out of the kitchen and look at me. I turn away a little, annoyed that I don't know what's going on. Just then Abuji opens the door and waves his hand toward us. So we all go into the room. Uncle is pacing around like crazy.

Abuji reads out loud from the newspaper: "By order of the Emperor, all Koreans are to be graciously allowed to take Japanese names."

"Graciously allowed . . ." Uncle says. His voice is shaking, he's so mad. "How dare they twist the words! Why can't they at least be honest – we are being *forced* to take Japanese names!"

Abuji reads some more to himself, then says, "We must all go to the police station in the next week to register."

Uncle curses and pounds his fist against the wall.

My name, Tae-yul, means "great warmth". My grandfather – Abuji's father – chose it. It's one of our traditions for the grandfather to do the naming. He'd taken it seriously, Omoni once told me; he'd wanted a name that would bring me good fortune.

For Sun-hee, too – “girl of brightness”.

A different name? I can’t imagine it. I look at Sun-hee and I can tell she’s thinking the same thing.

“Those who do not register will be arrested,” Abuji says.

“Let them! Let them arrest me! They will have my body but not my soul – my name is my soul!” Uncle’s face is red as a pepper.

Abuji holds up his hand. “Such talk is useless. It must be done. But let me think a while.”

We leave him alone. I’m last out of the room, but I don’t close the door. I watch him take a few books from the cupboard and turn the pages. Then he gets up again and fetches paper and pencil. Writes something on the paper, looks at it, writes some more. What’s he doing?

At last he calls us all back into the room. Sun-hee and I sit on the floor, but Uncle stays standing, his arms crossed. Stubborn. Abuji waits a few moments, until Uncle seems calmer and uncrosses his arms.

“Tae-yul, Sun-hee, you know that the Kim clan is a large and important one,” Abuji says. “Long ago, all Kims lived in the same part of Korea, in the mountains. Choosing the word for gold as their name shows what a strong clan they were. Gold was only for kings.”

He picks up the sheet of paper from the table and points at it. “I have chosen our Japanese name. It will be Kane-yama. ‘Yama’ means ‘mountain’ in Japanese, and ‘ka-ne’ means ‘gold’. So the name will honour our family history.”

He turns to Uncle. “*They* will not know this. But we will.”

Uncle doesn't look so mad now. "Kaneyama," he says quietly, and bows his head. "Hyungnim has chosen well."

"As to our first names," Abuji says, "Sun-hee, fetch your primer."

Sun-hee goes to the cupboard and brings back an old book. I know the book – it was mine first, then hers. The Japanese alphabet is on the first page. Abuji takes the book and opens it.

"We will close our eyes and point. Whatever letter we point to, we will choose a name that begins with this letter. These are not our real names, so we do not care what they are."

Uncle grins. "That's very good, Hyungnim. In fact, I do not care at all – you may choose my letter for me."

Abuji smiles, too. "No, we will each choose for ourselves."

First Abuji, then Uncle. My turn. I close my eyes, point my finger any old way, and then look.

N. My new initial.

My new name: Kaneyama Nobuo.

3. Sun-free

That night in bed my thoughts were racing around in circles. I was remembering something that happened when I was only six years old.

Four years ago the Olympics took place in Europe. It was so exciting. My family crowded around the radio each night to hear about the competitions. Tae-yul and the other older boys made hurdles in the lane. My friend Tomo and I ran

races with each other. We threw long sticks and pretended they were javelins. We even built an Olympic stadium.

Building cities was our favourite activity. In the vacant block down the lane from my house we'd gather up stones, sticks, little bits of wood. We used them to build cities – houses, schools, shops, a marketplace, a temple, army barracks. Sometimes we built a train station and tracks, too. We used long sticks for the rails and broke other sticks into shorter lengths to make the crosspieces.

We always had long discussions as we designed and planned our cities. Sometimes we'd build for days, then stop, take everything apart, and start over again.

I remembered the stadium especially well. It was so different – oval instead of square; we'd heard about it on the radio, its strange shape and how big it was. The stadium had been one of our greatest successes. For days we had races inside it, using little stick people as runners.

On the last day of the Olympics, we all gathered as usual to listen to the radio. And as usual, Uncle translated the announcer's words for Omoni.

Omoni knew a little Japanese, but not enough to understand the broadcast. She could speak only Korean, because she'd never gone to school. Back in the days when she was growing up, most girls didn't go to school.

The rest of us knew Japanese. Tae-yul had learned in school, like Abuji and Uncle. At the time I wasn't old enough for school, but I'd learned to speak and understand it from my friend Tomo. We'd been friends since we were babies.

Because of the way Uncle translated, I was glad I could understand Japanese. The announcer described the scene, the noise of the crowd, the colours of the athletes' uniforms, and how they were lined up on the track. But Uncle would just say something like, "The hundred-metre race is beginning." He never translated the details, but Omoni didn't seem to mind.

Now Uncle listened to the announcer for a few moments, then turned to Omoni. He said, "Instead of a baton, the French relay team will be passing one of those long loaves of bread."

Of course the announcer never said any such thing; Uncle was making it up. Tae-yul snorted, and I hid a smile behind my hand. Omoni rolled her eyes doubtfully.

"No, no, it's true," Uncle insisted. "It's a national symbol for them – they obtained special permission from the Olympic Committee to use it. The committee said yes, but each time a runner receives the handover he must take a bite of the bread." He acted it out for her – pretending to receive a bread-baton and then taking a bite of it while running.

Tae-yul and I laughed. Even Abuji smiled. Omoni covered her face in embarrassment at being teased, but I could see that behind her hands she was smiling.

After the relay the broadcaster announced that the marathon runners would be entering the stadium soon. Uncle looked at us excitedly. "There's a Korean runner in the marathon," he said. "He's one of the best in the world – he has a very good chance at the gold medal."

We all leaned a little closer to the radio.

“... the first runners should be entering the stadium at any moment now... They will make their way through the entrance tunnel and emerge onto the stadium track for a final lap... In a moment or two we should be able to see the leader... There he is now! It’s Kitei Son! Kitei Son of Japan—”

Uncle reached for the dial and turned it off abruptly, then slammed his hand against the radio so hard that he knocked it over. I stared at him with my mouth open. Everybody sat there, frozen.

Uncle jumped to his feet, his fists clenched by his sides. I’d never seen him like that before.

“Kitei Son!” he said, his voice trembling with rage. He spat on the floor, as if the name tasted bad. He choked out, “That is not his name.” And with that he left the room.

I looked at Abuji and Omoni. Their faces were very serious. I waited, hoping one of them would explain. But when Omoni finally spoke, it was only to tell us to get ready for bed. Abuji said nothing at all.

Nobody explained why Uncle was so angry. I went to bed feeling cross and worried.

The next morning Tae-yul waved at me to come out to the back garden. He looked solemn and important, the way he always did when he knew something I didn’t.

“Uncle talked to me,” he said in a low voice. “The man who won the marathon – Kitei Son? He’s the Korean runner Uncle was talking about. His real name is Sohn Kee Chung.”

“So? Why did that make Uncle angry?”

Tae-yul shook his head impatiently. “Sun-hee, don’t you understand? People all over the world know about the Olympics. He’ll be in all the newspapers—”

“That’s good, isn’t it? He’ll be famous!”

“He was wearing the *Japanese* flag on his uniform. The newspapers will give his *Japanese* name. No one will know he’s Korean – they’ll all think he’s Japanese . . .”

This is what I was remembering the night we all chose our new names. New for *us*, but the Japanese had renamed people before.

I only meant to remember that much, the part about Sohn Kee Chung’s Japanese name. But remembering isn’t something you can stop doing just because you want to. My mind kept going even though I tried to turn it onto another path. I saw Uncle’s face floating above me in the darkness: covered with bruises, his lip split and bleeding.

It’s all right, I told myself firmly. *He’s all better now*.

4. *Tae-yul*

Kaneyama Nobuo . . . Kaneyama Nobuo. No matter how many times I say it, I can’t get used to it. It feels all wrong, like shoes that don’t fit.

On the way to bed after we get our new names, Sun-hee whispers to me. “Sohn Kee Chung,” she says, her eyes big.

I nod – I’ve been thinking of him, too. The Olympic champion. A world record holder in the marathon. The

newspapers call him Kitei Son. But Uncle always calls him by his Korean name.

The day after the Olympics marathon, Uncle doesn't come home for dinner. After we eat, Abuji goes out. He doesn't say where he's going, and he's gone a long time.

We're in the sitting room. It's late, past bedtime, but Omoni doesn't seem to notice the time. We hear someone coming, and I run to the door.

Abuji comes in with his arm around Uncle. Holding him up, sort of dragging him. Because Uncle can hardly walk.

He's been beaten up. Really bad.

Omoni bathes Uncle's wounds and bandages them, with him groaning the whole time. Sun-hee gets in the way, so Omoni sends her to bed. I help Omoni, fetching water and rags.

Abuji talks to me afterward.

"My brother was at his shop late today because he was waiting for the newspaper delivery." I know that newspapers from Taegu, the nearest city, get delivered to Uncle's printing shop late in the day. "There was a photograph of the marathon champion on the front page."

A pause. He looks away from me. "Uncle and some of his friends changed all the newspapers. They crossed out the Japanese name and wrote his Korean name in its place. They altered the Japanese flag on his uniform, too – they drew a wavy line in the middle of the circle, so it looked like the Korean flag instead."

I gasp. So brave of Uncle! He must have known he could get into trouble. But he did it anyway. "What happened?" I

ask. My voice comes out all croaky. I take a breath, steady it, speak louder. "How did he get hurt?"

"They were caught in the act by a group of soldiers and dragged off to jail. All of them were beaten. Besides his face, he has several broken ribs. They kept most of them in jail, but a few were released."

"Why? Why did they let them go?"

"I am not sure. Perhaps as a warning. They want the townspeople to see them, to see how badly they have been hurt. To discourage further acts of this sort." A pause. "Or perhaps out of respect for my position at the school."

We're quiet for a little while. Then Abuji tells me to go to bed. "Sleep by your sister tonight," he says.

Sun-hee's eyes are closed, but she isn't asleep. When someone is really asleep they look . . . I don't know, heavier. Anyway, I can tell she's still awake.

And probably scared. She's only little. I get out some bedding and lie down right next to her. I whisper, "I know you're still awake, Sun-hee. Don't worry. Uncle is hurt, but he's going to be all right." I don't know that for sure, but I'm hoping hard. If he was worse, Abuji would have gone for the doctor.

Sun-hee turns toward me and touches my arm. I let her take my hand and hold it until she falls asleep.

A few days later Uncle calls Sun-hee and me into his room. It's the first time we've been allowed to see him. I've been sleeping in my parents' room to let him rest quietly.

He's still hurting a lot. It's hard for him to move or even take a deep breath. The swelling on his face has gone down,

but the bruises look awful. Dark blue, purple, red, and the biggest one, on his cheekbone, is greenish yellow around the edges.

Uncle sees the way I look at him. He grins and makes a terrible face. That makes me feel a little better. Then he tells Sun-hee to bring him the mirror. She holds it in front of him.

“Oh! Such colours!” he says. “Really, they’re rather pretty, don’t you think? I wonder if I could manage to stay this way.”

We laugh and I feel even better. He always makes us laugh.

Then Uncle nods at me. “Paper and pencil,” he says.

What for? I get them from the shelf and give them to him. He raises himself up on one elbow, wincing. Then he takes the pencil and draws a rectangle on the paper.

“I am going to draw the Korean flag for you,” he whispers.

I lean closer. There have been rumours in the street, people talking about Sohn Kee Chung and the newspapers. But I hadn’t seen the paper. The Japanese had burned them all. I’d never seen a Korean flag either.

Uncle draws a circle in the middle of the rectangle.

Sun-hee pouts. “That looks just like the Japanese flag,” she says. I’m thinking the same thing. It’s the flag on top of every public building in town: a red circle on a white ground. So familiar.

“Shh. Wait.” Uncle draws a curved line in the middle of the circle. “The top half of the circle is red” – pointing with the pencil – “and the bottom is blue.”

Then he draws four symbols, one in each corner. “These are black,” he says. “Each has three parts, and each part represents a different cycle. The seasons: summer, autumn, winter, spring” – he points at the corners in turn. “The directions: south, west, north, east. And the universe: sky, moon, earth, sun.”

“That’s good, Uncle,” Sun-hee says, bobbing her head and smiling. “It’s a lot fancier than the Japanese flag.”

Uncle smiles back at her. Then he looks serious. He glances around cautiously, so I do, too. Only the three of us there, but I still get a funny feeling, like someone might be watching us. “Bow,” he whispers. “Bow to the Korean flag.”

We stay as we are, squatting on our haunches, but we bow our heads.

“Never forget,” he says. “Keep it in your minds always – what the flag looks like and what it means.”

His voice is quiet, but strong at the same time. I stare hard at the paper, trying to memorise the flag.

As usual, Sun-hee has a question. “Why, Uncle? Why do we have to remember it? Why can’t we just put the picture up on the wall? That way we’ll see it every day and we’ll always know what it looks like.”

Uncle reaches out and pulls gently on one of her braids. “We can’t, little cricket. It is against the law to fly this flag – even to put up a picture of it. Korea is part of the Japanese Empire now. But someday this will be our own country once more. *Your* own country.”

He looks at us again. “You have it now? In a safe place in your minds?”

Sun-hee nods so hard her head is like a bouncing ball. I just look at Uncle and nod once.

Uncle lies back down. “Burn it,” he says.

Sun-hee looks scared. She follows me to the kitchen. Omoni is out at the market. I wonder what she’d think if she were here.

We watch the drawing blacken and then disappear in flames. Sun-hee looks a little less scared then.

When we get back to his room, Uncle raises his head and stares at both of us. “Never forget,” he says again. “I swear there will come a time when you, little Sun-hee, will sew that flag. And Tae-yul, you will help put it up over every building in the land.”

His words put a picture in my head. Me, on the roof of a building, raising a big Korean flag. Uncle down below, signalling to me that the flag was straight. It’d be fun, climbing on all the roofs.

There will come a time . . . he’d said.

But when?

5. *Sun-hee*

When we chose our new names, I pointed to the letter *K*. I went around whispering over and over, “Keoko. Kaneyama Keoko. Keoko.”

Kaneyama: Japanese family names were usually long.

Kim: Korean ones were short.

Keoko: Japanese first names could be long or short.

Sun-hee: Korean first names were almost always two syllables.

I'd always liked the sound of Japanese first names. "Tomo" meant "friend". I remembered learning that when I was little. It had pleased me so much that my best friend's name was "friend"! His sisters were Sachiko and Hiroko. Girls' names often ended in "ko", which means "girl" in Japanese.

I liked how Abuji had hidden our real last name in the new one he'd chosen for us. And he'd done the same for my first name as well. "Ko" meant girl, but it could also mean "the sun's rays". Rays of brightness, the same meaning as my real name.

I could think about "Kaneyama Keoko" as a name but not as *my* name.

For the next few days, there was terrible confusion at school. We had to learn our classmates' Japanese names and call them by those names. Suddenly, the girl across the aisle from me was Megumi, not Myung-gin. And the boy who sat behind me was Masado instead of Young-won. In school, when I spoke of my brother, I had to call him Nobuo!

Our teacher tried to be patient with us. If we forgot and used our classmates' *real* names, she prompted us – gently at first, but more sternly as time went on.

I was a good student; I'd never once given the teacher cause to beat me. I was very careful to use everyone's Japanese name and to respond when anyone said "Keoko", even though it felt as if they were talking to someone else.

But on the second day of the name change my brain grew tired of being careful every single minute, and I called a classmate by her Korean name.

I chose the worst possible moment to make this mistake. Onishi-san was in the room. He was the man who served as the military attaché for our school. Our teachers were Korean, but their bosses were Japanese. Onishi-san's job was to make sure all the students were learning to be good citizens of the Empire.

He came into our classroom several times a week, often in the middle of a lesson. We always stopped what we were doing and bowed to him. Then he'd stand at the back of the room and observe us for a while. I could tell he made the teacher nervous. I tried especially hard to give the right answers when he was around.

That day, I *knew* he was in the room. I knew I had to be extra careful not to make a mistake. And somehow I did the very thing I was trying so hard not to do – I said “Myung-gin” instead of “Megumi”.

Onishi-san heard me. He made a funny sound in his throat, like “Ah!” Then he looked at the teacher and made an abrupt motion with his stick.

The teacher glanced at him quickly and then at me. “Keoko! To the front,” she said.

The class was suddenly silent. I could see the surprise in the faces of the other students. The daughter of the vice-principal – who had never before been beaten . . .

In the brief moments it took me to walk to the front of the class, I saw the teacher's face. She looked so unhappy

that I felt sorrier for her than for myself. She didn't want to beat me, but she had to – because Onishi-san was there.

It was so unfair. First our names were taken away, and then we weren't given even a few days to learn everyone's new name.

So when the bamboo cane swished through the air I was angry, not frightened. With each stinging whack, the word rang in my mind . . . *unfair – unfair – unfair – unfair – unfair* . . . Best of all, I was too angry to cry.

At home that night Omoni pressed her lips together when she saw the fierce red welts on my legs. She soothed them with a paste made of herbs, but the marks stayed there for several days. I was glad they didn't fade right away. Seeing and feeling the sore redness of those welts always made me a little angry all over again.

I wanted to stay angry about losing my name.

The changing of my name made even Tomo cross. When we played together after school during those early days of the name change, he kept catching himself. “Sun-hee – I mean, Keoko,” he kept saying.

Once, after correcting himself for what seemed like the hundredth time, he stamped his foot in frustration. “Keoko-Keoko-Keoko,” he said, as if trying to pound the name into his brain. “Keoko-Keoko-Keekeeko-Kekoko—” He was getting his tongue all twisted.

I giggled. “Kee-kee-ko? Ke-ko-ko?”

“Ke-ya-koo! Ko-ko-ka!”

Now we were both laughing.

“Ka-koo-ko!”

“Ke-ay-ka!”

Tomo was laughing at the silly sounds. I was laughing for the same reason, but I was also secretly pleased to be treating my Japanese name with such disrespect.

At last our laughter faded and we caught our breath. Tomo glanced at me quickly, then looked away again. “Maybe, when it’s just the two of us alone, I could still call you Sun-hee. What do you think?”

It wasn’t often that Tomo asked for my opinion. I wanted to answer carefully, so I thought for a moment. “Wouldn’t that just make it harder?” I said. “You’d have to switch to my Japanese name when we’re with other people. You might get mixed up and – and forget.”

I didn’t say all that I was thinking – that as the son of the principal, Tomo always had to set an example. A mistake from him would be worse than a mistake from other students; he would lose a lot more face. I didn’t have to say it, because it was something Tomo lived with every day.

“You’re right,” he said. He flicked another glance at me. “It’s such a nuisance, isn’t it?”

And I knew this was his way of saying he was sorry I had to change my name.

It was our last year of school together. Primary students all went to the same school, but in high school, boys and girls went to separate ones.

Not that Tomo and I saw each other much in school anyway. The Japanese students had their own classrooms.

Tomo had told me that in bigger cities the Japanese had their own *schools*. But our town was too small for that.

I only saw Tomo at assembly times, which were in the morning, when the whole school met in the courtyard to recite the Emperor's education policy. We also sang the Japanese national anthem and did exercises together. And once in a while there were special assemblies.

Even though I couldn't read Japanese when I first went to school, knowing how to speak it made all the lessons much easier for me. At the start of my second year I was made Class Leader because I was the best in my class at reading and writing.

We had to learn three kinds of writing. Two kinds used the Japanese alphabet, and there were two different alphabets. The third system, which most of my classmates found terribly difficult, was called *kanji*.

Kanji has no alphabet. Instead, each word is a separate picture-character. Altogether there are nearly fifty thousand characters! Not even scholars who spend their whole lives studying kanji can learn them all. We had to learn about two thousand basic characters – to recognise them in reading and to write them ourselves.

We had calligraphy lessons as part of studying kanji. I loved calligraphy the very first time I tried it. It seemed that an unknown creature came to life in the brush as soon as I picked it up – a creature light as a dragonfly, smooth as a snake, quick as a rabbit.

The combinations of kanji characters were like magic to me. For example, the character for “love”. You wrote the

character for “mother” and combined it with the one for “child”. When stroked with the brush rather than sketched out with a pencil, the word truly did look more loving.

Every week we learned new characters. Sometimes the connections were easy to understand. The character for “life” was formed by writing “water” plus “tongue” – for without water to drink there can be no life. The characters “rice” and “mouth” together made “happy” or “peaceful”. It was true – how could you be happy or at peace if you were starving?

Kanji was full of secrets like this. Tae-yul hated studying kanji; he thought it was boring. I couldn’t understand that at all. Maybe I loved kanji because it was about knowing a little and figuring out the rest.

Abuji noticed my interest in kanji and began to spend more time with me. Before, Omoni had always looked after us; Abuji was busy with his own work. Until he started to help me study kanji, I’d spent very little time with him.

My lessons in school concentrated on learning and memorising characters. This was so difficult and took so much time that the teachers didn’t explain much about each individual character. Abuji took my learning a step further – or rather, a step backward.

One night we sat together at the low table in his room, bent over a sheet of paper.

“Mouth,” he said as he wrote the character: □ “This is very simple. It began as a circle, like an open mouth, but the line was squared to make it easier to combine with other characters.

“West. As the sun goes down, the birds fly back to their nests. So you see—” and he drew for me the progression of pictures that had evolved into the character for “west”.



I loved these sessions with Abuji. I watched with my eyes and listened with my ears and learned with my heart. My kanji got better without it ever feeling like work.

At the end of my fourth year of school I was awarded a special prize for my language skills. All students wore two badges on their collars, one with the school’s name and the other with their graduation year. I was given a third badge to wear. It meant I was the best in my grade at Japanese. It was the proudest moment of my life when the principal pinned the badge to my collar in front of the entire school. I didn’t look at Abuji, but I could feel how proud he was.

As I left the platform to rejoin my class, Tomo smiled at me with his eyes. I was so surprised and pleased that I almost stopped walking. Tomo and I never talked to each other at school. Even when I did see him – in the courtyard before school or during assemblies – I pretended I didn’t know him, and he did the same with me. It was just the way things were: Japanese and Korean children didn’t mix during school.

Tomo must have noticed my surprise, for he quickly looked away. But that didn’t bother me. Nothing could have bothered me as I walked back to my seat. I felt as if I were floating on a bright rosy cloud.

That afternoon on my way home from school I felt something whiz past my ear. I turned around quickly, ducking just in time as a second pebble flew past. I kept my head down but glanced around wildly. Who was throwing stones at me?

At that moment a gang of boys from school dashed out from behind a wall. They threw a final volley of pebbles at me, then ran away, chanting: “*Chin-il-pa! Chin-il-pa!*”

Chin-il-pa meant “lover of Japan”. It was almost like a curse. *Chin-il-pa* were people who got rich because they cooperated with the Japanese government. I hadn’t done anything like that! Why were they cursing me, calling me that awful name? I ran home, blinking away tears.

That evening I was distracted during my kanji session with Abuji. He was showing me “north” – two men sitting back-to-back at the top of the world – as I stared not at the paper but at the shining new badge on my collar.

The badge was the reason those boys had thrown stones and called me names. I was good at Japanese. They thought that made me *chin-il-pa*. I wasn’t a traitor, was I? Could you be a traitor without knowing it? Even to be called one was shameful.

Maybe I could take the pin off. But they’d all notice – my teachers, the principal, Abuji, everyone. Then I’d be in trouble at school as well.

I tried to make myself laugh inside by recalling Uncle’s favourite joke about the *chin-il-pa*: “They eat Korean rice, but their poo is Japanese.” But not even this cheered me.

Suddenly, Abuji put down the pencil and looked at me thoughtfully.

“You know, Sun-hee, kanji was not originally Japanese.”

Not Japanese? What did he mean? I looked up at him, puzzled.

“Both Korea and Japan long ago borrowed the system of character writing from China. The Japanese use it in their own way, of course, especially when they combine it with their alphabetic writing. But the characters are the same. This” – he picked up the pencil again and pointed to the page – “is the character for ‘north’ in Japanese *and* in Chinese. And in Korean as well.”

Abuji stacked the books neatly, rolled up the paper, and put away the ink pot. I stood and bowed to him, preparing to leave the room.

He spoke again. “Your grandfather was a great scholar. He knew much of the important classical Chinese literature. In his time and for hundreds of years before his time we Koreans always considered Chinese the highest form of learning.” He paused and looked at me calmly. “To excel at character writing is to honour the traditions of our ancestors.”

I hadn’t realised that my worries were showing on my face, but Abuji had noticed. What he’d said was meant to comfort me and to make me feel proud inside myself again.

I nodded, hoping he understood my silent thanks. If those boys called me *chin-il-pa* again, I could reach inside and hold on to the knowledge he’d given me.