

The Girl with Seven Names



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HYEONSEO LEE

Hyeonseo Lee was born in January of 1980 in Hyesan, North Korea. Her father was a member of the North Korean military, and her mother worked a government job, as many North Korean citizens do. Lee's family was not poor, and her mother ran a lucrative side business importing illegal foreign goods across the Yalu River from Changbai, China. Lee attended school in Hyesan and learned to play the accordion, a popular instrument in North Korea since the Cold War. In her early teens, Lee's father quit the military and took a civilian job, which mandated he travel to China frequently. He was detained on a return trip to North Korea and sent to a prison camp, where he remained until he was finally released weeks later. Lee's father suffered from depression and was hospitalized, where he later committed suicide by an overdose of Valium. Despite the widespread famine that struck North Korea during the 1990s, Lee's family managed to still thrive; however, Lee watched her country slowly starve around her. In 1997, just months before she turned 18, Lee escaped across the Yalu River into China and met up with her father's cousin, who defected during the Korean War. Lee spent over 10 years living under different aliases in China, until she finally sought political asylum in South Korea. Soon after, Lee arranged for her mother and brother to join her in South Korea, although it took them nearly a year to make the journey after being imprisoned in Phonthong Prison in Vientiane, Laos. Lee later became an activist, advocating for the human rights of those still stuck in North Korea, and to date she has given several speeches, including a TED talk in 2013 and a speech on the floor of the United Nations in New York City the same year. She is a graduate of Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, South Korea, and wrote her book, *The Girl with Seven Names: Escape from North Korea*, in 2015. Lee married Brian Gleason, an American from Wisconsin, whom she met through PSCORE (People for Successful Corean Reunification) in South Korea, and is currently working on her second book about North Korean women living in South Korea.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *The Girl with Seven Names: Escape from North Korea*, Hyeonseo Lee is shocked to learn after she defects from North Korea that the Korean War (known in North Korea as the Fatherland Liberation War) was *not* started by South Korea, as is traditionally taught in North Korean schools. In 1948, after the Cold War, the Korean Peninsula was divided by the Soviet Union and the United States into two sovereign states. North

Korea was made a communist state under Kim Il-sung, and South Korea was made an anti-communist state under Syngman Rhee. Both the North and the South claimed to be the only legitimate government of Korea, and tensions erupted into war when the Korean People's Army of North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, and advanced into Seoul, the capital of South Korea. 21 countries of the United Nations responded on behalf of South Korea, but the United States provided 90 percent of the required troops. On September 15, 1950, a counter-offensive was launched by the United Nations led by General Douglas MacArthur of the United States Navy. 75,000 troops and 261 naval vessels were dispatched to recapture Seoul and secure the city of Incheon. The counter-offensive was a victory for the United Nations, and American soldiers captured over 135,000 North Korean soldiers, greatly reducing the Korean People's Army. The war continued, however, and over the next two years, Seoul was captured by the North Koreans and taken back again by the United Nations four times. The war became a war of attrition—meaning each side tried to exhaust the other through repeated battles and the loss of soldiers and supplies—but the United Nations was largely successful in the air. The United States launched a massive bombing campaign against the North Koreans, and for the first time in history, jet fighters and air-to-air combat was used. The fighting stopped on July 27, 1953, with the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement, but a formal peace treaty was never signed. Technically, North and South Korea are still at war today, locked in a frozen conflict. The war resulted in over 3 million fatalities, and based on the population, saw more civilian deaths than World War II or Vietnam. North Korea remains one of the most heavily-bombed countries in all of military history.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hyeonseo Lee's *The Girl with Seven Names: Escape from North Korea* is a memoir that traces Lee's escape from North Korea and her eventual arrival in South Korea years later as a political refugee. Other memoirs by North Korean defectors include Hyok Kang's *This is Paradise!* and *In Order to Live* by Yeonmi Park, which follows Park's own journey from Hyesan, North Korea to China, where she was subsequently abducted by human traffickers. Park finally escaped to Mongolia in 2009 and safely arrived in South Korea. *Eyes of Tailless Animals: Prison Memoirs of a North Korean Woman* follows the experiences of Lee Soon-ok—a senior member of the Korean Worker's Party from North Hamgyong, North Korea—who was arrested by North Korean police on false charges in the 1980s and sentenced to 13 years in a prison camp. She was released after five years of torture and defected to China in 1992.

Throughout history, political refugees have escaped from many other countries around the world, and have recorded their experiences in stories and memoirs including *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* by Loung Ung, *We Are Displaced: My Journey and Stories from Refugee Girls around the World* by Malala Yousafzai, and *The New Odyssey: The Story of Europe's Refugee Crisis* by Patrick Kingsley.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Girl with Seven Names: Escape from North Korea
- **When Written:** 2015
- **Where Written:** Seoul, South Korea
- **When Published:** 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** North Korea, China, South Korea, and Laos
- **Climax:** Hyeonseo's mother and brother, Min-ho, finally make it to South Korea after defecting from North Korea.
- **Antagonist:** The oppressive North Korean regime
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Giving Back. Hyeonseo Lee is currently working to develop an organization that helps connect promising North Korean refugees with an international community.

Busy Lee. In addition to her published memoir, Hyeonseo Lee has written articles for the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal's Korea Real-Time* section, and the London School of Economics *Big Ideas* blog.



PLOT SUMMARY

Hyeonseo's story begins in Hyesan, North Korea, in 1977, when Mother boards a train to visit her brother in Pyongyang. On the train, she meets the man who will become Hyeonseo's father, and they quickly fall in love. Unfortunately, Grandmother refuses to let Mother marry him. Father's *songbun* isn't as good as Mother's, and Grandmother fears a drop in status. She arranges for Mother to marry a man from Pyongyang, and Hyeonseo is born Kim Ji-hae in 1980. Shortly after Hyeonseo's birth, Mother leaves the man from Pyongyang and divorces him. She goes to visit Father on the military base in Pyongyang, and he immediately proposes marriage and accepts Hyeonseo as his own. Against Grandmother's better judgement, she allows Mother to marry him, and Hyeonseo's name is changed to Park Min-young. Father's parents, however, never really accept Hyeonseo as their granddaughter.

Over the years, Hyeonseo and her family move to Hyesan and Mother gives birth to Min-ho, Hyeonseo's brother. Growing up, Hyeonseo is taught that North Korea is the greatest country in the world, and she believes it. Mother's high *songbun* means that they have a good life, and between Father's job with the military and Mother's side gig trading illicit goods sent over the Yalu River from China, they even enjoy luxuries like meat and a television. There is only one state-run television station, but Hyeonseo grows up believing the rest of the world lives in much the same way. When Hyeonseo is seven years old, she witnesses her first public execution, but she has no reason to believe such things aren't normal. North Korea is a closed state, and any information from the outside world is strictly prohibited. In the early 1990s, Mother takes Hyeonseo to a fortune-teller in the village of Daeoh-cheon, who tells Hyeonseo she will one day "eat foreign rice." Hyeonseo assumes the woman means she will marry and move to Pyongyang, as North Koreans are not permitted to emigrate.

One day, Grandmother tells Hyeonseo out of the blue that Father is not her biological father. She tells Hyeonseo about the man from Pyongyang, and while Hyeonseo is upset and confused, she never tells her family that she knows the truth about her parentage. Hyeonseo begins to drift away from her father, until she nearly stops talking to him altogether, and she feels herself distancing from Min-ho, too. Family and *songbun* are everything in North Korea, and Hyeonseo doesn't know who she is anymore. Father quits his job with the military and takes a job that requires travel back and forth to China. His business trips become longer and more frequent, and he is detained one day while crossing the Friendship Bridge back into North Korea from China. He is held for weeks before finally being released, and when he is, he is emaciated and beaten. Father begins to suffer from depression and is even hospitalized, where he commits suicide with an overdose of Valium. Hyeonseo is heartbroken, realizing too late that he was her true father and deserved her respect and love.

During the mid-1990s, North Korea suffers widespread famine, and millions of people die of starvation. Hyeonseo and her family are never without food, but Hyeonseo begins to think for the first time that North Korea isn't the greatest country in the world. From her home in Hyesan, Hyeonseo can see across the Yalu River to Changbai, China, and she begins to contemplate crossing. To do so is highly illegal, Hyeonseo knows, but she is curious and badly wants to see how the rest of the world lives. In December of 1997, just months before her 18th birthday, Hyeonseo crosses the river into Changbai and makes her way to Shenyang to meet her father's family, who defected during the Korean War.

Hyeonseo arrives at the home of Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee, who welcome her warmly. They invite her to stay, and Uncle Jung-gil wastes no time telling Hyeonseo certain truths, like the fact Kim Jung-il isn't even a communist, and that the

Korean War was really started by North Korea, who invaded South Korea unprovoked. Hyeonseo thinks he is crazy, but she pretends to be interested anyway. She stays in Shenyang for several weeks, well past her 18th birthday, and just as she is preparing to return home, Mother calls. The Bowibu knows Hyeonseo has escaped to China, and she can never come back—if she does, Hyeonseo will be arrested as a defector and punished, perhaps even executed. Hyeonseo stays in Shenyang, and Aunt Sang-hee soon introduces her to Guen-soo, the son of Aunt Sang-hee's close friend Mrs. Jang. Hyeonseo and Guen-soo begin dating, and even though she isn't attracted to him, Hyeonseo agrees to marry him. Mrs. Jang obtains a new ID card for Hyeonseo (as a North Korean, Hyeonseo is an illegal immigrant), which identifies Hyeonseo as a Chinese-Korean woman named Jang Soon-hyang. The wedding plans begin to pick up, and Hyeonseo feels trapped. It isn't her choice to marry Guen-soo, and she isn't in love with him, so she runs away.

In Xita, a neighborhood in Shenyang with a large Korean population, Hyeonseo finds a job as a waitress and slowly begins to settle in, disguising her true identity as a North Korean. In 2001, Hyeonseo is picked up by the police and interrogated as a suspected North Korean. She is given written and spoken tests of the Chinese language and manages to pass. The police let her go with an apology, but Hyeonseo knows that China can never be safe, and she begins to consider going to South Korea—if she can find a way to get there. Four years later, Hyeonseo hires a broker to find Min-ho and Mother back in North Korea, and she even manages to meet Min-ho briefly in Changbai, but the broker extorts all her money, leaving her with nothing. She even has to ask Uncle Jung-gil for a loan to make up the difference. She decides to go to Shanghai and leave Shenyang. It is January 2002, and Hyeonseo is 22 years old.

In Shanghai, Hyeonseo decides to change her name again, this time to Chae In-hee. To get a decent job and stop waitressing, Hyeonseo knows she will need an official ID, and she finally finds a woman in Harbin—a city over 1,000 miles away—to help her. The woman sells Hyeonseo the ID card belonging to an actual Chinese-Korean woman with a mental illness, whose parents sold the ID for extra money. Her new name is Park Sun-ja. Hyeonseo finds a good job as an interpreter at a cosmetics company and even meets another North Korean defector named Ok-hee. Hyeonseo settles into life in Shanghai and soon falls in love with Kim, a businessman from South Korea. Kim doesn't initially know Hyeonseo's true identity as a North Korean, but she tells him after she decides to appeal to the South Korean government for political asylum. Hyeonseo is Korean, and she wants to return to her country, even if she must live in South Korea. After a direct flight to South Korea, Hyeonseo arrives in Seoul and identifies herself as a North Korean seeking asylum. It is January 2008.

Hyeonseo is interrogated and vetted by the South Korean

National Intelligence Service and found to be a North Korean. After several months, she is finally given citizenship and an apartment in Seoul and begins her new life. During this time, she gives herself the name Hyeonseo Lee. Hyeon is Korean for sunshine, and Seo means good fortune, and Hyeonseo picks the name so she will live her life in "light and warmth." In 2009, Mother finally agrees to leave North Korea, but Min-ho refuses. Hyeonseo decides to go back to Changbai herself and guide her mother the 2,000 miles across China into Vietnam, where a broker will help them get back into South Korea. Min-ho brings Mother across the Yalu River into Changbai, but he is spotted and accused of human trafficking. Now, Min-ho can never return to North Korea, so all three of them make their way across China. When they reach the border, the broker informs them that Vietnam isn't safe, and they are forced to exit through Laos instead. Laos is a complete nightmare, and both Mother and Min-ho are arrested by local police as illegal immigrants. Hyeonseo spends all her money and energy trying to get them out of police custody, and just when she believes it is hopeless, a kind Australian man named Dick Stolp pays for their release and Hyeonseo's plane ticket back to South Korea. Hyeonseo has been accused of being a broker by the Laotian government and must leave the country or face arrest.

Back in Seoul, Hyeonseo learns that Mother and Min-ho were never released to the South Korean embassy and are being held at Phonthong Prison in Vientiane, Laos. They are released months later to the South Korean embassy and arrive in Seoul in August 2010, nearly one year after their journey began in Changbai. Mother and Min-ho try to adjust to life in South Korea, but they both fight the urge to return to Hyesan and their old lives in North Korea. Hyeonseo convinces them both to stay, and they slowly adjust. Mother even agrees to accompany Hyeonseo to Chicago in the United States after Hyeonseo meets and falls in love with Brian, a man from the midwest of America. Hyeonseo begins to advocate for the human rights of those left in North Korea, and she is even selected for a TED talk and gives a speech on the floor of the United Nations in New York City. She doesn't know how long the Kim regime will keep the people of North Korea suffering in the darkness, but she knows that dictatorships aren't as strong as they pretend to be. She also knows that politics and one's country aren't what really matter in life. What is important, Hyeonseo says, is family and togetherness, and as long as she has her family, she has everything.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Hyeonseo Lee – The protagonist of *The Girl with Seven Names*. Hyeonseo is born in Hyesan, North Korea, where she and her younger brother, Min-ho, grow up believing their country is the greatest in the world. Mother and Father make sure that their

children never want for anything, and even after Hyeonseo witnesses her first public execution at the age of seven, she has no reason to believe her life isn't normal. When she is just a girl, Grandmother tells Hyeonseo the truth about her biological father (the man from Pyongyang), and Hyeonseo is crushed. Family and one's *songbun* status mean everything in North Korea, and Hyeonseo has absolutely no idea who she is anymore. Hyeonseo's relationship with Father begins to suffer, and it is never mended before Father commits suicide, which becomes a constant source of regret and sorrow for Hyeonseo. During the famine of the mid-1990s, Hyeonseo realizes for the first time that the North Korean people are starving and dying. Before her 18th birthday, Hyeonseo defects to China and goes to visit her family in Shenyang. It becomes clear that she can never go back—if she does, she will be severely punished—and Hyeonseo makes the best life she can as an illegal immigrant in China. She changes her name several times, finds steady work at a restaurant, and even meets other defectors. After Hyeonseo is picked up by Chinese police and interrogated, she knows she will never be safe in China. She decides to appeal to the South Korean government for political asylum, and once she is finally established in Seoul—where she changes her name the seventh and final time to Hyeonseo—she returns to Changbai to lead Mother and Min-ho across China to freedom; however, when Mother and Min-ho are imprisoned in Laos, she fears they will never make it. Thanks to the kindness of a stranger named Dick Stolp, Hyeonseo makes it back to South Korea, and Mother and Min-ho soon follow. Hyeonseo's struggle reflects the importance of nationality on one's core identity, and her unyielding love for her family is a testament to the importance of family within North Korean culture.

Mother – Father's wife, and Hyeonseo and Min-ho's mother. After Mother divorces the man from Pyongyang and marries Father, he immediately accepts Hyeonseo as his own. Mother comes from a rather large family of exceptionally high *songbun*, and she is especially close with her sister, Aunt Pretty. Mother works a government job, as many North Koreans do, but she also maintains a side gig smuggling illegal foreign goods over the Yalu River from China. Mother has a strong mind for business, and she makes sure that her family has everything they need in life, despite their meager rations from the North Korean government. Mother provides her family with many luxuries, like the latest Chinese fashions and a perm for Hyeonseo, and she even manages to afford a color television. During the 1990s, when a massive famine strikes North Korea and the government stops paying salaries, Mother's illicit side business keeps her family living in the manner they are accustomed to. Mother is devastated when Father commits suicide after being accused by the government of bribery and abuse of position in his new civilian job, but she manages to bribe the hospital to change his cause of death to heart attack to save their family's *songbun*. After Hyeonseo crosses the Yalu River and defects to China, Mother remains in North Korea

with Min-ho; however, after an important North Korean politician is suspected of defecting, Mother finally agrees to leave. She crosses the Yalu River with Min-ho, and Hyeonseo guides them all the way across China and into Laos, where both she and Min-ho are arrested and imprisoned by the Laotian government. She finally makes it to freedom in South Korea nearly a year after leaving Hyesan, but she is never happy. Mother was considered quite privileged in North Korea, but in South Korea, she is just another immigrant working a menial job. Mother represents the importance of family within the book. She misses her family terribly living in South Korea, and it is a constant struggle not to return to them.

Father – Mother's husband, and Hyeonseo and Min-ho's father. Father first meets Mother on a train to Pyongyang in 1977, and they immediately fall in love. He is a member of the North Korean air force, and his family secured a good *songbun* with their bravery during World War II. Grandmother, however, initially refuses to let Mother and Father marry and forces Mother to marry the man from Pyongyang instead. After Hyeonseo is born, Mother divorces the man from Pyongyang and Father immediately takes her back and accepts Hyeonseo as his own. Father is kind and hardworking, and along with Mother, ensures that his family has everything they need despite their meager rations from the North Korean government. When Grandmother tells Hyeonseo the truth about her biological father, Hyeonseo distances herself from Father, and by the time he quits his military job, she is hardly talking to him anymore. When their house tragically burns down, Father risks his life to save the family's **portraits** of the Great Leaders—a display of heroics that should gain the favor of the regime. However, Father is already under surveillance, and is accused by the North Korean government of bribery and abuse of position at his new civilian job, and he is detained when he crosses back into North Korea after a business trip to China. Father is held for weeks before he is finally released to the hospital, but he is depressed and distant after he returns home. Father is soon hospitalized again because of depression, and he commits suicide with an overdose of Valium. Mother bribes the hospital to switch his cause of death to heart attack to protect the family's *songbun*, as suicide is viewed as the ultimate form of defection by the North Korean government. Hyeonseo never mends her relationship with Father before he dies, which is a major source of sadness and regret for her. Father reflects the importance of family within North Korean culture, and from him and Mother, Hyeonseo learns that what really matters in life is family and togetherness, not one's country or material possessions.

Uncle Jung-gil – Hyeonseo's "uncle," Father's cousin, and Aunt Sang-hee's husband. Uncle Jung-gil lives in Shenyang, China, where he defected during the Korean War. When Hyeonseo defects to China from North Korea, she goes to Shenyang to visit Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee. Like Aunt Sang-hee,

Uncle Jung-gil welcomes Hyeonseo with open arms, and he offers her a place to live after it becomes clear that she can never go back to North Korea. Uncle Jung-gil wastes little time telling Hyeonseo the truth about North Korea once she arrives in China, and he informs her of several “truths,” like the fact that Kim Jong-il isn’t really a communist and that the Korean War was actually started when the North Koreans invaded South Korea unprovoked, not the other way around, as Hyeonseo has been taught in North Korean schools since she was a child. Hyeonseo listens politely, but she thinks that Uncle Jung-gil is “crazy.” She has never heard anyone disrespect the North Korean government in such a way, and it is several years before she finally realizes that Uncle Jung-gil speaks the truth. The character of Uncle Jung-gil and Hyeonseo’s inability to initially believe his claims underscores the effectiveness of ideological indoctrination by the North Korean government and the power of the Kim regime to condition North Koreans to believe their alternative truths; however, Uncle Jung-gil also represents the importance of family in Korean culture. Uncle Jung-gil hasn’t seen Hyeonseo in years, but he still goes out of his way to help her time and time again, despite the fact aiding North Korean defectors is illegal in China.

Dick Stolp – A white Westerner from Perth, Australia, whom Hyeonseo meets in Laos after Mother and Min-ho are arrested by the Laotian police. The Laotian government extorts all of Hyeonseo’s money out of her, and she is left alone and stranded with no way to get Min-ho and Mother out of police custody. Dick Stolp approaches Hyeonseo on the street, feeds her, and gives her extra money; he even pays to get Min-ho, Mother, and three other North Koreans out of police custody. Afterward, when Hyeonseo is accused of being a criminal broker by the Laotian government and threatened with a lengthy prison stay if she doesn’t leave the country immediately, Dick pays her travel expenses to get back to South Korea. When Hyeonseo asks Dick why he is helping her, he says he isn’t. “I’m helping the North Korean people,” Dick says. He disappears, and Hyeonseo never sees him again. Dick Stolp’s kindness changes Hyeonseo’s life, and it restores her faith in humanity. Dick is a complete stranger, and as a Westerner, he has no connection to the North Korean people, but he helps them anyway. He proves that kindness, especially the kindness of strangers, does exist in the world, which, to Hyeonseo, often seems to be a very cold and lonely place. Hyeonseo finally finds Dick Stolp at the end of the book, and she communicates with him in Australia via email.

Min-ho – Hyeonseo’s brother, and son to Mother and Father. Min-ho is several years younger than Hyeonseo, and once Hyeonseo learns that the man from Pyongyang is her biological father and Min-ho is only her half-brother, their relationship begins to suffer. Min-ho is just a boy when Hyeonseo defects to China, but she manages to find him again with the help of Mrs. Ahn. Min-ho refuses to leave North Korea when Mother finally decides to defect, but after he is accused of human trafficking

while guiding Mother across the Yalu River, Min-ho knows he can never return. Min-ho escapes across China with Mother and Hyeonseo into Laos, where he is arrested and held in the Phonthong Prison in Vientiane for several months. Min-ho is finally released and goes to Seoul, where he is given his freedom and South Korean citizenship, but he is never truly happy living in South Korea. Min-ho even returns to Changbai, China, at the end of the book with the intention of crossing the Yalu River back into North Korea, but Hyeonseo is able to talk him out of it. Min-ho represents how difficult the transition to freedom can be for many South Koreans, especially those of high *songbun*, who are considered privileged in North Korea.

Soo-jin – A young North Korean defector living in Shenyang, China, with her South Korean boyfriend. Hyeonseo befriends Soo-jin while working in the Shenyang restaurant, and even shares her defector status with her. One day, Soo-jin disappears and her phone is disconnected—Hyeonseo fears she has been arrested and repatriated back to North Korea. One day, six months later, Hyeonseo sees Soo-jin on a street in Koreatown. Soo-jin claims to have been detained for six months in a *Bowibu* holding camp and released, and she suspects that a mutual friend informed on her. Hyeonseo never sees Soo-jin again, and within days of meeting her in the street, Hyeonseo is arrested by the Chinese police and interrogated as a suspected North Korean. It is highly unusual that Soo-jin is released from the *Bowibu* camp and not immediately repatriated back to North Korea. While it is never confirmed, Soo-jin’s identity is suspicious, as is her story, and it is possible that she informed on Hyeonseo herself and is potentially working for the *Bowibu*. Soo-jin represents the dangers of Hyeonseo’s existence as a North Korean defector living in China, as trusting others is nearly impossible, and one never knows who might be working for the North Korean secret police.

Kim Il-sung/The Great Leader – Kim Jong-il’s father, Kim Jong-un’s grandfather, and the North Korean dictator and leader of the Kim regime from 1948 until his death of a heart attack in 1994. Kim Il-sung is a cruel and neglectful leader, and he lives in the lap of luxury in Pyongyang while his people suffer and starve. Still, through fear, intimidation, and ideological indoctrination, the North Korean people worship him like a god, and large bronze statues of him and his son Kim Jong-il are erected in every North Korean city. The North Korean people believe Kim Il-sung is a hero who saved their country from Japanese imperialism during the colonial period of 1910-1945, and **portraits** of him and Kim Jong-il must hang in every North Korean home. Kim Il-sung dies when Hyeonseo is just a teenager, and North Koreans everywhere are forced to publically mourn him. Kim Il-sung represents power within Lee’s memoir, and he systematically abuses the Korean people and strips them of even their most basic human rights.

Mr. Ahn – One of Mother’s Chinese business contacts and Mrs. Ahn’s husband. Mr. Ahn lives across the Yalu River from Hyesan

in Changbai, China, and when Hyeonseo defects from North Korea, she goes to Mr. Ahn for help. Mr. Ahn doesn't initially recognize Hyeonseo when she arrives, but he immediately agrees to help her, despite the fact that aiding North Korean defectors is highly illegal in China. Mr. Ahn gives Hyeonseo warm clothes, and he helps her get to Shenyang, which is eight hours away from Changbai. Afterward, when Hyeonseo tries to contact Mr. Ahn, his phone is disconnected, and while Hyeonseo doesn't know it, he has been severely beaten by the North Korean secret police for helping her. He dies of diabetes near the end of the book. Mr. Ahn represents kindness within Lee's book. His willingness to help Hyeonseo even though it is dangerous proves that there is compassion and kindness in the world, even though it often feels like a cold place to Hyeonseo.

Grandmother – Hyeonseo's grandmother. Grandmother is an ardent communist, and she secured her family's high *songbun* during the Korean War when she hid the family's Communist Party identification cards instead of destroying them when the Americans came. Grandmother never approves of Mother's relationship with Father, and she initially refuses to allow them to marry. She arranges for Mother to marry the man from Pyongyang instead, and is furious when Mother leaves him after Hyeonseo is born to marry Father instead. When Hyeonseo is just a young girl, Grandmother tells her that the man from Pyongyang is her biological father, which begins Hyeonseo's struggles with her identity. At the end of the book, when Mother accompanies Hyeonseo and Brian to Chicago, Hyeonseo wonders what Grandmother, who is presumably dead by this time, would think about them being in America, one of North Korea's sworn enemies. Grandmother is a fierce protector of the family's *songbun*, and she represents the importance of family within Lee's memoir.

Kim – Hyeonseo's South Korean boyfriend. Hyeonseo first meets Kim in Shanghai, where he is on a business trip from Seoul, and they immediately begin spending time together. Hyeonseo and Kim date for several years, and Kim never once suspects that Hyeonseo is a North Korean defector. After she finally tells him, Kim supports Hyeonseo's decision to seek political asylum in South Korea, and he later supports Hyeonseo's decision to bring Mother and Min-ho to South Korea, too. Kim constantly worries that his parents won't accept Hyeonseo because she is North Korean, and he often encourages her to go to the university and become a doctor or a lawyer so they will accept her. Not long after Mother and Min-ho make it to South Korea, Hyeonseo breaks off her relationship with Kim, claiming they don't have a future. Kim agrees, and the two remain on friendly terms.

Aunt Sang-hee – Uncle Jung-gil's wife. Like Uncle Jung-gil, Aunt Sang-hee welcomes Hyeonseo with open arms after she defects from North Korea and comes to Shenyang, China. Sang-hee is kind, and she helps Hyeonseo adjust to living in China. She introduces Hyeonseo to Geun-soo, whose mother,

Mrs. Jang, Sang-hee knows from her Korean-Chinese social circle. Sang-hee is upset when Hyeonseo runs away and refuses to marry Geun-soo, but she soon forgives her, and even lends her ID card to Hyeonseo for Mother to use after she defects from North Korea at the end of the book. Aunt Sang-hee reflects the importance of family in Korean culture. She hasn't seen Hyeonseo or her parents in years, but she opens up her home to Hyeonseo anyway, even though she risks being punished for helping a North Korean defector.

Aunt Old – Mother's oldest sister, and Hyeonseo and Min-ho's aunt. Aunt Old is a sad and lonely woman, and after Father is detained by the North Korean government when returning from a business trip to China, Mother tells Hyeonseo why Aunt Old is so sad. In the 1960s, Aunt Old married a Korean-Chinese man against Grandmother's wishes. He grew tired of North Korea and wanted to go back to China, but Aunt Old refused, so he went back alone and was arrested by North Korean police before reaching the border and sent to a prison camp for life. To save the family's *songbun*, Grandmother arranged a divorce for Aunt Old and put her three children up for adoption. The story of Aunt Old illustrates the lengths some people will go to in order to preserve their family's *songbun*, a notion which has particular significance after Father's own arrest.

Kim Jong-il/The Dear Leader – Kim Il-sung's son, Kim Jong-un's father, and the North Korean dictator and leader of the Kim regime from 1994 until his death in 2011. Like his father, and later his son, Kim Jong-il is a cruel and neglectful leader who strips the North Koreans of their basic human rights and leaves them to suffer and starve. North Koreans everywhere, through intimidation and ideological indoctrination, worship Kim Jong-il like a god, and they celebrate his birthday each year as if it is Christmas. For many North Koreans, Kim Jong-il's birthday is the only day of the year they are rationed meat or fish to eat. **Portraits** of Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung must hang in every North Korean home, and citizens are punished severely for any noncompliance.

Miss Ma – The owner of a "salon" in Shenyang, China. Hyeonseo meets Miss Ma in the streets of Shenyang after Hyeonseo runs away from Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee's house, and she offers Hyeonseo a job as a stylist in her salon. Hyeonseo realizes immediately that Miss Ma's establishment is no ordinary salon, and that Miss Ma intends on exploiting Hyeonseo as an illegal sex worker. Hyeonseo is able to escape Miss Ma's salon; however, Miss Ma represents the constant dangers Hyeonseo is up against as a North Korean defector and illegal immigrant living in China. Human traffickers and conmen are always looking to exploit illegal immigrants, and as a defector afraid of being repatriated back to North Korea, Hyeonseo can't possibly go to the authorities for help.

Brian – A white Westerner from the United States, and Hyeonseo's eventual husband. Hyeonseo meets Brian in South

Korea through an organization called PSCORE (People for Successful Korean Reunification). Brian is the first completely free mind Hyeonseo has ever met, and they quickly fall in love. When Mother and Min-ho first meet Brian, they believe he is an “American bastard,” but they finally come around, and Mother even accompanies Hyeonseo and Brian to Chicago in the United States. Mother and Min-ho’s initial dislike of Brian reflects the effectiveness of the ideological indoctrination of North Koreans by the Kim regime, which conditions North Koreans to despise all Americans.

Ok-hee – Hyeonseo’s good friend and a fellow North Korean defector. Hyeonseo first meets Ok-hee in Shenyang, where they both work waiting tables in a restaurant, and they later reconnect in Shanghai. Ok-hee seeks political asylum in South Korea at the same time Hyeonseo does; however, Ok-hee takes a ferry to South Korea from China, and she moves through the vetting process and is allotted an apartment in Seoul much more quickly than Hyeonseo is. As South Korean citizens, Ok-hee and Hyeonseo remain close friends, connected by their shared fight for freedom and human rights.

Mrs. Ahn – Mr. Ahn’s wife. When Mr. Ahn falls ill and eventually dies, Mrs. Ahn takes over helping Hyeonseo and her family. Mrs. Ahn is a Chinese woman living across the Yalu River from Hyesan in Changbai, China, and she smuggles information and much-needed supplies across the border to Mother and Min-ho. Like Mr. Ahn, Mrs. Ahn helps Hyeonseo and her family despite the danger it poses to herself. Aiding North Korean defectors is highly illegal in China, but Mrs. Ahn works tirelessly on Hyeonseo’s behalf. Mrs. Ahn is proof that there really is kindness and compassion in the world, even though it can seem like a dark and cold place.

Geun-soo – Mrs. Jang’s son. Aunt Sang-hee introduces Hyeonseo and Geun-soo after Hyeonseo defects to China from North Korea, and she encourages them to date, and later to marry. Geun-soo is very kind, and he treats Hyeonseo well, but she isn’t attracted to him, and she certainly doesn’t want to marry him. Geun-soo obtains the new ID card for Hyeonseo, which claims she is a Korean-Chinese woman named Jang Soon-hyang, and he is devastated when she leaves him and runs off to Xita. Hyeonseo never sees Geun-soo again, but she does call him to apologize. Hyeonseo later hears that he has married another woman and started a family.

Ri Chang-ho – A North Korean border guard assigned to the Yalu River near Hyeonseo’s home in Hyesan. Chang-ho is of the absolute highest *songbun*, and he quickly falls in love with Hyeonseo and even asks to marry her. Hyeonseo declines Chang-ho’s advances, but they remain friends, and he even helps her to escape over the river and into Changbai, China. Ri Chang-ho is always kind to Hyeonseo and her family, and he is further proof that kindness does exist in North Korea, even though it may be difficult to see it.

Kim Jong-un – Kim Jong-il’s son, Kim Il-sung’s grandson, and

the current dictator of North Korea and leader of the Kim regime. Kim Jong-un comes to power after the death of his father in 2011, and the oppression and human rights abuses of the North Korean people continue under his reign as well. Like most dictatorships, Hyeonseo suspects that Kim Jong-un isn’t as powerful as he pretends to be; however, Hyeonseo doesn’t think the suffering will end in North Korea anytime soon.

Uncle Opium – Mother’s brother, and Hyeonseo and Min-ho’s uncle. As his name suggests, Uncle Opium is an opium dealer. Opium is illegal in North Korea, but since other medications and pain killers are hard to come by, opium use is common. The family’s high *songbun* protects Uncle Opium from the North Korean police and keeps him from being investigated, which underscores the importance of *songbun* and social status in North Korean society.

Aunt Pretty – One of Mother’s sisters, and Hyeonseo and Min-ho’s aunt. Aunt Pretty, who is known for her beauty, lives in Hamhung, and like Mother, she makes her living smuggling illegal foreign goods into North Korea. Mother and Aunt Pretty are extremely close, and Mother misses her terribly after Mother defects to South Korea at the end of the book.

Uncle Poor – Mother’s brother, and Hyeonseo and Min-ho’s uncle. Uncle Poor falls in *songbun* after he marries a woman from a collective farm. He is a talented artist, and he could paint the **portraits** of the Great Leaders; however, because of his low *songbun*, he is only allowed to paint propaganda placards. Uncle Poor reflects the importance of *songbun* within North Korean society, and its ability to determine one’s job and lifestyle.

Uncle Cinema – Mother’s brother, and Hyeonseo and Min-ho’s uncle. Uncle Cinema lives in Hamhung and owns the local movie theater. Hyeonseo and Min-ho are sent to stay with Uncle Cinema when Father is hospitalized with depression after being detained by the North Korean government, and he is the one to tell Hyeonseo and Min-ho that their father has died.

The Man from Pyongyang – Mother’s first husband and Hyeonseo’s biological father. Grandmother arranges the marriage between Mother and the man from Pyongyang; however, Mother leaves him not long after Hyeonseo is born. Grandmother tells Hyeonseo about her biological father when she is just girl, but Hyeonseo never meets him, and she considers Father, Mother’s second husband, to be her father.

Mrs. Jang – Geun-soo’s mother and Aunt Sang-hee’s friend from her Korean-Chinese social circle. Mrs. Jang owns a chain of local restaurants in Shenyang, and she encourages Hyeonseo to marry Geun-soo. Mrs. Jang is very upset with Hyeonseo after she runs away and refuses to marry Geun-soo, and Hyeonseo never sees her again.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Uncle Money – Mother’s brother, and Hyeonseo and Min-ho’s

uncle. Uncle Money is a successful business executive at a trading company in Pyongyang, and he is obviously very rich.

Aunt Tall – Mother’s youngest sister, and Hyeonseo and Min-ho’s aunt.

TERMS

Banjang – *Banjangs* are the heads of the neighborhood watch units created by the North Korean regime to spy on citizens and report any signs of disloyalty. *Banjangs* are usually middle-aged women, and they are assigned to residential areas consisting of around 30 households. When **Hyeonseo** and her family move into their new house on the military base in Anju, the *banjang* delivers them [portraits](#) of the Great Leaders, **Kim Il-sung** and **Kim Jong-il**. When Hyeonseo escapes North Korea across the Yalu River into China, **Mother** tells the police that Hyeonseo is visiting **Aunt Pretty** in Hamhung, but the *banjang* knows otherwise and tells the police the truth. *Banjangs* are an integral part of the oppression of the North Korean regime, and they help keep the people in constant fear of the government, which is always watching.

Bowibu – The *Bowibu* is the North Korean secret police, also known as the Ministry of State Security. The *Bowibu* has little interest in real crime and is only concerned with citizen disloyalty to the state. They have the power to make entire families disappear, and they are a source of constant fear for North Korean citizens. After **Hyeonseo** escapes to China, **Mother** and **Min-ho**’s phone calls are monitored by the *Bowibu*. The *Bowibu* has holding camps in China, and North Korean defectors caught in China are released into their care and repatriated back to North Korea. China is crawling with *Bowibu* spies, and even though Hyeonseo makes it out of North Korea, she still encounters them.

Songbun – *Songbun* refers to the North Korean caste system. The *songbun* system is broken into three broad categories and holds 51 degrees of status. No one in North Korea is told their *songbun* status exactly, although most have a general idea where they fall. It is nearly impossible to rise in *songbun*, but it is incredibly easy to fall, and one’s job and lifestyle are based upon *songbun* status. **Hyeonseo** and her family are from very high *songbun*, achieved by **Grandmother** during the Korean War when she hid the family’s Communist Party membership cards instead of destroying them when the Americans arrived. One’s *songbun* is fiercely guarded in North Korea, and it can protect one from poverty, arrest, and imprisonment.

occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



OPPRESSION, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND NORTH KOREA

The Girl with Seven Names: Escape from North Korea chronicles the real-life experiences of Hyeonseo

Lee, a North Korean woman born in the town of Hyesan, near the Chinese border. Growing up, Hyeonseo is taught that North Korea is the greatest country in the world, and since North Korea is a closed state and contact with the outside world is forbidden, she has no reason not to believe the claims of the government. Social status in North Korea is based on one’s status in the *songbun*, North Korea’s caste system, which determines one’s job and lifestyle. Hyeonseo’s family is of very high *songbun*, so she grows up with plenty of food and even some luxuries, like visits to the beauty parlor and the latest Chinese fashions, but her experience is not the same as those of other North Koreans—especially those of low *songbun* or those accused of disloyalty to the state. For many, North Korea is a cold and unforgiving place where the Great Leaders (Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and later Kim Jong-un) rule by fear and violence. Through *The Girl with Seven Names*, Hyeonseo Lee underscores the oppression of the Kim regime and advocates for the human rights of all North Koreans.

Despite being told that North Korea is the greatest country in the world, Hyeonseo and the other North Koreans are constantly oppressed by the cruelty of the Kim regime, which paints an entirely different picture of life in North Korea. Hyeonseo’s extended family is spread out all over the country, but they don’t get to visit one another as often as they would like. Most North Koreans never get to leave their home cities, and before traveling anywhere they must first obtain a travel permit from the government, which identifies their destination and is good for only four days. North Koreans aren’t allowed to freely travel and are expected to remain in their home cities for life. In theory, the government provides for everyone’s needs and even considers abolishing money. Twice monthly, citizens are given ration coupons for food, fuel, clothing, and housing, and the quality and amount depend not on need but on *songbun*. Often, the system breaks down, and rations disappear through corruption and theft, leaving the people to suffer and starve. What’s more, electricity is rare in North Korea, and in areas where electricity is available, it works only sporadically and is often cut by the government as a form of punishment. At night, most of North Korea is in the dark. Hyeonseo can see the bright lights of China from across the Yalu River, and this is her first hint that North Korea really isn’t the greatest country in the world as maintained by the Great Leaders.

In addition to these material forms of oppression, the Kim regime rules by tyranny and terror, which keeps the North



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes

Korean people in a constant state of fear and ensures their loyalty to the state. When Hyeonseo is just seven years old, she witnesses her first public execution. In Hyesan, where Hyeonseo grows up, all executions take place at the Hyesan Airport, and attendance is mandatory after elementary school. Offenders of the state are hanged or shot, and their family members must sit in the front row to watch. Executions take place for the slightest infractions, and North Koreans live in constant fear of upsetting the regime and being sent to the airport. In Hyeonseo's family home there is a wall-mounted speaker that cannot be turned off or down. The speaker is used for announcements by the *banjang*—the head of the neighborhood watch who reports citizen disloyalty to the regime—and it is a constant reminder that people are never really alone, not even in their own homes, which only adds to their fear. The *banjang* reports any infractions to the *Bowibu*, the North Korean secret police, which has the power to make entire families disappear. The *Bowibu* sends North Korean families to collective farms as punishment, and they even decide whose infractions are serious enough to warrant imprisonment or execution. The *Bowibu*, too, instills fear in the North Korean people, and it ensures that everyone remains compliant through constant spying and informing.

Hyeonseo is fortunate enough to escape the oppression and violence of North Korea, and she dedicates her life to advocating for the human rights of North Koreans and others around the world affected by dictatorships. “To know that your rights are being abused,” Hyeonseo says, “you first have to know that you have them, and what they are.” Through her memoir, Hyeonseo plainly outlines these rights in contrast with the abuses inflicted upon North Koreans in hopes of stripping away some of the Kim regime's power and hold over the country's citizens.



IDENTITY AND NATIONALITY

As the title suggests, Hyeonseo Lee's identity is at the center of *The Girl with Seven Names*, a memoir that chronicles her life growing up in North Korea and eventually defecting. Hyeonseo's struggle with her identity begins when she is just a girl and discovers that her father isn't her biological father. Hyeonseo's mother was married to a man from Pyongyang before her marriage to Hyeonseo's father, and this stranger is Hyeonseo's biological father. When Hyeonseo is born, she is given the name Kim Ji-hae, and after her mother marries her father, Hyeonseo's name is changed to Park Min-young. After Hyeonseo defects from North Korea and escapes into China, she assumes the name Chae Mi-ran, and she changes her name several more times over the years to disguise her North Korean identity. When she finally secures freedom in South Korea, she changes her name for the seventh and final time to Hyeonseo Lee; *hyeon* means “sunshine” in Korean, and *seo* means “good fortune.” Even as Hyeonseo fights

against the oppression of the North Korean regime, she never loses her connection to her North Korean heritage, though she must frequently hide it for her safety. *The Girl with Seven Names* highlights Hyeonseo's struggles with identity, through which she ultimately argues that, for better or worse, there is no escaping one's national roots.

Hyeonseo's identity changes several times throughout the book through repeated name changes, which are imperative to save her life and keep her North Korean identity hidden from the Chinese government. Early in her defection to China, Hyeonseo is given a fake identification card by Mrs. Jang, the Korean-Chinese woman who hopes Hyeonseo will marry her son, Geun-soo. According to her new ID card, Hyeonseo is a Korean-Chinese woman named Jang Soon-hyang, and at just 19 years old, she is even made a year older so she can legally marry in China. Hyeonseo lives as Jang Soon-hyang, even though she isn't Chinese at all. After leaving Shenyang and Geun-soo and arriving in Shanghai, Hyeonseo again changes her name, this time to Chae In-hee. “I had told too many people in Shenyang I was North Korean,” Hyeonseo says. “I needed to bury the name Soon-hyang.” In Shanghai, she lives as In-hee, and she again claims to be Chinese. In order to get a good job, Hyeonseo needs a valid ID card, so she pays a woman in Harbin (a city over 1,000 miles from Shanghai) to secure her a new card. For \$45, Hyeonseo is given the ID card of Park Sun-ja, a mentally ill Korean-Chinese woman, whose parents sold her identification for extra money. Using Sun-ja's identity, Hyeonseo builds a comfortable life in Shanghai, again concealing her true identity as a North Korean.

Hyeonseo's assumed identities are constantly tested, and she frequently mourns the loss of her true North Korean identity. Her experiences suggest that one can never escape who they really are. While living in Shenyang, Hyeonseo is arrested by the Chinese police and interrogated as a suspected North Korean. She is given written and spoken Chinese language tests and somehow manages to pass. The police declare that Hyeonseo isn't North Korean, and they let her go. She is obviously relieved; however, denying her true identity doesn't feel natural, and doing so grows more and more difficult. In Shanghai, Hyeonseo meets and falls in love with Kim, a South Korean businessman. After years of dating, Hyeonseo finally tells him the truth about her identity. “I'm not a Chinese citizen,” Hyeonseo says. “I'm not even Korean-Chinese.” Despite his initial shock, Kim accepts Hyeonseo's true identity, something that Hyeonseo isn't accustomed to. During the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, Hyeonseo secretly roots for North Korea, and the games prompt a “full-blown identity crisis” inside her. Hyeonseo can no longer tell if she is North Korean, South Korean, or Chinese. The only choice she has is to become a global citizen, but no matter how she tries, Hyeonseo can't fully escape her North Korean heritage.

Hyeonseo ultimately seeks asylum in South Korea as a political

refugee. She is, after all, Korean, and she wants to live on Korean soil with people who share her customs and language. Hyeonseo wants to shed her North Korean identity and “erase the mark it has made on [her],” but she can’t. She wants to be part of something bigger than her family and herself—to belong to a nation. In the end, North Korea is Hyeonseo’s country; she loves it, and it is deeply connected to her core identity despite all the challenges it creates throughout her life.



FAMILY

Family is central in Hyeonseo Lee’s *The Girl with Seven Names: Escape from North Korea*. Hyeonseo’s mother is one of eight siblings and comes from a very large extended family. Hyeonseo and her brother, Min-ho, often visit Mother’s siblings, including Uncle Money, a rich businessman in Pyongyang, and Aunt Pretty, a trader of illicit foreign goods in Hamhung. Hyeonseo also spends a lot of time with her grandmother in Hyesan, who tells Hyeonseo and Min-ho about the history of their family through the Korean War and before that, during the Japanese Occupation of 1910-1945. Families share the same *songbun*—the North Korean caste system—and when one family member falls in *songbun* status, the rest usually follow. North Korea is not an easy place in which to live—the Kim regime is notoriously cruel and oppressive, and widespread famine and supply shortages make life a constant struggle—but Hyeonseo’s “colorful family life” makes North Korea “a magical place” to live. When Hyeonseo defects to China to escape the oppression of North Korea, she risks everything to get her mother and Min-ho safely out of North Korea. With her memoir, *The Girl with Seven Names*, Hyeonseo Lee underscores the importance of family and ultimately argues that family and togetherness are all that truly matter in life.

The importance of family is well-established in *The Girl with Seven Names*, which highlights Lee’s primary argument that family is what matters most in life. As Hyeonseo introduces her mother, she describes her rather large extended family. “Family was everything to my mother,” Lee writes. “Our social life took place within the family and she formed few outside friends.” Hyeonseo and her family live for each other, and they very rarely rely on other people. When Hyeonseo discovers that her biological father is actually a man from Pyongyang, she is devastated. “In North Korea family is everything. Bloodlines are everything. *Songbun* is everything.” The truth about her parentage upsets Hyeonseo’s family life and connections, which is exceedingly difficult in a country like North Korea. After Hyeonseo defects to China, she goes immediately to her father’s cousins in Shenyang, Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee, and they welcome her warmly. “I was family,” Hyeonseo says, “it made no difference to them that they had not seen me years.” Of course, Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee don’t appear to know the truth about Hyeonseo’s actual parentage.

For North Koreans, even those who defect and leave their home country, family remains an extremely important part of life.

After Hyeonseo defects to China and finally makes it to freedom in South Korea, she goes to great lengths to get her mother and Min-ho safely out of North Korea, which again underscores the importance of family within the book. Even after escaping the oppression of North Korea, Hyeonseo doesn’t feel complete without her family. Crossing the border between North and South Korea is nearly impossible, so Hyeonseo and her family must escape over the border into China and reach South Korea from there. After Mother and Min-ho make it over the Yalu River to Changbai, China, Hyeonseo guides them 2,000 miles across China in coach accommodations. The journey is long, uncomfortable, and crawling with police and Bowibu (the North Korean secret police)—but to Hyeonseo and her family, it is worth it to be together. Once Hyeonseo, Mother, and Min-ho make it out of China and into Laos, Mother and Min-ho are arrested by the Laotian police as illegal immigrants, and Hyeonseo is accused of operating as a criminal broker. The Laotian police extort all of Hyeonseo’s money out of her, but she willingly pays their bribes just to get her family back. Mother and Min-ho are held in Laos for months in Phonthong Prison, a prison for foreigners in Vientiane, but Hyeonseo never gives up trying to get them out. Mother and Min-ho are finally released from the Laotian prison nearly one year after their journey began in Changbai, China. Again, their journey is not easy and is full of pain and heartache, but they are together in the end, which is all any of them care about.

Through all of Hyeonseo’s experiences, both good and bad, her love for her family is unyielding. She learns early on from her mother and father that keeping their family together and safe is all that truly matters. “We can do without almost anything,” Hyeonseo writes, “our home, even our country. But we will never do without other people, and we will never do without family.” By the time Mother and Min-ho escape China, Father has been dead for many years, and Hyeonseo never does reunite with her extended family, which is exceedingly difficult for Mother. However, this strong belief in the importance of family keeps Hyeonseo going throughout the book, even when it seems she has nothing to continue for.



KINDNESS

Kindness, especially the kindness of strangers, occurs very little in the beginning of Hyeonseo Lee’s memoir *The Girl with Seven Names*. When Hyeonseo is a young girl in the 1990s, a massive famine strikes North Korea, and citizens begin to quite literally starve in the streets. One day, while at the market outside the train station, Hyeonseo sees a starving woman lying in the street with an infant in her lifeless arms and watches in horror as people step

over the woman and child without so much as a glance. “Kindness towards strangers is rare in North Korea,” Hyeonseo writes. In a country where daily life is a constant struggle, it is “the ruthless and the selfish” who survive. Yet Hyeonseo also catches quick glimpses of kindness—both from her family and from strangers—which suggest kindness isn’t as rare as she thinks. When Hyeonseo finds herself alone and broke in a foreign land, it is the kindness of a total stranger that saves her life and her family’s lives. With the depiction of kindness in *The Girl with Seven Names*, Hyeonseo Lee suggests that offering help is a privilege that poor or oppressed people are often unable to extend to others, but effectively argues that genuine kindness really does exist in the world, even in places like North Korea where it’s difficult to see it.

Even in very difficult circumstances, instances of kindness appear throughout in Hyeonseo’s book, which suggests that it’s not really as rare as it sometimes seems. Hyeonseo’s mother is detained at the train station in Anju because of an expired travel permit, and she fears she will be punished for unauthorized travel. The ticket inspector takes Hyeonseo’s mother’s ID, but a second, kind inspector gives it back and tells her to hide on the train with her children. When the ticket inspector comes looking for them, the other passengers point the inspector in the other direction. The kind inspector and every passenger on the train could be punished for helping Mother, but they do it anyway, and Mother never forgets their kindness. When Hyeonseo first escapes North Korea, she goes across the Yalu River to see Mr. Ahn, a business contact of her mother’s. “I realize now what an extraordinary imposition I was making on him and what a kindness he was doing me,” Lee writes. Assisting North Korean defectors in any way is a serious crime in China, but Mr. Ahn makes sure Hyeonseo gets to her family in Shenyang. Later, it is Mr. Ahn’s wife, Mrs. Ahn, who continues to help Hyeonseo and her family. Mrs. Ahn finds smugglers to check on Hyeonseo’s family for her and bring word back to China, another serious offense if caught in either North Korea or China. Like her husband, Mrs. Ahn is kind to Hyeonseo and her family, despite the potential trouble it poses for herself.

Perhaps the most important example of kindness in *The Girl with Seven Names* is Dick Stolp—an Australian man and a complete stranger—who helps Hyeonseo and her family in Laos. Dick’s kindness proves that strangers really do care about others, and that people are often willing to risk all to show others kindness. When Mother and Min-ho are arrested in Laos and the corrupt Laotian police extort all Hyeonseo’s money, Dick Stolp approaches Hyeonseo on the street, and after asking what is wrong, immediately pays to get Mother, Min-ho, and three other North Koreans out of police custody. Dick doesn’t know them, and he has no reason to help them, but he does simply because he can. Dick even gives Hyeonseo extra money for food and expenses—the equivalent of

\$800—and when the Laotian police accuse of Hyeonseo of being a criminal broker and extort that money out of her, too, Dick covers Hyeonseo’s travel expenses to get out of the country when they threaten to arrest her. Because of the kindness of a complete stranger, Hyeonseo is spared a lengthy Laotian prison sentence. Before Dick disappears forever, Hyeonseo asks him why he is helping her and being so kind. “I’m not helping you,” Dick says. “I’m helping the North Korean people.” As an Australian and a Westerner, Dick Stolp has no connection to Hyeonseo and the North Korean people, but he still cares and shows them kindness.

Dick Stolp’s kindness changes Hyeonseo’s life. She learns that kindness is a privilege, and that it exists more frequently where others have resources to share. North Koreans aren’t indifferent to other starving North Koreans because they don’t care, they simply can’t afford—psychologically or financially—to do any better. Dick, on the other hand, has plenty to share. Her experience in Laos teaches Hyeonseo that there is “another world where strangers helped strangers for no other reason than that it is good to do so, and where callousness was unusual, not the norm.” From the moment Hyeonseo meets Dick Stolp, the world feels “less cynical,” and she understands that true kindness really does exist.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE PORTRAITS

When Hyeonseo’s family moves to the military base in Anju, the banjang presents them with two painted portraits of the Great Leaders, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. The portraits symbolize the power and oppression of the North Korean regime in Lee’s book. The portraits of the Great Leaders must be placed at the highest point of each North Korean home, and no other paintings or pictures are permitted to be hung higher, or on the same wall. Each household is given a white cloth with which to clean the portraits, and the cloth cannot be used to clean anything else. Once a month, a government official wearing white gloves comes to inspect the portraits for compliance and cleanliness. Anyone found to have dirty or crooked portraits is reported to the Bowibu and punished severely for disloyalty. Stories of portrait-saving heroics are popular in North Korea, and Hyeonseo is once told about a man who carried the portraits up over his head through raging floodwaters. One night, while Mother is transferring heating fuel to a new container, she accidentally splashes some on the cooking coals, and the entire house goes up in flames. As Mother, Hyeonseo, and Min-ho watch the roof of their house collapse, Father runs back inside

and emerges with both portraits tucked safely under his arm. He doesn't bother to save their money or family heirlooms—just the portraits. The placement of the portraits in every North Korean home and the widespread determination to protect the portraits at all costs reflect the power of the Kim regime and the oppressive hold it has over the North Korean people, whom the regime controls through fear and ideological indoctrination.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the William Collins edition of *The Girl with Seven Names* published in 2016.

Introduction Quotes

☝ I would like to shed my North Korean identity, erase the mark it has made on me. But I can't. I'm not sure why this is so, but I suspect it is because I had a happy childhood. As children we have a need, as our awareness of the larger world develops, to feel part of something bigger than family, to belong to a nation. The next step is to identify with humanity, as a global citizen. But in me this development got stuck. I grew up knowing almost nothing of the outside world except as it was perceived through the lens of the regime. And when I left, I discovered only gradually that my country is a byword, everywhere, for evil. But I did not know this years ago, when my identity was forming. I thought life in North Korea was normal. Its customs and rulers became strange only with time and distance.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: xiii

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the very beginning of *The Girl with Seven Names*, when Hyeonseo Lee is giving a speech and telling her story—presumably at her TED talk or on the floor of the United Nations—and it is significant because it establishes Hyeonseo's connection to her North Korean heritage, as well as the more general importance of nationality to one's core identity. Hyeonseo has witnessed terrible human rights abuses living in North Korea, even though she has not always experienced them herself, yet she still feels a deep connection and love for her homeland that she can't escape, or "shed" like some useless coat.

Hyeonseo has a deeply rooted need to feel as if she is part of a nation, and her status in exile as a North Korean


defector makes this impossible. Hyeonseo can never return to North Korea—if she does she will be severely punished and likely executed for being disloyal to the North Korean regime—but this doesn't keep her from longing to return to the happiness she knew as a child. The fact that Hyeonseo spent much of her life not knowing that North Korea is a "byword for evil" in most parts of the world reflects the power of the North Korean regime and the lengths it goes to indoctrinate and condition its citizens.

Prologue Quotes

☝ Yet what struck me most was that neither of my parents seemed that upset. Our home was just a low, two-room house with state-issue furniture, common in North Korea. It's hard to imagine now how anyone would have missed it. But my parents' reaction made a strong impression on me. The four of us were together and safe - that was all that mattered to them.

This is when I understood that we can do without almost anything - our home, even our country. But we will never do without other people, and we will never do without family.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Min-ho, Father, Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: xvi

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs in the book's prologue, when Hyeonseo first tells the story of the fire that burnt down their family home in North Korea. This scene establishes the importance of family in the book and reflects the importance of togetherness within Hyeonseo's family specifically. Hyeonseo's family literally has nothing left after the fire—they only have each other—but that is enough for Hyeonseo's parents. They understand, unlike their young children, that the only thing that matters in life is family, not one's home or material possessions.



This passage also illustrates the oppression of the North Korean people and the cruelty of the Kim regime. As a communist country, the government is supposed to provide for all its citizens' needs, but Hyeonseo and her family are given only the bare necessities—a two-room house (not a two bedroom house, but two rooms total) and state-issued furniture, which is likely utilitarian and provides little comfort. Furthermore, Hyeonseo's family is considered privileged by North Korean standards, so their home reveals just how little the majority of North Koreans have.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ No one was ever told their precise ranking in the *songbun* system, and yet I think most people knew by intuition, in the same way that in a flock of fifty-one sheep every individual will know precisely which sheep ranks above it and below it in the pecking order. The insidious beauty of it was that it was very easy to sink, but almost impossible to rise in the system, even through marriage, except by some special indulgence of the Great Leader himself. The elite, about 10 or 15 per cent of the population, had to be careful never to make mistakes.

At the time my parents met, a family's *songbun* was of great importance. It determined a person's life, and the lives of their children.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Kim Il-sung/The Great Leader, Father, Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs early in Hyeonseo's book, when she is explaining her family's status within North Korean society, and it is significant because it explains *songbun*, the North Korean caste system. The *songbun* system is spread across three broad categories, and it includes 51 different levels of status, which is reflected in Hyeonseo's language here. She claims that North Koreans innately know their *songbun* status, much in the way a flock of sheep can sense their ranks relative to each other.

The *songbun* system is also a key way that the Kim regime oppresses and controls the North Korean people. The "insidious beauty" of the system ensures that most of the North Korean people are held under crippling low status for their entire lives, without any hope to rise, except the positive attention of Kim Il-sung, the country's dictator (who is known as the Great Leader). But even such positive attention is fleeting and precarious. Falling in *songbun* is incredibly easy, which allows the regime to feel justified in further neglecting the needs of the North Korean people and oppressing them. The fact that *songbun* runs in families further underscores the importance of family in the book, and in North Korean culture and society as a whole.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ They had to be the highest objects in the room and perfectly aligned. No other pictures or clutter were permitted on the same wall. Public buildings, and the homes of high-ranking cadres of the Party, were obliged to display a third portrait - of Kim Jong-suk, a heroine of the anti-Japanese resistance who died young. She was the first wife of Kim Il-sung and the sainted mother of Kim Jong-il. I thought she was very beautiful. This holy trinity we called the Three Generals of Mount Paektu.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Kim Jong-il/The Dear Leader, Kim Il-sung/The Great Leader

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs as Hyeonseo explains the portraits of the Great Leaders, which are required to hang in every North Korean home, and it is important because the portraits are symbolic of the power of the Kim regime and the control they have over the North Korean people to force their loyalty and reverence. The portraits must be the "highest objects in the room and perfectly aligned," which underscores the regime's self-importance and its insistence that it must be honored above all else by the North Korean people.

Furthermore, the portraits must hang alone, so as to not confuse their importance with anything or anyone else, and they can't be contaminated by "clutter." Mount Paektu was the site of several revolutionary battles during Korea's colonial period, when the country was under the control of imperialist Japan, and the site of Mount Paektu, like the Kim regime (who heavily contributed to the revolutionary cause), is regarded with near-religious reverence. Religion is outlawed in North Korea, since nothing and no one can be worshiped except the Kim regime, and this is reflected in Hyeonseo's description of the three portraits as the "holy trinity."

☞ About once a month officials wearing white gloves entered every house in the block to inspect the portraits. If they reported a household for failing to clean them—we once saw them shine a flashlight at an angle to see if they could discern a single mote of dust on the glass—the family would be punished.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Kim Jong-il/The Dear Leader, Kim Il-sung/The Great Leader

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Hyeonseo explains the significance of the portraits within the book and within North Korean society as a whole. Her description reveals the lengths the Kim regime is willing to go to ensure loyalty and compliance and further oppress the North Korea people. The idea of a government official intruding in one's home to inspect the cleanliness of anything, much less the pictures of dictators, is extremely invasive and oppressive, and would seem ridiculous to people in most parts of the world.

Presumably, a government official in white gloves is sent into every North Korean home, which amounts to roughly six million individual households. The effort and expense of such monitoring must be immense, and it further underscores the self-importance of the Kim regime and the high value placed on forced compliance and loyalty. Many North Koreans likely keep the pictures because they are scared, not because they actually revere and respect the Kim regime. Many, however, likely do revere the regime due to its extremely effective indoctrination tactics. Either way, the state's power is absolute; whether or not North Korean people believe in the state's ideology, they have no choice but to behave as if they do, which just reinforces the regime's dominance.

Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs as Hyeonseo begins kindergarten in North Korea, and it is significant because it underscores the ideological indoctrination of even very young children, which reflects the oppression of the North Korean people and the power of the Kim regime to control them and condition their thoughts. Schools are closed in the winter, because the government can't afford to heat them—or, at least, doesn't care to. The colorful scenes of children performing gymnastics suggest that North Korean children are superior to the children of other countries and are more talented and better fit for physical activities. Furthermore, the image of North Korean children in uniform suggests they are always obedient and loyal to the regime. It's clear from this description that every tiny detail of the school is designed to nudge children toward a favorable perspective on the regime.

The killing of the “Yankee,” or American soldier, the Japanese soldier, and the South Korean soldier represents the three greatest enemies of the North Korean state. The North Korean state considers America an enemy because of America's involvement in the Korean War and its identity as a capitalist nation (North Korea is a communist country). Japan is North Korea's enemy because Korea was colonized by imperialist Japan from 1910 to 1945, and Japan routinely oppressed the North Korean people and erased their culture. South Korea, which the North Korean government absolutely refuses to accept as legitimate, is the mortal enemy of North Korea, with whom North Korea is still locked in a frozen conflict. A formal peace treaty was never signed when the fighting of the Korean War stopped, and thus North and South Korea are technically still at war to this day.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ The school year started in September, with a long vacation in the winter, not the summer, due to the difficulty of keeping the schools warm in North Korea's harsh winters. My kindergarten had a large wood-burning stove in the middle of the classroom and walls painted with colourful scenes of children performing gymnastics, children in uniform, and of a North Korean soldier simultaneously impaling a Yankee, a Japanese and a South Korean soldier with his rifle bayonet.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 21

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ Kindness toward strangers is rare in North Korea. There is risk in helping others. The irony was that by forcing us to be good citizens, the state made accusers and informers of us all. The episode was so unusual that my mother was to recall it many times, saying how thankful she was to that man, and to the passengers. A few years later, when the country entered its darkest period, we would remember him. Kind people who put others before themselves would be the first to die. It was the ruthless and the selfish who would survive.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs after the kindness of complete strangers keeps Mother from trouble when she unexpectedly discovers that her travel permit has expired, and it is important because it implies that kindness isn't as rare as Hyeonseo and her family initially think it is. There is risk in helping others in North Korea because it is very easy to offend the regime and incur its wrath, which often ends in the loss of one's life. Furthermore, kindness is rare because of the widespread suffering and oppression of the North Korean people; everyone is so preoccupied with their own survival that they rarely have attention to spare for others. However, the fact that complete strangers are willing to help implies there is kindness in North Korea after all.

Life in North Korea is so difficult that it creates a real "every person for themselves" mentality. The irony of turning the North Koreans into informers and spies against each other again reflects the power of the North Korean regime and the oppression and conditioning of the people. The regime's reward system for spying and informing ensures that the people police each other, which is highly effective and saves work for the regime itself.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ Propaganda seeped into every subject. In our geography lesson we used a textbook that showed photographs of parched plots of land, so arid that the mud was cracked. "This is a normal farm in South Korea," the teacher said. "Farmers there can't grow rice. That's why the people suffer." Maths textbook questions were sometimes worded emotively. "In one battle of the Great Fatherland Liberation War, 3 brave uncles of the Korean People's Army wiped out 30 American imperialist bastards. What was the ratio of the soldiers who fought?"

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Hyeonseo explains the propaganda she is exposed to in North Korean schools, and it reveals the ideological indoctrination of the North Korean people and extent of the power the Kim regime has over them. This type of propaganda and indoctrination is brainwashing, pure and simple. Farmland in South Korea isn't arid and desolate, and


the farmers there are more than capable of growing rice. However, such lies help the regime make the North Korean people believe they are superior to the South Koreans, whom the North Korean regime considers their mortal enemy.

This negative view of South Korea also keeps the North Korean people from defecting to the South. If the people think South Korea is a terrible country with little food and believe that North Korea is superior, chances are they won't try to escape to the South. The questions in North Korean math textbooks also reflect North Korea's resentment of America. The "Great Fatherland Liberation War" is what the Korean War is known as in North Korea, and the Korean People's Army is the North Korean Army. In saying that only three brave North Korean "uncles" "wiped out 30 American imperialist bastards," the North Koreans are again portrayed as superior, and the American soldiers appear weak and corrupt.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ The one luxury we did buy for the new house was a Toshiba colour television, which was a signal of social status. The television would expand my horizon, and Min-ho's, dramatically. Not for the "news" it broadcast—we had one channel, Korea Central Television, which showed endlessly repeated footage of the Great Leader or the Dear Leader visiting factories, schools or farms and delivering their on-the-spot guidance on everything from nitrate fertilizers to women's shoes. Nor for the entertainment, which consisted of old North Korean movies, Pioneers performing in musical ensembles, or vast army choruses praising the Revolution and the Party. Its attraction was that we could pick up Chinese TV stations that broadcast soap operas and glamorous commercials for luscious products. Though we could not understand Mandarin, just watching them provided a window onto an entirely different way of life. Watching foreign TV stations was highly illegal and a very serious offence.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Kim Jong-il/The Dear Leader, Kim Il-sung/The Great Leader, Mother, Min-ho

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 58-9

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Hyeonseo and her family move to a new house in Hyesan and Mother secures them a new color television, and it is significant because it further illustrates


the oppression and ideological indoctrination of the North Korean people. Hyeonseo's family is considered privileged in North Korea because they have things like the color television, which suggests that it doesn't take much to be considered privileged in North Korea. Hyeonseo's use of quotation marks around "news" implies that the news in North Korea isn't true, so it's not really news.

There is no free press in North Korea, and the only television station is obviously controlled by the state. The point of state-run television in North Korea is not to keep the people informed; rather, it is used as a platform to promote the Kim regime and make the country's dictators, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, look generous and concerned with the North Korean people—which they obviously aren't, since the people starve and suffer. The Kim regime is portrayed as powerful, knowledgeable, and dedicated to the people, but this couldn't be further from the truth, hence Hyeonseo's use of quotation marks around "news." The fact that Chinese television stations are highly illegal in North Korea further underscores how oppressive a closed state like North Korea is. The people are sheltered from news, information, and entertainment from the outside world—anything that may shed light on the fact that North Korea isn't really the greatest country in the world.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ It is mandatory from elementary school to attend public executions. Often classes would be cancelled so students could go. Factories would send their workers, to ensure a large crowd. I always tried to avoid attending, but on one occasion that summer I made an exception, because I knew one of the men being killed. Many people in Hyesan knew him. You might think the execution of an acquaintance is the last thing you'd want to see. In fact, people made excuses not to go if they didn't know the victim. But if they knew the victim, they felt obliged to go, as they would to a funeral.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Kim Il-sung/ The Great Leader

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after several public executions happen in North Korea because the citizens don't mourn sincerely enough for the passing of Kim Il-sung, the North Korean dictator and leader of the Kim regime. It highlights the use of fear and intimidation by the North Korean regime to keep

people in line and loyal to the state. The fact that North Koreans can be executed for not mourning enough makes it clear that the slightest infraction can get one killed in North Korea.

North Korean children are expected to witness public executions from a very young age, which effectively establishes fear of the regime and illustrates just how much power it has over the people. This power doesn't end with childhood, since factories close, too, in order to populate crowds at executions. Not only do public executions and compulsory attendance operate to keep people loyal to the regime, they also illustrate the importance of the regime in everyday North Korean life. The significance of the regime has the power to close down schools and factories, demonstrating that honoring the Kim regime (rather than education or commerce) is always the nation's top priority.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ As I travelled back to Hyesan, I thought the whole visit had seemed like a strange dream. I could not believe Pyongyang was in the same country where people were dying on the sidewalks in Hamhung, and vagrant children swarmed in the markets of Hyesan. In the end, though, not even Pyongyang stayed immune. The regime could not prevent famine coming to the heart of its own power base

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Mother

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Hyeonseo's mother brings a letter home from work which indicates that the people of North Korea are starving and dying, and Hyeonseo later sees the hunger and suffering first-hand. When she goes to visit Pyongyang and sees how much better things are there, it marks the moment that Hyeonseo becomes aware of the fact that North Korea is definitely not the greatest country in the world. This passage further reflects the fact that not even *songbun* and loyalty to the regime is enough to keep one alive through the country-wide famine that strikes North Korea in the 1990s.



The people of North Korea, Hyeonseo included, have always thought that loyalty to the regime and high social status would keep them privileged and safe. However, when push comes to shove, the regime proves that it is only really concerned with itself. Hyeonseo claims that not even the

people in Pyongyang—those of extremely high *songbun* and wealth—are “immune” to suffering, which implies that even the very rich and privileged will soon starve. This again reflects the oppression of the North Korean people and the power of the regime—as well as the regime’s selfishness and disregard for the people, even those who have displayed great loyalty and dedication to the Kim regime.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝ I realize now what an extraordinary imposition I was making on him and what a kindness he was doing me. I thanked him, but he held up his palm. He’d been trading with my mother for years, he said. He valued her custom and trusted her.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Mother, Mr. Ahn

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis



This passage occurs after Hyeonseo escapes North Korea over the Yalu River and into Changbai, China. It is significant because it reflects the extreme kindness that Hyeonseo does encounter, despite the fact that she believes true compassion and kindness are rare in the world, which is often cold and unforgiving. As soon as Hyeonseo gets to China, she knocks on the door of Mr. Ahn, a Chinese man and a business contact of her mother’s, whom she smuggles illicit foreign goods through.

Mr. Ahn has no real connection to Hyeonseo other than his association with Mother. In fact, Mr. Ahn barely knows Hyeonseo and doesn’t at first recognize her when she knocks on his door. Plus, helping North Korean defectors, even for a Chinese man like Mr. Ahn, is exceedingly dangerous. The North Korean government works closely with the Chinese government to identify defectors and repatriate them back to North Korea, and Mr. Ahn could be in real trouble for helping her. In fact, he is later beaten by the North Korean secret police for his association with defectors. Clearly, the reach of the North Korean regime extends all the way into China, and Mr. Ahn has more reason not to help Hyeonseo than to help her. However, Mr. Ahn helps out of pure kindness, which proves there is real compassion in the world—especially among those with the freedom to exercise their innate generosity.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝ My uncle and aunt made me feel instantly welcome. I was family - it made no difference to them that they had not seen me in years.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Aunt Sang-hee, Uncle Jung-gil

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears when Hyeonseo arrives at her father’s cousins’ house in Shenyang, China, after she defects across the Yalu River. This passage underscores the importance of family within the book, and within Korean culture as a whole. Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee may live in China, but they are North Korean, and they defected to China during the Korean War, which was long before Hyeonseo was born. Defectors don’t go back to North Korea—if they do, they are punished—and Hyeonseo has obviously never been out of North Korea.


Thus, Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee might as well be strangers to Hyeonseo; however, the connection implied within North Korean families is enough to obligate them to help her. For Jung-gil and Sang-hee, it makes “no difference” that they haven’t seen Hyeonseo in years: their connection as family is still strong. Like Mr. Ahn, Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee risk getting into serious trouble for aiding a North Korean defector—family or not—but they gladly risk this trouble to help her, which again illustrates the strong connection between even extended family members in North Korean culture.

☝ “You know all the history they teach you at school is a lie?”
This was his opening shot.

He started counting off the fallacies he said I’d been taught. He said that at the end of the Second World War the Japanese had not been defeated by Kim Il-sung’s military genius. They’d been driven out by the Soviet Red Army, which had installed Kim Il-sung in power. There had been no “Revolution.”

I had never before heard my country being criticized. I thought he’d gone crazy.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee, Uncle Jung-gil (speaker), Kim Il-sung/The Great Leader

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis



This quote appears after Hyeonseo defects to China and visits Uncle Jung-gil. It is an especially vivid illustration of the ideological indoctrination of the North Korean people and the power of the North Korean regime to convince its people of lies and alternative history. As a defector, Jung-gil has no reason to be loyal to the Kim regime, and he doesn't pull any punches telling Hyeonseo the truth. The fact that Hyeonseo has never heard anyone criticize the North Korean government reflects the control it has over the people, who are generally too afraid to speak out against the regime and too isolated from the rest of the world to question what they're told.

North Korean children are routinely taught historical lies in an effort to make the regime look good and the rest of world look bad. For instance, they don't learn the fact that the Korean War was started by the North Koreans, not the South Koreans. However, the truth behind the "revolution" and the exploits of Kim Il-sung during the 1940s cuts directly to the heart of the North Korean beliefs about their country and their beloved leader. The people believe that Kim Il-sung practically defeated the Japanese imperialist forces single-handedly, which makes his rule of the country legitimate in their eyes, but Jung-gil reveals here that Kim Il-sung wasn't really a hero after all. For someone who has grown up in North Korea, this is the equivalent to finding out God doesn't exist, and it is an absolute blow to Hyeonseo. In fact, she thinks Uncle Jung-gil is "crazy" for making such unbelievable claims, and her reaction again shows the effectiveness of North Korean indoctrination.

Chapter 33 Quotes

☝ I thought of my uncle's tirade against North Korea when I'd arrived in his apartment in Shenyang over six years ago, and the bizarre truths he'd told me about the Korean War, and the private life of Kim Jong-il. I'd refused to believe him. Ever since, I'd closed my mind to the reality of the regime in North Korea. Unless it directly affected my family, I had never wanted to know. I thought the reason people escaped was because of hunger, or, like me, out of an unexamined sense of curiosity. It had never occurred to me that people would escape for political reasons.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Kim Jong-il/The Dear Leader, Uncle Jung-gil

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears after Hyeonseo sees a news report of North Korean refugees storming the South Korean embassy in China, seeking political asylum. In addition to underscoring how widespread desperation is among North Korean people, this passage also sheds light on the real reason why Hyeonseo defects to China and leaves North Korea. Hyeonseo truly believed that North Korea was the greatest country in the world because, in addition to the ideological indoctrination she experienced, Hyeonseo never personally suffered while living in North Korea.

Hyeonseo's family is of high *songbun* and are privileged by North Korean standards. Plus, Hyeonseo's parents worked hard to ensure that Hyeonseo and her brother always had what they needed. Hyeonseo didn't defect because she was necessarily looking for a better life. In fact, she didn't really mind her life in North Korea; she was simply curious as to how the other half lives. Accordingly, Hyeonseo didn't believe Uncle Jung-gil's claims that the North Korean regime is oppressive and bad, but it is hard not to believe it when she sees it unfolding on the nightly news. This marks the point when Hyeonseo finally begins to believe that the regime is not concerned with the well-being of the North Korean people.

Chapter 41 Quotes

☝ "People may be hungry now," my mother said. Her voice trailed off uncertainly. "But things will get better. We're all waiting for 2012."

I groaned. This date was the centenary of the birth of Kim Il-sung, now less than three years away. For years, Party propaganda had been trumpeting it as the moment when North Korea would achieve its goal of becoming a "strong and prosperous nation."

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee, Mother (speaker), Kim Il-sung/The Great Leader

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Hyeonseo tries to convince her mother to leave North Korea and join her in South Korea. This moment is significant because it further illustrates the oppression of the North Korean people and the brainwashing they suffer



under the ideological indoctrination of the Kim regime. In the late 2000s, North Korea is struck with another famine, much like the famine that struck in the 1990s, and the North Korean people are again suffering, starving, and dying. Yet Hyeonseo's mother and other North Koreans believe things will magically get better on the 100-year anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung, their original dictator and the first ruler of the Kim regime.

Hyeonseo "groans" because she knows that North Korea will never be a "strong and prosperous nation" under a dictatorship. Party propaganda has been "trumpeting" 2012 as the moment North Korea will prosper because the party wants the people to think things will get better and that they won't always suffer. Of course, this isn't true. The regime and the Communist Party have no intention of making North Korea a prosperous place for its citizens; both the regime and the Party are only concerned with making the Kim regime prosperous, not the people of North Korea.

Chapter 47 Quotes

☝☝ The officials in immigration wanted Marlboro Reds, they had told me, the most expensive cigarettes. Once it was plain to them that I was agreeable, and opening a channel to them, their corruption became naked. At every one of my visits they'd ask how much money I had withdrawn from the ATM.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Min-ho, Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the end of Hyeonseo's book, when Mother and Min-ho are arrested as illegal immigrants in Laos, and it is important because it further underscores the oppression of the North Korean people and proves this oppression doesn't end just because one defects and is no longer on North Korean soil. Hyeonseo and her family are in Laos, but the Laotian government proves to be just as corrupt as the North Korean government, and they're vulnerable because of their status as defectors.



The Laotian police extort Hyeonseo's money out of her, and they try to get expensive cigarettes as well. Their "naked" corruption when it is clear she is desperate enough to play their games (she badly wants to get Mother and Min-ho released from custody, which further underscores

Hyeonseo's boundless love for her family) suggests the Laotian police aren't trying to hide their fraud in any way. As North Koreans, Mother and Min-ho have few rights, and the Laotian government gets in line to abuse them as well, which underscores how vulnerable North Koreans are to repeated human rights abuses and discrimination, no matter where they are.

Chapter 48 Quotes

☝☝ I'd seen Korean-Chinese expose North Korean escapees to the police in return for money. I'd known people who'd been trafficked by other humans as if they were livestock. That world was familiar to me. All my life, random acts of kindness had been so rare that they'd stick in my memory, and I'd think: how strange. What Dick had done changed my life. He showed me that there was another world where strangers helped strangers for no other reason than that it is good to do so, and where callousness was unusual, not the norm.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Min-ho, Mother, Dick Stolp

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs after Dick Stolp, a complete stranger, helps Hyeonseo and her family and pays for Mother and Min-ho to be released from police custody in Laos. This happens after the government defrauds Hyeonseo of all her money and leaves her broke and alone in a foreign country. As a North Korean and now an exile, Hyeonseo has seen terrible things. She has witnessed Koreans sell out other Koreans and people being sold into forced and sex work, and she grows up thinking that there isn't any real kindness in the world, especially where strangers are concerned.

Dick Stolp's kindness, however, proves to Hyeonseo that her theory about the rarity of compassion and kindness is wrong. Dick gives Hyeonseo and her family thousands of dollars and helps them simply because he can. Dick doesn't know Hyeonseo or her family, and as a white Westerner from Australia, he certainly has no formal connection to them or to the North Korean people. Dick even helps three random North Koreans who are being held with Mother and Min-ho. His kindness and compassion disproves Hyeonseo's theory on kindness, and it restores her faith in humanity, which, as a North Korean, is severely lacking.

Chapter 53 Quotes

☝☝ Behind the bluster, I sensed fear. Dictatorships may seem strong and unified, but they are always weaker than they appear. They are governed by the whim of one man, who can't draw upon a wealth of discussion and debate, as democracies can, because he rules through terror and the only truth permitted is his own. Even so, I don't think Kim Jong-un's dictatorship is so weak that it will collapse any time soon. Sadly, as the historian Andrei Lankov put it, a regime that's willing to kill as many people as it takes to stay in power tends to stay in power for a very long time.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Kim Jong-un

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs near the end of Hyeonseo's book, when Kim Jong-un, the latest North Korean dictator of the Kim regime, comes into to power in 2011. Hyeonseo's words here underscore the power of the North Korean regime to oppress the people; however, this quote also implies that this power is limited, as Hyeonseo claims all dictatorships are, because they rule through corruption and fear rather than legitimate means. Lee implies that such corruption and fear cannot stand in the long run, even though they might still cause untold pain and destruction along the way.

Andrei Lankov is a Russian scholar and historian, and he is an expert on Korean studies. Born in 1963 in Leningrad of the former Soviet Union, Lankov grew up during the Cold War, behind the Iron Curtain and at the mercy of the communist Soviet Union. Presumably, his experiences were not far off from Hyeonseo's experiences in North Korea in the 1980s and '90s. The power of the North Korean regime, much like the power of the former Soviet Union, is rooted in the regime's cruelty and disregard for the basic human rights of its citizens. Hyeonseo's reference to Lankov's work indicates that the future still looks dark for North Korean people as long as Kim Jong-un is in power.

Epilogue Quotes

☝☝ I know that the mask may never fully come off. The smallest thing occasionally sends me back into a steel-plated survival mode, or I may ice over when people expect me to be open. In one edition of the popular South Korean defectors' show, each woman's story was spoken through floods of tears. But not mine.

Related Characters: Hyeonseo Lee (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the very end of Hyeonseo's book, and it is significant because it highlights Hyeonseo's strength and implies she won't be broken down by the cruelty and oppression of the North Korean regime. Instead, Hyeonseo uses this ill treatment as a reason to become stronger, and a reason to fight and advocate for the basic human rights of those still stuck in North Korea being abused, neglected, and mistreated by the continued oppression of the Kim regime. Hyeonseo says earlier in the book that one of the great tragedies of communism and the oppression of North Korean people is that people wear masks, which hides their true feelings and personalities. Hyeonseo's mother wears such a metaphorical mask, and now Hyeonseo does, too.

The fact that Hyeonseo's "mask" will likely never come off reflects the long-term trauma and lasting consequences of living under such continued and severe oppression. Hyeonseo learned long ago not to let people in and not to let them know her true identity, and she can't simply let down this guard just because she has defected and obtained South Korean citizenship and freedom. She has a hard time letting people in, hence her tendency to "ice over" when people expect her to be warm and "open." Such oppression and human rights abuses as those experienced by the North Koreans—especially the women, Hyeonseo implies—have real and lasting effects that follow people throughout their lives.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION: 13 FEBRUARY 2013

In Long Beach, California, Hyeonseo Lee readies herself to go onstage. Hyeonseo is not the name she was born with, but it is the name she gave herself after reaching freedom. Hyeon is Korean for sunshine, and Seo means good. She has selected this name specifically to keep herself in “light and warmth.” The stage is big, and a voice asks if she is ready to go on. She walks onto the stage to sounds of clapping and is suddenly frightened. This is the first time Hyeonseo will tell her story in English.

Hyeonseo feels tears well in her eyes. Her story is not unique for many North Koreans, but for those in the West, it is hard to believe that a country like North Korea exists. Still, Hyeonseo loves and misses her country. She misses the snowy mountain landscape and the smell of coal and kerosene. Leaving North Korea is like entering into another universe—and she can never go back. As a North Korean defector, Hyeonseo is now an exile. She has tried to fit in to South Korean society, but she doesn’t completely accept South Korean as her identity. It is easier to just say she is Korean, but a single unified Korea doesn’t exist. North Korea is still Hyeonseo’s country, and this is her story.

Hyeonseo clearly has a very important story to tell if she is telling it from a stage to a roomful of people. The meaning of her name and her attempt to keep herself in “light and warmth” speaks to the cold darkness of North Korea, Hyeonseo’s home country, a place where electricity and heating fuel are sparse.



After the Cold War in 1948, the Soviet Union and the U.S. divided Korea into two separate states—the communist state of North Korea and the anti-communist state of South Korea. Hyeonseo’s love for North Korea, despite the awful things that have occurred there, is a testament to the connection people feel to their home countries and the mark nationality leaves on one’s core identity. Even though Hyeonseo can never return to North Korea, she still considers herself a North Korean—that connection is not severed when she defects.



PROLOGUE

Hyeonseo wakes to the smell of fire and the sound of Mother crying. Father yanks Hyeonseo to her feet, urging her to run. Outside with her mother and her brother, Min-ho, Hyeonseo is shocked to see her father run back inside the burning house. The roof is beginning to collapse, and after what seems like minutes, Hyeonseo’s father emerges carrying two **portraits**. He hasn’t saved their possessions, heirlooms, or money—just the portraits.

The portraits, which Lee later confirms are of the Great Leaders, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, are symbolic of the power of the Kim regime in North Korea. Upon discovering his house is on fire, the portraits are the first and only thing Father saves after ensuring his family’s safety. The regime has each citizen conditioned for this kind of absolute loyalty.



Father received some aviation fuel from some soldiers as a bribe, and when Mother transferred it into another container, she splashed it on the cooking coals. The fire was nearly instant, and now Hyeonseo watches as the house collapses. Neither her mother nor her father seems particularly upset. Their home is just like other North Korean homes: small, only two rooms, and full of state-issue furniture. Hyeonseo's parents understand that homes and countries don't matter. All that matters is family and togetherness. The street watches as Hyeonseo's family stands outside their burning house, the two **portraits** safely tucked under her father's arm. Saving the portraits should be enough to gain him official favor, but he is already under surveillance.

The meager home of Hyeonseo and her family reflects the oppression of the North Korean regime. Citizens are supplied with the bare necessities only—and sometimes not even the necessities are provided—and anything extra, including heating fuel, must be obtained through illegal bribes. This passage also reflects the importance of family. Undoubtedly, losing everything in a fire is devastating, but Hyeonseo's parents care only about each other and their children—and the portraits, of course, since taking care of them is necessary for staying safe under the Kim regime. The fact that Hyeonseo's father is already under surveillance foreshadows the political trouble later in the book.



CHAPTER 1: A TRAIN THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS

It is the summer of 1977, and Mother boards a train to Pyongyang. Her brother lives there, and she has received official permission to visit him. The train is full of young military officers, loudly laughing and talking, and they convince the passengers to play word and dice games. Mother loses her round, and the soldiers tell her she must sing. The train falls silent. Mother is just 22 years old and very beautiful. She sings a popular song from a North Korean movie, and when she is done, the train erupts in applause.

This passage speaks to the oppression of North Koreans. Mother isn't free to visit her brother in the city anytime she likes; she must first obtain permission from the government via a travel permit. Travel permits are only valid for a very short window of time, and anyone caught travelling without a permit is punished severely by the regime.



A man—Hyeonseo's future father—approaches Mother and asks her name. He is from Hyesan, just like Mother, but has spent many years in Pyongyang. He asks if he may write her a letter, and mother agrees, giving him her address in Hyesan. They reach Pyongyang, and afterward, mother can barely recall her time there. Her thoughts are full of nothing but the man from the train. Back in Hyesan, Mother waits for Father's letter but nothing comes. Then, one evening six months later, there is a knock on her door.

The story of Mother and Father reinforces the importance of family in North Korea, but it also reflects the repression of North Korean citizens. Mother and Father are deeply in love, but North Korean social norms dictate that they must not openly display their feelings.



The next year passes quickly, much like a dream, and Mother and Father quickly fall in love. Father is still stationed in Pyongyang, and they write letters each week and meet when they can. It is the height of the Cold War, but North Korea is in the middle of its best years. South Korea—North Korea's enemy—is in disorder, and the Americans have just lost a crushing war in Vietnam. Communism is on the rise, and it seems that history is on North Korea's side.

History appears to be on North Korea's side because is the information citizens get has been altered for the benefit of the North Korean regime. South Korea is not in disorder, but the North Korean citizens are told this by their government. North and South Korea have been in a state of war since their country was divided in 1948, and the North Korean government lies about the state of South Korea to make it seem less appealing to potential North Korean defectors.



On a trip to Hyesan, Father asks Mother to marry him, and she happily accepts. Both families have a good *songbun*, the North Korean caste system, which is broken into three broad categories and holds 51 degrees of status. No one is told their *songbun* exactly, but most people seem to know anyway. Rising in *songbun* is nearly impossible, but falling is easy, and one's rank within the system decides their life and job. Mother's family has a very good *songbun*, and father's is good as well, secured with his family's bravery during World War II.

Grandmother is a dedicated communist, and she secured her own family's *songbun* when she hid the family's Communist Party membership cards from American soldiers during the Korean War. Many others destroyed their cards, but Grandmother hid them in the chimney and won official favor. Now, she wears the card on a string around her neck. Grandmother is unimpressed with Father's position in the air force, and fearing for her family's *songbun*, she refuses to allow her daughter to marry such a man. Grandmother meets another man—an official from the National Trading Company—through a friend in Pyongyang and arranges Mother's marriage to him instead.

Mother is devastated and even suffers a breakdown, but in the spring of 1979, she marries the man from Pyongyang as Grandmother arranged. They marry in Pyongyang and take customary photos at the foot of the bronze Kim Il-sung statue on Mansu Hill, but no one smiles. Hyeonseo is born in January of 1980 and is given the name Kim Ji-hae. Mother leaves before the end of the year and divorces the man. Grandmother insists she put Hyeonseo up for adoption, but mother adamantly refuses. She travels to the military base in Pyongyang and is reunited with Father, who immediately accepts the infant as his own. Grandmother warns them that when a couple loves each other too deeply, one of them will die young.

This time, it is Father's family who objects to the marriage because Mother has another man's child, but Father insists. His family reluctantly agrees, and Hyeonseo is given a new name: Park Min-young. The wedding is small, and Father's family is obviously unhappy. Hyeonseo doesn't discover the truth of her parentage until years later in elementary school, and a large part of her wishes she never did. Such a discovery has devastating consequences—for both Hyeonseo and her father.

High songbun is usually achieved through service to the regime, and it also reflects the power of the government to oppress the people. If the people are not loyal or beneficial to the government in some way, they are given low songbun status and denied essentials, like food, shelter, and clothing. This ensures that people are always striving to be of service and remain loyal to the regime.



Songbun status is often shared by extended family members—when one family member falls in songbun, they all do—which reflects the importance of family in North Korea. Grandmother's high songbun is safe if Mother marries a rich man from Pyongyang. North Korea is officially a communist state, and during the Korean War, mass killings of communists and communist sympathizers was perpetrated, by both the South Koreans and American troops.



Grandmother's warning that one of them will die young hints at tragedy later in the book. The Grand Monument on Mansu Hill includes 229 bronze statues total, and they tell the story of the Korean people, especially of the Great Leaders, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. The fact that North Koreans typically take their wedding pictures at the foot of the 66-foot tall statue of Kim Il-sung reflects the loyalty and worship that is expected of the North Korean people by the regime.



Hyeonseo's repeated name changes contribute greatly to her conflicted identity; however, the fact that Mother must change Hyeonseo's name after she marries Father again underscores the importance of family in the book. Hyeonseo's name must match that of her family, and she is not permitted to keep another man's name, even though he is her biological father.



CHAPTER 2: THE CITY AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

For the first four years of Hyeonseo's life, her family lives in Hyesan, which is part of the Ryanggang Province. It is the highest part of the Korean Peninsula, where the mountains are magnificent and the winters cold. During the colonial period of 1910-1945, the Japanese bought railroads and lumber mills in Hyesan, and the city was the site of the revolution near Mount Paektu. Hyesan is also the site of Baekam Country, where families are sent into exile after falling out of favor with the regime.

Mother is one of eight siblings, and they each have very different careers. Uncle Money is a successful executive at a trading company in Pyongyang, but Uncle Poor fell in *songbun* after marrying a woman from a collective farm. Uncle Poor is a talented painter and could paint the Leaders, but since falling in *songbun*, he paints only propaganda placards. Uncle Cinema runs a local movie theater, and Uncle Opium is a drug dealer, protected from investigation by his high *songbun*. The oldest sister, Aunt Old, is a lonely and sad woman, and the youngest is Aunt Tall. The most beautiful is Aunt Pretty, who longs to be a figure skater, but like Mother, she has a real knack for business.

Mother and Aunt Pretty make quite a bit of money trading in the Chinese goods coming over the Yalu River, even though making money in North Korea is considered unladylike. Mother is strict, with very high standards, and she is neat and tidy in a way that borders on obsessive. She is always dressed fashionably and wouldn't dream of leaving the house in old or messy clothes. Hyeonseo assumes she will always live in Hyesan, until she is told before starting kindergarten that Father has received a promotion. They are moving to Anju, a city on North Korea's west coast.

Korea was occupied by Japan from 1910 until 1945. Under Japanese power, Korean culture and language were suppressed, and Korean resistance grew. Near the end of the occupation, Kim Il-sung led a revolutionary movement of guerillas through Mount Paektu, which helped to free the North Korean people from Japanese rule.



*Mother's family is proof of the difference good *songbun* can make for North Korean citizens. While Hyeonseo claims that *songbun* affects the entire family, Hyeonseo and the others in her family don't seem to be brought down by Uncle Poor's low *songbun*. The fact that the regime won't let an artist of low *songbun* paint their portraits regardless of talent again reflects the oppressive nature of the North Korean regime and the importance of status in society and within families.*



Mother and Aunt Pretty's jobs as illegal smugglers also reflect the oppression of North Korean citizens. North Koreans are not permitted to own foreign goods—like clothes or electronics from China or America—and one can only obtain such things through illegal smuggling. Despite its illegality, the smuggling of illegal goods is quite common in North Korea, which speaks to how little North Koreans are actually provided for by their dictatorial government.



CHAPTER 3: THE EYES ON THE WALL

Hyeonseo's family arrives in Anju in 1984. The city's main industry is coal mining, and it is terribly polluted and frequently floods during the rainy season. There are only a few Soviet-style buildings in town, along with the requisite Kim Il-sung statue. Mother is distraught by this new city. She is used to privilege, but their life is still good. Father's job allows them fish or meat with most meals—something most North Koreans only eat on the birthdays of the Leaders, when rations are increased.

The birthdays of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and now, Kim Jong-un, are celebrated as national holidays in North Korea. Children are given presents and candy, and elaborate meals are eaten throughout the country. All major North Korean cities—and many smaller villages, for that matter—have statues of the Great Leaders, which again reflects the power of the Kim regime in North Korea.



Hyeonseo's family lives on the military base, and in the middle of their new house is a wall-mounted speaker, which can't be turned off or down. The speaker is used to broadcast announcements from the *banjang*, the head of the neighborhood unit. *Banjangs* are usually middle-aged women, who deliver warnings and spy on people for the government. On the day Hyeonseo's family moves in, the *banjang* delivers them two **portraits** of the Leaders. The portraits are of the Great Leader, Kim Il-sung, and his son, the Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il.

The **portraits** must hang in all North Korean homes, and each home is issued a special white cloth with which to clean them. The cloth cannot be used to clean anything else, and the portraits must hang at the highest point in the home. Once a month, government officials wearing white gloves come to inspect the portraits and ensure they are clean and in compliance. Anyone found with dusty or crooked portraits is punished. Stories of heroic acts of portrait-saving are popular in North Korea, and every year on the birthdays of the Leaders, everyone lines up before the portraits and takes a long, deep bow.

One week after arriving in Anju, Mother is stopped in town by volunteers wearing red armbands, who wander the city looking for anyone violating social laws—like women wearing foreign perfume or jewelry (signs of “capitalist decadence”), or those neglecting to wear the pins of the Great Leaders over their hearts. On this day, mother is wearing trousers, not a skirt, which is considered unladylike and enough to get the attention of the volunteers. She bribes them and they let her go.

Life is different on the military base, but Hyeonseo's family slowly grows used to life there. Mother keeps her distance from most people. One of the downsides of life in North Korea is that people wear “masks,” and mother's hides a fun and compassionate woman. Hyeonseo begins kindergarten, which marks the point from which she no longer belongs to her parents, but to the state.

The banjang and the wall-mounted speaker reflect the oppression of the people by the Kim regime. The watchful eye of the powerful regime can't be escaped, not even in remote cities and villages. The idea of a speaker that screeches out warnings and intimidation invading one's home and family life is unthinkable in other countries, but to North Koreans, it is completely normal.



Again, the portraits reflect the power of the Kim regime and the hold the regime has on the people to force their loyalty and respect. The idea of every home having the portraits and the image of millions of people bowing before them is a particularly strong image. Furthermore, the white-gloved officials tasked with ensuring compliance reflect the self-importance of the regime. The regime is so determined to be worshipped, they employ hundreds of men just to ensure that they are.



*This incident, too, demonstrates the power of the regime. The regime is so powerful that citizens actually volunteer to spy on each other, and, presumably, gain favor with the state and increase their *songbun*. It doesn't take much to gain the volunteers' attention, obviously, especially if one's actions violate communist norms. Women like Mother and Hyeonseo are doubly oppressed, as they are punished for violating gender norms as well.*



Ideological indoctrination begins in kindergarten, which begins to effectively condition North Korean citizens to have and display absolute loyalty to the state and the Kim regime. Mother's “mask” and hidden compassion underscore Lee's argument that kindness often seems like a rarity in North Korea, even though it may be hiding under the surface.



CHAPTER 4: THE LADY IN BLACK

Hyeonseo's school is kept warm with a large wood-burning stove, and the walls are adorned with paintings of a North Korean soldier stabbing a South Korean, an American, and a Japanese soldier with his bayonet. Ideological indoctrination begins immediately, and the children are told stories of Kim Il-sung's heroics during the period of Japanese colonial rule. They are also told of Kim Jong-il's birth, which was foretold by the heavens in the form of a rainbow over Mount Paektu.

Hyeonseo's class sings songs about unifying Korea, and they are taught that South Korean children live in hovels, wear rags, and scavenge for food in the garbage. They are taught that American soldiers use South Korean children for target practice and that North Korea is the greatest country in the world. No one ever criticizes the school, and there are informers everywhere. Informers report on others to the Ministry of State Security, the Bowibu, or secret police. Citizens freely inform on each other, so there is no need for the Bowibu to spy. The secret police have little interest in crimes such as theft or corruption and are only interested in political disloyalty, for which entire families are known to disappear.

During a visit back to Hyesan, Uncle Opium tells Hyeonseo a story about the lady in black, who comes down from the sky each time it rains. If you grab the lady's skirt, Uncle Opium says, she will take you back with her. Opium is illegal in North Korea, but it isn't hard to come by. Painkillers and other pharmaceuticals are rare, so opium is often used for its medicinal qualities. A gold brick sits on the table next to Uncle Opium, along with a lump that looks like tar. Uncle Opium tells Hyeonseo to take a bit on the end of her pencil and eat it. She does, and even though she is sick with a cold, Hyeonseo feels instantly better.

CHAPTER 5: THE MAN BENEATH THE BRIDGE

When Hyeonseo is seven years old, she sees a man hanging by his neck under a bridge. His face is covered by a sack, and his hands are tied behind his back. There are several hangings over the next few days, and Mother even knows one of the women. The woman is suspected of seducing a state official to steal money, and she is immediately sentenced to death at her trial, which is little more than an official accusation. The woman is tied to a pole in the middle of town, and after the soldiers push her from the platform, she twitches and shakes before falling limp. Mother is pregnant with Min-ho and greatly upset by the hangings. She hates living in Anju and is relieved when Father is relocated to Hamhung.

South Korea is North Korea's mortal enemy; however, America caused much destruction to North Korea during the Korean War, and the Japanese did the same during the colonial period, so they are despised nearly as much as South Korea. Children are taught early to hate all three countries.



When Korea was divided in 1948, both the North and the South declared themselves the only true Korea and the only legitimate government. Many Koreans, both North and South, wish for the countries to reunite, but as neither side will concede that the other is legitimate, that seems unlikely to happen. North Korean children are taught negative things about Americans and South Koreans because it ensures they learn to hate them, but it also keeps North Koreans from defecting. No one will want to go South if they think they will have to live in a shack and eat trash.



The story of the lady in black is obviously a metaphor for opium and the sensation of flying when one is high, but more importantly, the need for the opium in the first place and the scarcity of more appropriate and safe medications further illustrates the oppression of the North Korean people. Ideally, if the government made health care and medication accessible and affordable, people wouldn't have to turn to opium and other illegal drugs.



Such public executions again demonstrate the cruelty and oppression of the Kim regime. Not only are citizens executed on a whim for even minor offenses, they are executed in the middle of town before a crowd and left hanging as an intimidation tactic. Executions are not done quietly and in private; they are terribly public, and they serve as a warning to North Koreans (even small children) to stay in line and remain loyal to the state, or suffer the very severe consequences.



After leaving Anju, Hyeonseo's family first stops in Hyesan before moving to Hamhung. Mother wants Min-ho to be born in Hyesan, so his birth certificate will be registered in the same city as the rest of the family. Father's family asks to meet Min-ho before they move to Hamhung, and when they do, they treat the young boy with obvious respect. It seems as if they like Min-ho better than Hyeonseo, and she assumes it is because he is a boy. Mother, however, knows Father's family will always treat her children with less respect than they would if she hadn't already had a child when they married.

Of course, Hyeonseo has no idea that she isn't her father's biological daughter, which is why Father's parents treat Min-ho so much better than they do Hyeonseo. Likely, the grandparents view Hyeonseo and the truth of her parentage as scandalous and a threat to their songbun and their status in society.



CHAPTER 6: THE RED SHOES

Compared to Anju, Hamhung is a big city with more cars and more air pollution. The words and likeness of the Great Leader are everywhere on murals and propaganda placards. Hyeonseo's family is given an apartment in a large complex, and Mother immediately takes to wallpapering the walls and tiling the bathroom. The government is supposed to provide for everyone's needs, but the communist system often breaks down, and the people must rely on bribery and unofficial markets to get by.

Again, the repression of the North Korean people is clear. Their living quarters are barely adequate (even though Mother works hard to make it nice, which reflects her inner goodness and love for her family), and vital supplies are often never delivered. It is easier to control poor and hungry people, and that is exactly how the regime keeps the North Koreans subservient.



On Sundays, Hyeonseo plays with the other neighborhood children. The other six days a week, however, are spent in school and in other official activities, like "study groups" or "discussions," in which the speeches of the Great Leader and the Dear Leader are memorized. This is the "communist way," and it ensures that no one ever strays from the accepted way of life. Such groups and discussions also create a system of surveillance, in which any deviation is reported to the authorities at once.

North Koreans don't actually "study" or "discuss" anything at official activities; they are simply an excuse to force the people to worship the Kim regime. Ironically, while this is seen as the "communist way," it has nothing to do with economics or ensuring the prosperity of the collective. Such forced worship only serves a select few, at the expense of the many.



Beginning school in Hamhung is difficult for Hyeonseo. The children are "rough" and not like those in Anju or Hyesan. During this time, Hyeonseo first learns about "life purification time," a system of self-criticism practiced in schools, in which each student stands up, accuses someone of something, and then confesses something. No one is exempt. Most of the time, Hyeonseo and a friend plan ahead to accuse each other of some low-level offense, like neglecting their studies, but the accusations can be dangerous. Once, a boy in Hyeonseo's class accused another boy of having too many luxuries and asked where his family got the money to buy such things. The teacher reported the accusation to the Bowibu, and three generations of the boy's family were arrested as traitors.

This passage reflects the power of the secret police and their ability to punish those they consider disloyal to the regime. It seems unbelievable that three generations of people—which likely includes tens of people or more—can be arrested as traitors simply for having too many material possessions. Many families obtain illegal extras through trading and bribes, much like Hyeonseo's family does, which underscores just how easy it is to gain the negative attention of the Bowibu and get sent to a collective farm or gulag in the north mountains.



When Hyeonseo turns nine, she joins the Young Pioneer Corps, North Korea's communist youth movement. It is the proudest moment in the life of a young North Korean, and while it is compulsory between the ages of nine and 14, not all children are accepted to the program at the same age. Before Hyeonseo's ceremony, Mother buys her a pair of red Mary Jane dress shoes from the dollar store in town. The shoes are a perfect match to the red cotton scarf given at the ceremony, along with the small Pioneer badge that must be pinned to everyone's blouse. Hyeonseo is very excited the morning of the ceremony, and as she walks up the official stage to receive her scarf and badge, she is full of pride in her new red shoes.

One of Hyeonseo's friends is not selected to complete the Young Pioneer Corps program with her, and after the girl misses a few days of school, the teacher decides the class should go to the girl's house to check on her. The girl's house is in a run-down part of town, and it smells like raw sewage. Hyeonseo can't believe her eyes; she thought the government provided for everyone. School is free in North Korea, but parents are expected to make donations. The girl's parents cannot afford their donations, so she has been missing more and more school. The teacher, who often criticizes those students whose parents don't make their donations, reminds the girl of the importance of school and leaves.

In 1990, Father announces they will be moving back to Hyesan. Everyone is very excited, and Mother, Hyeonseo, and Min-ho board a train back to Hyesan. No one is allowed to travel in North Korea without an ID passbook and a permit that is valid for only four days. A ticket inspector examines Mother's passbook, and, after informing her that it is expired, orders them to wait on the platform and walks away.

Mother is obviously distraught by her expired passbook, and a kind man stops to ask what is wrong. She explains, and he leaves, immediately returning again with her passbook. He tells Mother to board the train with Hyeonseo and Min-ho and hide. They do, and it isn't long before the inspector gets on the train looking for them. The other passengers tell the inspector that the woman and her children went in the opposite direction, and the inspector goes off in search of them. After a few moments, the train begins to move. They are safe. Such kindness is rare in North Korea—those who put others before themselves are often the first to die.

Such pride is considered taboo in a communist country like North Korea, as is wasting money on such extravagances as red shoes. Hyeonseo's red shoes are incredibly dangerous—they draw attention to her and speak of all the little extras Mother and Father make sure Hyeonseo and Min-ho have. Such things could draw questions from the Bowibu, who clearly have the power to punish citizens even if they only suspect they have behaved in an illegal or disloyal way. However, this scene also illustrates how much Mother loves her family—she wants to give them everything she can.



This event vividly demonstrates the importance of one's songbun, which has three broad categories and 51 specific variations. Compared to her friend, Hyeonseo lives quite a privileged life. This also reflects the power of the North Korean regime and their ability to make the people pay and force their loyalty. Hyeonseo's friend can't go to school because her parents don't have any money, and the friend can never hope to earn any money if she doesn't finish school, which shows the vicious circle of oppression in North Korea.



Mother will likely be punished for traveling without valid permission, which again reflects the repression of the North Korean people. North Koreans aren't permitted to freely travel about the country; they must obtain permission and are only allowed to travel for a short window of time.



North Koreans are too busy making sure they survive, along with their families, which is why kindness is rare there. The man and the entire train could be punished for helping Mother evade the ticket inspector and break the law, which would very likely be considered disloyalty to the state and the Kim regime. However, the fact that Mother, Min-ho, and Hyeonseo encounter such kindness suggests that it isn't as rare as they may think; it's just not always obvious under such oppressive conditions.



CHAPTER 7: BOOMTOWN

Hyeonseo's family's new home in Hyesan is another military-issued apartment, but it is nice by North Korean standards, and Mother immediately begins papering the walls and replacing the furniture. Illicit trade from China—including Western clothing and Japanese electronics—has grown in the past few years, and mother is excited to open her trade again. Goods come over the shallow sections of river, or over the Changbai-Hyesan International Bridge, known as the Friendship Bridge to the locals. Restaurants selling hot and cold noodles are always packed, and the state beauty parlor is equally busy. Women frequently perm their hair; however, coloring or dying one's hair is prohibited.

After a couple of years, Mother takes Hyeonseo to a fortune-teller in the village of Daeoh-cheon. North Korea is an atheist state (citizens are only allowed to worship the Great Leader and the Dear Leader), and anyone caught with a bible is sent to prison for life. Fortune-tellers are considered much like religion, even though Kim Jong-il himself is known to frequent them. Mother asks the fortune-teller the best ways to retrieve her goods without getting caught, and then she introduces Hyeonseo. The fortune-teller says Hyeonseo has a future in music and will “eat foreign rice.”

Mother is disappointed as they leave. She believes eating “foreign rice” means Hyeonseo will live abroad, and she doubts the fortune-teller's skills since North Koreans aren't permitted to live abroad. Hyeonseo is intrigued. She has recently taken up the accordion, a popular instrument in North Korea, and she wonders if the fortune-teller's words mean she will become a professional accordionist and marry someone from another province. Maybe Hyeonseo will live in Pyongyang when she grows up, which would be an absolute dream come true.

CHAPTER 8: THE SECRET PHOTOGRAPH

A few months later, Mother takes Hyeonseo and Min-ho to Grandmother's house for the day. Grandmother is always full of stories, and for reasons Hyeonseo will never understand, Grandmother decides on this day to tell Hyeonseo the true story about her parentage. Hyeonseo's name is not really her name, Grandmother says, and her father is not really her father. Grandmother goes to the bedroom and retrieves an old envelope and tells Hyeonseo to open it. Inside is a picture of Mother and a man—not Father—on their wedding day.

Communism usually connotes an image of forced uniformity and a strike against individualism, but even so, it seems ridiculous that the state should care if a woman dyes her hair. Furthermore, it is difficult to understand how dying one's hair can be considered capitalist decadence while a perm is not, but this still reflects the oppression of the North Korean people. They are controlled with arbitrary rules and forced to turn to illegal trade.



Again, the information revealed here highlights the oppression of the North Korean people and the self-importance of the Kim regime. Citizens aren't allowed to practice organized religion because Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung won't allow the North Korean people to worship any image that isn't them. The fact that Kim Jong-il prohibits fortune-tellers but visits one himself also reflects the hypocrisy of the regime.



The mention of eating “foreign rice” hints at Hyeonseo's later defection to China, and then to South Korea; however, this also further underscores the repression of the people and the power of the regime. North Korea is a closed state, meaning anyone leaving or entering the country is strictly controlled by the government. Only those of the absolute highest songbun are permitted to leave the country, and even then, legal emigration is rare.



Grandmother's story marks the beginning of Hyeonseo's identity issues. From the moment she discovers the truth of her biological father, Hyeonseo isn't sure who she really is. Hyeonseo can't even rely on something as simple as her name describing who she is, a theme that is reflected in the book's title. This moment also reflects the importance of family. Hyeonseo's father is key to her sense of family, which is now ruined in a way.



Back at home, Hyeonseo is quiet. She stares at Min-ho—her half-brother—and feels her emotions change. She begins to pick fights with him and treat him badly, and at dinner as everyone chats, Hyeonseo refuses to talk. Father asks her what is wrong, but Hyeonseo refuses to answer and won't look at him. He is not *really* her father, so she begins to avoid him.

Again, Hyeonseo is obviously hurt and confused regarding the truth about her identity. She has known nothing but her family her entire life, and now she learns that her brother is only her half-brother and her father is biologically unrelated to her.



CHAPTER 9: TO BE A GOOD COMMUNIST

Hyeonseo begins secondary school in 1992, where she studies Korean, math, music, art, and “communist ethics,” a mixture of North Korean nationalism and Confucian traditions. Father is adamant Hyeonseo learn Chinese characters, a skill that will one day save her life. The most important lessons in school are those about the Great Leader and the Dear Leader, and math books are full of questions like: “In one battle of the Great Fatherland Liberation War, 3 brave uncles of the Korean People’s Army wiped out 30 American imperialist bastards. What was the ratio of the soldiers who fought?”

The fact that the knowledge of Chinese characters will one day save Hyeonseo’s life again suggests that she will one day live abroad and foreshadows her future defection to China. The obvious ideological indoctrination and the hate for America that is instilled in North Korean schoolchildren again reflects the power of the regime and the oppression of the people. The people are not permitted their own informed opinions; they are told what to believe by the state, through textbooks and questions such as this.



Hyeonseo’s greatest escape from school is through books. Her favorite is *The Count of Monte Cristo*, even though most of the pages are glued together by the censor. One evening, during Hyeonseo’s second year at secondary school, Mother makes a special dinner to celebrate Father’s new job. He has left the military, and this marks the first time Hyeonseo has ever seen him out of uniform. Over dinner, Hyeonseo asks her father about the new job, even though she isn’t really interested. She barely talks to him anymore, and he is guarded and secretive about his new position.

The fact that Father is guarded and secretive about his new job suggests that it might be illegal, or at the very least, frowned upon by the regime. Censorship in North Korea is among the strictest in the world. There is no free press, and all books and outside materials are meticulously combed through by censors. This shows how the people of North Korea are oppressed intellectually as well as materially, through the restrictions placed on free thought and ideas.



Father begins to travel to China on business, often staying away days at a time. Two months later, Hyeonseo goes to bed early only to wake to the fire from the aviation fuel mishap. All her books and her accordion are destroyed in the fire, including something else so illegal, it could have landed her entire family in a prison camp.

While Lee doesn’t reveal exactly what illegal contraband she is hiding, it has the potential to get her entire family in trouble. Entire families are often punished for an individual’s offenses, which further underscores both how oppressive North Korea is and how crucial the concept of family is for people there.



CHAPTER 10: “ROCKY ISLAND”

Hyeonseo befriends the daughter of the chief of police, who just happens to know where they can get some illegal South Korean pop music. Hyeonseo’s group of friends begins listening to the music at each other’s houses when no one is home, and they dance around and laugh. Hyeonseo’s favorite is a song called “Rocky Island” by Kim Weon-joong. South Korean music is nothing like North Korean music, which is all about the Great Leader and the Dear Leader.

Even North Korean music is geared towards ideological indoctrination and the conditioning of the North Korean people to be loyal to the state and worship the Kim regime. The fact that young people aren’t permitted to listen to specific kinds of music again reflects the repression of the people, and the fact that it is the police chief’s daughter who breaks the law again underscores the hypocrisy of the state.



Soon, Hyeonseo knows all the South Korean songs she can get her hands on by heart, and she even teaches herself to quietly play them on her accordion. All the records are lost in the fire, but for the first time, Hyeonseo is aware of life outside of North Korea. Her family moves to their new house, a small three-room square near the Yalu River, and Hyeonseo believes she can throw a stone over the river, straight into China.

This references the fire that Lee writes about in the book's prologue and in the previous chapter. Hyeonseo's obsession with the South Korean music and her gazing across the river to China suggest that she is growing disillusioned with her repressed existence in North Korea.



CHAPTER 11: "THE HOUSE IS CURSED"

The placement of the new home on the river is perfect for Mother's illicit trade and smuggling operation, and she can easily receive goods and immediately shuffle them inside, out of sight of the Bowibu. She wastes little time getting to know the neighbors, who tell her that the house is cursed. Mother is superstitious, and no matter what Hyeonseo says, she won't give up her belief that the house really is cursed. In fact, mother's belief is so strong that Hyeonseo begins to believe herself. Still, Mother takes to wallpapering and decorating the house as usual, and she even buys a small color television as a sign of social status.

Again, Mother goes to great lengths to ensure that her family has the best living conditions possible, which illustrates Mother's love for her family and the importance family holds in all of their lives. This also speaks to Mother's character—she is tough and brave, and she breaks the law right under the noses of the Bowibu just to ensure her family has a good life. Likely, if mother is caught smuggling illegal goods, she will be imprisoned for life or executed.



Korean Central Television consists of one station, which shows endless footage of the Great Leader and the Dear Leader visiting schools and factories. Watching foreign television stations is illegal and considered a serious offense. This new area in Hyesan is known to be politically "sensitive," and as such, the Bowibu watch closely for any signs of disloyalty. In November, just as the snow begins to fall, Father returns home from one of his trips to China. He often brings back small luxuries, like toilet paper or fruit, but this time, he is carrying a huge package. Inside is a Game Boy video game for Min-ho and a doll for Hyeonseo. The doll is large and has a Western face, and even though Hyeonseo is a bit old for it, she knows it is her father's way to reconnect with her. It is the last gift he will ever give her.

Since the doll is the last gift Father ever gives Hyeonseo, the reader can infer that something terrible is going to happen. Likely, Hyesan is considered politically "sensitive" because of its location on the river and the obvious ease with which people can move foreign goods or escape across the river into China. The Korean Central Television station provides another example of how the regime uses its power to control what its people think and experience. Just like with the censored books, television is considered another source of outside ideas and independent thought, so it is very tightly controlled.



CHAPTER 12: TRAGEDY AT THE BRIDGE

January 1994, when Hyeonseo turns 14, is a tragic year that begins terribly. Hyeonseo's teachers have long since noticed that she rarely wears the school uniform, but Mother's donations generally keep them quiet. On the day of Hyeonseo's birthday, however, she arrives at school with a brand new perm in her hair and a pink Chinese jacket with matching boots. The boots are too far for her teacher, who immediately asks why she is wearing them.

Again, Hyeonseo's clothes and the extras provided by Mother and Father are seriously dangerous in North Korea. The teacher could easily report Hyeonseo's fancy foreign clothes to the Bowibu, which would open Hyeonseo's family up to investigation and potential punishment.



The teacher asks Hyeonseo where her uniform is, and Hyeonseo tells the teacher that if her mother doesn't have a problem with her clothing, then neither should the teacher. The teacher calls Hyeonseo a "rotten capitalist" and slaps her across the face. Hyeonseo runs all the way home in tears, wanting her father for the first time in years. Of course, Father isn't home. His business trips to China have become more frequent, and when he is home, he seems tired and preoccupied. Mother says Father doesn't sleep well anymore and is worried he is being watched.

Hyeonseo knows that her obsession with perming her hair and wearing Chinese clothing is due in part to her growing disillusionment with the "organizational life" of North Korea. She is no longer a Pioneer and is now expected to join the Socialist Youth League, which involves military training and more intense ideological indoctrination. In the spring, the Socialist Youth League takes the compulsory pilgrimage to the sacred sites of Mount Paektu, where Kim Il-sung fought the Japanese in the 1930s and 40s, but Hyeonseo can barely pretend to be interested.

Hyeonseo's relationship with Min-ho continues to suffer, and she suspects that he has been sneaking across the river into China. A few days after the pilgrimage to Mount Paektu, Hyeonseo arrives home to find her mother anxiously pacing the house. Father is due back from China by now, but he is unexpectedly late. By the third day, there is still no sign of him, and Mother becomes inconsolable. Days later, a work colleague of Father's stops by the house and informs them that Father was arrested four days ago crossing the Friendship Bridge back into North Korea.

CHAPTER 13: SUNLIGHT ON DARK WATER

Apparently, a group of officers from the Military Security Command, a form of secret police concerned only with the military, were waiting for Father when he crossed the Friendship Bridge back into North Korea. Hyeonseo and her family hear nothing of Father's whereabouts for 10 days and are told only that an investigation is ongoing into his business conduct. During this time, Mother is tearful and sad, and she tells Hyeonseo a story about Aunt Old and her children, which Hyeonseo has never heard before.

Again, the fact that Father's job is clearly the source of his exhaustion and preoccupation and the fact that he believes he is being watched by the secret police suggests that his job isn't exactly legal. In North Korea, extravagant luxuries like designer clothing are considered taboo, which is why the teacher calls Hyeonseo a "rotten capitalist."



Mount Paektu is considered North Korea's spiritual home because of Kim Il-sung's exploits there during the revolution, and it is assigned an almost mythical and religious quality. North Koreans visit the sites of the revolution on Mount Paektu like a Christian visiting the Stations of the Cross or a Muslim taking a pilgrimage to Mecca.



It is ironic that North Koreans call the bridge over the Yalu River "the Friendship Bridge," especially since they aren't trusted by the regime to move freely back and forth across it. The fact that Father was arrested on his way back from a business trip again suggests that his job involves some type of illicit activity, perhaps aiding the movement of illicit goods across the border.



Hyeonseo's family is told nothing about the specifics of Father's arrest, which suggests the state doesn't really have a good reason for holding him. Again, it's clear that the state has full power to subject its people to unjust treatment for any reason at all. Mother's devastation again underscores the importance of family and the deep love she obviously feels for Father.



In the late 1960s, Aunt Old married a Korean-Chinese man against Grandmother's wishes and had three children. Her husband soon grew tired of North Korea and wanted to go back to China, but Aunt Old refused. He returned alone, but was apprehended at the border and sent to a prison camp without a trial. Grandmother made arrangements for Aunt Old to get a divorce and put the three children up for adoption—the only way to save the family's songbun after a spouse is imprisoned. No one in North Korea talks openly about the gulags, which are different from the collective farms not far from Hyesan.

Hyeonseo can feel her resentment for her father soften, and two weeks later, they are told that he has been released to a hospital in Hyesan. Mother goes to visit him and is shocked by his appearance. He is skinny and looks old, but he tries to ease their fears. The investigation is still ongoing, and he has been accused of bribery and abuse of position. Father slips into a deep depression—an illness that is not considered legitimate in North Korea—and is sent back to the hospital in Hyesan. Hyeonseo and Min-ho are sent to stay with Uncle Cinema, who comes home one day and tells them their father has died.

Father's death makes Hyeonseo realize what a mistake she has made in treating him so badly. He raised her like his own child, and she considered herself his child. She loved him, and now he is gone. The hospital death certificate claims Father overdosed on Valium, committing suicide—which is considered the ultimate form of defection in North Korea and is detrimental to a family's songbun. Mother manages to bribe the hospital staff and gets Father's death certificate reclassified to reflect death by heart attack. In the following weeks, Hyeonseo grows closer with Min-ho, and she begins to think that perhaps their new house really is cursed.

CHAPTER 14: "THE GREAT HEART HAS STOPPED BEATING"

On July 8, 1994, lessons are interrupted at school, and Hyeonseo and her classmates are told about the death of Kim Il-sung. "The great heart," the teacher says, "has stopped beating." No one is told to cry, but Hyeonseo and the others know their tears are required. Hyeonseo rubs her eyes and feigns sadness, and the next day, all the schools in Hyesan join together for a period of public mourning. Shops and factories close, and all the people take to the streets to cry. When school finally resumes, the entire student body and all the teachers publicly chastise a young girl for faking her tears. Thankfully, no one seems to notice that Hyeonseo is not sincere in her grief, either.

A gulag is a political prison camp, and people usually aren't ever released from them. The fact that Grandmother gives up Aunt Old's children just to save the family's songbun highlights the importance of status in North Korean society, and it also doesn't bode well for the fate of Hyeonseo's family now that Father has been detained by the government and accused of disloyalty. Hyeonseo is likely too old to be put up for adoption, but Father's arrest will probably have a very negative impact on the family's songbun.



Father's haggard appearance suggests that he wasn't treated well by the authorities while he was detained. He was likely beaten, tortured, and starved into making any sort of confession the regime deemed punishable. Father's exact offense is never revealed, but the fact that he slips into such a deep depression implies he is innocent—at least of any major crime or offense.



Father's death prompts Hyeonseo to reexamine the crucial role that family plays in her life. Sadly, Hyeonseo realizes this importance too late to right the wrong between her and her father; however, her growing closeness with Min-ho suggests that she is determined not to let the same thing happen to their relationship. Father's death and the regime's opinion of suicide again reflects the regime's power and the repression of the people. Suicide is the ultimate snub to the regime and is considered extremely disloyal.



"The great heart stops beating" because Kim Il-sung was officially killed by a heart attack. The forced mourning again reflects the repression of the people and self-importance of the regime; appearing to be sad is considered the only appropriate reaction. After Kim Il-sung's death, a ten-day mourning period was declared, and hundreds of thousands of people were flown into Pyongyang from all over North Korea to attend his funeral, which was, of course, broadcast on Korean television.



Adults all across Hyesan are arrested for faking their own grief, and it isn't long before the public executions begin. Public executions are mandatory after elementary school, and factories close to ensure large crowds. Hyeonseo watches as the condemned are ushered to the Hyesan Airport, where all public executions take place. Three men are tied to stakes and given a chance to confess their crimes, then they are shot three times—once in the head, once in the chest, and once in the stomach—with their families seated in the front row.

These public executions again serve to intimidate the people, which is why the families of the executed are seated in the front row. Again, it seems outrageous that men are lined up and shot simply for not mourning the death of their dictator sincerely enough, but the regime nonetheless maintains the power to end its citizens' lives for such trivial reasons.



CHAPTER 15: GIRLFRIEND OF A HOODLUM

When Hyeonseo turns 15, she is forced to take special classes, in which girls are taught knitting and housekeeping skills. They are taught nothing about sex, however, and Hyeonseo thinks one becomes pregnant by kissing and holding hands. She finally learns about sex from an illegal South Korean video, and during her very first menstrual cycle, Hyeonseo finds a dead baby in a plastic bag in a public bathroom, the placenta and umbilical cord still attached. Hyeonseo briefly dates her first boyfriend not long after—a local “hoodlum” and petty thief of the kind common to all North Korean cities—but she doesn't tell Mother.

This further portrays the double oppression of women in North Korea. As a woman, Hyeonseo is expected to dedicate her life to domestic skills, and she isn't allowed to refuse and study something else. The lack of sexual education and the tragic image of the dead baby intensify this gendered oppression even more. Safe medical services don't exist, nor does a tolerance for single, unwed mothers. Women are forced to commit such atrocities to avoid punishment by the cruel regime.



That same year, the Socialist Youth League is given more responsibilities, and they must plant extra rice saplings and dig tunnels around the schools. America and South Korea are planning a nuclear strike, Hyeonseo and the other students are told. After one long day of digging, Hyeonseo goes to a friend's house. Hyeonseo is hungry after so much digging, so she asks her friend for a snack. Her friend says there aren't any snacks, and offers her corn stalks from a boiling pot on the stove instead. Hyeonseo refuses, irritated. She can't understand why her friend's family is eating corn and not rice.

In 1994, the Clinton administration considered a military strike on the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center in North Korea's Pyongan Province in an effort to denuclearize the Kim regime in accordance with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty of 1985. This, of course, never happened. However, the fact that Hyeonseo's school is forced to plant extra rice saplings and her friend is eating corn, not rice, suggests the country is experiencing a rice shortage that the regime is blaming on foreign threats.



CHAPTER 16: “BY THE TIME YOU READ THIS, THE FIVE OF US WILL NO LONGER EXIST IN THIS WORLD”

Hyeonseo hasn't seen Mother smile since Father's death, but she still manages to support them with her illicit trading business. Not long after Kim Il-sung's death, the government stops paying salaries and ration coupons are often worthless. One day, Mother comes home with a letter from a friend in North Hamgyong Province, which tells of widespread famine and food shortages. The woman who wrote the letter claimed to be dying of starvation and dreamed only of some corn cake. Hyeonseo immediately thinks of her friend—their family must not have food either.

This passage marks the first time Hyeonseo really understands the suffering of the North Korean people. Hyeonseo has never been hungry—Mother is more than willing to break the law so they don't want for anything—but the average North Korean experience is much, much different. Even those living closely to Hyeonseo, like her friend, are suffering, and Hyeonseo had no idea.



Soon, beggars appear all over Hyesan, and children are ordered to bring a quota of their own excrement to school for use as fertilizer. There is no fuel, and factories begin to shut down, one after another. It is 1996, near Hyeonseo's 16th birthday, and the government's official explanation for the country's difficulties is economic sanctions by the Americans and the United Nations, along with crop failures and record-breaking floods. The real reason, Hyeonseo will learn years later, is the collapse of the Soviet Union and the new Russian government's refusal to subsidize North Korea with food and fuel.

The Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il, is said to be eating only rice and potatoes, but he still looks portly and healthy. Law and order begins to break down across North Korea, and soldiers and police officers turn into thieves. Mother sends Hyeonseo and Min-ho to Uncle Cinema's near Hamhung, and Hyeonseo is shocked to see what has become of the bustling city. The factories are all closed, and people are dying in the streets. On the trip back to Hyesan, Hyeonseo sees a man at the train station with his skull bashed in and his brain exposed. Accidents like this are common during famines.

One day during the summer, Hyeonseo and Min-ho come home from school to find a thief in their house. He is trying to steal their television, but he is too weak to lift it. Mother gives the man money and tells him to go buy some food. Rumors of cannibalism begin to spread, and the government issues harsh warnings against it. The travel permit system is the next to collapse, so Mother sends Hyeonseo and Min-ho to Pyongyang to visit Uncle Money. No one is hungry in Pyongyang, which looks the same as it always has, but even this doesn't last. Not even the regime can keep the famine from spreading to Pyongyang.

CHAPTER 17: THE LIGHTS OF CHANGBAI

Hyeonseo is 17 and will turn 18 in a few months, at which time she will officially become an adult and childish pranks will no longer be tolerated. She frequently looks across the river to the lights of Changbai, China. She hopes to one day have a business dealing illicit goods like Mother, and she badly wants a closer look at Changbai. The Chinese people on the other side of the river don't appear to be starving, and Hyeonseo gets a sneaking suspicion that North Korea really isn't the greatest nation in the world after all.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, communism lost its stronghold in the East, and countries like North Korea, Cambodia, and Laos suffered greatly under dictators and deteriorating economic and political conditions. The North Korean government is quick to blame America and the West, as doing so aligns with their philosophy that the capitalist West wants the complete destruction of North Korea.



Kim Jong-il still looks fat and healthy because he isn't eating rice and potatoes like the people. The Kim regime lives in the lap of luxury in Pyongyang while the people suffer and die. The extreme hunger incites violence and crime across society, as evidenced by the man clearly dying in the street with a fractured skull. Likely, the man was attacked for food or money, or beaten by the police for stealing the same.



Those who live in Pyongyang are likely of higher songbun and are given more rations by the regime, but even these special rations can't last forever in the midst of a country-wide famine. Those of high songbun end up starving while the Kim regime eats well, which suggests that even loyalty and status aren't ultimately enough to protect one from the cruelty of the regime.



Surprisingly, Hyeonseo doesn't dream of leaving North Korea because she is starving or hoping for a better life in freedom. She plans to always live in North Korea; she is simply curious as to how the other half lives. She can tell that the Chinese live a better life, but she doesn't necessarily want that life at this point, which illustrates the power of nationality and country on one's core identity and desires.



CHAPTER 18: OVER THE ICE

The Yalu River is only 11 yards wide and a few feet deep in the middle. During the famine, people begin fleeing across the river, but by late 1997, the area is heavily guarded again. All illicit trade stops at the river, except for a single woman, who pays off the guards. Hyeonseo befriends the guard assigned to the stretch of river where their house sits, a handsome young man named Ri Chang-ho. Chang-ho is six years older than Hyeonseo and of the absolute highest songbun. One day, when Hyeonseo is leaving for Hamhung to visit Aunt Pretty, Chang-ho asks Hyeonseo to deliver a letter to his mother.

Hyeonseo takes the letter to Chang-ho's mother in Hamhung, who smiles at her with amusement after reading it. When Hyeonseo returns to Hyesan, Chang-ho tells her that he wrote his mother that he would one day marry Hyeonseo, so she should be extra nice to her. Hyeonseo is shocked and tells him that she is too young to marry. Chang-ho takes her rejection in stride, and they remain friends. Around this time, Hyeonseo makes plans to finally cross the river into China. She plans to go directly to the house of Mr. Ahn's, one of Mother's business contacts, but she can tell Min-ho thinks it is a bad idea.

During the second week of December, Hyeonseo makes her final plans to cross the river. When she arrives home that evening, Mother is busy making an elaborate meal. After eating as much as possible, Hyeonseo tells Mother she is going to a friend's house and walks out to the river. She finds Chang-ho and tells him she is going to Shenyang to visit relatives. He tells her crossing the river isn't possible, but Hyeonseo insists, and he finally agrees. Suddenly, a Chinese smuggler makes his way out of the darkness, and Chang-ho asks him to take Hyeonseo to the other side. He agrees, and for the first time, Hyeonseo feels fear. She will be back in just a few hours, but she still feels like her life is about to change forever.

CHAPTER 19: A VISIT TO MR. AHN

Hyeonseo opens the door to Mr. Ahn's house and bows. It takes him a moment to realize who she is, but then he invites her inside. He is a large man with big eyes and a bald head, and Hyeonseo explains that she is on her way to visit relatives in Shenyang. Mr. Ahn immediately knows that Hyeonseo has no idea what she is doing. Shenyang is over eight hours away, and there are many checkpoints along the way. Illegal North Koreans found in China are turned over to the Bowibu, he says.

The fact that the river dividing North Korea from China is so narrow and shallow underscores the control of the North Korean regime over the people. Crossing the river is easy—it isn't deep and would barely extend past the 10-yard line on an American football field—yet most North Koreans never dream of disobeying the state and crossing over to China.



Hyeonseo's ability to turn down Chang-ho's advances is proof of her own privilege, and Chang-ho's good-natured response is evidence of his kindness, which is Lee claims is rare in North Korea. Presumably, if Chang-ho wanted to push the idea, Hyeonseo would have little choice. Still, Hyeonseo's family isn't starving and they have everything they need, so Mother has little reason to insist that Hyeonseo marry. Though women still face extreme oppression across North Korea, these events make it clear that women of high songbun, like Hyeonseo, have substantially more freedom.



Mother's elaborate meal suggests that she knows all about Hyeonseo's plans to cross the river into China, and she is making her a good meal to mark the occasion in case the worst case scenario happens—if Hyeonseo is caught by the police or for whatever reason she isn't able to return as expected, Mother may never see her again. Hyeonseo's feeling that her life is about to change implies that her trip back across the river won't be quick or easy, even though she expects to return soon.



Hyeonseo's ignorance of just how far Shenyang is from Changbai reflects her general ignorance of the outside world and her repressed existence inside North Korea. North Korean children aren't taught about the world through subjects such as geography or history, so she knows nothing about China, even though she really does have relatives there.



Hyeonseo can tell that Mr. Ahn is not rich, but there is plenty of food, and he invites her to stay the night and agrees to help her get to Shenyang. The next morning, he shows Hyeonseo around Changbai, and gives her warm winter boots and a winter coat. As they leave the city and Hyesan disappears from view, Hyeonseo thinks of her mother and the promise she made the night before not to stay out too late.

Mr. Ahn is exceedingly kind to Hyeonseo, even though it is highly illegal in China to aid North Korean defectors in any way. Mr. Ahn is proof there is kindness in the world, even though Hyeonseo is taught in North Korea that kindness amounts to little more than a good way to get punished or killed.



CHAPTER 20: HOME TRUTHS

The beginning of the road to Shenyang looks much like North Korea, but as the villages give way to suburbs and traffic jams, Hyeonseo can hardly believe her eyes. The road into Shenyang is an eight-lane expressway, and Hyeonseo has never seen so many cars in her life. Although Hyeonseo doesn't know it, Shenyang is one of China's biggest cities and is home to over eight million people. After much trouble, Hyeonseo and Mr. Ahn finally locate the address of her relatives and find a large skyscraper full of windows.

The entire population of North Korea is roughly 25 million people, so the sheer size of Shenyang at eight million is difficult for Hyeonseo to fathom. Furthermore, most North Koreans don't own cars. Free travel and internal movement isn't permitted in North Korea, so cars, which would make such a thing possible, aren't permitted either. Plus, the people are poor and couldn't afford them anyway.



Hyeonseo knocks on the door to the apartment, and Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee appear with huge smiles. Uncle Jung-gil is actually Father's cousin who defected during the Korean War, and he is more than happy to see Hyeonseo. She explains that she wants to see China before starting college in the fall, and he gives Mr. Ahn money for his trouble before inviting Hyeonseo inside. The apartment is sophisticated and full of windows with a million-dollar view, and Uncle Jung-gil wastes no time catching up. He had no idea that Hyeonseo's father died and is shocked to hear the news. He immediately tells Hyeonseo that everything she has been taught in school is a lie.

Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee's immediate warmth and acceptance of Hyeonseo reflects the importance of family in North Korean culture, even that of extended family members. For all intents and purposes, Jung-gil and Sang-hee don't even know Hyeonseo, but they are more than happy to open their home to her, even though aiding a North Korean defector can get them into serious trouble with the Chinese government.



Uncle Jung-gil informs Hyeonseo that South Korea didn't really start the Korean War. It was actually North Korea that invaded the South, and, according to Jung-gil, Kim Il-sung would have lost badly to the Americans if not for China's help. He then tells her that Kim Jong-il wasn't really born at Mount Paektu but in Siberia, where Kim Il-sung was a member of the Red Army. Kim Jong-il isn't even a communist, Uncle Jung-gil claims, and he eats fine cheeses and drinks expensive wines while his people starve. Then Jung-gil says that Kim Il-sung's heart attack was Kim Jong-il's fault, brought about by stress when former president Jimmy Carter came to negotiate the denuclearization of North Korea on President Clinton's behalf. Kim Il-sung agreed, but Kim Jong-il refused, leading to Kim Il-sung's heart attack.

Uncle Jung-gil's negative comments are a shock to Hyeonseo because speaking in such a way about the Kim regime in North Korea is illegal and considered highly unorthodox and taboo. Because of ideological indoctrination, Hyeonseo truly believes the wonderful things she is told about the sacrifices of the Kim regime, and she believes the alternate history she is taught in North Korean schools as well, which makes the regime look good and the rest of the world look bad. Presumably, Hyeonseo thinks Uncle Jung-gil is simply an angry defector talking untruths about the regime; she has no idea that he is actually speaking the truth.



Hyeonseo can hardly believe Uncle Jung-gil's claims, and she secretly wonders if he is crazy, but he seems nice enough. Plus, he runs a local trading company and is very rich. On her first night in Shenyang, Uncle Jung-gil suggests Hyeonseo adopt an alias, and they decide on Chae Mi-ran. Unlike Hyesan, Shenyang comes alive at night, and they go out to a karaoke bar, where Hyeonseo sings "Rocky Island" and no one cares. After five days, Aunt Sang-hee convinces Hyeonseo to stay longer, but by her 18th birthday, Hyeonseo knows she must return to North Korea. As Uncle Jung-gil prepares to drive Hyeonseo back to Changbai, the phone rings. It is Mother, and she warns Hyeonseo not to come back. They are in trouble, Mother says.

Hyeonseo's unofficial alias of Chae Mi-ran marks her third name, which continues to have a major effect on her identity as a North Korean, and her place within her family specifically. With each name change, Hyeonseo becomes more and more confused as to who she really is. As Chae Mi-ran, Hyeonseo completely denies her North Korean heritage and adopts a Chinese identity. Hyeonseo's ability to sing "Rocky Island" loud and proud in public illustrates the immense differences in social norms between China and North Korea.



CHAPTER 21: THE SUITOR

Hyeonseo can't figure out how her mother is even calling China in the first place. They don't have a phone, and all public phones are monitored by the Bowibu. She doesn't sound angry, but begins speaking right away. The day after Hyeonseo left, inspectors arrived to register voters. Voter registration is just an excuse to find out if everyone is where they are supposed to be, since citizens don't actually have any say in elections or government. Mother told them that Hyeonseo was visiting Aunt Pretty in Hamhung, but the banjang was with the inspectors and knew the truth. Chang-ho told Mother that Hyeonseo had crossed the river, and it wasn't long before rumors started that she was in China.

All of this again reflects the oppression of the North Korean people. Hyeonseo isn't anyone important within North Korean society—she is just an average girl—but her absence is still noted by the Bowibu. Furthermore, the inability of the North Korean people to have any say in elections or government again underscores the power and cruelty of the regime. The regime denies the citizens basic voting rights, and then they name their spying efforts "voter registration" like a slap in the face.



Mother plans to take Min-ho and move to a new town where no one knows them and Hyeonseo's absence will be less suspicious, and she tells Hyeonseo not to contact them for the time being and hangs up abruptly. Suddenly, Hyeonseo realizes that she may never be able to go home to North Korea. Aunt Sang-hee happily agrees to allow Hyeonseo live with her and Uncle Jung-gil long-term, and Hyeonseo accepts; however, if Hyeonseo had realized how much she was going to miss her mother and Min-ho, she would have gone back to Hyesan anyway.

The fact that Hyeonseo would risk her safety just to be with Mother and Min-ho again reinforces the importance of family within the book. Families in North Korea frequently stay in oppressive circumstances just to remain together, and Hyeonseo's feelings are evidence of this.



Hyeonseo decides she must learn Mandarin if she is to stay in China, and she begins with television and children's books. Each day, Hyeonseo grows more and more homesick and feels trapped in a foreign land without an identity. Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee are kind and accommodating, but China isn't home, and Hyeonseo grows increasingly unhappy and depressed. She begins to have nightmares about the Bowibu chasing her across the Yalu River, and she hears police dogs and whistles before waking in a sweat.

Hyeonseo suffers nightmares through most of the book, which underscores the trauma she has endured at the hands of the cruel North Korean regime. However, her homesickness and longing for North Korean soil also illustrates the importance of nationality as a key aspect of one's core identity. Hyeonseo is a North Korean, and she will always carry love for her first home.



Hyeonseo decides she must go back to North Korea, no matter what. She tries to call Mr. Ahn, but his number is disconnected. Her link to Hyesan is gone, and Hyeonseo is devastated. Aunt Sang-hee tries desperately to cheer Hyeonseo up, and one day, she comes to Hyeonseo's bedroom and tells her she has a visitor. Hyeonseo excitedly jumps out of bed, hoping to find someone from Hyesan, but a young man she doesn't recognize is at the door. Sang-hee introduces him as Geun-soo, and he bows deeply, handing Hyeonseo flowers without looking at her.

Hyeonseo's desire to go back to Hyesan after what has happened reflects her connection to her country and family. Mr. Ahn's disconnected phone suggests he has gotten into trouble for helping her, which reflects the power of the North Korean regime, since it can reach all the way into China. From Geun-soo's flowers, the reader can infer romantic intentions.



CHAPTER 22: THE WEDDING TRAP

Geun-soo is the son of Mrs. Jang, one of Aunt Sang-hee's friends from her Korean-Chinese social circle. Aunt Sang-hee suggests Geun-soo and Hyeonseo go out for ice cream, and Hyeonseo is mortified. He is 22 and rich, and his parents own a chain of successful restaurants. Over the next months, Hyeonseo and Geun-soo go on many dates, but Hyeonseo isn't attracted to him in the least, although he is very kind. He knows that Hyeonseo is North Korean, but he believes her name is Chae Mi-ran, and she doesn't correct him. The relationship isn't serious, but it does get Hyeonseo out of the house and gives her a reason to practice her Mandarin.

Hyeonseo's forced relationship with Geun-soo further reflects her oppression as a woman and a North Korean, even though she has already escaped. Hyeonseo has few options, even living in China. She can never live openly as a North Korean in China. If she is caught by the Chinese government, she will be repatriated back to North Korea, where she will be severely punished. Plus, Hyeonseo's status as a woman dictates that she must one day get married.



Geun-soo takes Hyeonseo to meet his mother, Mrs. Jang, who soon talks about opening a new restaurant for Geun-soo and Hyeonseo to manage. Geun-soo hasn't proposed yet, but Hyeonseo knows it is coming and begins to feel trapped. Two years pass, and it is the end of 1999. Mrs. Jang says casually that she has visited a fortune-teller, who has recommended a summer wedding. Hyeonseo tries to tell herself that Geun-soo is all right and marriage won't be so bad, but she has little choice in the direction her life is taking. Within days, Geun-soo obtains a new ID card for Hyeonseo, which claims she is a Korean-Chinese woman named Jang Soon-hyang. The new card says Hyeonseo is 20, the legal age to marry in China.

Hyeonseo's feelings of being trapped and her lack of control in the direction of her own life further highlight her oppression as a North Korean woman hiding in China. The new ID card Geun-soo obtains for Hyeonseo and her new name, Jang Soon-hyang—Hyeonseo's fourth name—further splinter her identity and strip her of her North Korean heritage. As Jang Soon-hyang, Hyeonseo is no longer North Korean, but Korean-Chinese, which is completely at odds with who she really is.



By 2000, Uncle Jung-gil gives Hyeonseo a new cellphone just as the wedding plans really begin to pick up. Hyeonseo asks Mrs. Jang if she can use her new ID to visit her family in North Korea, but Mrs. Jang says it is too dangerous. She could be caught, and then they will all be implicated. Hyeonseo knows she can't marry Geun-soo. In the summer of 2000, with the wedding just weeks away, Hyeonseo walks out of Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee's apartment complex, dropping the chip from her new cellphone into a nearby trash can.

Hyeonseo's desire to visit her family in North Korea despite the danger illustrates the importance of family in her life and in the book. Furthermore, Mrs. Jang's fear that Hyeonseo will be caught and they will all be implicated suggests that the punishment for aiding a North Korean defector in China is stiff. Since Hyeonseo drops the chip from her phone into the trash—making it impossible for anyone to reach her—it seems that she isn't coming back and doesn't want to be found.



CHAPTER 23: SHENYANG GIRL

Hyeonseo hails a cab but has no idea where to go or what to do. She thinks about going to Xita, a place she has been many times before with Aunt Sang-hee, where many Koreans live and work. A nice middle-aged woman approaches and asks Hyeonseo kindly in Mandarin if she is looking for a job. Hyeonseo says she is, and the woman introduces herself as Miss Ma. She owns a salon in town and is looking for stylists. Training and lodging are free, Miss Ma adds.

Miss Ma's salon is unlike any salon Hyeonseo has ever seen. Leather sofas line the walls, and in the basement are several "therapy rooms." A young woman in a tiny slip is massaging a man wrapped only in a towel, and Miss Ma orders Hyeonseo to help before leaving the room. Hyeonseo sits down, mortified, and awkwardly rubs the man's arm. Afterward, the young woman takes Hyeonseo to a tiny room filled with bunkbeds and informs her she will be living here from now on. Stylists aren't allowed to leave, the girl says.

The next morning, Hyeonseo tells Miss Ma that she must return to Xita to get some of her things. After much hesitation, Miss Ma finally allows her leave, telling her to hurry back. Hyeonseo walks out the door and begins to run, hailing a cab as she does. She jumps in the back of the cab and without hesitating tells the driver to take her to Xita.

Xita is a neighborhood of Shenyang, and it is the largest Koreatown in Northeast China. Xita is home to over 8,000 ethnic Koreans and over 20,000 Korean-Chinese people. Hyeonseo's draw to Xita underscores her connection to her North Korean heritage and its importance to her core identity.



Obviously, Miss Ma's salon isn't really a salon, and the girls employed there aren't really stylists. The "therapy rooms" suggest that Miss Ma is operating some sort of illicit business, and the fact that stylists aren't allowed to leave suggests that they are exploited sex workers and likely all illegal immigrants, since they are clearly too afraid to go to the police for help.



Presumably, Miss Ma suspects that Hyeonseo is an illegal immigrant, which is why she attempts to exploit her. This experience proves that the oppression Hyeonseo experiences as a North Korean doesn't end just because she leaves North Korea, and it further reflects her vulnerability as a woman. This experience also illustrates Lee's argument that kindness and compassion are rare and that the world can be a cold and cruel place.



CHAPTER 24: GUILT CALL

In Koreatown, Hyeonseo sees a sign in the window of a restaurant advertising for waitresses. She goes inside and tells the woman at the cash register that her name is Jang Soon-hyang, and she is looking for work. The woman gives Hyeonseo a job for 50 yuan a month, which is about \$40 dollars in the United States. Hyeonseo's Mandarin is still poor, however, and it takes her awhile to get the hang of waitressing. Her customers suspect she is North Korea, but her employer never catches on, and Hyeonseo slowly falls into a routine. The other waitresses she lives with are kind, and Hyeonseo is soon promoted to the cash register and given a small raise.

Each day that Hyeonseo goes to her job and is seen in public, she risks being exposed as a North Korean, which again proves that the oppression doesn't end just because one defects. The meager pay of the job further reflects this oppression, as Hyeonseo can never hope to get ahead on such a salary. The kindness of her employer and roommates, however, suggests that there really is kindness in the world, despite how awful it can seem at times.



CHAPTER 25: THE MEN FROM THE SOUTH

In January 2001, two men come into the restaurant and ask Hyeonseo if she knows any North Koreans. The men claim to be from a South Korean television station looking for defectors who are trying to get into South Korea. Hyeonseo is suspicious and says she knows no one, but she secretly wonders if they are looking for her. She tells her roommates about the men, and they tell her that South Korea considers all Koreans citizens and routinely helps defectors establish a new lives. The men return to the restaurant each day, and after a week, Hyeonseo is still undecided if she should tell them who she is. Then, the men stop coming in.

One evening, Hyeonseo tells her friends that she is really a defector from North Korea. They are fascinated by her story, and Hyeonseo is soon introduced to other defectors hiding in Xita as well. She meets a young defector named Soo-jin, who is living in Shenyang with her South Korean boyfriend. After a few weeks, Soo-jin's number in Shenyang is disconnected, and Hyeonseo worries she has been caught.

Hyeonseo sees Soo-jin six months later on a street in Koreatown, and Soo-jin tells her that she was arrested and kept for three months in a Bowibu holding camp. Soo-jin was eventually released, but she knows that China isn't safe, and she must get to South Korea. Soo-jin says she was betrayed by a mutual friend, and Hyeonseo never sees her again. Hyeonseo is instantly paranoid and tries to remember exactly who she told about her real identity. A week later, two men arrive at the restaurant and ask for Hyeonseo by her alias. The men identify themselves as the police and insist that Hyeonseo come with them.

CHAPTER 26: INTERROGATION

Hyeonseo is placed in the back of a BMW and taken to the Xita police station, where a handsome inspector introduces himself as her interrogator. He asks her about her parents, and she gives him Aunt Sang-hee and Uncle Jung-gil's information. The inspector hands her a copy of a Chinese newspaper and orders her to read it. Then, he tells her to write several Chinese characters, which she does easily enough. He asks for her ID, and Hyeonseo claims it is at home, but she still has the number memorized from the ID Geun-soo gave her.

Hyeonseo's extreme paranoia over the true intentions of the men illustrates the trauma she has endured as a North Korean citizen and the power of the North Korean regime to reach all the way into China. Hyeonseo has no way of knowing if the men are truly interested in helping defectors, or if it is a trap engineered by the regime to round up defectors and bring them back to the country to be punished, and perhaps even executed.



Hyeonseo's fear that Soo-jin has been captured again underscores how dangerous it is for illegal North Koreans living in China. Defectors are routinely sent back to North Korea from China, and the Chinese government works closely with the Bowibu to identify and apprehend defectors.



The fact that Soo-jin is released from the Bowibu holding camp and not repatriated back to North Korea suggests that she isn't really who she says she is. From Hyeonseo's arrest not long after, readers can infer that Soo-jin is, at the very least, an informer working on behalf of the Bowibu and the North Korean government, if not an actual member of the Bowibu.



Hyeonseo's quick thinking, and her father's insistence that she learn Chinese characters, likely save her life. If Hyeonseo is sent back to North Korea, there is a possibility she will be executed. The BMW the Chinese police drive is a stark contrast to the poverty in North Korea, where there are very few cars, much less expensive luxury automobiles.



The inspector tells Hyeonseo she is free to go and apologizes for the inconvenience. They are simply following protocol, the inspector says, and must follow up on all reports, false or not. As Hyeonseo leaves, she is convinced someone has informed on her, and she silently thanks her father for insisting she learn all those Chinese characters. China clearly isn't safe, so she finds a new apartment right next to the Xita police station. Surely, they won't think to look for defectors so close to the station. One night, Hyeonseo returns home from a busy night at the restaurant and hears a sound in the darkness. Suddenly, she is struck on the head and blacks out.

Obviously, this part of China isn't safe, for defectors or anyone else, since Hyeonseo's attack in her apartment building seems quite random. Likely, Hyeonseo was reported as a North Korean by Soo-ji, and the police are following up on behalf of the Bowibu. Hyeonseo's thankfulness for father's insistence on learning the Chinese characters is another example of how important family proves to be throughout the book.



CHAPTER 27: THE PLAN

Hyeonseo has been on her own in Xita for nearly four years now, and she has finally saved enough money to hire a broker to get word to Mother and Min-ho in Hyesan. She decides to go back to Changbai and hopes Mr. Ahn still lives in the same house, but before she does, Hyeonseo meets a friendly Korean-Chinese businessman at the restaurant in Xita. In a moment of weakness, Hyeonseo tells him she is desperate to find her family in North Korea. The man says he has a contact in North Korea and offers to help, and Hyeonseo decides it can't hurt to keep the man's contact as a backup plan, but this, too, turns out to be a huge mistake.

The implication that Hyeonseo's connection to the Korean-Chinese businessman and his broker is a huge mistake foreshadows upcoming trouble, which further underscores the oppression of the North Korean people, even in China. Hyeonseo must go to great lengths to talk to her family and this again illustrates the hardships North Koreans face even for the most basic rights, like access to one's family and country. However, Hyeonseo doesn't hesitate to help Mother and Min-ho, despite the risks; her family remains her top priority.



CHAPTER 28: THE GANG

Mrs. Ahn opens the door in Changbai and tells Hyeonseo that Mr. Ahn is very sick and bedridden. North Korean border guards had captured him on the Hyesan side and beat him before sending him back to China, and on top of all this, he is suffering from severe diabetes. He has no news about her family and hasn't been to Hyesan in over two years. Mrs. Ahn, however, offers to help, and Hyeonseo offers to pay her a smuggler's fee. It is dark when Hyeonseo arrives, and even though she can't see Hyesan across the river, it still smells the same.

The smell of Hyesan in the dark illustrates Hyeonseo's connection to her homeland, since she recognizes it even when she can't see the city. The abuse of Mr. Ahn—a Chinese man—by the North Korean guards further reflects the power of the regime, while Mrs. Ahn's willingness to help Hyeonseo despite her husband's ill treatment again proves that there really is kindness in the world.



Hyeonseo returns to Shenyang and waits for word from Mrs. Ahn. Weeks later, Mrs. Ahn calls and informs Hyeonseo that she has found her family. Then she says that Min-ho is with her now. He picks up the phone, and Hyeonseo can hardly believe her ears. She makes immediate plans to go to Changbai and draws all her savings out of the bank. She converts it to US dollars, nearly \$800, and her phone rings. It is the businessman's contact, and he has found her family. He asks when Hyeonseo will be in Changbai, and she lies and says tomorrow.

The broker's phone call seems like a bad sign. Since the broker has found Hyeonseo's family, the reader can infer that the man has done the agreed-upon work and will expect to get paid. Hyeonseo obviously has some money, but the broker's cost is unclear, as is Mrs. Ahn's smuggler's fee. The fact that Hyeonseo carries on despite all this uncertainty again highlights how much her family means to her.



At Mrs. Ahn's house, Hyeonseo sees Min-ho for the first time in years, but before she can ask about Mother, there is a knock at the door. It is four men, an obvious gang, and they ask for Hyeonseo by her alias. The men claim they have found her family, and Hyeonseo promises to contact them the next day. No, the men say, she must come with them now. The men know that Min-ho and Mother are already on their way to the Ahns' house, but it makes no difference to them. They have already done their part and they expect to get paid. Their fee is \$8,500, and if Hyeonseo doesn't pay, they will have no choice but to take her back to North Korea.

Again, Hyeonseo has zero options and she is in serious trouble. She can't go to the police—she will be taken back to North Korea—so she has no choice but to figure out how to pay, or risk being sent back to North Korea anyway. The fact that the brokers hired by the businessman are an obvious gang suggests that they aren't exactly upstanding people. Presumably, the men are capable of doing unspeakable things to Hyeonseo, a threat that is made much worse because she is a woman, which further underscores her oppression and vulnerability.



CHAPTER 29: THE COMFORT OF MOONLIGHT

After three days of being held by the gang, Hyeonseo finally gets the courage up to call Uncle Jung-gil. He agrees to pay the gang's fee immediately, but it still takes two days for the check to clear. They finally let her go, and with a small wad of money pinned to the inside of her jacket, Hyeonseo boards a bus to Shenyang. Not knowing what to do next, Hyeonseo decides to go to a fortune-teller, who tells her to move south to Shanghai. Hyeonseo quits her job at the restaurant, packs up her small apartment, and leaves for Shanghai. It is January 2002.

Hyeonseo's visit to the fortune-teller, which mirrors her mother's habit of doing the same thing, is evidence of her connection to her family and her North Korean heritage. Visiting the fortune-teller makes Hyeonseo feel closer to her mother and her country, even though the fortune-teller's advice leads her even farther away from North Korea.



CHAPTER 30: THE BIGGEST, BRASHEST CITY IN ASIA

On the train to Shanghai, a group of police officers boards the train to inspect the passengers' IDs, and Hyeonseo begins to panic. She hides in the bathroom for what seems like forever, and when she emerges, the police are gone. She arrives in Shanghai, a massive city of about 17 million people, and finds a job in a local restaurant. Hyeonseo decides it is best to change her name. She told too many people her real identity in Shenyang and selects the name Chae In-hee, her fifth name.

Again, Hyeonseo's constant identity and name changes continue to fracture her sense of self and move her further away from her true identity as a North Korean—and her parents' daughter. Hyeonseo's new name, Chae In-hee, is very similar to the name she adopted when she first got to China, Chae Mi-ran.



Hyeonseo knows she has to find a way to get a new ID, and getting a legitimate ID means that she will need another broker. She quietly asks around and finds a broker who charges \$16,000, but she decides it is little use. She will never be able to afford such a fee waiting tables. One day, Hyeonseo meets a kind Korean-Chinese man whose aunt is a marriage broker for women wanting to find South Korean husbands. Hyeonseo lies and tells the man she would like to study in South Korea but is too old for a student visa. The man smiles. A new ID will make her younger, he says, and offers to ask his aunt for her.

\$16,000 is extremely expensive, and this high price further reflects the hardships and oppression Hyeonseo faces as a North Korean defector in China. She can't simply appeal to the government for an ID card, so she must resort to extremes to get ahead. Hyeonseo's implication that she is too old for a student visa and the man's knowing smile underscore the same sexist assumptions that constantly oppress Hyeonseo, both in North Korea and in China.



Weeks later, the man's aunt calls and tells Hyeonseo that she is willing to help, provided Hyeonseo can get to Harbin, a city nearly 1,000 miles away. After two days on a train, Hyeonseo finally arrives in Harbin. The woman takes her picture like a professional and hands her a new ID. Her name is now Park Sun-ja. The ID is real and belongs to a Korean-Chinese girl with a mental illness whose parents wanted to make extra money selling her ID. The new ID costs all the money Hyeonseo has left, but at least now she is legal—sort of.

CHAPTER 31: CAREER WOMAN

With her new ID, Hyeonseo is able to get a job at a tech company as a secretary for nearly four times as much as she made as a waitress. Most of her co-workers are South Korean, and they are all nice to her. Of course, no one knows she is North Korean. In Shanghai, they are all Koreans, speaking the same language and practicing the same customs. No one talks about the fact that their countries are at war. Time passes, and Hyeonseo grows more comfortable and secure, but she often thinks of North Korea. If she had never left, she would have graduated from school by now and would be working for the government and running illicit trade on the side like her mother. She wonders if such a life would have been so bad, but pushes such thoughts from her head.

Hyeonseo begins to frequent a North Korean restaurant in Shanghai owned by a business group in Pyongyang. The waitresses are all beautiful and selected based on their songbun. Hyeonseo knows the restaurant offers cover for Bowibu spies, but her new ID makes her brave. She becomes friendly with one of the waitresses who tells her she is saving her money to get a boob job. Hyeonseo is shocked. Then the woman tells her she has already had her eyes done, and Hyeonseo can hardly believe it when the woman says she had the cosmetic procedure in Pyongyang. The next day, the restaurant is closed. Apparently, the waitress had run off with a man, who, ironically, worked at Hyeonseo's tech company. Both the woman and the man are eventually caught and deported. The man is sent back to South Korea, and the waitress is sent back to Pyongyang.

During Hyeonseo's second year in Shanghai, she runs into the Korean-Chinese man from Shenyang who put her in touch with the broker, but she pretends not to recognize him. She is recognized again at a gathering with some friends and manages, somehow, to pretend to be someone else, until she meets one of the Shenyang waitresses she had known too well to fool. The woman's name is Ok-hee, and she is on the run from authorities in Shenyang, too. They become close friends.

Harbin is a city in Northeast China, and it is the eighth most populated city in all of China. The fact that Hyeonseo has to go so far from Shanghai—the most densely populated city in China and in the entire world—reflects the lengths Hyeonseo must go to in order to overcome the oppression of being a North Korean woman. Hyeonseo has few rights, and her existence is a constant struggle.



Hyeonseo's thoughts about what her life would be like in North Korea again reflects her connection to her homeland, which is clearly part of her core identity. The fact that there is no distinction between North and South Koreans in China implies that they are the same, even though the regime teaches North Koreans otherwise. North and South Korea are still at war because a formal peace treaty was never signed when the fighting stopped during the Korean War in 1953. The war reached a stalemate, not an end, and it continues as a frozen conflict.



The fact that the restaurant is owned by a business in Pyongyang and that it is a front for Bowibu spies reflects the power of the North Korean regime, which extends all the way into China. Shanghai is hundreds of miles from the North Korean border and even further from Pyongyang—North Korea's capital and home base for the Kim regime—but the Bowibu are still there, spying and rounding up defectors to punish and likely torture. The waitress's cosmetic surgery in North Korea, the same country where people step over dead and starving babies in the street, illustrates the extreme differences between those of different songbun.



Like Hyeonseo, Ok-hee is a defector from North Korea who is constantly on the run, evading capture. Not only does Hyeonseo feel a kinship to Ok-hee because she is North Korean, but she also feels connected to Ok-hee because they share the same hardships as defectors illegally living abroad.



CHAPTER 32: A CONNECTION TO HYESAN

One day, Hyeonseo gets a call out of the blue from Min-ho. It never occurred to Hyeonseo that he could actually find her, and she is glad to hear his voice again. He asks for more money and a cellphone, so she sends a Nokia and 1,000 yuan to Mr. Ahn to get to them. Days later, Hyeonseo's phone rings and Mother is on the other end. Hyeonseo begins to cry. They begin talking each weekend, and Mother fills her in on the last several years. She and Min-ho moved to a different neighborhood in Hyesan, and she bribed the police to leave them alone. She is no longer working her government job and instead is trading illicit goods fulltime with Aunt Pretty.

One weekend, Mother tells Hyeonseo that she has arranged a bribe with the police to allow Hyeonseo back home, no questions asked, for \$6,000. Hyeonseo isn't convinced. It feels like a trap, she says. Then Mother tells her that she has a few kilos of crystal methamphetamine and asks if Hyeonseo knows anyone in China who can sell it. Hyeonseo is mortified. The idea of her mother with three kilos of the drug is just too much. No, Hyeonseo tells her, she doesn't know any drug dealers, and she advises her mother not to accept any more drugs as bribes.

One spring weekend in 2004, Hyeonseo is talking to her mother on the phone and watching television, when something on the news catches her attention. She hangs up the phone and Ok-hee turns up the television. Scores of people are rushing the South Korean embassy in Beijing, and the news anchor says they are North Koreans looking for political asylum. Hyeonseo looks at Ok-hee. What does asylum mean, they wonder?

1,000 Chinese yuan is just over \$40, which isn't much, but it is about the equivalent of what Hyeonseo used to make in a week as waitress. Her willingness to so easily send Min-ho money reflects the importance of family in Hyeonseo's culture and life. However, if Min-ho can find Hyeonseo that means others can as well, which underscores just how precarious her existence is in China as a North Korean defector.



Mother will literally take anything as a bribe, which illustrates just how desperate living in North Korea can get. Mother is willing to do whatever it takes to provide for her family. Hyeonseo's fear that the bribe with the police is a trap reflects just how cruel the North Korean regime really is. The police will likely take their money and punish Hyeonseo as a defector.



Political asylum is protection granted by a foreign government for those escaping another country due to political unrest or human rights violations. Most North Koreans are suffering, and the people rushing the South Korean embassy are defectors looking for help and protection from South Korea.



CHAPTER 33: THE TEDDY-BEAR CONVERSATIONS

Over the next few months, there are several more news reports of North Koreans storming other countries' embassies in China looking for asylum. Hyeonseo thought people only left North Korea because of hunger or curiosity, not for political reasons. She remembers all the things Uncle Jung-gil told her about North Korea and wonders if he was telling the truth. Then, Hyeonseo discovers the internet and finds out what the rest of the world is saying about North Korea and knows her uncle was telling the truth. Ok-hee suggests they go to South Korea together, and Hyeonseo begins to consider it. In China, she will always be a foreigner. At least she can feel like she belongs in South Korea.

Hyeonseo and Ok-hee's desire to go to South Korea and at least be on Korean soil reflects their deep connection to their homeland and the mark it has left on their core identities. The ideological indoctrination is so effective in North Korea, many citizens don't even realize that they are being lied to and their human rights are being denied, which reflects the power of the Kim regime and the control they have over the North Korean people.



Ok-hee has contact with other North Koreans, and she finds a broker, who, for \$1,400, can provide them with the proper paperwork needed to get new IDs from the South Korean government. All they have to do is take the paperwork to the embassy, claim they lost their IDs, and get new South Korean IDs. Over the next few days, Hyeonseo gets ready to go to the embassy, but she is waylaid when a routine medical examination reveals that her blood sugar level is dangerously high. Hyeonseo is convinced she is dying, and she decides not to go to South Korea. She grows depressed and even suicidal. A month later, Hyeonseo has her sugar checked again, and it is normal. Apparently, the result of the previous test was due to lack of sleep and stress. Her depression lingers for a few more days, until an event in Hyesan wakes her up.

Lee's vague mention of an event in Hyesan suggests that something terrible is about to happen. Furthermore, Hyeonseo's dangerously high blood sugar level implies that she is under serious stress planning the stunt to get into South Korea, or, at least, appeal to the South Korean government for asylum. Hyeonseo's life is constantly in danger, and it is obviously wearing her down physically as well as psychologically. This, too, underscores the oppression Hyeonseo is up against as a North Korean defector in China.



CHAPTER 34: THE TORMENTING OF MIN-HO

When Hyeonseo made preparations to leave Shanghai before the sugar test, she had sent some money and her belongings to Mr. Ahn's, so she makes arrangements to travel to Changbai and retrieve them. It is October 2004, and when she arrives in Changbai, Mrs. Ahn tells her that Mr. Ahn has died. Hyeonseo packs her things, including a hairdryer, an iron, and some perfume, into two blue sacks and places all her cash into a small white sack. Then she calls Min-ho and tells him to come and get the things to take back to Hyesan. Mrs. Ahn has two smugglers take the sacks across the river to meet Min-ho, but Min-ho never calls to say he has received them.

Hyeonseo's efforts to smuggle money and supplies into North Korea to Mother and Min-ho again reflects the importance of family in the book. Smuggling goods across the border is risky, and the punishment is severe if they get caught. Mrs. Ahn's willingness to again help Hyeonseo and her family further suggests that kindness isn't as rare as Hyeonseo initially thinks.



With no word from Min-ho, Hyeonseo returns to Shanghai, and Min-ho calls a week later. He is blunt and asks her what was in the bags. Just normal stuff, Hyeonseo replies, and Min-ho hangs up. The call makes no sense at all. The next morning, a man calls claiming to be a friend of Mother's and asks Hyeonseo what was in the bags. Hyeonseo again lists off the items, and then the man asks about the money. He asks how much money was in the bag, but Hyeonseo can't remember exactly.

Min-ho's odd phone call and the second phone call from the mysterious and unknown man are highly suspicious. Min-ho is likely being watched by the regime; otherwise, he probably wouldn't be so abrupt with Hyeonseo, and he would at least try to explain himself.



Hyeonseo never once suspects danger, but then Min-ho calls a week later. Both he and Mother were arrested, and all their calls have been recorded. The same day Min-ho retrieved the bags from the river, a group of inspectors knocked on their door. They were arrested and the bags confiscated. The inspectors were shocked by the amount of money in the bag and assumed it had come from a South Korean spy, but their call to Hyeonseo convinced them otherwise. Afterward, both Hyeonseo and Ok-hee decide their plan to obtain South Korean passports is a bad idea. They don't want to risk being sent back to North Korea.

Lee never does say how much money was in the little white sack, but the behavior of the North Korean police suggests it was a considerable sum, especially since they thought it came from a South Korean spy. This also reflects the paranoia of the North Korea regime that the South is spying on them. The regime teaches citizens that the South desires the North's destruction, just as it insists America does, and this helps promote hate and fear of foreign countries, further isolating the North Korean people from the world.



CHAPTER 35: THE LOVE SHOCK

Hyeonseo spends another year in Shanghai and finds a good job as an interpreter at a cosmetics company. Except for Ok-hee, all of Hyeonseo's friends are South Korean. It is 2006, and Hyeonseo is 25 years old, when her friends suggest they go to a swanky sky-bar in the city. There, Hyeonseo meets a handsome South Korean man named Kim, who is visiting on business from Seoul. Hyeonseo and Kim begin dating, and he finds new reasons to prolong his trip to China. Weeks pass, and Hyeonseo is suddenly dreaming of going to South Korea again.

The first time Hyeonseo tells Mother about her desire to go to South Korea, Mother doesn't take the news well. She can't understand why Hyeonseo would want to go to the country of the enemy. Hyeonseo explains she has no real connection to China. At least in South Korea she will be in Korea again. Hyeonseo doesn't tell her that she has fallen in love with a South Korean named Kim. Hyeonseo begins to look for a new broker who can help her get a South Korean ID, but they all want too much money. She decides all she really has to do is get to the airport in Seoul and then claim asylum as a North Korean. Now, she just has to tell Kim the truth about who she really is.

CHAPTER 36: DESTINATION SEOUL

After two years, Hyeonseo tells Kim that she wants to go to South Korea. He tells her it is a bad idea. Korean-Chinese people have low status in South Korea, he says, and she is better off staying in China. Then, Hyeonseo tells him she isn't Chinese. He doesn't follow, and she tells him that she was born in Hyesan in North Korea. He is angry at first that Hyeonseo has kept such a big secret from him, so she tells him her entire story, beginning with her crossing of the Yalu River in 1997. Kim begins to laugh and tells her she should probably go to South Korea then. Hyeonseo books her ticket to Seoul in January 2008.

Hyeonseo and Kim say goodbye at the airport, fearing that it will be too risky to travel together. She boards the plane without too much trouble, and soon she is flying over South Korea. The border between North and South Korea is narrow, but the two countries are worlds apart. Suddenly, the pilot announces their descent, and Hyeonseo hears the wheels engage for landing. She is in Seoul. As the plane lands, Hyeonseo thinks of Mother and Min-ho. Will she ever see them again?

Hyeonseo is obviously dreaming of going to South Korea because she is falling in love with Kim. However, Hyeonseo doesn't have any rights, and she can't simply go to South Korea to be with her South Korean boyfriend. What seems so simple for some is completely out of the question for North Korean women like Hyeonseo.



The fact the Hyeonseo hasn't told her boyfriend, whom she loves, that she is North Korean illustrates just how far she is forced to go in denying her true identity. Hyeonseo should be able to freely share things with Kim without any fear of consequences or arrest, but she can't. This again illustrates Hyeonseo's oppression and suggests that as a North Korean, she has few of the human rights that are often taken for granted elsewhere. Mother's belief that South Korea is the enemy again reflects how effective the regime's indoctrination is.



The fact that Korean-Chinese people are of low status in South Korea underscores the importance of nationality in Korean culture. Korean-Chinese are treated badly because they aren't, strictly speaking, Korean. This sequence of events also reflects Hyeonseo's denial of her true identity. Even her boyfriend didn't know who she really was, and Hyeonseo isn't sure anymore, either.



Hyeonseo's trip into South Korea is surprisingly easy, which is not the usual experience. Lee includes a map of defector routes in the beginning of the book, and some North Koreans are forced to go through China and into a third country, like Mongolia or Burma, before finally getting into South Korea.



CHAPTER 37: WELCOME TO KOREA

Inside the airport, Hyeonseo makes her way to the immigration counter and stands in the line for foreigners. When she finally gets to the counter, Hyeonseo tells the man behind the counter that she is North Korean and is looking for asylum. A woman appears and asks if she is telling the truth, suspecting that Hyeonseo is Chinese and looking to gain South Korean citizenship. Hyeonseo tells the woman that she is in fact North Korean, and the woman leads her to an interrogation room. Hyeonseo smiles at the irony. Not so long ago, she convinced an interrogator that she wasn't North Korean, and now here she is, trying to convince another interrogator of the exact opposite.

After a couple of hours, the woman leads Hyeonseo out of the airport to a waiting car. She is told that hundreds of North Koreans are showing up each week from Mongolia and Thailand, and she watches as Seoul passes in the window. The wealth of the buildings and people shock her. South Korea is not at all the country she had been told about as a child. Soon, the car arrives at the National Intelligence Service processing center. Her investigation will begin here.

CHAPTER 38: THE WOMEN

Hyeonseo spends her first night in Seoul in a general detention room with 30 other North Korean women. Violence occurs often, even though poor behavior can hurt their chances for South Korean citizenship, and one of the women even tries to steal Hyeonseo's clothes. There is much talk of lesbians at the center, and everything happens there, including sex. Hyeonseo has previously had no idea that there are actually homosexual North Koreans. Until now, she thought homosexuality was a foreign phenomenon or a plotline from television devised for drama.

Two weeks later, Hyeonseo is moved to a solitary room, where she meets her interrogator. He is a kind man and tells her to write down as much of her story as she can, using as much detail as she can remember. After several days, the interrogator smiles and says he believes she is North Korean. He has been vetting people for over 14 years, he says, and can always spot a liar. Still, he claims Hyeonseo is part of the one percent. She arrived in Seoul, direct on a two-hour flight, without paying a broker. He asks if boarding the plane was her own idea. Hyeonseo tells him it was. "Then you're a genius," the interrogator says. The next morning, Hyeonseo wakes up relieved. It is the first night she hasn't had a nightmare in over 11 years.

There is also widespread suffering in China (although not quite to the extent of North Korea) So many undocumented Chinese immigrants try to enter South Korea in search of a better life. There are well over 200,000 undocumented Asian immigrants in South Korea, and many of them come from China.



As a child, Hyeonseo and the other North Korean children were taught that the South Koreans reside in poverty, living in shacks and eating garbage, but that isn't at all the reality. Ironically, the description of South Korea given by the regime more aptly describes the conditions in North Korea, which are a humanitarian nightmare.



Of course there are homosexuals in North Korea; they just remain in the closet so they are not targeted and abused. Homosexuality isn't technically illegal in North Korea—meaning there isn't a law in existence that specifically prohibits same-sex relationships—but any sex deemed inappropriate or obscene in North Korea is illegal, and homosexuality certainly falls under that umbrella.



The kindness of the South Korean interrogator again suggests there really is compassion in the world, especially in places where people aren't preoccupied with their own survival. It also implies that the officer accepts Hyeonseo as a Korean, not just a North Korean. Again, the ease with which Hyeonseo makes it into South Korea is not the usual experience for most North Korean defectors. Some journeys to freedom can take years. However, the fact that Hyeonseo has been experiencing nightmares for 11 years suggests her journey wasn't really all that easy or quick; it's been underway ever since she crossed the river out of Hyesan.



CHAPTER 39: HOUSE OF UNITY

Hyeonseo is loaded onto a bus with several other North Koreans and taken to Anseong, in Gyeonggi Province. She soon discovers that true freedom is terrifying, but she vows to make a good life for herself in South Korea. The facility is sparse, but clean, and she is given an allowance for snacks and a phone card. Hyeonseo immediately calls Kim, who is delighted to hear her voice. Next, she calls Ok-hee. Ok-hee arrived on a ferry and was processed much more quickly than Hyeonseo. She is already living in an apartment in Seoul. Then Hyeonseo calls Mother, who tells her about Min-ho's new girlfriend, a lovely young girl of high songbun. Hyeonseo feels a sting of sadness. She will likely never meet Min-ho's love.

At the facility, Hyeonseo and the other North Koreans take classes on democracy and their rights, and they are warned about conmen who prey on asylum seekers. She is introduced to a priest and told that many North Koreans embrace the Catholic faith in their freedom. She also attends history classes, where she is taught the truth behind the unprovoked attack of the South that sparked the Korean War. Many of the North Koreans realize their country is bad, but they still find it difficult to accept the truth behind the war. For many, the truth is the “undoing of their lives.”

In order to prevent the formation of North Korean ghettos, the South Korean government spreads asylum seekers throughout the country, and no one gets to choose where they go. Hyeonseo's hopes to stay in Seoul are dashed when she learns that only 10 out of every 100 people are given housing in Seoul through a lottery system. She is given a number—number 11—and waits to be called. As the officer calls off the numbers selected for housing in Seoul, Hyeonseo is shocked and relieved to hear him call number 11.

CHAPTER 40: THE LEARNING RACE

Hyeonseo's new apartment is small, unfurnished, and located near the subway station in Seoul. The first time she closes the door, she feels her freedom and begins to panic. She calls Ok-hee and asks to sleep at her apartment. Ok-hee is happy to see her, and she tells Hyeonseo about her troubles finding a job. Things are difficult for North Koreans in the South, Ok-hee says. Hyeonseo begins to understand that she is not a South Korean, either.

The treatment Hyeonseo receives by the South Korean government reflects her rights as a human being. She has a right to clean and safe housing, and she has a right to try to make her life the absolute best it can be. The South Koreans make sure these rights are met, which is not the case across the border in North Korea. But at the same time, Min-ho is clearly comfortable and happy living in North Korea, and he doesn't appear to have any plans to defect.



North Korean reluctance to believe the truth behind the Korean War again reflects how effective the ideological indoctrination is in North Korea, but it also reflects the North Koreans' connection to their homeland. No one wants to believe that their government has perpetrated terrible atrocities, and being forced to face such things has serious effects on one's identity.



The use of the lottery system suggests the South Korean government is at least trying to be fair in assigning housing to the refugees. The best housing—that in Seoul—is given out randomly, not based on one's songbun or loyalty to the government as housing is allotted in North Korea.



Despite South Korea's claims that North Koreans are Koreans, too, there is still obvious discrimination against them. Plus, Hyeonseo doesn't have much, and the government can't be expected to take care of everyone (it is, after all, a capitalist state), so immigrants like Hyeonseo are often poor and have fewer opportunities.



The next day, Kim flies in from Shanghai and takes Hyeonseo to the movies. All the signs are written in English, however, and Hyeonseo doesn't understand the language. She knows she must learn fast if she is ever going to fit in. She learns that social status is important in South Korea, too, only one's status is based on education, not songbun. Many North Korean defectors are uneducated, which means they are given only the most menial jobs. Hyeonseo had kept her identity secret for years in China, and now she wonders if she will have to do the same in South Korea.

Hyeonseo decides to enroll in a six-month course to become a tax accountant, but Kim suggests she apply to the university. Becoming a doctor or lawyer will impress his parents, Kim says. That summer, Hyeonseo watches the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games on television, and she silently roots for North Korea. The Olympics strike an identity crisis of sorts deep inside her. Is she North Korean? Or Chinese? Or South Korean? Hyeonseo doesn't know anymore.

Hyeonseo still talks to Mother every weekend. The incident with the bag of money has gained the negative attention of the Bowibu, and Mother has to keep bribing the officers to avoid being sent into exile in the mountains. Hyesan is getting worse, Mother says, and the famine has returned. Still, she refuses to leave. She will never leave North Korea, Mother says.

Hyeonseo finishes her course on accounting and finds a job at a law firm with a respectable salary, but Kim continues to encourage the university. Hyeonseo wonders if she has what it takes. Plus, by the time she graduates, she will be nearly 34 years old. She contacts a professional name-giver, and for \$45 is given a new name: Hyeonseo. She decides she will never change her name again. It is the summer of 2009, and Hyeonseo is finally beginning to feel settled, until she is again knocked down.

CHAPTER 41: WAITING FOR 2012

Mother tells Hyeonseo that the famine is worsening, but relief will come in 2012—the centenary of the birth of Kim Il-sung, when North Korea will finally be prosperous. Hyeonseo knows nothing will change come 2012, but Mother won't listen. Then, wanted posters are plastered all over Hyesan for the secretary of the Socialist Youth League, who was thought to have defected. Suddenly, Mother decides that perhaps she will leave, too. Min-ho, however, will never agree to come with her. He has a business and is planning to marry soon.

These events again speak to Hyeonseo's difficulties in expressing her true identity. If she hides her identity as a North Korean, she will likely be given more opportunities than she might get otherwise, which is evidence of the oppression of the North Korean people, even when they're living in South Korea with South Korean citizenship.



North Korea only sporadically participates in the Olympic games. In 2008, North Korea participated in the Summer Olympics, but not the corresponding Winter Olympics. To date, North Korea has won 56 Olympic medals, including 16 gold medals. Hyeonseo's support of the North Korean team further reflects her connection to her homeland, even as she grows more and more confused about her identity.



Mother's refusal to leave North Korea reflects her own connection to her country. She doesn't want to leave, even though she admits it is terrible. Regardless of the repression and suffering, it is still Mother's country, and like Hyeonseo does, she loves it.



The seventh and final time Hyeonseo changes her name reflects the more stable identity she is growing into. Lee explains the meaning behind her name in the book's introduction, and for the first time, Hyeonseo's identity reflects who she really is. Except, of course, for the fact that she can never return to her home country. Still, at least by this point Hyeonseo doesn't have to conceal who she is.



The North Koreans' belief that relief will come with the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung again reflects the power of the indoctrination in North Korea, and the self-importance of the Kim regime to propagate such an arbitrary and ridiculous belief. There is real suffering in North Korea, but the government simply preaches relief that will never come. Min-ho's refusal to leave again illustrates his own connection to his home nation, which stays strong no matter how bad things get.



Hyeonseo contacts a reverend in Seoul who often helps North Koreans escape, but his services involve brokers and thousands of dollars. The journey across China is long—over 2,000 miles—and very difficult. Hyeonseo is averse to the use of brokers, so she decides to go to Changbai and meet Mother on the riverbank. Hyeonseo will guide her through China herself.

Hyeonseo's willingness to guide her mother 2,000 miles across China by herself reflects the importance of family in her life. The journey is long and dangerous—they could both be arrested, Mother for being a defector and Hyeonseo for helping her, and there are also other dangers, like human traffickers and conmen.



CHAPTER 42: A PLACE OF GHOSTS AND WILD DOGS

Hyeonseo feels her stomach flutter with nerves as she rings the bell to Aunt Sang-hee and Uncle Jung-gil's door. Aunt Sang-hee answers and is genuinely happy to see Hyeonseo. Hyeonseo repaid her debt to them years before, and she learned that Geun-soo had since married. It is clear to Hyeonseo that Aunt Sang-hee has forgiven her for leaving so abruptly years earlier, which is good, because Hyeonseo needs another favor. She will need Aunt Sang-hee's ID card if she is to get Mother out of China safely.

The need for Aunt Sang-hee's ID card to safely get Mother across China again highlights how limited options are for North Korean people. Mother can't simply travel across China; she has to lie and pretend to be someone else. Sang-hee's happiness to see Hyeonseo also underscores the importance of family in the book; their connection is more important to her than the trouble Hyeonseo presumably caused when she ran away.



Aunt Sang-hee agrees to let Hyeonseo borrow her ID card. It is September 2009, and by the time Hyeonseo arrives in Changbai, it is almost three o'clock in the morning. She checks into an expensive hotel—one she hopes no Bowibu will ever look for North Korean defectors at—and calls Min-ho to confirm their plans. He will guide Mother across the Yalu River tomorrow evening between seven and eight o'clock. Mother has already bribed a hospital doctor to file a fake death certificate. As far as the government is concerned, mother died on her way to Hamhung.

Mother's bribe ensures that her absence won't be noticed by the secret police, but it also ensures that she can never return to North Korea. If she does, the government may find out that she faked her own death and defected, and she would likely be punished and even executed.



At 6:15 the next evening, Hyeonseo arrives on the riverbank and waits. By 8:15, there is still no sign of Mother or Min-ho. Another hour passes, and Hyeonseo's phone rings. It is Min-ho. We have a problem, he says.

The continued problems Hyeonseo and her family experience throughout the entire book underscore just how difficult it is to defect from North Korea and evade the regime.



CHAPTER 43: AN IMPOSSIBLE DILEMMA

When Min-ho and mother attempted to cross the river, they ran straight into a border guard. Luckily, it was a guard Min-ho knew well, and he didn't arrest them. The entire area is in lockdown, however, and they won't be able to attempt another crossing for several hours. The next morning, Min-ho calls again. He and Mother have made it safely across and are hiding in an old house in Changbai. Hyeonseo runs outside. It has been over 11 years since she has seen her mother.

Eleven years without seeing her mother have been extremely difficult for Hyeonseo, which further reflects the importance of family in North Korean culture; despite all she's gained, she's still eager to reunite with her mother. The fact that the guard lets them go is evidence of the corruption of the secret police. The guard likely lets them go because Min-ho has made money for the guard, who is being oppressed by the Kim regime just as Hyeonseo's family is.



When Hyeonseo is reunited with Min-ho and Mother, there is no time for talking. She rushes them to a cab and safely to her hotel room. Hyeonseo closes and locks the door, and Mother breaks down in tears. She has aged 12 years in the last 12 hours, Mother says. Hyeonseo can't believe she is finally with her mother and brother. It has been nearly eight years since her short visit with Min-ho at Mr. Ahn's house, and she doesn't recognize the man standing in front of her. Suddenly, she is struck again with sadness. Min-ho will be crossing the river back into North Korea the very next day.

Suddenly, Min-ho's phone rings. He was spotted going across the river with a woman (Mother is dead as far as the authorities are concerned), and he has been accused of human trafficking. If he returns now with the woman, there will be little trouble; however, if he returns alone, he will be prosecuted as a trafficker. Min-ho looks to Hyeonseo. He can't go back, Min-ho says. "We'll leave together," Hyeonseo says. "We'll do the best we can."

CHAPTER 44: JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

The next day, Hyeonseo goes to the train station to buy three tickets, but the man behind the counter asks for her ID and the IDs of those she will be traveling with. She goes back to the hotel and asks Min-ho if he knows anyone who has an ID they can borrow. Min-ho finds a business contact who owes him a favor. The man is several years older than Min-ho, but the gender matches, and Hyeonseo hopes it will be enough.

Using Aunt Sang-hee's ID and the ID belonging to Min-ho's business contact, Hyeonseo buys three tickets for a train leaving at 2:00 the next day. Miraculously, the train leaves on time, and their voyage begins. Less than five minutes into the ride, the train stops, and several officers from the People's Armed Police board the train. Hyeonseo lifts her phone and snaps a picture of the guard. The guard is upset and tells her to delete the picture. Taking pictures of guards is illegal, he says. Hyeonseo flirts with the guard, telling him she only wanted a picture of a handsome man in uniform. The guard walks away, irritated, and Hyeonseo slumps in her seat. She has 2,000 miles left of this. How will they ever make it?

This, too, reflects just how close Hyeonseo is with her family and how long it has been since she has been with them. Lee says in the opening pages of the book that family togetherness is the most important thing in the world. Thus, the 11 years Hyeonseo spends away from her family must be absolute torture.



Human trafficking is just one of the human rights abuses experienced by North Korean defectors. While it is impossible to ascertain how many people are trafficked crossing the border into China, it is estimated that 70% of them are women exploited for sex.



Travel is tightly monitored in China as well, likely as a way to identify North Korean defectors and other undocumented immigrants. Still, the security is rather lax, and even though the age is wildly wrong on Min-ho's ID, it is enough to get him by.



The People's Armed Police is the North Korean police, not the Chinese police, which further reflects the power and reach of the North Korean regime. Hyeonseo and her family are not safe from the North Korean government just because they have left the country. The North Korean police have the authority to apprehend them in China, too, and bring them back to North Korea for punishment.



CHAPTER 45: UNDER A VAST ASIAN SKY

Aunt Sang-hee wants Hyeonseo to bring Mother and Min-ho to Shenyang, but there is no time. Their journey across China will take nearly a week, and they will have to cross eight large provinces. Nearly a week later, they arrive in Zhengzhou Province, and Hyeonseo begins to feel excited. They are set to meet a broker at the border to bring them into Vietnam, but Hyeonseo instantly has a bad feeling about him.

The broker is upset. He was not planning on Min-ho being with them, but Hyeonseo finally convinces him that she will pay extra once she gets back to Seoul. Then the broker tells her that he will be taking them through Laos. Vietnam is too risky, he says, but Hyeonseo will have to head back to Seoul without them for the time being. She refuses, but the broker won't help unless she follows his instructions exactly. Hyeonseo finally agrees. She gives Min-ho \$150 and has him memorize her number in Seoul.

After the broker leaves with Min-ho and Mother, Hyeonseo decides to stay in Kunming in China. The next day, Min-ho calls her cellphone and tells her that they have made it to Laos. Hyeonseo is relieved and decides to finally return Kim's calls. She has been ignoring his texts all week. She tells Kim that she is in China and that she has gotten her mother and brother out of North Korea and safely into Laos. Kim can't believe she has lied to him again, but he is looking forward to hearing the story. As Hyeonseo readies herself to leave China, her phone rings again. It is the broker. Min-ho and Mother have been picked up by the police.

CHAPTER 46: LOST IN LAOS

The broker is no help in telling Hyeonseo where the Laotian police took Mother and Min-ho, but he thinks they are probably in Luang Namtha. Hyeonseo didn't even know Laos existed, even though the country is communist and an ally of North Korea. She hails a cab and heads to the airport. It is Friday night when Hyeonseo arrives in Laos, and she must wait until Monday to go to the immigration office. The immigration officer is kind but distracted, and speaks to her in Mandarin. Yes, the officer says, two North Koreans were picked up at the border and brought to the immigration office.

Hyeonseo has had bad experiences with brokers in the past, and this one proves to be no different. The Zhengzhou Province is large, and extends into Central China, but they are moving closer to China's border with Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, which illustrates just how long their journey has been.



Hyeonseo's reluctance to leave her family and her initial refusal to do again reinforces how deeply important to her they are. The broker's own reluctance to help Min-ho suggests that he isn't a broker because he wants to help those oppressed by the North Korean regime; he is simply in it for the money, which underscores Lee's theory that kindness in the world is rare.



Kim's quick acceptance of Hyeonseo's dishonesty illustrates his fondness for her and his kindness and good nature, but the fact that Hyeonseo doesn't tell him the truth in the first place reflects the habits Hyeonseo has grown accustomed to as a North Korean refugee. She hasn't been able to be honest with people about her identity in the past, and she can't very easily stop now, even though she has South Korean citizenship and freedom.



Hyeonseo's complete ignorance of the existence of Laos again illustrates how limited her education was in North Korea. North Korean children are taught very limited information about the outside world, even about countries like Laos who aren't enemies of North Korea. Laos is a country that borders China and Vietnam in Southeast Asia, and Luang Namtha is the capital of the country's northernmost province.



CHAPTER 47: WHATEVER IT TAKES

At the immigration office, Hyeonseo is told that she must make an official request to see Mother and Min-ho. She spends the next week bribing the officers with money and cigarettes, and then she must call Kim in Seoul and ask him to wire her more money. He agrees, and seven days later, Hyeonseo is allowed inside the women's prison to see Mother; however, she won't be able to see Min-ho on the men's side.

Prison officials tell Hyeonseo it will take at least six months and \$5,000 to get Mother and Min-ho out of prison. She finally talks them down to \$700 a piece, but she still doesn't have enough money. Plus, she realizes, her own visa is about to expire. Hyeonseo is told she can travel to Vientiane, the capital of Laos, and apply for a new visa, but this too will cost her several hundred dollars. Hyeonseo doesn't know what to do, so she throws her head back and closes her eyes. Then, a kind English voice interrupts her thoughts. "Are you a traveler?" the voice asks.

Kim's willingness to wire Hyeonseo money in Laos is more proof of kindness and compassion in the world. Like North Korea, the Laotian government is terribly corrupt, and they extort all of Hyeonseo's money out of her, which again demonstrates how oppression follows vulnerable people like Hyeonseo everywhere.



The difficulties Hyeonseo faces in Laos and the extreme expense of both the bribe and her travel visa underscores the privilege implied in traveling through the country; it's only a simple process for people with ample resources. Hyeonseo doesn't have any money, and Mother and Min-ho are both refugees seeking asylum, and their situation highlights the human rights violations against North Koreans, even in Laos. Furthermore, there is a huge difference between \$5,000 and \$700, which implies just how corrupt the Laotian government is.



CHAPTER 48: THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

The man, Dick Stolp, sits down next to Hyeonseo, and she tells him that she is trying to get two North Koreans out of the local prison but has run out of money. The man is kind, from Perth, Australia, and he is the first white person Hyeonseo has ever spoken to. He tells her to wait and goes across the street to an ATM. Dick comes back and hands her a large wad of green money. Hyeonseo asks why he is helping her, but he says he isn't. "I'm helping the North Korean people," Dick says.

The next day, Dick takes Hyeonseo to the prison and pays for the release of Min-ho, Mother, and three other North Koreans, and then he disappears. The police tell Hyeonseo and the others to go directly to Vientiane to the South Korean embassy, and when they arrive, a female officer guides Hyeonseo away from the group. Hyeonseo is reluctant to leave Min-ho and Mother, but the woman insists. The woman speaks in Lao, through an interpreter, and asks Hyeonseo if she knows why she is being questioned. Hyeonseo says she doesn't. "Because you're a criminal," the female officer says.

The fact that Dick Stolp is the first white person Hyeonseo has ever spoken to illustrates just how guarded Hyeonseo's life was in North Korea, and to some extent in China, too. Westerners are a rare sight in North Korea, and travel warnings and bans for American travelers especially are common in North Korea.



Hyeonseo is certainly not a criminal—she is simply trying to get her mother and brother to safety—but the Laotian government treats her like one, which again speaks to how common human rights abuses against North Koreans are. But at the same time, the random kindness of Dick Stolp further proves that there really is kindness and compassion in the world. Dick doesn't know them, and he has no reason to help them, other than the fact that he truly cares about humanity and has the financial resources to do something about it.



CHAPTER 49: SHUTTLE DIPLOMACY

Hyeonseo is accused of being a broker and illegally assisting North Koreans through Laos. Hyeonseo explains they are not criminals, just refugees seeking asylum, but the woman won't listen. She leaves Hyeonseo alone in the room, and Hyeonseo slips out the back door. She finds the South Korean embassy, and a diplomat returns to the police station with her. Hyeonseo has been charged with being a broker. If she doesn't pay a \$1,300 fine, she will be sent to prison. The diplomat can do nothing to help, as the embassy has no real authority in Laos. In Hyeonseo's wallet is the \$800 from Dick Stolp. The female officer takes the money, extends Hyeonseo's visa by 24 hours, and tells her if she is still in the country tomorrow, she will definitely be arrested.

Outside in the street, Hyeonseo is again at a loss over what to do. The police have taken all her money and she has nothing left. Suddenly, her phone rings. It is Dick Stolp. Hyeonseo is beginning to think he is some kind of divine being, and even though she doesn't want to, she asks him to cover her travel expenses. He immediately agrees, and Hyeonseo promises to pay him back. She leaves Laos the next morning.

The next day, Hyeonseo is relaxing on Kim's couch in Seoul. It is the first week of December. She has been gone for over two months, but she is feeling positive about getting Min-ho and Mother into South Korea. Weeks later, Hyeonseo has heard nothing from the embassy in Laos, until her phone rings unexpectedly. It is Min-ho. He is being held in Phonthong Prison in Laos.

CHAPTER 50: LONG WAIT FOR FREEDOM

Min-ho tells Hyeonseo that both he and Mother are being held in Phonthong Prison and have seen no one from the South Korean embassy. Two months later, Hyeonseo receives a phone call that Min-ho and Mother have been released to the South Korean embassy and processed through the Laotian government. Six months later, Min-ho and Mother are finally released to the National Intelligence Service in Seoul. It is the spring of 2010, and it is finally over.

By extorting the last of Hyeonseo's money, the Laotian government all but ensures she won't be able to leave the country, which practically guarantees her subsequent arrest and imprisonment. \$800 is a lot of money, and it is only the extra money Dick gave her after paying to get Min-ho and Mother out of police custody, which further highlights Dick's extreme kindness (and, presumably, his wealth). Dick doesn't just give Hyeonseo his pocket change or buy her something to eat; he ostensibly spends thousands of dollars helping her family and the other North Korean prisoners.



Again, there is no end to Dick's kindness and generosity, which proves the world isn't as cold a place as Hyeonseo initially believed it is. In a way, Dick's kindness restores Hyeonseo's faith in humanity by making it clear that in less oppressive circumstances, people really do have a deep capacity for kindness.



Phonthong Prison is a prison for foreigners in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. The prison holds both men and women, and it is notorious for its rough conditions and human rights violations. Prisoners are given very little food, and they are known to be tortured through approaches such as waterboarding.



The fact that it takes Min-ho and Mother six months to make it from Phonthong Prison to the custody of the South Korean government again reflects the corruption of the Laotian government and the human rights violations suffered there, similar to North Korea. Compared to Hyeonseo's quick two-hour flight from China into Seoul, Mother and Min-ho's experience is a nightmare. They are clearly not part of the 1%.



CHAPTER 51: A SERIES OF SMALL MIRACLES

Min-ho and Mother's vetting process is much longer than Hyeonseo's was, and they are sent to Hanawon for three months. During this time, Hyeonseo decides to have a talk with Kim. She knows they don't have a future now that her family will be joining her. Kim agrees, and he knows that his own family will never accept hers. They part as friends, and Kim leaves before she breaks down and cries.

Hanawon is a Settlement Support Center for North Korean Refugees in South Korea. A three-month stay at Hanawon is mandatory, and refugees are permitted to leave. They receive services and education there and are prepared to enter free society, which can often be a shock to North Koreans.



CHAPTER 52: "I AM PREPARED TO DIE"

In September of 2010, Hyeonseo is accepted to Hankuk University. Min-ho has his own apartment and a job at a construction company, and Mother works as a maid in a hotel. There are 27,000 North Koreans living in the South, and for those who had a rough life in North Korea, the adjustment is easy. However, for people of high *songbun*, like Mother, the adjustment period isn't so easy. She misses Aunt Pretty and her other siblings badly, and one day, she tells Hyeonseo that she wants to go back. She knows she will die one day soon, and she wants to die in North Korea. Luckily, Hyeonseo is able to talk her out of it, but she knows her mother's life in South Korea will never be easy.

*Mother's desire to die in North Korea reflects the deep connection she feels to her family and her homeland. For Mother, like Hyeonseo, her North Korean heritage is a core part of her identity, and it can't be denied. Mother's difficulty adjusting to a menial job and her rather poor existence in South Korea reflects the privilege her high *songbun* afforded her in North Korea. Working as a maid is beneath Mother's status, and it makes her life in South Korea feel exceedingly difficult.*



One day, Min-ho calls Hyeonseo from the banks of the Yalu River in Changbai. He is going back, Min-ho says. He doesn't know how to live in South Korea. At least in North Korea, he knows how to live and make money. Hyeonseo begs him to stay. He will surely be killed if he returns, but he is adamant. Hyeonseo suggests they all move to America and get out of Korea entirely. They are free now, and they can go wherever they want. Min-ho agrees with reluctance to come back to Seoul, but Hyeonseo knows Min-ho will never be happy either.

*Like Mother and Hyeonseo, Min-ho, too, feels a deep connection to his North Korean heritage, which is also part of his core identity. This reflects the importance of nationality on one's identity and makes his life as an exile very difficult. Min-ho also has a tough time living and working a menial job. Like Mother, he is used to the privilege of their high *songbun*.*



CHAPTER 53: THE BEAUTY OF A FREE MIND

Soon after Min-ho and Mother arrive in South Korea, Ok-hee introduces Hyeonseo to an organization called PSCORE (People for Successful Corean Reunification), where Hyeonseo meets several male Westerners, who remind her of Dick Stolp. At one meeting, Hyeonseo meets Brian, a kind young man from Wisconsin in the United States. They soon begin dating, and Hyeonseo quickly falls in love with him. Brian is the first completely free mind Hyeonseo has ever known.

Ever since the division of Korea in 1948 into North and South Korea, many Koreans—and others across the world—have advocated for reunification to ensure an end to political unrest. Several other countries have reunited in similar ways in the past, like East and West Germany and North and South Vietnam, and many hope Korea will one day, too.



When Hyeonseo introduces Brian to Mother and Min-ho, they instantly believe he is “an American bastard.” Some convictions, Hyeonseo says, cannot change overnight. Hyeonseo begins to speak professionally and advocate against human rights abuses in North Korea. To know one’s rights are being abused, Hyeonseo says, one must first realize they have rights in the first place. Then, in December 2011, Hyeonseo and Mother see on a news program that Kim Jong-il has died and has been succeeded by his son, Kim Jong-un.

Hyeonseo is selected to give a TED talk (a lecture at a prominent technology, education, and design conference that is held annually), and she even goes to New York City to speak before the United Nations alongside several other defectors from a North Korean gulag. Dictatorships, Hyeonseo says, are not as strong as they may seem. She doesn’t know how long the suffering will continue under Kim Jong-un—probably until Korea is finally reunited—but she will keep fighting for the rights of North Koreans until it does. In the meantime, Hyeonseo’s relationship with Brian strengthens, and she soon asks Mother for her blessing to marry him.

EPILOGUE

Hyeonseo searches the internet trying to find Dick Stolp but is unsuccessful, until he finally sends her an email after her TED talk. She can feel herself healing after her long journey from North Korea, and she notices that even Mother cries less now. Mother still misses her siblings in North Korea, of course, but she too is adjusting. Mother even accompanies Hyeonseo and Brian to Chicago in America. If only Grandmother could see them now, Hyeonseo thinks, she wouldn’t believe her eyes.

Mother and Min-ho’s belief that Brian is an “American bastard” again reflects the effectiveness of ideological indoctrination in North Korea. North Korean citizens are constantly encouraged to hate Americans, and their arbitrary dislike of Brian is proof of this. Hyeonseo’s dedication to the human rights of North Koreans underscores the importance of the rights of others, both in the book and within humanity as a whole.



The fact that Hyeonseo seeks Mother’s blessing before marrying Brian highlights the importance of family in her life and within Korean culture in general. Even though Mother remains biased against Brian, Hyeonseo still values her opinion and wants to remain close with her. Kim Jong-un is the current dictator of North Korea, and he is the latest in the multigenerational Kim regime. Oppression and human rights violations continue under Kim Jong-un, and North Koreans are still defecting and risking their lives for the opportunity to be free.



Hyeonseo’s Grandmother was an ardent communist, and seeing her family in America would come as a particular shock to her. Dick Stolp is a large part of the reason why Hyeonseo is able to heal after her experiences in North Korea and later as a defector. Dick finally proved to Hyeonseo that good and kind people do exist in the world, a lesson she badly needed and greatly appreciates.





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