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The Great Homecoming

Novel

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Roman)

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Prologue (narrated by Hanna)

The thirsty late afternoon light made the pine trees appear greener, lush and cast a shadow play on the walls. It was the light I remembered, a light I had seen for the first time many years ago, when it made the drab façades of the old city shimmer; later, the monsoon would wash away the colour and transform the city into a steaming basin, the sky a lead-grey expanse, and the many odours, cooked by the summer heat and infused with damp, would become more intense than I had known in any other place. Today, and here, however, in the former American missionary quarter, in front of the only ground-level house on the street--surrounded, like all the other houses in the quarter, by a brown wall that protected the house from view, part of a labyrinth of which only fragments survive in old Seoul--it smelled mouldy, neither of spices nor of fruits; a rusty drying rack with crumpled washing stood on the pavement; and music trickled out from inside the house, a mewling trumpet, the pitter of the piano, a plodding bass, and finally, louder than the accompaniment, the voice of Billie Holiday.

In my solitude

You taunt me

With memories

That never die

I had just decided to wait for the end of the song, to use the silence between the tracks to knock on the door, when a man's voice pushed through the crack in the window.

"What are you waiting for? Or are you spying on me? If you are, then you're a goddamn awful spy, so I really hope you're the translator. Come in then, if you're here already!"

I didn't understand the last, mumbled words. I was wondering whether or not I should ask the voice to repeat itself, when it barked: "Come on, what are you waiting for?"

As soon as I stepped inside the house, I found myself in a place which consisted entirely of music, in a cavern of noises and sounds. A long moment passed before a picture began to develop; the surroundings filled with colour and detail, I made out plants in pots, cushions on the couch, pictures on the walls, figures and books on the dark shelves which swallowed the scant light. At first I thought there were only a few books, but in fact they were everywhere, stacked up from the floor – I was in a library. Only then did I see the man who was crouched on the floor; my colleagues called him *the archivist*.

"You look Korean", he said, staring at me with piercing eyes. "Not a bit like a German."

Yunho Kang studied me from beneath the cover of twilight; I was standing in the spot of light that came in through the window. "I'm both", I answered.

"Did I understand correctly that you were adopted by a German couple?"

"Yes."

"How old were you?"

"I was four."

"Can you still remember Korea?"

I shook my head.

"And how could you, really. Is this your first visit here?"

"No, my second."

"What do you know about your homeland?"

I looked at him, puzzled; he rephrased his question: "I mean, have you studied Korean history? Or the language?"

"Both", I answered.

"And you speak English?"

"I lived in London for a while."

He tapped a cigarette out of its crumpled packaging and lit it.

"Were you surprised by my request?"

I hesitated with my answer; I don't know why.

I'd already been asked to translate a few times, I said eventually, there was obviously a demand for it. He looked at me for a moment, then nodded slowly. "You're very tall", he said, "and your ears are big too. As big as mandarins."

He smiled.

"How long have you been working for the Maryknoll Order?"

"For the past two weeks."

"What are your duties?"

"I deliver food."

"To the old and sick?"

"Primarily to the old and sick. Sometimes I help in the office too."

"Why are you doing that? Couldn't find any other work?"

"I haven't really started to look yet."

He nodded again. Could I understand him, he asked, or was he speaking too quickly?

"Just about", I answered.

"Just about. Where did you learn Korean?"

"At university."

"At university."

Yunho repeated my sentences, as though he needed to make sure he had understood me correctly.

Later he said: "You have a Japanese accent."

"I have a Japanese accent?" I asked; I was echoing him too. It was my intonation, he explained. "I don't sing, I speak," he said, "I push the words in front of me. When you speak, you whirl them up, you throw them."

He took a deep drag on the cigarette.

"Don't worry," he said, breathing the smoke out slowly. "It sounds sweet."

When I answered, I made an effort neither to throw nor whirl. He had a singsong to his voice as well, I said, forcing mine to an emergency landing. He looked at me thoughtfully. No-one had ever told him that before, he said, it must be his belly-button laughing, and as if to ensure that no laughter escaped, he laid a hand on his stomach.

Yunho was seventy-eight years old, and besides Korean spoke fluent Japanese and a little Chinese. His hair was silvery, wavy and shoulder-length. Because he thought his bald patch was getting bigger, he carefully eyed every hair that fell out, inspecting the root before he placed it in the bin; he didn't throw it, he placed it, just as he didn't walk, but sauntered, the dark pinstripe trousers flapping around his legs, the contours of his lower abdomen visible through his white shirt. The trousers, which had been worn thin by many washes, reached far above his waist, only to be pulled up even further by grey suspenders. Yunho never went out without his cane, gloves, hat and glasses, the latter having belonged to his father, and he didn't really look any better in them, even though he convinced himself he did.

He used the polite form of address when speaking to me, which I wasn't used to; I knew spoken Korean only from my nanny, Yōnghee Maria, who I had always called Young Maria--even though I was surprised that an elderly woman, who seemed almost ancient to me at the time, would refer to herself as young despite no longer being so; I thought she called herself that because she had never, in fact, been young.

When I was a child, Young Maria had taken me under her wing, feeding me Korean sentences and delicacies while she carried out small jobs around the house. In the evenings she would fetch her ironing board, an old pillowcase stuffed with newspapers, and crouch down on the floor with a pile of clean washing next to her. She didn't pass the iron over the clothes, but instead just pressed it down on them; she was afraid of the steam and claimed that the device was snorting with rage. We ironed in the evenings, when Monika and Wolfgang, who I didn't want to call mother and father, had gone out, and I lay happily on the strangely soft linoleum floor next to Young Maria, beneath the yellow kitchen light, while she pressed the washing and told me stories about a time in Korea when the noble young ladies, shrouded in floor-length silk cloaks, their faces concealed beneath their hoods, were permitted to go out in the dusky glow of the gas lanterns. Men wouldn't take to the streets at this hour, only the blind and

royal messengers were permitted to mix with the ladies, and the blind masseurs would take out their flutes and begin to play, their sad melodies wandering through the city; sometimes a window would open, and they would be invited inside. The dogs, seduced by the strains of the flute, struck up a song of their own, which was accompanied by the rhythmic knocking from the working-class women, who beat their washing with wooden clubs to smooth it out. She sighed, stroked my hand and said that the birds' cries were much more beautiful, and I called out: "But Young Maria, birds can't cry!"

Whenever I think of Young Maria, I remember the doll which I used to take with me everywhere, to school, to my piano lessons. She slept in the front compartment of my rucksack, and sometimes beside me on the couch; she didn't fit in my trouser pockets, and my skirts had none—a shortcoming which led to their banishment in the Siberia of my wardrobe. One day, when she was lying on the floor next to me, Young Maria took off her headscarf and used it to strap the doll to my back. Now I could carry her like a Korean mother carries her baby, she said, in Korea there were no prams and the women always had their infants strapped to their backs, which is much more practical than pushing them around in some little house.

As I galloped across the living room with my doll strapped to my back, a thought suddenly came to me. Had I been carried on my mother's back too? I asked. "By your mother?" asked Young Maria. "Yes", I answered, begging her to demonstrate.

She looked at me for a long while; despite her brown eyes, she had a bright, cool gaze, alert and hard, but on that day it was dark and soft, framed by short curls. She had treated herself to a perm at the hairdressers, though normally she did it herself, letting me watch while she put in the curlers, sprayed on the white fixing spray and uttered the strangest of curse words.

I remember she sighed loudly, before eventually answering: "No, *Hannaja*, no. Your mother didn't get to know you, she separated from you immediately after the birth. She left you with the pastor, who introduced you to your German parents."

She left me with the pastor who introduced me to my German parents.

It was this sentence which, years later, prompted me to give notice at my job and hand back the keys to my apartment; this sentence which put me on a plane and brought me to a country where I knew only a single living soul.

When I arrived, I realized I had forgotten to take any lightweight clothing with me, so I was constantly hunting for air conditioning, open windows and doors. I slept through the first few days, confused by the time difference; I thought it was evening when it was actually morning, and the light confused me, behaving unexpectedly: it seemed like the bright light of spring even though it was late summer.

Immediately after my arrival in Seoul, I made an attempt to find Young Maria. But her name, Yōnghee Jang, made it impossible, it was too normal, too *ordinary*--too many people had the same name.

Eventually I set off to the Maryknoll Brothers convent, with a city map and a dictionary in my rucksack, in the hope of finding work that would keep my head above water for a while.

Blue moon, sang Billie Holiday; and indeed we were on a blue moon, the floor lamp between us casting a bluish shimmer over the low tables and cushions which were scattered across the wooden floor, even giving a blue tinge to the smoke that escaped from the cigarette in the glass ashtray – and to Yunho’s profile, which, because he consistently avoided my gaze, I was able to study at leisure. After a while, I started to feel that I had before me not a human being, but a photograph, light and shadow that had been lent a semblance of life by a voice and a little smoke; it seemed fitting for this world, in which I dreamt through the days and stayed awake through the nights.

“Hanna,” he said, and from his mouth it sounded like *hana*, the number one in Korean, and in my head I counted on, *dul*, two, *set*, three, *net*, four, “will you look for your parents?”

I had been waiting for this question; I had hoped to wait in vain.

“Probably. I haven’t decided yet.”

He nodded. I should give it proper thought, he said, who knows who I would find, even the people you know well surprise you with their secret lives.

“Secret lives?”

“Yes. Everyone has secrets. Yourself included.”

“And you?”

He held my gaze but changed the subject.

“Am I right in thinking you’re a translator?”

I had resolved to be cautious, so I said: “From time to time.”

“And what languages do you translate from? English, Korean?”

“From English into German.”

“And from Korean?”

“Rarely.”

I reached for a cigarette. The last one I had smoked had been a year ago.

“Why do you ask?”

“I would like you to translate this letter for me.”

“A letter?”

He had received it a few days ago, he said, a letter from America, but he couldn’t read it. Yunho laid it on the table; the envelope was snowy white, the address written in block capitals, the script heavy-handed. He cleared his throat and mumbled, as if wanting to hide the words from me, that he believed it contained important words, and I was to tell him what they were.

He gave me the envelope, and I opened it and unfolded the piece of paper. It came from a retirement home in Richmond, Virginia. A Mrs Linda Miller wrote that Mrs Eve Lewis had *peacefully departed from us* on the night of the fourteenth to the fifteenth of the previous month. As Mr Lewis was already deceased and Mrs Lewis had no children, nor any relatives in the USA, the retirement home management had decided to send the notice to the only address which had been found amongst Mrs Lewis’s documents. Perhaps the addressee could inform Mrs Lewis’ relatives in South Korea of her passing?

With sincere thanks and sympathy,

Linda Miller

I didn't know what I should say; then I noticed that Yunho was crying. I stubbed out the cigarette, sat down next to him on the floor and passed him my handkerchief; it was crumpled. He took it, wiped the tears off the letter and said: So Eve is dead.

“Eve.”

He repeated, this time with the trace of a smile: “Eve Moon.”

He told me that he had never been able to pronounce her name correctly, that there was no W or V in Korean, just B. He looked at me thoughtfully. Why had she chosen such a difficult name, he asked?

He rummaged around in his trouser pocket, pulled out a packet of cigarettes. I said, without giving it much thought, that perhaps she had only intended to be addressed by Americans. He took a deep drag and nodded carefully, agreeing that this could be it. His silence and the crackle of the vinyl forced me to speak, and I heard myself ask: “Who was Eve Moon?”

He looked at me, his eyes clear and still. That was a question to which there was no easy answer, he said. “Do you really want to know who Eve was?”

He tapped the last cigarette out of the packet and lit it.

“The simple answer is this: she was Mrs Henry Lewis, Eve Lewis. But she was also Eve Moon, Yunmee Moon and Mizuki Takahashi. She had many names. I can still remember clearly where and when I saw her for the first time: in Johnny’s tiny room in Seoul, more than 50 years ago...”

Second extract (pp.115-125)

Chapter Four (narrated by Yunoh)

(...)

That evening, Mrs Kim was called up. We heard her name and froze; we thought women would be spared. As Johnny was unable to move from fear, he asked me to look out for his mother, perhaps this was a different Mrs Kim. I managed to push my way forward, using the grown-ups as cover...

And that was where I found him again, my stubborn, foolish brother--on the wrong side. He was sitting behind the group leaders, behind the leaders’ deputies, in the fourth or fifth row, in a corner. As soon as I saw Yunsu, I barely took in anything else from the hearing. I think I remember Mrs Kim being asked where her husband was and whether she knew that he was an enemy of the party and the country. That he had collaborated with the Japanese. That he was in cahoots with the Americans, and with the Dictator, Rhee. That he had betrayed his countrymen whenever it suited him. During the whole interrogation I watched Yunsu: he didn't bat an eyelash when Mrs Kim was beaten to the floor.

I crept back over to Johnny. He looked at me in despair; he had recognised her voice. He held his hands tightly over his ears as his mother began to cry.

Mrs Kim survived. She had to be carried home by two soldiers. Johnny followed them, while I slipped away. I wanted to speak to Yunsu; I had to know whether he had seen Mother.

I didn't have much time--midnight was just an hour away, and then it would be curfew.

It was easy to track down the billet of the People's Army, I just had to follow the noise. No sound, not even a whisper, emerged from the surrounding houses, many of which were still abandoned. The air smelt of smoke, burnt straw, burnt wood. The yellow squash blossoms were wilted, brown; the last fruits hung from the chili bushes. Apart from the fact the streets were empty, our village looked no different to usual, and yet it felt different.

The soldiers had taken up residence in the school, one of them was watching the entrance and he spotted me before I had the chance to hide. When I asked him about my brother, my voice trembled, and he patted me on the shoulder to calm me down. I let him. He said: "Wait a moment, I'll fetch him," and disappeared inside. I heard a murmur, the clack of hard soles on wood...

The chirp of the cicadas.

A rustling in the bushes.

The soft calls of a screech owl.

I remember the noises because I didn't dare to look up, all I could bring myself to do was listen. The door opened. It creaked more quietly than usual. Everything was quieter, more muffled. That's what war does, I remember thinking back then, it muffles all sounds; I was still a child.

Yunsu lit up a cigarette as soon as he was out in the open air. A roll-up. A little tobacco in a scrap of paper with print on it--the paper was probably from a book. I didn't know he smoked. He had always spoken contemptuously about Mr Kim's *decadent habits*, alcohol and nicotine.

He said he was happy that I had found him. He sat down, I stayed standing. I asked whether he had searched for me. He didn't answer, took a long drag of the cigarette. I asked, did he know where Mother was? He shook his head, breathed out the smoke. How was I doing? he asked. Good, I said, Mrs Kim had taken good care of me. He nodded. Good, he said and stood up. He knocked the dirt from his trousers, it made a dull sound, but at the same time metallic, hard. He cleared his throat. Would I come by again tomorrow? he asked. He said he wanted to see me again. I nodded. I didn't dare contradict him.

The next day, he was waiting for me. He seemed uneasy, downcast. He said that he didn't have much time, they were moving on the following day. He sighed. Turned away. He said he felt he owed me an explanation. An explanation, I asked? About why he was fighting with the North Koreans, he said. I said that I already understood. He laughed. What could a twelve-year-old possibly understand about it? Fourteen, I said. Fourteen, he said, well that changes everything then. Then he told me to sit down next to him.

He said that the prison in Daejeon had been overcrowded. That in the preceding months Syngman Rhee had already begun to arrest union and Korean Workers' Party members, socialists and communists, locking away one group after the other: everyone who criticized Rhee and his government, everyone who demanded new elections because they didn't want to accept a divided Korea, everyone who thought that the Americans should withdraw, that Korea couldn't go back to being a colony. He said that his cellmates hadn't been criminals, and certainly not *political criminals*, but innocent people, opposition members.

In prison they had barely been fed--a bowl of slop, once a day, containing just a few grains of rice. Those who had been tortured were unable to either move or speak. Doctors had been denied access, he said. They had tried to help one another, he had ripped the sleeves from his shirt and used the material to dress wounds, but the puss had already eaten too far into the flesh. Many died. Because their cell was so full, only the sick had been able to sleep lying down, the rest had taken turns, and most just dozed standing up. He had heard that Mr Söng and his sons had been imprisoned too, but he hadn't seen them.

Yunsu said he had thought he would never leave the prison; that he had been brought there to die.

A few weeks later, on the 8th of July, the prisoners from the lower floor had been driven out into the yard. He heard the rattle of the chains and steps dragging across the concrete floor, then the ignition and hum of the engines. When the chugging gradually became more faint, he had envied the poor wretches, believed they were being set free because war had broken out. Many had hoped they would be drafted.

When the prisoners still hadn't come back by the evening, only the drivers and prison guards, he thought his hope was justified; he told himself and his friends that tomorrow they too would be free.

Free at last.

That night he had been unable to sleep, neither standing up nor lying down. He had waited for the sunrise, for the reddish-yellow light that managed to push its way through even their small cell window. Suddenly he had heard steps. A guard had told them to stand up and leave the cell, that they were being transferred to the south-west, to Sannae. During the journey, some of his friends had laughed, cracked jokes; they had no idea what was awaiting them.

A trench, perhaps one or two hundred metres long.

Carelessly filled in, the soil just strewn around.

Something that didn't look like soil jutted out of the pit.

Soldiers – hundreds of them? It could even have been thousands. Standing in a row along the trench, guns in their hands.

The prisoners had been forced to get out of the vehicle and line up, single file. Like they did when food was being handed out. The first fifty were told to squat down by the edge of the trench with their heads lowered. They pressed their faces into the backs of those in front of them. Clung on to them. The soldiers had lined up behind the prisoners, each of them assigned a head, but the order was too quiet and some hadn't heard it, they pulled the trigger too late or missed the target; some of the soldiers cried, they had been just as afraid as their victims.

The corpses had toppled to the side, but hadn't fallen all the way into the open grave. The soldiers had to kick them in. Other soldiers were waiting inside the trench. They shot those who were still moving. Those who begged to be released from their suffering.

All watched, he said, by the American soldiers who were photographing the executions.

He could no longer remember how long he had to wait. It was probably close to daybreak when the young soldier who was watching them undid their chains and told them to make themselves scarce.

He hadn't known where to go. He fell in with a group that joined the partisans who captured Nonsan. Mother had been amongst the villagers who had died during the battle, he said.

She had been mistaken for Mrs Kim and shot.

Later. Many years later, I heard a rumour that Yunsu had killed Mother in order to prove his loyalty to the Communists. I began to search for the truth – it's important that you understand: I grew up with the illusion that the truth existed, and *only one*. I believed there must be a record of it somewhere, and so I searched, feverishly, like Mother had for Father's photo back then. I began to collect articles, protocols, reports, I read my way through mountains of essays. From one, I discovered that the inmates of South Korea prisons between 1945 in 1950 were mainly political prisoners--communists and socialists--and that in the days before and immediately following the outbreak of the Korean War, the jails had been emptied, the inmates systematically murdered; the first emergency act of 28th June 1950 ensured that the mass executions were legal. Most of the members of the *Re-education Association* were shot out of fear that they would join the People's Army – a death toll estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands: workers and farmers who had once joined the association solely to receive fertilizer and rice from the government. Some had been forced to sign up by the police, while others had let themselves be talked into it, they said they had quotas to fulfil, that every branch had to provide a certain number of *education volunteers*, and if not, they would be held responsible. And there was nothing to it anyway, they had said, you just had to go once a month and listen to a government representative, who would explain to them why Communism was bad for Korea. And after they would get a hot meal. They were called together in schools, poor houses and warehouses and killed by the military, even though all they had wanted was some fertilizer and rice.

When the Briton Alan Willington became the first foreign journalist to report on the mass murders for the English newspaper the *Daily Worker*, his report *I saw the Truth in Korea* brought him great difficulties: In America and Great Britain, the word was spread that he was a liar and traitor to his country, and in 1954 the British authorities refused to renew his expired passport, upon which he effectively became stateless.

Try to imagine Rangwul valley, wrote Willington in 1951 (thirty years later he would die in East Berlin, in possession of a British passport). I am unable to forget the paragraph which begins with those words: *Try to imagine Rangwul valley, about 5 miles south-east of Taejon on the Yongdong road. In the middle you can walk safely, though your shoes may roll on American cartridge cases, but at the sides you must be careful, for the rest of the valley is a thin crust of earth covering the corpses of more than 7,000 men and women. One of the party with me stepped through nearly to his hip in rotting human tissue. Every few feet there is a fissure in the top soil, through which you can see into a gradually sinking mass of flesh and bone. The smell is something tangible that seeps into your throat. For days after I could taste the smell. All along the great death pits, waxy dead hands and feet, knees, elbows, twisted faces and heads burst open by bullets, stick through the soil.*

When I read of Nazi murder camps at Belsen and Buchenwald, I tried to imagine what they were like. Now I know I failed.

The concentration camps had been liberated only six years earlier; the fact that Winnington makes this association is understandable. Another contributing factor may be that Douglas MacArthur, the general who was supposed to free Korea from the Red Menace on behalf of the United Nations, had as his right-hand man a *little fascist*, as he affectionately called him. General Charles Willoughby (who may or may not have been born in Germany and only emigrated to the USA at the age of eighteen) was Chief of Intelligence in the Pacific region until his dismissal in 1951, and famous for two things: his “Prussian” posture (supposedly he walked as straight as a rod, as though he was staring over a high fence into the distance) and his self-important secret communiqués, which were often wholly fabricated. He was known as an anti-Semite and a racist, who, following the admission of Chinese volunteers into the Korean War, wrote that he regretted deeply that *illiterate Chinese coolies were wiping out American conscripts*, because *the white man is an expensive and limited commodity*. Even many years after the end of the war, he was unable to resist manipulating the few files which were opened up to the public. Aside from Douglas MacArthur, who Willoughby lauded as a modern Napoleon, he worshipped General Franco and had close contact with General Ishii, leader of the *Epidemic Prevention and Water Purification Department*, better known as Unit 731; he was also acquainted, of course, with Reinhard Gehlen and other former Nazi officers who helped the American secret service during the Cold War.

She was by far the only person on the road, writes Winnington, all the others hid themselves in the trenches just in time, ducking as they heard the approaching plane. Pilot error was ruled out; in Korea, especially for someone with good eyesight, it was easy to recognize a woman even from a distance. *Typically, this one was carrying a baby strapped to her back and a big bundle on her head, and was wearing a long billowing white skirt*. He knew it was a woman and her child, but he had shot at them anyway. Casually, even.

Try to imagine Rangwul valley. I do not try; I refuse to, but I cannot forget. The valley, my brother’s story and my mother’s murder, they have merged together in my imagination. The murderers are no longer many, but just one – and he doesn’t have Yunsu’s face. I didn’t believe the rumour when I first heard it, and I still don’t, but sometimes I wish I could tell my brother that I am convinced of his innocence; I wish, *and I wish it so hard it hurts*, I could undo it...

I wish I could take back the fact that, when he tried to say goodbye on that evening in front of the school, I evaded his embrace.