

THE
PICTURE
BRIDE

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Part One

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1917, OJIN VILLAGE

“Miss Willow,” the Pusan Ajimae said, “you’ll be eighteen next year, won’t you? What about going to Powa and getting married?”

At that, the eyes of Willow and her mother, Mrs. Yun, grew large. Although in fact she lived in Gupo, some miles away from Pusan, the “Pusan Ajimae” was a peddler who went about from village to village selling women’s things like camellia oil, face powder, combs, mirrors, haberdashery, and matches, from a bundle she carried on her head. She had been visiting Mrs. Yun’s family since she was a child. The Pusan Ajimae would visit Ojin Village once or twice a year, and always open her bundle, sell her wares, and stay overnight at Willow’s house.

In the villages nestling in the valleys along the foot of Maebongsan Mountain, the sky was visible as if from the bottom of a well. Ojin, a small village of less than fifty households, was particularly remote. In order to reach the closest market, at Jucheon, it was necessary to cross the crests of three hills. Therefore, the village women waited impatiently for a visit from the Pusan Ajimae. Among the items in her bundle, they rarely bought anything but packets of needles or some matches, all the other things being too expensive for them, but still they were a feast for the eyes. And hearing news of the outside world from the

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Pusan Ajimae, who journeyed all over the region, was a feast for the ears.

That evening, the women who had filled the room went back home, while Willow's younger brothers Gwangsik and Chunsik went across to their room to sleep. As she unfolded the bedding, Willow eyed her mother for some reaction to the unexpected talk of her marriage. She had never heard of a place called Powa. The same was true for Mrs. Yun, for whom the name was unfamiliar.

"Powa? Where's that?"

Her mother's expression was a combination of delight and anxiety. Willow knew the cause of her anxiety. No matter how good a marriage candidate the man might be, it was going to be difficult to find the money to prepare a new set of bedding to take as the bride's contribution.

Before she was born, her father, Schoolmaster Kang, had nourished the ambition of passing the state examination, restoring the fortunes of his impoverished family, and transforming the corrupt world. On passing the first part of the exam, he was entitled to be called Chosi Kang, but then the examination system was abolished. There could be no greater disaster for Chosi Kang, who had been doing nothing but preparing for the exam. Not only was the paltry financial aid he had been receiving from his family cut off, but his father-in-law also went bankrupt and could not help. A yangban without an official position and without money was like a tasty-looking, rotten apricot.

Chosi Kang set up a scrivener's office on the marketplace in order to earn a living, but they were so poor that Mrs. Yun was obliged to earn money with her needle. Then wealthy Mr. An invited Chosi Kang to become the schoolmaster in Ojin Village.

Eight years ago, when Willow's father passed away, a shadow

like that of a mountain fell over her family home, even on clear days, together with a heavy silence. When the eldest son died two years later, the shadow over the house settled on her mother's face.

"Well, it's a bit far off. Have you ever heard of America?"

"I've heard of it," Mrs. Yun replied, "The foreign pastor of Jucheon Church is an American. Is he from Powa?"

"Well, Powa is American land, but it seems it's an island that they call 'Hawai'i.' If you go there, they say you can sweep up money with a dustpan. I've been told that clothes and shoes grow on the trees, you only have to pick them and put them on. The weather is wonderful, too. Every season is late springtime, so you don't need winter clothes."

The Pusan Ajimae's face was looking more excited than when she was selling her merchandise.

"Outside of Paradise, can there be such a place?" Willow asked excitedly.

"Well, they say Hawai'i is a paradise. Once you go there, fortune will smile on you. If I were ten years younger, I might powder my face and get married myself."

At the wrinkled old Pusan Ajimae's words, Willow and her mother both laughed, and the atmosphere in the room, which had grown tense with talk of marriage, grew more relaxed.

"But are there men from Korea living there?" Mrs. Yun asked.

Willow was also curious.

"A decade or so ago, a large number of men from Korea went to work in Hawai'i. Now they've succeeded in life and want to find brides. One of my husband's relatives living in Pusan sent their daughter to be married in Hawai'i. When she went, she left in tears but after five years, she's helped them to buy land and build a house. And she felt it was too good to be enjoying

life there alone, so she's sent her brother photos of would-be husbands, men wanting a bride from Korea. He's asked me to help find an especially good lady I know of. I even have a photo of the would-be bridegroom."

The Pusan Ajimae pulled a picture from her bundle and held it out. Willow was bashful about looking directly at it, as if she were facing a real man. Instead, Mrs. Yun took it and examined it closely. Willow scrutinized her mother's expression. She was curious to know what he looked like.

"Well, will he do as a son-in-law?" asked the Pusan Ajimae. "Does he look like a good man? He's not only a good person, he's a landowner who's farming on a really large scale."

On hearing that, the eyes of Mrs. Yun and Willow grew even larger.

"A landowner?" Mrs. Yun's voice grew louder. "In the United States? While the Japanese are taking people's land away from us, how could we become a landowner in a foreign country?"

It was the dream of everyone in Korea to farm their own land.

"That's right. If you're diligent, you can go to another country and purchase land. Why, you're holding a picture of a man who did this, aren't you? So, will you powder your face and set off?"

Mrs. Yun let the photo drop onto Willow's skirt.

Willow shyly picked it up; her eyes were already gazing at the man in a suit. He had dark eyebrows, big, bright eyes, a straight nose, and a tightly closed mouth and seemed to be staring at her. Her face turned red. Willow's heart began to race.

"On the back there's his name and age."

Willow flipped the photo over. On it was written in a neat hand, *So Taewan, 26 years old*. The name So Taewan was immediately imprinted on Willow's heart.

There was nobody else around, but the Pusan Ajimae low-

ered her voice. “If he’s only twenty-six years old, that’s young. It seems most of the men in Hawai’i looking for brides are older.”

“If it’s not a matter of a second marriage, what’s a nine-year difference?” Mrs. Yun asked, indicating that she was half inclined to accept. “Where is his home and how large is his family?”

Willow’s eyes were fixed on the picture. Even if she liked him, he was too far away. Even if he lived close by, it would be hard for her to visit her home more than once or twice a year, but if she went to Hawai’i, she might never see her family again. She didn’t want to go that far, leaving her mother and younger brothers behind.

“His hometown is Yonggang in Pyongan-do, up in the north. His mother died a few years ago, his sisters are already married and living elsewhere in Korea. Father and son are the only remaining family. There will be no other family to care for. And just think, if you go there you’ll be able to go to school.”

Willow looked up. “Is . . . is that true?”

“Sure. The girl from our family was totally illiterate, but after arriving there she was able to study. Now she writes letters home, and she can speak English like an American.”

Willow’s heart pounded.

When a primary school was established in Jucheon, her father had sent her eldest brother to school. He reckoned that since the world was changing, his children should study the new subjects as they grew up. Two years later, he sent Willow, who had just turned eight. Hongju, her friend, pestered her own father, Mr. An, until she was able to enroll with Willow. Hongju’s family had been commoners for generations, but Mr. An had earned enough money by buying and selling cattle and bought land in Ojin Village. He built a tiled house overlooking the fields and settled down, then bought a genealogy allowing

him to be considered a yangban. The local people called him “Wealthy An” because they didn’t think he merited any title.

Both girls were the only daughters in their families, the other daughters having died early. Willow was the second child among her brothers, and Hongju was the youngest, after her brothers.

It was much more fun for Willow to learn Hangu, Japanese, arithmetic, and gymnastics with friends at primary school than to study the *Thousand Character Classic* at her father’s Confucian academy. Although she had to climb over three hills to reach the school, it didn’t bother her. However, when her father passed away, her mother couldn’t afford the monthly school fee for both children. If one of them had to quit, of course it would be the daughter.

Willow left school without completing her second year and helped with the housework, and taking care of her younger brothers. The following year, Mrs. Yun sent Willow’s other younger brother Gysik to school, but not Willow.

“What about me?” Willow argued and pleaded. “Send me back to school, too.”

“It’s enough if a girl can read and write her own name. What more do you need?”

At that, Willow threw a tantrum.

Mrs. Yun tore off her apron and stood up. “If you don’t stop right now, I’m going up to throw myself over the waterfall in Maebongsan Mountain and die.”

Frightened of being an orphan, Willow embraced her mother’s legs as she prepared to leave the room and swore that she would never again talk about going back to school. After that, the only thing she could do was to comfort herself by writing on the ground with a poker so as not to forget the letters.

After graduating from the four-year primary school, Hongju had not gone on to the girls’ upper school. She had no inter-

est in studying, and her parents had no intention of sending their daughter to one of the new schools, the threshold of which none of their sons had ever crossed. After being in a place with a school and a market, Hongju returned to her mountain-valley home and felt bored, but Willow had been glad to have a friend nearby. While she was with Hongju, she could forget her situation, obliged as she was to help her mother earn a living. In the evenings, Hongju's house was the only place that Willow was allowed to visit. Taking her sewing with her, Willow would hurry to Hongju's place whenever she was free. Sewing was less boring when she was chattering with Hongju than when she stayed with her mother.

Hongju had a room all to herself opposite the main building. There, Willow had enjoyed snacks such as dried persimmons or cookies, and read novels that Hongju kept hidden in her clothes chest. After reading the books, they would talk nervously about free love, apply lipstick, and imitate the heroines.

The previous year, when Hongju had turned sixteen, her bridegroom had been chosen. He was from a prestigious yangban family in Masan. Her mother had taught her how to keep house lest her daughter be scolded once she was married. Most of all, Hongju had hated sitting quietly and sewing. Willow, who had acquired her mother's skill while helping with the needlework, spent the evenings embroidering the cushions and pillowcases that her friend would take to her new home.

When Hongju's mother left the room to tend to other chores, Hongju would lay aside her embroidery frame and chat away. While Hongju was thrilled to be leaving Ojin Village for busy Masan, Willow was already missing her friend. It would be different from when Hongju had been away at school. Then, there had been a time limit, she would come back after graduating, but getting married meant leaving forever.

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When Hongju's wedding was celebrated in the yard of her home and she had left the village, Willow cried more bitterly than Hongju's mother. Now, there would be no one to open her heart to, no moments of respite with her friend. It seemed that Willow would never be able to cast off the shadow of her father's absence. However, two months after her marriage, Hongju became a widow. Rumors circulated that the groom's family had concealed the fact that he was sick, or that her father had been so eager to form an alliance with a yangban family that he had concealed the fact that a fortune-teller had said that their horoscopes showed that they were incompatible.

Tradition dictated that once a woman was married, she "buried her bones" in that house forever. When Willow thought of Hongju, she was reminded of an embroidery left bloodstained after her needle pricked her finger. No matter how well the embroidery was done, it was useless once it was stained. In a flash, through no fault of her own, Hongju's destiny had become that of a bloodstained embroidery.

Willow sometimes felt guilty wondering whether her friend's misfortune might have been caused by her own negative attitude, because she had disliked seeing her get married. "How will she spend her whole life in that household without a child?" Willow sighed as she sewed. Her mother had long been in the habit of saying that if it had not been for the children, she would have thrown herself over the Maebongsan Mountain waterfall long ago.

"Stop sighing," said Mrs. Yun as she cut a knotted thread. "That's just Hongju's destiny."

It turned out not to be the case. Hongju returned to her parents' house shortly after her husband died, thanks to a divination by the Surijae shaman, who declared that if a young widow remained in the house, a yet greater disaster might be-

fall them. Not only Hongju's in-laws, but even her own family reckoned that her husband had died because of her. There was also a rumor in the village that Wealthy An had offered his in-laws a large sum, enough for them to live on, in return for bringing Hongju home.

On the evening she went to see Hongju for the first time after her return, Willow's heart and steps were heavy. Willow had grown up seeing her widowed mother. More tenacious than the suffering of the one who had lost her husband was the widespread gossip about the woman who had devoured his vitality. The title of "widow" that she would have to bear like a yoke all her life was like the name of a great crime.

As Willow made her way to Hongju's house, combining her own sorrow with Hongju's misfortune, she imagined all kinds of sad things. She prepared to hug her friend and cry. As she entered the gate, she could not help being struck by the sight of Hongju's mother's grief-stricken face. She seemed to lack the energy to say anything, merely greeting her with a look and nodding in the direction of Hongju's room. When she saw Hongju's elegant leather shoes lying on the stone step in front of the room, she felt tears rising. Willow left her straw sandals beside them and entered the room.

Hongju, wearing mourning dress and with her hair in a bun, sat in the darkened room with one knee raised. She didn't look around even though she knew that Willow was there. Her husband had died two months after the marriage. It was as though her whole world had collapsed. Willow, sympathizing with her friend's unfortunate situation, scarcely daring to breathe, sat down next to her. A housemaid, coming in behind her, put down a plate of dried persimmons and looked briefly at Hongju. Once she had left the room, Willow prepared to speak.

Just then, Hongju shook out her skirts and relaxed her formal

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posture, lowering her knee. With both fists resting on her crossed legs, she gave vent to her fury. "That guy had always been sick. I didn't kill him, so I don't see why I should stay locked in here like a criminal. If his family had not turned me out, what would have become of me? If I had to spend my whole life in that house, I would have suffocated to death."

Hongju was unlike any widow that Willow had ever seen. As Hongju spat out without hesitation ideas that she had barely dared formulate, Willow felt relieved. She was right. Even if someone became a widow, even if the children were left fatherless, it was not their fault.

"That's what I think, too. They did well to turn you out."

Willow and Hongju hugged and laughed, instead of crying.

Without knowing that, Hongju's mother, fearing that her daughter might reach some bad decision on account of her changed situation, asked Mrs. Yun to let Willow visit her every day.

Once again, as before, Willow and Hongju sat embroidering or chatting together or reading novels. The only thing that had changed was that Hongju now had experience of a man, so her words were more forthright.

"I got through the first night as best I could because it was my first time. Having read love stories, I was better prepared than that sickly bridegroom smelling of milk. He was shaking so much he couldn't even undo my dress. . . . Really, it was so frustrating."

Willow listened with red cheeks and sparkling eyes.

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The first rooster crowed. The rooster belonged to Jangsu, the most hardworking fellow in Ojin Village. Willow had not slept a wink, and not just because of the Pusan Ajimae's snoring. She felt that her beating heart was even louder.

Mrs. Yun had postponed giving an answer the previous evening, saying that she would think about it, but Willow inclined more and more toward marriage as time passed. “If you agree, the groom’s family will send you all the wedding expenses, so you don’t have to worry about money.” She wanted to go to Hawai’i. She wanted to study. In the future, she didn’t want to live like her mother, she didn’t want to earn a living as a widow’s child by sewing, then get married to a man in a similar situation. There was no time for herself in her mother’s life. It was a world where it was natural for daughters to sacrifice themselves for their parents and brothers until finally they got married. But in Hawai’i, married women could also study. That alone made Hawai’i a paradise. Although it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, she also knew she wanted to leave her family for the sake of her desires, and she felt ashamed.

If only Omma would send me to school, I wouldn’t feel like this.

Willow braced her weakening heart and reminded herself that by getting married she would be helping the rest of her family. When she got married, that would mean not only a helping hand less but also one mouth less to feed. Then her mother would have fewer difficulties. Gyusik, who was working in a bicycle shop in Kimhae, was earning his own living, while Gwangsik and Chunsik were already fully grown. Rather than staying at home doing the cooking, it would be much better for her to get married and help her family live better, like the Pusan Ajimae’s niece. The more she thought, the more she felt that there could be no better groom for someone in her situation, and felt impatient at the thought that they might miss the opportunity by putting off answering.

As usual, her mother rose before dawn, combed her hair and pinned up her bun before she went out to the privy. Willow, who had not slept a wink all night long, shook the Pusan Ajimae as soon as her mother went outside.

“Ajimae, Ajimae.”

“What’s the matter?” The Ajimae mumbled a reply, still half asleep, and turned toward Willow. Fearing that her mother would soon return, Willow spoke in an urgent voice.

“Is it true that I can study if I go to Hawai’i to get married?”

So long as she could study, it didn’t matter if she didn’t live in luxury. Even if she had a hard time, she wanted to do something for herself just once. As the Ajimae sat up straight, Willow did likewise.

“It’s true. I told you, didn’t I? My niece, who was completely uneducated, went and now she writes letters home and speaks American like a native.”

“Ajimae, I want to go to Hawai’i and get married. Please, convince my omma.” She seized the woman’s hand and pleaded.

“You’ve made the right decision. Don’t worry.” The Ajimae rubbed the backs of Willow’s hands.

Once Willow’s decision was made, her mother agreed. But the marriage was not accomplished just because Willow had made up her mind. Willow also had to send a picture and receive the bridegroom’s agreement.

“Don’t worry,” said the Pusan Ajimae. “There’s no better bride to be found anywhere, I’ll put in a good word for you. As soon as day dawns, let’s go to the photo studio and take a picture.”

“That’s what you think,” Mrs. Yun sighed, “but she has no aboji, we’re hard up, nothing special . . . and she has nothing decent-looking to wear for the photograph.”

Once she had decided to marry off her daughter, So Taewan became a son-in-law too good to lose. But her mother was right.

Willow spoke impatiently. “Omma, shall I ask Hongju to lend me some clothes?”

Mrs. Yun startled. “Are you asking for bad luck? How could

you even think of taking a wedding photo wearing a young widow's clothes? Do you want to ruin things from the start?"

As far as Willow could see, apart from not being able to leave the house, Hongju was better off than she was, being able to speak freely, eat freely, with no problems. At present she was worse off than a widow, but things would change once she got married in Hawai'i. Willow imagined herself as a new woman who had studied, beautifully dressed, coming home with husband and children. That was something that could never happen to Hongju.

"You're right, those clothes won't do," the Pusan Ajimae agreed.

After thinking for a moment, Mrs. Yun seemed to have come to a major decision. "We'll use a little trick. Willow, wear those clothes and have the photo taken."

The clothes she indicated were a set she was making for someone who was soon to be married, and all that remained to be done was to stitch on the lining of the collars.

"Oh, how could you propose such a thing?" said Willow, startled.

Her mother had never coveted so much as a grain of other people's barley, even if she was dying of starvation, and had taught her children to be the same.

Mrs. Yun spoke resolutely with a flushed face. "Do it. If we send a picture of you wearing a nice dress, the marriage will surely succeed. If you wrap it up well and wear it only when you take the photo, it won't show any sign of having been worn."

"That's right," the Pusan Ajimae agreed. "And since it's for a good cause it will be okay."

Mrs. Yun applied camellia oil to Willow's freshly braided hair. The Ajimae said she would go with her to the photo studio and apply powder and rouge.

Willow left the house with the Pusan Ajimae, carrying that other person's clothes in her arms. She felt a little awkward about deceiving the man she was to marry from the beginning, but even Willow was reluctant to send him a picture of her dressed in patched clothes. Willow wanted to please Taewan and go to Hawai'i.

The question of the clothes was solved, but there was another problem. It was the fact that Hongju knew nothing of this great event. Her mother had begged her to keep it secret from Hongju until the marriage was settled. If the word "marriage" started to circulate and then things went wrong, that too was always considered the woman's fault. Hongju had spoken to Willow frankly about everything in the meantime. She had not hidden the fact that her first love had been Willow's dead brother, or what happened on the first night of her marriage.

On the evening of the day when the picture was taken, Willow went to Hongju and told her the truth. No matter how hard her mother begged, she didn't want to have any secrets from Hongju, and the news was too daunting for her to keep it hidden in her heart. Hongju already knew about marriages between men living in Hawai'i and girls from Korea.

"I heard talk about it from my in-law in Masan and her neighbors. One neighbor's eldest daughter got married by a picture marriage then arranged for her younger sister to go too. At that time, I couldn't imagine going so far to get married, but now it looks a hundred times better than being a widow."

As soon as she heard what Hongju said, the anxiety that was lodged in one corner of Willow's heart vanished. The Pusan Ajimae was not the kind of person to lie, but there was the vague fear of an unknown place. But Hongju's neighbor's daughter wouldn't have called her sister to join her if Hawai'i wasn't a good place.

Willow even went so far as to tell her that the groom was a landowner, and that in the photo he looked manly. She couldn't bring the picture because she was not following her mother's request for secrecy. Willow was really worried. "What will I do if he says he doesn't like the look of me?"

"Then ask for another bridegroom. He's not the only one, is he? You have to be happy. I want to go to Hawai'i too. It's so boring, I can't endure staying cooped up at home any longer."

It was the first time Hongju had ever envied Willow.

But the next evening, Hongju's mother visited Willow's home.

"Go and fetch a bowl of water," said Mrs. Yun to Willow.

As she left the room, Willow felt sudden anxiety tugging at the back of her head. What was going on in the middle of the night? Had something happened to Hongju? Had she heard of the picture marriage? Had she come to complain that she had given Hongju false ideas? *Mother will scold me severely because I didn't keep the secret from Hongju.* Willow's hands trembled as she shut the door behind her. Just then, she heard Hongju's mother speaking.

Willow stopped and listened hard.

"I've heard about picture marriages. We'll send Hongju too. Her husband died before he could inscribe her name in his family register, so she's free, but there's no thought of deception in any case. There must be a widower like Hongju. Tell me where the Pusan Ajimae lives." Her voice was also trembling.

Willow went to the kitchen and drew a scoopful of water from the jar. Her hands were shaking and the precious water spilled. More overflowed when she poured it into the bowl. Willow sat down for a while on the stove to calm herself.

When she had thought that Hongju couldn't go, she had wanted to brag about her great good luck, but hearing she could go too, there was nothing better than that. If her friend was

there too she wouldn't feel lonely and would be much more assured. Since it was a paradise, there would be no difficulties, but it would be much more fun being happy together. Just as Willow went back into the room, Wealthy An's wife was suddenly startled.

"Oh dear. We're acting behind my husband's back."

Willow set the bowl of water in front of her.

"How are you going to win him over?" Mrs. Yun asked with a worried look.

Hongju's mother gulped down the water, then put the bowl down with a bang, and spoke determinedly. "He can only kill me, can't he? If Hongju stays here, it's a living death for her. Even if I die, I've had my life. It's better I should die than have a young child fading away, trapped in her room."

"You're right. It'll be far better than staying here. That's why I'm sending our Willow. I was worried about sending our grown-up daughter all alone on a long journey, but if Hongju goes with her, that's wonderful. You've thought of Hongju's future and made a difficult decision."

Mrs. Yun seized Hongju's mother's hand and the two shed tears together. Willow too had a runny nose.



THE WOMAN IN THE MIRROR, THE MAN IN THE PHOTO

Hongju insisted on choosing her bridegroom for herself. Her mother told her husband she was going to their son's house and set off with Hongju to visit the Pusan Ajimae.

Willow felt jealous of Hongju. Taewan wasn't too bad, but she was not sure how she would feel if Hongju picked a better partner. "If I had known this was going to happen, I would have gone with Hongju to find out more," said Willow, her sewing needles still in her hands.

"Stop that. Why trust a picture? The Pusan Ajimae is a much more reliable guarantee than any picture." Her mother's words silenced Willow.

Two days later, after her younger brother said he had seen Hongju returning over the hill, Willow went running over without even drying her hands after doing the evening dish-washing. Hongju explained breathlessly how she had met the Pusan Ajimae, gone over to the matchmaker's house and picked a bridegroom. On her way back, she had visited the photographer in Jucheon market to have a photo taken to send to the bridegroom. Wondering what kind of man Hongju's bridegroom was, Willow impatiently snatched at the picture Hongju held out.

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Unlike the photo of Taewan, which only showed his face, it showed a man wearing a suit standing with one foot resting on the running board of a car against a background of a house and trees such as she had never seen before. Willow focused on the trees rather than the person, the house, or the car. The Pusan Ajimae had said that clothes and shoes grew on the tree. She looked carefully at the tree in the photo, but all she could see was some kind of round fruitlike gourds hanging at the top. She wasn't sure if it was because the photo was too small for them to be seen properly, or if the clothes and shoes were inside the round fruit.

"What do you think?" Hongju spoke excitedly. "He looks manly and reliable, doesn't he? He owns a car, too."

Only then did Willow take note of Hongju's potential bridegroom, the owner of a car that she thought only kings and high officials could ride in. His face was too small to see properly, but the way he stood with his chin on his hand while his elbow was supported by the leg resting on the car looked very elegant. Willow returned the photo to Hongju and asked, "How old?"

"Thirty-eight years old. He lost his wife early on and has no children."

When she heard that he was Hongju's father's age, Willow's eyes grew wide. That made him twenty-one years older than herself.

"Isn't that too old?"

"I've seen what a young bridegroom is like. I don't want to have a young husband. Older men are the most reliable."

Hongju was ignoring completely the problems arising from his age.

"I'm sorry, but he's not even like an older brother, he's like your aboji."

Willow recalled the village men of that age. They were so

old, and it was creepy just to imagine being under the same blanket as someone like that. Willow grew even fonder of Taewan, with his twenty-six years.

Hongju, who had met the Pusan matchmaker in person, had learned a lot about Hawai'i. Hongju asked her, "Have you ever heard of sugarcane?"

Willow knew about sugar candy, which she had tasted once, and she knew the sorghum growing along the edges of kitchen gardens, but she'd never heard of sugarcane.

"It seems that powdered sugar comes from sugarcane. When men from Korea went to Hawai'i, it was to work in sugarcane fields, several thousands of them."

"Are there so many sugarcane fields in Hawai'i?" Willow's eyes widened. When they were younger, Hongju had once been given some Japanese sugar candy that her older brother bought in Pusan. Hongju said it was incredibly expensive and precious, as she broke a piece of candy with her teeth and gave one half to Willow. Whenever Willow ate anything outside her home, she would usually think guiltily of her mother and younger brothers, but it was such a shame that the candy melted away in her mouth and disappeared so quickly, and her only thought was that she wanted to eat more. How expensive a field that made such precious candies must be. If Taewan was a landowning farmer, she could easily believe that he could "sweep up money with a dustpan."

Once the photos taken at the studio arrived, Willow and Hongju wrote letters to send with the photos, as the matchmaker had instructed. When it came to writing skills, Hongju, who had graduated from primary school, and Willow, who had only attended school briefly, were pretty much equal. Willow sometimes wrote letters to Gysik or her mother's parents. Willow and Hongju wrote painstakingly, line by line, all the time

consulting one another. It was only a brief self-introduction, but they were as excited as if they were writing love letters.

Although Willow and Hongju had not yet received replies from the men, they still imagined life there as if they were already married. There was no comparison with the marriage of their parents or the people around them, or the marriage that Hongju had experienced so briefly. In Hawai'i, where food and clothing hung from trees, and women studied to their heart's content, marriage too would surely be very different from in Korea. Hongju, who had previously married a man her parents had chosen without her ever seeing his face, was excited about Jo Doksam, as if he was her first boyfriend. She said choosing each other and exchanging letters was as good as getting married by free love. When Willow said she would study when she arrived in Hawai'i, Hongju looked dumbfounded.

"What? Why study?" Hongju dreamily held the picture of Doksam to her breast. "You're really weird, but okay, go ahead and study. I'll wear pretty clothes, and drive about in my husband's car and enjoy sightseeing."

Willow didn't mean that she would do nothing but study. She wanted to study while living happily with Taewan. They would not be like the couples in Ojin Village, indifferent to each other as if they were cows or chickens, they would also love and cherish each other like lovers in a novel.

Letters between Korea and Hawai'i took over a month. A reply reached Hongju first. The letter said he was glad to have found a pretty bride with neat handwriting, and he would be waiting for the day when they could meet, with every day feeling like three years as he craned his neck and gazed across the white surf toward Korea. With the letter came a hundred dollars in American currency to cover expenses. He said the boat fare

from Japan to Hawai'i would cost fifty dollars. Money would also be required to prepare documents and to travel to Japan. Hongju was delighted with the letter, more than the money.

Hongju smiled broadly as she showed Willow. "Why, I'm so embarrassed."

Willow hoped that the letter from Taewan would be sweeter than that from Doksam, for whom this was the second marriage. However, Taewan merely sent one hundred and fifty dollars through the matchmaker with a formal notification that he would marry her. Willow was disappointed, but comforted by the extra fifty dollars, which she gave to her mother.

"He must be shy," Hongju said, comforting her. "He's a bachelor, after all, so wait. It'll be different when you meet."

Hongju wrote back to her bridegroom saying that she dreamed of him every night. Willow envied Hongju, who impatiently awaited a reply starting from the very next day. Willow regarded Taewan as someone serious and deep-hearted and comforted herself with that.

There was a lot to prepare before they set off for Hawai'i. Since picture bride marriage was a legal formality by which a husband invited his homeland bride to join him in Hawai'i, the marriage had to first be officially registered in Korea. As soon as the marriage registration was finished, Willow considered Taewan her true husband. Once he sent the passport he obtained from the Japanese consulate in Hawai'i, she would have to obtain a travel permit, and even if she had all the documents, she would not be able to board a ship to the United States unless she passed a medical examination in Japan.

Willow secretly looked at Taewan's picture every evening. More often still, she looked at herself in a hand mirror. She had been given the mirror, and her mother camellia oil, as gifts

by the Pusan Ajimae. Among all the desirable things in the Ajimae's bundle, the hand mirror had been the thing she had desired most of all.

"This is my last present. I'm going to stop this business. I'm aching all over from a life spent walking about carrying a heavy bundle on my head. My son is pestering me to stay home and look after my grandchild."

"It looks as though his brewery is doing well enough," Mrs. Yun said, looking lonely. "You'll have to do as your son says. But I'll be sad not to see you anymore."

Willow looked at herself in the mirror several times a day without her mother's knowledge. She hoped that the face in the mirror was pretty enough to be loved by a man. As the days went by, Willow was often embarrassed on waking from a dream in which she had become a lover in one of Hongju's novels. The main characters in the dream were the man in the photo and the woman in the mirror.

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It was at dawn, on the seventeenth day of the first month of the year known as Muo (1918), the year in which they turned eighteen, that Willow and Hongju left Ojin Village. The date had been fixed so that they could celebrate the lunar New Year and the first full moon at home. After the departure date had been decided, Willow had set about mending her family's clothes and threadbare boson socks. On New Year's Day, she went to pay her respects at her father's grave, and on the day before she left, she went to the well several times and filled all the jars with water.

"You'll be leaving soon?" a neighbor asked when she met her at the well.

"Yes, I'm leaving tomorrow."

Since there are no secrets, the news that Willow and Hongju were going to Hawai'i for picture marriages spread widely across the neighborhood. Some people who also wanted to send their daughters secretly visited their home. On the one hand, there were those who criticized Wealthy An's wife for allowing her daughter to remarry less than three years after she was widowed, while others whispered that Mrs. Yun, who pretended to be a yangban, had sold her daughter for money.

"How will your omoni live after sending you so far away?" The woman clacked her tongue.

Now that it was time for her to leave, Willow's heart was heavy. Who would sit sewing with her mother, and who would take care of her younger brothers Gwangsik and Chunsik? Thinking of those she was leaving behind, Willow felt guilty for having been so excited about getting married.

On the last evening, Willow took a bath in the kitchen, then went to lie down as usual beside her mother. Normally, Mrs. Yun snored loudly as soon as her head touched the pillow. However, that night she seemed unable to get to sleep. Willow sensed that her mother was sobbing in the dark. Feeling a lump in her own throat, she took her mother's hand. The hand, chapped by cold winds and callused from sewing, felt like a tree stump.

"Omma, just hold on a bit longer. Then I'll make sure you're comfortable."

"Willow, I hope you realize I'm doing you a favor, sending you far away like this. I don't want you to spend your whole life here and grow old as a maiden ghost."

"Why should I grow old as a maiden ghost?" Willow asked, thinking it a joke, but Mrs. Yun sighed heavily.

"You don't know what I'm talking about. With the Japanese in control, who would ever marry the daughter of a righteous army member? You've had it hard thus far thanks to

your unfortunate parents, so things will be better with that man in Hawai'i."

It was the first time that Mrs. Yun had ever used the term "righteous army." Willow had never heard from her mother exactly how her father died. When Japan was about to swallow up Korea, her father, who had sometimes gone away for a time, disappeared for good. Willow remembered when her mother had been taken off to the police station. She had lain ill for a few days after returning and had said nothing about the reason. Soon after, her father came back as a corpse.

Willow had heard from others that her father had been in an anti-Japanese righteous army. After the visit by Japanese police, for a while nobody came to visit them, as if they had the plague. If wealthy Mr. An had told them to get out of his house, they would have been on the street. Instead he allowed them to go on living there and secretly provided food.

Willow's brother, three years older than herself, was attending school in Kimhae at the time. Full of resentment, he had died standing up to a Japanese policeman, harassing people on the street, kicked in the head by the policeman's horse. Willow recalled what her mother had told Hongju's mother, wailing, the night she came back from the funeral.

"How can they talk of vanquishing the Japanese when even our king couldn't do it? That's how their aboji died, and now they've killed my son, but I won't hate them or blame them. And I'm not going to tell my remaining sons to take revenge on the enemy."

Her goal was to ensure that the children did not hold resentment against the invincible opponents. Subsequently, Mrs. Yun never mentioned the death of her husband or her son. Yet now she had spoken the name of the righteous army.

"For me, Korea is the enemy. Because our land is powerless, I

lost my husband and my child. But Hawai'i is not Korea, there you'll have no country to protect. Once you're there, just forget us here, be happy with your husband and children, and enjoy life. That's my only wish."

Her mother's bitter voice was engraved on Willow's heart as she fell asleep.

* * *

At last she was in Hawai'i. The trees and buildings that she saw for the first time in her life were dazzlingly bright, like a paradise. As the Ajimae had said, food and clothes were hanging in clusters from the tree. Jo Doksam came to meet Hongju, driving his car. However, there was no sign of Taewan. Instead, a message came that he had canceled the marriage. Willow could not get off the boat, she would have to go back home. On the boat, as it sailed away from Hawai'i, she cried and shouted, stamping her feet, at which she woke up, relieved to find that it was a dream. On the one hand, she felt anxious that the dream might come true, but also hopeful since dreams often foretold the opposite of what happens.

Hearing rattling noises in the kitchen, Willow got up and opened the door leading to the kitchen, where Mrs. Yun was making rice balls. Willow rushed into the kitchen. She had vowed to prepare a meal for her mother before she left, but she had overslept.

"Omma, let me do it."

"Never mind, dear. Wash your face and get ready. I've put water on the fire to heat."

Before the meal, Mrs. Yun undid Willow's braided hair and tied it in the bun of a married woman. It would be safer to undertake her long journey as a married woman rather than an unmarried girl. Besides, the documents showed that she was

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leaving as the spouse of Taewan. Willow looked at her new hairstyle in her hand mirror. The front was not much different from when her hair was braided, but now there were no curls hanging down at the back, so it looked light and empty. Willow wore a cotton skirt and blouse made by her mother, the first new clothes she had had since her father died.

Mrs. Yun had used the money Willow gave her to make the new clothes. A skirt and jacket made of crimson silk for the wedding ceremony, a set made of cotton for everyday wear, two light summer jackets since it seemed the climate was hot, two slips and two loose drawers, and three pairs of boson socks. In addition, she made a pillowcase for the father-in-law, a pair of pillowcases embroidered with lovebirds for the newlyweds, and even a jacket for a not yet born grandchild.

There was only one spoon on the table where there was a dish of steamed eggs and roasted seaweed, in addition to the usual rice mixed with millet, bean paste soup and salted radish. Willow looked at the table, then at her mother. "Am I to eat alone?"

"I'll eat with the boys later," Mrs. Yun replied. "They said goodbye yesterday evening, don't wake them up."

Willow understood why her mother said that. If her brothers were watching, Willow would not be able to eat as much as she wanted. For the first time since she was born, she ate alone. Willow's throat tightened as she held back tears. Soon, she would be in Hawai'i and eat delicious food, while her family would not be able to eat their fill even of the millet-rice, hard as grains of sand. Despite her mother's urgings to eat everything, Willow left half the food uneaten.

After the table had been cleared away, Willow curtsied deeply before her mother. Mrs. Yun sat turned to one side, tight-lipped, saying nothing.

"Don't worry, Omma. I'll write as soon as I arrive. Just stay

healthy until I can provide you with more comfort. My brothers, too.”

Swallowing her tears as she took her leave, Willow leaned on the door for a while. The smell of the sesame oil mixed in with the rice balls emerged from the bundle she was clutching. Inside, there were the clothes her mother had packed, a menstruation cloth, and a pair of decorated shoes. Willow had put the hand mirror in her mother’s sewing box. She longed to take it, but more than that she wanted her mother to look at the pretty mirror and remember her daughter.

Willow hugged tightly the bundle full of her mother’s love. Willow stepped onto the creaking wooden floor and went to open the door of the room where Gwangsik and Chunsik were sleeping. A sound of snoring emerged. She resisted the impulse to caress the face of at least her youngest brother. Closing the door again, she vowed to give her two brothers a chance to study in high school. She would also enable Gysuk, who was working at the Kimhae bicycle store, to set up his own shop.

Putting on her straw sandals, Willow went outside. The flower buds on the plum tree planted by her father next to the privy were red and swollen. It was a pity she had to leave without seeing the plum blossom. Standing in front of the brushwood gate, she looked back at the house once more before departing.

Willow met Hongju at the entrance to the village. They had agreed in advance that they would say goodbye to their families at home. Instead of straw sandals, Hongju wore leather shoes, but she was dressed simply, although the bundle she was holding was larger than Willow’s. When Willow saw her friend’s swollen eyes, the tears she had been holding back burst free.

“Don’t cry. It’s a long way, it’ll make you tired.” Hongju took hold of Willow’s hand. Whirlwinds of emotion passed from

one to the other. Together, they took their first steps toward a new world.

* * *

After walking all day without rest, Willow and Hongju reached the Pusan Ajimae's house at nightfall. It was a thatched house behind the market. Apart from being located in a busy area, it was just as shabby as Willow's family home. The Ajimae came out barefoot to welcome them.

"Why, young ladies, come on in. You must be tired. Aren't you hungry? Songhwa, bring some food!" The Ajimae shouted toward the kitchen as she ushered Willow and Hongju into the room like a mother hen driving her chicks. The moment they entered the room, Willow and Hongju collapsed onto the floor like ripe persimmons. They no longer had the strength to bend a single finger, let alone a leg. It was amazing that they had been able to walk such a long way. A girl briefly put her head out of the kitchen, but Willow didn't get a good look.

Expressing pity for Willow and Hongju, the Ajimae brought out pillows. Willow's weary body lay flat on the floor, until it could fall no further.

"Ajimae, that girl in the kitchen, isn't she the granddaughter of Kumhwa in Surijae?" Hongju asked, as she lay on her back with arms spread wide, struck by a sudden thought.

"Do you know Songhwa?" Willow and the Ajimae asked at the same time. There was a shaman's house on Surijae, one of the ridges going from Ojin to Jinyong. People in the neighborhood went to Kumhwa to have their New Year's fortune told, for charms and talismans, and for shamanistic kut ceremonies. Kumhwa had a daughter named Okhwa, who had given birth to a daughter whose father was unknown. She was named Songhwa. There was no knowing if the madness

came first, or the birth of the child, but Okhwa always carried Songhwa about with her. Every one of the children in Ojin had joined in throwing stones at Okhwa and her daughter.

Willow remembered Okhwa, who used to laugh lightly with a frightened face, more clearly than Songhwa, who would follow behind her mother looking terrified. Although Okhwa was crazy, she was the prettiest woman Willow had ever seen. After rumors circulated that Okhwa had fallen into a pond and died, there was no sign of Songhwa. People said that the elderly Kumhwa was having a hard time caring for her granddaughter.

“I saw her when I went with Omma for a ceremony not long ago.” After Hongju decided to marry Doksam, her mother went to Kumhwa and had her perform a ceremony to appease the spirit of Hongju’s first husband.

“Has she come to live here? To work in your house?” Willow asked.

“No. She’s going to Hawai’i to get married, too.”

Willow and Hongju abruptly sat up.

“What? Is there a man who would marry that girl?” Willow asked, looking incredulous. At some point, the boundary between yangban and commoner had begun to collapse, but it wasn’t the same for a shaman or a butcher. Dongbuk the butcher, who lived in an isolated house, was obliged to bow low even before the young children of the village, despite being a white-haired old man. The same was true for the shaman Kumhwa, who had passed sixty, then seventy, long ago.

“Indeed, there is,” the Pusan Ajimae said with a smile. “She’s a good-looking girl. It’s just been settled.”

“It’s unheard of. She’s not even that pretty.” Hongju pouted.

“But how did that girl hear about Hawai’i?” Willow asked, unable to hide her dismay.

“Old woman Kumhwa heard about it from Hongju’s mother

so she brought her to me. She asked me to help Songhwa leave Korea and live in a world different from that of her kin.”

“The shaman kept asking questions at the ceremony, she must have been planning this even then,” said Hongju.

“The situation of Songhwa is very like your own. Who would ever marry the granddaughter of a shaman without even a known father? Either she would have to become a shaman like her grandmother, or be sold off to become a gisaeng, an entertainer.” The Ajimae sighed.

Willow could not agree that her situation was similar to that of Songhwa, even if Hongju had already been married once.

The Ajimae went on, as if she could read Willow’s mind. “I’ve been roaming the world with a bundle on my head since before you two were born, there’s nowhere I’ve not been. I’ve seen people living in every kind of house. And do you know what I’ve concluded from that? It’s that people are all the same, everywhere. Yangban, commoner, rich man, beggar, they’re all the same. The yangban does not feel more pain, nor the butcher less. When it comes to their children, every parent’s heart is the same. Kumhwa’s concern for her granddaughter is just the same as your omoni’s concern for you. If you could live better lives here, why would you go far away from your parents and siblings? Aren’t you setting off for a new world because you can’t live decent lives at home? Feel sympathy for Songhwa, and accept her as your companion from here to Hawai’i.”

Although the Ajimae spoke with intense sincerity, Willow could not help feeling uneasy at the thought of eating and sleeping together with Songhwa over the entire journey.

Hongju, who had been silent, asked, “Did the man in Hawai’i really think that girl was pretty?”

Just then, the door opened and Songhwa came in carrying a tray table. They looked up at her as she entered. Compared

to her grim childhood, she looked very different, but her face, with eyes round as the snails in paddy fields, projecting nose, and pointed chin, could certainly not be called pretty. Perhaps intimidated by their piercing gaze, Songhwa placed the table with chipped corners before Willow and Hongju and went to sit down in a corner. She looked frightened, but didn't seem slow as the rumor said.

The moment the tray table was set down, Willow's interest shifted from Songhwa to the food. On the table was rice mixed with millet, radish-top bean-paste soup, shrimp sauce and marinated dried radish.

"Eat up, you must be hungry. Hongju, you must have eaten well at home, I don't know if this will suit you."

"I'm so famished I'd eat anything, even horse droppings," said Hongju as she turned to the table. For a while the only sound in the room was that of people eating. As soon as they finished, Songhwa left the room and brought in bowls of scorched rice soaked in water, just like Willow would do at home.

Willow turned her attention back to the Ajimae. "Are you living alone? Doesn't your son live with you?" Willow remembered how, whenever the Ajimae came to her home, she would talk about her son and grandchildren.

The Ajimae's face was clouded with sorrow. "They left for Manchuria just after New Year's Day. They urged me to go with them, but if I went I'd only be a burden and it would soon have been the death of me." The Ajimae smiled sadly as if she was forcing herself to be cheerful.

"Why did they go? Didn't you say that the brewery was doing well?" Willow recalled the people she had seen on the road. They were on their way to the train station, carrying not just bedding, but even cooking pots. They were all looking very shabby.

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“The Japanese brutes demanded huge taxes, so he closed it down. They had an ax to grind about selling their own liquor. Unable to get back a penny of the money that went into it, he ended up ruined, with nothing but debts. He left because he couldn’t stand the constant harassment. In Manchuria there’s plenty of open land. He left saying that if he only cleared some stony ground, they could survive. When I think of what a hard time they’ll have so far from home, my heart aches.” The Ajimae used her skirts to wipe away tears and blow her nose. “Whereas, once you’ve suffered a bit, you’ll prosper in later years. You’ll be able to live comfortably watching your grandchildren’s cute tricks.”

Everyone slept in the main room, where the fire was lit. The Ajimae took the bedding and spread it on the floor. “Tomorrow you leave for Pusan right after breakfast, so we’d better sleep early.” With their feet on the warmest part they lay down in order: the Ajimae, Songhwa, Willow, and Hongju. One quilt covered the Ajimae and Songhwa, the other covered Willow and Hongju.

When the lamp was extinguished, the room became dark. The Ajimae fell asleep as soon as she lay down. Willow had been awake since dawn and had walked a long way, but she was still wide awake. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see the shapes of the clothes hanging on the wall. It seemed like several years had passed since the early morning.

Hongju prodded Willow. “Are you asleep?”

“I can’t sleep. I’m used to sleeping alone.”

“Not me. It reminds me of a school trip to Pusan when all the children slept together in one inn room. The first one to fall asleep got charcoal smeared on her face.”

Willow remembered hearing about it from Hongju. Nothing made her heart ache like the story of the school trip she had

missed. But now that was all past. Once she got to Hawai'i, she'd be able to do whatever she wanted.

"Songhwa, when did you come here?" Hongju asked, speaking to Songhwa for the first time.

The room filled with a silence denser than the darkness.

"She's asleep," Willow said, although she knew that Songhwa was not asleep. She no longer had a problem with going to Hawai'i with Songhwa, but she never wanted her to become a close friend.

"Are you really sleeping?" Hongju asked again.

"Just after the winter solstice." In the dark, her slightly hoarse voice echoed. It was similar to the voice of Kumhwa when she was telling New Year's fortunes for the neighborhood women.

"You mean you've been here ever since?" Willow asked. That was more than two months.

Songhwa sighed. "Grandma told me not to come home again . . ." Songhwa's pain was plain even in the dark. They could understand without her needing to say anything more.

"What have you been doing for two months?" asked Hongju.

". . . Just . . ."

Hongju gave up waiting for her to answer and instead asked, "What kind of person is your husband? Do you have a picture? Let us see it."

Willow was also wondering who might have chosen Songhwa.

After a moment's hesitation, Songhwa stood up with barely a sound and lit the lamp. Willow and Hongju, who were by now sitting, screened the light with their hands as the Ajimae murmured something. Once the Ajimae turned over and resumed snoring, Willow and Hongju giggled in relief. Seeing that, Songhwa also smiled, and carefully opened the overhead cupboard to retrieve a picture from her bundle.

Hongju, who had been watching her slow movements, snatched the picture and held it up to the light of the lamp. Willow pushed her head closer to get a good look. The man, who was also wearing a suit, did not look much different from Taewan or Doksam. On the back, the photo said *Park Sokbo, 36 years old*, three years younger than Doksam.

“Did you get a letter?” asked Hongju.

Songhwa shook her head.

“Can you write?” Willow asked. Songhwa shook her head again. It wasn’t a big deal, because there were fewer people who could write than couldn’t, but Willow felt sorry for this Park Sokbo, who would find himself with a bride who was not only the granddaughter of a shaman but uneducated to boot.