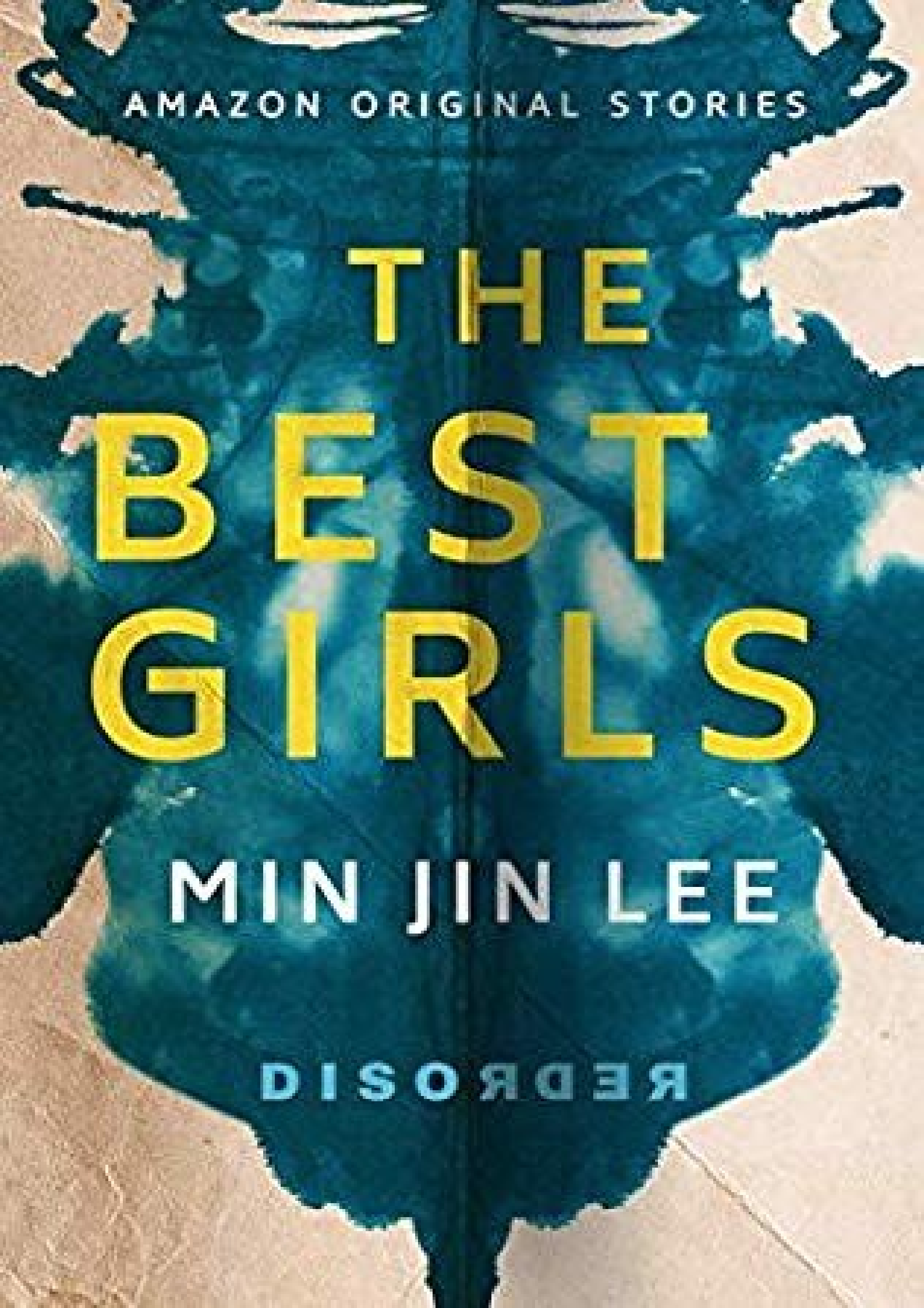
AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES
THE BEST GIRLS
MIN JIN LEE
DISORDER

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Four years ago, when Janmi, the last of the girls, was born, Dad went to the bar near his work, drank two bottles of soju, and passed out behind the vegetable stand. Dad's best friend, Mr. Chung, found him and brought him home. I was nine years old then. Still drunk, Dad stumbled across the threshold of our three-room house, trying to lean against the tall, light frame of Mr. Chung. Grandmother helped Dad remove his shoes. That night, Dad had somehow lost his pay envelope, so there was no money again except for Mama's cleaning wages. Grandfather scolded him, and Mama cried while holding my infant sister.

"Four daughters. What a fate," my grandmother said. I shushed my sisters, Okmi and Sangmi, and we stayed as quiet as we could on our side of the room, waiting for Grandfather to stop his yelling.

A year later, Jaesung was born. Grandmother hung a string of dried red chili peppers over our front door. At last, a boy. That day, Dad boasted to the neighbors that Jaesung would become a scholar. My father had wanted to be a pharmacist but couldn't finish high school because Grandfather hurt his back at the plant. Jaesung would go all the way through, Dad said. After the joyous birth of her son, Mama slept soundlessly.

On Jaesung's first birthday, we had a *doljanchi*, and Grandmother made beef and vegetable *jeon*, and Mama dipped into her savings and ordered a tray of beautiful *mujigae-tteok* from the *ajumma* down the street. We'd never had such lavish things to eat. Aunt, Mama's older sister, the one who never married, took the bus from Daegu just to get a sight of Jaesung and brought him a special *hanbok* for the occasion. Mr. Chung brought over a sack of hard persimmons and a crate of large red apples. Jaesung wasn't walking yet then; however, even at a year old, he was alert and smart.

On the straw mat, Grandmother laid out a crisp 1,000-won note, a thick skein of white string, and a calligraphy brush. As if he knew the correct answer to a difficult test question,

Jaesung crawled toward the calligraphy brush and picked it up right away, and Dad's prophetic boasts seemed to be realized. Mr. Chung clapped and cheered.

"Our son!" Dad shouted. "Our son!" Beaming with gladness, Mama said Jaesung would be good in school. I pictured Jaesung receiving a degree from a famous university like Seoul National and becoming a wise professor or a respected judge. Our little brother, one day wearing a long black robe; he would provide our family with dignity and wealth.

"Four daughters. What a fate."

None of us girls had had a doljanchi. I didn't know that girls could have such a thing until my friend Jinyoung told me that she'd had one. She's a year younger than I am and has three little brothers. Until I graduated sixth grade, just a few months ago, all of us kids—Jinyoung, her three brothers, my two school-age sisters, and I—played together at recess. As the eldest, it's my responsibility to make sure that Okmi and Sangmi don't get into trouble, so during breaks we'd just hang out with Jinyoung and the boys. We had fun together.

I saw the photographs of Jinyoung's doljanchi when she brought them to school.

"You still look like that, Jinyoung," I teased, and she giggled because this was true.

In the photograph, a baby girl with ruddy cheeks grasped a clementine in her left hand and a string in her right. Her mother told her that when she grabbed the string, it meant that she'd live a long and healthy life. Jinyoung wore a pretty yellow-and-blue hanbok with striped sleeves. She had the grin that babies have—silly, kind of foolish. You don't really know what they are smiling about; still, you hope they're smiling because of you. My youngest sister, Janmi, is four years old now, so she's not a baby anymore. Unlike Okmi and Sangmi, Janmi doesn't talk, but when I give her the leftover colored

folding paper that I take from school, she smiles just like my friend Jinyoung in the photograph.

Even though we'd never had one ourselves, my sisters and I were happy about Jaesung's doljanchi, his subsequent birthday parties, and the hanbok that Grandmother made for him out of her old festival dresses. Whenever we did something special for Jaesung, I felt that our family was as good as Jinyoung's. Her family doesn't have much money, either—Jinyoung's father works in the factory with Dad. But her family has three boys, and she's the only girl.

It wasn't that Jinyoung was bragging about her doljanchi. She's not like that. She'd only brought the photographs to school because I'd asked her to. But when she showed the pictures to me, I'd felt funny inside and sad.

I don't have photographs of myself. I suppose that when I was little, I looked like Okmi, Sangmi, and Janmi. We don't have a camera at home, and whenever the teacher asks us to buy a school photograph, Mama says that we don't have the money for that. So when we do special things for Jaesung, I tell my sisters that this is for all of us.

For Jaesung's third birthday, Aunt visited us again. She bought him a frosted bakery cake with tiny yellow ducks on it. We had seen American cakes in magazines but had never eaten one before. Each of us got a small slice, and it was more delicious than anything I had ever tasted. The paper cake box had some icing smeared on the sides, and Okmi licked it up, and Sangmi pinched her for not sharing. I told my sisters to quit fussing, because we should be grateful.

Aunt told us that we were good girls, the best girls, because we never complained. Then Grandmother said that we must take good care of Jaesung, because a boy would protect and honor his family. This was something we had to remember. One day our brother would save our parents from dying on a lonely mountain.

Grandmother, my *halmoni*, is always busy, which makes her stern. She wakes before my parents go to work. She does nearly all of the cooking, cleaning, and washing, and she

grows cabbages, cucumbers, and scallions in our little garden in the backyard. My sisters and I clean the floors twice a day and weed the garden to help, but we do almost nothing compared to her. Once in a while, when she's in a good mood, she will sit down on a floor cushion and tell us stories. She's far more interesting than my teachers at school because she makes her lessons scary so that we won't forget them.

After we finished the birthday cake and the dishes were washed and put away, *Halmoni* sat down on the grape-colored floor cushion and told us about a son who had a terrible decision to make.

"A long, long time ago"—she always begins this way —"there was a young man who lived with his mother and father, and he realized that he could no longer support his wife and seven children with the meager crops of that season. He owed his landlord crops as rent for the past two years and didn't have seed money for the year to come. He had only two more burlap sacks of rice for the autumn and winter. His wife yelled at him night and day for failing as a farmer. He walked around his tiny plot of land in search of an answer. He wondered why he could not work the land that his parents had sustained themselves on for all their lives.

"The seasons were dry. The children were trying to help, but no matter how hard they labored, after the taxes were collected and the landlord was paid, there was never anything left over. The man's aging parents grew more troubled, as they watched their son sicken himself with worry over their poverty. They had to do something. His mother and father resolved that they would ask their son to carry them to the high mountain near their village so they could die in peace with their ancestors' spirits.

"That evening, the son wove a basket large enough to hold his mother. He attached rope grips to secure over his narrow shoulders. When he completed the woven vessel, he wept pale-yellow tears. His father helped his mother into the basket. The son found a strong wooden staff to aid his father in walking up the narrow mountain trail hemmed in by rows and rows of thick trees. The old man tried to keep pace with the

son who carried his mother. The journey took several hours. They did not speak during the dangerous walk. The noises of the dark forest scared his mother, but she kept silent in her basket. As they reached the top of the mountain, the son searched for the words to say before he left both of them there to die with the spirits of their ancestors. As he helped his mother out of the basket, she handed him a bundle of thin broken sticks. The sticks were still warm where she had tightly held on to them. He asked his mother what they were for.

"'I broke these sticks to make markers on the trail so you wouldn't get lost in the forest as you return home to your family. I wanted you safe,' she said.

"The son wept. He begged forgiveness from his parents. He began to help his mother back into the basket. He resolved that no matter what the circumstances were, he could never let his parents starve to death, frightened, on a mountaintop. They walked back down the mountain to their village.

"Since that day, the tradition of letting old people die on mountains was ended," my grandmother said. "The sons realized that their parents loved them and were concerned for their safety, even as the old ones traveled to die."

No one answered me when I asked if they lived happily after they returned home. The grandparents wouldn't die from starvation or be eaten by the tigers that lived in the tree-covered hills, but when the son and his parents came down, did the family rejoice in their homecoming? Ever since I heard this story, I kept wondering what happened to that family. I wanted it to rain, the crops to be plentiful, and no one to feel hungry. The story did not have such an ending. Like them, we, too, were always so poor.

No one answered me when I asked if they lived happily after they returned home.

Today, Dad came home around five o'clock, and he scooped up Jaesung, who played next to Grandfather, who was reading the paper. Dad usually returns home around eight, and

none of us expected to see him when it was still light out. *Maybe the factory closed early,* I thought. After he let the wiggling Jaesung return to his spinning top, he went to find Mama in the backyard. She was digging up scallions from the garden. Grandfather said that to buy them would be scandalous when they grew so easily even in a polluted city like Seoul. So when we had scallion pancakes with soy sauce and vinegar, my grandfather always credited himself for the treat.

In the garden, Mama dropped the scallions onto the ground. She took off the red kerchief that she was wearing on her head and wiped her neck. She sat on the large covered jar while Dad started to cry. I'd never seen him do that before.

Jaesung started to sing a song from a radio commercial that he had memorized.

"Lucky soap is the one for me. Lucky soap is the one for me." Jaesung was singing in his sweetest voice. "Get Lucky soap for your famileeeey."

Grandfather looked up from his paper, removed his reading glasses, and squinted at the window. He said something to Grandmother. They looked confused. Grandfather went to the garden. Grandmother handed me some coins and told me and Okmi to go buy tofu for dinner and if there was any money left over, we could buy shrimp chips for us kids to share.

Okmi and I often talk at great length about the things we want from the store. We almost never have any money except for when we find silver pennies on the street or when we get a coin on New Year's Day. We would like to taste the thin cookies dipped into the small containers of chocolate that are packed at the bottom of the package. At the market, sometimes, there are fat yellow bananas from Jeju, which cost more than what my mother brings home in her pay envelope from Mrs. Kang. They look really delicious. Okmi and I usually take forty minutes to run the fifteen-minute errand. Grandmother seems to understand our delay most of the time, except when we're sent to fetch her stomach medicine.

Though, today, as we went to the store, the only thing I thought of was my father's tears.

Okmi doesn't notice when I am feeling bad. My family long ago concluded that I'm the moody one, so even Okmi expects me to be quiet most of the time. She skipped ahead of me. The red hand-me-down skirt that I had given her was already too short. She screamed that she wanted to race. "On your mark, get set, go!" Her skirt flew violently, whipping against her skinny, brown legs. I could not run like my younger sister. We bought the tofu and a small bag of shrimp chips, and after we divided it five ways, I let Sangmi, my second sister, eat my share, because she had done a good job watching Janmi and Jaesung while we were at the store.

Later, that night, I lay still behind the blanket wall.

An enormous double-sided blanket with a furious tiger on one side hangs on a laundry line to divide up our sleeping area. The girls sleep on the left side of the blanket, and the right side is for my parents. Grandfather and Grandmother sleep in the bedroom in the back of the house with Jaesung. Behind the image of the terrifying beast, the other side of the blanket has images of fairy maidens from a long-ago dynasty. Some are bathing, and some are dancing while a muse plays for them. They coil their black hair with jade sticks and wear embroidered dresses with huge sleeves, concerned only with their beauty. My favorite lady of the blanket is the one that sits alone beside the stream, watching the carp swim. When I'm feeling low, I think about her day. After she finishes playing a game with her friend, perhaps she strolls around the palace gardens to look for pretty birds and listens to their singing. Maybe she will have her *gayageum* lessons after that, then share ripe pears with her family.

My sisters and I were supposed to be sleeping. Awake, I listened to my grandfather asking Dad questions. Grandmother gasped repeatedly. Dad said we had lost our house. We would have to move out. The men from the bank told him that it would not be honorable to fight this decision made by his creditors.

I tried not to make the blanket tremble. I held my breath. When my grandparents, Mama, and Dad gather quietly, I know it's important. Our family has never been very quiet; because our home is so small, we do not try to sit together too often.

When the weather is bad and we're forced into a small common space, Grandmother will complain about the flies, my brother will cry because he doesn't like too much noise, and I'll be sent out with my sisters to the rice shed, which is sturdy and dry. There, Sangmi and Janmi will make dolls out of old newspapers, and Okmi will poke around the shelves, looking for dead mice. The traps don't work, so Mama sets out medicine to catch them, and Okmi throws the mice away.

Although the night was beautifully clear outside, I felt trapped in this room, unable to sleep. Eventually, Grandfather stopped talking, and there was only my father's calm voice.

Mr. Chung, my father's friend, had asked my father to cosign a loan a year and a half ago. Mr. Chung had wanted to open a tobacco shop. The only person he knew with a steady factory job and a small home was his best friend. Dad had known him all his life. They'd attended the same schools until Mr. Chung and Dad dropped out. He was like an uncle. He never married, and he lived like a free man. He ate many holiday meals with us. Mr. Chung adored my mother and teased her whenever he came over. He would bring us colored penny ices. After eating, he and Dad would leave to drink somewhere. My grandparents must have liked him enough to let him visit the house so often. Mama felt sorry for him and called him the orphan.

Last spring, when he came to my father and told him that he wanted to have a business, Dad had hope for Mr. Chung. He wanted my father to cosign a loan from the Seoul Bank. The terms were that our home would be the collateral. My mother was concerned because Mr. Chung did not stay in his jobs for very long.

Initially, his business went pretty well, so my father thought Mr. Chung must be settled. Dad had not worried. But Mr. Chung hasn't stopped by the house in two months, and

today we found out why. He had not made his loan payments to the Seoul Bank. He was no longer at his boardinghouse. The bank officers called my father's foreman and left a message. Dad received the note during his lunch break. Over cold rice and a thin beef broth from the night before, my father lost the house.

Trust had prompted my father to sign the papers. Honor made him turn everything over to the bank.

My sisters were asleep already, and I looked up at the ceiling. The hairline cracks in the white plaster made the shape of a large diamond, and I wished that I could have such a thing to sell.

The grown-ups talked now about school fees. I had just entered the seventh grade, and my tuition was a burden. Mama's wages as the cleaner for Mrs. Kang, a lady teacher who lived downtown, went toward my tuition. Okmi, Sangmi, and Janmi would go to school for free until the sixth grade, as I had. Jaesung would begin kindergarten in three years. Tuition would have to be found for four more children. My parents were saving so Jaesung could receive private lessons for his high school and college examinations. Grandfather had explained that tutoring had been made illegal a while back so poor children could have the same chance as rich ones. But still, smart college students secretly gave lessons for high rates. No matter how many coins we threw into the powdered milk can for the next ten years until Jaesung required tutoring, the money was an exorbitant amount for us. Now that the house was gone, the tutoring for Jaesung was not possible. And without tutoring, without a college education, he would be unable to save us.

Grandfather and Grandmother went to their room, where Jaesung was already asleep. Mama and Dad fell onto their thick pallets. In no time, Mama began snoring quietly.

I crept outside the house to sit on the back doorsteps. The field mice darted brazenly by the wire fence. They were small and plump. They'd found a hole in the rice bags in the shed, judging from their size. The mice scattered throughout the scallion patch. I counted maybe eleven scurrying creatures—

their grayish bodies dancing in the light of the evening. The hair on the rounded ends of the mice looked neatly trimmed. I wanted to be a mouse then, dancing under the moon, running aimlessly throughout the rows of scallions. I wanted to be a small, round mouse, dreaming of pancakes while smelling yellow dandelions. I remembered my father crying in the garden.

I try not to cry, because it doesn't seem to make any difference. And whenever I do, I shut my eyes to make it stop. The last time I looked like a crying baby was when I graduated from lower school.

All those times that Dad and Mama talked about Jaesung and how he'd become a great scholar, I'd wondered if I could be smart like that. I did well in school. All the boys and girls competed to be first in subject tests during the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. When the teachers posted the scores on the classroom door, often I got top marks. Some of the boys were furious at me, and two of the really smart girls in the class would not even look at me after I kept placing first. None of them had invited me to their houses, so I had not played with them during all the years at lower school. When the kids went to the candy store at the end of the day, my sisters and I went straight home. Jinyoung and her brothers were the only friends my sisters and I had. But we didn't mind because we always had a good time.

The day I graduated, I received six ribbons and two gold-colored pins at the ceremony. I received more awards than even Sejong Chun, the smartest boy in the class. It was funny because I'd have to keep going up to the stage to receive the ribbons and the certificate papers, go down to my seat again, only to go up to receive another one. The people in the audience grew irritated. Dad and Mama were working, so they could not come. My grandparents were taking care of Jaesung and Janmi, so they stayed home. The first two times the principal called out my name, I went up to the stage and my sisters cheered and stood up in an imitation of the parents in the audience. Okmi was pretending to be Dad, and if she'd had a camera like the others, she would have looked just like a little-girl father. Sangmi was giggling at Okmi's individual

standing ovation, then she, too, stood up for my second award. But as the awards ceremony progressed, people began grumbling. My sisters were afraid to stand up after the third award. They smiled, but they didn't clap. Miss Kim, the head teacher for the sixth grade, and the principal looked nervous after each time one or the other called out my name. When I walked off the stage after receiving my fifth award, I saw the principal look reprovingly at the audience as if to make them behave. I thought that they should have just given me the awards in a bag after the ceremony.

There was an ice cream party after the graduation, at Eunah's house. I didn't really know her, so it made sense I hadn't been asked. I looked for Sangmi and Okmi in the auditorium. Miss Kim said they'd gone back to their classes since the second and third graders hadn't finished school yet. My friend Jinyoung would still be in class because she was in the fifth grade. I was done now with school, and I wanted to go home with my sisters.

I took all the awards that the school had given me. I had received a dictionary, a small leather-bound history book of all the kings in the Yi Dynasty, and sheets of colored paper documenting my eight awards. Carefully, I walked around the groups of people so I wouldn't interfere with their picture taking, but all of them noticed me anyway. As I dodged the flashes of the cameras, I heard the people talk about my plain clothes and face. They said that it was obvious that I studied too hard and I wouldn't get married. Some said that I was disrespectful to my teachers because I had dressed so poorly on commencement day. One mother told a man that I probably cheated. She said that I looked mulish, not very clever. The man said, "Some kids just know how to study but have no common sense."

I remembered the intensity of the boys when they took the competition exams; they never slept much the night before. I had figured that if the boys in the class wanted these gold stars and red checks so badly, I might as well try to get them, too. I wanted Dad to boast about my marks and the foil stars next to my name. I wanted Mama to smile like those pretty-smelling ladies who talked about my dress in the auditorium. But Dad

and Mama did not say anything about the high grades or the awards all during fourth, fifth, and sixth grade. Now, holding the award books and certificates and with all the ribbons pinned to my blue poly dress, I couldn't imagine walking out of the school from the front. There were even more parents laughing and taking pictures there. So I walked out the back. Miss Kim called out my name, but I pretended not to hear her.

It was nice outside, and I felt that it was going to be a good day anyway. I looked at all the prizes that I got. Slowly I tore each certificate into a thin ribbon. With one of the gold-colored pencils that Miss Kim had given me, I curled the ribbons made from the yellow document papers, pink certificates of excellence, and white pages into a huge serving of paper noodles. After I pulled the pages from the loosened binding of *A History of Korea*, I had a leather plate on which to place my excellent document noodles. The thin, long pieces of paper were generously flecked with words of black ink. I took the leather cover, which held the remains of my awards, and I tossed them high into the air. I saw swirls of color. The shards of paper, held by the wind, formed countless rings about my head and rose high before falling around my blue dress. I shut my eyes tightly.

I stopped crying and walked around to the front of the school because I heard the schoolchildren coming out. Recess had begun. I realized then that I should not study too hard. Because people only dislike you for it. I hoped that Jaesung would study, though, because I felt sure that he would be more popular and his success wouldn't make anyone mad at him.

Slowly I tore each certificate into a thin ribbon.

The backyard is my favorite place. No one had noticed me leaving the house, even when the back door squeaked a little. Everyone was still sleeping. It wasn't too cold outside. Seated on the lower step, I hugged my arms and took a deep breath. A tiny, tiny mouse drew near my rubber-soled canvas shoe, and I

picked it up. It might have eaten some of the medicine already, and it didn't squirm in my hand. Its paws had dirt on them. Unlike Okmi, who isn't afraid of anything, I'd never held a mouse before. Its fur was short and smooth, its breath steady. No matter, a mouse would always be despised—fat or skinny, fed or unfed. I'd never been taught its utility. I held the mouse still as I walked to the shed and got more of the medicine. It was easy to pop open the lid of the aluminum tin. I poured a bit of white powder onto my hand. The mouse would no longer steal our rice. The brown-gray creature put its snout to the powder to sniff it. Its weight shifted to its warm belly. I felt the bottom of its gentle warmth in my left hand. Once, I saw my father kill a rat with his shoe. I'll never forget the bloodstain by the front door. This mouse would never feel the blow of a dusty black shoe. I placed it beside a cluster of dandelions.

When Mama and Dad go to work tomorrow morning, I will help Grandmother make breakfast. Grandfather doesn't stir until nine, when Jaesung wakes up. It's my job to make sure that my sisters eat their morning meal while Grandmother washes dishes and prepares the day's lunch and supper. In the morning, when my grandmother is in the kitchen, I will place enough of this powder into my sisters' and my porridge bowls. Mama and Dad will be sad, but it will be all right.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo © Elena Seibert

Min Jin Lee is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Pachinko*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction, a runner-up for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and a *New York Times* 10 Best Books of 2017 selection. Lee's debut novel, *Free Food for Millionaires*, was a Top 10 Book of the Year for the *Times of London*, NPR's *Fresh Air*, and *USA Today*.