

1925:

A young girl was born in 1925. She was as a second daughter of Kim family. Her parents – Myung-soo Kim, the father, and Shin-young Park, the mother – were thrilled to have another member in the family but also worried since they were financially struggling.

Kim's family was originally a well-respected Sunbi family in Icheon. They had many ancestors who served in the palace and used to own 50 acres of rice fields. However after Japan colonized Chosun, Kim's family lost all of their lands and became poor. Japanese officials initially made two offers: to work with the Japanese government in collecting high taxes from peasants and to 'donate' all lands to Japanese government. Myung-soo's father, Myung-ho, decided to not to collaborate with the Japanese government and instead divided all their lands and handed them to peasants who used to work for him. At that time, Myung-ho thought that Japanese colonization was not going to last for long and felt obligated to help out fellow Chosun people during the time of hardship. Because of Myung-ho's generous gesture, all peasants remained loyal to Kim's family around the area. However because of Myung-ho's noncooperation, Japanese officials around Icheon took everything - from furniture to plates – away from the family. As Myung-ho and his former peasants got older, their loyalty pledge fell apart. Basically during the time when Myung-soo's second daughter was born, the family situation was rough. Instead of a tile-roofed house with a garden, Kim family lived in a thatched-roofed house with one room.

Nonetheless, Myung-soo was well educated. Even after Myung-ho became poor, he was never frugal in educating his son, Myung-soo. Myung-soo went to a Japanese school but learned Korean from his dad. His father always emphasized the importance of knowing one's root. Myung-ho often told Myung-soo: "We are from a Sunbi family. You always need to remember our origin and remain classy." Myung-soo remembered that well.

Shin-young was also from a Sunbi family, but unlike Myung-soo, she was from a poor Sunbi family. Nonetheless because her parents also emphasized the importance of education, she was bright and elegant. After attending a school together, Myung-soo decided to marry Shin-young. She was the exact girl he was looking for: intelligent, similar in values and class. They both believed that Korean Empire will restore and reconstruct itself one day and wanted to create a family to continue their Sunbi heritage for post-Japanese colonization era.

Therefore, they valued education when raising children. Boys would have been preferable since males could only participate in Chosun politics, but they knew that education could help women get a good reputation, a good husband and make a good mother. With these kinds of hope, Myung-soo decided to name his second daughter In-sun after Shin Saimdang. Shin Saimdang was a great poet and an artist during Chosun Dynasty. She was also known for being a great daughter and a mother who raised Yulgok Yi-I, a great politician and philosopher who wanted to bring solidarity within Chosun and build stronger military to protect Chosun from foreign powers.

1941-1942:

In-sun ended up being really smart, actually smarter than her sister, In-hwa. In-sun learned Japanese at school, and Myung-soo taught In-sun Korean at home just like his dad. From time to time Myung-soo regretted that In-sun was a girl, but he was still proud that In-sun was the best student in her class. In-sun liked to read and debate, and her favorite subject was Japanese literature. One day, her Japanese literature Sensei, Yoji Iwatara, called In-sun to teacher's lounge.

“In-sun, you have done so well in the class. Your transcripts are filled with “A”s and great comments from teachers in other classes as well. So I called you today to discuss an amazing opportunity,” said Iwatara.

“What kind of opportunity, Sensei?” responded In-sun.

“The government has asked if our school could send some top students help out the great Japanese military. All expenses are covered. You will actually get paid, and you will also get an opportunity to explore the world with the military.<sup>1</sup> I just think you are a great candidate since you are more than fluent in Japanese and the best student I have ever seen since I moved to Chosun peninsula<sup>2</sup>,” said Iwatara.

In-sun was bothered by the fact that she would have to help out Japanese military for this work, but seeing the world beyond Icheon sounded amazing. While trying to hide her mixed feelings, In-sun replied, “That sounds amazing. I would love to go explore the world, but first I have to ask my parents.”

After school that day, In-sun ran home to talk about this offer with her parents. When she told her mother, Shin-young gasped and yelled at In-sun: “Have you not learned anything from what I have taught you? We should never trust Japanese. It does not matter whether she is your teacher or a soldier. How much do you know about this ‘job’ that you would be doing abroad? I can never send you to work for a Japanese military. Not when I am alive.”

When her father came home, In-sun asked him as well. Myung-soo said the same: “Did you not hear of a rumor of disappearing girls? In other towns, there is a rumor that Japanese military are taking un-married teenagers. I do not trust any Japanese. Furthermore, I just cannot send my beautiful princess to a battlefield. I love you too much.”

Because In-sun was sixteen, parent’s disapproval made her suddenly want to take the offer. She stood up against her parents by saying, “But that is just a rumor. Sensei Iwatara has always been nice to me. I do not think she will send me anywhere dangerous. You should not judge all Japanese by their military. There are some nice Japanese out there.”

As soon as In-sun finished talking, Shin-young fell on the ground, and Myung-soo got teary. “Oh God. What has the school made you become?” murmured Myung-soo. In-sun was shocked. She had never seen her parents so distressed. After a long silence, Myung-soo started to talk. “You know we are currently looking for In-hwa’s husband. Do you know why? We are looking for her husband because we are afraid that Japanese will take her. Yes, they are just rumors. But nowadays you always want to play safe. We cannot risk anything. Actually, we were going to look for a husband for you as soon as we find a husband for In-hwa even though you are only sixteen. I want you to be safe, and during this time I think it is too dangerous to follow the military, even for a guy.”

In-sun did not know that their parents were considering marrying her off. Shocked, In-sun yelled, “Wait, marriage? That’s ridiculous. I am so young. I know what kind of guys you are looking for In-hwa. I do not want to get married to some old guy, just to get married.”

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<sup>1</sup> Some girls were tricked in this way to serve as ‘comfort women.’ Japanese teachers at that time did not know that they were sending students to serve as sex slaves.

<sup>2</sup> I used Chosun and Korean empire interchangeably because even though Korean Empire was declared in 1897, Japanese refused to recognize its legitimacy and called Korean Empire, Chosun. After Japan completely took over Korea, Japanese called Korea by Chosun. Japanese also used the term Chosen-Jing in a derogatory way, even though the term initially did not have a demeaning connotation.

Shin-young responded calmly. "I got married when I was eighteen, when I was only two years older than you. You are not young. You need to see what kind of options you have. As of now, getting married is the most optimal option for all girls in Korea, even if your husband is old."

"Yes, and that is not the point. The point is that you cannot go with Japanese military to 'explore the world.' If you ever bring this up again, we will stop sending you to the school. End of story," said Myung-soo as he went to his room.

Frustrated and disturbed, In-sun did not have any choice but to go back to her room.

The next year, In-hwa got married to a thirty-year-old man. In-hwa was eighteen-year-old.

1943:

A year after In-hwa's marriage, Myung-soo got sick. Doctors could not figure out why Myung-soo got high fevers and hives. Myung-soo's absence brought a devastating effect to the Kim family. Without Myung-soo, Shin-young and In-hwa did not have any source of income. Predicting that his end was near, Myung-soo believed that In-sun's marriage was the only solution to Kim family's financial problem. Only if he could find a guy who would take care of both Shin-young and In-sun, he would die happily without worries. First, he needed to find a guy with a stable job.

'There was a mailman next door, and he seemed like a diligent guy. But he was not from a Sunbi family. There was also a rice cake factory owner in the neighborhood, but he was too old. He was in his forties.' Unable to think of any guy, Myung-soo decided to ask In-sun if she knew anyone. Myung-soo called In-sun in.

"In-sun, I called you to discuss an important matter, and please consider this as a last hope from your dying father," said Myung-soo.

"Do not ever say that you are dying. Our family cannot live without you. Just remember it is all about your mindset. You need to believe that you are going to live. Anyways, why did you desire to talk to me?" asked In-sun.

"I think the best way to solve our financial situation is through your marriage. You are now 18-year-old, the same age when your mother and sister got married, and can contribute to our family through marriage. This marriage could also protect you from any type of Japanese tricks. However, I could not think of any guy and was wondering if you knew anyone," said Myung-soo carefully as he examined In-sun's response.

"Wow. I cannot even believe what came out of your mouth, father," said In-sun indignantly. "All the guys are drafted for Japanese army, and every guy who is left in this town are either old or physically or mentally defective. You want me to marry a disabled man when I do not even love them? You want me to live and die as a widow?" In-sun has never been this furious. She caught her breath and continued: "I am an educated young woman. Don't you ever think that Japanese soldiers will trick me, because they will not. I know enough Japanese to know what is going on. If money is the problem, then I will find money. I will find a job."

In-sun stormed out, crying. She could not believe that her family had faltered this much. In-sun knew that her dad loved her, but they had different views on what women could do, what In-sun could do. Sitting by the porch, In-sun started to make a list of people who could help her. After she came up with three people's name, In-sun decided to go to sleep and visit them as soon as she woke up tomorrow.

The first person on the list was the rice cake factory owner. In-sun visited to see if she could get a job, but the owner said the factory itself was struggling and currently not looking for a new employer. The second on the list was Sook-hee, a girl she knew from school. Sook-hee worked

at a café that Japanese soldiers visited often. She made a lot of money because rich Japanese soldiers tipped her well. In-sun visited Sook-hee and was surprised to see Sook-hee completely changed. Sook-hee had a lot of make up on and flagrantly showed off her jewelry. In-sun approached and asked Sook-hee, "Long time no see, Sook-hee. You look different, in a good way! How did you afford all these?"

"This is kind of scandalous, but since the time I worked here, I got really close to few soldiers, if you know what I mean," Sook-hee replied as she winked at one of the soldier and continued, "And after I do them a favor, they bring me jewelry. By selling jewelry that I do not like, I can get better clothes and make-up, and I keep those that I like." Sook-hee laughed mindlessly. After Sook-hee realized that In-sun was shocked and uncomfortable, Sook-hee immediately covered her mouth with her right hand that had four bracelets on. Sook-hee calmed herself down a little and asked In-sun, "So what brings you here?"

"Oh nothing. I came near this café for something else and simply decided to drop by since we have not seen each other for so long," In-sun responded. "But it looks like you are doing fine, so I am going to go." Without listening to what Sook-hee had to say in back, In-sun rushed outside of the café. Her friend, Sook-hee, was basically a prostitute. In-sun knew that she could not sell herself to a Japanese soldier even if it was for 100 kg of jewelry.

The last person that In-sun visited was Sensei Iwatara. Since her family stumbled, In-sun did not go to school. She took care of her dad while her mom went out to help chores at other family's house. However, In-sun knew that Sensei Iwatara would help her since In-sun was a great student. In fact, Iwatara became the Vice President of the school that In-sun used to attend, so maybe In-sun could get a teaching job given her educational background. With these hopes, In-sun walked into the Vice President's office. As soon as she entered, Iwatara greeted her warmly. "In-sun. I have not seen you in a really long time. How is your family doing? Did your father get better?" asked Iwatara.

"Sensei Iwatara, my family is unfortunately not doing well these days, and I came here today wondering if you could help me out," stated In-sun.

"How could I help you out? I would love to help a great student like you," replied Iwatara.

After a deep breathe, In-sun spitted out what was in her mind. "My dad is trying to marry me off to an old man, so that our marriage will sustain our family financially. He is not doing any better. I really do not want to get married to an old man for money, so I was wondering if the school had any teaching job opened."

Iwatara approached In-sun and hugged her, "Oh In-sun. You know the rules. Chosen Jing is not allowed to teach in our school. I know you are a bright student, and I would love to hire you if it was not for the rules. However I simply cannot. Nonetheless, there is another opportunity for you. The government is recruiting women to work at factories abroad. You will get paid well, and the compensations should be enough to take care of your parents."

In-sun burst tears out and said, "Thank you Sensei for helping me out."

Iwatara responded with a generous smile: "Yes no worries. The truck normally comes on the first day of the month to bring girls to the factory. They meet at the entrance to the market place. If you tell them that I recommended you, they will welcome you and take you where you need to go to make money."

"Thank you, thank you," with that remark In-sun came home. Without changing, she gathered her parents and spoke.

"Father, you told me I was old enough to get married. What you said confirmed that I was old enough to make a decision on my own. Today, I ran around the town like a rat to find a job, and

fortunately I found one. Sensei Iwatara offered me a factory job abroad. I know you will repeat what you said two years ago on how dangerous other countries are during the war and how no one should trust Japanese. Well I do not care. If you guys had sent me two years ago, then I would have made money and our family would not have struggled this much. I am going to take this job and leave on the first day of next month.”

In-sun’s parents knew that they could not stop her. She was right. They would have been better off if she had worked since she was sixteen, and it would be amazing if In-sun could bring money. They did not have any choice but to acquiesce to what In-sun said and send her to the factory.

When In-sun went to the market place on the first day of May, she met three other girls who were also looking forward to working at a factory. Throughout the truck ride on the first day, they talked and became friends. Three girls’ names were: Mi-hee, Young-sook, and Young-ja. They were all from a struggling family and hoped to help out their family members. When it got dark, soldiers who drove the truck forced the girls out of the truck. Then four girls were thrown into a room. Soon after, four Japanese soldiers came in and started to touch the girls. All girls were confused, and In-sun – the only girl who could speak in Japanese – decided to ask one of the soldier what was up.

“What is going on? Where are we and why are you guys touching us?”

A soldier slapped In-sun without any response. Holding her cheek that got swollen, In-sun realized something was wrong. Furious, In-sun yelled, “What is going on! Are we even going to the factory right now? Why are these men creeping on us?” Another soldier chuckled as he responded, “You guys are not going to factories to work. You are going somewhere else to work for us.”

Shocked, In-sun murmured, “My parents were correct. No one should trust any Japanese.” The biggest soldier out of the four heard In-sun. He approached her imposingly and slapped her other cheek.

“You, Chosen Jing. How dare you insult the Great Japanese Empire,” with that he ripped In-sun’s clothes and raped her. Starting with In-sun, three other girls lost their virginities that night. From that night on, their trip was repetition of tears and rapes. During the day, they were transported through trains. During the night, they were raped by yet another Japanese soldiers on the way. In-sun did not know how many days had passed, but eventually In-sun and others arrived at a military troop somewhere.

“Where are we?” asked In-sun to a soldier. “China,” responded a soldier.

At the troop, four girls were given Japanese names. Mi-hee became Akiko; Young-sook, Kokoro; Young-ja, Sena; and In-sun, Haruka. All four girls lived in a shack. The shack had four rooms, separated by a thin wall. Each room did not have a door but a curtain. Every day, these girls each dealt with five to ten men on average. Every time when someone raped the girls, they screamed and cried. However none seemed to care. Soldiers came in and left as they satisfied their needs. Every Wednesday, a doctor came to check if any of the girls had sexually transmitted diseases or got pregnant. Every night, they cried more over a wall. They only had each other, and they all missed home. They would fall asleep talking about their lives back home. How they were happy even though they were poor.

One day, Akiko and Sena visited Haruka at night.

“In-sun, I do not think I can continue doing this. If I stay here any longer, I will just end up killing myself. I have been talking to Young-ja, and I think we are planning on running away. Do you want to join?” asked Akiko.

“But that is so dangerous. You do not speak any Chinese, and we do not even know where we are right now. Are you sure you want to risk your life?” said Haruka.

“I would rather be dead than to stay here. If you do not want to join, that is fine. Just do not tell anyone,” responded Akiko. Akiko and Sena ran away the next day.

Because the troop was now short of two girls, more men visited Haruka and Kokoro. One day Haruka fainted while someone was raping her. When she woke up, she found yet another men raping her. At that point, she stopped screaming or crying when soldiers took advantage of her. She had kind of given up in life. Life seemed hopeless and dead. Kokoro felt the same, until she got hold of opium.

“In-sun. You need to try this,” said Kokoro.

“What is this?” asked Haruka.

“It’s opium,” responded Kokoro.

“Where did you get this?” asked

“This one Japanese soldier seems to like me. After he saw me stress from this ‘physical labor,’ he brought opium to me and told me this would make me feel better, and it did. I know it is wrong to do drugs, but during this time what is right or wrong. Every thing seems to be so vague, and I just want to do something that would make me feel better. This makes me feel better,” said Kokoro.

“Okay, I will try it tonight,” said Haruka. This is how both Kokoro and Haruka became addicted to drugs. To relax or go to sleep... or to forget about their horrendous reality, they did drugs. Two days later, two soldiers came back to the troop proudly, yelling, “We found the girls.” They had found Akiko and Sena. Akiko and Sena were brought to the room with Kokoro, Haruka and other generals, and the generals discussed on what to do with the girls in front of Akiko and Sena. “Obviously we need to punish them,” said one general.

“But we cannot punish them harshly or kill them. We need them to keep our soldiers sane and clean. They are needed,” said another general.

Akiko had learned some Japanese words from living in the troop and knew they were talking about her own future. Infuriated, Akiko yelled, “Man whores” in Japanese and said, “No one can decide what to do with me. I would rather die than to stay here for one more day.”

Japanese generals only understood the word, ‘man whore,’ and ordered Haruka to translate what Akiko had said. Haruka did what she had to do, and the general ordered Akiko to be dead. Akiko was beaten up to death. Everyone had to participate, including Sena, Kokoro and Haruka. If the general thought people were not hitting Akiko harsh enough, that person got hit by the general. So all the girls were forced to hit Akiko as hard as they could.

For Sena, the general believed that her punishment should remind Sena of her wrongdoing for her life. Therefore they decided to tattoo her body. They drew Korean flag on her chests and covered it up with words like ‘bitch’ and ‘whore’ on top of it. Her body was filled with ethnic slurs and praising words for the Japanese Empire. Sena could not wake up for days.

1945:

A year and half has passed since Haruka arrived at the troop. On one day, however, Haruka noticed something irregular about the troop. Normally troop was very organized and scheduled. However today, everyone seemed to be packing up and getting ready to leave. Haruka asked one of the soldiers, “What is going on?”

One soldier replied, “We lost the war. We are going home.”

“What? What happens to us then? Can we go home?” asked Haruka out of an excitement.

“Who knows? I am not the one who is in charge,” responded a soldier.

Haruka went to Sena and Kokoro to tell them about the news. However, she only found Kokoro sobbing on the ground.

“What happened? Why are you crying, Young-sook?” asked Haruka.

“It’s Young-ja. Young-ja hung herself after she heard that the war had ended. She said that she was too ashamed to go anywhere,” said Kokoro as she grabbed Haruka’s arm as if she could not stand by herself.

“No,” Haruka fell on the floor. But soon, Haruka put herself together and said, “Young-sook, we will go home together. Don’t you ever think of doing something stupid. Our lives are too precious. We cannot just die here after suffering this much. We are going to go home, meet our families, get married, have families, and have a happy life.”

“But who is going to marry us? People will call us prostitutes. We are never going to be accepted, anywhere,” cried Kokoro as she ran out of breathe.

“Get yourself together. We will survive. I will figure out what they are up to, and I will make sure that we both get out safely. Remember when they initially tricked us, when they told us that we were going to work for a factory, they promised us large sums of compensation, enough to support our families back home. We will go home with that money and live a new life,” said Haruka.

Haruka went near the general’s office to figure out what was going to happen to them. Shockingly, soldiers were discussing to bury Haruka and Kokoro alive to keep the existence of ‘comfort women’ in secret. As soon as Haruka heard the news, she rushed back to Kokoro. Haruka told Kokoro the news, and they went back to their room and packed their essentials. Afterwards, Young-sook and In-sun sprinted out of the troop without looking back.

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