

Minbak

ALSO BY ELA LEE

Jaded

Minbak

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For the mothers. For my mother.

Your absence is inconspicuous;
Nobody can tell what I lack.

Sylvia Plath, *Parliament Hill Fields*

Incheon, South Korea, 1985

The night the boy without a surname was born, the army rolled through his mother's industrial town. It was the first of November, brittle and silver. The sight of riot vans, advancing with too much intent, was not unusual; the country was under military rule. Still, resistance crackled like a bonfire, charring onto itself in sudden bursts, leaping sparks, catching.

Twenty kilometres away, having screeched into a harshly lit delivery room, a middle-aged woman was somewhat relieved for the distraction. That evening, shop shutters clattered down, windows closed. People moved unclearly, blearily, like bees feeling along a closed window. Mothers called their children inside, a lumpy football and skipping rope left beached in the street. Amidst the commotion, no one had noticed the two of them climbing into the groaning pickup, shapes in the dark, slipping away, returning as three.

The woman's bearing was humble, such that she rarely caught attention anyway. The tidy owner of the local minbak, known for her knife-cut noodles and her discretion, she conducted business without greed, earning her an abundance of goodwill. Her hands were never free and she wore her life in the folds that branched around her eyes. They arrived back home in the ochre of dawn, as the sun's yolk peeked over the weed-scattered yard. Drags of soil, smoke and salt on the breeze.

Inside, she squatted – buttocks to the floor – to place the swaddled child in her father’s brown leather suitcase. Memories tightened, released: carrying the same suitcase, her infant brother straddling her left hip, as they walked from the North. The baby blinked up at her with bright, telepathic eyes and oh! Her heart barked. What to do with him? His personhood was so immediate but, to most, so tenuous. Love was blooming in colourful, exuberant rushes. She watched over him, until his eyelids drooped heavily and his bottom lip stopped suckling. Then she rose and set about the kitchen to make seaweed soup to nourish his mother, curved like a bow on her mat in the inner room.

She blew on the mossy broth, steam twirling from the spoon, before raising it to the girl’s lips. Outside the window, pearls of snow started to fall, sugaring the persimmon tree, hundreds of sweet orange bulbs peeking from between the white.

Hana

하니

Sitting in the clean light of her kitchen, Hana vacantly stared into the middle distance, ignoring the phone as it shrilled over and over. It had been ringing, unrelentingly, all morning. The answering machine beeped: ‘We’re so sorry for your loss, such a brilliant man . . .’

Hana yanked the cable from its plug, mid-platitude. A dark mist fell. She fanned the opening of her shirt, made hot and stifled by these gluey condolences, each a statement of her new condition: widow. Life had been quite front-loaded for Hana; at forty years old, she had already been many women. But all of them, like wife, like widow, had existed outside of herself, by reference to others. A chronic cruelty, when the only thing Hana had ever truly craved was the chance to choose her own terms.

Ada curled around the door, already dressed in a black skater dress with a satin bow in her ponytail. A delicate and even-tempered fifteen-year-old, her face was clean, shaped like a plump raspberry, and her baby hairs stood around her parting like tiny exclamation marks. *Hey Mum*, they seemed

to impress, *over here!* It was the last Saturday morning in June 2008, the start of the summer holidays, two weeks since they had both lost the third point of their triangulated family.

‘You’re up early,’ Hana said in Korean.

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ Ada replied, eyes swollen. It had been Ada who spoke to the police that terrible afternoon. The girl had banshee-screamed, Hana had moved towards the noise, towards the conclusion, to find Ada compacted on the polished oak floor, rocking knees into chest. Hana recognised the internal origami taking place within Ada ever since. That was what lessonless grief did: folded a person this way and that around loss, until they finally emerged an entirely different shape.

After a long pause, Ada asked, ‘Are you going to say anything today?’

‘When?’

‘During the service.’

‘Why would I?’

Ada pulled her chin back towards her neck. ‘I don’t know. I’ve rehearsed my poem three times this morning. It’s probably too late anyway . . .’

Hana couldn’t imagine trying to articulate, in English, in front of everyone, what Tim had meant to her. It would be easier to stand up there naked. She wasn’t nimble with her words, and even less so with her emotions. Hana found heartache unexceptional, a test of endurance, uncomplaining sorrow as constitutional as birth and death itself. She didn’t know how to communicate all this to Ada, who was still looking hopefully at her, so instead she turned away and sighed. ‘What’s the point?’

Ada nodded quickly, chastened. Inside, Hana begged

herself to say something comforting. To just lay her hand over Ada's. Anything but this elongated, melting silence. Right there in the kitchen however, Hana changed the topic with bustling. She wanted to believe, as tears blurred her vision, that if she devotedly wiped down the sink, tidied away all the cups, restored the buzz of domesticity, things might miraculously return to position and the girl still nodding across the counter might not have a dead dad. When Hana did finally speak, it was routine and trite: 'We need to leave soon to pick up your grandmother.'

They pulled into Farm Lane Care Home – 'the Farm' to the family – circling the weeping willow at the centre of the drive, its tendrils sweeping the windscreen. The day an unapologetic, saturated blue. Docile carers in crisp uniforms floated as if in a post-war film about a convalescence home for the shell-shocked.

Three years ago, Hana's eldest brother had called. Their mother Youngja was tripping over invisible obstacles, losing herself on paths she had trodden for fifty years, holding a remote control to her ear wondering why the phone wouldn't dial. Then, with a wide-eyed smile, she'd asked her son what town his parents were from.

'You don't work,' he had said. 'You should take care of her.' He still believed he could boss her around. All that firstborn-son Confucian cherry-picking. And then, with a defeated huff, 'You're the only one she remembers. When she goes missing, we find her at the bus stop, waiting for you to come home from school.'

Kind, altruistic Tim had sorted the best care for the progressive disease spreading like mould through Youngja's memories. He thought he was doing the right thing and

Hana didn't stop him. She sent her mother to eat jam on toast with strangers she didn't share a language with, and Youngja accepted the severity quietly. Still, they were tethered to each other as if by umbilical cord. Only Youngja knew the full of Hana. And as Youngja dissolved, Hana kept her contained at the Farm to stop the feeling that parts of herself were loosening and crumbling away too.

'Omma,' Hana reached her hand out, 'have you been well?'

'If you want me to be well,' Youngja raised her head to reply, without any sign of recognition, 'then I am.'

She didn't meet Hana's hand.

'Halmoni,' Ada said, emerging from the car and shyly bowing to her grandmother. Hana had forgotten she was in the back seat.

Youngja's face opened like a sun shower for Ada, a tiny dart in Hana's chest. She had a soft, secret need for her mother's arms. Though she'd sooner bite off her own tongue than say she needed anything from Youngja. For a pale, barely registered flash, it occurred to her that Ada might have the same yearning, but the thought dissolved as quickly as it formed.

At the entrance to the church, Hana's favourite photo of Tim on a balcony in Greece was propped on an easel, surrounded by white calla lilies. There was a swarm of suits around Gary, Tim's business partner and oldest friend. He'd wanted to be helpful, so Hana'd given him ownership of the guest list. The weeks since the accident had highlighted that she had no mummy friends from the school gates, no book-club buddies, no colleagues, no friendships welded together in beer-soaked dorms. Now, Hana

could name most of the attendees, but hadn't seen them in years.

A busy hum reverberated off the granite walls and there were so many hands slapping shoulders that the funeral had the air of a school reunion. Eyes were hesitant over her. With a name like Hannah Penny, Tim's Surrey friends had expected his bride to be creamy-cheeked and impeccably mannered. But when they first met Hana, they found that she was small, with hard black eyes, and a face that was beautiful but, they'd agreed, not attractive. She was kind of sexy, but marred by a lack of ease and simplicity; an unsettling concoction to those who didn't venture beyond easy and simple. *An elopement*, they'd commented, *how Austenian*. Tim had bobbed an unfazed smile in response, his arm cradling her waist, backing his subtly sharp twenty-four-year-old Korean bride who'd appeared one day like an apparition. Privately though, she'd never forgotten that he'd scrawled 'Hannah' instead of 'Hana' on the wedding register, and, in that moment, she realised he hadn't known her well enough to marry her.

'Hannah,' Ed Malthouse, Tim's schoolfriend, approached, 'I'm so sorry—'

She nodded stoically but didn't speak.

'We can't begin to imagine . . . ' The man's hammy lips faltered, searching for something to cut through the awkwardness of death. 'Do you have any idea what you'll do?'

'What?' Hana raised an eyebrow.

'I mean, where will you go? Back to . . .?'

He was so sincere, and yet so revealing, that for a horrifying moment Hana thought she might break into a giggle at her husband's funeral. She wanted to insult him straight back – tell him she'd always thought his jawline

was questionable at best – but instead settled on, ‘I have a passport now.’

She couldn’t help but be direct. She knew English, but not *the ways* of the English. The need to cushion basic facts with fluff. Polite, but not kind. She ended up accidentally shutting down most conversations.

‘Mum?’ Ada said, smiling apologies to the man, one hand holding her grandmother’s wrist as if Youngja might otherwise drift away. ‘It’s time to go in.’

A closed casket was necessary. Two weeks earlier, Tim’s MG had collided with a truck carrying tiles from Portugal, destined for a bathroom renovation. His car had crumpled like an empty can under eight wheels, a forty-four-year-old man still inside. All Hana had to identify him by was the violet birthmark on his inner thigh. One of those small intimacies of marriage, born from years of comfort around each other’s bodies, that only became precious after it was shared with a coroner.

Gary’s eulogy brimmed with childhood anecdotes of the two boys fecklessly riding through country lanes. He wept. Guests sniffled. Tissues squeezed into damp palms. But Hana stared straight ahead, unable to lay bare her mourning. Not like this. Not so plainly. She’d long learned to weigh fear – and whatever other irritants it mixed up – down with composure. Built a fort of herself, fending off pain’s constant invasions.

Then Ada rose, mild, long-lashed, floating out of the pew towards the lectern. Silence, as the freshly fatherless girl composed herself. Her world of stability so thoughtlessly thrown into chaos. She smoothed a crease in her dress, draped in a haze of diffused light, before leaning forward to

recite the same Auden poem Tim read at his own father's funeral.

“Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood,”’ Ada spoke. Dust particles hovered around her head. Her breath wavered through the mic. “For nothing now can ever come to any good.”’

The whole church held a collective breath, moved by the softness and power of this girl. There was an amorphous quality about Ada that took Hana a few years to pinpoint. The girl radiated a fullness, a spiritual wealth that humbled those around her. It was conflicting for Hana, inviting a comparison that did not favour her. Ada's frame was backlit by colourful rays of sun refracted through stained glass. Beauty persisted somehow. The rest passed in a blur. Before she knew it, the pallbearers began carrying the casket down and out to the graveyard.

As they prepared to lower Tim, a strange, physical weight pressed against Hana's ribcage. It was hard to breathe. It looked so cavernous and damp down there. He'll be so cold and wet! She wanted to crowbar his coffin open and drape a warm blanket over him. The enormous falseness of their life together something tidal, its wrongness climbing towards her, cresting, crashing. There he goes, Hana thought, with his long torso, narrow hips, straight fingers. A normal man to you, but the man who chose me, gave me claim to all the things people are supposed to lay claim to. Gratitude and guilt chased each other like a dog its tail. She had yoked herself to his offer of Hannah Penny, because Hana Park was a cautionary tale, a tragedy, a myth and a martyr all at once, depending on who you asked. And now she was sorry.

Hana blinked. Soil was already scattered over the coffin.

She'd missed it. She was terrible. People were dispersing. Gary's wife Maeve was hugging Ada tight and Hana was relieved she was getting softness from somewhere. Until she walked past and overheard Maeve saying, 'I know you feel alone, honey. You can come to ours any time, all right?'

As if Ada didn't have Hana.

Youngja

영자

It was like driving in the dark. Headlights illuminated only what was directly in front of her, while everything else fell away into a black hole. But with the scant information she had, Youngja could drive for hours. She made out blurry ghouls, moving drearily around her. Static noise blurred, this constant aural inflammation. Wherever she was, it wasn't a happy place. Youngja used to be able to spot a hare on the hillside quicker than any of her brothers, but her sight wasn't so sharp any more.

Someone took her arm. 'Omma, it's been a long day, you must be tired.'

'Are we going home?'

'Yes.'

The sound of Korean a life ring, reeling her in from the deep, back to firm ground. The woman had called her Omma so must be her daughter? But when Youngja thought of Hana, she saw a sweet schoolgirl, with a spill of hair that moved as a single, silky sheet. She saw a translucency, a tendency to slip through rooms unnoticed. She saw the

two of them moving around the minbak in unison. The memories Youngja could access didn't match this refined woman in front of her, who wore naked dissatisfaction in the stiff tilt of her lips. Something between the girl Youngja raised and the woman calling her Omma was blank. Youngja zoomed into the same lips, and saw her husband's Cupid's bow, dipped like a clay bowl. The woman's skin and her own, two peaches plucked from one branch. Yet Youngja was on guard. Something didn't ring quite true.

She was being led somewhere. She said again, 'Are we going home?'

A sigh. 'Yes, Omma. This way to the car.'

Then, the woman took Youngja's hand. Their fingers bent into each other's. Hands, two half-moons, cupping together, making something whole. It was unmistakable: no matter how much the mind dissolved, the heart remained, solid and unwavering. Layers peeled away, rewinding like the film in a cassette. Backwards, backwards, Youngja went. From the squat table stowed behind the wardrobe, to the navy comforter she shared with Hana each night, and the purple plastic sieve she washed her Napa cabbage in.

My sweetheart, Youngja felt like she might burst with relief when she recognised Hana, *there you are*. She was next to her daughter, finally. How long had it been? A tiny miracle splashed inside Youngja's chest.

'Don't cry today' was a mother's parting instruction to the bride, as she tied her jeogori across her bust. 'Especially at night. No whimpering.'

Two hours later, Youngja was married. She didn't cry. The wedding was a solemn, practical affair. No such thing as the happiest day of a girl's life in 1956, when everything around

them was a bleak, post-war dredge of brown. Youngja was just gone eighteen. Her tailbone-length hair graduated from a single plait to a modest bun at the nape of her neck, because she was now a married woman. The groom was three years older, taller than most at a hundred and seventy centimetres, with a tawny, impassive face. The eldest son of an eldest son, and in possession of a small sweet-potato farm which was invaluable considering the scarcity of food after the war. He clasped her hand as they drove away from her sobbing siblings, in a dilapidated Chevy with a steel panel replacing a blown-off door. Her mother's lips remained in a thin, flat line until she disappeared behind a corner.

Youngja was nineteen and twenty when her two sons were born. Swift proof of her worth. Their infancy passed in a fast gasp: babbles turned into brief grunts, and suddenly they were quick to brush her kisses off their cheeks. She was so preoccupied with the height and weight and gait of her sons that she hardly noticed her very way of life slowly unravelling. In 1961, when her eldest was four, an army general named Park Chung-Hee, with only a scuffle and no loss of life, marched into Seoul and seized power. The new president set about industrialising the country in a hurried, impersonal blur. Youngja didn't pay much attention to the brutality with which he achieved this, focusing instead on the plot of land that fed them. The farm, a fifteen-minute drive from home, was an equally weighted family member.

She fell pregnant again in 1968. When carrying her sons, Youngja was keenly aware of her body as a vector. Once exited, the boys would not be hers, but the family's. This third pregnancy however, was altogether unlike anything she had known before. It reminded her of sand mingling with sand, granite stacked atop granite, a red pine surrounded

by its kin in a forest. There was such a sense of belonging, of surety that this child was part of Youngja's own topography. When the time came, it made perfect sense that she was a girl.

Youngja and Hana. Hana and Youngja. Two of the same, in different forms, like dew and clouds.

When Hana was three months old, Youngja received word that her mother, Bong-Soon, was dying. Cancer, tying knots in her stomach.

'She's a doll,' Bong-Soon croaked, smiling on Hana in the crook of her elbow. She turned to Youngja. 'I visited the fortune teller when I knew I was going to die.'

'Mother—' Youngja protested.

'I can't leave until I know what will come of you children,' she said, as if she were just going on a long trip.

'And?' Youngja kept her fear and her face discrete.

'She says the boys will all do well. She told me not to worry. The mangnae will be a writer, allegedly.'

Youngja thought of her youngest brother and, though she didn't know any writers, agreed that he had the introspective nature of one. 'I can see that. He picked the pencil at his doljabi, do you remember?'

Bong-Soon's hand landed on her arm.

'Youngja-ya.' Her mother's voice took on a tender turn. 'I called you here today because I have something important to tell you.' She bobbed her head towards the baby.

'The fortune teller said that she saw a young monkey.' She waited for Youngja to connect. 'Hana was born in the Year of the Monkey, wasn't she?'

'A lucky guess.'

'I didn't confirm or deny,' Bong-Soon went on. 'She knew

there was a baby girl, and said that, one day, she will be sent away, across seas, further than you can imagine.’

A chill rustled up Youngja’s neck. Her mother was an emotionally celibate woman, who listened intently and seldom spoke out of turn. But the dying did strange things. Youngja shook the comment away, disregarding it as a fortune teller’s irresponsible mutterings. The warning faded into the back reaches of Youngja’s mind but pressed a fingerprint on her mothering. She clutched Hana even closer.

Only years later did Youngja suddenly grasp: her youngest brother had become a journalist.

By the time the boys entered middle school, the president was done with the straitjacket of democracy. He had served the maximum two terms but wasn’t ready to leave power. Hello authoritarianism. October 1972, somewhere distant, president turned dictator. It was a Tuesday. As power was consolidating, a young couple shared their first, chaste kiss, a burst pipe flooded the local hardware shop, Youngja could name every shade in Hana’s irises: copper and hazelnut and molasses. While newspapers reported a state of emergency and a suspended constitution, Youngja scrunched the pages into balls, feeding them into the firebox to heat the floor. Things of the world, but not of her world. Industrialisation accelerated to a speed that broke necks. And arms and kneecaps and spines. As the children grew, so did Incheon, doubling in land surface, the port city prodding the sea further out. Rice fields replaced with smoking factories and gleaming shipyards. Before long, the same rural town Youngja moved to on her wedding day became swallowed into a blue-collar belt, and the family’s hard-earned intimacy with its soil slid out of profit or use.

Life went on. Dictators took hold elsewhere. Pinochet, Pot, Amin. In the autumn of 1979, eleven years after Bong-Soon died, Youngja was in the yard sweeping skins off garlic with a paring knife, dropping the nude cloves into the red bucket between her legs. With each flick of the wrist, she had been mulling over an emptying store shed and narrowing margins, when she heard the president had been assassinated with a bullet to the temple. The country in limbo, hope flowering, men squabbling for a seat at the table, Youngja pressing perilla-seed oil, the golden liquid dripping. One young general in particular, Chun Doo-Hwan, steadily rose ahead of the others. His only authority would be the sword. Hana was top of her year for Maths and English. Strikes and demonstrations flared. Youngja's eldest broke his collarbone and whined about his sling for weeks. The pressure was building. It would boil over in seven months' time, when the new dictator sent the military into the streets of Gwangju and made them run with civilian blood. It would be as if the country had been handed glasses for the first time, suddenly seeing clearly; democracy would have to be fought for. What followed was a state of full martial law, a ban on political activity, a censored press, mass arrests. Youngja went to the farm. She came home.

But that week, before they knew all that lay in store, Hana's father returned from the lake, triumphantly holding a pike above his head, against a ceramic sky. A softly spoken wind carried the smell of lakewater and blood. Youngja gutted the fish there and then. Its lungs still expanded as she pulled them out, full of final breath. She held one lung up and popped it like a corn kernel, which used to thrill her sons, but Hana could barely manage a smile. Youngja tossed the inedible organs and sinew to one side and, from behind the

food-storage shed, came peeking the neighbourhood street cat, a white thing dirtied grey.

‘Where are your babies, huh?’ Youngja sing-songed to the cat.

‘How do you know she has babies?’ Hana offered her hand to its pink snout, the sparkly resin balls on her scrunchie knocking against each other.

‘Her nipples, like taffy!’ Youngja said, pointing at her belly and teats with her knife. ‘She’s given birth recently, no doubt about it.’

The cat settled by the discarded fish, wasps circling above, and miaowed into the sky. The edge of Youngja’s knife ran along the fish’s skin, scattering glistening scales. The queen kept calling. Out of the grass padded two, three, then five sets of paws. Kittens no bigger than Hana’s palm. Impossibly round, cartoonish eyes. The cat guarded the fish waste as her kittens fed, a strip of light shadowing the rungs of her ribcage.

‘Aygo, that wretched thing,’ Youngja muttered. ‘She’ll starve herself feeding her babies.’

That evening, Youngja cooked the pike. Juicy, tear-dropped fillets for her husband first, then the boys. Brown, crumbled underbelly for Hana, and the head for herself. Hana’s eyes darted between plates. She’d already worked it out. Silently, she swapped her own plate with Youngja’s.

At the time, Youngja took it as a sign that she was raising a considerate, tender girl. Years later, the memory of that day struck like a lightning bolt. Had it been her mistake to let Hana sacrifice her own plate? Should she have encouraged her to remain confident in what was rightfully hers? Youngja was raised to be useful, not happy. To give and give

and expect nothing in return. To never be fulfilled in her quest to fulfil others. And she couldn't shake the feeling – which took on the strange shape of guilt – that she had, in a series of imperceptible moments, taught her daughter to lay her wants and needs at the feet of a bigger, looming thing known as 'duty'. Youngja swallowed the shame of passing that weight down.

Oh, what did it matter anyway, all this agonising?

The woman Youngja now knew to be her daughter was staring at a big brown lump on the ground. It was grainy, with the texture of wet sand.

'Goodbye, Tim,' Hana said quietly.

The headlights strobed on, high beam. Tim's funeral. Hana began walking away, and Youngja wished she'd linger for a beat longer. Things still needed to be said. She had to tell Hana to get the video from the suitcase, before they got the barley down. Wait. She had to tell Hana to get the barley . . . she had to tell Hana to . . . she had to . . . Her brow creased. It could wait another day, she supposed.

After she left, on that awful day in 1986, Hana became Youngja's shooting star, propelled into the stratosphere, to be watched from a distance and wished upon. Hana turned nineteen, twenty-one, then twenty-four and abruptly called to say that she was getting married. She informed her parents, rather than asked. All those hard-working Korean men in England, and she'd wanted to shack up with a foreigner. Youngja hadn't known it was possible for a child to spit on her elders from continents away. If he hadn't already, her husband would have disowned Hana for such disrespect.

After a long pause, her mind wrestling, Youngja said, 'You mustn't mention it.'

‘It’, a handy euphemism.

A beat later, Hana replied, ‘I know that.’

He had a straightforward name at least. Tim. Easy for Youngja to say. A simple name for a simpleton. Because what man recklessly proposes marriage to a woman without knowing what sort of family she comes from? She had heard that the West was loose, but that had seemed absurd. She told herself that, at the very least, he wanted to marry Hana, therefore presumably provide for her, as opposed to just sharing her bed. That was a tick in his favour.

Youngja could admit that she had been wrong about Tim. He had been a responsible husband, a tender father, and a genial son-in-law. He had always treated her with kindness, and she got the sense it was because it was in his nature to be decent, rather than because he felt duty-bound. It was a shame that no amount of integrity could keep a person alive.

Clouds carpeted the sky in a murky grey. It might rain soon. Youngja became agitated. She didn’t have time for this. She needed to bring in the sheets drying outside in the yard, before they got soaked. And then she needed Hana’s help to get the barley down.