

Untitled

By Rosa Kwon Easton

This is the beginning of my novel in progress. It is inspired by my grandmother's life as a young Korean girl growing up during the Japanese Occupation. Faced with an arranged marriage and separation from her childhood home, Soongdoh grows to mistrust relationships, but when she unexpectedly finds romantic love, tragedy strikes, and she must learn to love again before it's too late.

Late August 1928

Northern Korea

Soongdoh first noticed the stranger in uniform from her perch on the mulberry tree. She was pretending to squint through binoculars like the Japanese soldiers when she heard a tapping sound underneath. She looked down and saw a man with matching gray shirt and pants poking around her house holding wires in his hands. The smell of corn roasting on the farm next door wafted up her nose, distracting her from her game. It was no doubt Mrs. Cho making that delicious corn drink for the upcoming harvest. She ignored her rumbling stomach and focused on hiding behind the thick leaves to scout what was happening below.

The stranger straightened up, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. He had a short mustache and his underarms were stained with sweat. There was a name on his shirt pocket but she couldn't make out what it said. She was 12-years-old and learned in primary school that every Korean would eventually have a Japanese name. Teacher Kim said it was just a matter of time before the people in rural villages like hers would be forced to use Japanese names and speak Japanese in school.

I wonder what my Japanese name would be, Soongdoh thought, twirling one of her braids. She was curious whether it changed who you were inside if you had a different name. Suddenly, the man stopped when he saw Soongdoh's sister Bohbeh bending over to feed the chickens by the coop.

Bohbeh was just 15 but tall, with a round, pale face that Mother said was a sign of budding beauty. The other day, while taking a bath together in the metal tub in the courtyard, Soongdoh noticed Bohbeh had developed curves around her breasts and hips while she was still skinny as a chopstick. She wondered whether the stranger could see through Bohbeh's hanbok, the way he gawked at her in the middle of whatever he was doing. She had noticed some young men on the way to the market stare at Bohbeh that way too.

Mother's voice interrupted the stranger's trance. "Is everything all right? It would be so nice to have some electricity finally!"

“Yes, everything is fine....” he said, slowly turning his head away from Bohbeh.

Soongdoh couldn't hear the rest of the conversation, but it didn't matter. She was busy imagining what she could do if she had electricity in the house, like staying up longer to read, and being able to see where she was going to the outhouse.

It turns out the name on the man's shirt was Haramoto, which was his assigned Japanese name. His Korean surname was Park. He explained this at dinner later because Mother had invited him to stay at their boarding house, which was vacant that evening. Mr. Haramoto worked for the Japanese government in Korea to install electrical wiring in their village.

Mother went out of her way to prepare a feast: pollack soup, mungbean pancakes, and homemade young radish kimchi. The dishes clanged loudly on the tray as Mother removed her rubber shoes to step up to the main living room. She brushed aside her falling hair, which was up in a slack bun. Her face was brown from picking chameh melon in the hot sun, making her look older than her 33 years. A soiled dishtowel hung over her shoulder.

They sat on the waxy yellow ondol floor to eat. The low table was chock full of side banchan dishes of pickled lotus roots, sesame spinach and garlic eggplant. An iron kettle steamed gently on the brazier. Soongdoh always loved this time of night when there were no more chores and she was about to fill her stomach.

Bohbeh poured Mr. Haramoto some makkoli into a little bowl with two hands, her eyes cast downward. Bohbeh looked especially lovely tonight because Mother had insisted she brush her hair and change into fresh clothes. Mr. Haramoto, on the other hand, was still wearing his dirty uniform. He guzzled down the makkoli and smacked his lips. She didn't know why, but Mr. Haramoto must have been important since Mother only served the alcoholic rice drink to special guests, and to Father when he would visit occasionally.

Maybe it was because of his Japanese name, Soongdoh thought. She had never met any Koreans who were using Japanese names. No one in her hometown had changed their names yet. Mr. Haramoto still sounded very Korean.

“I don't like the Japanese,” Mr. Haramoto hissed. He rubbed the name on his uniform as though he was trying to erase it. “But they pay, so I have no choice.”

After dinner, Soongdoh climbed the mulberry tree again to look at the stars. From this vantage point, she could see over the thatched roof into the central courtyard of their house. Hidden in the thick branches, Soongdoh overheard Mr. Haramoto talking to Mother by the front door while Bohbeh was washing the dishes in the yard.

“Thank you for dinner.” Mr. Haramoto said, bowing to Mother. He continued in a more

hushed voice. "As I said earlier, my younger brother has a big, beautiful house in Kyoto. He is a successful electrician and earns a good living."

Mr. Haramoto hesitated to gauge Mother's reaction. She nodded her head and Mr. Haramoto continued. "He needs a Korean wife and your daughter Bohbeh would be a perfect match. She could eat precious white rice every day!"

Soongdoh gasped, holding her hand to her mouth. This was horrible. She didn't want Bohbeh to go away and get married. Not another sister. Not again. She held her breath waiting for Mother's response, afraid that her answer might be yes.

After a few agonizing minutes, Mother replied haltingly. "Let me ... think about it. I will... let you know tomorrow."

Mr. Haramoto nodded and retired into the guestroom, saying goodnight to Bohbeh on the way.

Soongdoh relaxed her shoulders and sucked in the night air. To her relief, Mother sounded uncertain. Surely, Mother wouldn't let Bohbeh get married and move to Japan, especially after what happened to Youngja-unni!

Three years ago, Mother had arranged for Soongdoh's oldest sister to marry someone in Manchuria that she had never met before. Youngja had also been 15, like Bohbeh. Soongdoh wondered if Youngja still looked the same, or whether she was still even alive, because they hadn't heard from her. She had worried so much for Youngja when she heard a rumor in school that once you crossed the river into Manchuria, there was no coming back.

"Ohmani, I heard Youngja is not going to return!" Soongdoh had yelled this to Mother in her loudest voice.

"Stop shouting!" Mother responded. "You must accept your elder's decisions. Youngja's future husband is waiting across the river. The Japanese have stolen our land but there are plenty of fields to farm in Manchuria."

Soongdoh believed Youngja drowned while crossing the river. She, Youngja and Bohbeh used to play in the pond next to their farm and Youngja was always scared to go in too deep since none of them could swim. Although Mother didn't talk about what might have happened, she had seen her crying secretly while making Youngja's favorite bean sprout soup.

Please don't let Bohbeh go, thought Soongdoh. She gazed at the stars and wished on one of them that Mother would not send Bohbeh away too. She would be all alone with no sister at home. Who would share the joy of holding a warm, freshly-laid egg? The spot next to hers on the bed roll would be cold when she closed her eyes at night.

Soongdoh's stomach ached. She couldn't figure out if it was from Mr. Haramoto's proposal or from being so unusually full. She told herself that maybe Bohbeh would be better off in Japan because she could eat whatever and however much she wanted. What Mr. Haramoto said about eating white rice everyday was intriguing, since they usually only ate millet and barley. It wouldn't be odd for Mother, with two girls to feed and so little money, to send Bohbeh to Japan. After all, she had done it before with Youngja

Soongdoh gulped. It dawned on her that maybe she would be next. She felt nauseous all of a sudden and clambered down from the tree.

When she finally crawled into bed with Bohbeh that night, Soongdoh decided not to say anything to her about what she overheard. Listening to Bohbeh's soft snores, she felt guilty for wanting her to stay. Maybe Bohbeh would be happier in Japan. Soongdoh had seen Kyoto on the big map at school and it was probably a grand city. But thinking of Youngja changed her mind. The idea of never seeing dear Bohbeh again made her angry. Two sisters gone. Arranged marriages seemed like an awful thing.