

Our Esteemed Filmmaker

A Novella

by

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To Mom and Dad
and those wonderful people out there in the dark

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Abstract

Eugene Park, a formerly successful Korean-American film director in his 30s, had fallen on hard times in Hollywood by 1978. But that was before the regime found him. The power-hungry son of the ruler of North Korea, known to his subjects as Dear Leader, is a big fan of Eugene's films and, as his country's cultural minister, also happens to be looking for someone to spearhead North Korea's aspiring film industry. Eugene, lured into a trap while searching for his missing actress ex-girlfriend Sun, is imprisoned for five years in reeducation camps and then introduced to the citizens of North Korea as their esteemed new film director.

Trapped in an isolated country locked under strict authoritarian rule, Eugene (himself the son of North Korean defectors) is forced to do Dear Leader's bidding as he and Sun plot their escape. But Eugene has his own demons to confront: He, too, harbors a strong desire for control, as Sun knows all too well. And it is becoming increasingly difficult for him to separate reality from film.

This thesis primarily deals with themes of power, control and survival, and with the uncomfortable truths popular art can reveal about individuals and society. It is loosely based on the true story of South Korean film director Shin Sang-ok, who was kidnapped by special agents of Kim Jong-Il in 1978.

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I.

Five years.

They kept him for five years.

There were escape attempts, of course. Many of them, as human nature dictates. A request to use the bathroom, down the hall from where he was being held under house arrest in an abandoned building, turned into a mad dash for the door. It was a crude plan, the best he was able to hatch after the first couple days, and one destined to fail – even if he had wrested himself from the Worker’s Party guard stationed just around the corner, there still would have been the outside security: two strong-arms and one sharpshooter. Then there were the claims of sickness, the insistence to see a doctor, the snatching of the operating knife and the threatening of the doctor’s life, mimicking the hero from *Agent of Destruction*, one of his own spy movies made several years earlier. He had once blocked this very shot – in safer circumstances, of course, but nevertheless he figured he must have learned something useful from the experience. The guards snuck up on him rather easily that time, embarrassingly so, in fact. That wasn’t supposed to happen.

They moved him after that, from the Pyongyang house arrest to Prison No. 6, the all-male internment camp for especially dangerous opponents of the regime. This was where the diet of rice and grass started. Every morning at precisely 6:30, a guard would march into the bunk, command all 22 prisoners to rise and lecture them for one hour on the infinite greatness of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Any man who tried to grab an extra minute of sleep was dragged outside and beaten. Every evening at precisely 23:00, a different guard would march in and yell for another hour about how much worse things were in the rest of the world, lecturing on different countries every

night but always with the same updates: poor, starving, floundering in misguided international economic trade agreements, slowly but surely destroying their nation because they were not following the core Communist ideals. The guard would rip off a strip of paint peeling from the bunk wall and defy any of the prisoners to point out one single flaw in the Communist system. Any man who tried to go to sleep early was dragged outside and beaten.

Eugene by this time had recognized the infeasibility of fighting back, and besides the prison guards were a great deal more muscular and fearsome than the ones who monitored his house arrest had been. He found this amusing, as all the prisoners were already so poor and sickly they wouldn't win in a fight against a 12-year old. Why would the regime send their strongest men to guard their weakest ones? It didn't make sense to Eugene, but he kept his mouth shut about it. He got smarter about what he said after the day he first arrived, when they asked him his name and without thinking he told them "Eugene."

"That's an Imperialist name!" they yelled, pulling out their canes. "Why don't you have a proper Korean name?"

The shortest guard struck Eugene's kneecap and he buckled. "Wait, wait," he cried out. "My name is Park Seong-Kun." No one had called him by his given Korean name since his father died.

This was acceptable to the guards and they let him be. But every so often, one of them would snarl "Eww-geeeene" when they walked by him in the prison yard and strike him again without warning.

The inmate who slept next to Eugene, a short, fidgety native of the northern city

of Cheongjin, introduced himself as Jo Soo-yun. He had shaggy, shoulder-length hair and long yellow nails, marks of a long-term stay. His daughter had been seized from him two years ago, on her 14th birthday, and he had been told only that she would make a great “present” for the soldiers. He protested. He made a giant banner that asked, “Where is my daughter?” and taped it to a street sign near his apartment. Two days later they came for him.

“Watch what you say around here,” Jo Soo-yun told Eugene on his first day as they stood shivering in line for their daily allotment of rice outside the mess hall, bare feet cutting into the rocks and gravel on the ground. “They have eyes everywhere.” He was speaking the Northern dialect of Korean that Eugene had learned at home, as opposed to the Southern dialect spoken by pretty much every other Korean Eugene encountered in America. A small relief there.

“Do they have flying monkeys, too?” Eugene asked him, grinning through cracked lips, trying to lighten the mood.

Jo Soo-yun looked at him blankly. “I don’t understand.”

“You know, monkeys?” Eugene said again. He stuck out his arms like wings and made an airplane-flying noise with his bottom lip and two front teeth. The others in line all turned to stare at his movements. “From *The Wizard of Oz*? You’ve seen it, no?”

Jo Soo-yun was lost. He hadn’t.

One night in the middle of their second week as his stomach growled and his bruised legs rubbed against the rough surface of his straw bedding, Eugene could hear sobs coming from the bed next to him. They went on for hours, building to a crescendo every ten minutes, reaching a pitch of such high-volume sorrow that the next bunk over

was sure to hear, before dying again, only to rise back up a few minutes later. He put his hands over both his ears and squeezed, trying to press the sound out of his head, until he fell into something resembling sleep. The next morning when the guard entered for their reeducation speech, Jo Soo-yun jumped up from his bed, screamed, “Where is she, you son of a bitch?” and rushed at him with clenched fists. The guard grabbed him by his torn shirt collar and silently hauled him outside, and that was the last anyone ever saw of Jo Soo-yun.

Eugene kept his mouth shut after that.

But never once did any of the guards turn to him during one of their reeducation speeches and tell him why he was there in the first place. After a time he found he no longer had an urge to learn. He accepted the fact implicitly – he had done something wrong, something to hurt the regime, and was paying the price for it now, with prison-issued pants that wore through scratched knees and terrible meals that made him vomit off the side of his bed in the middle of the night.

Perhaps they had finally tracked him down as a descendant of his parents, the defectors. The regime’s memory was remorseless and highly selective. Maybe they only felt the need now, thirty years after his elders had once fled their homeland during its hour of most need, to pluck him from the home he had built for himself in America, to return him to where he should have been all these years. Sins of the father revisited and all that. It would make more sense as a motive, at the very least – not that the regime would even feel the need to provide one. And of course, only Eugene thought of life in terms of motives in the first place.

Back in Hollywood, when he would struggle with a script, it was usually over what his mentors had always called the “suspension of disbelief.” There was only so much you could accept as inherent in a story before its walls would start to collapse around you, caving in from a lack of structure. His first studio had rejected his script about Hong Gil Dong, the Korean folk hero, because they said “no one’s going to believe a Chinaman can be Robin Hood.”

Yet here he was, watching his own movie unspool in his head as he was wont to do, and he could not suspend his own disbelief. There was still, after all this time, no rhyme or reason to his predicament. No news from the outside, nothing to suggest that anyone back in America was looking for one of their own formerly successful film directors gone missing, nothing to speculate as to whether such hypothetical efforts were proving to be, or could ever be, successful.

It was truly strange to be somewhere for such an extended period of time without any dramatic rhyme or reason. He was trapped in someone else’s first draft.

But other things were being suspended in place of his disbelief. His health, for one: though he was allowed 30 minutes of physical activity a day, which mostly amounted to jogging around the compound as the barrels of the guard tower rifles followed, he could feel his muscles getting weak and his bones getting soft. Also his mind was suspended, as he began to realize while sitting and fuming in his straw bed or rubbing his hands up and down the plaster walls, forming a movie screen with his thumbs and index fingers and blocking shots, positioning rocks and pebbles as furniture for phantom actors, running off set and telling ghost Sun that she would cross the room like this, see, in front of the camera, and then she would sit down in the chair and fold her legs

like this, see, and face her partner and deliver these lines in this particular tone. And then Eugene would shout “Action!” to nobody while the other prisoners only stared not daring to laugh, and screaming and stomping every which way when she blew yet another perfectly good take.

Sun. She was eating away at him. Maybe that was why he was thinning. She would be blowing his takes for as long as he lived, even if she never did another movie with him. She blew the takes inside his own head, the role she was supposed to play. Such a basic role: a loving partner, a selfless individual. A stock character, really. Should’ve been a cakewalk for such an experienced actress. And yet, all her life, she could never get that role right. “I’m sick of being in your movies.” Blown take. “He’s just a guy from the editing room – stop being so paranoid.” Another ruined line reading.

And the worst blown take of all: her disappearance, his pursuit, the reason he was here.

Really, his entire life was on suspension while he waited for some sort of resolution from within his bunker. Perhaps it would pick up again in the future where he had left off, planning his cinematic comeback, the return to the glitzy parties and shiny gold awards and accolades he used to gobble down like his mother’s homemade red bean donuts. It would resume as though there had never been an interruption. No one would ask questions; whatever had transpired would just be understood, unspoken, and they would leave him alone about it. “Eugene, you’ve lost weight,” his production assistants would tell him when he got back home (he had entered this prison overweight, belly frequently peeking out of stained shirts, but had lately started to shrivel up like a raisin). “Good to see you. Where should we set up this tracking shot?”

There were also film critics in his head, constantly. They never left. They had been there since his first film at USC – he was cutting the last shot together in the editing room at 3 AM, and suddenly the voice of The New Yorker’s Pauline Kael, which was for some reason gravely and snappy as he had never actually heard her speak, announced, *My God, what a piece of trash. This is the sort of junk our private-school-educated minorities are passing off to us as the next generation of filmmaking. What an outright rejection of our highest form of culture. I’m going to be sick.*

And then from nowhere Roger Ebert of The Chicago Sun-Times chimed in, too. *You are so right, Pauline. I don’t know what this Chinaman was thinking when he put this together. Plot holes everywhere. Patchwork story structure. A protagonist I can’t imagine anyone in the world caring about. If this joker finds a future as a filmmaker, I know it will be at the expense of the entire medium.*

So it went with every subsequent movie he released. *What garbage. What utter dreck. Made with all the care and compassion of a highway collision,* they would say. No matter how much all the real people would tell him they enjoyed his work, Pauline and Roger always had to have their say.

It had been a while since they’d come out of the woodwork, even before the kidnapping. It was tougher for Eugene to finance his films these days and he was finding less people willing to work with him, hence the length of time since his last movie. But now – would you look at that – here they were again.

God, the life of this prisoner is so rote. The pacing here is terrible. Something happen already!

Rather unimaginative set design, wouldn’t you say, Pauline?

That's the least of his problems, Roger. He's got no conflict, no central motives, no characters we can root for. Not much of anything, in fact.

The saddest part, Pauline, is I think this is truly the best he can do.

Then, Roger honey, God help us all.

So. Five years. The time for hope had passed. Then one morning the guard appeared behind Eugene walking back to his bunker after their breakfast of cold cabbage soup. Eugene was trailing behind the others like usual. The guard dragged him across the prison camp illuminated by the rising sun, into a waiting black car with burned-out taillights. "They're going to take you somewhere nice," he snapped at Eugene before closing the door. "You're going to get cleaned up. So act nice. And if you want to stay in nice places, remember that you were never here."

Then the car drove away, drove for hours, drove past less and less barren countryside, drove toward Pyongyang. After all those years of painful nothing, here was an authoritative *something*.

His freshman-year screenwriting professor, a withering, gray-haired relic of the RKO Pictures days, had barked at them all from behind his flask that before they started anything, they needed to know the WHO, the WHAT, the WHERE, the WHEN and the WHY. As this man with two B-movie credits to his name dictated to his students how to succeed in this business, he'd scrawled each "W" on the blackboard behind him in large, boxy letters. "You need to have a *protagonist*, you need to have him enter an *extraordinary world*, you need to have him confront his *innermost cave*, and you need to have him emerge victorious," the professor would repeat, over and over like a mantra. "If you don't have these things," he'd said, "you have *no story*. Period."

Fine. So was Eugene in a story now? A proper story would at least have the promise of an end. For his own sake, he hoped he was in one.

* * *

SMASH CUT:

A glimpse, a flash of green.

Sun. Across the hall. Her long straight black hair in a tight bun, the slightest hint of blush on her pale cheeks. Her floor-length emerald dress, easy to pick out in a room filled with stodgy male diplomats in identical brown suits sporting red flag pins. She clutched a small green purse to her chest like a security blanket. Whoever had dressed her had wanted her to stand out.

It was a bait-and-switch. They'd used her to get him. They wanted the two of them together. All those years in his cell, surrounded by nightmare visions, and Eugene never had this thought before. Early on he mostly felt fear for her, having heard stories of how these people treated women. And he felt shame at himself for just turning into another victim, for not doing a better job tracking her down. That segued into anger, frustration. If it weren't for this stupid compassion he felt, compassion that she never saw fit to return while they were together, he wouldn't have goaded himself into searching for her in the first place. And then he wouldn't have been captured.

Of course, sometimes lying alone at night in that all-male prison camp, there were fantasies too. He would reach his hands out above the covers in the empty night and embrace her, fondle her. Recall their most sensual nights together, the only erotic memories of any kind he possessed. And now she was here in the flesh.

But as soon as he saw her in the flesh, he immediately felt a large hand gripping his left shoulder. The index and middle fingers slid to the pressure-point area just above Eugene's collarbone, delicately folding over the lapel of his all-black suit. There the fingers remained, quivering slightly. *I won't kill you now, but I could.*

Eugene stopped moving.

"*Ajik andoe,*" the strong-arm said behind him. "Slow down, my friend. Let's not get carried away by whatever we think we see."

Eugene slowly turned around to face his oppressor. The big man was jowly and wore translucent sunglasses that revealed thin, cold eyes. His black hair was cut very short and his brown suit was so smooth it looked plastic. Eugene could hear the static coming out of his large, conspicuous earpiece.

"How did she get here?" Eugene hissed, his voice combative for the first time in years. "What did you do to her?"

The big man paid no heed. "Dear Leader will be making his grand entrance soon. It is not in your best interest to make a scene in front of all these nice people."

It seemed impossible that Eugene could draw any more attention to himself — his every move was already being followed by dozens of guards just like the big man, each stationed at points around the room, all sporting identical black suits with gold buttons, all watching him intently. "You're going to kill me here and now?" A dribble of sweat slid down his back like a spider. The pincer fingers dug deeper, squishing his flesh. "I am not prepared to believe that."

"I would suggest not testing your theories of what we are and are not capable of doing to you at the present moment," the big man said calmly.

Around Eugene and the big man, the other party guests continued to chat and clink glasses of rice wine. No one except Eugene paid any notice to the two fingers jamming into his neck. He felt his paranoia mounting and wondered if the entire party was in on this little game.

Eugene thought back to two days ago, the ride from the prison to the hotel where all the Russian delegates would stay when they visited. The twelve hours they'd left him alone; the beautiful, uninterrupted sleep; the dreamscape that wafted from Sun to his parents to movies he'd made to movies he hadn't made to Sun again. The desire to try another escape, the complete lack of energy to do so. The tub, too. His first bath in years. And then the sheet over his head; the darkness; the cold, bare room with the neatly pressed suit staring him in the face, clinging to the hanger suspended from a metal pipe.

Now he wiggled the toes nestled out of sight within his shiny black shoes. They pushed against the leather fabric of their prison. Well, if he was going to die here, he would do it on his own terms. He found himself no longer scared by the prospect.

"I need to talk to her," Eugene demanded. She was still standing uneasily on the other side of the room. She hadn't seen him yet.

"Be quiet," the big man commanded a little too loudly, as an older woman in all-black turned around to hush the two with a stern glare. Eugene caught a whiff of what smelled like a putrid mix of motor oil and dead fish from the big man's breath.

"I will make a scene," Eugene threatened. He had no idea if this would scare his adversary or not.

The big man regarded him suspiciously for a moment, then locked eyes individually with each of the other guards stationed around the room, exchanging secret

messages with nods, stares and glares. Finally he whispered, “You will walk over to her. You will do it slowly, at a reasonable pace. You will not yell or run or draw attention to yourself in any way.”

“Of course,” Eugene said. He had already figured that trying to solicit help from a roomful of strangers who were likely friends and allies of the regime would bring him more harm than good. “I will stick to the script.”

“Smart choice,” the big man said, with a hint of amusement.

So Eugene made his way through the crowds at a slow, deliberate speed. He zigzagged around tables and between conversations, smiling and bowing to strangers as he went. “*Sillyehamnida, sillyehamnida,*” he muttered as he passed. “Excuse me.”

She wasn’t more than 20 feet ahead now, and Eugene could see she had her own minder following her, a shorter man with cuts on his hands and a long scar running down his left cheek. The scarred man was trailing Sun very closely, a menacing shadow.

“*Sillyehamnida,*” Eugene said to a slender, middle-aged war hero more heavily decorated than the banquet tables, bowing but trying to look the entire time behind the soldier at Sun.

“A good day to you!” the veteran responded loudly, catching Eugene off guard. “Praised be Dear Leader for bringing us all here for such a wondrous celebration!”

“Uh, yes,” Eugene sputtered, trying to maneuver around the veteran, his eyes darting between obstacle and target. But the veteran made no effort to move, instead gesturing his arm in Eugene’s direction in a motion to start a conversation.

“Tell me, dear comrade, what position of importance do you hold to be present for such a high-ranking ceremony?” he asked, at a volume several notches above normal

speaking levels. "I myself fought valiantly in the War against those American imperialist puppets to the South. That is where I received these marks of courage and bravery."

Beaming, he patted the shiny pins on his lapel, begging for Eugene to probe more, oblivious to his struggles to pass. Eugene thought he could hear the big man snickering behind him.

"Sorry, but I'm in a bit of a hurry," Eugene said to the veteran, trying to maintain as much decency as possible in his voice, knowing that failure to do so could lead to further imprisonment for disrespecting the armed forces. "Might I pass by?"

The veteran, though confused and clearly a little hurt, nevertheless made no effort to move. "Of course, fellow citizen," he said to Eugene, "but can you not at least tell me what it is you do, what you contribute to our fine society? That certainly seems like a fair enough question to me, and all I ask is for a word of expla-"

"I'm a filmmaker," Eugene interrupted, fed up. "I make films."

A look of awe came over the veteran's face. "A filmmaker! But that means..."

"This is the filmmaker?" yelled a larger, overly made-up woman near them who had overheard. Several others nearby made similar exclamations, gazing at Eugene with clear disbelief. One man whispered, "Remarkable! He's here!"

Eugene stood in the middle of this sudden attention, just as surprised as the rest of them. And then he looked again over at Sun, not more than three strides ahead of him now. From afar she had seemed like a projection on a screen. Now the screen was gone.

She was staring straight at him, wide-eyed, a delicate hand shot up to cover her mouth. As the masses began swarming Eugene, he smiled in her direction and gave a sheepish wave. Their worlds were meeting again, at last.

II.

INT. THE WHO, THE WHAT, THE WHERE, THE WHEN, THE WHY.

She'd never adored him as much as he'd adored her. Through all the time they spent together at USC, Sun always kept her emotions way out on the windowsill where others could see but never reach. She was the only one of the Theatre majors who had responded to Eugene's flyers when he was casting his freshman-year film project. The ripped-off stub from the bottom-left corner of the "Actors Wanted" paper he'd meekly taped to the common area of Marks Hall had validated him in a strange and irrational way. Someone he didn't know wanted to be a part of his creation, wanted to help him, sight unseen. It felt special to him, that pure spirit of collaboration, something he hadn't felt in grade school roping friends and family members into his silly little videos. This was the real thing; this was what it meant to contribute to the world, to have your intentions and desires recognized.

But that emotional high lasted only until Eugene and Sun met in person for the first time. She'd strolled into the coffee shop composed, collected, wearing oversized shades and a low-cut floral sundress, with five piercings in her left ear and three in her right. She'd only been at the college for a few months, like him, but had already made dozens of friends and professional connections. A résumé — a *résumé!* — emerged from her moleskin knapsack. Leads in every school play. Community theater. A stint in the chorus line of a traveling production of "Anything Goes" when she was five and her immigrant parents had stars in their eyes. A supporting role in a greaser flick called *That Girl is Trouble* while still in high school, playing the Asian best friend who gets stabbed by toughnecks during a knife fight in the schoolyard, causing a moment of catharsis in

the white protagonist. *That Girl is Trouble* was one of those cheapos that played to a drive-in crowd after hours, a movie made by hundreds of working professionals in Hollywood to facilitate necking among its uncaring, sex-crazed audience. Eugene could never find a screening anywhere, but it was out there; it validated her. She was real.

He'd asked her, so softly with nervousness that she'd had to lean forward to hear him, if she could be a weak, helpless girl who needed to be rescued.

"I can play that," she'd said. No hesitation.

They started speaking Korean to each other on set by the second day. He was really just giving her the same directions he told everyone else in English, but it made him feel special to know that they shared it, this secret form of communication right in front of everyone. The rest of the crew, his fellow film school classmates, grew to resent him for speaking her language – it gave him a leg up on the other guys, after all. When they began meeting up off set for coffee and homework help, that's all they wanted to speak in.

That was how they'd discovered that both their families had defected from the North before they were born. "Do you ever think about going back?" she asked him once.

"Never," he told her. "I like it here. My parents want me to be happy."

"So that's why they agreed to send you to an expensive film school," she said, smiling, bringing her mocha to her lips.

"They said that I have every right to follow my dream in a free society," he responded, somewhat defensively. "That's why we're here in the first place, isn't it?"

"I guess," she said, laughing. "Sorry, I didn't mean anything by it. Anyway I think it's neat, you 'following your dreams' and all that. Guess that's what I'm doing."

“Yeah, but you’ve got a shot,” Eugene told her. “You’re beautiful” was the part he didn’t add.

“Hey!” Sun said, punching his arm. “So do you.” He smiled at this.

Their first short together, a 20-minute production about a renegade soldier of an unnamed war who heads back into the battlefield to rescue his true love, had been a huge success. It was shown on every corner of campus and won boatloads of awards in several national and international student film competitions. The dean had paid a personal visit to Eugene in his dorm room to congratulate him. *Fearless* was screened at the start of every campus tour as an example of the towering achievements of their student body. Eugene and Sun spent considerable time together at various functions for the film and realized they worked well together; she starred in every one of his student films for the next three years. For Eugene, it was the rush that never left his system.

The dating part developed organically during all of this, part genuine affection and part casualty of an especially hormone-infused chapter of their lives. Going over the script rewrites together, his stacks of notes balanced on her knobby knees while the two of them shared the squishy futon in his dorm room, his arm would drape itself over her shoulder. Or he’d call her up on a Sunday evening, ask if she wanted to grab a late dinner at Woo Diner on Normandie Avenue with the elderly server who reminded him of photos he’d seen of his grandma, and while she picked at her kimchi he’d rattle off all the ideas bursting through his head, crazy conceptual things that’d never work, like a gigantic, historically accurate retelling of the life of Genghis Khan, with armies a hundred strong and bloody battles and horseback riding, and she’d smile and nod and laugh at all of them. And eventually he found himself telling her other things: deep, personal secrets

he'd never shared with anyone. Fears of disappearing off the face of the Earth and nobody caring enough to search for him, of laying down to die with nothing to give the world in exchange for the time he'd spent, of his father tracking him down from beyond the grave to tell him he was still too fat to fit into his Little League uniform. And she'd share her own secrets, too: of disappointing her parents and everyone back home, of waking up one day with no friends and all of her talent and personality somehow drained from her. It was selfish, she'd said, but selfishness was a part of who she was, and she never wanted to lose that desire to fight her best friends tooth and nail for a bit part in some film student weirdo's senior thesis. The day she lost that, she said, she would lose herself.

And they'd take each other's secrets and swear each other to secrecy about those secrets, over the last few bites of cold bulgogi, and he'd walk her back to her place, and she'd turn to him at the door and explain that her roommate was out of town for the weekend and it was hard for her to go to sleep by herself and maybe he'd like to come up as well, if he didn't have to be anywhere important. He never had anywhere else to be.

Yet for all the soul-baring, hand-taking, lovemaking, love-faking and heartbreaking they shared during those three years, Eugene recalled two things at the end of it all. One was the way Sun looked on that very first day, in her floral sundress and shades. It was the way she appeared when he closed his eyes at night. She was always in mid-stride, approaching his table but never quite reaching it, like the asymptote on a graph, one sandaled foot perpetually suspended, forever just outside of the door she was walking through. And the other thing was her smell, the lilac scent she wore whenever she had an especially strong desire to impress. Both these things were purely

characteristics of physical attractiveness, which would cause Eugene to wonder if he really was so superficial as to be incapable of seeing women as real people, like she had screamed at him one night during a particularly heated argument over why she had to play the damsel-in-distress yet again. Maybe he was turning into that shallow voyeur of the camera, maybe he could only see breasts and hair and eyeliner and more breasts. But maybe, he would then reassure himself, there never had been a real person beneath the stunning special effects.

* * *

Well, of course the pretty movie star remains a pretty movie star all this time later. It's a face of life that movie stars don't age, no matter what you do to them. Unlike my own body, which has aged a hundred years since I started watching this sham of a life.

You are so right, Pauline.

She was here now, she whose ghost hovered just above every obstacle, the last link to the world where he once belonged. Unthinkably, she looked the same as she had when she'd walked out of his life five years ago. Cheeks were a little thinner – her bones stuck out more. But wherever they'd kept her had not made her age nearly as quickly as he had.

Eugene tried to fend off his mob of well-wishers, to reach Sun and have a conversation in private, away from the guards and the guests and the ears and eyes. But the opportunity to do this was looking less likely with every passing moment.

The big man broke through the surrounding crowd. "Dear Leader wishes to speak to our esteemed filmmaker," he announced loudly, and the awestruck people immediately

cleared a path for the two of them, making little bows as they did so.

“All praise Dear Leader in his infinite wisdom for bringing to our nation a man of such gifted artistic talents!” someone cried.

“Yes, praise him,” said the big man mechanically, storming his way to Sun and the scarred man, with Eugene following closely behind. The big man and the scarred man exchanged nods and then turned in unison to march toward the center of the hall. Sun embraced Eugene, a hug not of passion but of survival.

“My God,” she whispered in his ear, in English. “What are you doing here?”

“What have they done to you?” he whispered back, but neither of them could answer each other’s questions. There was so much to share, but not here, not now.

“You two,” snapped the big man. Everyone in the room had seen their gesture. “This is not a joke. Dear Leader desires to see you. Both of you must come with me.”

Sun let go. The big man and the scarred man led the terrified pair on a twisty path, snaking through tables, until they reached the one in the dead center elevated above all the others on a custom-built platform five feet off the ground, directly underneath the most exquisite chandelier. Here the goblets were shinier, the floral centerpiece grander. Seated around this most elegant of tables was the extended royal family: ten members of the Kim clan, ranging in age from kicking-each-other-under-the-tablecloth to having-difficulty-gripping-utensils-with-quivering-wrinkly-hands, all dressed in shimmering gold suits and dresses, all being waited on hand and foot by a surrounding force field of subservient staff. And at the head seat, propped up in a special custom throne-like arrangement, was the five-foot-tall man of the hour. This man’s father, Great Leader Kim Il-Sung, the clan patriarch and enemy of the globe, had isolated his country from outside

contact following the War almost three decades ago, ordered his face plastered on every building and street corner and executed all those who attempted to flee his rule, except for those lucky few, like the families of Sun and Eugene, who had made it out alive. For Eugene, Kim Il-Sung had, until now, lived only in the tears of his mother when she told stories of her past. The dictator's famously temperamental, power-hungry son, revered as a son of God by his people, was the next in line to the throne and the head of his nation's military and cultural cabinet. He had a name, but the people referred to him chiefly as Dear Leader, and now Dear Leader was rising from his throne to greet his guests with a broad, unnerving smile and outstretched hand. There were two empty seats at the table, one on either side of him.

“Welcome, welcome!” Dear Leader said joyously, as though greeting old friends, and extended his small hand to Eugene. He clasped Eugene's clammy hand with both his own while giving a warm, deep bow; Eugene was so shocked he delayed his own bow long enough to fear the big man shooting him in the back of the head for failing to show proper respect. Next Dear Leader bowed to Sun, who returned the gesture with wide eyes.

Dear Leader then extended his arms, inviting them to drink in the glory. His face was scrunched into a baby doll's glare, with tufts of black hair plugs poking out of his scalp. “It is truly an honor,” he boomed to the room, “to be here in your presence.”

The room burst into rapturous applause, the likes of which Eugene hadn't heard since his first film's debut all the way back in USC, the applause he'd some time ago given up hope of ever hearing again. He knew the claps were foreboding, knew they meant he might never see home again. And yet... and yet, they were clapping for him.

“Please, sit down,” Dear Leader said. “You are my guests of honor.”

Hesitantly, Eugene and Sun slid into their seats; him to the right of the throne, her to the left. Sun carefully set her purse on the table, inching it close to Dear Leader. They both looked at the general with no idea of what was to come next.

Dear Leader lifted his own champagne glass from the table and raised it high in the air. Immediately everyone in the room raised their own glasses. Eugene and Sun followed suit.

“Brothers and sisters,” Dear Leader commenced, and Eugene noticed for the first time a tiny microphone affixed to his collar. “You are here today to witness the anointing of a wonderful, joyous new chapter in our great nation’s cultural history.”

As if on cue, the others all clapped wildly again. Some cheered. Dear Leader cleared his throat and they instantly fell silent.

“Tonight, the most talented and ambitious film director in the world formally becomes a resident of this great state,” he said. “He has become disillusioned with the terrible, inhumane practices of the imperialist nation of America and fallen in love with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, with our rich heritage and hard-earned philosophy of self-reliance. Now that he has embarked on a five-year journey of self-discovery, the great and talented Park Seong-Kun will henceforth take up permanent residency within our nation, where he will be granted absolute creative freedom and unlimited resources to construct cinematic masterpieces declaring the virtues of our land for all the world to see.”

More ecstatic applause. Eugene sat in his seat and stared blankly.

“And,” continued Dear Leader, “as a token of my appreciation, I am presenting him with the keys to the Kim family estate. Our guest house shall become the new residence of him and his beautiful, talented actress fiancée, Sun Hye-Jung, the model citizen every proper Korean woman should aspire to be. Here their every need will be attended to. And one day...”

He gave a warm smile to Sun, whose expression had morphed from one of desperate composure to one of sheer terror.

“...they will start a family of their very own, right here in this most wonderful of all nations. And so I give the happy couple my blessing this day.”

Addressing both of them as one, he declared: “May the sun rise to greet you every morning with the strength you require to carry out your days. May your trials in life always yield success. May you bring great artistic work and prestige to our wonderful, prosperous nation. And may you both, now and forevermore, find your proper place in this world.”

The glasses clinked all around as cheers and laughter rang out. There was fine food and drink for all. And in one fleeting moment, Sun and Eugene’s eyes met, two trapped souls drowning in their deepest fears.

III.

INT. MARCH TO UNCERTAINTY.

“They love you in Hong Kong,” her agent had told her. It was a wonderful thing to be told, like finding out there’s a brand-new bike waiting for you across town right after your old one is stolen. It was a statement of purpose, one of those joyous no-more-tears songs you heard in a Julie Andrews musical, maybe one that you landed a role in a spangly-shoed kick line for: “When life just ain’t swell / And everything is going wrong / Just dust off your hat / And remember that / They love you in Hong Kong.”

So of course she agreed to go film a movie there. Why wouldn’t she? After Eugene all but killed her career with his string of repetitive one-note movies casting her in repetitive one-note roles? After she found herself having to shed more and more clothing for each subsequent role she took on, just to keep a bed waiting for her at night, until there was nothing left to shed? There was no life for her in America, but the promise of a glorious second life somewhere far away. And the script for this one was something else. She was going to play the *femme fatale*, the double agent secretly working for Vietnamese spies trying to derail the Cultural Revolution, who toys with the soldier’s heart while wearing beautiful dresses and slinky negligées. She’d never had that role before, but always admired the flawless white women from Hollywood past, the Rita Hayworths and Ava Gardners and Gloria Swansons, with their perfect complexions and complete control of the men in their lives. It didn’t even matter that she’d never heard of the director before (no one had heard of Cecil B. DeMille once, either), or that they were putting her up in some ramshackle place near the fish market district (maybe it was so she could better immerse herself in the culture), or that they hadn’t even booked her a return

flight home (a simple bookkeeping error, surely). So she kept rationalizing and rationalizing until she arrived at her hotel and the thugs bagged her from behind and she woke up to find herself living on rations. In her weakest hours over the next five years, as she was carted between the country's military bases in ugly brown dresses forced to put on "morale-boosting" shows for the valiant, hard-working soldiers of the DPRK, she would often remind herself that they still loved her in Hong Kong.

This was what she told Eugene as they sat cross-legged on the floor in a makeshift guest bedroom buried somewhere in the floor plans of Kim Il-Sung Military Museum and Banquet Center, the same building where their "welcome ceremony" had just been held. Some servant's windowless living quarters had been dusted off and all the furniture covered in a floral print, with a bouquet of *Magnolia sieboldii*, the white-petaled national flower, sitting on a card table-turned-nightstand. Eugene and Sun had been led here by the big man and the scarred man at the conclusion of the event, immediately after Dear Leader's speech had finished, before anyone else present at the ceremony could accost them. It was a "temporary stay," the big man had growled before shoving them both into the room. "You'll be moving early in the morning, so don't get too comfortable. Now get inside so I can go obtain my annual glass of cognac." He and the scarred man left them alone once they were in the room, though not without first locking and bolting the door shut from the outside.

Their exit cued the real hug, the tears, the uncontrollable gasps of relief one submits to upon discovery of another person in the universe. Eugene felt joy from somewhere in the darkness. Sun was here with him, at last, but she didn't bring renewed hope – indeed, the idea of escape had never seemed more beyond Eugene's

comprehension. This was a moment that rose from the endless despair, he thought as they embraced. It was nothing more than that, but it needed to be remembered. This moment could save his sanity.

“But what are *you* doing here?” Sun asked him, after she had told her story. They spoke in English. Korean was now the language of the enemy.

And at this he grinned. “I came for you.”

“What?” she exclaimed, as he tried to read her reaction. “Eugene, we haven’t seen each other in almost a decade. Why would you come for me? How did you even know I was here?”

He hadn’t expected this. Where was the unfiltered gratitude, the relief at the existence of such selfless compassion?

“I... I read about you in the paper,” he stammered. He undid the buttons on his suit; the room was getting hot. “They said you were missing... I wanted to help, you know? Just to see if there was anything I could do.”

She shook her head, covered her face in your hands. “Oh, Eugene,” she said, almost laughing now, nothing else to do. “They never wanted me. They wanted you. This whole time. You followed me – you did just what they wanted.”

“I know,” he said, quietly. But what else to say? “I’m sorry.”

And now she really was laughing. “Doesn’t matter where I go, what I do. They still tie me to you. I’m still defined by you.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again.

“They took me because of you. And now I’ll probably die because of you.” She plucked a flower from the bouquet, laid down on her back feeling the pedals between her

thumb and forefinger, her glassy brown eyes staring at the ceiling but not really at the ceiling. She let out a long sigh. Five years with no sleep.

“You won’t,” he said. “We won’t. I won’t let that happen.”

Sun reached for her purse on the table, opened it and withdrew a small black tape recorder. The red button on the side was pressed down and Eugene could see the tape whirring inside. Sun stopped it with half the reel left unspooled.

“I bought this in Hong Kong, when I started to get suspicious of the shoot,” she said. “And they never found it on me, thank God. We can use it to record what they say about us. If...” She closed her eyes, took a deep breath. “If we get out of here, we can show everyone what they were planning.”

Eugene walked over and took her trembling hand in his. “We *will* get out of here,” he declared shakily. “We’ll work together. We’ll find a way.”

This fool hasn’t got an ounce of sense in his entire body. I certainly wouldn’t believe a word of assurance he utters. Would you?

Not at all, Pauline.

He sat on the floor watching her for some time. She placed the recorded carefully back into her purse but wouldn’t pick herself up, just kept staring up at nothing. Eventually Eugene stumbled into the cot, waited for sleep to come. He saw a glimpse of the outside world in his mind’s eye just before it did – a portrait of his mother, a faded sketch of the bronze lettering outside of his studio in L.A. – but then the glimpse faded and he was left with only the ether.

* * *

“Friends and comrades, a new day is dawning. Let us all bow our heads in reverence and praise the Great Leader for blessing us with such a gorgeous sun!”

The radio deejay’s voice was giddy, like an American child who had just seen the ice cream truck drive down the street. Eugene shivered in the back seat of the limo transporting him and Sun to their new home. He looked out the tinted window at the sparkling clean shacks of Pyongyang, at the plump, rosy-cheeked children lined up on the streets cheering the arrival of their favorite film director. The regime must have picked their best-looking, most photogenic children to lead the crowds. The sky, despite the radio’s claims, was overcast.

“Thank you, Great Leader!” yelled their driver from the front seat, shaking and pounding the steering wheel for emphasis. Eugene caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror, pale and scrawny and tired. Today they still wore their formalwear for lack of a change of clothes.

“Thank you, Great Leader,” the big man said in his deep voice, with less enthusiasm. He was in the seat opposite Eugene, staring at him calmly and unblinkingly, scarred hands casually folded in his lap.

“Today is truly a great day for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. A great day indeed,” continued the deejay, who sounded in his late 30s. “A truly talented filmmaker of our own prized heritage has defected to our great nation from the treacherous imperialist United States of America. Park Seong-Kun, together with his stunningly beautiful actress fiancée Sun, desires to make films in our prosperous union and bring the gloriousness of Korean cinema to all the people of the world. Let us thank Dear Leader for bringing our fellow comrade to this land of opportunity!”

“How about that, you made the headlines,” muttered the big man to Eugene without a trace of emotion as the driver cried out, “Thank you, Dear Leader!”

Sun was shaking quietly to Eugene’s right. They were all still wearing their formal attire, as they had been shepherded into the limo after spending the night in the palace without a change of clothes and driven through the carefully maintained streets of their new country on some sort of homecoming tour. Dear Leader, Eugene knew, was in another limo directly behind theirs, his window no doubt rolled down so he could extend his hand to his adoring subjects.

The last time Eugene had been in a limo was at the premiere of his first studio film. Back then he had been excited to step inside that plush car and be waited on hand and foot, like he hadn’t truly succeeded in life until it became the job of others to make sure he was comfortable. The chauffeur, an ill-tempered high school dropout with a Texas drawl, had mocked his weight offhandedly, asking if the studio needed to widen the little director’s chair especially for him. Eugene, being too shy to respond, had sat quietly through what was supposed to be his own victory lap while Sun took it upon herself to defend him, calling the driver a “hick and a joke.”

Before kicking them both out of his limo halfway to the theater, the driver had asked Eugene if he always let his girlfriend fight his battles for him. He refused to ever ride a limo to another premiere after that. And he continued to cast Sun as a vulnerable, powerless love interest.

Now no one was going to fight either of their battles for them.

The deejay was going on about the latest developments in the military, announcing how all the expert projections indicated DPRK’s continued success in

keeping its borders safe from outside enemies. He was reciting a sports report that Dear Leader had hit all hole-in-ones on Pyongyang's lone golf course yet again, continuing to humiliate the Western imperialists at their own game, when Sun broke her silence for the first time since the party.

"What are you people expecting from us?" she said to the big man, her voice remarkably light and composed. She straightened in her seat, set her purse on her lap and smoothed out her rumpled dress as if ready to make negotiations. Still an actress, Eugene thought. But she wouldn't look at him, and he wondered if she had really meant "us."

The big man didn't move or change his expression, but merely turned his head to face her. "We expect nothing," he said plainly. "Nothing you cannot deliver us. We only wish for you two to lead a happy, healthy, productive life here in our great nation. Everything necessary for your well-being will be provided at no cost."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the driver happily. "Live and work and prosper and join our proud people! There is much to see and do here. All are happy."

The limo barreled over an unpaved stretch and all three passengers hit their heads on the roof. "Sorry, so sorry!" the driver called.

"But of course," the big man continued, rubbing his bruised forehead, "if you happen to be, shall we say, struck by inspiration during your time here, Dear Leader has requested that you repay him for the generous living provisions by occasionally making a film for the people of this country to enjoy."

He had focused back on Eugene, who felt he lost his future somewhere back down the road. "You know how to make a film, don't you, Eugene?"

* * *

They were leaving the well-groomed areas behind and rolling past the outskirts of Pyongyang's poverty district. As they left the city and the crowds, Eugene could see in the neighborhoods and the people on the streets evidence of the regime no longer caring to keep up appearances. One young boy was running through the street in bare feet to keep pace with the limo's leisurely cruise. His grey shirt had been ripped; the fabric only reached his stomach. His rib cage was visible, puffing in and out like a balloon as he ran. He had a wide smile on his face and waved his arms at the window.

They were driving on long, winding roads that led through snow-capped hills. Looking up at the hills through the tinted window, Eugene could see guards — big men with big guns — standing watch around every bend. No nook or cranny was ever left untended. Now they were all watching the royal brigade, with swiveling obedient heads.

They passed through eight cold metal gates on their way up to the palace, each overseen by an armed guard. At every one the driver rolled down his window and exclaimed, "By the Great Leader's grace, I have brought with me the eager new residents of our wonderful and prosperous nation." This was met by the guard saying, "May good fortune smile upon Great Leader and upon all of us," and opening the gate for passage.

By the third gateway Sun had started fidgeting with the silver charm on her neck, an heirloom from her parents. Clutching the charm, which formed the Chinese character meaning "precious one," they had fled to China to escape this country's death camps, then America once the war ended. Eugene tried not to dwell on what it meant that the charm, a symbol of her family's tenacity and triumph over the forces of this country, had now arrived smack-dab right back where it started, where it belonged.

By the fifth gateway Sun had refocused her energy on her nails, painted emerald to match her dress. She stared at them anxiously, pinching them, scraping small specks of polish off them, lifting them out of her lap and bringing them slowly to her mouth, until they'd bridged the gap and she was biting them. More like gnawing, really, giving each nail a turn, in a process that started gradually but grew more fixated and determined with each approaching metal barrier ever higher up the road, each monotonous-yet-enthusiastic exchange between the driver and the gatekeeper, each passing second in the car's ascent to hell.

Eugene had never seen Sun bite her nails during all her years with him and he wondered if this was an ancient habit of hers, one her parents had drilled out of her in grade school for fear she would be seen as weak. Some fear inside of her had been triggered. He wondered if he knew a similar fear.

The undeveloped landscape was the ideal setting for a large battle sequence. Eugene imagined legions of armored troops riding through on horseback, wielding sabers, with mounted cameras designating the spots where victims would be slashed.

"What is your name?" Sun asked the big man, placing her hands in her lap.

"I do not wish to tell you," he said, not elaborating.

"Thank you very much for asking!" called the driver over his shoulder. "I am proud to be able to represent our party's honorable mindset to newcomers! My name is Lee Tae-Don. My family was fortunate enough to be blessed by the generosity of Dear Leader and I now drive under his service for good pay and accommodations. We are big fans of your work. Big fans!"

"Just drive, you idiot. She wasn't talking to you," the big man snapped.

“Stop it,” Sun commanded, holding out her hand in protest. Eugene was stunned at this sudden pull of authority; even the big man looked taken aback. “I am very interested to hear Mr. Lee’s story. It is always a pleasure to meet... to meet a fan.”

She was through biting her nails, it seemed. Eugene knew Sun felt more comfortable whenever she could fall back on her famous-actress routine. “Feed your ego and the rest of your body will follow,” she used to tell him when he would admonish her for her behavior at press junkets, the way she’d flirt with all the reporters and tousle her hair at fans. Now it appeared she wanted to start eating well again.

Sure enough, when she next spoke she addressed Lee Tae-Don directly, goading him. “I am glad to hear you enjoy my work. What was your favorite of my films?”

The driver started laughing uncomfortably, becoming starstruck now that Sun was exerting the confidence she was known for. “Oh Sun Hye-Jung, we are actually not permitted to watch any of your films in our country, for they promote inappropriate Western ideals. But our Dear Leader has described to us many times through his public addresses about how you and your fiancée have maintained strong ties to each other, as well as to the values and principles of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and it is that sort of fidelity that we always aspire to achieve here.”

Eugene choked back laughter at the word “fidelity,” provoking a look from the big man that might have gotten him killed back in Prison No. 6. “Yes, well,” he sputtered. “That’s a shame. We certainly worked hard on all our films. All... all seven of them.” Said as if he had trouble remembering the number, as though he hadn’t played over the shooting schedules for every single one in his head after she left, remembering

every rehearsal, every last-minute rewrite, every costume change (some of which he would join her in her trailer for). “It is too bad that they will remain unseen here.”

The eighth gateway was approaching now; once again the procedure, the coded exchange between guards. Sun looked unsatisfied with Lee Tae-Don’s dismissal of her films; the big man looked annoyed. Eugene shifted a little more in his seat and stared at the floor, not wanting to look at either of them.

At the very top of the hill rode into view a massive monolith, a 15-foot-tall statue of Dear Leader in a location where almost no one would see it but himself. Behind the statue rose the 20-building complex that made up his primary “Luxury House,” one of eight such establishments he had throughout the country. The four-story entrance looked like what would happen if a mad scientist became an architect: Greco-Roman columns clashed uncomfortably with a European red-brick façade and a Chinese-inspired golden palace roof.

“Dear Leader wanted a little bit of everything in his home,” the big man said, as if reading Eugene’s mind.

Lee Tae-Don, overcome with excitement, pulled up to the grand entrance and stepped out of the car. “We are going inside Dear Leader’s sacred living quarters! My family has served him well for me to be bestowed with such an honor!” he sang.

He started to skip up the path when the big man barked at him. “Stop! What do you think you’re doing? Dear Leader must always take the first step into his home. Are you trying to insult his honor? Do you want your family to be sent to the death camps?”

Lee Tae-Don let out a baby’s scream and dove back into the limo, covering his head in his hands. “I have offended Dear Leader’s honor!” he wailed. “I am not fit to

work in his personal service!” Eugene snuck a glance at the big man and thought he saw a faint glimmer of a smile cross his face.

The second limo pulled up behind them and out came the driver, running quickly to the back door so he could swing it wide open with an exaggerated gesture. From the depths of the car climbed Dear Leader, all five feet and five inches of him, wearing his ornamented olive-green suit and platform shoes. Without acknowledging the hordes of servicemen and shapely, attractive women in nurse’s uniforms who were now rushing out of his front door to meet him with bags of medical equipment and Hennessey cognac, Dear Leader strode across the drive directly toward Eugene’s limo. A tearful Lee Tae-Don scrambled out of the car and hurried to open Eugene’s door, fumbling his shaky hands over the handle before swinging it open with gusto. With a shove from the big man, who was looking plenty nervous himself by this point, Eugene and Sun climbed out to meet the most powerful general in the world for the second time in two days. He walked right up to them and stopped. A hint of a smile cracked his face as he extended his hand in the direction of the estate grounds.

“Welcome,” he said, “to your new home.”

Every servant broke into applause.

They were ushered into the house by the stampede of eager men in pressed grey suits and smiling teenaged girls wearing tight white blouses with the top three buttons unbuttoned and skirts cut just below the waist. Eugene thought back to Jo Soo-yun and wondered if one of these girls was his daughter, if her smile was real.

The girls, giddy with the excitement of following orders, swarmed Sun like honeybees and pushed her up the grand, spiral staircase leading up from the main foyer. Sun pressed her purse to her chest, shielding it from the flood of overeagerness. The men, meanwhile, wanted Eugene out in the back: “Dear Leader must speak with the filmmaker,” they kept saying. “Dear Leader desires his audience.” But as the couple (and they were a couple, Eugene knew, even if only in survivalist terms) was separating, Sun turned her head back from the stairs, and Eugene, catching her eye, gave her a faint smile. It was a dumb gesture, a childlike one – a slight smile of resilience meant nothing when surrounded by big, plastic grins of obedience. And yet, before she was shepherded out of sight, Sun smiled back.

* * *

While the helpful authorities led Sun through the labyrinth guest house to her room, Dear Leader pulled Eugene aside and asked to take a walk with him along the grounds.

“I have been very impressed with your work,” Dear Leader said to him after they had stepped outside of the house. He walked at a slow, deliberate pace, possibly to keep his balance on platform shoes, with his small hands clasped serenely behind his back and chest jutted outward like a robin’s.

“Thank you, Dear Leader,” Eugene said quietly. He was focused on slowing down his normal walking speed so as to keep in line with the supreme leader in a natural-seeming manner. Eugene found it difficult to feel intimidated by someone a head shorter than him and half his weight, but he knew that if he didn’t display enough reverence, his stay here could be reduced significantly.

“I have all of your films in my personal collection,” Dear Leader continued. His collection, it was rumored throughout the world, was some 20,000 movies deep, like the leagues under the sea. “They grab me in a peculiar way. You are in many ways like a young Hitchcock, you know.”

The word sounded funny in the man’s clipped tone, the “tch” running together in his mouth so it came out like a light “j,” the “cock” at the end over-emphasized. The two of them were passing a full-sized, deserted racetrack with more stables than spectator seats.

“I am very pleased and honored to hear you say that,” Eugene responded. “Dear Leader,” he added quickly.

Dear Leader paused in his tracks to study Eugene’s frame, tapping his nose thoughtfully as he did so. Eugene felt uneasy watching those small, beady eyes size him up like they must have sized up so many prisoners begging for their lives.

“Yes,” he mused. “I have seen older photographs. You used to have the girth of a Hitchcock, which is a good start. Successful men know how to stay well-fed.”

Eugene felt red at the cheeks and shame at being judged on his weight even here and now, even when he was a skeleton. Sun used to call him her big special guy, but would still always cook him the blandest, healthiest vegetables she could find for dinner. Stewed celery and cabbage. Good for the heart and mind.

“But more than that,” Dear Leader said. “You have a real gift for manipulation. You know how to get exactly what you desire from everyone you work with, and you show the world only what you *want* them to see, only what they *should* see.”

They had passed the racetrack and were approaching the pool house, a glass-

walled rectangular prism housing the largest indoor water facility in the country. Through the glass Eugene could make out a twisty water slide and a wave pool.

“We are the same,” said Dear Leader, and Eugene felt cold and alone. “We are both supreme leaders of our orders. We rule with absolute power. You hand your subjects a script and you can make them do whatever you wish.”

Eugene didn’t know what to say, if he was supposed to say anything. He thought of home, of all the times he’d begged, coerced or threatened Sun into playing the same damn character in every one of his movies.

“Dear Leader,” he began, heart pounding. “I am not sure I should be —”

“You know *Vertigo*?” Dear Leader interrupted, as if no one had spoken out of turn. Eugene wondered how many men had been killed before him for doing what he had just attempted.

“Of course,” Eugene said. He remembered enjoying the movie specifically because his Screenwriting professor had hated it so much, though he hadn’t understood a lick of the plot.

“Amazing movie. Jimmy Stewart loves Kim Novak, loses Kim Novak. He finds another Kim Novak and makes her over, transforms her into his old Kim Novak.” Dear Leader turned to continue walking on the path, lined with smoothed cobblestones that looked individually hand-scrubbed. “Control and power in its finest hour.”

They were leaving the pool house behind and circling back to the guest house. Eugene could see Sun in his mind’s eye, trapped in her room like a little girl, unable to escape her role even in the farthest corners of the earth.

“I do not want you to make another *Vertigo*,” Dear Leader commanded. “We do

not need that sort of immoral movie in The Democratic People's Republic of Korea. We need a movie that shows the rest of the world what they *should* see. We must unite as a nation to prove we are a rich and vibrant cultural center. I am unhappy with the current state of our film industry. Our home-grown directors lack the necessary skill, the drive to execute their vision. They would prove incapable of completing our nation's ideal film. But you can make that film for me. It will be seen the entire world over."

"My last film was seen by only 100 people in New York and Los Angeles," Eugene said, with a forced chuckle. He didn't know why he had decided right then to risk a joke.

Dear Leader stared at him for a little bit too long before making the faintest smile. "Yes," he said. "We will give you complete freedom and a guaranteed audience here. Soon you will discover you have no need for New York or Los Angeles or anyone else back there in the imperialist nation. You will find that self-reliance can be quite... liberating."

There was a brief flash in Eugene's mind of him making the three-hour Genghis Khan epic he had dreamed of since he was a little boy, of having unlimited resources and a cast and crew that wouldn't fight his every decision. He let in a sharp gasp at the vision, tried to expel the horrible thoughts. Dear Leader either didn't notice or pretended he didn't, diverting his attention to the servant clad in all grey who had come rushing out to meet the two of them clutching a bottle of cognac and two shiny glasses. Eugene accepted the glass without truly registering it, holding it still while the spirit was poured. The servant retreated back into his quarters as soon as the drinks were served, and Dear Leader raised his glass in a toast.

“This will be your Hollywood ending,” he proclaimed, and it seemed like he was addressing a roomful of people once again instead of just one man. Eugene unsteadily raised his own glass as well. “And like all happy endings, it will have a wonderful love story in the middle. The world’s greatest.”

At this, and in spite of everything, Eugene couldn’t help but chuckle. “World’s greatest,” he said incredulously.

“I know she is not really your future wife. Yet,” Dear Leader whispered, a stoic expression on his face like he was devising a plan to lead his troops into battle. “But she will be. She is your muse, your Kim Novak. You two will thrive off each other in due time. Every man needs a good, able-bodied partner.”

He downed his cognac in one unbusinesslike slurp, Eugene following suit with his own sips. “I will see to it that you have everything you want here. Everything.”

Dear Leader wiped his mouth on his sleeve with vigor. They walked the rest of the way to the house in silence. And once they reached the door, Eugene remembered to step aside to allow the general first entry into the palace. Before following, he gazed out at the grounds and the mountain range in the distance. Somewhere out there was the world.

IV.

INT. AN INESCAPABLE SITUATION – EVENING.

Dinner that night was a spartan affair, with cold dumplings and kimchi replacing the roast duck and beef they had enjoyed at the banquet so many miles and ages ago. Eugene and Sun sat at a clothless wooden table, morosely shoving the food into their mouths one bite at a time with worn-down chopsticks. Dear Leader had departed the premises soon after his private talk with Eugene, taking with him the cognac, the fleet of limos and his dozens of servants. Only the big man and the scarred man had remained behind with the prisoners – and Eugene was starting to realize that, yes, he and Sun were prisoners, just like in all the spy movies, only with their own personal guards and the most pristine cell money could buy.

Some prison – does this man have any respect at all for traditional genre characteristics? Am I really supposed to believe he could find himself in this sort of predicament?

You are so right, Pauline.

They had been directed to sit facing each other, with the big man and the scarred man filling out the table. The minders didn't eat; they didn't even have plates or utensils. Their sole purpose was to keep their camera-eyes on their prisoners, to keep watching. Eugene kept sneaking furtive glances at Sun throughout the meal but never met her gaze; she kept her head bent the entire time, as if in a constant state of prayer. He wondered what she had been doing while he was out with Dear Leader, if she had stayed in the bedroom, if she had even spoken a word. But the dinner was a vacuum of speech and sound. No conversation was attempted.

Yes, they had been fed well at dinner the previous night, but neither of them had eaten all day and Eugene could feel the too-familiar prison emptiness in his stomach taking over even as he ate his miniscule portion now. Sun had wolfed down her dumplings in seconds, her table manners having completely eroded over the last five years like Eugene's, and was now staring intently into her empty bowl. Still without a word, Eugene grasped his last dumpling with his chopsticks and deposited it into her bowl. She looked up in surprise, started to push the bowl back to him, but he picked his own bowl off the table and cradled it in his arms to prevent her from getting at it. Finally Sun gave up, clearly annoyed, but when the scarred man reached for her bowl she yanked it from him and shoved the dumpling into her mouth.

“You two must be exhausted now after your long day,” the big man announced authoritatively the instant Eugene placed the last grain of rice in his mouth, and before Eugene could even swallow he and Sun had risen from the table and marched dutifully up the mansion's spiral stairs, past the portraits of Dear Leader that adorned every wall.

A queen-sized bed with fresh-pressed, scratchy sheets greeted Eugene upon his entrance into their “master bedroom,” along with a dresser and a small, wobbly nightstand. No closet, no clock, no radio or TV, but there was a tiny, Mona Lisa-sized painting of Dear Leader mounted on the otherwise blank wall opposite the bed. There had to be another, much more exquisite bedroom somewhere else in the house – Dear Leader would not allow himself to sleep in such accommodations on those nights when he wasn't already staying at one of his seven other chateaus.

“Dear Leader has graciously provided the two of you with the finest quality garments in the country to sleep in,” the big man said. “You will wear them to bed to

show your continued appreciation and dedication to his generosity.”

Matching lavender sleepwear was laid out on the bed — pressed shirt and pants for Eugene, a silky sleeveless nightgown for Sun. Both of them were still wearing the formalwear that had been forced on them for the banquet, and now it seemed as though the regime was demanding another costume change. Eugene realized that he had none of his own possessions with him in this country, and that if they would be staying here for some time, which he was starting to become convinced was the case whether he and Sun liked it or not, everything from their clothes to their food to his pillowcase was going to be provided by this omnipresent power. He might never see his old flannel pajamas with the tiny holes in them ever again.

The minders had positioned themselves just outside the doorway of the bedroom, facing the room. The scarred man produced two folding chairs and sat down in one, folding his arms impatiently. The big man took the other and settled slowly in his seat. Neither made any sign to imply they would be averting their eyes. Their expressions were cold, robotic, unsympathetic. In a moment of rashness Eugene attempted to push the door shut, but the big man stuck out his beefy arm without a sound, nudging it back open before clasping his hands casually in his lap.

“We must maintain our surveillance for your own protection,” the scarred man stated in a monotone. “It is dangerous to be out of our sights for even a minute. Enemies are everywhere.”

“What are you talking about?” yelled Sun, with an anger that was only seeing light for the first time. “You’ve held me here for five years and no one’s ever watched me change before. You perverts, you sick creeps —”

“We have direct orders from Dear Leader to watch you at all times when you are together,” boomed the big man, speaking over Sun as though she had not uttered a word. “That one – ” here he pointed to Eugene, like he was a monkey in the zoo – “is a wily creature, known for making several escape attempts. As are you, my dear actress, if you will recall your first month in our stay. As such, Dear Leader does not wish for us to take any chances with you. Failure to follow his orders will lead to our immediate execution, and I promise you our replacements will not be as nice as us.”

When Eugene turned back to look at Sun, he saw that her glassy gaze was on a crack in the wall, her eyes in tears. He had seen her cry before, sure, on camera when he had instructed her to. She had cried for him many times, gotten very good at the fake waterworks (she told him once that all she needed to do was think of her mom, and they started coming). The tears became her calling card. Now here they were again, but different somehow, shakier, raspier. These were ugly tears, not being drawn out for any sort of dramatic cohesion but simply *there*, of their own accord, slapped across her face so hard they left a rash. Brittle, salty, destructive tsunami tears. Why was she suddenly crying now, though, when she had been going through the same thing for five years? But Eugene knew it didn't matter why. Even the best actors break character at some point.

“You are living in a nation where all citizens work together,” said the big man, as if reading Sun's mind. “You have no need for privacy.”

“You are an actress,” added the scarred man, not missing a beat. “You have no privacy.”

As Eugene watched, he felt the mounting distance between the two of them, the sensation that he was now standing with the minders watching her through a lens as she

was objectified for their amusement. He turned around to face the big man and the scarred man, both unmoved by this surprise emotional display. At one point Eugene would have been big enough to block the doorway almost completely, to shield their view, but no more, not after thirty grains of rice a day outside the mess hall of Prison No. 6. So the voyeurs looked straight past this non-threat blocking their field of vision, while Eugene simply stood there, turned away from her, the only man in the room who had seen her naked, the only man trying not to watch now. But there was a mirror in the hallway outside their room, behind the minders, and even as Eugene tried to lock gazes with them he could see in his peripheral vision the unmistakable reflection of one thin, fragile female body, shaking from tears, her back turned away from all the eyes, struggling to unzip her emerald dress, hands shaking violently as they fumbled with the garment. And then Eugene wasn't pretending to stare down his oppressors anymore but was actually focusing all of his attention on the mirror, on that dress, on that zipper, on the first promise of naked female flesh he had seen in years. He suppressed an urge to turn around and help her unzip, only to wonder if that would actually be preferable to gazing through this secret, shameful lens. And then he was *willing* her to unzip, *wanting* her to submit to his eyes, until finally she grasped it, the zipper, pulled it down, made it halfway down the curvature of her back before it caught, as the big man and the scarred man leered – they were actually leaning forward by this point – and the scarred man had an ugly, upsetting grin on his face. And her cries were more audible now, with no longer any attempt made to mask them, as her hand found the zipper again, pulled to no avail, until she began tugging at the sleeves of her dress instead, exposing her left shoulder first – the one with the small mole, Eugene knew before it peeked out at him – then her right –

revealing several haphazard scars Eugene had never seen before, like pieces of barbed wire had carve their way through her skin – getting her full, bare, slender arms through the sleeves, tugging down without enough give in the waist, tugging harder still, wailing now as well, a sound of sorrow and helplessness that daggered into Eugene’s ribcage, until finally the seams gave and the dress ripped down the back, cutting a path across her right side that sloped down, down, and then the whole thing collapsed in a pool at her feet, and the guards yelled and hollered because they knew how much it hurt her.

It was then, finally, that Eugene shut his eyes. He not only closed them but squeezed them shut, blocking out not just sight but the *idea* of sight, like he was 15 years old again watching *Psycho* for the first time after sneaking in with his friends and the detective was climbing the stairs to his death in Norman Bates’s house. He saw only the darkness inside his own head and listened through the slobbering jeers and the unanswered cries for a minute longer, until he heard the rustle of bedsheets and was shoved roughly in the chest with a “Stop standing there with your eyes closed and get undressed.” Only then did Eugene himself change outfits, locking his glare again as he did so, daring his guards to crack a smile at the sight of a starved Asian man attempting to remove a tuxedo.

Light was fading from the windows and without interior lighting, the mansion was gradually slipping into its nighttime state of complete darkness. Eugene lay frozen in bed next to Sun, petrified, with her facing away from him, still holding her purse and shaking slightly from her heavy breathing. He raised the covers up to his chin, cowered behind them, thought back to his childhood when he would imagine that his bed was an island floating in the ocean, and if he stepped onto the floor he would be eaten by sharks.

As darkness descended upon them, Eugene saw a flicker of candlelight protrude from the open door frame, casting ghostly shadows onto the floor. He wished desperately for sleep to come but it refused, and the only thing that swept over him was the terrible, stomach-churning sensation that he was being watched.

* * *

FLASHBACK.

“Can I be your muse?” she asked him, smiling the way she smiles. “I’ve always wanted to be someone’s muse.”

It was another late night at Woo Diner on Normandie, the night after Eugene first screened his senior thesis to his professors. Their rapturous response had inspired him to pull out an old, unpolished script from his closet — stashed safely behind his winter gear, where his roommate wouldn’t find it — and share it with Sun at their weekly dinner. He was holding the script just above the table so it wouldn’t get stained by whatever substance made all the dishes stick to the wood. The two had downed an entire bottle of wine between them, and a giddy Sun was trying to snatch the script from his hands in-between hiccups. He kept pulling it away from her at the last second, laughing.

“Give it here,” she demanded, reaching for it one more time. “I want to see!”

“Settle down!” he said. “You’re so needy.”

She slumped back into her seat and crossed her arms in a mock-huff. “I am not,” she insisted.

He grinned. “So you really want to be my muse?”

“Of course!” she said. “I think I’d be good at it. Besides,” she added, leaning close, “you need me.”

“What?” Eugene exclaimed. “Me, need you? That’s ridiculous. You clearly need me.”

She shook her head. “You need me more. You need inspiration and a feminine presence in your life, or you’d have nothing.”

Eugene relaxed his hand for a bit and Sun sprung. She grabbed his arm and held it in place, knocking over the empty wine bottle as she did so. The old woman wiping down tables at the far end of the restaurant yelled “*Meomchuda, malsseongkkuleogi!*” (*Stop it, you troublemaker!*) in Korean but Sun paid no heed, snatching the script out of Eugene’s writhing hand and practically knocking him out of his chair. Finally she wrenched it free with a triumphant “Aha!” just as the woman had made her way to their table, slammed on it repeatedly and gestured to the door with exaggerated motions. They sheepishly gathered their stuff and exited the place, and Eugene placed a sizeable tip on the part of the table where the wine bottle used to be.

Outside they stomped through the puddles in the roads until Sun stopped under a streetlight to open the script. She couldn’t wait another minute before finding out what role she was going to play.

* * *

When did the roughness between them first start? It was difficult to say. Certainly by the time his fifth film *The Absent-Minded General* had premiered, in a single ramshackle Manhattan theater that mainly catered to drunk hoodlums stumbling in from the pornoplex next door, there was a certain degree of animosity between him and his muse. Her career outside of his movies had no traction, no success stories, and sitting

next to him in that whiskey-infused auditorium clad in farcical formalwear, she must have finally become fed up.

“Goodbye, Eugene,” she had whispered in his ear, roughly, with just a touch of the soft purr that sometimes infiltrated her voice in the bedroom. Then she had stood up and strode up the aisle, out of the theater, looking for all the world like a lost relic from film noir. She called her own cab.

He had sobbed profusely at first, for weeks at a time, and then segued into scouring the trade papers for her name every morning at breakfast. He hoped for some sign, any sign, that she was working and happy, wondered if she had become involved with some new wunderkind director, if she was sleeping with him as well. But nothing, nothing. Until it turned up where he had desperately hoped it wouldn't.

Oriental Daily News was a Chinese-language newspaper in Hong Kong that traded in sensationalist tabloid journalism — pop stars on tour, politicians caught with prostitutes, the like. It was a general rule in Hollywood that no one successful should be caught reading tabloids of any kind, that the agents were supposed to read them and report the latest rumor-mongering concerning whomever their client desired to work with next, but Eugene still maintained this special subscription so he would have a way to keep using the rudimentary Chinese language skills he'd picked up at USC. He was never able to understand much more in any given issue than “sex,” “new movie” and the occasional celebrity name, but the habit had become ingrained in him over time, and he found it very difficult to shake loose old routines. So it was that on a rainy Tuesday morning at his dusty, stained breakfast table, some months after his last encounter with Sun had eliminated his need to clean the house every once in a while, Eugene

halfheartedly opened up the Oriental Daily News over a bowl of Frosted Flakes and nearly choked on his spoon when Sun's face stared back at him.

It was a grainy, black-and-white photo, with a sinister-looking headline that Eugene couldn't read with the exception of "famous actress" and a word that looked like "missing." He yelled, swore, knocked his cereal bowl onto the floor, where it shattered and spilled sugary flake residue over the week-old soy sauce stains in the carpet. He called the production assistant on his third film, *To Die With Honor*. The Hong Kong native spoke little English but had come highly recommended by the studio, and Eugene demanded that he come to his house immediately or the pending letter of recommendation to UCLA's film school would be retracted. The P.A. arrived within the hour, took one look at the newspaper headline and clammed up, refusing to talk no matter how much he was threatened or cajoled, until finally he tore off a page from Eugene's latest script-in-progress and scribbled that she had last been seen on some low-budget movie set, that nobody had heard from her in weeks, that the shower had still been running in her hotel room when the authorities busted down the door, that there were signs of a fierce struggle, that foul play was strongly suspected. With every misshapen English word the P.A. scrawled onto the paper, Eugene grew more furious and hysterical, until the P.A. finally set the pen down on the dirty table and ran out of the house.

In those first two blurred hours afterwards, the way seemed clear. Eugene would fly to Hong Kong immediately and investigate. The police over there didn't know her, didn't understand her like he did. How could they ever hope to track her down without that intimate connection? No, he needed to undertake this task himself. She needed him.

But did she? Was he really doing this for her, or was this part of some secret, perverse desire to finally play the role of the dashing hero he had always envisioned for himself? Could he really bring her to safety, or was he just framing the shot of an impossible storyboard? Perhaps he would die trying to save her. Perhaps that was where his legacy would lie: in failing to protect the woman who didn't love him back.

I simply don't see the artistic merit of watching someone spend his entire life failing at one pointless, borderline-chauvinist task. What an awful misuse of a person's existence.

You are so right, Pauline.

* * *

There was that night when they were both at the peak of their happiness (or maybe he had just imagined they were — he was realizing now that he could never be exactly sure just what Sun had been thinking at any point in their history), the summer after graduation when they'd first moved out to L.A., when they lay curled next to each other on a stained sheetless bed in their apartment surrounded by duct-taped boxes and bubble-wrapped paintings of Seoul nightlife, and Eugene had looked into her eyes with all the Errol Flynn wonder he could muster and declared that there was nothing he wouldn't do for her, that he would die for her. And she smiled her wide I-love-you smile, and they kissed passionately and gave the bed a trial run, their bodies distorted in the reflection off the lens of the video camera Eugene had placed on the bare dresser seconds after entering the apartment, the camera watching their movements with a black, unblinking eye.

Now Eugene wondered for the first time if he had really meant it the way it'd sounded. To die for someone was an awfully long way to go, after all, and life was such a fragile thing. He doubted there were any truly noble, purely selfless people left in the world. His parents, certainly, had not been so altruistic — they had abandoned their families in Korea in 1945 when the nation divided so that they themselves could enjoy freedom. They took the four children they already had – Eugene's older siblings – and just left, without a second thought. The myriad aunts and uncles he would never meet were left behind, would have been sniffed out by the regime as the family of traitorous minds, would have been assumed to have taken part in their escape. Eugene could imagine the big man's even bigger father dropping by his own grandfather's house, carrying official papers with testimony from the neighbors declaring him to be a conspirator against the regime. He could imagine his grandfather being thrown in Prison No. 6, in the bunk he himself would later occupy, perhaps receiving execution by firing squad on a slow day when they had no one else to execute, perhaps fashioning a spear out of a discarded chopstick and stabbing himself in the heart with it. All so his own son could come to America and live the happy, free life he would never know for himself.

Wasn't that about as selfish as you could get? But if his parents hadn't abandoned everyone they had ever loved, he wouldn't be here now.

Even as Eugene debated his course of action, he knew he never really had a choice. Whether Sun acknowledged it or not, she needed him. She left his orbit in a huff and look what happened.

By the end of the night Eugene had booked his flight. Round trip, one week. If he hadn't found her by then, there would be no reason to keep looking. He mailed his latest

script (a B-movie trifle about a village trying to wall itself in from an encroaching toxic waste flood, a horrible piece of trash he could sell for \$20,000 to Roger Corman's New World Pictures if he agreed to put in a scene of two nubile girls removing their tops) off to his producer to look over in his absence, packed a small suitcase with two changes of clothes and a camera, and set off on his mission. Two days later, while wandering around the hotel she had been staying at, Eugene was grabbed by two large men in suits, knocked out with a blow to the back of the head, and came to on a small plane headed east into the unknown.

INT. EXTRAORDINARY WORLD.

The minders were still there in the morning as the first rays of light began to shine through the bedroom window. The door was still propped open and Eugene, in his groggy state, squirmed underneath the scratchy sheets, trying to once again comprehend his surroundings.

“Good morning,” boomed the big man, entering the room as he spoke. “Let us give thanks to Dear Leader for this day and the wonderful opportunities it promises.”

He turned to the painting on the wall and bowed deeply to it, muttering “Thank you, Dear Leader” as he did. Behind him, the scarred man had also entered the room and now mimicked his actions. The big man then turned back to the couple in bed expectantly.

It was better to play the game than to die defending your right not to play it, Eugene reasoned. He shook himself awake and stumbled out of bed, bowing hurriedly to the painting as he did so. “Thank you, Dear Leader,” he shouted, his voice full of imitation-subservience. His rebellion would come later, he told himself, once he had gained better control of his surroundings. It was the approach used by the smartest movie prisoners, and it was probably what had allowed his parents to plan their own escape.

The figure of Sun remained in place, nestled underneath the covers facing away from the proceedings, icy fingers still gripping the purse. She gave no indication that she had heard the big man’s announcement, nor that she was aware of what was going on in her bedroom.

The big man crossed over to Sun's end of the bed, grabbed the covers and ripped them off savagely. A scream sounded from within the flurry of sheets and then Sun was exposed on the bed, knees tucked between her linked arms, stained eyes. She was wearing the prescribed nightgown from the night before but Eugene felt she could not have looked more violated if she had been naked. Soundlessly, the big man grabbed her thin arm with his meaty fist and pulled. The purse fell from her grasp onto the bed, but the big man barely noticed. She clawed at the mattress, got her hands on her pillow and tried to pummel the big man with it; his other hand engulfed the squishy weapon and in a brief tug-of-war it exploded, sending clumps of imitation buckwheat raining down upon the two of them. Still, Sun scratched and kicked and tried to bite his arm, until he reared back his pillow-destroying hand and smacked her across the face in a brutal backhand. She cried out and Eugene gave a start, making a tentative step in their direction before he felt the scarred man's own arms grab his torso from behind. Frightened by the touch and remembering what had happened the last time he had attempted to fight these people, Eugene immediately stopped struggling as the big man slapped Sun again. She went limp in his arms, sniffing. He hauled her in front of the portrait and thrust her onto the ground; she fell to her knees and murmured, "Thank you, Dear Leader" in a broken voice. Her formerly radiant face was blackened and bruised, and a drop of blood trickled from her lip. Her side of the bed was newly littered with three red splotches.

"Thank you," she whispered again.

* * *

At the height of his success, Eugene was able to greenlight a script called *How Many Stars in the Sky*, about a Korean prostitute servicing American military men during

the War to earn money for her impoverished family. Sun played Yoo-Jung Lee, the “Western whore,” and the country’s favorite teen heartthrob Mark Masee, with his surfer-boy locks and melting smile made famous in such blockbusters as *We’re Goin’ on Vacation* and *Love Me Please*, signed on to play the soldier with a heart of gold who turns down Yoo-Jung’s advances in favor of helping her re-open her family’s restaurant. The script was set in Korea, but MGM had a better idea – they bankrolled the production of an enormous, to-scale replica of a Southeast Asian mountainside village on one of their backlots, a 30-foot man-made river running through a whole neighborhood of little houses with working plumbing, right next to an abandoned Eiffel Tower exterior from *An American in Paris*. It was truly amazing to Eugene, how his heritage could fit so cozily into one more Hollywood compartment of make-believe. He didn’t know if he should be astonished or insulted or what, but he did know that the only world he felt truly comfortable in was the one that had been built just for him.

His first day on set in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, walking with a newly black-eyed Sun into the warehouse studio converted from a factory that used to make government-subsidized cheap packaged food, felt like nothing else he’d ever experienced. The world this time was still built for his bidding, just like back at MGM. But everything was distorted, lower budget yet higher stakes, a fun-house Hollywood. In one corner was a single interior set. It was adorned with a dozen stools, one podium and a gigantic, wall-sized flag of the DPRK. In another corner, a mat of grass mat browner than it was green, slapped down underneath a hot lamp and a plastic poplar tree missing half its leaves. Propped up against the far wall next to a portrait of Dear Leader was the country’s lone green screen, bought by Dear Leader from an unnamed source for an

undisclosed sum shortly after Eugene was kidnapped, with a slight tear in the bottom-left corner just out of the camera's view.

These sets, not good-looking enough to pass muster in an Edward D. Wood, Jr. production, slumped droopily as hordes of unidentified crewmembers ran in every direction at a frantic pace. Some carried lighting equipment or boom mics that looked like they'd been mashed in a horrible accident. Others held clipboards, trays of food, bright-colored cords snaking from large, metallic generators that looked big enough to power whole industries. The largest crew Eugene had ever seen was working on the most ramshackle production he could imagine. Dear Leader looked to have appointed several dozen people to this film, and they were all racing as though he was watching every step they took.

This was the chaotic scene that greeted Eugene when he entered the building, a fully operational machine, looking like just another day in a long-standing studio instead of the first day on a Communist-sponsored set. The workers were aggressive and single-minded, cross-cutting each other as they ran, barely glancing up. And they certainly didn't seem like they needed Eugene or Sun, neither of who had been told a lick about what sort of movie they were expected to make before they had been shepherded onto this set.

"What is this place?" Sun whispered to Eugene, clearly as awed as he was. "How could this possibly—"

Behind them, the big man produced a loud coughing noise and Sun trailed off mid-sentence.

As they took their tentative steps into the world of the set, there came a yell from somewhere within the massive crowd of workers. “It is the great and honorable film director and his gorgeous wife!” proclaimed a confident, high-pitched voice. “They are here among us at last!”

The running and bustling halted immediately. All heads turned toward the couple and their minders, and Eugene wondered how many more mobs of people he’d have to contend with in his lifetime. From the swarm of people emerged Lee Tae-Don, their driver. He raced up to the pair and bowed feverishly.

“Welcome, welcome!” he exclaimed loudly. “So good to have you both here on our wonderful set!”

Eugene and Sun smiled and stood in place for an awkward moment, unsure of what to do. “Hello, Lee Tae-Don!” Sun finally replied. “You are, ah, working on our movie now, I see?”

Lee Tae-Don smiled and nodded, more times than seemed necessary, so that he looked like the cheap John Wayne bobblehead doll Eugene had once bought in a Koreatown hobby shop. “Dear Leader, in all his grace and infinite wisdom, has granted me the privilege to work on this important, revolutionary film with you as your assistant director. I will be a small part of this great new chapter in our nation’s cultural history!”

“Good for you,” said Eugene.

Lee Tae-Don turned around to address the crew, still frozen in their tracks. “Please, fellow comrades, continue about your work! We cannot afford to fall behind in our shooting schedule. We do not want to disappoint Dear Leader!”

Immediately the small army of production assistants snapped back into their nonstop beelike work mode, even more fast-paced than before, if such a thing was possible. It crossed Eugene's mind that if he had had assistants this dedicated and this numerous working on all his films, he likely would have emerged with a much more accomplished output. But something troubled him. He approached Lee Tae-Don.

"What shooting schedule?" he asked the driver.

"Dear Leader wishes there to be no down time, nor wasted opportunities or resources on set." Lee Tae-Don replied. "The production of *Pulgasari* is much too important to him and the people of the Republic of Korea to leave to chance and misfortune. So he has selflessly donated a portion of his valuable time to laying out the shooting schedule you will be working with over the course of your film!"

"Generous," Eugene said. "Perhaps he would like to share with the director what it is exactly I am supposed to be working on?"

Eugene took the shooting script from Lee Tae-Don, the first time he had laid eyes on what he was expected to be filming. He held the packet of pages – yellowed, indicating that this film had been a long time coming – in his hands, aware that he was crossing some sort of threshold as he did so: the point where he would begin to accept that he was here to make a movie, the point where he would actually start considering the obstacle in front of him as a production to be filmed instead of a prison to escape from.

The driver then proclaimed, "We must get our lovely, talented actress into makeup so as to accentuate her delicate skin tones on camera!" On cue, three female crew members with greasy faces and dirt stains on their arms materialized around Sun, leading her off to somewhere in the madcap production. One reached to take her purse but she

pulled it away roughly. Sun turned to look at Eugene with her black eye as they ushered her away, but he only waved her along, turning his attention instead to the script.

Eugene retreated to a small corner stashed with plastic medieval weaponry to skim over the document. He hadn't read a script in years and had forgotten what the experience was like, the subconscious staging in his mind's eye, the urge to pull out blank sheets of paper and start storyboarding. They were making a monster movie – a small dinosaur figurine named Pulgasari in feudal Korea comes to life and grows 20 stories tall by consuming massive quantities of iron, at which point he joins forces with the common people to overthrow the evil capitalist regime. Leading the revolt alongside Pulgasari, naturally, was the nation's new poster-ready movie star, Sun-ye Park (Eugene could barely suppress his laughter at the notion that the government viewed her as a Communist role model). Dear Leader and his father, Great Leader Kim Il-Sung, shared a co-writing credit on the picture, as its title page loudly proclaimed in typeset larger than the film's title (“Written by the blessed, divine hands of our Great Leader and his son, Dear Leader”). So this was the work that would vault the Regime back onto the world's cultural stage, the film of such profound importance that only Eugene, as the “gifted and talented” outsider filmmaker, possessed the necessary skills to pull it off. It was so absurd it almost made sense.

Contained in the screenplay were many, many notes to the director from the all-knowing writers. Notes of a very specific nature to the production, like “Here, Pulgasari must wave his arms, which are exactly the length and width of 2.5 rolled-up tubes of regulation-sized paper towels as dictated by national standards on toiletry rations, in a counter-clockwise manner for 3.5 seconds while his pointed fork tongue juts out of and

then back into his mouth in an unabated cycle” and “The quantity of townspeople present at the town hall meeting must number exactly 37, with 20 full-grown men, eight full-grown women, five very small schoolchildren and four infants, all clad in uniforms conforming to the national standard for onscreen modesty, ordered in seating arrangement according to a combination of height, weight and physical attractiveness to the viewer.”

Eugene looked up from the script to find the first shot already being set up around the drab-looking “outdoors” set. A heavy-set, vacant-eyed man wearing all but the head of a brown, hideous rubber suit with chest plates, pointy claw arms and what looked like clumps of fur glued to the back was being ushered in front of the camera by Lee Tae-Don, who turned to a stuttering assistant at his right to bark, “Where is the head of Pulgasari?” in an uncharacteristically demanding tone. The assistant cried and bowed many times while shuffling backward before turning and sprinting off toward the props trailer, yelling, “We need the head! Who has the head?”

“So sorry, master,” Lee Tae-Don said to Eugene. “These people here – they do not have your legendarily stellar work ethic. They know not what they are doing. You must be patient with them. I am very sorry and take full responsibility for all lapses in their performance. I should have trained them better.”

Eugene was about to say something when Sun emerged from behind the set, dragged by the hand by her troupe of makeup artists. They had done her up, several more shades of pale than she would have received back in America, trading in her black eye for a shade of ghostly white. She kept her head down, and in the naked light of the set lamps,

Eugene could see the layers of artificiality caked on her face. “Our work is complete,” the head artist announced. “She is ready.”

“Master,” Lee Tae-Don said, bowing to Eugene again. “The set has been prepared according to the instructions handed to us by Dear Leader. We await your orders.”

Eugene surveyed the scene before him, as the many crewmembers stopped running and stood in clusters of 10, staring expectantly at him. The big man and the scarred man had retreated to somewhere outside the building at some point during the commotion, mumbling how they “can’t stand being around all these puppets” and “it’s not like he’ll be going anywhere else today.” Directly under the large heating bulb being used as lighting, the man playing Pulgasari forced a smile as currents of sweat dribbled down from his face and into the cracks in his rubber suit. All were waiting to follow whatever Eugene told them. The prisoner was in charge now.

Eugene cleared his throat and leafed blankly through the pages of the script he was still clutching in his clammy hands. He hadn’t the slightest clue what was going on. It was insane, but here insane seemed to be the new normal. “Well, then,” he said, opening to a page in the middle. “Let’s shoot... let’s shoot this scene right here, where... where Sun comes across the little Pulgasari doll in the clearing for the first time.”

The crewmembers exchanged wary glances. Finally Lee Tae-Don spoke up. “But, forgive me, esteemed director,” he said. “We were told by Dear Leader to first film scenes with the full-grown Pulgasari. We have set up the cues for that shot and obtained our Pulgasari actor specifically for those scenes.”

And here Eugene allowed himself a little smile. He saw an opening, for the first time in too long. “Yes, Lee Tae-Don,” he said. “I am aware that is what you were

previously instructed to do. However, in my experiences as an esteemed director, it is much better service to the flow of the cinematic narrative to shoot scenes in as chronological of an order as possible. To aid the actors in their emotional transitions and all that. And I know that my lovely wife was certainly looking forward to filming scenes of wide-eyed discovery today.” He gestured to the now thoroughly confused Sun, who looked more lost than the time the two of them had gone hiking in Santa Barbara and stepped off the trail. “You have already made her up. Might as well let her film her first scene.”

“But master,” Lee Tae-Don began to protest, until Eugene cut him off. “I know what Dear Leader has told you,” he said. “But I have spoken with Dear Leader as well. And he has put his full faith in me as a director. We are inside a movie studio now. This is my domain. In here, my voice is one with Dear Leader.”

Silence, until finally Lee Tae-Don turned to the crew and announced, “Set up Pulgasari discovery scene. Do as commanded by Dear Leader.”

Eugene turned to sit behind the camera. The little victories, he knew, were the best ones. They would soon lead to the big victories.

“I hope you know what you are doing,” Sun whispered in his ear, in English, as she sidled past him to step onto the set, ready if not willing to follow his instructions. Just like old times.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered back. “I don’t.”

* * *

The days went by, slowly but inevitably, as they always must. Eugene began taking over more and more aspects of the production, wrenching its direction ever further

from Dear Leader's delicately constructed vision. He succeeded in recasting the role of the village leader who first attempts to halt Pulgasari's reign of destruction, as Eugene declared that the novice actor playing the part – a middle-aged widower and former shoe salesman from Kanggye – lacked the raw passion necessary for appearing on screen. He orchestrated multiple outdoor shoots, “on location” trips to impeccably preserved historical palaces that would double as the feudal kingdom in the film – trips during which he and Sun would gaze upon the open, untamed landscapes all around them and dream.

It was a power shift, most certainly, but the most insignificant one imaginable. When he lay awake at night, in that bed in that guest house with those eyes still watching him, he would ponder his so-called accomplishments from the day on set and wonder what they meant. He wasn't going to bring down a regime by commandeering their film project. He wasn't going to free Sun by instructing her to stand in front of yet another camera for 12 hours each day. There were small thrills he took in the progress on *Pulgasari* itself, little bursts of glee that manifested themselves whenever he was able to pull off a neat-looking pan around Sun's delicate body or use shadow to obscure the creature in such a way that you almost couldn't tell it was just a man in a flimsy rubber suit. The critics in his head, Pauline and Roger, had been silenced. But even if he somehow made a good movie underneath Dear Leader's oppressive tutelage, it wouldn't free him. If anything, a prominent display of directorial talent would only serve to increase his sentence here, as a “homegrown” success story of the DPRK. It seemed, just like before, as though there was nothing he could actually achieve. And Sun was growing ever more irritated.

“These people are still controlling everything we do,” she yelled at him in frustration the second week, in English, the two of them alone in the plywood-constructed, outhouse-sized “trailer” she had demanded the crew build for her once she started feeling comfortable enough to demand things. They were on one of their rare five-minute breaks on set, a luxury that Dear Leader afforded the crew only once every 48 hours of work. This was an unbendable rule that not even Eugene at his most domineering could overturn, and so he and Sun worked within the confines of the breaks they were allowed, taking every one to retreat to her tiny sanctuary, the only place where they could escape outside eyes and ears.

“Don’t you want to be the director again?” she asked him. “Not just of this stupid movie, Eugene. Of your life. Of *our* future.” He couldn’t help but mentally embrace her use of “our,” the first time it didn’t seem constructed for the benefit of the outside world.

This was more or less the same conversation they had every time they retreated to her trailer. Every time Sun would insist that the two of them plan their means of escape. Every time Eugene would equally insist that to do so was too dangerous, that there was no way to fight these people, that their only hope of survival was giving the regime what it wanted from them. And she would say he was siding with them, with the most evil people on Earth. She would say he was scared, or that maybe he actually *liked* it here, where he was pampered and respected and treated like a success. He would say how dare you insinuate that. She would say well unless you give me evidence to the contrary, I have to assume that’s the truth. Then their five minutes would be up and Lee Tae-Don would immediately start banging on the trailer door, announcing loudly and unmistakably

that the production needed to start up again or they would not be worthy of Dear Leader's praise.

But now Sun had had enough. She grabbed her purse from the table, withdrew the recorder and pressed it into Eugene's hand, closing his fingers around it. "Eugene, I want us out of here. We need to take a stand against them now, or we never will."

He was scared. He would always get scared back at USC whenever she would suggest something new and dangerous for the two of them to do, whether it was skydiving or trying Mexican food or moving into a bigger place. But just like back then, he knew that once the thought was out, there was no turning back, no matter how much he would try to delay or reverse the decision. Just like back then, he finally, painfully, arm-wringingly agreed.

* * *

"She is all yours, you know," Dear Leader said, seated at the desk he had instructed his architects to build on an elevated platform. "If you want her."

Eugene nodded, waiting. In the cocoon of his jacket pocket, shielded from sight, lay the tape recorder. The small red button on the device had been pressed down about 30 minutes ago, just before the big man had entered his room to escort him to his nightly progress report meeting. Now muffled by a large mass of tissues, it was whirring pleasantly — or so he hoped, as he knew that the recordable tape was running low and the apparatus could easily have shut itself off while he was walking, causing him to risk his life for nothing.

Dear Leader poured himself a glass of cognac, having not offered Eugene a glass of his own at any meeting since their first walk through his estate, and took a long sip,

spilling a tiny drop on his lap. To his left, the big man immediately whipped out a handkerchief and bent over to gently pat the stain. Dear Leader, acting as though the incident hadn't even occurred, kept his eyes trained on Eugene.

“She is quite the attractive young woman,” he continued. “Even after suffering that unfortunate on-set injury...” He gestured to his own face with a shake of his head.

Eugene shot a glance at the big man but his expression betrayed nothing.

“No matter,” said Dear Leader. “Her physical features are still more than adequate. She has already become the Marilyn Monroe of our great nation.” He laughed, a little too long, a little too loudly. “I mean in terms of looks, of course, not in terms of her ultimate fate.”

Eugene feared that the only thing the recorder was picking up was the boom-boom-boom of his heart.

Behind Dear Leader's desk were floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with videotapes and filmstrips. They were labeled with every language under the sun; some Korean tapes, to be sure, but many more displayed in English, French, Spanish, Chinese and Russian. Not an inch of shelf space was left bare. They stretched far above Dear Leader's height, so that from Eugene's vantage point, the viewing materials seemed poised to teeter and collapse on top of him at any second.

The general leaned back in his plush chair and webbed his fingers absently. “Have you given any more thought to my earlier proposal?” he asked. “Should you decide to, ahem, reinvigorate your relationship, my associates would see to it that she make herself available to you in any fashion you desire, whether you on the set or off.”

Every night for the past five days Dear Leader had called Eugene into his office to present this case. And every time, there was only one thing Eugene could hope to say.

“Thank you for the offer, Dear Leader,” he responded, bowing his head. “I will consider it and report back to you.”

Dear Leader nodded, thoughtfully, as though hearing his reply for the first time. “Good, good,” he said. “She is such a gorgeous woman. Such a wonderful opportunity she would be to you. I am sure of it.” He leaned forward in his chair. “Now, tell me about your film. How is it progressing?”

Eugene cleared his throat deliberately and shuffled around in his seat. “Very well, Dear Leader. Thank you once again as always for your continued generosity and your belief in the project.”

Dear Leader waved off the compliments in a more dismissive manner than Eugene had ever seen from him before. Perhaps he was starting to grow weary of the formalities? Was this a good or a bad thing?

“The script is a masterwork. The actors are all experts in their craft. The input of each member of the crew is invaluable to our efforts as a whole,” Eugene continued robotically. “Everyone has been trained perfectly in their expected roles despite the country’s previous lack of a proper film industry. It is absolutely remarkable. Your core philosophy of self-reliance has truly extended to every aspect of the production. We will thrive on and make the best movie the world has ever seen without the need of any other country’s resources.”

“Yes, yes, good,” muttered Dear Leader, and Eugene scoured his face for any sign of impatience manifesting itself. “This is all excellent news, truly. I have always preached

these values. To see them on display in this way is a dream come true for generations of my family.”

He picked up his cognac and downed the glass in one more swig before immediately pouring himself another. A small amount of the spirit dribbled onto his chin and the big man was there with his handkerchief before Eugene could blink — his one-man makeup crew.

“What I want to know now,” Dear Leader said while pouring the glass, “is whether our vision has remained intact.”

This gave Eugene pause. “Our — our vision, Dear Leader?” He scrambled to provide an acceptable answer, wondering if the man in front of him knew about the changes he had imposed. “Well, of course our vision to bring film into the country has become a thriving, flourishing reality. We have more personnel and more resources and more talent than I could have ever dreamed of obtaining in America —”

“No!” yelled Dear Leader suddenly, and Eugene froze in mid-sentence, mouth still forming the “a” sound. Even the big man seemed a little startled. Eugene didn’t know if it was the mentioning of his home country that had set the leader over the edge — he had repeated to himself, so many times, to never mention the name of the “imperialist country,” knowing that one simple slip of the tongue could be deadly — but he thought then, as he thought every time Dear Leader had a mild outburst or paused a little too long in his presence, that this was it, this was the mistake that would cost him his selfish little life. But instead of ordering any action, Dear Leader took a few seconds to calm himself down.

“No,” he continued. “I was not referring to my political or philosophical vision, as important as I know both of these elements to be. I was referring to our joint collective directorial vision for the project. How is it progressing... creatively?”

It felt to Eugene like he was at a loss for words more and more lately.

“Creatively, Dear Leader?” he echoed.

“Why, yes,” Dear Leader said, leaning back in his chair. “I want the wonderful creativity of our nation’s top filmmaker on full display when we export the work to international markets. And as your producer, I have more than a vested interest in making this happen.”

Dear Leader giving himself producer’s credit on *Pulgasari* was a joke, a chance for this man to forget about the concerns of his own people for the chance to play Mr. Hollywood. Though Eugene had to admit, all other concerns aside, Dear Leader was the best producer he’d ever had: He could clear a bustling Pyongyang street in two hours for a shoot and round up 200 extras without batting an eye.

“There must be a vision on display,” Dear Leader mused. “A vision of singular uniqueness, representing not the individuality of its creator but the collective spirit of its people.” He had segued into the hand gestures by now, pontificating for his audience of one captive and one employee. “Because we are truly a great nation, and the world must know our vision.”

Eugene leaned forward in his seat, angling the side of his coat that held the tape recorder closer to Dear Leader. “Yes, of course,” he said, nodding vigorously. He’d come this far, he might as well leave with some information he could use. Death would feel the same one way or the other. “But Dear Leader, why must we present ourselves *so much*

through the medium of film? Surely there are other ways of attracting the world's attention?"

Dear Leader looked amused at the direction this conversation was taking. "This from a self-proclaimed film director," he responded with a laugh. "You should know better than me why your work is the most valuable output this country has. I can control you, just as I can control all of the people who reside within this great nation's walls, because they are my people. But I cannot control everyone in the world. Your films can."

"I'm sorry?" Eugene responded, leaning so far forward now he was grasping the undersides of his chair handles so as to keep himself perched. "How is that?"

Dear Leader, the patient teacher. "Because, my eager subject. Because the movies will always be linked to obedience. The cast and crew must be obedient to the director. The audience must collectively be obedient to what the camera chooses to show them. The director must be obedient to the needs and interests of his characters. And what if you could take that a step further?" He rose from his seat now and stepped down from his elevated chair, head barely skimming the top of his desk. The big man looked flabbergasted; this room had not been designed for him to pace in. Clearly there were very few situations that would have compelled the general to move around as he talked.

"Could you not use the power of film to make your people sit rapturous at your feet? They would hang onto every word spoken by your voice boxes, your actors, whose movements and speech patterns your very whim dictates." Dear Leader had walked over to Eugene's side of the desk, so close Eugene could see his own ghostly face – a face starved of sleep and nutrients, a face begging its captor not to notice the light bulge in its body's coat pocket – reflected in the man's thick-lensed glasses. "Your people would

absorb all the Dutched angles and long takes you throw at them, and they would take all of your filmmaking decisions – even the wrong ones – as the only ones that could have possibly been made. Because you are the Director, and all that wonderful power and control is unspooling with the filmstrip before your eyes.”

They stared at each other a beat longer, in silence. Dear Leader had been amplifying his voice as the speech progressed, leaving a sudden awkwardness hanging in the air between them after he finished. The big man remained standing in his corner, checking his watch surreptitiously. Without warning a young soldier ran into the room.

“Dear Leader!” the guard exclaimed, out of breath. He bowed low. The kid couldn’t have been more than eighteen; he had bad patches of acne all over his face. “Please forgive my interruption. The men from Japan have just arrived on the grounds.”

“Well, don’t just stand there,” Dear Leader barked as the big man snapped into action behind him. “Take us out to meet them.”

Dear Leader and Eugene met the four men from Japan out on the front grounds. Everyone exchanged cursory introductory bows; the men, middle-aged and dressed in the kinds of dark, pressed business suits no one in this country wore, brandished four wide smiles that masked twitchy necks and quick-darting eyes. Guards were everywhere.

Eugene was introduced by Dear Leader as “our film’s esteemed director,” though it was done in such a way as to indicate the men should never, ever address him directly. As Dear Leader took immediate control of the conversation, relating to the special-effects artists elaborate plans to build state-of-the-art postproduction houses in Pyongyang that would rival the finest in Asia, Eugene fingered the pen and wad of tissues he had stuck into his pocket that morning.

“...Now of course, *Godzilla*, a very successful film for you,” Dear Leader was saying. “But very primitive... yes, very, very primitive. Anyone watching with half a brain could see how your team put that silly lizard together. A man in a rubber costume, stomping around a toy city. Good for your country’s masses, maybe, but my Korean people are a much smarter breed, trained to question tricks of the eye, and so of course we all saw right through it immediately.”

“Of course,” parroted the big man, striding next to Dear Leader. “Very primitive. Silly.” The Japanese nodded, exchanged nervous glances.

Eugene’s mind raced. There was a plan the hero would concoct in this situation. Trail behind his captor. Scrawl something on a tissue – a short, punchy statement, disrupt the natural order. Would “Help” be sufficient? “Send Help” wasn’t urgent enough, “Help Me” too selfish. And how would he write without any of the minders noticing? This seemed above and beyond the level of his capability, even designed to be so.

I thought heroes were supposed to be impulsive and gung-ho? What is he doing to our greatest cultural archetype?

You are so right, Pauline.

“Us Koreans demand a more immersive and commanding film experience,” Dear Leader continued. “*Pulgasari* will provide that. As members of your country’s filmmaking elite, you are being provided with an unprecedented opportunity to be a part of this new breed of film from the ground up. You of course are aware of how generous we are being in offering this to you when most of my fellow Koreans would sooner stab themselves than enter a business partnership with their former colonists.”

If the Japanese were offended by this frank talk, if they had interpreted it as a threat of some sort, their unwavering wooden smiles betrayed nothing. Eugene realized that the odds of them doing anything to help him should he even succeed in slipping them the note undetected were very low indeed.

“We sincerely hope that you will take advantage of this offer,” Dear Leader concluded. He turned to the big man. “Take our director home,” he instructed. “I will show these people our filmmaking facilities.”

The big man nodded and the Japanese hurriedly chattered their thank-yous. Dear Leader led them and his troupe of minders to a fleet of limos waiting nearby.

“Let’s go,” the big man said to Eugene, as they walked back across the grounds to the rear of the palace.

They walked in silence for a while, traversing empty hallways and still courtyards. As they approached Eugene’s waiting ride home, the big man stuck out his arm suddenly; Eugene halted in his tracks.

“Open your jacket,” the big man instructed.

Eugene’s fists clenched and unclenched. “What?” he asked.

“Open it,” the big man said again, already losing patience and reaching for Eugene’s jacket button himself. The accused took a step back. The big man stepped in his direction, hooked his index finger just above the button and yanked.

“What are you doing?” cried Eugene as the big man roughly patted him up, down and around his back in a grotesque parody of a bear hug, his jacket button rolling away on the ground. “I have done nothing wrong!”

“Master Seong-Kun!” yelled Lee Tae-Don from inside the limo. “Are you all right? Is everything all right?”

“Quiet!” the big man commanded the driver, without a glance in his direction. “Or I will have your family detained for questioning your higher-ranking officials!”

The big man’s hand brushed the inside of the jacket pocket containing Eugene’s recorder.

A concealed tape recorder? Really. That was the best weapon he had at his disposal? I’ve seen more realistic escape plans hatched by the Three Stooges.

You are so right, Pauline. And what exactly was he planning on doing with it if he even got out alive? What a poorly conceived gambit. This effort was just an all-out failure by all parties involved.

Well, except for the man who wants him dead, of course.

The big man reached into Eugene’s pocket and produced the recorder, audio strip still spinning though the tape had run out some time ago. He dangled it in front of Eugene’s face. The whirring drone hung there in the air, a taunt.

“We,” the big man said very softly, “have given you everything. All that you could possibly desire. The best of food. Wonderful accommodations. Complete... creative... control.” He punctuated the last three words with taps of his foot. “Many of our citizens have suffered so we could give you more. They sacrificed their daily rations, their water access, their electricity, so that you and your spoiled, deformed wife may create great works of art that will bring pride to our nation.”

Eugene said nothing, felt nothing. His throat was dry.

“And this is your repayment. We give you the country and our reward is...”

The big man trailed off, staring at the recorder in his hand. Finally he let out a roar and threw it on the cracked cement. Eugene, startled, jumped back as the device shattered into pieces on the ground. The big man stomped on the plastic shards, ground them into fine powder. He looked back up at Eugene, who felt what was by now for him an all-too-familiar gut reaction: *This is it. I am going to die.*

“Get in the car,” the big man instructed.

And Eugene, feeling what was left of his freedom slipping away, did as he was told.

VI.

FLASHBACK – A YOUNG BOY’S EARLIEST MEMORY.

He hadn’t known where he was the first time. He had simply followed the rest of his family in, clutching his father’s index finger with his small hand, gazing at his surroundings.

The room was big, and full of cushy red seats all in perfect rows. He reached out his spare hand and squeezed the back of one of the chairs as they passed by, pushed his fingers deep into the softness. An encrusted brown stain was on the fabric. It was the most beautiful seat he had ever seen in his whole life.

The screen towered over them, a hundred stories tall. He knew what a TV was, but that screen back home was much smaller. Were they in a big TV room? Why were there so many other people around? There was a couple in the very back and several other families scattered in packs. They were all white and they were all holding snacks, big boxes of candy and tubs of popcorn. He wanted snacks of his own but his father said no, like he always did.

His oldest brother ran ahead of the family, crunching his new shoes into the clumps of buttered popcorn on the aisle floor, till he got to the very front row and announced proudly that this was where they would sit. His other two brothers followed, twins two years older than him, and his sister, a year older, behind them. They knew the drill; they had been here before.

He nestled into his cushy chair and stared up at the vast monolith of the screen. It filled his vision, stretched across the horizon and kept going. He craned his neck in either direction, stood on his chair and whirled around in a circle trying to take it all in. His

father reached out a hand and yanked him back down, hissing, "*Anj-a yeojeonhi.*" Be still.

So he sat, still, fingers tingling even once shoved under his butt. The lights dimmed and he yelled, out of fear mostly but with an undercurrent of excitement. Maybe this was the way it was supposed to be.

And then, where there was once a blank screen, there were people, giants dressed in bright costumes and shooting each other and galloping horses through the countryside just because they could. He got so scared at times that he turned around and pressed his face into the back of the chair so he couldn't see. At other times he laughed so hard, rocking back and forth in his seat, that he could feel tiny tears trickling down his eyes. And sometimes he would get so excited that he'd holler at the picture, smack his dried-out hands together as loud as he could, and he'd carry on like this during the best parts until his father stood up, grabbed his arm and hauled him out of the magical place, him squirming and twisting all the way back up the aisle, straining to catch one last glimpse at the giant people on the screen.

* * *

INT. ENCROACHING FEELING OF DOOM.

There was no punishment enacted right away, and that was what had scared Eugene most of all.

The big man had instructed the driver to take them straight home that evening. Sun was already there, still with the not-quite-healed bruises and scars on her face, matching in a strange way the features of the scarred man who was lurking in the shadows of the dining room, watching her. Eugene thought the big man would announce

something to them that night, order them to pack their bags, or maybe just take them out back and shoot them, but nothing was said or done. Dinner, as usual, was in silence, but a deeper silence this time. Eugene said nothing to Sun, as usual, and she had no way of knowing if the recorder plan had been successful.

Bedtime was silent too, as was breakfast the next morning, and Eugene's inner fear was getting the best of him. There was no way the two of them would be allowed to carry on living the way they were. Something was being planned. It had to be.

But the two of them were brought to their set the next morning, as usual, sharing a limo with the big man and the scarred man. Lee Tae-Don, the same insufferable driver, took the same path through Pyongyang that he always did, made the same enthusiastic comments about how privileged he was to still be working in the favor of Dear Leader, barreled over the same potholes, uttered the same apologies.

Everything was in its proper place on the *Pulgasari* set inside the warehouse studio. The 1/160th scale replica of the coastal village of Wonsan, built by dozens of unpaid laborers using cardboard, lead paint and a homemade paste that had caused three workers to lose their sense of smell during preparation, remained poised for its impending destruction at the hands of the iron beast. The country's lone green screen was still propped up against the far wall, still with the tear in the bottom-left corner just out of the camera's view, unchanged since the previous day when Sun had to stand in front of it for ten hours, mock-screaming and pretending she was being chased by Pulgasari himself. All 63 crewmembers were scurrying around the set hurriedly when Eugene and Sun arrived in the early morning, as they did every morning. Some of them had been working 20-hour days, but none ever had anything less than a smile on their face.

“You will carry on with your predetermined shooting schedule today,” the big man instructed as they entered the studio. “There will be no interruptions or delays.”

The big man then turned to whisper something, first to Lee Tae-Don, and then to the scarred man. Then he and Lee Tae-Don left the studio together, with the scarred man assuming minder duties for both Eugene and Sun. This was, so far, the only out-of-the-ordinary event that had taken place since Eugene’s recorder had been discovered.

Sun, seeing the big man leave, started breathing heavily and her eyes got wide. She looked to Eugene for some sort of explanation, but he was unable to provide any. She still wasn’t privy to anything that had happened at Dear Leader’s palace the day before, but there was nothing that could be done or said now.

For the next several hours things progressed much as they would have on any other day. Eugene shot footage of the rubber-suited actor playing Pulgasari as he stomped around the Wonsan set. He shot interiors of the sound stage where the crew had constructed a set of the DPRK’s military stronghold, scenes where big, burly actors in uniform (also former soldiers) yelled at each other over how to best attack Pulgasari. And he shot endless hours of Sun, dressed in peasant’s gear donated by actual peasants in exchange for additional rations, as she screamed, ran in place in front of the green screen and stood in artificial meadows picking fake flowers in attempts to sooth the savage beast. In-between takes the crew would run around at breakneck speed, carting away microphones and setting up new lighting, sometimes colliding into each other in their hurry to keep everything running on schedule. They would constantly refill Eugene’s water glass and provide him with an endless supply of food (mostly rice they had brought from home for the sole purpose of cooking for him), despite his insistent pleadings to

save some food for themselves. Without Lee Tae-Don present to order them around, many crewmembers often looked lost and confused. Some would run around the set in circles hoping Eugene wouldn't notice they weren't actually doing anything. When new scenes were being set up Eugene would run his actors through rehearsals, going through the motions he had learned back in Hollywood, and should they get a line wrong or botch a reading with the incorrect inflection, they would wail and drop to their knees, crying that they were not worthy of appearing in Dear Leader's glorious production.

But there was an edge about the proceedings this time, a twitch. Eugene was on high alert all day, shooting his head around to the studio entrance every time he heard noise. When others would sheepishly ask him questions, he'd shoo them away immediately.

He paid even less attention than usual to the goings-on of the film, kept foreseeing his own death in the back of his mind. Maybe there would be a public execution, a nationwide event in the Pyongyang town square, in the shadow of the giant bronze Great Leader statue. He knew they did those sorts of things from time to time. It was how his uncle died, a story his father started telling him and his siblings when he was only seven years old, saying it was important for them to understand the depths to which humanity is capable of evil in this world. Eugene couldn't sleep after the story's first telling.

Or maybe they'd send him right back to Prison No. 6. His old bunk would still be waiting for him. He wondered how many of the others who were there when he left would still be there, if any had heard what had happened to the man with the strange accent and the obscure movie references.

As the door at the warehouse entrance swung open around midday, Eugene wondered if he would die quickly or slowly, from an act of violence or a crawl of deprivation. As the big man strode in with a small army of fellow minders and buxom young women, Eugene wondered when news would reach home, how his mother would react, if she was already lighting a candle for him next to his father's, if the American Film Institute would showcase a retrospective of his work, if he was important enough. As the ranks of the minders fanned out and everyone in the crew gasped audibly, connecting head to floor in hurried fits of praise, Eugene wondered what would become of Sun, the national movie star who was surely too valuable to outright kill or make disappear – how long they would keep her here, what they would make her do. But as the small, infuriated figure of Dear Leader himself clacked his platform shoes on the hardwood floor in his stride to reach the production's once-revered director, Eugene felt more certain than ever that he was not leaving this country alive.

And this is how it ends for one of the least talented directors whose work I have had the supreme displeasure of following all these years: not with a satisfying bang, sadly, which would have at least provided some sort of closure to all this madness and possibly an explanation for how this imposter became a target for such ludicrous international espionage in the first place, but with unverified slow-moving dread, a lark, a parched-tongue whispered plea for help against villainous ears. In short, a life ended as pathetically as it was lived.

You are so right, Pauline. What a pity.

* * *

The crew had dropped to their feet instantly upon glimpsing their leader, no matter where they happened to be on set. This meant that quite a few members were now groveling directly in the path of Dear Leader himself, and were too absorbed in worship to comprehend that they were blocking his way to Eugene. But Dear Leader, for his part, didn't acknowledge their presence either, or at least had no desire to change course around any of them, keeping his eyes on Eugene as he walked across the warehouse floor. This necessitated that the big man walk ahead of Dear Leader, at a brisker pace, so that he could reach the obliviously adulating subjects (loudly singing phrases like "We work day and night to achieve your blessing, Dear Leader!" and "Our only desire is to please you, Dear Leader!") before his master did, grab them roughly by the collar with his meaty hands, and hoist them out of the way like a large sack of rice.

Only Eugene and Sun remained standing upright by the time Dear Leader reached the director's chair.

"Park Seong-Kun," Dear Leader said, addressing Eugene by his full Korean name. "I have been hearing some reports about you. Disturbing hearsay."

Eugene had no response. He felt out of words.

"The fact that I am here, in your presence," Dearest Once continued, "should tell you how serious this matter is to me. I cancelled five meetings with Communist allies who have come from overseas so that I may deal with this situation."

"They do not begrudge your priorities in the slightest, Dear Leader," the big man interjected quickly. "They are being taken very well care of inside of our foreign affairs office. Our finest nurses are tending to them as we speak. Your guests know what it means to be requested at urgent matters of national importance."

“Quiet,” Dear Leader snapped, and the big man seemed to shrink for the first time since Eugene had known him. “I saw how insistent you were in securing my presence here, how urgent you painted this situation. Do not make me second-guess my decision.”

The big man stopped talking, his shoulders slumped, and slunk backwards out of the way. So there was more manipulation going on here. Eugene could use that. Maybe this scene, like so many that had come before it, was escapable, after all.

“I have been told,” said Dear Leader, once again addressing Eugene, “that your allegiance to our party’s ideals is, shall we say, beginning to falter somewhat. I desperately hope this is not the case.”

He glanced around the set, at the mounted cameras, the rubber suits, the burning lights that gave off a faint sizzle. Gazing at Sun, who stood frightened in front of the green screen clad in full ghostly makeup and traditional red *chosǒn-ot* dress with gold stitching patterns across the parameter of her skirt, Dear Leader appeared to lose his train of thought.

Eugene seized the opportunity, suddenly finding the right words. “Dear Leader, I would be... honored to present to you full proof of... of my loyalty to this party. Perhaps you would like to see some... some of the footage for the film that we have shot and composed at this juncture, some of the fruits of your labors.” He made sure to emphasize the *your*.

From the shadows, the big man cleared his throat in protest, but Dear Leader shot up his hand with agitation and the noise instantly fell silent. “Yes,” he responded.

“Footage. I think that would be wise.”

They walked out the back door of the set – Eugene, Dear Leader and the big man, leaving Sun behind with the crew members who were still too scared to rise once again to their feet – and crossed over to the makeshift editing studio next door, Eugene leading the way, so nervous he couldn't walk in a straight line. They sat down on haphazardly strewn grey stools, except for the big man, who remain perched in the back of the room hawk-like, with a scowl that told Eugene he was doing the right thing. Eugene fiddled with the filmstrips sticking out of the projector, which was mounted on a wooden platform with not-fully-hammered nails sticking out of every corner. The lights dimmed, and then, in bleached-out color, Sun's steely feminine figure filled the screen.

She was standing on top of a hill with gorgeous fields billowing out all around her feet. This was the one day when the production had been able to drive out to the country, chosen by Eugene to show because he knew it was the only footage which would make his work appear halfway decent. The camera gazed longingly on Sun's figure, first from a medium shot displaying the whole of her upper body from a reasonable distance, and then in the next shot from a luminously close-up vantage point, a Hollywood-tinged celebration of her facial features the likes of which were not traditionally shot in DPRK cinema. Her ruby lips, her dark eye shadow, all visible. She focused her attention on a spot just beyond the camera with an expression that altered ever so subtly from worry to a slight smile, and it was as though she seemed ready to step right off the screen and into the men's collective laps.

The shot was maintained, agonizingly, the take stretched out for tens of seconds. In the next shot, Eugene knew, Sun would discover the Pulgasari statue on the beach and the full, lumbering steam engine of the plot would begin to chug along, but for the

moment it was just this woman and the camera. Eugene shot a glance at Dear Leader, who was sitting in full, wondrous rapture, edging forward on his stool, mouth agape. Here was the beauty, the majesty, the steadfastness of the human spirit. It didn't matter the context. Context would only ruin the moment.

And Eugene stared, too, just as rapturous, at this woman onscreen, the woman who had so improbably become not just a part of his life but actually his life. It was the first time he himself had seen the footage, as well, and he had forgotten the filming choices he'd made that day, the command to make her stare straight at him from his off-camera position rather than at some arbitrary marker, the decision to leave in the take where the wind blew that one strand of hair across her forehead in that one particular way. So here she was looking at him again. The way he preferred to see her, not quarreling with him in the flesh but only adoring him from the celluloid, intimate yet safely distant. Sun on the screen. His muse.

Then the reel ended, its tail flopping through the projector spools like a panicked fish, the gorgeous hillside replaced onscreen by the prison-wall bars of the empty film strips. Eugene and Dear Leader remained frozen in time, eyes still pinned to the screen until the big man once again cleared his throat from the back of the room.

"It is certainly wonderful, isn't it?" Dear Leader finally asked after a long pause. He stumbled to his feet as though in a daze. "Our actress. Our country. So much glory, so much to be proud of."

In his transfixion, Eugene had momentarily forgotten that his life had been on the line. Now having seen such a face again, the question of death seemed somehow

immaterial. “Thank you, Dear Leader,” he finally managed, rising to his own feet as well. “Your praise is what we all—”

Dear Leader held up his hand again. “Yes, yes, I know,” he said. “Listen to me, Park Seong-Kun, my director. Unlike some others in my company, I do not doubt your loyalty to our country.” As he said this he looked at the big man, who again lowered his head in what Eugene was now convinced was only mock shame. “But I do think it is time to, perhaps, reinforce this loyalty for all the nation to see. Our people could use a good, happy, Hollywood-style narrative to lift their spirits right around now. I must say that the ideals of the American film industry are just about the only American goods worth exporting.” He laughed loudly, invitingly, and Eugene and the big man nervously chimed in.

“What... what sort of narrative did you have in mind, Dear Leader?” Eugene asked as they headed for the door.

Dear Leader smiled, reflexively looked back at the blank screen as though hoping to once again catch a glimpse of something beautiful upon it. “I think you know what I am picturing,” he said. “There is someone that our people want to see, perhaps even more than myself.”

The three men stepped out of the editing room and walked back to the movie studio, back to the artificial locations, the groveling masses and the one ordained woman, back to the cameras always rolling, always watching.

VII.

INT. COMPLETE CONTROL.

Their wedding day was something Eugene had fantasized about since the day he first met her in that L.A. coffee shop. It had seemed, for the longest time, like it was only a question of when. He'd never worked up the nerve to propose, telling himself it would be best to wait until a little more money rolled in, until their next movie had wrapped. Until until until. And then she started running off with all the other guys, the suave leading men, the muscular lighting directors, and he told himself no, these were just side projects, like a guest appearance on *To Tell the Truth*. The real story, the real wedding, that was still happening, it was still a guarantee. And even after she walked away from him, those fantasies would still crop up in his mind from time to time.

She would often think of her wedding, too, but Eugene was never the groom. She would instead picture the ideal MGM studio executive, a thirty-year old man with his own tailor and a fancy car, someone who normally only lets women into his fifth-floor office if they're a secretary or Greta Garbo. She would woo him with her feminine wiles, maybe a high heel and a short skirt; he would snag her the lead in the latest Billy Wilder picture. They would marry and honeymoon in a perfect reconstruction of a Caribbean island he would build for her on his studio backlot, where every detail could be perfectly arranged and neither of them would have to miss work.

These were thoughts she'd shared with Eugene the first week they'd made acquaintance, during that time period where such matters still took the form of trivial pleasantries. She'd told him in a joking manner, and he'd laughed with her. As their relationship strengthened, what was once fair game for public discussion and even light

ribbing became too private, too personal to share. Odd, how it took the opposite trajectory of everything else she ever talked about with him, how it became more forbidden as the likelihood of its reality came more into focus.

Standing next to her now, once again in the grand ballroom of Dear Leader's palace, Eugene could no longer trust himself to determine what was real. Something inside him was telling him this was what he'd wanted all along, what he'd come here for. Was it not true?

He wore a new suit that had been provided just for this day; Sun wore the same red *chosŏn-ot* dress from the *Pulgasari* shoot, not a trace of white on it. Same costume, different set.

The big man, the scarred man and Lee Tae-Don were all present as well, Lee Tae-Don accompanied by his family of six, each member just as hysterical and jubilant as him. Filling out the grand ballroom were hundreds of guests: generals, high-ranking party officials and their concubines. Eugene and Sun knew none of them. The guest list had been composed by the regime.

Sun's black eye had healed but she bore other cuts and scars on her face now, more injuries. Eugene suspected some of the marks were her own doing, her own attempt to escape how this country saw her. A team of the country's best makeup artists had been deployed to her face in advance of the wedding to make her presentable for all the official state photographers that were present.

Dear Leader presided over the ceremony, using the powers vested in him as a demagogue of the people to bind the couple for all eternity, to love and support one another in accordance with the Communist ideals. He had a large, beaming smile on his

face, the happiest one in the room. The ceremony included no mandated kiss, as such a thing was considered immoral for public display. Then cognac was served to all and the guests engaged in an evening of modest dancing and praising of Dear Leader. The event was nationally televised across all five TV stations in the DPRK. It was the top story in all the newspapers. It was perfect, they all said in indistinguishable editorial stances. It was the dream wedding any couple should strive for.

In the center spotlight, Eugene and Sun could only blink, hold hands and act.

* * *

They were in their limo on the way back from their wedding, alone for once, except for Lee Tae-Don in the front seat, of course. The big man was taking a separate car tonight, on direct orders from Dear Leader so the couple could “share a special moment together.”

“Eugene,” Sun said. He braced himself for yet another plea to plan an escape. “I was just thinking of my mother.”

Eugene looked at her in surprise. “Your mother?” he asked. He hadn’t seen her mother in close to a decade. She used to criticize his weight behind his back, and he would fantasize about casting her in his next movie as a fire-breathing dragon lady.

Sun nodded slowly. “She and I would always talk about my wedding day. She wanted me to have the greatest wedding ever, big enough to make up for... for hers.”

She sniffled, biting her lip again, fingering once again the charm around her neck. “Look at us, Eugene. This wasn’t what either of us wanted. This was supposed to be the most special day of our lives...”

He put his arm around her, lay her head on his shoulder. They said nothing for a

while, rocked back and forth together to the pulse of the potholes the car was flying over on the familiar path back to their guest house.

“Listen,” Eugene said. “I know we shouldn’t be here. I don’t know how, or if ever, we’ll ever get out of here. I don’t know if you still care about me the way I care about you. But when I left home, I did it because I thought you were in danger. I wanted to find you, to keep you safe. To keep *us* safe.” He lay his own head on hers. “And you’re still here, and I’m still here. We don’t have to love each other, but at least we *have* each other.”

She lifted her head from the soft space she had wedged between his neck and shoulder and sat up straight to look him in the eye. The layer of makeup covering the marks on her face was starting to bleed and she wiped some of it on the sleeve of her dress, exposing the red marks beneath. “Eugene,” she said. “Of course I care about you. I did things I shouldn’t have done.”

“We’ve both done things we shouldn’t have done,” he said, reaching his hand out to smooth out her hair. “Maybe we deserve each other.”

They sat there, the two of them, until Sun leaned over and met his lips with her own, and Eugene leaned into her as well to return the favor, and then they leaned into each other and were bound together and her fingers danced on the back of his neck and he thought, if there was still some good left, this was where it was hiding.

Back at the house, and once Lee Tae-Don pulled away, they were alone. They held each other in the empty, cavernous foyer, the chandelier projecting their shadows onto the walls in eerie spectral harmony.

“I don’t want to direct you, ever again,” he whispered, the two gently rocking against each other in a slow dance.

“Let me direct you,” she replied.

Sun took his hand and led him up the spiral staircase, first one step, then the other. As they climbed she reached her free hand behind her head and undid the tight bun that was the standard female hairstyle for DPRK weddings. Her straight black hair cascaded down her shoulders like a waterfall, and Eugene could just feel their breeze on his face.

She sat down on the bed first, stared up at him, still holding his hand. Eugene remembered how he had once stood in this room and tried so hard not to watch her undress. He leaned down to kiss the top of her head, then down more to kiss her lips, then down, then down. The old feeling was coming back. He knew what she responded to, where she wanted to be kissed, to be touched. They lay down across the bed. Her hands mapped his back. His toes played with hers. He remembered how he’d conjure her late at night in Prison No. 6, wondered if she’d thought of him, too, during that period, in that way. He had a thought – maybe this was what the regime had wanted all along. He didn’t care.

They were finding each other again. A sound escaped from Sun’s lips and she arched her back toward the sky, finding familiar movements, motions that had lain dormant in her body for a long time. He ran his hands over her, buried his head in her neck and climbed up to her lips, accelerating. There was a noise from outside, a slamming of doors, a stomping of feet up stairs. Eugene looked at Sun in panic. “No,” she breathed, and lifted her head up again to his ears. “I don’t care. Don’t stop.”

And then he heard someone walk into their room, heard the big man say, “By

Dear Leader's grace, what is going on here?" But Eugene didn't look behind him, and Sun linked her arms around him and rocked with him. "Don't stop," she directed again. So he didn't stop, was glad not to stop. He embraced it finally, the being watched, just as he was embracing her.

"Stop this immediately!" yelled the big man fitfully. "Stop this immoral behavior!" But there was no stopping them. This was their wedding night.

So he accelerated even more, put all he had into the moment. He held Sun close, felt her breasts press against his body. She turned her head to the side, focused her gaze just beyond Eugene, at what he could only assume was the big man, and gave out an extra loud moan, with a hint of a smile – she was taunting their voyeur, teasing him. "No," Eugene said. "Look at me, look at me..." She did, into his eyes, through his eyes, into that part of his mind that had never stopped thinking about her since the moment they met at that café at UCLA and back then and right now and all the time in-between and tomorrow and the next day and every day, and at all times, and forever.

And they reached it together, that moment where nothing else mattered but them, and they directed each other through the moment, and Eugene felt the escape, felt all the bad in his blood as it left him, cleansed him. They cried out together into the distant night. And as they lay down together again, shielded from harm, he felt sure the big man would grab him, stab him, choke him to death. But Eugene felt nothing and when he finally did turn to look at their bedroom door, no one was there, and no one appeared in view as he held her for the rest of the night.

* * *

Eugene's house back in L.A. wasn't very big. He didn't have a lot of money – even though he had fallen into favor with MGM right out of college, the studio knew how to get away with cheating him out of back-end profits because he was Asian and new to the industry and didn't know any better. But even though he didn't have a lot of space, Eugene devoted one out of his house's five rooms entirely to his own filmography. He collected filmstrips of all his movies: the spy flicks and the period pieces and the ones where Sun's radiant figure burst from the frame as she ran away from any one of a number of threats. He installed cushy seats and a projector, made himself a home theater, really splurged on the whole enterprise. Spent his entire first film's salary on the room. It was important to Eugene, perhaps the most important thing.

It started out as a way for him to study his own technique. He would take notes on the flaws in his work (poor lighting, sloppy editing) as well as the stuff he did right (strong story structure, Sun's performances), so he'd know what and what not to incorporate into future projects. He'd sit there with a notepad and scribble down the thoughts that came to mind as he watched his own work. Mostly these notebooks were filled with variations of insults directed at crew members that had let him down: a director of photography who had failed to secure the horizon line Eugene had demanded, or a leading man who had failed to properly express an unquenchable desire for Sun's character as demanded by Eugene's direction. The problem was never with Eugene. It was always with those around him who hadn't listened to his every word.

But over the years as his films began performing worse and worse in theaters and he amassed more and more of them into his collection, the room – My Life Room, as he called it – became a refuge for Eugene, an escape. He spent more time in My Life Room

than in his bedroom, sometimes sleeping in one of his own custom-built cushy chairs, lulled into serenity by the click-clacking of an empty reel as it spun through the projector.

Eugene imagined the audience watching the films with him, imagined them sitting in rapt attention, laughing on cue, crying on cue. An audience of all ages, with his family and Sun always present. He imagined them never questioning his vision, content simply to sit back and watch it unfold. It didn't matter how well the movie actually went over in its release. It always went over well in My Life Room. Eugene could erase the jeers and walkouts and critics from his memory and construct the ideal audience in his head, the audience that responded to everything the way his five-year-old self had: never skeptical, never cynical, just always enraptured by what was happening on screen, completely in awe of the power of movies. It was the audience every director wanted: the audience completely under control.

* * *

“*Pulgasari* is an unprecedented success,” Dear Leader declared to Eugene and Sun in his office. “It has broken all domestic box office records and we are securing distribution deals for the picture in the Russian and Japanese markets.”

Dear Leader leaned back in his chair as the big man wordlessly refilled his cognac. It was three months after their lavish wedding and in that time Eugene and Sun's daily world was just the tiniest bit better. Every day on set Eugene demanded more changes, rewrote large passages of the script by himself. Every night he and Sun found each other in bed again and the big man would never bring himself to stop them, would always end up leaving the room, so that the couple would start to pretend to make nightly love even if they had no intention of doing so just to ensure their privacy. Sometimes

Eugene would hear what he thought to be masturbatory sounds from outside the room but he was never entirely sure. The film had wrapped only two weeks prior and had been slapdash composed in the editing room – reduced rations for crewmembers had been threatened for every day of post-production the movie still was not completed. Dear Leader, in his infinite wisdom, viewed the days between production and release as superfluous, reasoning that if the movie could be shot perfectly, there would be no need to edit it. Eugene, in his new disposition, had greeted this unique viewpoint with a loud and certainly life-jeopardizing bout of laughter.

“The world is beginning to see that our wonderful Communist ideals can indeed be expressed through the medium of film, and successfully,” Dear Leader said.

“Audiences love the picture. It is teaching them the correct way to behave in our society. It is a far more valuable tool than our military demonstrations or enforced punishments could ever be.”

The color was drained from Eugene’s face as a result of all the sleepless nights of editing and Sun. News of the film’s success didn’t surprise him in the slightest – even if *Pulgasari* had been a complete bomb, he and the public would never hear otherwise. He was brought to the DPRK to be a successful film director, and if that reality didn’t exist, the regime would make it so.

“Now,” continued Dear Leader, “we must begin talk of a follow-up. It should be grander, loftier, more expansive and all-encompassing in every single way.” He slammed his fist on his desk in a forcefully dramatic gesture. “This next film must show the entire world what our country is capable of!”

He was talking in these vague notions of goals again. Eugene knew their leader would never be truly satisfied with the work produced. Why would he, when he can always demand more, better films?

Then, to everyone's surprise, the big man stepped forward and spoke. "Dear Leader," he said, in his low, deep voice. "Forgive me, but I was speaking with your father this morning..."

Dear Leader turned in his seat to look at the big man. Something changed in his eyes. His father, the Great Leader, the one ruling over the entire country, had not before ever been talked about while Eugene was around Dear Leader. Eugene had never even met the Great Leader outside of the welcome banquet.

"We have given you specific instructions," Dear Leader hissed slowly, in a tone that gave Eugene chills, "to never mention my father in my presence."

The big man was quick to bow, as though he had anticipated his need to do so right away. "Yes, Dear Leader, I understand," he said. "And I ask that you forgive me for breaching the subject. However, I feel the manner calls for it."

"How so?" Dear Leader asked, fingers rapping on his desk. Eugene and Sun stole a worried glance at each other. They had spent so much time around this man that they occasionally forgot just how powerful he was, just how much damage he could do if someone crossed him the wrong way.

The big man continued, undaunted. "Your father, the Great Leader of our nation, has expressed his doubts over your... prioritizing of your responsibilities. He said that in wake of increasing difficulties securing our nation's borders, your duties as head of our military and cultural cabinets should be occupied more with our armed forces and less

with our... film directors.” The big man looked at Sun and Eugene accusatorily as he raised his head, and Eugene realized why the minder had waited until they were present to breach this conversation – he wanted to use them as a shield.

Dear Leader rose from his seat and quietly paced in a half circle around the big man, stopping at the floor-to-ceiling shelves housing his film collection. He ran his hand absentmindedly over the neatly arranged film canisters, grazing the silver metallic tips with English labels written in black marker: *Shadow of a Doubt*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Sunset Boulevard*. “And you thought,” he said, “that you possessed the authority to communicate this information to me?”

Now the big man was hesitant, unsure of himself. “Yes, I did,” he began. “But Dear Leader, your worshipfulness, I was instructed to do so.”

“You were instructed by a man of ailing health, a man who has grown out of touch with the needs of his country and his people,” Dear Leader said. “He is no longer fit to rule this nation. He does not know how a Great Leader should think. Two people in this room do know how a Great Leader should think. But you are not one of them.”

Eugene felt a strange rush. It was the most frightening offhanded compliment imaginable.

Then Dear Leader looked up from his filmstrips and out toward the door. “Minder,” he yelled, in a voice that carried a higher volume but seemed, on the surface, no less conversational than the rest of the exchange.

There was noise from outside, and then the scarred man burst into the room. “Dear Leader,” he stated gruffly, glancing at the frightened expressions of Eugene and Sun suspiciously, his voice short and clipped.

Dear Leader's hand had floated back to the canisters on his shelf. His chest was beating in and out very fast. "Prepare this man for public execution," he said.

The scarred man grabbed Eugene instantly and pulled him out of his chair. Sun screamed; Eugene shouted in surprise and tried to wriggle free before Dear Leader pointed at the big man and yelled, "Him! Not the filmmaker, him!"

"What?" the scarred man said in surprise, releasing Eugene, who fell into Sun's arms.

"For charges of insolence and conspiring against the well-being of our party," Dear Leader spat out before he could ask the charges. "He will be hanged tomorrow in the town square. Alert our Ministry of Propaganda to pass the word along to the newspapers."

"Right away, Dear Leader," the scarred man replied, releasing Eugene, who promptly fell back into his seat. Without another word, the scarred man made his way to the big man and grabbed his partner, shoving him out the door, leaving Eugene and Sun alone for the first time with Dear Leader, who returned to his red-cushioned seat as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"I am very sorry you had to witness that unfortunate exchange," said Dear Leader, and he really did seem legitimately sorry. "Hopefully it has not inconvenienced you too much."

Before Eugene could process this, Dear Leader continued hurriedly. "Genghis Khan. Your next project will be the story of Genghis Khan. You will be briefed on the details in the coming weeks, but I am afraid I must ask you to leave now. I have much work to attend to."

So with barely another word, Eugene and Sun rose from their chairs. Sun was quick out the door, faster to embrace, for the first time, the absence of a minder watching her every step. As Eugene exited the room, he turned back to glimpse Dear Leader refocusing his attention on his film canister, carefully unspooling and re-spooling the celluloid strip, cradling it in his arms like a holy scroll.

* * *

I am so fed up with this “filmmaker” and his pathetic “love story.” She can seriously still be attracted to someone who has caused her life so much hardship and grief? How much longer must we suspend our disbelief in this manner? I am ready to suspend my viewing of this ersatz life.

You are so right, Pauline.

“Eugene,” she whispered to him, in bed one night with his arms wrapped around her. He had been drifting off to sleep and saw himself riding a motorcycle over Prison No. 6 like Steve McQueen. “I realize how vain and self-absorbed I was. Back home, I mean.”

No new minder had been assigned since the big man was taken, and the couple had the guest house to themselves, thought there were of course the armed guards positioned just outside every door. They had climbed into bed early because Dear Leader had requested Eugene’s special attendance at the public execution the next day.

He opened his mouth to protest but she put her finger on his lips, shushing him. “It’s the way I was brought up. And I feel horrible now, about all of it. My mother, she just... she wanted me to succeed, so very bad. She wanted to prove she hadn’t escaped this place for nothing.” Sun glanced around the room, resigned. “Apparently she had.”

Eugene kissed her. “Listen to me,” he said. “This isn’t where our story ends. All right? This isn’t where it ends.”

She looked at him, eyes reddening. He could count the scars on her face. But the light in the room was fading.

“I need you to believe me,” he said. “Please believe me.”

He felt her cheek, her neck. The two lay in place. Sleep hit him as he pleaded, with “believe me” coasting through his lips.

* * *

The uniformed guards stepped aside when Eugene approached them. He climbed the steps that led higher and higher through the palace, passing more clumps of guards every 20 feet, until finally reaching two giant double doors. He pushed them open and found himself on a platform overlooking Pyongyang’s town square from far above, with thousands of identically dressed civilians organized themselves in perfect gridlike patterns on the ground below. Barely any military personnel were visible on the ground – the citizens of North Korea didn’t need any authority figures by this point to act as one. Their attentions were all turned to the gallows in the center of the square, where the day’s demonstration was about to take place.

Seated just three feet from the edge of the platform, surrounded by the usual assortment of loyal subjects, was Dear Leader, in his throne chair which someone must have dragged up to the balcony from his office for the occasion. An empty chair had been placed next to him – a director’s chair.

“So glad you could come,” Dear Leader said after Eugene took his seat. “I wanted to make sure you could see.”

A thin woman to Eugene's right leaned over and handed him a glass. She produced a bottle of cognac from behind her and filled the glasses of both Eugene and Dear Leader, then corked the bottle and shuffled away quickly to leave the two with their view of the city. Dear Leader took a swig. Eugene stared at his, swished it around a bit, not feeling very indulgent.

"I know about the changes you made to the *Pulgasari* shooting schedule," Dear Leader said, matter-of-factly.

Eugene almost dropped his glass. "You do, Dear Leader?"

The leader nodded. "It was brought to my attention rather quickly, and of course I later noticed it in the finished work. They expected me to act. They expected me to kill you."

Dear Leader lapsed into silence. Eugene gazed again out onto the square. He could now see a trio of guards leading a hooded individual clad in nondescript grey toward the gallows platform. The individual did not struggle. The crowd made no noise.

"I think it takes a certain degree of, shall we say, bravado to disobey such orders from your all-powerful superior," Dear Leader continued. "It shows certain things about the disobeyer. Perhaps courage. Perhaps stupidity. Both traits that I can admire, in moderation." He grinned.

"Sir," Eugene asked suddenly, keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead on the scene in front of him. "Dear Leader. Why did you pick me?"

He turned to the general, who looked confused. "To direct," Eugene continued. "To lead your country's filmmaking empire. There are many other qualified Korean filmmakers out there in the world, I am sure. Why me?"

Dear Leader smiled. “Because I have seen all your movies,” he said. “Isn’t it obvious? You have always desired this. Maybe you were not aware of your own desires, but they were there on film. Sometimes we reveal more through our art than we ever knew about ourselves.”

The guards and the hooded figure had ascended the steps by now, and the noose was being lowered across the victim’s head. “What was obvious?” Eugene asked.

“That you needed total control,” Dear Leader said. “That you needed an environment where absolutely anything and anyone you desired was at your disposal. Hence why I allowed you to steer *Pulgasari* as you desired. You are one of the great artists, Park Seong-Kun. You and I both. And artists like us, who value the sound principles of self-reliance, we have no need to listen to these people.” He gestured offhandedly to the subjects that lay beneath him. The ones who saw the hand motion cheered uproariously, misinterpreting it for a display of affection. “Our only need is to *control* these people. And, of course, to make sure no one can control us. This is why I felt it was so important you view these proceedings with me today. I needed to show you how...” He cleared his throat, swished his cognac, searching for the right word. “How *dangerous* these bad influences can be.”

There was the sound of a door opening behind them, and then a sickeningly familiar voice said, “Dear Leader. Apologies for my lateness.”

Eugene whirled around. There was no way. It couldn’t be...

But there he was, the big man, standing tall, face as impenetrable as always, a hint of a gloat present in his eyes when they settled on Eugene. “I wanted to be sure I would not miss this.”

“Of course,” said Dear Leader, nodding his head. “After all, it was you who showed us the tapes from the film set that revealed who the true conspirator was. It was you who translated from the English she was speaking on the tape, so it is only fitting that you should –”

Eugene’s heart was throbbing, his vision blurry. “What... what true conspirator?”

But as he turned back to the gallows, there was a part of his mind that knew already, the same part that had thought of nothing else but her since they met. And he watched, helplessly from far above, too far away, as the guards on the platform fastened the noose and ripped off the mask, and Eugene was on his feet now, knocking his chair backwards, turning around to run but it was no use now, and the big man pinned him down and turned his head back to the horror presented in front of him, yelling “Do you see! Do you see!” in his ear, and someone pulled the lever and she fell, face contorted into a permanent scream visible even from this distance, kicking and flailing and fighting with every ounce of strength she’d ever amassed in her short life. But she could do nothing, and he could do nothing, and they screamed together, the last thing they would ever do together as the swinging of the rope grew more and more frenzied and they struggled less and less against their oppressors, until there was no more struggling but only the scream as Sun’s last breath did something she would never do. It escaped, away from this horrible country and into the open air.

VIII.

INT. THE INNERMOST CAVE – INDETERMINATE TIME.

He could feel his insides rotting away more every day, the pain ever rising, never leaving. The movie scenes all fled his head. The critics, too. Only emptiness was left, the constant palpable intangibility of a great loss.

They threw him into a minimum-security cell because he would attack anyone who came within 10 feet. The air in the cell was damp and stank of mildew, the walls a putrid brown, the bed bearing scars where it had been slashed by sharpened fingernails of the past. Soldiers relayed daily messages from Dear Leader, pleas to return to work masked in cocoons of forced, hollow compassion.

“To Park Seong-Kun: I must once again extend my sincerest wishes that you rediscover that strength and burning artistic drive within yourself that I once admired so very much. Your country needs you like it has never needed you before. As I have already communicated to you several times, we were all equally saddened to discover that your cherished wife was an enemy of the state, a conspirator of the Imperialist mindset who infiltrated your own thought process to plant misguided desires of ‘escape’ in your mind. We so very much wanted her face on display for the whole world to see the true beauty of our great nation, but impure minds have no place on a grand stage and the actions we took were for our own good. I do hope you will come to understand in due time, and as soon as you have accepted the error of your judgment, we can return once again to your infinitely promising filmmaking career. With deepest regard, Dear Leader.”

He ate less, first unconsciously then deliberately. Refused all portions of rice and dumplings and kimchi. Tried to starve himself, to become so thin as to float away in the

dead air. He fantasized nightly, not of her anymore but of suicide, the only guaranteed means of escape. Pressed his forehead to the wall, felt the patch of cool, wanted to smash his skull through it. Spun his dinner chopsticks on the floor, wanted to shove them down his throat. But he knew he would never bring himself to do it. He was, at the end of the day, a coward, someone who'd created artificially constructed worlds all his life so he could hide from the real one. Life was nothing. Death was even less.

There was no light in the cell, no way to record the passage of time, no desire to do so. After a period of sleeplessness and not eating and thinking of death and less eating, he once again hauled himself upright, wrapped his hands around the cell bars and tugged them pitifully, wailing. Then his stomach caved in and his legs gave out and he collapsed to the ground, splayed out legs-up like some Warner Brothers cartoon. He felt something close to bliss, the letting go of his last remnants of humanity, felt memories slice through his fingers like shards of glass as they fell away.

But then he woke, on a cot in a large, grey hospital room. A young woman bent over him, one of the regime's customary "nurses" with the tight blouse bursting at the seams and a white latex cap stretched over her head. She couldn't have been older than seventeen with her rosy cheeks and pursed lips. The nurse wore a stethoscope but held it daintily with her thumb and forefinger as though not entirely sure what to do with it. When she saw Eugene stir, she yelped with excitement.

"He is alive!" she squealed. "Oh, Dear Leader! Our great director will live another glorious day in our kingdom!"

Eugene could hear a great commotion all around him and then several more faces appeared in his vision, minders and other nurses, all beside themselves with glee. Then

they all parted paths and someone from behind him lifted his torso to sit him up in his cot, bringing him face to face with Dear Leader yet again.

“Welcome back,” said the general. “We thought we would never see you again.”

Eugene groaned, wheezed. He leaned forward with arms outstretched and intent to strangle, but doubled over from sharp pangs in his stomach and lost his balance on the edge of the bed. Two minders stepped forward immediately and propped him back upright.

“One of you fools get this man something to eat!” barked Dear Leader. “Can you not see he is in a state of delirium?”

A gaggle of minders and nurses rushed out of the room at once to track down some food. Eugene, with great difficulty, brought his eyes to meet his tormentor.

“You have murdered my love,” he whispered, his voice but a scratch. “You have murdered me.”

Dear Leader, in no mood for amusement, snapped back, “Now, my esteemed filmmaker, I think you have spent too much time engaged in the petty dramas of your screen.”

“She was –”

“She was the past and no more. I have had my aides explain the situation to you many times. I have run out of patience. It is time to move on.” Dear Leader ran his fingers through his hair plugs and adjusted his sunglasses. “I am flying you overseas to secure international financing for our Genghis Khan project. Our European investors have asked to speak with the director in person. I have arranged the meeting to take place

in Vienna so that you may enjoy the crumbled buildings and collapsing infrastructure of the ruined city from *The Third Man*. You leave in ten days.”

Eugene ran his tongue around inside his salty mouth and spat on Dear Leader’s platform shoes. “I will do no more work for you,” he said, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his gown.

Dear Leader regarded with puzzlement the spot on his shoe where the spittle had landed and was now dribbling down the side of, leaving a foamy trail. Finally he motioned to the closest minder, who whipped out a cloth and threw himself upon the ground to vigorously wipe the affected area.

“It is not worth my valuable energy arguing this with you,” he said to Eugene. “I simply want you to be aware of the fact that you are no longer considered to be in my favor, and should you provoke me I shall treat you as I treat any other enemy of the regime. In your current state of delirium you may think you would welcome such a punishment as a relief. Trust me when I tell you that this would not be the case.”

Dear Leader motioned to the nurse at Eugene’s side, the one who had first been tending to him when he’d woken up. She stepped forward, a large, plastic smile on her face, and bowed deeply to Eugene.

“This is your caregiver,” Dear Leader said. “Her only assignment is to be with you, take care of you, please you at all times. She is one of my favorite nurses as well as an aspiring actress and I give her to you as a gift, my final act of generosity. I hope you understand how dearly I want you to take up our cause again. My hope is that she will help you to do it.”

The nurse bowed again. “Master,” she said, addressing Eugene. “By Dear Leader’s grace, I am at your command.”

Eugene, repulsed, heaved again, felt like vomiting. The nurse took a tiny, nervous step back but retained her frozen smile. She reached up and tugged her cap off, undoing the bun underneath, letting her hair fall down in a manner so dizzyingly familiar it gave Eugene vertigo.

“She used to have her own name, but she has given it up for the good of the party’s future,” Dear Leader said. “We have renamed her for your benefit. She is now called Sun.”

And with that the general turned on his heels and left the building with his minders and nurses trailing behind, through a doorway adorned with his portrait, the face that saw everything.

IX.

EXT. THE END – NIGHT.

No more portraits where they sent him. No more starved, bare-shirted, balloon-chested citizens bowing endlessly. The streets of Vienna were clean and cobblestoned, and wound through the city with reckless abandon, taking U-loops and hard rights on a whim. The people looked wealthy and white. The shops were stocked with German sweets and novelty candles smelling of mint leaves. There were bells that jangled above doors when you walked inside.

Eugene walked down these streets and felt that there could indeed be such a thing as a free world, even as Dear Leader's biggest, most dangerous minders followed on either side of him. *We won't kill you, but we could.*

Dear Leader was wrong about Vienna: It no longer resembled the war-torn wasteland it was in *The Third Man*. The city used to be in a state of utter disrepair, yes, rubble piled within caved-in buildings. But Vienna had grown and prospered in the 35 years since the film was made. It cleared out the bad blood, swept away the evil influences of past world leaders. It learned to let go of the past. The minute Eugene stepped off of his private, chartered plane and into this newly reformed sky, he knew the difference, could sense it in his bones. Could recall the streets of Pyongyang and their potholes, their starving children playing a Party-approved marbles game in the streets, their diligent soldiers strutting around every corner, leaving no patch of land unpatrolled for more than five minutes. The DPRK remained stubbornly frozen in time, its citizens doomed to languish forever in poverty and despair, its leaders only learning about the outside world from whatever was put into movies.

Fake Sun was at Eugene's side as well, the regime's cruelest joke. She wore a sleeveless, knee-length sundress with a sugary floral pattern, a regime-selected outfit that would have gotten her imprisoned on charges of indecency if she had worn it in her home country, and she cupped her hands behind her back as she skipped down the road keeping pace spouting inane platitudes about the greatness of Dear Leader in her attempt to make conversation with her assigned soulmate. Her youthful ignorance was a jeer. She didn't understand why she was there or what role she was supposed to be playing. She understood only what the regime told her, which of course was why she was picked. Eugene had learned to loathe his wife's hairstyle and dress now, all because of how it had been instituted on this stupid girl.

Why were they even in Vienna, of all places, right now? Another joke. A taste of freedom to be yanked away shortly, the carrot on the stick. There were, so he'd been told, investors here who had expressed interest in co-financing a production with the DPRK. There was also a considerable monetary deficit Dear Leader was trying to mask before his father found out, a result of blowing a quarter of the nation's military budget on *Pulgasari* and covering the expenses by taking more cuts out of the already dwindling budgets for state-mandated health care. This, at any rate, was what Eugene had deduced from hushed conversations between the minders on the plane ride, when they'd seen his head propped against the side of the windowless vessel and thought he was asleep.

There were two investors, blonde bristle-haired businessmen with thick Austrian accents named Julian and Lenhard. They looked as nervous as those Japanese special-effects artists had been around Dear Leader. Eugene stared at them, tried to read them, to figure out why they were here discussing finances for a movie about Genghis Khan over

a dinner of weiner schnitzel with him and this artificially constructed girl in this restaurant with thick peach-colored tablecloth and floor-to-ceiling glass windows.

“We are big, *ehm*, fans of your work,” Julian said to Eugene, pausing between each word to remember its English pronunciation, like someone pecking at a typewriter searching for the right keys. He sipped at his white wine. “We love what you do for... *ehm*, the film world.”

“We want the business, to be in, with your country,” Lenhard added, which seemed unlikely. Lenhard had slightly more linguistic proficiency than Julian, but Eugene had a hard time believing the investor fully understood the meaning of the sentence he’d just uttered.

Fake Sun, sitting to Eugene’s left, smiled widely at the investors and nodded in sync with their words. She rotated her fork between her fingers and felt the smoothness.

They were on the top level of the Donauturm Observation Tower on the banks of the Danube. The Vienna International Centre, headquarters for the United Nations, was visible out the window, on the other side of a park more blindingly green than anything Eugene had seen in a long time. He could fly down those stairs and run across that park, maybe, just make a break for it. Just run into the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and beg for sanctuary. But the minders were right outside the building’s main entrance. And Lee Tae-Don was out there somewhere, as well; he had tagged along on the trip as the official navigator on the behest of Dear Leader, even though he had never been out of the country before, and had disappeared somewhere minutes after stepping off the plane. Eugene doubted even Lee Tae-Don would hesitate to kill him on

sight if he was caught trying to escape. There were eyes everywhere. They would sense him and they would find him.

“We love Genghis Khan,” Julian continued, nervous that he seemed to be losing Eugene’s attention. He dabbed at his forehead with the cloth napkin he had tucked into his collar. “His story, truly... *ehm*, magnificent. Epic. Cinematic.”

“Let us make that true story, the story of his own, for the world to see,” Lenhard said. “We want to do it with true Asians, you know, authenticity. Not like that terrible, you know, with the John Wayne, what was it, *The Conqueror*. Horribly offensive.”

“They all got cancer, you know,” Eugene said, fitfully enjoying the looks of surprise around the table at the first words he’d said all evening. “From the movie. There was radiation from an atomic bomb testing in the desert where they filmed. It killed John Wayne and everyone else. A movie so bad it was fatal.” He gave a wry grin, and the other three laughed on cue, even Fake Sun, who couldn’t understand a word of what anyone was saying.

“Yes, well,” Julian began again, after they had all had a good approximation of a laugh. “Let us discuss matters of –”

“But that’s not even the best part,” Eugene interrupted, zero interest in whatever Julian had to say. “When they went back to Hollywood, they took the dirt with them. Sixty tons of cancer dirt. They shipped it for the reshoots. You know, for authenticity.” He laughed again. “They took the death with them, for this movie. And for what? For dirt! There’s dirt everywhere! Everything is dirty!”

Eugene leaned back in his fancy chair, threw his arms up and laughed uproariously. It was hysterical. The movie business was hysterical. They all laughed, too.

They laughed because he did.

* * *

The DPRK had a very strictly enforced curfew on all citizens. After nightfall, absolutely no one with anything to lose was to be caught outside his or her home. Eugene and Sun, while being driven through the streets of Pyongyang late at night after falling behind on the day's shooting schedule, would stare out the limo window at the burnt-out black hole of the city, at the abandoned power grids and decaying railroad tracks. No signs of life for miles, except for the occasional soldier out on patrol. It made Sun wonder what people did in their homes after the sun went down. "Do they talk all night?" she'd speculate. "Do they tell each other their hopes and dreams? Do they ever stop being who they are in the daytime?" Eugene didn't know.

Eugene and Fake Sun followed the Austrians out of the Donauturm tower after dinner. Lenhard had a crippling fear of elevators, as Julian explained ("He is a cripple, with the elevators"), and so they took an unmarked fire escape down the seven flights of stairs, emerging onto the lamp lit street out of a back door, instead of the front entrance where the minders were waiting. After the Austrians hailed a cab and left the couple alone, it took Eugene a second to register that he was outside at night, and the guards, at least for the moment, didn't know where he was. There were lights illuminating the park and cars honking at each other and a young European couple holding hands by the Danube. To be out on the streets on a Vienna night meant you were free.

But he wasn't free, not yet.

Fake Sun stumbled out just behind him, still getting used to the high heels she had been outfitted with as part of her newly Westernized ensemble. "That went very well,"

she said, clearly relieved she could talk again in her comfortable Korean. “You possess truly great interpersonal skills, my love.”

“I know you were instructed to say these things. Do not bother saying them,” Eugene snapped, barely glancing at her.

But she continued undaunted. “I think that Dear Leader will be most pleased when he hears the good news from this meeting,” Fake Sun said. “Perhaps he will compliment us, or give us extra rations! I hope that –” But her voice trailed off; something had just dawned on her. She threw her hand up to her bare neck and gasped.

“Oh no, oh no!” Fake Sun wailed, losing her lip-tugging smile for the first time. “I forgot... I had orders... I will be punished!” She opened her custom-designed handbag, which was embroidered with the bright red flag of the DPRK in a way that clashed severely with her sundress. Opening a handbag was a task so obviously foreign to her that it took her several shaky-handed fumbles with the zipper before she succeeded.

“Wear the jewelry,” she said, channeling her voice from somewhere far away, echoing the orders in her head. “They must see our country as wealthy and successful... you must present to them a certain image or you will let your nation down and your family will suffer...”

Her hand fished through the bag until it produced a familiar necklace, silver, with a Chinese character...

Eugene grabbed her hand with white knuckles, pried open her fingers and seized the charm, the item that belonged to his love. Fake Sun cried out in alarm and, once Eugene had wrenched the charm from her, fell to her knees.

“Please!” she cried. “I beg you! They cannot know I forgot to wear their jewelry!”

“Where did you get this?” Eugene demanded. “This is not yours.”

Fake Sun grabbed Eugene’s ankles, still weeping. “It was a part of my outfit,” she sobbed. “Direct orders from Dear Leader. Please, have I ruined the movie deal? Tell me I have not ruined it, my love, please, tell me...”

Eugene felt the necklace in his hand, rubbed his thumb across the silver lettering that spelled *My Precious One*. It had become tarnished over the years, lost some of its sheen. But when Eugene looked at it, he could still see Sun and her family, could still see the lineage of suffering and perseverance that allowed the item to survive all these years. The regime thought they could just throw it around the neck of the replacement girl and wipe everything under the rug, start a new chapter, direct the story like Eugene’s next movie.

He looked around. The vast green expanse of Donaupark lay in front of them. But a block behind, Eugene could see his minders emerge from the shadows, alerted by the screams, the four nameless men whose sole job on the trip was to keep him from doing what he was about to attempt. He recognized none of them, which was somehow fitting. The enemy was, as it has always truly been, faceless. They were tall and muscular, trained and most likely armed. Eugene was none of those things. But he’d never let a little thing like certain death stop him before.

“Get up,” he hissed at Fake Sun, who was still clutching his ankles as though she would float away if she let go. The girl shot to her feet in haste, saw the approaching minders in the distance and gave another shriek, burying her head in Eugene’s chest.

“Please,” she said, her voice muffled by Eugene’s European cut suit, also regime-issued. “I cannot go back with them. They will kill me.”

Eugene could feel the vibrations of her voice against his body better than he could actually hear it. And every word this fake Sun spoke reverberated through him. *They will kill me. They will kill you, your ideas, everything you stand for. They will.*

“Well, hello, our esteemed filmmaker,” called one of the minders from the end of the block. They were striding over to him and the quivering fake Sun. “What a coincidence meeting you out here on this wonderful evening. I take it your meeting with the investors went well? Perhaps you would like to come discuss the particulars with us.”

“Listen to me,” Eugene whispered to Fake Sun. “When I say ‘run,’ we are going to run. OK? No stopping, no looking back. You do not listen to them. You listen to me, you do as I say. Understand?”

Slowly, Fake Sun nodded. “By Dear Leader’s grace,” she recited again, “I am at your command.”

“Not Dear Leader’s grace,” Eugene muttered. “By my grace.”

And then, after glancing around again, he gave his direction: “Run.”

* * *

The chase scene was something Eugene had always tried to avoid as a director in America. He found the prospect of venturing out onto real city streets too cumbersome, was always conscious of how much all the normal citizens hated him for setting up roadblocks around their morning commute. They were out trying to get to their real lives, and his fake life was getting in their way. And he never found the whole experience that exciting as a viewer. Obviously the hero gets away, right? Otherwise the movie would just kind of... end. So where were the thrills? Where was the suspense in watching something where the outcome was preordained but the filmmakers had spent countless

amounts of time and money trying to convince you it wasn't?

And the geography of the chase scene always bothered him, too, in ways he couldn't explain. The chase was set in a real place, obviously, but the scenes were rarely shot in a manner that obeyed the rules of space and time. One minute the heroes would be running down Sunset Boulevard, dodging between pedestrians and hurdling construction signs, then they'd turn down an alleyway and emerge on Wiltshire, a mile away. As if they were swallowed up into Movieland itself and spat back out wherever it was most convenient for them to start running again. But the director had no desire to follow the rules of geography. He didn't need to. He could make the fabric of the Earth bend at his will.

When his producers had demanded chase scenes they could cut into trailers, Eugene always tried to make them as realistic-looking as possible. No explosions, no cars flying off bridges, no fruit cart vendors getting in the way. Just two people running, on their own two feet, away from their oppressors. He had sent Sun running away screaming from her antagonists so many times over the years that it no longer seemed like a special event; it was just the way things were. In Eugene's world, people coped with their problems by running away from them.

They were running now, him and Fake Sun. They were running through a world they didn't know. Eugene was counting on the darkness of Donaupark hiding them from the minders who were now surely giving chase. He led Fake Sun in zigzags through the grass. The International Centre was just ahead. Thirty feet away. Twenty feet.

He was holding her hand with a vice grip, practically dragging her behind him. One of her high heels snapped and she moronically tried to keep running on it for several

seconds until Eugene yelled at her to take it off. He didn't know why it was so important to keep protecting her. He could have abandoned her, let her fend for herself. And even if they made it back, she'd never be able to survive in a completely free society on her own – she'd need Eugene with her at all times, instructing her on what to do and how to act. But he knew where she'd be headed if they caught her, and he didn't let go. He needed to prove to himself that there was still some good left.

Eugene snuck a glance behind him but saw no one, heard nothing apart from his own heavy breathing and Fake Sun's occasional yelps. Why weren't the minders chasing them? Something was wrong.

They reached the International Centre and stepped from grass to pavement. A circular drive lay in front of them, and behind that a closed-off gate. On the other side of that gate was diplomatic immunity. "Come on," Eugene snapped, tugging harder on Fake Sun's arm. He hauled her up the slope to the top of the drive.

But there was a limo parked in the drive, and the sunroof rolled down, and a familiar head, arms and torso emerged from the top of the car to face the two: Lee Tae-Don, with a tortured, pained expression, holding a Korean People's Army assault rifle.

"Master director," Lee Tae-Don wailed, tears streaming down his face even as he aimed his weapon. His shaky fingers fumbled around the handle. "It is not too late. You must step into the limo and repent the error of your ways. Dear Leader will understand. Dear Leader is all-forgiving."

Eugene froze. Fake Sun made toward the car but Eugene jerked her back.

"Lee Tae-Don, my friend," Eugene called to him, frantically scanning for signs of the other minders. "You do not have to do this. You are a good soul. Dear Leader is not—"

“Liar!” Lee Tae-Don yelled, brandishing his gun at the couple. Fake Sun screamed. Eugene took a step back. “He has given us everything. He has given *you* everything. Your country loves you, cares for you, provides for you, and you repay us by committing treason!”

“No, Lee Tae-Don,” Eugene said, breathing heavily. “Dear Leader controls you. He lies to you. He *directs* you. Like I do to my film crew. He tells you what to do, what to say, what to think. You, you as the individual, as Lee Tae-Don with a family and a love of film and superior navigation skills, you mean nothing to him. But you mean something to me. Please listen to me. Please help me.”

Lee Tae-Don kept his rifle trained on Eugene, though his eyes betrayed his confidence. They stared at each other for the longest while. Finally the driver relaxed the gun and pointed it at the sky instead. He said nothing. He no longer met Eugene’s eyes. But as he did so, gunshots could be heard from a distance. Bullets from unseen sources zinged past Eugene’s head. Some struck the limo, some hit the ground. One hit Lee Tae-Don in the chest and he slumped onto the hood of the car like a stuffed animal. His rifle slipped from his hand and fell to the ground.

Fake Sun was screaming. Eugene crouched down and ran to the limo to scoop up the rifle. He’d held more than his share of prop guns in his life, and even though he knew this one was real, he was still unprepared for just how heavy it was. It took his withered body a powerful two-handed heave to holster the thing, and even then he had no clue how to aim it. He just pointed the gun in the general direction of where he thought the bullets were coming from and held down the trigger; the force of the spitfire protruding from the barrel made him stumble over his own feet and the gun swung in an arc over his shoulder,

causing a hail of bullets to fire over the gate and into the International Centre. Alarms went off all around him and blazingly red lights – the same shade of red as the flag of the DPRK – flashed everywhere, though nothing was as loud as the screams coming from the mouth of Fake Sun as she cowered on the ground with her hands wrapped around her head, rocking back and forth.

“Come on,” Eugene snapped, running over to her, grabbing her hand and hauling her away from the building. As they ran toward the bridge over the Danube, Eugene fired blindly at whatever was behind him until his gun ran out of bullets. Their antagonists were still unseen –the only figure around was the lifeless body of Lee Tae-Don, still splayed awkwardly across the hood of his limo, fading into the distance as Eugene ran. The serenity of the Vienna night had become polluted with gunfire and sirens. Eugene could see the half-moon and the tips of the tallest buildings reflected in the waters of the Danube, shimmering delicately, a mirage of a more peaceful world.

Eugene saw a blue taxicab parked near the bridge. He and Fake Sun ran over to it. The driver was frantically trying to start the cab, but he saw Eugene’s gun and turned ghostly pale, cowering in fear behind his steering wheel. In that split second, Eugene was grateful to be the man with force on his side.

He wrenched open the back door of the cab and pushed Fake Sun inside, then climbed into the passenger’s seat. Pointing the empty, prop gun at the driver, Eugene said, “The American Embassy. Go.”

The wrinkled, white-haired driver, gasping for breath, replied “Yezzir, yezzir, don’t shoot, I have family,” in a thick Austrian accent, turned the key and squealed out onto the street, across the bridge. A bullet shattered the cab’s rear window. The driver

and Fake Sun both screamed. “Quiet!” Eugene yelled at the driver; then, “*Joyonghage hada!*” at Fake Sun.

The driver flew off the bridge at well above the speed limit and took off through the city. Eugene shot a glance behind them and saw a limo speeding to catch up with them. It was the vehicle Lee Tae-Don had been in, now commandeered by the minders. They hadn’t even bothered to remove his body, which was now sickeningly flapping in the wind through the sunroof in some grotesque ballet. Eugene wanted to vomit. The minder in the passenger’s seat leaned out of his window and produced an assault rifle identical to Eugene’s, which he aimed at the cab’s tires.

Eugene grabbed the steering wheel from the driver and spun it hard to the right. The cab screeched onto the sidewalk, plowing through several outdoor tables that had been set up in front of a restaurant promising authentic Austrian cuisine, as the bullets from the minder’s rifle bounced harmlessly off the cobblestone. Eugene jerked the wheel back to the left and the cab shot off down a one-lane road before the driver or Fake Sun had time to scream again.

But the limo couldn’t turn as well, nor could it maintain a top speed high enough to catch up to the taxi. As they pulled further and further away from the oppressors, Eugene felt the smallest sliver of hope begin to swell up within him, a feeling he’d never had during all those years in prison or in the presence of Dear Leader. Hope, at last. He might survive the unthinkable, after all.

Eugene saw the starred and striped flag waving from the side of the unassuming building far away and thought of America, of Hollywood, of the home he’d made for

himself, of unruly producers and surly crewmembers and low box office returns, of My Life Room and of crying into his cereal.

And Eugene heard the bullets still being fired somewhere behind them, fired as a last-ditch effort by slaves of the regime who were, by now, just as scared as he was, because they knew to go back to their country without the esteemed filmmaker was to go back to certain death. He heard the bullets and thought of their source, of hordes of brainwashed citizens, of cognac, of giant rubber monsters and Prison No. 6 and public executions, of the office of one of the most powerful men in the world lined with thousands upon thousands of filmstrips.

And then he thought of Sun. Was shocked, in a way, to realize he had not already been thinking about her.

The nervous driver made several more hard turns, trying to dodge more congested traffic on either side. More shots rang out, even though the limo was far away. They would never outrun the shots. This threat, this lingering death, it would follow them wherever they went now.

The driver swerved to avoid a tour bus and the cab plowed into a streetlamp. The impact slammed Eugene against the dashboard. His ribs crunched inside his body. His useless gun flew from his arms, crashed through the windshield. Head ringing in protest, Eugene lifted himself up and glanced to his left. The driver's maligned body was wrapped around the lamp, a pool of blood forming in his seat. He could hear more moaning and sobbing coming from the back seat.

Wincing with pain and clutching his chest, Eugene wrested the door open and stepped onto the street on jittery legs. He opened the back door and pulled out Fake Sun,

whose mascara had smeared all over her face. There were screams all around, from pedestrians pointing at the wreckage. No one stepped forward to help. It was just another movie to them.

They were half a block from the embassy – so close. Eugene grabbed Fake Sun’s arm with purpose and tugged, using what little was left of his strength to keep one foot in front of the other. He knew the limo couldn’t be far behind. He knew it wouldn’t stop for anything.

Maybe someday he could recreate all this in his studio, under his own terms. He could direct the action with care so no one would get hurt. He could find another Eugene and another Sun out there, proxies to play the parts. He could make Sun the hero, show her to be the bravest, most noble person in the world. He could secure financiers, assemble the perfect crew, sweep the Oscars, win an audience – *his* audience. He could touch the pulse of the world. He could remake his life on celluloid, take everything and condense it into thousands of scratchy images pressed inside a canister with a little label so Dear Leader would know how to properly categorize it on his shelf, where it would slowly deteriorate as it succumbed to the ravages of time.

Eugene could make a movie. Maybe then he could finally begin to see.

* * *

FADE TO BLACK.

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