

The Last Vestiges

Eun-Kyung Park stood proud and tall in her dull green uniform as the state news camera focused on her. This was her moment. They had chosen her out of so many to speak to the entire nation. She was special, a true symbol of patriotism for North Korea. But more importantly, she looked healthy and well-fed.

The young woman wanted to shine in that moment and take every advantage of that opportunity to be someone, an individual, a valuable person, a girl to be remembered. It was her only chance.

In those moments she would remember how tired she felt inside. It was a fatigue that ached within her bones. It felt as if the very marrow of her bones were aching, she was so tired. She had slept the night before, a full eight hours, but in her mind it felt as if she'd endured a thousand sleepless nights and was being called to perform on the thousandth and first.

If only she could sleep awhile longer. That seemed to be her greatest wish; to sleep in a soft bed in a warm room in stillness and quiet. Eun-Kyung had visions of Korea from years past in which such peace once existed and such beautiful stillness could be found. She always wondered where those visions came from because such things weren't taught about. But she knew about all of it and it seemed to her like they were the memories of her own ancestors who had lived in a Korea far more beautiful than the North Korea she now lived in.

But of course, she couldn't let her fatigue show on her face as the cameras were recording. So she did what she had always done. With the fingers of her spirit, she reached deep down; very deep down into her soul and pulled up a small portion of the last vestiges of her strength and resolve. It was like drawing water from a well that was always near-empty and constantly being dug deeper to find more water.

And with those last vestiges of strength, she opened her mouth to speak.

Her voice was triumphant. It was strong and determined. It was loud and exaggerated. Even her posture exhibited these qualities, with shoulders straight and head held high, using her right hand and fist to add emphasis to her words of patriotism. And what was her speech about? Kim Jong-Un's show of strength to the entire world as he threatened South Korea with his nuclear weapons.

It was a display that irked North Korea's neighbors and made the entire world groan. That's never quite the response one hopes for when flaunting his power, but that's exactly the response North Korea will always get. The DPRK is like the youngest child of a family. Everyone sees him, but no one respects him. And when this child throws fits and tantrums, all he receives is a patronizing pat on the head with a smile or nod.

But this time, *finally*, the father figure, the great China, has grown weary of this child's tantrums. He's always been there to help and support his wayward son, but perhaps he's finally seeing his child's delinquency. Meanwhile, South Korea, the mother figure, has always been harsh and bitter with this unruly child, never willing to concede to the tantrums or give attention to the shouting and screaming of one so undisciplined. She sees him as an embarrassment and a disgrace.

When Eun-Kyung was finished with her speech and the cameras had been shut off, she was able to let go of the strength she was grasping in her shaking hand and fall back into the fatigue she knew so well. Her moment of fame and pride was over and there was no reward for it.

She returned to her dormitory at the campus of the military academy in Pyongyang where she was studying. Collapsing onto her bunk, she closed her eyes and took in a long slow breath, her black hair falling over her eyes and nose. She could smell the shampoo she and everyone else used. Its scent was stale, the shampoo old and past its expiration date.

Eun-Kyung thought about the situation that had developed in her country and what Kim Jong-Un was creating for himself. It was entirely idiotic. She thought the Supreme Leader was a moron, and she knew if her thoughts were ever heard, she would be sent to a labor camp. But, she already felt like she was imprisoned. Her anger led to even more exhaustion and she finally fell asleep.

When Eun-Kyung awoke she could have sworn she smelled something unusual. It was a pleasant and savory scent, something that awakened all of her senses. It smelled like... food.

It was dark outside. She'd slept right through the evening and it was now around midnight. Eun-Kyung got out of bed and stepped slowly towards her door, which went out into a hallway. She lived in the women's military dormitory.

She opened the door a little and peeked out into the hall and the savory odor hit her even stronger. It was mouthwatering. She knew the scent was familiar, but she could barely name it. The word was on the tip of her tongue. Flashes of this food streaked through her mind, as if she'd once tasted it.

Eun-Kyung entered the hallway and followed the scent down a number of doors until she found herself by a door ajar out of which a soft light, the smell of the food, and voices came. She slowly opened the door and her eyes widened at what she saw.

Inside the dorm room was a party. A group of four girls were seated around a traditional Korean table. Paper lanterns hung from the ceiling, casting a soft golden glow about the room. It was nothing at all like the dull cold dorm rooms she'd slept in. It was welcoming, warm, and joyful. Something unheard of in North Korea.

And the table was piled with food, unlike anything Eun-Kyung had seen in her life. They were traditional Korean dishes, but Eun-Kyung had never eaten them. The number of bowls and plates alone impressed her, but the food was unimaginable.

She saw bowls of kimchee, steaming white rice, bi bim bop, plates of mandu and seafood pancakes. There were bowls of soup, too, regional specialties of Pyongyang: Pyongyang naengmyeon and Taedonggang sungeoguk. And she even saw kalbi, barbecued beef short ribs. This kind of food could never be found in North Korea. The only one with access to it was Kim Jong-Un. His fat face was evidence of that.

The girls seated around the table drank soju from small porcelain cups and they smiled at Eun-Kyung. They were friendly and Eun-Kyung didn't feel as though she were crashing their party. She actually felt invited. It was such a wonderful feeling.

Eun-Kyung sat down at the table, so happy she was crying, but as one of the girls prepared a dish of food for her, everything began to blur and she suddenly realized it had been a dream.

When Eun-Kyung finally woke up, for real, she was crying. The only thing in the dream that had been real was the tears. It was dark outside though, but no scent of food wafted through her room. It was cold and quiet in the dormitory. She felt hungry, but knew she had missed dinner and there weren't any late night snacks to be had. The reality of it was too harsh. She gritted her teeth, feeling angry, furious even. She closed her eyes again and tried desperately to recall the dream. If only she could taste the food on that table, she would feel better.

The next morning Eun-Kyung was rather popular among her group of friends. They couldn't believe she had been on TV. They considered it such an honor and Eun-Kyung had to admit that it was an exciting moment, even though it had been fleeting.

"What was it like?" asked one of the girls.

"It really wasn't anything too special. There was a bright light in my face and they just asked me to comment on the current situation," said Eun-Kyung.

"But your face is going to be all over North Korea!"

"Yeah, wherever there's a television," she replied.

"We didn't see you at all yesterday afternoon and you weren't at dinner. What happened?" asked another girl.

"Oh. I was so tired after the TV crew interviewed me. I just went back to my room and fell asleep."

"Then you didn't hear the news! We're going to see the nuclear missiles today! The Supreme Leader is parading them through Pyongyang as they head off towards the DMZ," said her friend.

“Really? Wow,” said Eun-Kyung.

Somehow she wasn't as excited as her friends. It was ironic given how she'd just touted them on TV the day before. She knew that had all been a farce though.

“So what time does the parade start?” asked Eun-Kyung.

“We have to be at the square in front of Kumsusan Memorial Palace at 1:00pm.”

Eun-Kyung thought about sharing her dream with her friends, but she felt the dream was too sacred to be spoken out loud and perhaps too outrageous for them. She decided to keep it a secret.

All the girls jabbered excitedly, but the only thing Eun-Kyung felt was a sense of annoyance...and hunger. She wasn't interested in looking at those blasted weapons, which had caused so much grief for the people of North Korea. It was because of those weapons, and the government's horrific greed, that the people had been without food for so long and were living in destitution.

Eun-Kyung was relatively lucky to be in the military and living in Pyongyang, but even the soldiers hungry most days, eating only rations of rice and little protein. It was ridiculous to think that the North Korean army could fight a battle given their widespread state of malnutrition.

Those missiles had sucked up everything the country had and they were all for the purpose of making the Supreme Leader's dick look big. Sure, it had been started by his father, but there's hardly a difference between them.

Of course, Eun-Kyung had to attend the parade. It wasn't optional. Nothing is really optional in North Korea. So at 12:30pm she and her friends gathered with their unit to march towards the palace.

It was a beautiful and cold sunny day. The sky was bright blue and long thin white clouds stretched out into the distance. Ever since she was a little girl, Eun-Kyung imagined skating across just such clouds and dreamed of where they might take her. It was exciting to think of what lay beyond the borders and she had spent many hours picturing those foreign lands where no one could dictate her. But most of all, she wondered what people ate. She wondered if anyone in the world had enough food or if they all felt hungry like her.

Many people were being gathered in the square in front of the palace for the parade. Policemen herded them along in groups, making sure no one dropped out. The different military battalions marched in unison, their black jackboots stomping along the pavement.

The city was quiet and dull, as usual. It was a sorry excuse for a showcase city or a national capital, but of course, by North Korean standards it's like Macau. It's a city that only appears inhabitable, yet the streets are empty and the sidewalks see few pedestrians. Strange conglomerations of soldiers and civilians can be found in the city squares practicing for state-run performances or some other government-scheduled event, and nobody truly has a life of their own.

After everyone had arrived in the square in front of the memorial palace, the grandiose building which housed Kim Il-Sung's and Kim Jong-Il's embalmed bodies, the ceremony began with Kim Jong-Un standing on a balcony high above the people without a smile on his face. He

has an entire nation to himself, yet he, like his forefathers, can't even grant them a smile. Their allegiance and obedience is boring to him.

Music from one of the state orchestras plays loudly across the square and the parade begins with soldiers marching and women dancing in traditional Korean dress. Eun-Kyung watched as they passed by, the parade feeling lifeless, without a soul.

After multiple battalions and marching bands passed, the showpieces arrived, the nuclear missiles that the Supreme Leader had ordered to be sent to the DMZ. They were massive and incredible to see up close. Even though Eun-Kyung hadn't been excited about it, she was awed at the sight of these terribly destructive weapons coming so close to her.

The missiles were mounted on giant military trucks with enormous wheels. The trucks spewed greyish-blue exhaust with every foot traveled and rumbled across the stone pavement of the square. Eun-Kyung wished the missiles would somehow be lost, disappear without a trace. Just the thought of that made her grin. She could imagine the chaos Kim Jong-Un would be in if his precious bombs went missing. It would be a victory for the entire country.

As the first missile passed in front of her, Eun-Kyung looked at it carefully and noticed something peculiar. There was a panel along the side of the missile facing her that looked part-way open, like a screw had come loose. But what really caught her attention was the arrival of a familiar scent.

As she stared at the loose panel on the missile, the odor of food wafted past her nose as if a bowl of soup was right in front of her face. It was so strong she decided to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. It was real.

She looked to her right and left and asked her friends, “Do you smell that?”

They stopped and sniffed the air and a confused look came over them.

“What is that?” they asked her.

“I think it’s food,” said Eun-Kyung.

“But where would it be coming from? It smells like a feast!”

Eun-Kyung looked back at the missile, which was just passing her.

Without thinking any further, Eun-Kyung broke away from the group and ran through the barrier created by the police to keep everyone at a distance. She charged full-speed towards the truck carrying that first missile and quickly reached it since the trucks drove very slowly. She jumped onto it and climbed up the chassis to where the missile was docked.

By then the police were shouting, ordering her to get down, but Eun-Kyung ignored them. She grabbed hold of the loose panel on the missile and yanked it. It opened with ease, the other screws flying loose. The panel dropped and fell off the truck, clanging on the stone ground. And inside the missile, behind that panel, Eun-Kyung saw a horde of food giving off the exact scent she had smelled in her dream.

She turned around and screamed.

“Look! Look at this!”

Everyone stared at her and at the missile. They could see what was inside: beef, noodles, chicken, cabbage, eggs, rice, fruit, and everything they didn’t have. It was literally falling out of from the opening, spilling onto the ground below.

After what seemed like an eternity, the people broke through the barricades and charged towards the weapon filled with food. They swarmed around the truck, forcing it to stop, and then climbed on top so they could grab what was inside the missile.

The parade ground to a halt at that moment and when the word had spread throughout all the crowds, the other missiles were swarmed and torn open and each one was discovered to contain incredible quantities of food.

Even the police and the soldiers were overwhelmed by it. Their own hunger was at the breaking point and they didn't try to fight the crowd. Instead, they joined them in gathering the food.

The trance of allegiance and loyalty to the Supreme Leader was overcome by the people's hunger and they no longer cared about obeying him. His disgusting secret had finally been revealed. All of North Korea's resources had been used in the creation of those missiles, leaving nothing for the people to survive off of. He had hoarded what he needed for himself and wanted to waste the rest on destruction.

It was like déjà vu when Eun-Kyung and her friends gathered together around a table to eat and drink as much as they could. The table was filled with dishes of the most delicious Korean foods and a spirit of happiness filled the room, one that was more powerful than any fear ever to crawl out of the president's palace. The people had buried fear and the bodies of the leaders who reeked of it and the land of North Korea once again produced crops enough for everyone to find sustenance.

As they ate and laughed, Eun-Kyung suddenly remembered the dream she'd had. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten it. It seemed like ages ago.

“Did I ever tell you about the dream I had before the parade?”

The room grew quiet as Eun-Kyung shared her sacred vision. The paper lanterns glowed softly around the room and the scene before her never faded out.