

# PACHINKO

*Min Jin Lee*

National Bestselling Author of  
*Free Food for Millionaires*

*a novel*



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GRAND CENTRAL  
PUBLISHING

NEW YORK BOSTON

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Grand Central Publishing

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

[grandcentralpublishing.com](http://grandcentralpublishing.com)

[twitter.com/grandcentralpub](https://twitter.com/grandcentralpub)

First ebook edition: February 2017

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ISBN: 978-1-4555-6391-3

E3-20170111\_DANF

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Also by Min Jin Lee:

*Free Food for Millionaires*

*For Christopher and Sam*



Book I

*Gohyang/Hometown*

1910–1933

Home is a name, a word, it is a strong one;  
stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit  
answered to, in strongest conjuration.

—Charles Dickens

# 1

## Yeongdo, Busan, Korea

**H**istory has failed us, but no matter.

At the turn of the century, an aging fisherman and his wife decided to take in lodgers for extra money. Both were born and raised in the fishing village of Yeongdo—a five-mile-wide islet beside the port city of Busan. In their long marriage, the wife gave birth to three sons, but only Hoonie, the eldest and the weakest one, survived. Hoonie was born with a cleft palate and a twisted foot; he was, however, endowed with hefty shoulders, a squat build, and a golden complexion. Even as a young man, he retained the mild, thoughtful temperament he'd had as a child. When Hoonie covered his misshapen mouth with his hands, something he did out of habit meeting strangers, he resembled his nice-looking father, both having the same large, smiling eyes. Inky eyebrows graced his broad forehead, perpetually tanned from outdoor work. Like his parents, Hoonie was not a nimble talker, and some made the mistake of thinking that because he could not speak quickly there was something wrong with his mind, but that was not true.

In 1910, when Hoonie was twenty-seven years old, Japan annexed Korea. The fisherman and his wife, thrifty and hardy peasants, refused to be distracted by the country's incompetent aristocrats and corrupt rulers, who had lost their nation to thieves. When the rent for their house was raised again, the couple moved out of their bedroom and slept in the anteroom near the kitchen to increase the number of lodgers.

The wooden house they had rented for over three decades was not large, just shy of five hundred square feet. Sliding paper doors divided the interior into three snug rooms, and the fisherman himself had replaced its leaky grass roof with

reddish clay tiles to the benefit of his landlord, who lived in splendor in a mansion in Busan. Eventually, the kitchen was pushed out to the vegetable garden to make way for the larger cooking pots and the growing number of portable dining tables that hung on pegs along the mortared stone wall.

At his father's insistence, Hoonie learned to read and write Korean and Japanese from the village schoolmaster well enough to keep a boardinghouse ledger and to do sums in his head so he couldn't be cheated at the market. When he knew how to do this, his parents pulled him out of school. As an adolescent, Hoonie worked nearly as well as a strong man twice his age with two well-shaped legs; he was dexterous with his hands and could carry heavy loads, but he could not run or walk quickly. Both Hoonie and his father were known in the village for never picking up a cup of wine. The fisherman and his wife raised their surviving son, the neighborhood cripple, to be clever and diligent, because they did not know who would care for him after they died.

If it were possible for a man and his wife to share one heart, Hoonie was this steady, beating organ. They had lost their other sons—the youngest to measles and the middle, good-for-nothing one to a goring bull in a pointless accident. Except for school and the market, the old couple kept young Hoonie close by the house, and eventually, as a young man, Hoonie needed to stay home to help his parents. They could not bear to disappoint him; yet they loved him enough not to dote on him. The peasants knew that a spoiled son did more harm to a family than a dead one, and they kept themselves from indulging him too much.

Other families in the land were not so fortunate as to have two such sensible parents, and as happens in countries being pillaged by rivals or nature, the weak—the elderly, widows and orphans—were as desperate as ever on the colonized peninsula. For any household that could feed one more, there were multitudes willing to work a full day for a bowl of barley rice.

In the spring of 1911, two weeks after Hoonie turned

twenty-eight, the red-cheeked matchmaker from town called on his mother.

Hoonie's mother led the matchmaker to the kitchen; they had to speak in low tones since the boarders were sleeping in the front rooms. It was late morning, and the lodgers who'd fished through the evening had finished their hot suppers, washed up, and gone to bed. Hoonie's mother poured the matchmaker a cup of cold barley tea but didn't break from her own work.

Naturally, the mother guessed what the matchmaker wanted, but she couldn't fathom what to say. Hoonie had never asked his parents for a bride. It was unthinkable that a decent family would let their daughter marry someone with deformities, since such things were inevitable in the next generation. She had never seen her son talk to a girl; most village girls avoided the sight of him, and Hoonie would have known enough not to want something he could not have—this forbearance was something that any normal peasant would have accepted about his life and what he was allowed to desire.

The matchmaker's funny little face was puffy and pink; black flinty eyes darted intelligently, and she was careful to say only nice things. The woman licked her lips as if she was thirsty; Hoonie's mother felt the woman observing her and every detail of the house, measuring the size of the kitchen with her exacting eyes.

The matchmaker, however, would have had great difficulty in reading Hoonie's mother, a quiet woman who worked from waking until bed, doing what was needed for that day and the next. She rarely went to the market, because there was no time for distracting chatter; she sent Hoonie for the shopping. While the matchmaker talked, Hoonie's mother's mouth remained unmoving and steady, much like the heavy pine table she was cutting her radishes on.

The matchmaker brought it up first. So there was that unfortunate matter of his foot and broken lip, but Hoonie was

clearly a good boy—educated and strong as a pair of oxen! She was blessed to have such a fine son, the matchmaker said. She deprecated her own children: Neither of her boys was dedicated to books or commerce, but they were not terrible boys. Her daughter married too early and lived too far away. All good marriages, the matchmaker supposed, but her sons were lazy. Not like Hoonie. After her speech, the matchmaker stared at the olive-skinned woman whose face was immobile, casting about for any sign of interest.

Hoonie's mother kept her head down, handling her sharp knife confidently—each cube of radish was square and certain. When a large mound of white radish cubes formed on the cutting board, she transferred the load in a clean swipe into a mixing bowl. She was paying such careful attention to the matchmaker's talking that privately, Hoonie's mother feared she would begin to shake from nerves.

Before stepping into the house, the matchmaker had walked around its perimeter to assess the financial condition of the household. From all appearances, the neighborhood talk of their stable situation could be confirmed. In the kitchen garden, ponytail radishes, grown fat and heavy from the early spring rain, were ready to be pulled from the brown earth. Pollack and squid strung neatly across a long clothesline dried in the lacy spring sun. Beside the outhouse, three black pigs were kept in a clean pen built from local stone and mortar. The matchmaker counted seven chickens and a rooster in the backyard. Their prosperity was more evident inside the house.

In the kitchen, stacks of rice and soup bowls rested on well-built shelves, and braids of white garlic and red chilies hung from the low kitchen rafters. In the corner, near the washbasin, there was an enormous woven basket heaped with freshly dug potatoes. The comforting aroma of barley and millet steaming in the black rice pot wafted through the small house.

Satisfied with the boardinghouse's comfortable situation in a country growing steadily poorer, the matchmaker was certain that even Hoonie could have a healthy bride, so she plowed ahead.

The girl was from the other side of the island, beyond the dense woods. Her father, a tenant farmer, was one of the many who'd lost his lease as a result of the colonial government's recent land surveys. The widower, cursed with four girls and no sons, had nothing to eat except for what was gathered from the woods, fish he couldn't sell, or the occasional charity from equally impoverished neighbors. The decent father had begged the matchmaker to find grooms for his unmarried daughters, since it was better for virgins to marry anyone than to scrounge for food when men and women were hungry, and virtue was expensive. The girl, Yangjin, was the last of the four girls and the easiest to unload because she was too young to complain, and she'd had the least to eat.

Yangjin was fifteen and mild and tender as a newborn calf, the matchmaker said. "No dowry, of course, and surely, the father could not expect much in the way of gifts. Perhaps a few laying hens, cotton cloth for Yangjin's sisters, six or seven sacks of millet to get them through the winter." Hearing no protest at the tally of gifts, the matchmaker grew bolder, "Maybe a goat. Or a small pig. The family has so little, and bride prices have come down so much. The girl wouldn't need any jewelry." The matchmaker laughed a little.

With a flick of her thick wrist, Hoonie's mother showered the radish with sea salt. The matchmaker could not have known how hard Hoonie's mother was concentrating and thinking about what the woman wanted. The mother would have given up anything to raise the bride price demanded; Hoonie's mother found herself surprised at the imaginings and hopes rising within her breast, but her face remained collected and private; nevertheless, the matchmaker was no fool.

"What I wouldn't give to have a grandson of my own one day," the matchmaker said, making her closing gambit while peering hard at the boardinghouse keeper's creased, brown face. "I have a granddaughter but no grandsons, and the girl cries too much."

The matchmaker continued. "I remember holding my first son when he was a baby. How happy I was! He was as white

as a basket of fresh rice cakes on New Year's—soft and juicy as warm dough. Tasty enough to take a bite. Well, now he's just a big dolt," feeling the need to add a complaint to her bragging.

Hoonie's mother smiled, finally, because the image was almost too vivid for her. What old woman didn't yearn to hold her grandson when such a thought had been inconceivable before this visit? She clenched her teeth to calm herself and picked up the mixing bowl. She shook it to even out the salt.

"The girl has a nice face. No pockmarks. She's well mannered and obeys her father and sisters. And not too dark. She's a little thing, but she has strong hands and arms. She'll need to gain some weight, but you understand that. It's been a difficult time for the family." The matchmaker smiled at the basket of potatoes in the corner as if to suggest that here, the girl would be able to eat as much as she wanted.

Hoonie's mother rested the bowl on the counter and turned to her guest.

"I'll speak to my husband and son. There's no money for a goat or a pig. We may be able to send some cotton wool with the other things for the winter. I'll have to ask."

The bride and groom met on their wedding day, and Yangjin had not been scared by his face. Three people in her village had been born that way. She'd seen cattle and pigs with the same thing. A girl who lived near her had a strawberry-like growth between her nose and split lip, and the other children called her Strawberry, a name the girl did not mind. When Yangjin's father had told her that her husband would be like Strawberry but also with a crooked leg, she had not cried. He told her that she was a good girl.

Hoonie and Yangjin were married so quietly that if the family had not sent out mugwort cakes to the neighbors, they would have been accused of stinginess. Even the boarders were astonished when the bride appeared to serve the morning meal the day following the wedding.



When Yangjin became pregnant, she worried that her child would have Hoonie's deformities. Her first child was born with a cleft palate but had good legs. Hoonie and his parents were not upset when the midwife showed him to them. "Do you mind it?" Hoonie asked her, and she said no, because she did not. When Yangjin was alone with her firstborn, she traced her index finger around the infant's mouth and kissed it; she had never loved anyone as much as her baby. At seven weeks, he died of a fever. Her second baby had a perfect face and good legs, but he, too, died before his *baek-il* celebration from diarrhea and fever. Her sisters, still unmarried, blamed her weak milk flow and advised her to see a shaman. Hoonie and his parents did not approve of the shaman, but she went without telling them when she was pregnant for the third time. Yet in the midst of her third pregnancy, she felt odd, and Yangjin resigned herself to the possibility that this one, too, may die. She lost her third to smallpox.

Her mother-in-law went to the herbalist and brewed her healing teas. Yangjin drank every brown drop in the cup and apologized for the great expense. After each birth, Hoonie went to the market to buy his wife choice seaweed for soup to heal her womb; after each death, he brought her sweet rice cakes still warm from the market and gave them to her: "You have to eat. You must get your strength."

Three years after the marriage, Hoonie's father died, then months after, his wife followed. Yangjin's in-laws had never denied her meals or clothing. No one had hit her or criticized her even as she failed to give them a surviving heir.

At last, Yangjin gave birth to Sunja, her fourth child and the only girl, and the child thrived; after she turned three, the parents were able to sleep through the night without checking the pallet repeatedly to see if the small form lying beside them was still breathing. Hoonie made his daughter dollies out of corn husks and forsook his tobacco to buy her sweets; the three ate each meal together even though the lodgers wanted Hoonie to eat with them. He loved his child the way his parents had loved him, but he found that he could not deny her

anything. Sunja was a normal-looking girl with a quick laugh and bright, but to her father, she was a beauty, and he marveled at her perfection. Few fathers in the world treasured their daughters as much as Hoonie, who seemed to live to make his child smile.

In the winter when Sunja was thirteen years old, Hoonie died quietly from tuberculosis. At his burial, Yangjin and her daughter were inconsolable. The next morning, the young widow rose from her pallet and returned to work.

## 2

### November 1932

The winter following Japan's invasion of Manchuria was a difficult one. Biting winds sheared through the small boardinghouse, and the women stuffed cotton in between the fabric layers of their garments. This thing called the Depression was found everywhere in the world, the lodgers said frequently during meals, repeating what they'd overheard from the men at the market who could read newspapers. Poor Americans were as hungry as the poor Russians and the poor Chinese. In the name of the Emperor, even ordinary Japanese went without. No doubt, the canny and the hardy survived that winter, but the shameful reports—of children going to bed and not waking up, girls selling their innocence for a bowl of wheat noodles, and the elderly stealing away quietly to die so the young could eat—were far too plentiful.

That said, the boarders expected their meals regularly, and an old house needed repairs. The rent had to be paid each month to the landlord's agent, who was persistent. In time, Yangjin had learned how to handle money, deal with her suppliers, and say no to terms she did not want. She hired two orphaned sisters and became an employer. She was a thirty-seven-year-old widow who ran a boardinghouse and no longer the shoeless teenager who'd arrived on its doorstep clutching a set of clean undergarments wrapped in a square bit of fabric.

Yangjin had to take care of Sunja and earn money; they were fortunate to have this business even though they didn't own the house. On the first of every month, each lodger paid twenty-three yen for room and board, and increasingly, this was not enough to buy grain at the market or coal for heat. The lodging fees couldn't go up, because the men were not making any more money, but she still had to feed them the same

amount. So from shinbones, she made thick, milky broths and seasoned the garden vegetables for tasty side dishes; she stretched meals from millet and barley and the meager things they had in the larder when there was little money left at the end of the month. When there wasn't much in the grain sack, she made savory pancakes from bean flour and water. The lodgers brought her fish they couldn't sell in the market, so when there was an extra pail of crabs or mackerel, she preserved them with spices to supplement the scantier meals that were sure to come.

For the previous two seasons, six guests took turns sleeping in the one guest room: The three Chung brothers from Jeollado fished at night and slept during the day shift, and two young fellows from Daegu and a widower from Busan worked at the seaside fish market and went to sleep in the early evening. In the small room, the men slept beside each other, but none complained, because this boardinghouse was better than what they were used to back at their respective homes. The bedding was clean, and the food was filling. The girls laundered their clothing well, and the boardinghouse keeper patched up the lodgers' worn work clothes with scraps to make them last another season. None of these men could afford a wife, so for them, this setup was not half bad. A wife could have given some physical comfort to a workingman, but a marriage could beget children who would need food, clothing, and a home; a poor man's wife was prone to nagging and crying, and these men understood their limits.

The rise in prices accompanied by the shortage of money was distressing, but the lodgers were almost never late with the rent. The men who worked at the market were occasionally paid in unsold goods, and Yangjin would take a jar of cooking oil in place of a few yen on rent day. Her mother-in-law had explained that you had to be very good to the lodgers: There were always other places for workingmen to stay. She explained, "Men have choices that women don't." At the end of each season, if there were any coins left over, Yangjin dropped them into a dark earthenware crock and stowed it