

THE MILLION-COPY
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

The cover features a stylized illustration of a woman with short, dark hair, wearing a light blue collared shirt. Her face is partially obscured by the title text. The background is a vibrant yellow with a cityscape of red and orange buildings, including a prominent tower on the right. The overall aesthetic is modern and graphic.

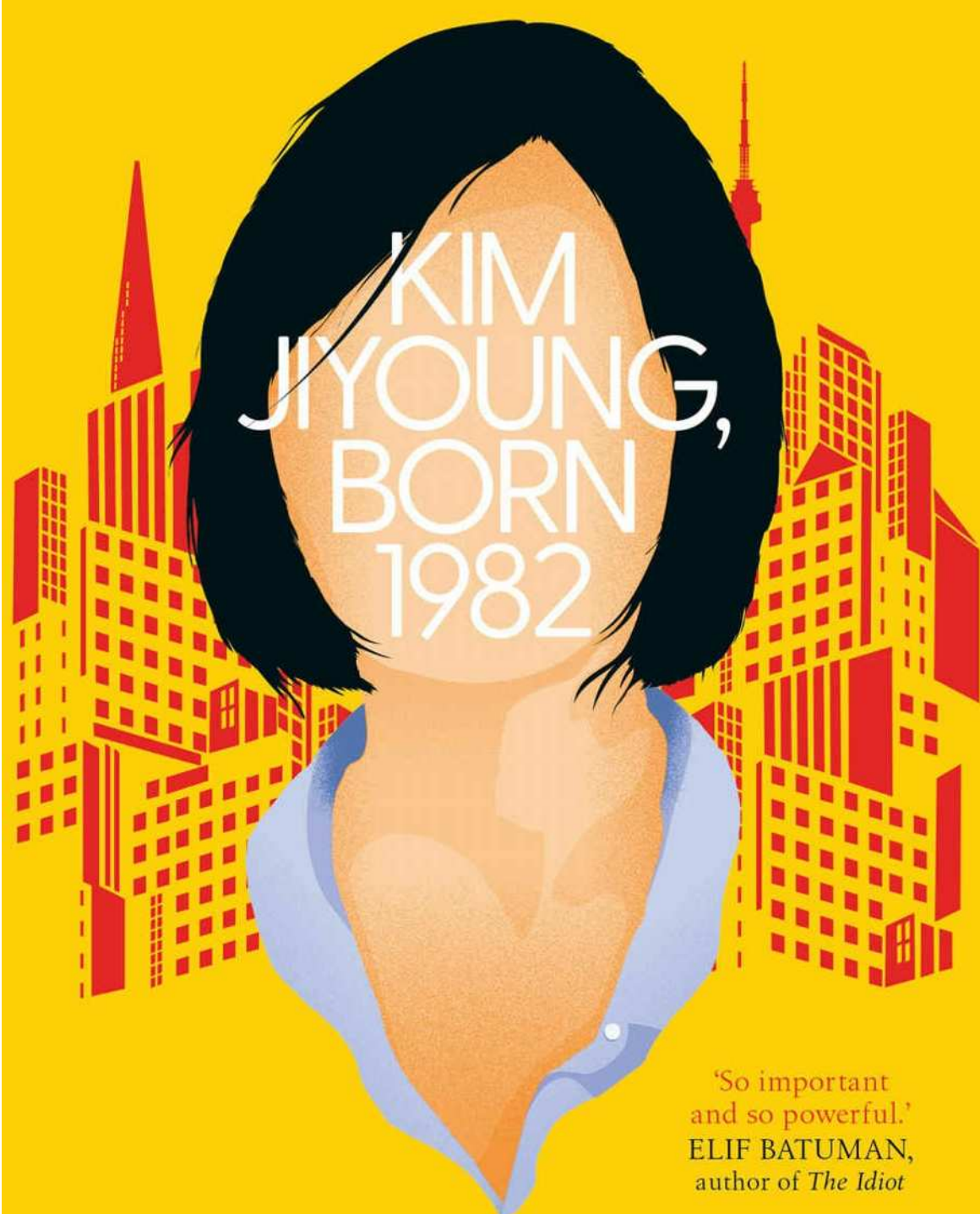
KIM
JIYOUNG,
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and so powerful.'
ELIF BATUMAN,
author of *The Idiot*

CHO NAM-JOO

Translated by Jamie Chang

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Praise for *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*

‘I loved this novel. Kim Jiyoung’s life is made to seem at once totally commonplace and nightmarishly over-the-top. As you read, you constantly feel that revolutionary, electric shift, between commonplace and nightmarish. This kind of imaginative work is so important and so powerful. I hope this book sells a million more copies.’

Elif Batuman, author of *The Idiot*
(shortlisted for The Women’s Prize)

‘I imagine the million Korean copies of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* as a kind of membership card or printed creed – proof of a collective experience too often demeaned.’

New York Review of Books

‘*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* has much in common with Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*.’

Los Angeles Review of Books

‘Though she’s a fictional character, Kim Jiyoung is a symbolic figure in Korea. It seems her status will be even more elevated as novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* recently became a million-copy bestseller.’

Korea Herald

‘Not only a riveting read, but a mirror to society that is daring enough to portray us as faceless as we truly are.’

Korean Literature Now

‘It has touched the hearts of readers of diverse backgrounds across Korea for its subtleness. Rather than depicting extreme situations for the sake of the plot, the book calmly describes common experiences that happen in the everyday lives of Korean women – things that have always been there, but have never been thought of as problematic until recently.’

Korea JoongAng Daily

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KIM
JIYOUNG,
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Palsip Yi Nyeon Saeng Kim Jiyeong

CHO NAM-JOO

TRANSLATED BY JAMIE CHANG



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AUTUMN, 2015

Kim Jiyoung is thirty-three years old, or thirty-four in Korean age. She got married three years ago and had a daughter last year. She rents a small apartment on the outskirts of Seoul with her husband Jung Daehyun, thirty-six, and daughter Jung Jiwon. Daehyun works at a mid-size IT company, and Jiyoung used to work at a small marketing agency, which she left a few weeks before her due date. Daehyun usually comes home from work around midnight and goes into the office at least once on weekends. Daehyun's parents live in Busan, and Jiyoung's parents run a restaurant, making Jiyoung her daughter's sole carer. Just after Jiwon turned one in the summer, she started daycare as a half-day infant. She spends her mornings at a converted ground-floor apartment daycare centre in the same apartment complex where she lives.

Jiyoung's abnormal behaviour was first detected on 8 September. Daehyun remembers the exact date because it was the morning of *baengno* ('white dew'), the first night of autumn when the temperature drops below dew point. Daehyun was having toast and milk for breakfast when Jiyoung suddenly went to the veranda and opened the window. It was quite sunny out, but the cold air rushed in as soon as the window was opened and reached the kitchen table where Daehyun was sitting.

Jiyoung returned to the table with her shoulders hunched and, as she sat down, said, 'I knew there was a little nip in the air these past few mornings, and today's *baengno*! White morning dew on fields of *goold*, on *baengno* when the nights grow *coold*.'

Daehyun laughed at his wife, who was talking like a much older woman.

'What's up with you? You sound like your mum.'

'Take a light jacket with you, Jung *seoba-ahng*. There's a chill in the mornings and evenings.'

Even then, he thought she was just joking around. Her imitation of her mother was flawless, down to her signature right-eye wink when she was asking for a favour, and the elongated last syllable of 'Jung *seobang*'. He

had found her staring off into space or crying over sad songs, but Daehyun figured she was just exhausted from taking care of the baby. She was basically a cheerful person, full of laughter, who often made Daehyun laugh by doing impressions of celebrities. So Daehyun shrugged off Jiyoung's imitation of her mother, gave her a hug and went to work.

When Daehyun came back from work that night, she was sleeping next to their daughter. Both were sucking their thumbs, looking cute but absurd. Gazing at the two side by side, he tugged at his wife's arm to pull her thumb out of her mouth. Jiyoung's tongue stuck out a little and she smacked her lips, just like a baby, and then settled back into sleep.

A few days later, Jiyoung said that she was Cha Seungyeon, a college friend who had died a year before. Seungyeon and Daehyun started college the same year and Jiyoung had been their junior by three years. All three were members of the same university hiking club. However, Jiyoung and Daehyun didn't know each other in college. Daehyun wanted to go on to graduate school, but had to give up due to family circumstances. After he completed his third year of university, he took time off to belatedly fulfill his military service, after which he returned to his home in Busan to work part-time for a year. Jiyoung had entered college and was an active hiking club member during his time away.

Seungyeon had always been good to her fellow female club members, on top of which she and Jiyoung had something in common: they didn't actually enjoy hiking. They became friends and kept in touch and met up frequently even after Seungyeon graduated. In fact, Seungyeon's wedding reception was the very occasion on which Daehyun and Jiyoung met for the first time. Seungyeon died giving birth to her second child due to an amniotic fluid embolism. Jiyoung was suffering from postpartum depression when she heard about Seungyeon's death, and the shocking news on top of everything else made it hard for her to handle everyday tasks.

After their daughter had gone to sleep, the couple relaxed and drank some beers, something they hadn't done in a while. When Jiyoung had almost finished a can of beer, she tapped her husband on the shoulder and abruptly said, 'Hey, Jiyoung is having a hard time. Raising a toddler is emotionally draining. You should tell her every chance you get: *You're doing great! You're working so hard! I appreciate you!*'

'Are you astral-projecting, hon? Fine, fine. Yes, you're doing great, Kim Jiyoung. I know that you're going through a tough time. I appreciate

you and I love you.’ Daehyun lovingly pinched her cheek, but she swatted his hand away, irritated.

‘You still see me as the lovestruck twenty-year-old Cha Seungyeon? Who shook like a leaf in the middle of summer confessing her feelings?’

Daehyun’s heart stopped. That was almost twenty years ago. In the middle of the day in the middle of summer, in the middle of the university athletics field, yards away from the tiniest spot of shade. The blazing sun was beating down on the two of them. He couldn’t remember how they ended up there, but he’d run into Seungyeon who suddenly said she liked him. She liked him, she had feelings for him, she had said, sweat pouring, lips trembling, stammering. Daehyun gave her an apologetic look, and she instantly folded.

‘Oh, you don’t feel the same. Got it. Forget what I said. Forget this whole thing happened. I’ll treat you the same as before, like nothing happened.’

And with that, she trotted across the field and disappeared. She really did treat him the same as before, as if nothing had happened and so casually that Daehyun wondered if the whole thing had been a sun exposure-induced hallucination. He never thought about it again. And here was his own wife bringing it back—a scene from a sunny afternoon almost twenty years ago that only two people in the world knew about.

‘Jiyoung,’ was all Daehyun could say. He might have mumbled her name three more times.

‘Hah dude, stop calling me by her name. I get it, I know – you’re a model husband!’

Hah dude, Cha Seungyeon used to say over and over when she was drunk. His hair stood on end and he felt something like electric currents spreading over his scalp. Pretending to be unfazed, he kept telling her to stop kidding around. Jiyoung, leaving her empty can on the table, went to the bedroom and lay down next to her daughter without brushing her teeth. She immediately fell fast asleep. Daehyun got himself another beer and knocked it back. Was this some kind of joke? Was she drunk? Was she possessed by a spirit or something, like those people on TV?

The next morning, Jiyoung came out of the bedroom massaging her temples. She didn’t seem to remember what had happened the night before. On the one hand, he was relieved to think she had simply been drunk, but on the other hand, that was one spooky drinking habit. He also found it hard to believe that she had actually been drunk and blacked out. She’d only had one can of beer.

Her odd behaviour continued sporadically. She'd send him a text message riddled with cute emoticons she never normally used, or make dishes like ox-bone soup or glass noodles that she neither enjoyed nor was good at. Jiyoung was starting to feel like a stranger to Daehyun. After all this time – the stories they shared, as countless as raindrops, the caresses as soft and gentle as snowflakes, and the beautiful daughter who took after them both – his wife of three years, whom he married after two years of passionate romance, felt like someone else.

Then came the *Chuseok* harvest holidays. They were visiting Daehyun's parents down in Busan. Daehyun took Friday off, and the three of them left home at seven in the morning and arrived in Busan five hours later. They had lunch with Daehyun's parents immediately after they arrived, and Daehyun, tired from the long drive, took a nap. Daehyun and Jiyoung used to take turns at the wheel on long drives, but ever since their daughter was born, Daehyun did all the driving. The baby fussed, whined and cried every time they put her in the car seat, and Jiyoung was better at keeping her occupied and happy by playing with her and giving her snacks.

Jiyoung did the dishes after lunch, took a coffee break and went to the market with her mother-in-law to shop for *Chuseok* food. They spent the afternoon boiling the ox bone, marinating ribs, prepping and blanching the vegetables to season some and freeze the rest for later, washing and preparing seafood for the next day's pancakes and fritters, making, eating and clearing dinner.

The next day, Jiyoung and Daehyun's mother flipped pancakes, fried fritters, stewed ribs and sculpted rice cakes. The family ate freshly made holiday dishes and enjoyed themselves. Their daughter, Jiwon, felt right at home in the arms and laps of her grandparents, who showered the affectionate child with love.

The day after that was *Chuseok*. Daehyun's older cousin was in charge of the ancestral rites, so Daehyun's family didn't have much to do on the day itself. Everyone slept in, had a simple breakfast of food made the day before, finished the dishes, and Suhyun, Daehyun's younger sister, arrived with her family. Two years younger than Daehyun and a year older than Jiyoung, Suhyun lived in Busan with her husband and two sons, and her in-laws lived in Busan as well. Her father-in-law being the eldest of his male siblings, Suhyun was under a great deal of pressure during the holidays to make food for the ancestral rites and wait on the guests. Suhyun passed out as soon as she arrived. Jiyoung and Daehyun's mother

made soup from the ox-bone broth, cooked a fresh batch of rice, grilled fish and seasoned vegetables for lunch.

After lunch was cleared, Suhyun brought out a big bag of gifts for Jiwon: dresses of all colours, a tutu, hair slides, lace socks and so on. Suhyun put slides in Jiwon's hair and socks on her feet, admiring the baby girl. *I wish I had a daughter. Daughters are the best.* In the meantime, Jiyoung brought out plates of apple and pear slices, but everyone was so full from lunch they barely touched them. When she brought out rice cakes, Suhyun took a piece.

'Mum, did you make this at home?'

'Of course I did.'

'Mum, how many times do I have to tell you? Don't make food at home! I was going to mention this before, but don't make ox-bone broth, either. Buy the pancakes at the market, and get the rice cakes from the shop. Why do you make so much food when we don't even hold ancestral rites here? You're too old for this, and it's hard on Jiyoung.'

Disappointment flashed across the mother's face. 'It isn't work when you're feeding your own family. The point of the holidays is to get together, make and eat food together.' She turned to Jiyoung and put her on the spot: 'Was it too much for you?'

At this, Jiyoung's expression softened, her cheeks flushed into a gentle pink, and a warm smile emerged in her eyes. Daehyun was nervous. Jiyoung responded before he could change the subject or get her out of there. 'Oh, Mrs Jung. To tell you the truth, my poor Jiyoung gets sick from exhaustion every holiday!'

Time stood still in the room. It was as if they suddenly found themselves sitting atop a great iceberg. Suhyun finally broke the silence by letting out a long, frosty sigh that dissolved in the air.

'Ji, Jiwon needs a nappy change, no?'

Daehyun belatedly grabbed Jiyoung by the hand, but she swatted him off.

'Jung *seoba-ahng!* You're to blame, too! You spend all your holidays in Busan and drop by our place just for a quick bite. This year, try to come earlier,' she said, winking her right eye.

Right at that moment, Suhyun's six-year-old son fell off the sofa while playing with his little brother. He began to howl in pain, but no one had the mind to tend to him. He took a look at the adults sitting there, mouths agape, and stopped crying on his own.

'What is this nonsense?' Daehyun's father thundered. 'Is this how you behave in front of your elders? Daehyun, Suhyun and everyone else in our

family only get together a few times a year. Is this really something to complain about – spending time with family?’

‘Father, that’s not what she’s saying,’ Daehyun tried to explain, but he didn’t know how to start.

‘Mr Jung, with all due respect, I must say my piece,’ Jiyoung said in a cool tone, pushing Daehyun aside. ‘As you know, the holidays are a time for families to gather. But they’re not just for your family. They’re for my family, too. Everyone’s so busy nowadays and it’s hard for my children to get together, too, if not for the holidays. You should at least let our daughter come home when your daughter comes to visit you.’

In the end, Daehyun had to cup his hand over Jiyoung’s mouth and drag her out.

‘She’s not well, Father. You’ve got to believe me, Mum, Father. Suhyun, too. She hasn’t been well lately. I’ll explain everything later.’

Daehyun got his wife and daughter in the car so fast that they didn’t even have time to button their coats. Once in the car himself, Daehyun pressed his head against the steering wheel, overwhelmed. Meanwhile, Jiyoung sang to their daughter as if nothing had happened. His parents didn’t even come out to say goodbye. Instead, Suhyun appeared carrying her brother’s bags and put them in the trunk.

‘Jiyoung’s right,’ said Suhyun. ‘We’ve been inconsiderate. Don’t fight or argue about it. Don’t get mad. Just say that you’re grateful and you’re sorry. Got it?’

‘I’m off now. Talk to Father for me.’

Daehyun wasn’t angry – he was baffled, sad and scared.

Daehyun visited the psychiatrist alone to discuss Jiyoung’s symptoms and treatment options. He told his wife, who didn’t seem to be aware of her condition, that he had booked a therapy session for her since she hadn’t been sleeping well and seemed stressed. Jiyoung thanked him, saying that she had indeed been feeling blue and enervated, and that she suspected maternity blues.

CHILDHOOD, 1982–1994

Kim Jiyoung was born on 1 April 1982 at an obstetrics clinic in Seoul. She measured 50cm and weighed 2.9kg. At the time of her birth, her father was a civil servant and her mother a housewife. Jiyoung's elder sister had been born two years earlier, and a brother was born five years later. In a roughly 35-square-metre house with two bedrooms, one dining and living room, and one bathroom, Jiyoung lived with her grandmother, parents and two siblings.

Jiyoung's earliest childhood memory is of sneaking her brother's formula. She must have been six or seven then. It was just formula, but it was so tasty she would sit by her mother when she was making it for her brother, lick her finger, and pick up the little bits that spilled on the floor. Her mother would sometimes lean Jiyoung's head back, tell her to open wide, and pour a spoonful of that rich, sweet, nutty powder in her mouth. The formula would mix with her saliva, melt into a sticky mass, then turn soft as caramel, before sliding down the back of her throat and leaving a strange feeling in her mouth that wasn't quite dry or bitter.

Koh Boonsoon, Jiyoung's grandmother who lived with them, detested the very idea of Jiyoung eating her brother's formula. If her grandmother ever caught her getting a spoonful of it, she would smack her on the back so hard powder exploded from her mouth and nose. Kim Eunyong, Jiyoung's big sister, never ate formula after the one time she was admonished by their grandmother.

'You don't like formula?'

'I do.'

'So why don't you eat it?'

'It stinks.'

'What?'

'I don't want their stinking formula. No way.'

Jiyoung couldn't understand what she meant by that, but she understood how she felt. Their grandmother wasn't scolding them just because they were too old for formula or because she was worried there

wouldn't be enough formula for the baby. The combination of her tone, expression, angle of head tilt, position of shoulders and her breathing sent them a message that was hard to summarise in one sentence, but, if Jiyoung tried anyway, it went something like this: *How dare you try to take something that belongs to my precious grandson!* Her grandson and his things were valuable and to be cherished; she wasn't going to let just anybody touch them, and Jiyoung ranked below this 'anybody'. Eunyong probably had the same impression.

It was a given that fresh rice hot out of the cooker was served in the order of father, brother and grandmother, and that perfect pieces of tofu, dumplings and patties were the brother's while the girls ate the ones that fell apart. The brother had chopsticks, socks, long underwear, and school and lunch bags that matched, while the girls made do with whatever was available. If there were two umbrellas, the girls shared. If there were two blankets, the girls shared. If there were two treats, the girls shared. It didn't occur to the child Jiyoung that her brother was receiving special treatment, and so she wasn't even jealous. That's how it had always been. There were times when she had an inkling of a situation not being fair, but she was accustomed to rationalising things by telling herself that she was being a generous older sibling and that she shared with her sister because they were both girls. Jiyoung's mother would praise the girls for taking good care of their brother and not competing for her love. Jiyoung thought it must be the big age gap. The more their mother praised, the more impossible it became for Jiyoung to complain.

Kim Jiyoung's father was the third of four brothers. The eldest died in a car accident before he married, and the second brother emigrated to the United States early on and settled down. The youngest brother and Jiyoung's father had a big fight over inheritance and looking after their mother that led to a falling-out.

The four brothers were born and raised at a time when mere survival was a struggle. As people died, young and old, of war, disease and starvation, Koh Boonsoon worked someone else's field, peddled someone else's wares, took care of domestic labour at someone else's home, and still managed to run her own home, fighting tooth and nail to raise the four boys. Her husband, a man with a fair complexion and soft hands, never worked a day in his life. Koh Boonsoon did not resent her husband for having neither the ability nor the will to provide for his family. She truly believed he was a decent husband to her for not sleeping around and not

hitting her. Of the four sons she raised thus, Jiyoung's father was the only one to carry out his duties as a son in her old age. Unwanted by her ungrateful children, Koh Boonsoon rationalised this sad outcome with an incoherent logic: 'Still, I get to eat warm food my son made for me, and sleep under warm covers my son arranged for me because I had four sons. You have to have at least four sons.'

Oh Misook, her son's wife, was the one who cooked the warm food and laid out the warm covers for her, not her son, but Koh Boonsoon had a habit of saying so anyway. Easy-going considering the life she'd had, and relatively caring towards her daughter-in-law compared to other mothers-in-law of her generation, she would say from the bottom of her heart, for her daughter-in-law's sake, 'You should have a son. You must have a son. You must have at least two sons . . .'

When Kim Eunyoung was born, Oh Misook held the infant in her arms and wept. 'I'm sorry, Mother,' she'd said, hanging her head.

Koh Boonsoon said warmly to her daughter-in-law, 'It's okay. The second will be a boy.'

When Kim Jiyoung was born, Oh Misook held the infant in her arms and wept. 'I'm sorry, little girl,' she'd said, hanging her head.

Koh Boonsoon repeated warmly to her daughter-in-law, 'It's okay. The third will be a boy.'

Oh Misook became pregnant with her third child less than a year after Jiyoung was born. One night, she dreamt that a tiger the size of a house came knocking down the front door and jumping into her lap. She was sure it was a boy. But the old lady obstetrician who delivered Eunyoung and Jiyoung scanned her lower abdomen several times with a grim look on her face and said cautiously, 'The baby is so, so . . . pretty. Like her sisters . . .'

Back at home, Oh Misook wept and wept and threw up everything she'd eaten that day, while Koh Boonsoon heard her daughter-in-law retching in the bathroom and sent her congratulations through the door.

'Your morning sickness is awful this time! You never got sick once when you were pregnant with Eunyoung and Jiyoung. This one must be different.'

Reluctant to leave the bathroom, Oh Misook locked herself in, to cry and throw up some more. Late that night, after the girls had gone to sleep, Oh Misook asked her husband, who was tossing and turning, 'What if . . . What if the baby is another girl? What would you do, Daddy?'

She was hoping for, *What do you mean, what would I do? Boy or girl, we'll raise it with love.* But there was no answer.

‘Hmm?’ she prodded. ‘What would you do, Daddy?’

He rolled over to face the wall and said, ‘Hush and go to sleep. Don’t give the devil ideas.’

Oh Misook cried all night into her pillow, biting her lower lip so as not to make a sound. Morning came to find her pillow soaked and her lip so badly swollen that she couldn’t stop herself from drooling.

This was a time when the government had implemented birth control policies called ‘family planning’ to keep population growth under control. Abortion due to medical problems had been legal for ten years at that point, and checking the sex of the foetus and aborting females was common practice, as if ‘daughter’ was a medical problem.¹ This went on throughout the 1980s, and in the early 1990s, the very height of the male-to-female ratio imbalance, when the ratio for the third child and beyond was over two-to-one.² Oh Misook went to the clinic by herself and ‘erased’ Jiyoung’s younger sister. None of it was her fault, but all the responsibility fell on her, and no family was around to comfort her through her harrowing physical and emotional pain. The doctor held Oh Misook’s hand as she howled like an animal that had lost its young to a beast and said, ‘I’m sorry for your loss.’ Thanks to the old lady doctor’s words, Oh Misook was able to avoid losing her mind.

It was years before Oh Misook fell pregnant again, and the boy made it safely into this world. That boy is the brother five years younger than Jiyoung.

Being a civil servant, Jiyoung’s father had a stable job and a steady income. But it was certainly a challenge for a family of six to live on the wages of a low-level government employee. As the three children grew, the two-bedroom house started to feel crowded, and Jiyoung’s mother wanted to move to a bigger place where she could give the girls, who were sharing with their grandmother at the time, their own room.

Mother did not commute to a job like Father did, but was always doing odd jobs on the side that allowed her to make money while doing chores all on her own and looking after three children and an elderly mother-in-law. This was common among mothers in the neighbourhood who were more or less in the same situation. There was a boom in made-for-housewife jobs, all with the label *ajumma*, or middle-aged married woman: insurance *ajumma*, milk and Yakult *ajumma*, cosmetics *ajumma* and so on. Most companies outsourced their hiring, leaving the employees to their own devices if there were disputes or injuries on the job.³ With three

children to look after, Mother chose sideline work she could do from home. Taking out stitches, assembling cardboard boxes, folding envelopes, peeling garlic and rolling weather strips were just a few of the endless list of jobs available. Jiyoung helped her mother, usually with the clean-up afterwards or counting units.

The trickiest job was rolling weather strips. Long, narrow pieces of spongy material, with film-protected adhesive on one side, would arrive at the house, and it was Mother's job to roll the strips up two at a time and put them in a small plastic wrapper. Mother held each weather strip lightly between her left thumb and index finger, as if to simply keep it in place, and rolled with the right hand. Pulling and rolling the weather strips, she often cut her finger on the paper film on the adhesive side. She wore two layers of work gloves, but her finger always bled anyway. The material took up a lot of space, the work produced a great deal of debris, and the fumes from the sponge and adhesive gave her a headache, but the pay was the best among all the odd jobs. Mother kept taking on more, and worked longer hours.

Father would often come home from work to find Mother still rolling weather strips. Jiyoung and Eunyoung, in elementary school at the time, sat in the living room with their mother, variously doing homework, goofing around and helping her, and their baby brother enjoyed himself ripping up pieces of sponge and wrapping plastic. On days when she had too much work, the family would push the pile of weather strips aside and have dinner next to it.

One day, Father came home from the office later than usual to find his young children still rolling around in weather strips, and complained for the first time: 'Do you really have to leave this smelly, dusty stuff around the children?'

Her busy hands and shoulders suddenly stopped. She crawled around, putting away the wrapped weather strips in boxes, and Father knelt down next to her to sweep sponge and pieces of paper into a large plastic bag.

'I wish I could give you an easier life. I'm sorry,' he said and let out a heavy sigh. A huge shadow seemed to balloon over him and fade away.

Mother lifted and stacked boxes bigger than herself in the living room, and swept the floor next to Father.

'You're not giving me a hard life, Daddy,' she said. 'We're working hard together to make it. So stop feeling sorry for yourself as if our home is your responsibility alone. No one is asking you to, and, frankly, you're not doing it on your own,' Mother retorted coldly, but she quit the weather

strip job right away. The van driver who delivered the weather strips was sorry to hear it – she was the best and the fastest worker.

‘It’s just as well,’ said the van driver. ‘Your talents are too good to waste on weather strips. You should get into arts and crafts. I think you’ll be good at it.’

She waved him off saying she was too old to learn new things. She was thirty-five at the time. The van driver’s words seemed to have made an impression on Mother, who left young Eunyong in charge of the even younger Jiyoung, and the youngest in the care of his grandmother, and enrolled on a course. It wasn’t arts and crafts, but hairdressing. She didn’t even bother with licences. ‘You don’t need a licence to cut hair,’ she said. As soon as she picked up a few simple skills, how to cut and perm hair, she started making cheap house calls for children and the elderly around the neighbourhood.

Word spread. Mother was indeed talented, and had natural business savvy she was oblivious to. After their perms, old ladies got a simple makeover using Mother’s eyeliner and lipstick, and she threw in a quick trim for the younger sibling or the mother after cutting a child’s hair. She found out what product they used at the neighbourhood hair salon, and used something slightly more expensive on purpose.

She would read the label on the bottle to the old ladies, pointing to each word in the copy. ‘See here? New. Irritation-free. Formula. With. Ginseng. Extract. I’ve never had a single piece of ginseng in my life, but I’m treating your hair with it!’

Mother saved every last bit of cash she made and didn’t pay any tax on it. The neighbourhood hair salon lady did try to pull out a chunk of her hair for stealing her customers, but Mother was a local with a well-cultivated reputation – the customers took her side. The customer base was eventually divided up organically, and the salon and Mother were able to keep their businesses going without getting in each other’s way.

Oh Misook, Kim Jiyoung’s mother, is the fourth of five children, two boys, two girls and a boy, in that order. All five grew up and left home. Her family grew rice and did well for generations, but the world was changing. Traditionally an agricultural society, Korea was industrialising fast, and her family couldn’t get by on crops alone. Her father sent his children to the cities like most parents from rural areas did in those days. But he didn’t have the means to support all five of them through school or training that would lead to their respective career choices. In the city, rent

and living costs were expensive, and tuition was even more difficult to afford.

Oh Misook finished elementary school and helped out around the house and in the paddies. She moved to Seoul the year she turned fifteen. Her sister, two years older than her, was working at a textile factory on Cheonggyecheon. Oh Misook got a job at the same factory and moved into a chicken coop dormitory the two sisters shared with two other girls. The factory girls were all about the same age, level of education, family background and so on. The young labourers worked without adequate sleep, rest or food, thinking that was what working entailed for everyone. The heat from the textile machines was enough to drive a person insane, and rolling up their uniform skirts, which were short to begin with, didn't help – sweat dripped from their elbows and down their thighs. Many had respiratory problems from the plumes of dust that sometimes obscured their vision. The unbelievably meagre wages from working day and night, popping caffeine pills and turning jaundiced, went towards sending male siblings to school. This was a time when people believed it was up to the sons to bring honour and prosperity to the family, and that the family's wealth and happiness hinged upon male success. The daughters gladly supported the male siblings.⁴

Oh Misook's eldest brother attended medical school at a national university outside of Seoul and worked at the university hospital at his alma mater for the rest of his career, and the second eldest brother was police chief by the time he retired. Oh Misook was proud of her upstanding, hardworking, smart elder brothers and found supporting them rewarding. When her older brothers, the ones she was so proud of she would often brag about them to her friends at the factory, began to earn a living, they put the youngest boy through school. He attended a teacher training college in Seoul thanks to their support, and the eldest was praised for being the responsible firstborn son who brought honour to the family through his own success and provided for his family. Oh Misook and her sister realised only then that their turn would not come; their loving family would not be giving them the chance and support to make something of themselves. The two sisters belatedly enrolled in the company-affiliated school. They worked days and studied nights to earn their middle-school diploma. Oh Misook studied for her high-school certificate on her own and received her diploma the same year her younger brother became a high-school teacher.

When Kim Jiyong was in elementary school, her mother was reading a one-line comment her homeroom teacher had made on her journal

assignment and said, 'I wanted to be a teacher, too.'

Jiyoung burst into laughter. She found the idea outrageous because she'd thought until then that mothers could only be mothers.

'It's true. In elementary, I got the best grades out of all five of us. I was better than your eldest uncle.'

'So why didn't you become a teacher?'

'I had to work to send my brothers to school. That's how it was with everyone. All women lived like that back then.'

'Why don't you become a teacher now?'

'Now I have to work to send you kids to school. That's how it is with everyone. All mothers live like this these days.'

Her life choices, being Kim Jiyoung's mother – Oh Misook was regretting them. Jiyoung felt she was a rock, small but heavy and unyielding, holding down her mother's long skirt train. This made her sad. Her mother saw this and warmly swept back her daughter's unkempt hair.

Kim Jiyoung attended a very large elementary school that was twenty minutes away on foot along winding alleys. Each grade had between eleven and fifteen classes, fifty students to a class. Before Jiyoung entered, the school had been forced to split the lower grades into morning and afternoon classes to accommodate everyone.

Elementary school was Jiyoung's first social experience, as she did not attend kindergarten, and on the whole she did well. After an adjustment period, Eunyoung was put in charge of getting Jiyoung to school. Eunyoung checked the timetable each morning and packed her sister's books, notebooks and class announcements log, and filled her fairy princess pencil case with one eraser and four pencils that were not too sharp or too blunt. On days Jiyoung needed extra supplies, Eunyoung asked Mother for money and picked up the items at the stationery store by the school gate. Jiyoung walked to and from school without wandering off, stayed in her seat during class and did not wet herself. She wrote down the daily announcements in her class announcements log, and sometimes got 100 per cent on her dictation quizzes.

Her first obstacle in school life was the 'pranks of the boy desk-mate' that many schoolgirls experienced. To Jiyoung, it felt more like harassment or violence than pranks, and there was nothing she could do about it besides run crying to Mother and Eunyoung. They weren't much help. Eunyoung said boys were immature and that Jiyoung should just