

CHAPTER ONE





CHAPTER I

September, 1944



Wang Sunjin stared in disbelief at his new teacher. Slightly built and wearing a plain gray uniform, the man appeared only somewhat older than the twelve-year-olds in his class. Clapsed behind his back, his hands kneaded one another, the fingers nervously folding, opening, and folding again. Nevertheless, this young man with neatly trimmed hair and round spectacles stood erect at the head of Sunjin's line. He appeared dead set on doing his job well. A look of determination crossed his face as he observed the mass of wiggling students before him.

The August sun shone hot and the students grew restless. Someone at the back of the line gave a hard shove, knocking one boy into another. The elbow of the boy behind him struck Sunjin's shoulder blade.

"Ouch!" he blurted, almost dropping his book bag.

Principal Nakata, who had been delivering a welcoming speech, stopped abruptly. He fastened his eyes on Sunjin. "Aha!" said the squat man, whose own gray uniform did not fit him well. "Come here, country boy."

The students snickered openly as Sunjin shuffled forward.

“And are there any others here who ... oh yes, now I see ... you and you!” Nakata pointed out two boys, one of which stood in Sunjin’s own class line. Like Sunjin, they were dressed in ordinary street clothes, and ragged ones at that. The taller of the two hastily tucked in his shirttail. “Step up here. Be quick!”

A burning heat spread across Sunjin’s face as he mounted the platform and faced the principal. The other two boys kept their heads down. The smaller of the two curled and uncurled his toes over the edge of his straw sandals.

“Just look at the three of you,” said the principal, shaking his head. He began to pace, and as he did so the long acacia whip he wore attached to his belt dragged on the ground. Speaking slowly and clearly as if the boys were hard of hearing, he said, “You are living in Wönsan City now, not in some thatch-roof hut near a rice paddy. And furthermore, your parents have enrolled you in the Wönsan Japanese Middle School because they obviously want the best for you.”

He began to lecture about Japan ruling Korea and about the superiority of a Japanese education, and as he talked Sunjin glanced furtively at his fellow sufferers. Like him, they had the unmistakable appearance of farmers’ sons. They wore threadbare shirts and unkempt, longish hair covered their eyes and spilled over their collars. The taller of the two was biting his lip so hard it turned white. Sunjin guessed that their families, like his own, had come

to Wönsan looking for work. Had their fathers, like Sunjin's, been seized by the Japanese and hauled away somewhere to slave for the war effort?

The sensation of his own hair being yanked upward snapped Sunjin out of his thoughts.

"You see this?" Nakata was now addressing the entire student body. Muffled laughter rippled through the crowd. "Ah, you remember this, do you? Most of our Korean students had shaggy heads once, just like this one. But a Japanese scholar's hair is shaved close to his head, so as not to be a distraction. As long as you study at this school, you will become Japanese, speak our language, and learn our customs. What are your names?"

"Yang Sunjin."

"Kim Jiho."

"And are *you* also a seventh grader?" said the principal to the smallest boy.

The boy scooted closer to the one called Jiho, still staring down at his sandals. He was severely bow-legged, and looked as if he had stopped growing too soon. He appeared so shy that his eyes could barely fasten for long on anyone's face.

"He is twelve," offered Jiho. "Our mothers are sisters. His name is Kim Jae-Won."

So they are cousins, thought Sunjin, feeling a stab of pity for the small one.

Principal Nakata crossed his arms and rolled his eyes in disgust. "Boys, I do not want your Korean names. I want your Japanese names. If your families did not adopt Japanese names, they could not have enrolled you in this school. Without Japanese names

they could not obtain ration cards or find jobs. Therefore, since you do not appear to be starving to death, you must have Japanese names. What are they?"

The cousins looked at each other, and Jiho whispered something. In unison they replied, "Sato."

Sunjin said, "Yamamoto."

Nakata gave a satisfied grunt. "Very well." One by one he seized the boys by the shoulders and turned them to face the assembly. From the podium, each class line looked like a writhing, many-eyed snake waiting to devour its prey. "Students of the Wönsan Japanese Middle School, I want you to welcome these new boys, and help them along in the process of becoming civilized."

A few students giggled in reply, but a stern look from Nakata shut them up.

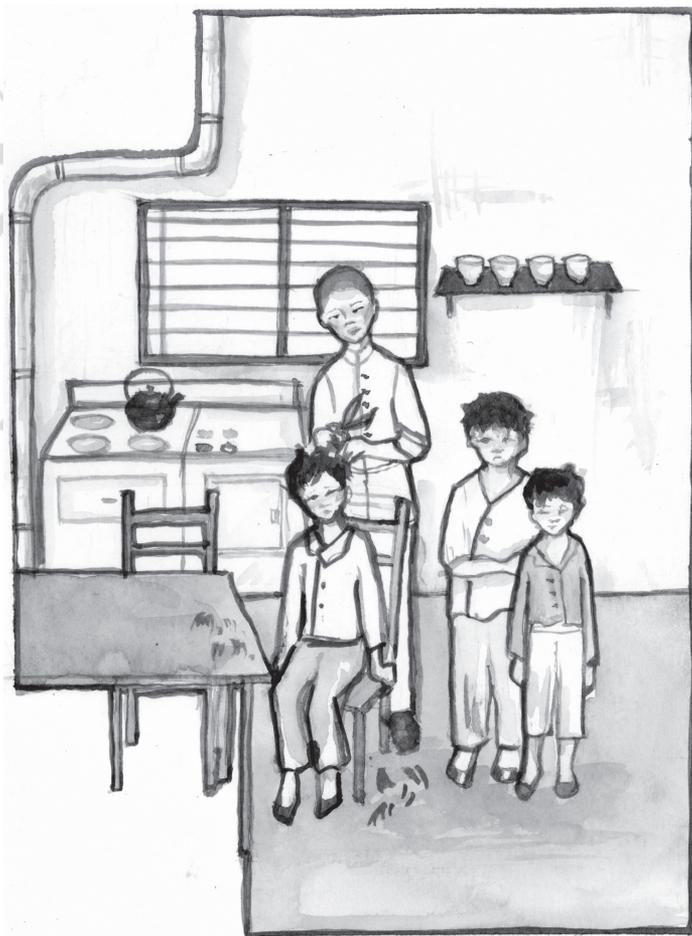
"The hair must go. Kitano-*san*?"

The young teacher stepped forward.

"Take care of the problem," ordered the principal. "Taller Sato boy! Yamamoto boy! Kitano-san is your new sensei. Follow him. The smaller Sato will follow too."

Kitano-sensei herded all three boys away as Principal Nakata led the rest of the students in reciting the Pledge of Imperial Subjects. The teacher took them into a small room outfitted with western-style table and chairs. A kettle of water simmered on an electric hot plate and small, white teacups sat neatly arranged on a shelf. The sensei opened a cupboard drawer and pulled out a pair of clippers.

"It will hurt!" wailed Jae-Won, his round face



turning pale. He dug stubby fingers into his cheeks and backed into a corner behind the table.

“It may,” said Kitano-sensei. “If it does, it is because I have no experience in cutting hair. But I will do my best to cut only your hair and not your scalps.” His eyes settled on Sunjin. “You first.”

Feeling queasy, Sunjin stepped forward and

bowed low in submission to the clippers. What would Haraboji say? Sunjin's grandfather had scolded his daughter-in-law harshly for enrolling her son in a Japanese school and agreeing to take on a Japanese surname. Now came this new outrage, another insult to all things Korean.

Though he tried to be gentle, the teacher wrestled with the unfamiliar clippers, tugging and snipping and once or twice nicking the skin. When it was all over, Sunjin's head seemed to float, weightless and strange. Cool air hit the back of his neck, sending a shiver up his scalp.

The sensei surveyed his work. "Well, you can see that I am no barber. But the first and most difficult step has been taken. A professional barber will have to tidy it up. I suggest that to keep it looking neat you should visit the barber every four weeks."

Resigned to his fate, Jiho offered his head to the clippers. Still sniffing, his cousin did the same. When all three heads had been shorn, the boys exchanged looks of silent misery. As the electric bell above the doorway rang, a din of voices rose up from outside. The yard echoed with marching feet. The opening assembly had come to an end and classes would soon begin.

A middle-aged teacher with a double chin poked his head into the room. "Finished yet? Good! Come along, Jae-Won; there are two seventh grade classrooms, and you are in mine."

With a look of despair, Jae-Won parted from Jiho. Before leaving, Jae-Won's teacher turned to

Sunjin and Jiho. “Take my advice, boys, and get yourselves a school uniform. Away with those shabby clothes! Why make yourselves laughingstocks? Just because you are Korean doesn’t mean you’re stupid. You can learn as well as any of the Japanese boys. Don’t give them reason to make fun of you.”

Kitano-sensei nodded in agreement as he wiped hair from the scissors and put them away.



Sensei introduced himself to his class by pulling a sword from a shiny black scabbard. Its long blade arched in a delicate curve. He held it just so, pacing back and forth, making sure each boy could see the silk-wrapped handle with its decorative lions of beaten gold. “My name is Kitano Kiyoshi,” he said. “You will call me Mr. Kitano. I am the proud descendent of *samurai* warriors, and the sword I hold in my hands is over four hundred years old.”

Each boy gasped quietly, imagining in his own way the sword’s adventures.

“Let the sword be to this class a symbol of Japan’s strength and beauty. As your teacher, it is my duty to educate you in the Japanese way – to give you the best of what my country has to offer. I vow to do my utmost to teach you if you will do your utmost to learn.”

Kitano-sensei handled the heirloom cautiously, as if it did not belong in the hands of a teacher. He seemed relieved when at last he returned it to its scabbard and laid it gently on his desk. Then he

launched into the day's lessons, reading aloud from textbooks and writing on the blackboard. Moving from desk to desk, he gracefully corrected one boy's algebra equation, changed the stroke of another's Japanese character, flipped through a stack of maps to find the answer to an obscure geography question. He showed great patience with his students, most of whom were Korean and still made mistakes when speaking or reading Japanese.

There were only two Japanese boys in the class. Hitoshi and Makoto sat in the front row and kept aloof from their Korean classmates. Soo-Chan, Sunjin's deskmate, whispered that he knew for a fact they had been kicked out of a Japanese private school for bad behavior. When Sunjin, called on to answer a question, stumbled over a word, Hitoshi snorted to Makoto in a loud whisper, "That turd came right out of the cow pasture!"

The class burst into laughter.

Sensei rapped his bamboo pointer sharply on a desk. The room fell silent. "You might mispronounce Japanese too, Hitoshi, if you had spent your early school years in a sōdang. Am I right about that, Sunjin?"

He was right. Until the fifth grade, when he began attending a Japanese school near his tiny village of Sambakkae, Sunjin had been educated in the very same way his father and grandfather had.

Sensei paused in his science lecture to talk about traditional Korean sōdang schools. He spoke about Confucianism, and the long and close friendship between China and Korea. Sunjin felt a surge of

pride as the teacher talked; it was true that he knew his Chinese characters every bit as well as Korean script. But then Kitano-sensei said, "You city boys must work alongside me to help bring Sunjin and Jiho up to a Japanese level."

Sunjin felt his skin go hot as he withered inside.

Late in the afternoon of that first humiliating school day, the sensei unrolled a large map of Japan and tacked it to the wall. "Observe," he said, "what a vast and rich land Japan is." He aimed his pointer at a large island. "Hokkaido is the center of Japanese farming, forestry, fishing and mining. It contains ninety percent of Japan's pastureland. Its capital city is Sapporo." Sliding the pointer farther south, he continued, "Japan has more than two thousand fishing ports ... "

Sunjin understood most of what his teacher said. But some Japanese words were still unknown to him, and his mind wandered. He thought, *If Japan is so great, why do the Japanese have to force Koreans to slave in their factories?* Of course he already knew the answer – Japan was at war, and he had heard it whispered that the war had overwhelmed her. Yet Sunjin had resigned himself to the fact that Japan would emerge victorious. For thirty years now, Kitano-sensei's strong country had ruled Korea. Sunjin had never known any different. Since earliest childhood he had been trained to bow respectfully to all Japanese, for they were the ones in authority. With his own eyes he had seen that some Japanese were cruel and some were kind, but they were all to be called *master*. And now Kitano-sensei was his

master. He forced his ears back to his teacher's words and his eyes back to the map.

When the final bell rang, Sunjin felt a chilling dread. At the schoolyard gate he watched Jiho and Jae-Won meet up and go home together. Jae-Won's eyes were still swollen from crying. Sunjin turned in the other direction and trailed behind the handful of Japanese students that attended his school. Being so few, they stuck together, rarely mixing with the Korean students. The sons of government officials and businessmen, they wore finely tailored school uniform jackets and shiny leather shoes. They cackled at jokes and playfully swung their leather book bags at each other until tall, athletic Hitoshi turned around and spied Sunjin.

"Hey, look! It's the turd from the cow pasture."

The others began to moo like cows.

In that moment, Sunjin forgot all his training to show respect. "If you Japanese don't like Korean cow pastures, why don't you go home?"

As they stared at him, blank-faced, it dawned on Sunjin that they hadn't understood a word he'd said. He had shouted in Korean. They simply laughed and turned around to walk on.

"He doesn't even speak Japanese," jeered Hitoshi.

But another boy, whose thick, close-cropped hair was due for a trimming, hung a little behind the group. "Don't worry," he said. "They won't hurt you."

Hitoshi whirled around and pitched a pinecone at his friend. It struck the back of his head and tumbled to the ground. "They won't hurt you," he mimicked in a silly falsetto voice. "Hurry up, Saburo."

Saburo shrugged and scurried to catch up with his friends. None of them glanced backward again.

Sunjin dragged himself home, punching a fist at every telephone pole along the way. By the time he arrived at the front gate of the house where his family rented a room, his knuckles were chafed raw.