

# LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

## A Desire for Something to Happen

By Jung Yun

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MAY 8, 2017

TWO STUDENTS ARE ROLLING a large barrel — not a keg, but a real wooden barrel — down the street as I write this. From the sixth-floor window of my office in Washington, DC, I watch as they maneuver toward a busy intersection, wait patiently at the crosswalk, and then disappear into the crowd. On my ever-expanding list of strange sightings, barrel rolling doesn't even crack the top 100, not after spending nearly 20 years on various college campuses as a student, faculty member, or administrator. Perhaps that's why I saw nothing out of the ordinary in the opening line of Jimin Han's debut novel, *A Small Revolution*: "A woman is running in a field of fallen leaves, and a man is

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### **A Small Revolution**

By Jimin Han

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Little A

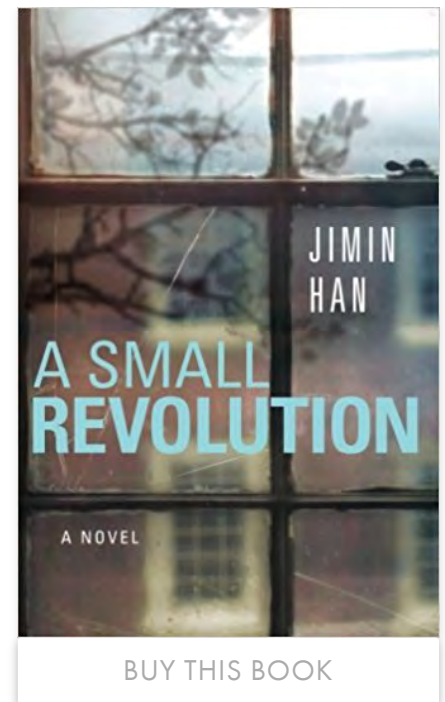
207 Pages

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running behind her.” Given so many years of conditioning, I assumed these characters were joggers, a love-struck couple, or friends running late to a class. But within a few sentences, the scene takes a frightening turn and the woman watching this pair from her window is calling 911.

That woman is Yoona Lee, the novel’s 18-year-old narrator. It’s the fall of 1985, and Yoona is a newly arrived freshman at Weston, a small college in central Pennsylvania. Weston’s campus is a bucolic, well-insulated place compared to her home in Millsberg, New York, where regular occurrences of domestic violence caused her to fold ever inward. It also provides relief from the chaos of Seoul, South Korea, where she spent the summer immediately before college, in an atmosphere darkened by political unrest and state-sponsored police violence. The impressions left on Yoona by both these worlds — home and homeland — come to a head when Lloyd Kang, the man running on the lawn, bursts into her dorm room with a shotgun pointed at her friend, Daiyu, the woman he was chasing.

The early pages of *A Small Revolution* are thrilling and jarring. Sections of the rapidly developing hostage situation alternate with backstory about Lloyd’s unexpected arrival at Weston weeks earlier, as well as interior monologue in which Yoona addresses a mysterious “you.” The contrast in pacing and tone is compelling. While the hostage sections spike furiously with tension, the interior sections meander with heartbreak and longing. Eventually, we learn that “you” is Jaesung Kim, the object of both Yoona’s and Lloyd’s affection. The trio — all Korean-American students signed up for the same group tour — met a few months earlier in Seoul during that chaotic



summer of protest. They quickly became inseparable, with the attachment between Yoona and Jaesung turning romantic. Jaesung, however, died in a car accident shortly after Yoona returned to the United States to start college. Or so she thought until Lloyd appeared on campus, insisting that the accident was a cover-up and Jaesung had actually been kidnapped by the government.

If Lloyd's claims seem outlandish, it's important to consider the historic role that young people played — and continue to play — in South Korean politics, taking part in major protests since the early 20th century when Japan still occupied the peninsula. It's also worth noting that despite various regime changes, government suppression of protesters was not an uncommon practice in Korea, before or after the Japanese were forced to leave. In 1980, Chonnam National University students organized an anti-martial law protest in Gwangju that descended into nine straight days of violence after government troops beat and fired upon demonstrators. Over 140 civilians died during this period, and approximately 2,000 residents of the city disappeared. By the time Yoona, Lloyd, and Jaesung arrived in Seoul five years later, the spirit of student protest that existed before the Gwangju Massacre had fully mobilized into a movement with a clear and passionate vision of South Korean democracy. Caught up in this unique historic moment, the idealistic Jaesung briefly flirted with the idea of becoming a student martyr by wrapping himself in gasoline-soaked sheets, setting himself on fire, and jumping from a building — “a protest for the world to see.” To Yoona's relief, Lloyd talked him out of it, reminding Jaesung, “You can't change anything if you're dead. Who's going to be left?”

Because of the odd circumstances surrounding Jaesung's death, which occurred while he and Lloyd were driving to meet with student protest organizers, Yoona is initially eager to believe Lloyd's account of what happened, even as his explanations grow more convoluted and inconsistent. She also doesn't seem to notice the way Lloyd keeps expanding the circle of people they can't trust, effectively distancing Yoona from her friends, including Serena Im, a cello prodigy and Weston classmate whose South Korean media contacts could actually help Jaesung.

Lloyd and I had an uncanny connection during this time. Lloyd called it being on the same wavelength. He'd appear wherever I was, wandering into the same room I was in at the library or finding me in line at the bookstore.

Despite numerous unresolved discrepancies and Lloyd's increasingly paranoid and possessive behavior, Yoona continues to believe him, long after we understand that she probably shouldn't. She can't see what Han renders for the reader like an orchestra reaching its most thunderous, heart-stopping crescendo: something about Lloyd isn't right.

At times, Yoona's desperation to hang on to Jaesung, her first love and the father of her unborn child, is both touching and deeply frustrating. But it's a believable by-product of her abusive family life, which left her with a hollow understanding of love.

I never saw my parents kiss, never saw them embrace. My father patted my mother's arm with tenderness, I could admit that. And she handed him things, like his coat when it was snowing

outside or a glass of tea on a hot day. And in the transfer, I saw love.

Given the unfamiliar tenderness that Yoona experienced with Jaesung and her guilt over not being able to protect her mother from abuse, it's entirely plausible that she would continue to hope much longer than others might consider reasonable. Yoona, after all, is practicing what she learned from her father, a violent and self-loathing man who once told her: "You have to be patient. You have to endure for people you love."

Strangely, Lloyd acts out something else that Yoona's father tells her about love: "You kill for it sometimes ... I've seen people kill for less." The hostage drama ensues after Yoona realizes that Lloyd is the one who can't be trusted and tells him to leave campus, which he refuses to do. When she finally decides to oust Lloyd from her life, he interprets her rejection of him as giving up on Jaesung, a betrayal he refuses to forgive. Determined to make her believe again, as well as prevent her from aborting Jaesung's child, Lloyd takes Yoona, Daiyu, and two others captive. His dialogue, rendered throughout the hostage scenes in small caps, effectively captures both his terror and rage. He demands to meet privately with President Ronald Reagan, South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan, and North Korean leader Kim Il Sung because he thinks their intervention will free his friend and prove to Yoona that he was right all along. He repeatedly asks the hostage negotiator, "Do you think I'm stupid?" as if he knows on some level that his demands are an act of madness.

Throughout these tense scenes, Yoona blames herself — for believing Lloyd's claims about the KCIA (the

South Korean National Intelligence Service) having information about Jaesung, for welcoming Lloyd's unexpected arrival at Weston and bringing him into her friends' lives, and for allowing him to accompany her to New York and meet her family when her mother was sick. As she replays various incidents with Lloyd and revisits his bizarre claims, we squirm with discomfort as we learn how he deceived and manipulated her over time, much like an abuser would. And yet, due to Han's deft touch, we can't help but feel sympathy for this young man as his mind unravels. We also can't help but notice the deafening silence of his parents, who seem embarrassed by their son's actions and the inconvenience he's brought upon others. Even when Lloyd's life is potentially at risk, they are unable to bring themselves to say the words "mental illness."

Han masterfully portrays the claustrophobic confinement experienced by Yoona and her friends as Lloyd grows increasingly agitated with their situation and the failure of the negotiator to meet his demands. "Love, love, love. All I've ever given you was love," he says to Yoona as he paces the small room with his shotgun. He sets and resets an imaginary clock with the negotiator, threatening to kill one of the girls if he isn't given a plane, and then later, a car. "Love, love, love, love. Why don't I deserve love? We had a plan, Yoona. We were going to find Jaesung. Why didn't you need me anymore?" Lloyd casts a disturbed and fractured shadow early on in the novel, but like Yoona, we only come to understand just how disturbed in hindsight. The morose, brooding side he displayed in Seoul presages what he will eventually become in the dorm room after losing the two people — Jaesung and Yoona — he holds closest to him. The "love" he professes to her is not the romantic variety, but an

obsessive, controlling version of it, similar to her father's. It makes sense that when Lloyd and Yoona's father finally meet, the consequences will be violent and tragic.

*A Small Revolution* is a novel of remarkably rendered extremes. It casts the sweetness of Yoona and Jaesung's first love opposite the emotionally bereft version practiced by her troubled parents. It contrasts the promise of Jaesung's wide-eyed idealism with the dark and disturbed ideas forming in Lloyd's mind. It is an ambitious and accomplished debut that pulls us out of our comfortable window seats and places us in a room, in a young woman's heart, and in a nascent democracy's earliest days. In doing so, *A Small Revolution* embodies what hope is — a desire for something to happen — and much like Yoona, readers of this novel will continue to hope for something better to happen to each of these characters, long after we know that it won't.

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