

JUNG H. YUN

The Strange Genius of American Men

ALABAMA IS BRAGGING ABOUT HIS PEANUT FIELDS AGAIN. Twice as long as a football field, he says. I don't know what football is yet, but I imagine his fields are very big because Alabama spreads his arms like wings whenever he talks about them. Which is always. His arms are short and thick with muscles, cut sharp like stone. He will never be a good bird, but I smile at him anyway. *Come again soon.*

Great Aunt waits until he leaves, then flings open the curtain that separates us.

"Which one was that?" she asks.

"Alabama."

"The one with all the peanuts?"

I nod.

She waves her hand in the air, shooping away a bug I can't see. "No farmers," she says, snapping the curtain shut.

The store is quiet for an hour. Only a convoy passes—twelve trucks long—pelted the windows with gravel as it rumbles down the street. I dust the shelves, waiting for Chungmee to arrive. When she doesn't, I straighten things that are already straight. Jars of freeze-dried coffee, boxes of Air Mail envelopes, cans of soup and Spam and corned beef hash. Too much time passes like this, waiting for Chungmee, wondering if she'll come late, or not at all. We have plans to see a movie today, an American movie starring Ingrid Bergman. I watch the clock as the ticket line wraps around the corner, past my window, and down the street.

Iowa arrives, as he usually arrives, at half past two every Sunday. He pushes through the crowd outside the store, leans on my counter with one elbow, and asks for his weekly supply of Pall Malls and rubbers.

"Ten large," he says, smiling. His teeth are straight and white, neat like a fence. If I didn't dislike him so much, I might like him a little, if only because he's so clean. "On second thought," he says, "make that a dozen."

I count out twelve rubbers and drop the coin-shaped packages into a paper bag. Iowa watches me, as he always watches me, so I turn my back to him.

"Do you know what a tulip is?" he asks.

"It's a tree," I tell him. "The state tree of Indiana."

Iowa shakes his head. "No, it's a flower."

I search my memory and clearly see a tree. Tall, with green and yellow blossoms shaped like bells. I want to correct him as he corrected me, but I know better—responding will only encourage him more.

"It's a Dutch flower," he says. "Originally from Holland. It looks like a little cup."

I nod, but in my head, I still see a tree.

"My hometown in Iowa hosts a big tulip festival every spring. Tulips for miles and miles. Anyway, that dress of yours, it got me thinking about tulips."

My dress is brown, a shade lighter than bark, nothing at all like flowers except for the dirt they grow in. I hand Iowa his rubbers and a carton of Pall Malls, hoping he has nothing more to say about tulips.

"Six dollars and fifty cents, please."

Iowa peels off seven bills from a thick roll of money, held together by a dirty rubber band. Twice, he tosses the roll in the air, making a show of it, how much he carries. I give him two quarters in change, which he slides back across the counter for me. Then he closes his left eye, pulling tight the fine wrinkles underneath. *Wink.*

"You keep those," he says. "Your birthday's coming up, right?"

I stare at the quarters, surprised that he remembered something I'd forgotten myself.

"So how old will you be?" he asks.

"Eighteen. Nineteen, if you count the Korean way."

"Oh, right. You count extra here, like dog years."

I hold open the front door to let him pass, certain that my smile looks too fake. *Come again soon.*

After Iowa leaves, I reach for my book under the counter. Indiana begins on page 93. The photo is there, just as I remembered it. A tall, leafy tree with pale open blossoms that look nothing like little cups. The caption under the photo reads: "The majestic Tulip Tree was formally adopted by the Indiana state legislature in 1931." I snap the book shut and put the quarters in my pocket. Iowa is an idiot. A peacock. A joke.

Great Aunt comes out from behind the curtain, shaking her transistor radio. She squeezes past me into the narrow space behind the counter and takes a package of batteries off the shelf.

"The Communists are advancing south," she says, smiling. "Who was that?"

"Iowa," I tell her, dusting things that aren't dusty.

"No good, that one. You see what he buys." Great Aunt leans in close, wrinkling her nose at me. "Cigarettes and . . . rubbers. What kind of dirty

man is that?" She slides four new batteries into the radio and holds it against her ear, pulling out the antenna until a thin, whiny static fills the air.

I know what kind of man Iowa is, what kind of men they all are. I don't need any of her warnings. I inch my stool away, dragging the metal legs across the tile. Great Aunt rarely spends time in the storefront anymore. She says her shriveled face isn't what servicemen want to see. Instead, she keeps to herself in the storage room with her radio, the curtain pulled tight between us. I prefer it that way. Her, back there. Me, up here. The space behind the counter is too small for us both, and her skin always smells rotten, like fruit gone bad in a barrel. As I inch further away, I notice a man approaching the store, a uniformed man with three gold stripes on each shoulder. My mouth goes dry as he opens the door and Great Aunt eyes him up and down. Please don't be from New Hampshire, I think. Anywhere but New Hampshire.

"Hello, sir," she says. "Can we help you?"

The man looks around uncertainly. "Birthday cards?" He glances at me, nods once in my direction. "I need to send one to my mother."

Great Aunt pokes me in the side. "Over there in the corner. Lots of birthday cards to choose from."

When his back is turned, Great Aunt pokes me again and whispers: "A man who takes care of his mother. Now that's what you want."

He returns to the counter with a card that has a red heart in the middle, surrounded by candy-colored words: *Honey, I love you so much.* I look at Great Aunt, wondering what she thinks of him now, but she's still too excited by his stripes to notice.

"So, are you new to the base?" she asks, sliding the card into a bag.

"Not really. I just don't get off as much as I should."

Great Aunt hands him his change. "Well, come back any time. We have lots of things here."

"Thank you," he says, looking straight at me. "I guess I see why all the boys on base keep talking about this store."

Great Aunt puts her hand on my shoulder and laughs. It sounds like air leaking from a tire. "She's very pretty, yes. But smart too. Goes to church every Sunday like you do."

To demonstrate, she lifts the small gold cross I wear around my neck. The thin wire chain is mine; the cross hanging from it, I found in an alleyway. Great Aunt knows as well as I do that I've never been inside a church, that I wear the cross for no other reason than it's pretty, but she thinks going to church will make them like me more.

"And where are you from?" she asks. "What's your home like, sir?"

My spine goes straight. Please, please don't be from New Hampshire, I think.

"Mississippi," he says. "Couple of miles south of Vicksburg. Not much to say about it, other than it's hot there. Hotter than this, even."

Great Aunt presses her foot on top of mine. Gently. Then not so gently. I'm supposed to say something clever about Mississippi, something about Jackson or mud pie or magnolias, but I can't. Not for him.

"My niece has been reading about Mississippi. She even knows how to spell it. Show him, Nanhee. Show him how you can spell."

Doubles of everything float past me. S's and I's and P's. I blink them away, determined not to utter a sound. Great Aunt shifts all of her weight onto my foot, but I shake my head and look down at the counter, at the fingerprints of strangers pressed into the glass. Even if she crushes every last bone, I won't speak, not to someone who doesn't think I can read a birthday card, someone who has a girlfriend at home and wants a whore over here.

"Oh, well." Great Aunt smiles with all of her teeth. "Not today, I guess. Come back again tomorrow. Nanhee works every day."

"Nan," Mississippi says, clipping my name in half. "That's very pretty, if you don't mind me saying."

Our eyes meet, and I take a good look at him, at the beads of sweat running down his cheek. He's piggy, I think. Pink-skinned, with a round, upturned nose. His eyes are a pleasant, milky shade of blue, but too glassy to be trusted. I mind him very much, so I offer him nothing, not even a smile or a wave goodbye. Definitely not a "come again soon."

After he leaves, Great Aunt opens and closes things. Opens and closes them again. "You'll never get married like that," she says. "You think they want a wife who doesn't talk?"

I pull out my book, turn to Mississippi and draw another check on the corner of the page. "Cotton," I tell her, pointing to a picture of a fluffy white plant so she can see. "They grow cotton in Mississippi." I hold up the book a few seconds longer than I should because I want her to notice how many checks I've made on the page, how carefully I'm following her instructions.

"You and that stupid book," Great Aunt says, throwing her hands in the air. "What does it matter what they grow there? He had three stripes, didn't you notice? *Three* stripes. How many men like that come in here?"

Not many, I know. Usually, I look at a man's shoulders before I look at him. Great Aunt says the more stripes a man collects, the more money he earns from the army. It's a good system, I think. Alabama talks and talks about his peanut fields, but his bare shoulders tell me something different, and this I need to know because I know what men do. The butcher's daughter was engaged to Colorado, a tall, dirty blond who liked to show off pictures of his cars—a red one with a white stripe on the side, a black one that looked like a Jeep. Last winter, he flew home with only one leg and now the

butcher's daughter sits at home, her belly fat with Colorado's child, waiting for an envelope of money that will never come. She should have known. Colorado had no stripes; he probably didn't even have any cars.

"Let's eat," Great Aunt snaps. "Go put the sign on the door."

We take our meal in the storage room. Me at the table. Great Aunt in the corner, rice bowl to face, radio to ear. Great Aunt is obsessed with the war. Whenever the Communists advance, she laughs out loud and counts her blessings. Whenever the Americans and the ROK advance, she counts her dollar bills. Lately, though, the news has been more confusing than usual. The Americans pushed the Communists past the Kumsong River last week. This week, the Communists are pushing back. Troops have been going this way and that way for the past three years, but now the new American president wants his troops to come home. Great Aunt doesn't like to hear people talking about how the war might end soon. Americans, she insists, are winners. They won't go home until they win. This, I suppose, is what she dreams about at night. The Americans and their money, staying here forever. And if not forever, then long enough to marry me off to one of them, preferably a rich one with stripes. Of course, if she asked me—and Great Aunt will never ask me—I'd rather spend the rest of my life in this store, selling rubbers and cigarettes and greeting cards, before leaving it with an American.

I unpack the rest of our lunch and serve Great Aunt a cup of barley tea. She lifts it to her mouth and half-moons of steam fill her glasses.

"Too hot," she says. "You always make it too hot."

Last week, she said the tea was too cold.

"And how long has it been since we had meat for lunch?"

"Meat is too expensive," I tell her, not for the first time.

"Then you should make noodles. Shred some meat on top. Or boil some beef bones for soup. That would be a meal." Great Aunt thumps her chest and burps. "By the way, where's that little friend of yours? I thought you were going to a movie today."

I look at the clock as the long hand clicks upward. The movie started half an hour ago. A disappointment, I think, but not a surprise. I shrug my shoulders and watch the flies gathering around my bowl.

"She's at the base. She had to work."

"She's working a lot these days, isn't she? I haven't seen that pig face of hers in weeks."

I have no reason to lie for Chungmee, no reason other than speaking the truth makes it real. Until recently, the two of us went to the movies every Sunday. We were always the first in line, always the first to claim the two worn velvet seats in the back row. There, we watched double features of

American romances dubbed in Korean, with starlets dressed in clothes too pretty to imagine wearing ourselves. When Chungmee found a job at the army's PX, I began to see less of her. Now that she has a boyfriend, I see less of her still. I don't think much of California, who Chungmee refers to as "Tim." He comes to the store from time to time and buys magazines filled with Hollywood pin-up girls like Lana Turner and Gloria Grahame and Carroll Baker. Chungmee is no Lana Turner, but she could do better than California, who sometimes smells like perfume and beer.

"Is she still dating that red-headed boy?"

I nod, not bothering to look up from the table. The last time I saw them both, Chungmee brought California to the theater for a Vivian Leigh double feature. She sat between us, whispering stupid things in his ear the entire time, not paying attention to me or the movie at all. During the intermission, I noticed that California's hand was resting under her skirt, as if the space between her legs belonged to him already. I could hardly remember what happened to that poor Blanche woman in the streetcar movie. Everyone on the screen seemed to be yelling at each other, but I couldn't hear them anymore.

"See? Even *she* has a boyfriend," Great Aunt sniffs. "And she's not half as pretty as you. Her nose is too flat, like the midwife smacked her face instead of her bottom when she was born." She lifts her bowl to her mouth, scraping the last bit of rice inside. "You know what the difference is between you two?"

"What?"

"She's not afraid to talk to them. And she's not the least bit picky, either. You, on the other hand, you're nothing but picky. Pick, pick, pick."

Great Aunt bobs her head like a sick chicken as she says this. I want to remind her that she was the one who gave me the book, the *Encyclopedia of America* that she found in a garbage can near the base. The cover was torn off, but inside, the color pictures were still clean and new. A map for every state. A flower, a motto, a bird. Great Aunt encouraged me to study it. She told me not to hurry. I had no reason to act like the other girls in town, the ones who fell all over themselves if a serviceman floated them a smile. I was a prize, she said. A pretty girl who could read and write English, do long math without paper or pen, cook and clean and not talk back. She told me to mark each state with a check whenever I met someone who lived there. She told me to learn everything there was to know about America and her men. Meet at least one from every state, she said, then pick the best man you can.

These days, all of the pages have at least five or six checks on them except for New Hampshire, which has none.



Chungmee arrives on the following Sunday with no apology or explanation for the week before. I'm so happy to see her, I quickly forget that I have something to forgive. Instead, I admire her new yellow dress, a "sundress" she calls it, with two long strings that tie in the back with a bow. Great Aunt admires the dress too, looking it up and down with a suspicious eye. The color is too bright to be practical, the cut too stylish to be cheap. Nothing a sensible girl would buy for herself.

"Good material," Great Aunt says, pinching the hem between her fingers. "Are they really paying you that much at the PX?"

Chungmee glances at her feet and shrugs. "I've been working extra hours lately."

The way she shifts her weight from one foot to another I know she's lying, but Great Aunt has loud opinions about women who accept gifts from men. The line, she says, between gifts and money is no line at all. Chungmee continues shifting her feet, but Great Aunt is too busy with her radio to notice. She shakes the plastic case like a can of condensed milk, as if shaking it will make the insides work again.

"Have you been playing with this thing?" she asks.

"No," I tell her—and this is the truth. Nothing said on the radio is worth hearing these days, not since the Americans changed their minds and pledged more troops to us. "Can we go now, please? The movie's starting soon."

"Such a waste," Great Aunt says, repeating the same speech she gives every time I go to the movies. "You could be minding the store instead of sitting in the dark, throwing away perfectly good money." She sighs loudly. "What would your parents say if they knew I let you do this? They asked me to raise you well, to teach you to be respectable."

The speech is tolerable until Great Aunt mentions my parents, who left me in her care when I was four or five. I never hear from them anymore, but I know Great Aunt sends them my wages because she always makes a big show of it, how my parents wouldn't survive without her. Chungmee once asked if I was angry at them for leaving me and I said no, that's just what farmers did with their daughters. My only regret is that they're strangers to me now, strangers who I assume must have been pretty desperate or dumb if they thought someone like Great Aunt would make me respectable.

"You'd like the movie today," Chungmee says. "It's about a nun who takes care of children at an orphanage."

Great Aunt gives the radio another shake, then presses two coins into my palm. "Fine, fine. Go waste my money on nuns," she says. "But come back

after it's done, before it gets dark."

Chungmee and I take off running, past the base and the newspaper store and the noodle stand. The afternoon is humid, and our hands sweat, clasped together as they are, the same way we used to run from place to place as little girls. At the fishmonger's shop, we turn into an alley and stop to catch our breath, taking in air that smells ripe with saltfish and cod.

"Let's keep going," I tell her. "The line's probably getting long."

Chungmee shakes her head. "We're not going to the movie. I have something else to do today, and I need you to come with me."

It's been months since Chungmee needed me for anything. I'm so grateful to hear the words, to feel her hand in mine, that I let her lead me further into the alley, asking no questions about what she plans to do or where she plans to go. We turn into another alley, narrower than the one before, and I follow her as she looks from one building to the next, searching for the sign we eventually find in a cracked window: *Dr. Myungsik Kim*. I know this man, I think. A tall, unreasonably elegant doctor from the north. I saw him at the vegetable stand once, buying whole ginseng by the kilo. When he left, the vegetable man called him an American word I didn't know.

"What could you possibly want with him?" I ask, tempted to use the word again, but thinking better of it since I still don't know what "bastard" means.

Chungmee reaches into the pocket of her dress and pulls out a handkerchief. When she unwraps it, I see crumpled American bills, dozens of them. "I finally saved enough," she says. "I'm getting one of those operations so I can look like the girls in the movies."

Chungmee's face is flat and moon-shaped, surrounded by hair that falls to her shoulders like a stiff broom. And her nose, as Great Aunt is fond of saying, is barely a bump with two slits. Nothing could make her look like one of the girls in the movies, but I never wanted or needed that.

"Did California put you up to this?" I ask. "Do your parents know what you're doing?"

She pockets the handkerchief and scowls. "*Tim*. His name is Tim. And the two of us will be married and living far away from here soon, so my parents won't have anything to say about how I spend my money."

This is the first I've heard of marriage. It feels worse than I expected. The thought of Chungmee, married to that shiftless, stripeless man, maybe even moving all the way to California where I'll never see her again—I don't know what to do except grab her by the arm as she reaches for the door.

"But *I* think you're beautiful. Doesn't that mean anything?" I lean toward her, hoping to press my lips against hers before she jumps away, but I'm too late.

"I told you I don't want to do that anymore," she says, looking around

the empty alley. "That was just practice before."

She always says this—it was just practice—but I never thought so little of our time together in the theater. In the dark, on those soft green velvet seats, Chungmee was completely mine. Out here in the open, with the glare and the heat beating down on us, we're nothing.

I kick a large rock down the alley, raising a cloud of dust in its trail. "Why would you waste your money on something like this?" I ask, kicking another, and another.

"It's not a waste. I want *men* to think I'm beautiful. That's how it's supposed to be, dummy. Now are you staying or not? Because I can do this alone, you know. I just thought it might be nice to bring a friend along."

I should be hurt by this, hurt by the fact that I'm no longer Chungmee's "best" friend, only "a" friend. Like "a" neighbor or "a" schoolmate, someone too unimportant to be singled out from the rest. I should be hurt, but I'm not. I've known this was coming for a while now. California, I think, is to blame for this. California, Mississippi, Iowa, Colorado, Alabama—all of them. They've turned us into idiots with the lives they promise, and girls like Chungmee, they're not smart enough to see.

"I'll stay," I tell her, because being "a" friend to Chungmee is better than nothing at all.

"Good, then. Just stay out of the way and let me talk."

She knocks on the door and an elderly man's face appears in the window. *What do you want?* he mouths through the glass.

Chungmee takes one finger to each eye and pulls up on her lids. The door opens quickly and the man from the vegetable stand appears, wearing a bright white shirt with a green scarf tied around his neck.

"Both of you?" he asks, holding a lit cigarette between his lips.

"No, just me," she says.

He tips back Chungmee's head and massages her eyelids with his thumbs. "Fine," he says, his voice soothing like milk. "You'll do just fine."

I want to swat his hands away, but he stops and turns his attentions to me. "And what about you?" he asks, leaning in too close. "Your eyes would be perfect for this." He reaches toward my face, but I jerk back.

"No. Just her, like she said."

He shrugs and waves us into his office, which isn't an office at all, but a small house. The living room is sparsely furnished, with only a lamp and a long brown sofa missing one of its cushions. I tug once on Chungmee's hand, but she ignores me.

"Where do you work?" I ask.

The doctor points to a set of painted swinging doors. I close my eyes and imagine a clean, brightly lit space behind them, like the doctors' offices in

the movies with their gleaming metal instruments and spotless white sheets. Instead, when I open the doors, I see a kitchen table pushed up against the wall, trapped by three mismatched chairs on each side. There are dirty dishes in the sink, a pot of something half eaten on the stove, a basket of moldy onions and turnips hanging from the ceiling.

"This? This is where you do your work?"

The doctor smiles. "Why? What's the matter?"

I hold out my hand to Chungmee. "I changed my mind. You can't do this. Not here."

She plants herself on the sofa, folding her arms across her chest. "You said you wouldn't talk."

"Chungmee, let's go. This isn't a real doctor's office. He's probably not even a real doctor."

"Calm down, calm down," he says. "Of course, I'm a real doctor. Look at how I'm dressed. The only reason I do these procedures at home is that it's cheaper. I don't have to charge you girls so much." He smiles again, warmly this time, and lights another cigarette. "Your friend could never afford to look so beautiful if she went to the hospital."

As if this is all the explanation she needs, Chungmee takes out her handkerchief and begins flattening the crumpled bills on her lap.

"American money," the doctor says agreeably. "Better than *won*. I can do both of you today for the same price, if you'd like."

Chungmee looks at me. I shake my head no.

"But these Americans, they don't like flat, hooded eyes. They like big, round eyes with nice double lids. Good for wearing makeup like Ingrid Bergman, or Jennifer Jones."

I don't wear makeup. Neither does Chungmee. But this doesn't seem to matter. The doctor continues. "When you see your friend here, you'll wish you said yes. She'll have American boys calling her day and night." He turns to Chungmee. "Tell me, do you have an American boyfriend now? I'm sure you do."

Chungmee's cheeks turn bright red. She loses track of what she's counted, so she has to start all over again. I want to beat this man senseless. I want to kick him in the chest. I know exactly what a "bastard" is now. And this one is no better than the rest of them, cooing and coaxing until he gets what he wants—half of Chungmee's money, now neatly placed in his hand.

"No, no, no," he says. "Full price."

"But I thought you could do both of us for the same amount," she says. "So I owe you only half, right?"

"No. That was a special offer just for your friend. She's very pretty. If I make her even prettier, she'll send more business my way. For you only, full price."

Chungmee's mouth tightens, and I can see it—how the possibility of running from this place is gone now. She hands the doctor the rest of her money.

"Good then. Go to the next room over there and wait for me."

Chungmee ignores my outstretched hand as she walks into the kitchen, leaving me alone with the doctor. I watch him recount the money, turning the bills around so that all of the faces are right side up and pointing in the same direction. When he finishes, he stubs out his cigarette in a cup.

"This shouldn't take more than twenty minutes," he says.

I don't know what kind of operation takes only twenty minutes. But I know what can happen if things go wrong. I've seen girls who have done this to themselves. Some of them actually look pretty with their double-lidded eyes, so large and round, as if they were born that way. But the unlucky girls end up with crooked lids, skin scarred purple for life. I sit on the sofa and wait. Then I walk the length of the room. One, two, three, four, five times. When I can't sit or walk anymore, I slowly lean over the kitchen doors to see without being seen. Chungmee is sitting on one of the chairs with her head tipped back, biting down on a flat piece of wood wrapped in cloth. Dr. Kim stands above her holding a triangular piece of glass. The light from the window reflects off its surface, casting small, dark shadows across the room. Dried blood, I think. This man is going to cut her face with a dirty piece of glass. Not even a proper knife.

I push the doors open as Dr. Kim grabs Chungmee's hair and runs the sharp tip across her closed eyelid. Blood spurts out in a stream, splattering the floor, the window, his shirt and her dress. Chungmee's back arches up as she grips the seat of her chair with both hands, and more blood sprays out, more than I've ever seen. I don't know why, but I can't help but laugh at this, at so much blood, even though I'm vaguely aware of biting my own hand to shut myself up, vaguely aware of the doctor screaming something horrible at me. Still, I laugh and laugh until I can't laugh anymore and the pain in my hand is like every pain ever felt, and the screaming is the last thing I hear before everything goes sideways, then black.

Later, when I open my eyes, the doctor is holding a bottle of something sharp and bitter under my nose. I sit up straight, startled from a sleep that could have lasted a day or a week. The room is dark now. The afternoon light replaced by the lamp in the corner, its halo too bright for my eyes.

"That's a bad bump," he says, replacing the stopper on his bottle. "You hit the wall when you fell."

I reach back and feel a bump the size of an apple. When I lower my hand, I notice bloody gauze wrapped around my palm. The skin beneath it pulses as if I've been holding it to a fire. "Where's Chungmee?" I ask.

He points to the other end of the sofa where Chungmee is sitting with

her head on a cushion, curled up like a ball.

“What’s wrong with her? Why is she asleep?”

Dr. Kim ties another scarf around his neck, a blue one this time, and I notice that he’s changed into a clean shirt. “It’s normal to lose a fair amount of blood. She’ll be fine, and the swelling will go down in a week or so.” He tucks the ends of the scarf into his collar. “You’re a very stupid girl, you know. You shouldn’t have come running in like that. Now if you don’t mind, I think you should wake up your friend and take her home. I’m expecting another patient soon.”

As I hear the doctor’s footsteps climb the stairs and cross the room overhead, I move closer to Chungmee, leaning into her so I can see. Her eyes are red and puffy; both lids are covered with a thick crust of blood. I put my hand over my mouth, wondering if it was me or the doctor or his dirty piece of glass that did this. Chungmee shifts in her sleep and turns toward the lamp, her skin almost blue in the dim light. I don’t know how to wake her, or how to get her home, or how to make her well, so I do the only thing I can. I wrap my arms around her and gently put my lips on her forehead as the smell of iodine drifts into my nose. Then I press my lips against Chungmee’s, holding them there until I’m reminded of everything that came before this. Before the war started, before the Americans arrived, before we lost ourselves to the strange genius of men and mine was the only face she could see.

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