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A NOVEL

COUNTER-ATTACKS AT THIRTY

WON-PYUNG SOHN

TRANSLATED BY SEAN LIN HALBERT

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The year I was born, there was a man with a large nose living in South Korea. White-haired and a retired general, he lived a life that was as far from ordinary as you could get. But then just before turning sixty, the words “ordinary people” suddenly became one of his favorite phrases. He liked this phrase so much that he started to introduce himself as an “ordinary person,” always remembering to follow this self-proclamation with “Trust me,” as if he knew people wouldn’t. He even started

going around claiming that the “era of ordinary people” was coming. Thus, it was to everyone’s surprise that he used this script-flipping slogan to rise to the highest office in Korea. But the *unordinary* trajectory of his life didn’t stop there. Most famously, a picture of him and the previous president standing shoulder to shoulder, handcuffed and dressed in blue prison uniforms, made the front page of every newspaper in Korea. You would be hard-pressed to find an ordinary person who had experienced the things he had.

Even though this all happened around the time of my birth, I knew it like I’d experienced it firsthand. The rest of his story, however—the protests, the fighting, the bloodshed in the square—was nothing to me but tales from long ago, things I had to learn about through books and documentaries. Since then, the world has taken a few steps in the right direction—but only a few. Injustice is still the law of the land, and the promised era of ordinary people never came. What we got instead was the exact op-

posite: a world in which ordinary people are forced to follow the crowd while simultaneously being expected to use every method to stand out from it, desperately screaming at the tops of their lungs, begging to be noticed. As for me, I am just one of the many unfortunate souls whose farewell to youth came during this era.

Of course, I have my own unique origin story. And like most people born under unique circumstances, my mom loves telling everyone she meets about how I came into this world. So whenever the topic of how I got the name Jihye comes up, she tells a tale that starts one sultry summer day in 1988 with a lonesome boy rolling a hoop across a sports field in Seoul. Fascinated by the story of a developing country hosting the Olympics, the whole world was watching with anticipation. Likewise, every Korean was glued to their television set, white-knuckled and praying that a mere boy, barely seven years old, could roll a hoop across the world’s biggest stage without messing up.

For the rest of the games, that video of the Hoop Boy, as he came to be known, was replayed on proud news channels across the peninsula. Every night, our small apartment complex in Junggye-dong was filled with cheers of joy and groans of disappointment as people watched the festivities.

One afternoon, my mom was watching the games on TV, her body sprawled out on the couch. She rested one hand on her bulging stomach as she used the other to desperately fan fresh air toward her face—despite it being late September, the summer heat had yet to leave the city. Her eyebrows were pulled up to the middle of her forehead in anger as she thought about my dad, who'd stayed out late the previous night drinking. But on a deeper level, her mind was perturbed by the name the baby in her stomach would take when born.

It was destiny that I be named Chu-bong (秋峰). Constructed from two Chinese characters that meant autumn and mountain peak, the name could be interpreted as “peak of au-

turn” or “the pinnacle of beauty.” But unlike its beautiful meaning, the name itself sounded hideous, like it belonged to an old man. Not surprisingly, it had been carefully selected by my grandfather, who had taught Confucian classics in the North before coming down as a refugee during the war. Because my dad's generation was the third consecutive generation in his family with only one son, and because his father had lived such a hard life as a refugee from the North, he had no intention of disobeying his father's wishes and giving in to my mother's sulking.

When she first heard the news that the child in her stomach was to receive the hideous name Chu-bong, she fell into despair and spent several sleepless nights with tears in her eyes. She pleaded with him to change the name, but my dad wouldn't budge. The best he could offer her were a few reluctant words of consolation:

“You should consider yourself lucky that the baby will be born in the fall. Can you imag-

line if it were born in the spring? Then its name would be *Chun*-bong. That sounds even worse. And thank goodness my last name isn't Koh. *Kim* Chu-bong is one hundred times better than *Koh Chu*-bong."

It took my mom a second to understand what he meant, but as soon as she recognized the double entendre of "Koh Chu"—which in Korean meant both pepper and penis—she burst into tears again. Realizing he'd only made things worse, my dad excused himself with a fake cough and distanced himself from her sobs.

Because my mom had been given the name Bae Mal-suk, which was a common yet old-fashioned name for someone born in the early 1960s, she had always had the dream of giving her child a beautiful name. But now all she could do was pray that the child in her stomach wasn't a girl.

On the TV, Carl Lewis and Ben Johnson were just about to face off in the 100-meter final. My mom had been sensing a disturbance in

her stomach for some time now, but her mind was too preoccupied to notice that the pain was coming in regular intervals. She picked at the calluses on her fingertips, filled with resentment toward my dad and repeating to herself the name that her baby would have to carry for life. As soon as my grandpa had heard the news that his daughter-in-law was pregnant, he pulled out a calendar, calculated the month I would be born, and then wrote down my name on a notepad. That piece of paper became his last will and testament because, just a few days later, he passed away. Had he lived just a bit longer, my mom might have been able to negotiate with him, but instead he died suddenly, leaving behind nothing but that cursed will. Just thinking about this and the fact that her husband had left her home alone when she was due any day, and with no way for her to contact him, was enough to make her break out in tears again.

It was at that exact moment that the contractions started in full force. With shaky

hands, she left a note for my dad that was written much nicer than how she truly felt:

*—I'm headed to the hospital. Please hurry.
The baby is coming.*

After barely managing to get herself out of the house, she waited on the street for a long time before she finally caught a cab that drove her safely to the hospital. Just as the pain was starting to become unbearable, my dad appeared, ruddy from trying to cure his hangover with yet more alcohol.

Even as she howled like an animal in agony, my mom did her best to give him a death glare. Ashamed and embarrassed, he said in a halting voice the only thing he could think of to say:

"I heard Ben Johnson won."

The slap that my mom gave him right after he said this was the first and last time she ever hit him.

My mother's long, painful labor continued, but for some reason, I refused to come out.

Perhaps it was because I'd grown attached to my mother's womb, which I'd called home for the last nine months; perhaps it was because I hated the name Chu-bong; or perhaps it was simply because I was afraid of the world I'd have to face.

After two days of excruciating pain, my mom's face was pale and gaunt. But when the doctor suggested surgery, my mom refused. She said the baby wasn't coming out until its mother had what she wanted. It seemed my mom had realized that she had leverage over the situation. Dumbfounded, the doctor said he'd never seen such an obstinate woman. My dad, on the other hand, said nothing and merely looked down at his feet. Eventually, the doctor fixed his glasses and said, "At this rate, both the mother and child could die." It was then that she presented my dad with an ultimatum:

"I'd rather die than name my child Chu-bong. I want your word."

My dad's face was pale white as he decided between his late father and pregnant wife. In

the end, he decided to save the living. He turned to her and nodded with conviction. Barely conscious and with the help of the doctor's hand, my mother wrote a memorandum.

"Remember this. If you go behind my back and use the name your father made, I'll take the child and never return. I swear."

Just before she went into the operating room, a sign came. My mom let out a few short, intense breaths to psych herself up, just like she'd read about in a book. And after just three of these, I came into the world. A baby girl. Thinking about how close her daughter had been to being named Kim Chu-bong, she held me close as she cried tears of relief and joy.

A few hours after taking my first breath, I fell into a peaceful sleep. And that night, as if to symbolize my mother's comeback victory, the gold medal in the men's 100-meter final was stripped from Ben Johnson and handed to Carl Lewis. At the same time, my mom, who must have been tired from her long, tear-filled battle and who hadn't finished her postpartum care,

stayed up all night flipping through the pages of a Chinese character dictionary searching for my name. What she settled on was the most common name for girls born in Korea in 1988: Kim Jihye.

Although the story of how I got my name was as spectacular as the battle between Carl Lewis and Ben Johnson, everything else related to my name was completely unspectacular.

On the first day of elementary school when my teacher called out my name, another girl answered before me. Her name, it turned out, was also Kim Jihye. Awhile later, my teacher called my name again, but this time, too, another girl beat me to the punch. Eventually I realized that my name was written on the attendance sheet as "Kim Jihye 3."

Things like this happened throughout grade school. Wherever I went, there was always a handful of Kim Jihyes; the only difference was what the teacher decided to attach to our names. When we started learning English, 123

became ABC. And one year in middle school, I was in a class with four other Kim Jihyes. It was pure chaos. Numbers and letters weren't going to cut it. Our teacher decided on adjectives: Big Kim Jiye, Little Kim Jiye, Fair-skinned Kim Jiye, Tan Kim Jiye, and even Chubby Kim Jiye. Indeed, more than our names, it was these modifiers that distinguished us. I was given what I considered to be the least interesting descriptor: Little Kim Jiye. But I didn't receive this designation because I was particularly small or petite; it was just that Big Kim Jiye was so much larger than me. So naturally, as the most average of all the Kim Jihyes, I had to be Little Kim Jiye. And Jiye wasn't the only absurdly common name in Korea that year. Just as common were the girl names Minji, Eunji, Eunjeong, and Hyejin. Slightly less common, but still common enough to have at least one instance in every class—like a smattering of sprinkles on ice cream—were the names Boram, Areum, and Seulgi. Anyway, that was how all the Jihyes of Korea grew up: as friends with

all the other Minjis, Eunjis, Eunjeongs, Hyejins, Borams, Areums, and Seulgis of Korea.

Even outside of school, it was easy to find people with the same name as me. It was always problematic when the name Kim Jiye was pulled out of a hat for a prize raffle at cram school. And I often turned over bags of chips to see if the factory worker who packaged them had the same name as me. I even shared names with several celebrities—although all of them had changed their name to something less common. It was so bad that sometimes “Kim Jiye” felt more like a common noun, like dog or cat, than it did my own name. And yet, while I often lamented the commonness of my name, most of the time, its banality suited me. In fact, I was very grateful for the anonymity it provided me. It was a name fit for a person who didn't have much to brag about.

Of course, after failing countless job interviews, it stung when I realized the name on the acceptance list for the content planning department at DM Group (the company I really