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AMERICAN HAGWON

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BOOK I

March 1992–January 1995

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*Return**Gaepo-dong, Seoul, South Korea**March 1992*

The rules of engagement have changed already.

Within a month of their arrival from Australia, Mrs. Helen Koh found her family a suitable apartment in a good school district in Seoul. The middle-class neighborhood of Gaepo was not as nice as the one where her sister, Sonya, lived, but it had to suffice. After paying key money for the two-year lease, a painful sum that consumed the bulk of the family's savings, and replacing the most urgent things before the shipping container from Sydney could be delivered, Helen accepted that there just wasn't room in the budget for any place better.

Their rental house in Campsie, a suburb of Sydney, had four bedrooms, a den, and a generous backyard for cookouts. Their Seoul apartment, on the third floor of a five-year-old building put up quickly by mediocre developers, had three small bedrooms, a decent-size living room, and two baths. The largest bedroom went to the two boys, Bo and DH; Helen and her husband, John, occupied the medium-size bedroom; and the tiny one near the foyer was for Mido, the child Helen worried about the most.

From the outset of their marriage, John had put his sensible wife in charge of the household finances. Helen's thrift and good judgment allowed him to focus on his career. For almost two decades, on Monday mornings, Helen had given John a weekly allowance for his carfare, meals, and pocket money; then it was her job to make do with the remainder of his salary for their tithes, living expenses, and retirement savings, if any, and in that order. A former math major at Seoul National University, John preferred problems he could solve on paper, and family life had far too many unknown variables.

Raising three children was costly, and when they were still young, Helen began working as a retail sales associate to supplement John's steady income, which was inadequate for their mounting needs. John's work had taken the Koh family to Paramus, Seoul, and Sydney. In each city, Helen's supervisors recognized her talent as a reliable salesperson.

For each of the three Koh children, Helen kept a spiral notebook, and on the back flap, she pasted a manila envelope where she tucked away cash for their school fees, clothing, and sundries. This year's envelopes were lighter than usual because the children had needed many new things upon their return to Korea. In addition to school uniforms, Bo and DH required larger sneakers, thicker winter coats, and stacks of study guides. Mido, the youngest, had not grown as much as her brothers, so her wardrobe would serve another year; however, in Sydney, she had needed to see learning specialists, which had wiped out her portion of the savings.

Mido was thirteen years old and in the first year of the local middle school. She was short and slight for her age, and often mistaken for a much younger child. Like her father, Mido had small, round eyes that formed an endearing expression when she smiled. And like him, she had perfect vision and didn't need to wear eyeglasses, which Bo had required since he was a toddler. Mido wore her dark hair parted in the middle in two thick braids, which suited her pale, unremarkable demeanor.

Although Mido could speak well enough, she seemed almost incapable of doing so at school, church, or anywhere else outside the home. With her family she spoke as needed, and around her father, Mido was especially at ease. On Saturday evenings, after Mido finished her homework and household chores, the two of them watched music variety programs on television, smiling and laughing in a wordless cocoon.

All the children were born in Paramus, New Jersey, when John worked at a Japanese trading company in New York City and reported to Taehun Shin, who had been one year his senior at university. Shin had been like a brother to John throughout school, military service in the elite KATUSA unit where their English-language skills only improved, and at both the Japanese and Korean trading companies, which had allowed the men's families to live overseas as subsidized expatriates. The Koh family had lived in New Jersey for seven years, Seoul for three, then Sydney for almost six, prior to their return to Seoul one month before the start of this school term.

Throughout her childhood, Mido's teachers had asked Helen to come in to discuss her daughter's excessively quiet manner. At her preschool in Paramus, and in the first years of school in Seoul, Mido barely spoke with the other children and was left out of friendships. At her primary school in Sydney, the teachers had hinted at learning issues, despite her high marks. They'd encouraged her to talk more in class, advocate for herself, and work better in groups.

Helen saw herself as a modern, educated parent, and she wanted to help her youngest child. She took time off from work and visited a learning specialist, a speech therapist, and an occupational therapist. The doctors in Sydney pronounced Mido normal, more or less. A reputable pediatrician said there was nothing medically wrong with the girl's hearing or vocal cords. The child psychologist believed that Mido's shyness was cultural, and all the moving around might have confused her. Asian children, the school counselor had observed, were often less talkative.

Mido's father, a high-functioning introvert who managed the natural resources department at a multinational trading company, dismissed such simplistic nonsense. Not all Koreans were quiet. His own family had been filled with loud people. At the slightest provocation or encouragement, his mother, father, and elder brother would shout and argue their well-articulated opinions. To be left alone, John had retreated into his studies, excelling at math and foreign languages. As an adult, he did not ask for much in life. He enjoyed listening to music and being in the presence of his wife and three children.

John wanted to comfort his dear Helen, who was clearly troubled that their daughter did not have friends. Throughout her own childhood, Helen, like her elder sister, was a natural leader—engaging, kind, and deliberate in her goals and methods, articulate in both Korean and English. In college, she had served as vice president of an English poetry society and secretary of a music appreciation group. Helen took her daughter's difficulties personally.

John felt less anxious about his daughter's prospects. Mido was a seventh grader who read at a college level. The other children did not appreciate her, he reasoned. When ready, she would speak up, make friends, and find the work she was meant to do. She would grow out of this social reticence. Helen, a devout woman, prayed he was right. Maybe Mido would be more outgoing if her self-assured brothers didn't crowd her with their

larger personalities, or if the Koh family hadn't moved across the world every few years.

John Koh wanted things to be equal for his sons and daughter but recognized their innate personality differences. Above all, he wanted to protect his daughter's peace of mind. All this poking around and extra attention couldn't be good for her. If you looked hard enough, you could always find something wrong. The world was too noisy. It was fine for Mido to be her own way, to seek privacy and solitude.

As might be expected of a child who read a great deal and hardly talked, Mido received admirable grades; however, on her report cards, her teachers often commented, "Mido is a fine student and a good girl. What is concerning is her lack of social relationships."

Helen was accustomed to her sons' strong school performance and popularity. Bo was a standout student, the teachers' perennial favorite, and DH was an exceptional soccer player. Helen was the sort who needed to fix things, and she wanted to know what she could do to bolster her daughter's self-esteem. Mido didn't have to be school president, the prettiest, or the top student; Helen simply wanted her child to be included.

Although Helen had not wanted to return to Seoul, preferring to raise the children abroad to enlarge their opportunities, there was some consolation: Mido's shyness seemed almost commonplace in Korea. A child could be quieter here.



The middle school was six blocks from the main shopping street and less than a ten-minute walk from the Kohs' apartment. The four-story cinder-block building with a slate roof, whitewashed and with a dark-blue trim, housed numerous classrooms, a spacious auditorium, two music rooms, and a new gymnasium. There was a well-maintained field for the three grades of boys and girls. Mido did not attend the coveted middle school in Gangnam, which sent the greatest number of students to the desirable specialized public high schools in the city, but her school was far from the worst.

In Mido's homeroom class, there were forty-six students. Mr. Na, the homeroom teacher who also taught mathematics, assigned Mido to sit in the second row.

Seated directly behind her was an attractive child with dark, large eyes. A formidable student, Yun Kim was also known for being a brilliant sprinter and a fine keyboard player. Each year, her homeroom teacher selected her

as the classroom president because her peers listened to her. In the morning, Yun's mother French-braided her only child's shoulder-length raven hair, and although all the girls wore matching uniforms, Yun stood out by wearing American sneakers.

As classroom president, Yun was expected to help Mido, the new student from Australia, assimilate. On the first day of school, it was Yun who told Mido where to put her lunch box, where and when to change into her sports uniform, and what clubs she could join, as well as where all the meeting rooms were located. Mido did as instructed, not bothering Yun with any unnecessary questions, and as usual, she kept to herself. Ever an attentive child, Mido was able to pick up from observation whatever she needed to know.

To make up for her silence around the other girls, Mido smiled often, her eyes curving along her round, pink cheeks. Most adults liked her sweet face, but her classmates would not have considered her as pretty as Yun, whose symmetrical features were often commented upon with great admiration. Mido's lack of distinguishing physical charms did not bother her; if anything, she was relieved not to be noticed.

On the third day of school, shortly before lunch recess, Mr. Na called on Bora Kang to solve a math problem. On the bulletin board by the front door, the teachers posted weekly exam scores, and more often than not, Bora's name was at the top of the lists.

Bora, a serious girl who wore a different-colored headband each day, marched to the board, solved the problem neatly, wiped the chalk dust from her right hand, and returned to her seat in the last row by the window. She tucked her navy pleated skirt beneath her bottom before sitting, then smoothed the front of her skirt to cover the tops of her thighs.

Mido checked Bora's answer on the chalkboard against her worksheet. There was an error. Mido should not have multiplied the numerator. She rubbed the worn-down ear of her blue-and-white puppy eraser against the pencil markings and started again.

Mr. Na called out, "Koh Mido," and she looked up from her paper and smiled at her teacher.

"Number three," he said, pointing to the board.

Mido swallowed and approached the chalkboard gingerly, bringing her worksheet with her. She copied her answer on the board with great care.

"Incorrect," he said, shaking his head in disappointment. Out of

consideration for her recent arrival in the country, he had assigned her a relatively simple problem.

Mido bit the inside of her lip, then checked her solution against the way Bora had solved the previous question. She had made the same computation error as before by multiplying the numerator. Using quick strokes of the chalkboard eraser, Mido wiped off her wrong answer, smudging the edge of her blue sweater sleeve, to begin again.

“Who told you that you could do that?”

Startled by Mr. Na’s stern tone, Mido froze.

“How can you learn if you do not recognize, admit, and explain your mistake? It does no one any good if you do not point out your error. You erased the error, so now no one can learn from what you did wrong. Erasing it is like covering a weakness. It’s lying. It’s cowardice and selfish.”

Mr. Na had been a college basketball player and became a sports radio announcer in Daegu after graduation. When he couldn’t support his family by working at a local radio station doing a job he adored, he had labored hard to become a middle school mathematics teacher for his second career, eventually landing in the capital city with his wife and two children. Female teachers and administrators admired the handsome former athlete, and the male teachers looked up to him for his discipline and dunking skills.

“Koh Mido,” Mr. Na said in his rich tenor voice. “Did you hear my question? How can you learn if you do not admit and then explain your error?”

Perplexed, Mido glanced at him, then lowered her gaze just as quickly, having no idea what he wanted her to do now. Was she supposed to write back in her mistake? Tears filled her eyes.

Crying never moved Mr. Na. It only made things worse. If girls were to succeed in the world, he believed, they had to be more stoic. As a father, he was as tough on his daughter as he was on his son. Life was full of terrible disappointment and cruelty, and he didn’t see the pedagogical purpose of coddling these middle-class girls, who had no idea how easy they had it compared to his generation and the ones before it.

The teacher crossed his arms and frowned. He didn’t like her face—the features were too soft and little, and her head was not yet in proportion to her small body. Mr. Na preferred girls to be bright like a new coin, visually engaging as the loveliest of flowers and with the vitality of youth in their movements. No doubt this girl was an unmotivated, overindulged child

from a rich family that had lived overseas. He ascribed her puny size to her being a picky eater.

“Go stand by my desk.”

Mido approached the teacher’s large wooden desk near the windowed door. Across the hall, uniformed boys and girls lined up in size order against the tile-bordered wall. She wished she could bolt through the classroom door and hide in a bathroom stall until her heart stopped pounding so fiercely.

“Hold out your hands,” Mr. Na said.

Incomprehension clouded her shining eyes.

“Like this.” Mr. Na held out his large, strong ballplayer’s hands, pale palms facing upward.

Mido crinkled her brow and imitated him. Her palms were three colors, more white and pink in the center and bluish around the thumbs and fingers. She had never given much thought to her body, least of all her own tiny hands.

From his pencil cup, Mr. Na withdrew his brass ruler, one of the classroom supplies he’d bought with his first paycheck as a teacher.

He raised his right hand and struck her open palms with the heavy ruler.

“One,” he said quietly.

Mido grimaced, stunned by the sharp pain.

The class pitied Mido. She’d had no warning. No one had told her that this was something that happened. The only way to avoid this shame was by getting the answer right, or if the teacher had an understanding with your mother. Things could be different if your father was an important person.

As a class leader, Yun felt especially guilty for not having mentioned Mr. Na’s golden ruler, which left red welts across a child’s soft palms.

Tears flowed down Mido’s cheeks, and she regulated her breath the way Dr. Ryan had taught her to whenever she was afraid. Everyone was watching her get punished, but she had to keep breathing. The gentle, gray-haired doctor from Sydney had told her that when she felt fear or worry, Mido had to keep inhaling and exhaling. *It will be fine*, he’d said. *Breathe.*

“Two,” Mr. Na said calmly, then raised the metric ruler with a flourish and swung down.

“Three.”

The class heard the final smack of the metal hitting skin, and the girl

stood in her place without a murmur. The children knew this was the last time.

Three strikes for the third problem.

Mido wiped her cheeks with the back of her left hand. Only after Mr. Na tilted his chin toward her desk did she bow to the teacher and return to her seat.

"Students, lunchtime," Mr. Na said, his voice elegant and reasonable. He left the room.



Yun retrieved her lunch box and Mido's from the shelves next to where the textbooks were stored. She placed them both on her desk. The other students opened their sacks and fabric-tied parcels, transforming their homeroom into a noisy dining hall.

"Follow me," Yun said.

The girls walked down the long hallway, and Yun pulled Mido into the washroom.

"I hate him," Yun whispered. "A real son of a bitch," she said, savoring the forbidden salt of the insult, and smiled at Mido, revealing her matching dimples.

Mido blinked back tears. She had gotten the problem wrong, so she was at fault. But no one had ever hit her before. Not at home or school.

Yun opened the water faucet.

"You'll feel better after you wash your face. Go ahead," Yun said, and Mido obeyed. From her pocket, Yun retrieved a clean white handkerchief.

"Dry your face. You can't pay attention to that fool."

Mido had never heard any girl talk like this. Even her brothers didn't use these words. At her school in Sydney, you could be sent to the principal's office for name-calling. In their homeroom, Yun was an ideal and well-spoken student. In the washroom, she was someone else. Even her pretty face seemed less placid, her teeth clenched, her jaw firm, and in her anger, the cords of her thin neck had become more visible.

Yun examined Mido's hands. There were pink stripes across the meat of her palms.

"Most of the teachers here are pretty nice and never hit us, but I'd heard about Mr. Na from the older students. I'm sorry I didn't tell you." Yun let out a short laugh. "My mother says it's my fault when the teacher hits me. My

father says it's good for me to get the shit kicked out of me by the teacher because then I'll study harder."

Mido couldn't imagine her parents thinking hitting was necessary.

Yun stared hard at Mido's face, trying to read any meaning behind her dark eyes. Since school started, the new girl had barely spoken beyond faint murmurs of assent for roll call. Somehow Mido's silence had not troubled Yun. In a way, she felt more drawn to the new student. Mido made Yun feel useful, which she liked.

"But I disagree with them," Yun added. "I don't study harder because the teachers could hit me. I don't usually get hit, but I don't want to watch anyone else get in trouble, either. I just hate the teachers who do this. There must be other ways to make your point." She shrugged. "Anyway, save yourself some trouble at home, and don't tell your parents what happened today."

Yun glanced in the metal mirror, then looked away as quickly as if the pretty girl in the reflection were a surprise to her.

"Just imagine if you had messed up problem ten." Yun raised both her hands, splaying all ten fingers. "Ten smacks." She giggled.

"Mr. Na doesn't know anything. He won't teach you, but he expects you to get the right answers. If you get something wrong, he'll hit you again and again. I heard that when he gets really fired up, he can use the broomstick on your legs. The ruler's not so bad, I guess. Two years ago, I heard he hit a boy so hard that he bled on the back of his calves. Even his mom came in to complain. Not that it did any good."

With an imaginary broom handle, Yun's wiry arms made dramatic swinging motions below Mido's knees. She shivered, realizing then that the joke was more scary than funny, and she looked down at her clean white leather sneakers.

Yun turned serious. "Mido, are you bad at math? I don't want you to feel worse, but that problem wasn't the toughest one of the group today."

Mido shook her head no. In Sydney, she'd received perfect grades in mathematics. But here the math was far more advanced, forcing her to read and reread the textbook every night. Homework took more time. Her brothers, too, had complained about it. Bedtime kept getting pushed back because of the difficulty of the school assignments.

"Maybe you have to change your hagwon," Yun said.