

조선말 큰사전: The Lost Pages

A Kyöngsöng story of language and quiet resistance

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Chapter 1: Whispered Scripts at Dawn

(Gyeongseong/Seoul, October 1942)

A double tap at the door, sharp and urgent. Sun-hee waited as the bar lifted and the door cracked open, letting cold air sting her face. It was 1942, during the Japanese occupation. The country's language was forced underground. Sun-hee slipped inside, clutching her shawl tightly as if it could ward off fear. She pressed her back against the wood while she caught her breath, feeling a weight in her chest—a mixture of dread and determination. Each mission carried the risk of discovery, yet she clung to the hope that her small actions would keep their language alive. She eased the door shut behind her. Her grey hanbok brushed softly as she moved. Cold air unsettled the lamp's pool of light. The room smelled of ink, kerosene, and damp paper—a reminder of risk. In the corner, the press sat silent, abandoned for safety.

Mr. Baek stepped forward and handed her a muslin bundle. His eyes tracked her hands with the guarded look of someone trained by years of secret dealings. The ink-stained cloth in his grip signalled both urgency and care as he transferred it to her.

"From a friend of a friend," he said, which was the same as saying: from no one. She set the bundle beside a thin textbook; the cover, softened by years of anxious use. Her fingers brushed a floorboard. It shifted, and a memory flared—the tap-tap of her father's lessons over the warm ondol. Protecting the language, he'd said with quiet anguish, was as urgent and daily as keeping the rice from burning. The words burned in her now, a painful, stubborn light.

They moved without words. Baek positioned himself near the window, peering out to scan the street while Sun-hee knelt beside the floorboards. She lifted a plank, slipped most of the cloth-wrapped pages into the hollow below, and closed it carefully. She left one muslin bundle out—the courier's parcel for delivery before dawn. To the authorities, these slips meant guilt. For their keepers, these pages were no mere dictionary entries; they were embodiments of their cultural identity and history, guarded with unwavering devotion. Each slip was a testimony, a small but significant rebellion against erasure, preserving not just words, but the very soul of their people.

"When they ask," Baek murmured, "you were told to carry a parcel. You don't know what's inside."

She nodded, jaw clenched so hard it hurt, a hot tremor forcing tears behind her eyes. Korean was banished from schools. Newspapers had surrendered to silence. Tram stops bore *naisen ittai*—the policy like a bruise she could not hide. Only furtive whispers kept the language alive under floorboards; among the friends she clung to with her life. As she worked, she whispered: 한 글자, 한 생명—one character, one life. That phrase pierced her, defiance and grief pulsing with every dangerous syllable drawn in air that no longer felt like hers.

A bicycle halted outside. Both Baek and Sun-hee froze in place, pausing mid-motion with their hands on their tasks—Sun-hee still bent at the floorboards, Baek holding the curtain edge—then silently resumed their tasks, practised in the art of working while holding their breath. The fear in the room was palpable, the tension so thick it could be cut with a knife.

"There's a rumour," Baek said. "A schoolgirl's diary in the provinces. Police saw a page, tugged the thread, and now they're pulling at every seam."

The floor creaked like a listener clearing its throat.

"If they come," Baek said, "we burn first. Then we start again." Their determination was unwavering, their resilience a beacon of hope in the face of adversity.

She laid her palm gently on the top sheet, as if soothing something wild and trembling inside herself, her touch promising protection against what storm might break. Her internal turmoil was a tempest, threatening to overwhelm her at any moment.

The first blow crashed through before dawn could soften it, splitting the night with terror. The door juddered beneath an animal kick; glass shrieked as a window burst, shards spraying like cries. Boots stamped ovals into the dust, heavy with fate. A child's marble—forgotten, heartbreakingly fragile—snapped beneath a merciless heel. Men—colonial police, one bearing a Special Higher Police armband—stormed in, faces cold with appetite for fear, expecting only surrender and despair.

"Under the table," Baek breathed.

Sun-hee slid into shadow behind the table, curling her body tightly around the courier bundle and clutching it to her chest. An officer's hand gripped her neck and yanked her upright into the lamplight. As the cloth slipped from her grasp, the pages fanned and fluttered to the floor like spilled water. She knelt amid the scattered pages, her eyes rising to meet the officer's unreadable face. He did not raise his voice. He set his flashlight on a ledge so its beam washed the mess into order. Another man snatched up the textbook from the table, flipped it open with his thumb, and bent the spine experimentally as if searching for a flaw.

"Name," the officer said in clear Japanese, a clerk's cadence.

"Han Sun-hee," she answered, shaping each syllable carefully.

His badge caught the lamp: Nakamura. He aligned his flashlight, then set his folder on the table, as if neatness could tame the scene.

"Purpose of this circle?" he asked the room as much as her. "Subversion of the national polity?"

He let the accusation sit. In this room, using language could be construed as sedition. She fixed her eyes on the pencil in his hand. A teacher had told her once that truth, like wood grain, shows best when left undisturbed.

"I carry what I'm told," she said in Japanese. "A mother waits for me at home."

He sat down with care, aligning the folder precisely with the edge of the table. He unclipped it, and the stamp hovered like a verdict, poised in his hand. Sun-hee glanced at Baek, who stood tense nearby. A policeman shoved Baek backward with a flat palm. Sun-hee braced herself for what would follow.

Nakamura recited years and measures: schools restructured, Koreans removed, newspapers closed, and associations dissolved. Baek tallied losses—friends, neighbours, a teacher who'd loved words. Nakamura's tone stayed even. He placed the slips into the folder with practised care.

A vendor's bell rang in the alley—a chime that, so wrong, splintered the air. Sun-hee's mind flashed to a classroom filled with breath. She remembered her teacher's fingers gently shaping vowels and her mother's lullaby, pressed beneath blankets where secrets shivered. 한 글자, 한 생명—one character, one life—echoed in her chest. It was a battered lullaby for courage, a pulse resisting dread's claw.

"Others will speak with you tomorrow," Nakamura said. "Cooperate, and you will be returned."

He did not say to whom. A damp blindfold came down. The corridor counted her steps on cold stone. Somewhere, water ran.

The cell was precise, as if sorrow had been measured in advance for someone like her. Through a narrow slit, she saw only a finger's width of sky—hope rationed to nearly nothing. She pressed her palm to the wall, letting the cold seep bone-deep. Across the yard, a door creaked, sounding like pity. An old hinge groaned a careful lament. Seodaemun, she thought, and wrapped the name around herself like a whispered prayer.

She lay on the idea of these slips and waited. Would fear claim her, or would fatigue take hold first? Morning crept in: wall, hand, floor. Outside, the city moved on, untouched by her absence. She drew a deep breath. Sometimes, the word for 'end' also meant 'edge.' She pictured the margin of a page—still whole. The image let her rest.

Back at Baek's table, the chair where Sun-hee had sat now held only the faintest impression. Nakamura filled out forms, his movements careful and precise—the discipline of a soldier's child evident in how he placed each mark. A saying of his grandfather's surfaced in Nakamura's mind: The same plank makes a bridge or a fire. Nakamura dropped the stamp onto the folder and closed it. A constable, distracted, nudged a stray slip beneath the table leg with his toe.

Baek met Nakamura's gaze for a beat and found neither approval nor sympathy, only the tired acknowledgment that this would happen again.

"Burning is faster," Baek said in Korean to the broken window once they had gone. "But paper remembers smoke."

The lamp shrank to a stub. Dawn hesitated at the threshold.

Chapter 2: The Rediscovery

(Gyeongseong Station, September 8, 1945)

Three years later, pale light seeped into the warehouse at Gyeongseong Station. Crates made narrow aisles, and people came in clusters: students with rolled sleeves, a grandmother with a basket, a printer with his lantern. What began as a necessity became a ritual. Nobody called themselves volunteers; they called each other neighbours.

Baek led, cautious on the warped boards. Sun-hee followed, her shawl hiding a pencil and a small knife. Hyun clutched a notebook. Ji-woo pushed up her glasses, doubt shadowing her hope. Soo-jin, once a bookshop runner, moved as if she knew where everything belonged. At a crate, an older man ran his palm along the lid. "Joseon Transport," he read from the stencil. People called him Chief. They found a floor plan in the office; the corners were worn smooth. In the war's final months, crates shifted in haste, their labels fading. Whatever lay inside had endured in silence.

"Will any of this be worth the dust?" Ji-woo asked, half to steady her own pulse.

"Everything is worth dust," Hyun said—young enough to believe it, old enough to want to.

"Let the paper tell us," Baek said, choosing a crate. He worked the knot with his pocketknife.

The lid lifted. Cloth bundles lay in neat rows. He loosened the first tie with care. The top slip showed Hangul in a tidy hand. Letters sat side by side—neighbours borrowing sugar in the dark.

No one said the word crowding every mouth. Baek lifted the slip, and they learned in as if it might speak.

"It's theirs," Sun-hee said, then let the sentence walk to the end of itself: "ours."

Pencil notes crowded the margins—queries, crossings-out, a signature that trembled at its start. Headwords showed plain meanings: nara, country; sarang, love; kkeut, end.

"What are we holding?" Hyun asked.

"Manuscript slips," Baek said.

Counting became their work. Blankets unfurled, trays appeared, and Min-ji took the tally.

"One hundred... three—no, two hundred..." She started over. Eventually: "Twenty-six thousand five hundred." The number settled in the room. Baek blinked, remembering friends lost since the year of the arrests. He ran a finger along a slip's edge—a scar still raw. "For them," he said.

Chief straightened. A life of listening to rails had taught him the music of a timetable. Years ago, a respected elder had told him, if you ever see certain boxes, remember. He'd carried the sentence like a folded note in his coat. He opened his mouth and found the last word was today. He nodded instead and set about sharpening pencils.

By a pillar, Nakamura—now a civilian—paused. He had come for a rope and found the careful rescue of paper. For a moment, he stood transfixed, recognising the resilience of words and those who preserved them. He touched two fingers to his cap in a slight bow, then slipped out the side door. Sunlight hit him squarely: for a heartbeat, he felt lighter than air.

"Date," Min-ji said suddenly. "Dates keep us honest." She sharpened a pencil to a fine point.

The whisper of blade on wood made everyone look up the way a match does in a dark room. A student wrote: Found at Gyeongseong Station, September 8, 1945. They set the first bundle on a blanket and tied it with a new knot. A plan took shape: there would be a publisher, paper, and readers in quiet places. Someone hummed—not a song, just hope.

"Gently," Soo-jin warned as Hyun lifted too boldly. "They've survived enough."

"You mean the slips," Hyun said.

"Of course," she said, and did not add "and us."

Outside, the station clock kept steady time. Inside, they coaxed old labels into legibility and chalked new marks: ㄱ, ㅋ; an alphabet stepping into light. They loaded the bundles onto a cart; knots tied with care. Leaving a place better than you found it is never a small thing.

"Where will they go?" Ji-woo asked.

"Shelves," Chief said. "A place where we can finish what was begun."

Sun-hee worked quietly. One slip said end. She rested her hand on it. "It didn't disappear," she said. "It was waiting."

Afternoon stretched, and laughter found its echo. Rice balls went round in newsprint. The cart wheels rolled out with a steady beat. At the loading bay, sunlight poured through the open doors. They chalked a new label: **조선말 큰사전 — Joseonmal Keunsajeon**. The letters stood without apology.

"Mind the corner," Soo-jin said.

"Always," Hyun answered.

They walked beside the cart and each other. The rails outside ran in long parallel lines, like ink finally finding its page.

They carried the crates into a room scented with glue and tea. Shelves stood waiting. A kettle clicked. The first bundle settled onto the table. "Tomorrow," Ji-woo began.

"Tonight," Baek said, and lifted another lid.

Later, there would be covers, bindings, maybe a ceremony. For now, victory stayed low to the ground: paper in sunlight. The country's tongue, quiet for years, lifted its head and tasted the air. The city, after years of holding its breath, finally exhaled.

Sun-hee paused in the doorway, watching the light touch the bundles. She took a deep breath, feeling the weight of both loss and new beginnings. Baek stood silently beside her. "Let them speak," he murmured. Together, they stepped out into the new day, hope humming in every corner.

THE END

Historical note

This story is fiction, but it is grounded in documented events.

In October 1942, Japanese colonial authorities used the Peace Preservation Law to arrest language workers in Gyeongseong (Seoul) and seize materials connected to a Korean dictionary project; after liberation, on 8 September 1945, roughly 26,500 manuscript slips for the Joseonmal Keunsajeon were rediscovered in a warehouse at Gyeongseong Station (often marked “Joseon Transport”). Seodaemun Prison and the Special Higher Police (Tokkō), as well as policies such as naisen ittai and the removal of Koreans from schools and the press, are historical.

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