THE ACCUSATION

FORBIDDEN STORIES FROM INSIDE NORTH KOREA

BANDI
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In Place of a Preface</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record of a Defection</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Specters</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life of a Swift Steed</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So Near, Yet So Far</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pandemonium</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Stage</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Red Mushroom</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterword: How <em>The Accusation</em> Came Out of North Korea</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Note From Do Hee-yun</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Place of Acknowledgments</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

The provenance of the Korean manuscript from which this translation is derived is detailed in the two afterwords to this edition. In order to protect the identity of the author, some of those details have been changed. Beyond the assessment presented there, the publishers have no further information about the origins of *The Accusation*, but believe it to be an important work of North Korean samizdat literature and a unique portrayal of life under a totalitarian dictatorship.
In Place of a Preface

[A poem included with the original manuscript of *The Accusation*, with this title]

That old man of Europe with his bristling beard
Claimed that capitalism is a pitch-black realm
While communism is a world of light.

I, Bandi, of this so-called world of light,
Fated to shine only in a world of darkness,
Denounce in front of the whole world
That light which is truly fathomless darkness,
Black as a moonless night at the year’s end.

—Bandi
Record of a Defection

Sangki, it’s me, Il-cheol. I’m sitting down now to write this record of my defection. You remember Choi Seo-hae’s *Record of an Escape*, which he wrote back in 1920? But now it’s 1990, more than fifty years since our land was liberated from the Japanese colonizers—and unlike Choi, I’m escaping from my own country. Sounds absurd, doesn’t it? But I want you to understand, so I’ll try to explain it all as simply as possible. In a way, you could say it all began with a medicine packet, the one I showed you that time.

The packet fell into my hands quite by chance. You remember my brother’s youngest son—he was eight years old then. The kid used to be at our place so often you’d think we were his parents. Of course, this wasn’t so strange when you consider that the apartment I shared with my wife was practically next to my brother’s house, where I’d lived until I got married. But as I think back on it now, that wasn’t the
only reason for the visits. No, the real reason was my wife’s constant readiness to drop whatever she was doing and lavish attention on the kid. She was tenderhearted by nature, true, but this was something else—she welled up with compassion every time she set eyes on him, and was always happy to have him stay over, unrolling an extra mattress right by hers.

After a while I got to thinking that perhaps the maternal instinct grows even stronger when a woman doesn’t have a child of her own, making the most of whatever outlet it has. In her eyes the boy could do no wrong, and he adored her every bit as much. The day everything changed, the day of the medicine packet incident, was also the first time he showed up at our door.

My wife had gone downstairs to help our local Party secretary repaper his ceiling, leaving me to my own devices. I was getting on with some work when the kid burst in, looked around for his aunt, and, when he couldn’t find her, promptly settled on pestering me instead. It was a kite he was after; we were at the end of autumn, when the wind which tosses the fallen leaves starts producing the kind of splendid gusts that children find irresistible. And my nephew was so innocently eager, I didn’t have it in my heart to disappoint him.

Now, for a kite, ordinary paper wouldn’t do—you needed something tough yet pliable—and I remembered there’d been some scraps left over from when we’d last repapered the door. As it was, I ended up turning the place upside down looking for them, even rummaging through the wardrobe where we stored the bedding during the day. But when I thrust my hand
into the tiny gap between the quilts and the back of the ward-
robe, the rustling material my fingers closed around wasn’t
the offcuts from the door, but a paper packet of loose pills.

I didn’t think much of it at first, just carried on with
my search, but I soon found my thoughts straying back to it.
Where was my wife in all this? The more I wondered about
those pills, the more puzzling they appeared. What kind of
medicine has to be hidden away out of sight like this, and
taken only when nobody’s looking? What kind of illness has
no external symptoms? Then it dawned on me. Of course—it
had to be something to keep her from getting pregnant!

I was too distracted to make a good job of the kite, and
I cut myself twice in the process of making it. The more I
thought about it, the less likely it seemed that confronting my
wife directly would get me a straight answer. And so I tried a
different tack, and ended up knocking on your door, Sangki,
seeking your advice as a doctor. But what you told me when
you looked at the pills I’d brought only served to confirm my
worst suspicions.

“Contraceptives?” I burst out, forgetting the many other
patients, some women included, who were waiting just out-
side your consulting room. “Are you sure?”

“Now, now, there’s no need,” you blustered, wincing at
the volume of my voice, your eyes entreating me to remember
where we were. I left you standing there and raced back home,
not even stopping for breath, the accusation balanced on my
tongue like a primed grenade the whole way. But when I finally
did fling our door open, I found myself face-to-face with my
wife—and the pin jammed. Seeing her there reminded me that this was a delicate situation, one in which I’d do best to tread carefully. After all, it was an open secret that my wife and I weren’t exactly equals.

I’m not talking about any difference in personality—there was nothing much to choose between us there—but as far as our family history was concerned we couldn’t have been further apart, and that, after all, is what counts in this society. On her side, my wife could boast a spotless record, without even so much as a distant relation whose loyalty to the Party might be questionable. Whereas on my side, a different story . . . I’ve no doubt more than a few jaws would have hit the ground when word got out that Lee Il-cheol and Nam Myung-ok were engaged. “A white heron and a black crow—what good can come of a match like that?” Those would have been the words on everyone’s lips.

And now that white heron had been going behind my back, looking out for her own interests at the expense of our marriage, which after all was the one blemish on her otherwise flawless reputation. This was the first thought that sprang to mind, and was it really any wonder? How else could I interpret the fact that my wife, for whom married life should hardly have had time to lose its shine, wished to avoid having a baby with me?

“What’s happened?” my wife asked, seeing my mood as soon as I rushed in.

I ground my teeth to give my mouth something to do, cracked my fingers, then threw myself down on the bench by
the window, still panting from the exertion. Carefully releasing a gentle breath, my wife picked up a pack of cigarettes and a matchbox, walked over to the bench, and set them down on the windowsill. But I wasn’t about to be placated by this show of wifely consideration. The whole incident had forced me to remember the one thing I didn’t want to think about, the one thing I could never get away from—my “standing.” And the reason mine was so low? Because my father was a murderer—albeit only an accidental one, and one whose sole victim was a crate of rice seedlings.

This was just after the war, when the socialist system of cooperative farming had only recently been introduced. In other words, it was a time of great upheaval, one of history’s so-called transitional periods, so surely it was a matter of course that the majority would find themselves out of their depth. Using greenhouses to raise rice seedlings was utterly alien to those who worked the land. For farmers who’d never known any other way of cultivating rice than to grow the seedlings in water-filled containers before transplanting them into the paddy fields, this new method was bound to prove tricky at first.

And that was how my father came to make his terrible mistake, the mistake that was to see him branded an “anti-Party, antirevolutionary element,” a black mark that appeared overnight but that would dog our family for generations.

There was also the matter of his land, a scant few acres which he’d carved out for himself before liberation, all through his own blood and sweat, and which, when collectivization
began, he hadn’t relinquished as meekly as he might have. In this, he was like the child of a second wife, whose position in the household is already so precarious that it needs only the slightest trip to topple over into disaster. Ultimately, he was arrested, hauled off to a place whose location we would never know, while we, his wife and children, were turned out of our home, where we’d often been able to sate our hunger by simply reaching up to pluck a ripe persimmon, and sent on forced “migration” to this barren, unfamiliar land, so close to the border with China that the clamor of the Yalu’s rapids seemed constantly in our ears.

When the narrator of Choi’s Record of an Escape has to make his way through the badlands around the Tumen River, a region bearing the distant memory of marauding Manchu tribes, he and his family still manage to maintain a spark of hope, unquenched even in the midst of adversity. But for my mother, who’d crossed the Gaema pass with her two young sons after seeing her husband taken away in handcuffs, there was only a heavy shroud of helplessness and desolation, with not a single strand of hope woven into its weft.

The people in Choi’s book were fortunate in a way, heading into that adversity of their own free will, with nothing but their determination driving them on. They certainly seemed fortunate compared with us, being forcibly wrenched from everything that familiarity had made dear to us and “migrating” under armed guard to these distant parts where both the shape of the mountains and the sound of the water were foreign.
It was among these strange, comfortless sights that my mother breathed her last, still young, but beaten down by suffering and resentment. Her eyes were staring open when she died, her children’s prospective future pricking her heart like one of the thick icicles that were abundant in our new home.

And now what fresh tragedy is unfolding for my mother’s vengeful spirit to howl at. Sangki! When I couldn’t remain sitting in our apartment any longer I jumped up from the window seat and fled, still with the packet of contraceptives stuffed in my pocket. To my mother’s grave, to the foot of the Gaema pass—even I can’t remember everywhere my feet carried me that day, my upcoming shift far from my mind, until it was late in the evening and I found myself back at home. I can only recall that my wife greeted me exactly as usual, and took care to set each dish down within reach of my spoon and chopsticks. In other words, she showed me no less affection than she always did, though I repaid her with sharp scrutiny. She was unchanged in every respect, from her gaze, which seemed shyly aware of the warmth that suffused it, down to her soft voice and gestures. If anything, these characteristics seemed to intensify as the days went by. But this only served to increase my anxiety. It wouldn’t be the last time that one suspicion gave birth to another and odd rumors came to my ears.

I mean the rumor about the steam that rose from our third-floor apartment, once early in the morning and then again a few hours later—twice in the same day, without fail, which could only mean two rounds of cooking. Apartment
living makes it all too easy to keep an eye on other people’s business, and though I was aware that such rumors are unlikely to be entirely groundless, I hadn’t risen to the bait; I didn’t want my wife to become the victim of women’s vicious tongues. Several days later, though, something happened that meant I could no longer turn a blind eye.

I was overseeing a welding job that had me perched on the arm of a hundred-ton crane from the very start of the day, with an uninterrupted view of the area around the factory. Sure enough, I saw that second round of steam spurt out of our chimney, a good few hours after I myself had had breakfast and left for work. Winter had already set in and it was bitingly cold, but I climbed up onto the crane’s arm the next day and the day after that, on the pretext of making sure that the welding was proceeding safely. Only on the third day did I clamber down not long after I’d gone up, make a plausible excuse to the foreman, and hurry straight home.

“Oh! What are you doing home?”

I’d surprised my wife in the kitchen, and she’d cried out before she had time to think. The whole place was a fug of condensation, owing to the steam belching out of a large pot on the stove. My wife forced a brittle smile, which sat awkwardly on her usually open features.

“I went out without my tape measure,” I said, looking suitably shamefaced.

“Your tape measure? And they sent you back for a thing as small as that?”
THE ACCUSATION

Taking it rather too much to heart, as though it were her fault I’d had to come back from the factory, she hurried away to fetch it. Seeing my chance, I lifted the lid of the pot and peered inside, impatient to have the riddle solved—but all I saw was an insipid mess of dog food: a scant handful of corn and some grains of rice jumbled up with dried radish leaves that no human could have got any nourishment from. So my wife was feeding dogs!

I wasn’t quick enough fitting the lid back on; I still had my hand on it when my wife returned with the tape measure.

“What are you doing?” she said, alarmed.

“What about you?” I countered. “Why are you bothering with dog food?”

“What? Oh, yes, for dogs, that’s right . . . because . . .”

“You make this every day?”

“Yes. I . . . Well, please just concentrate on your work. Don’t worry yourself about household affairs. And try not to make this kind of mistake again,” she said, pressing the tape measure into my hand. “The Party secretary from downstairs came around yesterday. He’s promised to seriously consider the possibility of you joining the Party, and he asked me to give you my full support in the meantime, so you don’t have anything distracting you from your work. My full support . . .”

She bit down on her lower lip, both eyes brimming, as though the words she was suppressing were threatening to burst forth as tears. She bowed her head, trying to save me from having to witness this show of emotion, but it was still
too uncomfortable for me to stay there for a single second longer.

I didn’t so much as look at the tape measure, never mind use it in my work, and though it stayed tucked away in my pocket I felt it there like a lead weight. But the strange thing was that from that day onward the cares that had been weighing on me gradually lifted. I reproached myself for having been so underhanded, and began to convince myself that my wife couldn’t possibly be using contraceptives for the reason I’d supposed. If it was true that she feared mingling her bloodline with that of a “crow,” feared seeing her children tarred with the brush of a Party traitor, the generous affection she’d always shown me would have been nothing but a mask, and that simply wasn’t something I was prepared to believe. If I even dared to doubt that woman, I felt, I’d deserve to be struck down. My only wish was for everything to be revealed as a misunderstanding, and for my wife to remain as she had always been, a generous and loving companion.

Time went by without incident, and I was happy to let it do so. Our nephew continued his frequent visits, and our chimney continued to release two rounds of steam each morning, for me now merely a source of gentle self-reproach. The one noticeable difference was that my wife was increasingly anxious to have our nephew stay over. She claimed she had trouble falling asleep on those nights when I had to stay late at the factory, though this had never been the case before.

It was on one such night, a month ago now, that things finally came to a head—the reason I started to write this record.