Princess Bari – Hwang Sok-yong

1

I was almost twelve when our family was scattered to the wind.

My childhood was spent in Cheongjin, where we had our own house, on a hilltop that looked down on the sea. In the spring, on the patch of vacant ground in the village, a clump of azaleas pushed itself up amongst the dried grasses, each vying for the other's space; in the mornings and evenings the sun's red glow torched the flowers redder still, while the tall ridge of Mt Kwanmo was touched with white where it rimmed the edge of the eastern sky, its lower half shrouded in mist.

Looking down from the top of the hill, hulking steel container ships lay at anchor in the water, with small fishing boats slowly wending their way around them, the sound of their motion recalling a giant's muffled footsteps. And the gulls scattered in all directions the sunlight which struck the sea's edge, where the water glittered like fish scales, their powerful wingbeats driving them forwards into the light. I waited there, for my father to come back from the harbour office, or for my mother to have finished the shopping and set out for home. I strayed from the road, pushing on all the way up into the steep hills, because the view down over the sea gave me every bit as much pleasure as the excitement of waiting for my parents.

Our family consisted of grandmother, father, mother, and six sisters all older than me. To us children it seemed as though mother's belly must have been constantly swollen for going on fifteen years, that no sooner had she given birth to one of us than she'd found herself with child again. My sisters were all born only one or two years apart; the eldest and the second eldest both remembered the tense, fearful atmosphere on those days when mother had given birth to one of us younger ones.

All the same, in a way she'd been quite lucky, given that she'd had grandmother there by her side at every birth, ready to act as midwife. For the first three children, father, too, had made his presence felt, pacing up and down outside the room or out in the yard, puffing away on one cigarette after the other. After that, though, they told me that he would volunteer for the night shift rather than having to come home on those days when it looked like a birth was imminent. The volcanic temper which had been building steadily inside him finally erupted at the arrival of my fifth sister, Suk-i. Grandmother and mother were in the women's room, washing the newborn baby in a wooden bowl; it was morning, and father had just gotten back from the night-duty room. Barely had he opened the door and stepped inside when he cried out “my god, not another one!”, snatched my sister Suk-i up and plunged her into the water, forcing her under. Appalled, grandmother fished the baby out as quick as she could; it coughed and spluttered, possibly having taken some water into its lungs, or perhaps it was just crying. When my sixth sister, Hyeon-i, was born, father hurled the breakfast table into the yard in a fit of temper and my eldest sister, Jin-i, who was just coming back from the outhouse, ended up with the contents of the kimchi bowl over her head. Given all that, what must it have been like when I was born? “We all hid together behind the room and held our breath,” Jin-i told me. After they all heard the baby cry my second sister, Seon-i, went to check on the situation, then came back and reported, her lower lip trembling on the verge of tears.

“I'm not sure,” she whispered, “but they're saying it's another girl...”

“Not another word,” hissed Jin-i, “not one single word from any of you, and don't even think about going outside before father gets home.”

Grandmother, who'd been the one to pull me out, went through the motions of wrapping me up in swaddling bands, making sure they were pulled tight, but that was as far as it went. At her wit's end, unable to even contemplate making the nutrient-rich seaweed soup traditionally served to new mothers, she wandered into the kitchen, slumped down in the middle of the dirt floor and sat staring vacantly about her. Mother stayed for a while in the women's room, crying muffled tears. After a while, though, she seemed to come to a decision; slipping out of the house with me in her arms, she hurried all the way to the woods, far enough from the village for there to be no danger of being observed. Then, or so I was told, she dumped me in a thicket of dried pine and tugged the swaddling
clothes up over my face. I would either suffocate or freeze to death in the chill morning wind.

No-one called out a greeting when father arrived home, and when he opened the door to the bedroom he found mother there with the quilt pulled up over her face. She neither spoke nor looked at him, and grandmother's only contribution was the occasional dry cough coming from the kitchen. Only too aware from the atmosphere inside the house that there was absolutely no hope of his being presented with a son, he stormed straight back out again. Mother and grandmother each remained as they were, the one in the bedroom and the other in the kitchen, in a kind of stupour. Eventually, when the sun had risen to its zenith, grandmother came in to the woman's room and demanded to know where the baby had gotten to.

“I don't know,” my mother told her, “maybe it crawled outside?”

“Ai, I know what you've done, and may heaven strike you down for it! You've thrown the baby away!”

Later, Grandmother told me how she'd searched for me all over, inside the house and out, and how she'd been gripped with fear when I was nowhere to be found. Sighing over the sorry hand that her daughter-in-law and granddaughters had been dealt, she poured cold water into a porcelain dish and set it on the small dining table, sat there laving her hands carefully and thoroughly, and offered up a prayer of supplication.

“Gods of heaven and earth, let there be no calamity in this house, please keep the little one out of harm's way, help its poor afflicted mother have a change of heart, and take away the father's anger, too, please bless and keep us all.”

When Grandmother had finished her prayer she made a thorough search of the house, and after that proved fruitless she even went all the way to the edge of the village, but it was all in vain, and she had no other option but to return home. Like the majority of countryside houses, ours was encircled by a narrow wooden porch, which was where grandmother was sitting and trying to gather her thoughts when our dog, Hindung, thrust its head out of the kennel and stared straight up at her. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and as she turned to face the dog her gaze landed on a corner of the white cloth she'd used to swaddle the baby. Hoping beyond hope, she jumped to her feet, and there in the kennel, or so I was told, she found me, lying bundled up between our Hindung's legs. My eyes were closed, and in fact I was sound asleep, my breathing deep and regular. The dog must have followed my mother at a distance and sniffed me out, investigating the pine thicket where I'd been abandoned, before taking hold of me in her mouth and carrying me back to the house.

“My word, our Hindung is a wonder! That child was sent down from heaven, clear as day, you mark my words!”

Whether or not the story surrounding my birth was strictly true, when I was growing up, my grandmother and that albino dog were always closer to me than the rest of our family. The dog was a white-furred P'oongsan, hence the name 'Hindung'; which means white. It any case, it was a name, whereas I myself had no name at all for the first hundred days of my life – in other words, until I could be thought of as an actual person rather than just another mewling bundle, doubly scorned because of my sex. It simply never occurred to anyone to give me a name. Later, when our family ended up scattered all over, with some of us crossing the Tumen river and living in a dugout mud hut, grandmother often told me the story of Princess Bari, whose name meant Princess Abandoned, which she'd heard in turn from her great-grandmother, a very long time ago. When grandmother finished her story she would explain to me in a sing-song voice, “Cast away, little castaway thing, abandoned, little abandoned thing, and that, my child, is why I called you 'Bari’”.

In any case, I'd had no name, and no-one even seemed aware of any issue until grandmother brought it up over dinner one day. We children ate at the big round table with mother, while grandmother and father shared the square table for two.

“Good grief,” she exclaimed out of nowhere, turning to father, “don't you know you still haven't given the little thing a name? Why on earth not?”

Father slowly ran his eyes over his other children, seeming to count them.

“Well,” he said, “there's plenty of name-pairs you can give to twins, and then bigger sets, some
even up to six, but more than that? I'm not even sure there's enough characters...”

“And you a university graduate, with that Chinese and Russian you studied! You're telling me you can't think of a name for your own daughter?”

Things were still going well for the Republic in those days, and so when twins were born the family would be visited by TV and newspaper reporters, even if they were all the way out in the sticks, and they'd get their own little segment on the evening news. They'd have plenty more to be grateful for, too; the northern provinces could afford to be generous, so the babies would be raised at a public nursery and provided with a plentiful supply of powdered milk, and the Great Leader would shower them with a veritable mountain of gifts, from baby clothes to toys. It being the custom to give one's children ‘matching’ names, quadruplet girls would be given a set like Mae, Ran, Guk and Juk, and there were even some sets for five or six children. In other words, father had been prepared for up to six daughters, but no more, and so the set of names he'd chosen for my sisters – Jin, Seon, Mi, Jeong, Suk, and Hyeon – had all been used up by the time I arrived. Confronted with yet another daughter instead of the longed-for son, a daughter who, to make matters worse, was one too many for the set, it seemed father had taken this as a sign of how pointless it had all been, that my birth had stripped the meaning from the names he'd given my sisters, reducing them to a mere combination of letters. He'd said all he was going to say on the matter, and after he left for work mother and grandmother took the opportunity, now that it had already come up, to discuss the issue of my name between themselves.

“Well,” grandmother said, “hadn't you better give that last one a name too?”

“She's in for a wretched life, alright. May as well call her 'sorrow' or 'regret', that's all I can say.”

“True, you do hear names like that now and again...hang on a minute, though. After all, you abandoned her in the woods, didn't you?”

And so it happened that my grandmother ended up calling me 'Bari', though the true meaning of this name wasn't brought home to me until much later.