

*In the Absence of Sun:
A Korean-American Woman's Promise
to Reunite Three Lost Generations of Her Family*

by Helie Lee

Review by Mary E. Connor

This review was published in "Korean Culture," a former publication of the Korean Cultural Center in Los Angeles

The timing and value of Helie Lee's *In the Absence of Sun* could not be greater. Front-page headlines throughout the world include heart-wrenching accounts of North Korean families trying to escape famine and political oppression. Thousands of desperate people risk death for the slim chance that they might find freedom. Starving people, young and old, must foil border guards, risk drowning in the swift current of the Yalu, or prepare to ingest rat poison, if plans go awry. In return, they hope to find food, work, refuge, and relative freedom in China. Most end up on the run. Up to 300,000 North Korean refugees are hiding out in China and live in sheer terror of being arrested, repatriated, and executed. China, in deference to its longtime ally, returns these people to their own country. With regularity defectors are storming diplomatic compounds in hopes of political asylum. Analysts fear that a mass exodus of North Koreans into China might destabilize the entire region.

Helie Lee's account of her dangerous mission to rescue family members from North Korea (via China and Vietnam) is a microcosm of the troubles and hardships experienced by the North Korean people. Lee tells a compelling story of faith, love, and her family's determination to reunite. *In the Absence of Sun* (published by Harmony books in April 2002) is the sequel to her internationally recognized first book, *Still Life with Rice*, the biography of the remarkable life of Halmoni, Lee's grandmother.

For forty-one years Hongyong Baek (Halmoni) agonized over the loss of her son, Yong Woon, who at age sixteen disappeared during the Korean War. Her last words to him were "come back to me unharmed, I beg you, I will be here waiting." Then in 1991 an unexpected letter arrived from North Korea to inform Halmoni that her son is alive. At a time when economic conditions were worsening in North Korea, P'yongyang suddenly announced that North Korea would allow worn-torn families to reunite. Inspired by this news, Halmoni applied for a visa. As she waited (her visa was never approved), the family was given permission to exchange a few more letters. In a letter dated June 20, 1991 Yong Woon wrote, "Mother, I wish to see you before I die. My wife and I wish to bow before you." Subsequent letters reveal that he and his family knew nothing of the outside world. A letter from Yong Woon's daughter, Ae Rae, conveys the belief that in North Korea "we are living well with no worries...Imaging you suffering in somebody's else's land, we are unable to eat." They blame "the American barbarians" for their continued separation.

By 1993, as living standards continued to deteriorate, P'yongyang closed its doors. Visas stopped. Letter exchanges ended. In 1996 *Still Life with Rice* was published. Without recognizing the possible dangers or realizing that the book would be widely read throughout Asia, Lee had included details of her uncle's life and his whereabouts. As the author traveled throughout the United States, she spoke out about the corruption and oppression of the North Korean regime. P'yongyang authorities were notified and Yong Woon's life was put in jeopardy. Because Halmoni was now eighty-five and had been hospitalized twice by serious illness, the Lee family moved resolutely to rescue her son. In April 1997 Helie Lee, her father, and her grandmother flew from Los Angeles to Seoul to Beijing and finally to a remote area that borders North Korea.

Their mission was costly and involved four long trips, extensive planning, bribery, betrayal, endless frustration and delays, tremendous risks, continual anxiety, and physical hardships. In the narrative, Lee provides us with vivid and memorable images of the North Korean border, remote areas of China, Mongolia, and Vietnam. She also intersperses Korean history and traditions with personal revelations of growing up American, a failed relationship, and an unexpected romance. Upon return from their eight-month journey, Lee doubted whether she could write another book. She feared reliving the trauma and losing face, but her sense of responsibility prevailed. "If I didn't get the story out, I wasn't sure if I could live with my failure, because the story is greater than me, greater than my family." The human suffering in North Korea had to be exposed along with the difficult plight of the refugees in China.

This book holds immediate appeal for the general reader. It is a journey of self-discovery and a rescue. The author is descriptive, witty, open about her life and proud of being an American and a Korean. We fear for her. When Lee arrives with her father at the Yalu, they see Yong Wong "a gnarled old man staggering toward the water... He wouldn't, couldn't speak. Seeing him weep, his whole body quivering, I began to cry... I was also crying for Halmoni, who had mourned the absence of her son for over forty-seven years. And now that we had found him, a narrow river made so dense and impenetrable by clashing politics still separated them." As Lee tries to capture the moment on her video camera, a policeman appears, grabs the camera, and says in Mandarin, "You're not allowed to take pictures of the border. It's espionage." Fortunately, their guide intervenes. Shortly thereafter, the Lees are told that he is a scam artist. They realize that if they alienate him, he could easily destroy the mission.

Lee's father, Jae Hak Lee, hires another guide, an intriguing and mystifying individual who falls for Helie. He devises a plan, but it fails. Yong Wong is too ill to escape. The next plan involves a Chinese navy boat, considerable risk, and approximately \$40,000. Although it is decided that all nine family members must escape together, family circumstances foil this idea. Yong Woon drinks excessively. His daughter, Ae Ran, is taken captive by her abusive husband who suspects something. Yong Woon's son wants to postpone their escape in order to attend his college graduation. The undertaking with the boat is scrapped. The subsequent tactic is to escape through China to the South Korean embassy in Hanoi. Lee's father makes contact with the Seoul Broadcasting

System (SBS) to document the escape and to use its contacts with the government to get Yong Woon's family out of China and into South Korea.

When they finally cross, Yong Woon almost drowns in the Yalu rapids and only four of the nine family members get out. After bribing border guards, they are transported by car, but are forced at one point to flee by foot when soldiers block the road. After a stay in Beijing, a train transports them to the border of Vietnam. The guide pays soldiers at the checkpoint to safely deliver the family members across the border and hires a taxi to take them to the Korean Embassy in Hanoi. They fly to Seoul to await the arrival of the other five members of the family whose lives are in jeopardy.

Twenty days later the other five family members escape, but they are forced to hide for months in student housing in Beijing awaiting word of political asylum. Ultimately, they obtain fake identification, fly to Ulaan Baatar (Mongolia), and receive permission to board a plane for Seoul from the Korean CIA. Two weeks later the family is finally united with Halmoni. After she embraced Hong Wong, all nine formed a semicircle in front of her, lowered their heads, and bowed deeply before her. As she "stood before them, she held herself with a simple and powerful dignity. She was absolutely beautiful with her hands folded in front of her, her head slightly lowered, and her eyes squeezed shut. I could see her lips move in prayer. In this amazing scene, Halmoni's life was a testimony to Korea's tragic history, desperate longing for unity, and destiny."

From my perspective as an educator, I believe that *In the Absence of Sun* has great merit for secondary and college level students. Consequently, I am adopting it for use in my Asian Studies classes. Students will be inspired by the courageous efforts of the Lee family and absorbed by the sheer drama and complexity of their mission. The book is relevant, informative, and inspirational. I am confident that my students will take note of Confucian loyalty to family and respect for elders. Certainly, they will become more aware of what it means to live in a totalitarian socialist state. They will be more sensitive to the longings of the Korean people for reunification of their country.

"The Crossing," a 20-minute documentary of the Lee family's dramatic rescue, is available by contacting ABCNewsstore.com or call 1- (800) - CALL- ABC. The order number is N98January 16-01. VHS available for \$8.00. (Note: this should be corrected)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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One-Sentence Synopsis

Helie Lee's *In the Absence of Sun*: Book Review and Excerpt

The author's account of her dangerous mission to rescue family members from North Korea is a microcosm of the troubles and hardships experienced by the North Korean people. The book is the sequel to Lee's internationally recognized *Still Life with Rice*.

