

READING EXERCISE

The Adventures of Lola Badiola

CHAPTER 46 – THE AFTERSHAVE

Park was in a state of high anxiety throughout the rest of the day. He was unable to do any work. His mind kept going back to the conversation with Kang.

Where exactly was his best friend Kim? What were they doing to him? Was he still alive?

Park was equally concerned about himself. He was sure that he was going to be interrogated about every element of his relationship with Kim. He would probably receive a lie detector test or be drugged with a truth serum.

Every North Korean knew that if you did not immediately report a crime you became an accomplice to that crime and suffered the same consequences as the criminal. How was Park going to be able to convince the secret police that he knew nothing of Kim's plans without getting tongue tied?

At exactly 6pm Park shut down his computer and made his way home. He sat at the back of the bus looking through the window at the urban wasteland surrounding him. He felt like a beautiful big fish that had jumped out of a dirty little pond and now found itself gasping for air. The sense of helplessness was overwhelming. He was the world's greatest computer programmer, a genius, and yet his talents would never be fully realized or appreciated. His life was a miserable failure.

He looked at all the other functionaries on the bus in front of him. They were the same pathetic faces that he saw every day going backward and forwards in a pointless process of production. They filled in forms and went over reports until one day they were sent back to their villages to grow old and die. He didn't know whether to cry, scream or hijack the bus and drive it to the Chinese border.

But before Park could burn his boats, something caught his attention and brought him out of his self-indulgent daydreams. There were two men sitting half-way down the bus that he never seen before. He was sure that he knew everyone on this daily commute, but these men were new.

The strangers were wearing the typical clothes worn by government employees, but their shoes were different - leather, shiny, high quality, built for outdoor activities, built for the military. Both men had very sharp haircuts and the backs of necks were muscular and slightly tanned.

It didn't take long for Park to figure out that they were from the secret police. But not the regular secret police. They were too well-fed for that. They must have been from the Special Operations Force (SOF), North Korea's finest and bravest soldiers.

What were they doing on the bus? What were they doing on this specific bus at this specific moment? It was very unlikely that this was just a coincidence. They must have been following him. Park's sense of paranoia started to grow.

The bus arrived at Park's stop, he stood up and walked quickly down the aisle to the exit. He didn't look back. He jumped off the vehicle and made his way directly to his apartment. It was getting dark

but there were still plenty of people around. As always, everyone who was out on the street minded their own business, nobody looked anyone else in the eye.

As he got closer to his apartment he started to speed up, and by the time he reached the entrance to the building he was running. He didn't dare look backwards but he sensed the presence of the two secret servicemen breathing down his neck.

He took his keys out of his pocket and clumsily unlocked the front door of the building. He closed it behind him and for the first time looked to see if anyone had been following him. There was no-one, just the neighbors going about their daily business.

He realized he was out of breath and sweating. The Russian army coat felt like it weighed a ton. He took it off and carried it up the stairs and into his apartment. As soon as he was inside his living room, he breathed a sigh of relief. He was home, in his castle, protected by his four flimsy walls.

He opened the fridge door to get himself a drink of cold water, but the fridge wasn't working. The dodgy electric circuit had been tripped and the contents inside of the machine were at room temperature. Park shook his head and swore. He was sure that he had opened and closed it carefully earlier that morning.

He poured himself a glass of tepid water and sat down on the sofa to watch television. He needed to distract himself from the current events in his life. The 7pm news was just finishing and the next program on the schedule was a documentary about rice production in the Chang Dong region between 1994 and 2009.

Park checked the remote control and realized that the television was on the news channel. This didn't make any sense. The only programs he ever watched on TV were sports related. He was sure that he had left it on the Sports channel that morning.

There could only be one explanation for why his fridge wasn't working and the television channel had been changed. Someone had been in his apartment.

Park started to feel like he was sinking into his sofa, like a great weight had been placed on his shoulders and was pushing down from above.

Were the intruders still there?

He jumped up onto his feet and grabbed a knife from his kitchen countertop. It still had some Kimchi sauce on it, but it was sharp and would do trick. He slowly and silently walked up to his bedroom door and listened carefully. There was no sound from within.

He closed his eyes and counted to three. One. Two. Three. Then he burst into the room screaming at the top of his voice and slashing the air with his kitchen knife.

There was nobody there. His bedroom and bathroom were empty. He checked all the cupboards and curtains and found nothing and nobody else in the apartment. The intruders had long since left the premises.

He sat down on his bed and let the adrenalin dissipate through his body. Gradually his normal breathing returned, and he came back to his rational senses. He needed to think clearly. He needed to plan his next move. He was a brilliant problem solver and tactician. That's what made him such an effective hacker. Now, more than ever, he needed to rely on his resourcefulness.

As his senses gradually returned to him, he became aware of a strong smell in his bedroom. A smell that was familiar. It was sweet, floral and somewhat acrid. He got up, walked over to his bathroom and opened the door. The smell became even stronger. It was the distinct essence of Dragon aftershave.

He looked closely at the bottle of pungent perfume on the shelf in his bathroom and noticed two things that were wrong. Firstly, the bottle was positioned with the logo facing inwards. Secondly, the level of fluid had dropped from earlier that morning. Whoever had been in Park's apartment had helped themselves to a large quantity of his most treasured possession.

Park's emotions had been on a roller coaster that day, from hope, to paranoia, to fear and now finally he was moved to anger. Was there nothing sacred in this society? The Fatherland had taken his talent, his best friend and now his aftershave - the one thing that made him feel unique and human. He could not contain his bitterness and resentment. He attacked the air around him with the knife in his hand, stabbing an imaginary Kang, slashing the two-secret policeman, cutting the jugular vein of the Supreme Leader and watching him collapse on the bedroom floor in a pool of blood.

This physical expression of his inner emotions made him feel much better. It allowed to release the adrenalin that had bult up in his system. And, for a brief moment, it made him feel powerful.

In the background he heard the 8pm news starting on the television. It brought him back to the present moment. And he suddenly remembered that he needed to be somewhere at 8pm. He remembered that he needed to be sitting on a bench in Chunghwa Park with the Girl Almond Eyes. He was already late for his date.

He ripped off his clothes and jumped in the shower. Then he fixed his hair and splashed on some aftershave. Then he grabbed his Russian coat and headed out the door. On his way out he picked up the kitchen knife and put it into one of his coat pockets, just in case.

Despite all the uncertainty in his life, despite all the questions surrounding his future at the Ministry of Information, there was one thing of which, he was sure.

Park Jae Bong was not going die a virgin.

READING COMPREHENSION

1. What does Park think will happen to him the next day?
2. How does Park feel as he looks out of the window of the bus?
3. Who are the two strangers on the bus?
4. How does Park behave on the way home after seeing the two strangers?
5. What two things make Park suspect that there has been an intruder in his apartment?
6. What does he do as he enters his bedroom?
7. How does Park react when he finds that his aftershave has been used?
8. Where does Park have to be at 8pm?
9. What does he take with him to his meeting?
10. Despite all the uncertainty in his life, what is Park sure about?