

READING EXERCISE

The Adventures of Lola Badiola

CHAPTER 52 – THE TOMB OF THE GLORIOUS FARMER

Park remained hidden in the bicycle carriage until the rider had taken him beyond the streetlights of the city. It was a clear night, and the moon illuminated the way into the empty countryside. It wasn't long before the urban sounds diminished, and all Park could hear was the squeaking of an unoiled bicycle chain and the panting of his diligent rider.

It was a bitterly cold night. The temperature was just above freezing but the humidity made it feel a lot harsher. Park pulled the enormous collar of his Russian army coat around his head so that only his eyes and forehead protruded from the material. He sat silently in the carriage looking out into the shadowy trees that lined the route into Shenzhen Forest.

"Keep going until we reach the Tomb of the Glorious Farmer"

The rider of the carriage acknowledged his instructions with a grunt.

As each kilometer passed, the road became more potholed. The rider had to weave from one side to the other in order to avoid the deepest cracks. Eventually the surface disappeared entirely to leave a rutted pathway that only a horse could navigate.

"This is as far as I can go."

"How far is it from here?"

"About 2 kilometers."

"Ok, wait here."

"Yes sir."

Park jumped out of the carriage, stretched his legs and then continued his journey on foot, into the darkness and the wilderness of the unwelcoming forest.

The Tomb of the Glorious Farmer was built in 1999 following the great famine of the previous five years. Nobody knew how many peasants had died during the period of mass starvation, but the estimates were between 240,000 and 3.5 million. The government had labelled it "The March of Suffering" blaming the shortage of food on foreign enemies - the Japanese, the Capitalists or the Imperialists. The Tomb commemorated this noble struggle against the forces of evil.

Park knew the truth. He had read about it from a wide variety of international sources. It was a homemade disaster, the result of economic mismanagement, political isolation and endemic corruption.

In the winter of 1996, hundreds of thousands of starving peasants had made their way from their drought ridden and infertile lands to the outskirts of Pyongyang. This was not a revolution, it was not an attempt to overthrow the government, it was a desperate cry for help.

The pathetic mass of humanity had been blocked by the military. They were prevented from entering the gates of city and left to perish at the perimeter of Pyongyang. The piles of dead bodies were collected in trucks and dumped in mass graves in Shenzhen forest.

As Park made his way along the path that led to the Tomb, he shuddered at the thought of the bones that were buried beneath his feet and the lost souls that floated between the trees.

Amongst the dead were his mother, his father and his little sister Min-Sung.

Where were they now?

What part of this god-forsaken graveyard did they occupy?

It was starting to get light by the time Park arrived at the monument. It was a pyramid consisting of 1996 blocks of stone about 20 metres high. At each apex was the statue of Chollima, a mythical winged horse, too rapid to be ridden by any mortal, an ironic symbol of North Korea's economic future.

In the years since the tomb had been built the country had moved on, reforms had been made and further famines narrowly avoided. Two Supreme leaders had come and gone, and the current dictator wanted to distance his regime from the apocalyptic events of the 1990s. Consequently, the monument was no longer celebrated or even mentioned. It was left to decay and fall into ruin. It was only prevented from disappearing into the forest by the relatives who, like Park, came to pay their respects to the loved ones that they had lost.

Park sat at the foot of one of the statues and meditated. He journeyed deep into his childhood memories:

I am in a field planting seeds with my father. I'm in the house washing plates with my mother. I'm catching cockroaches with my sister.

We march with many others to the city.

Now I'm in a windowless orphanage. A man from the government visits. He tests our physical and mental abilities.

I am moved to a boarding school. There is the soap, hot water and clean bedsheets.

I receive classes in maths, physics and computer science. I excel. I am the best in the class, the best in the school, the best that they have ever taught.

The other children bully me. They call me "The Peasant". They attack me while I'm sleeping.

I win a place at a prestigious University. I obtain a master's degree in physics.

I am recruited by the cybercrime division of the North Korean government.

Park curled up at the foot of the monument, wrapped up in his Russian Army coat, and fell into a restless sleep, the memories of his life flashing before him in an abstract and mixed-up manner. He had journeyed to the Tomb of the Glorious Farmer to bid a final farewell to his family. He was closing one chapter before the next was opened.

As the sun rose on a bright winter's morning, two agents from the Special Operations Force, North Korea's finest and bravest soldiers, quietly observed Park's sleeping body.

READING COMPREHENSION

1. Where is Park going?
2. Why does he walk the final 2 kilometers?
3. What was the "March of the Suffering"?
4. What was the true cause of the famine?
5. Describe Shenzhen Forest in your own words.
6. What happened to Park's family?
7. Describe the monument in your own words.
8. Describe Park's childhood in your own words.
9. Why has Park come to Shenzhen Forest?
10. Who is following him?