

Year of Impossible Goodbyes Study Guide

Year of Impossible Goodbyes by Sook Nyul Choi

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Plot Summary

In 1945, the Japanese had been occupying Korea for over thirty years. Sookan is a little Korean girl whose family fights for the cause of Korean Independence, but this is very dangerous. The family hopes that World War II will end soon so that they can be free.

Sookan and her little brother, Inchun, try to help out at home, where they are secretly taught about Korean history and culture by their Grandfather. The family runs a small sock factory in their yard, with a group of teen-aged girls who work all day, every day to make socks for the Japanese army. The Japanese Imperial Police rule over the people cruelly, confiscating anything of value, and forcing everyone to worship the Japanese Emperor. Sookan's three older brothers and Father are far away, in Japanese labor camps, or working to free Korea from Japanese rule. When Grandfather is dying, he asks Sookan's Mother to tell the children the stories of their family, and Sookan discovers just how cruel and destructive the Japanese have been to her family. Captain Narita, an Imperial Police officer, kidnaps all the sock girls, taking them to the front to be sex slaves for the Japanese army.

The Japanese finally surrender to the Allies, ending the war. Sookan's family is so happy to be able to act Korean again, but soon the Russians come in to take over Korea. They recruit everyone to be a good Communist and work hard to build a workers' paradise. In fact, the people are no better off than they were before, because they still have to work as slave laborers for very little food, while constantly being barraged with propaganda. Sookan's family pretends to love the Communist Party, while they plan their escape to the south. Sookan, Inchun, and Mother run away in the night, paying a guide a lot of money to take them across the border of the thirty-eighth parallel, where Korea is divided. After a harrowing train ride and a day of running and walking, Mother is separated from the children, and they discover that their guide is a double agent, who has betrayed them.

Sookan and Inchun wander for several days, looking for Mother, and finally they find someone who offers to help them get across the border. They have to crawl under a train, cross a river on a large train trestle, cross two fields where a searchlight seeks out targets to shoot, and go through a barbed-wire fence. They barely make it, and the Red Cross nurses on the other side help the children recover for several days. They take a bus to their Father's apartment, where they are reunited with their three older brothers. After more time has passed, Mother and their sister also make it to the south, and the family builds a new life for themselves.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Sookan is a little girl growing up in Korea during World War II. All her life, the Japanese have occupied her homeland and treated her people as slaves.

Sookan is ten years old in the spring of 1945, living with her family in Kirimni, an area of Pyongyang, which is today the capital of North Korea. Sookan lives with her Mother and Aunt Tiger, Grandfather, and her little brother, Inchun, who is about six years old. Sookan has an older sister, Theresa, who is a Catholic nun at a convent, and Sookan's three older brothers are away at a Japanese labor camp. Sookan's father is in Manchuria, working with the Korean Independence Movement to try to free Korea from Japanese rule. Sookan is old enough for school, but her family does not want her to attend the Japanese school, where she will be taught to venerate the Japanese Emperor and all Japanese people as divine beings. Since Sookan is small for her age, the family pretends that she is younger, and each morning, Grandfather secretly teaches Inchun and Sookan to read in Hangul, which is the Korean written language. He also teaches them about their own culture and history, but all of these lessons are illegal, so the children must keep them a secret.

One morning, Grandfather notices how nice his pine tree looks in the yard, and he declares that it has been thirty-six years since he has meditated under a spring sun. Against his daughter's protestations, Grandfather meditates under his pine tree, while Sookan looks on in fascination. She respects Grandfather for his age and wisdom, and she quietly mimics him. Soon it is time to begin the business of the day, making socks. The Japanese government forces the family to run a small sock factory in a shed in their yard, making socks for the Japanese military. They receive very little pay, and never have a day off, working hard all day to fulfill their quota of socks. Even when there are disasters like a power blackout, they must make enough socks to please Captain Narita, their local Imperial Police officer, or face terrible punishment. Each morning, Captain Narita visits the family and makes sure that they are dutifully visiting the nearby Shinto shrine to make offerings to the Japanese Emperor, whom they say is a god. Many sacred Buddhist shrines in Korea have been destroyed and made over as Shinto shrines.

Soon the factory workers start arriving. Sookan's Mother has prepared a tiny breakfast for them of little millet cookies and tea. Although Korean farmers grow plenty of rice to feed the entire country, they are forced to give their crops to the Japanese, while the Koreans usually have to eat the low-quality millet and barley, when they can get any food at all. The Japanese overlords have had over thirty years to obtain almost every object of value in Korea, and they keep making the people poorer and poorer in the name of financing the army so they can protect Korea from an invasion by "the White Devils." Kisa is the only man who works in the factory, as a mechanic and supervisor. Because Kisa is crippled and has trouble walking, he has not been sent to the work

camps like Sookan's brothers and most of the other young men. All the other workers are teen-aged girls. Sookan's favorite is bubbly Haiwon, who never stops sharing neighborhood gossip during the short breaks from factory work. Haiwon speaks against the Japanese, and it makes Sookan sad that such a sweet, friendly girl should have to work each day as a slave.

Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter introduces the reader to the historical background of the story, which may be unfamiliar to many readers. The Japanese Imperial army occupied many surrounding nations in the years up to and during the second World War, treating them as resources to be exploited. In fact, young Sookan has never known a time when her people were free. It is clear, from many aspects of her life, that the Japanese occupation has turned the lives of the people of Korea upside-down, demanding not just submission in the form of hard work and poverty, but also forcing children to learn Japanese propaganda, and trying to force everyone to change religions. However, in the midst of all these details, which seem to suggest despair, are hints that Sookan's family still holds out hope for the future. Sookan's Japanese schooling has been postponed partly because her family hopes that the war will end soon, freeing the people of Korea. Sookan's mother gives each of her sons a name ending in "chun," which means "spring," in the hopes that this will herald a springtime for Korea. However, Sookan points out that so far, this naming strategy has not worked.

There are also objects which represent the tenuous hope to which Sookan's family clings. Sookan wishes that she could plant flowers in her yard, but she is forbidden to do so because the Japanese do not want the Koreans wasting effort or resources on anything which does not help the war effort. She dreams of a time when she will be able to plant flowers, which represent her own youthful potential, which has been forbidden to bloom. A similar symbol is a silver hairpin which Sookan's Mother wears in her hair. The elaborately-carved hairpin is very tarnished, but when Sookan suggests polishing it, Mother explains that it is a family heirloom, and the only piece of jewelry that she has been able to keep the Japanese from confiscating. For now, she must keep the hairpin ugly, in the hopes of one day revealing its true beauty in safety. Just like the hairpin, Sookan, her mother, and the Korean people in general have been forced to hide their beauty and value from their oppressors.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Sookan's family finds out that Haiwon's sixteenth birthday is coming up and they decide that they want to throw her a surprise party to show her how much she means to them. Mother volunteers to make the journey to Theresa's convent, in hopes of obtaining a nice birthday gift for Haiwon, and also to hear any news of the war that the nuns might have heard on the radio they keep hidden in the basement. Because traveling is forbidden, Mother must take only back roads, leaving as soon as Captain Narita has done his daily inspection. Mother is Catholic, and proud of Theresa, and she gets a little bit of rice from the nuns, as well as a pretty illustrated religious book for Haiwon. Sookan and Inchun enjoy looking at the little book and make their own copy before wrapping it in their own drawings for wrapping paper.

In the morning, in the short time before work must begin, the family surprises Haiwon with their handmade presents and a tiny feast. Haiwon is overwhelmed and moved to tears. Unfortunately, Captain Narita shows up earlier than usual, finding the family joyously eating off of brass dishes. Narita confiscates the dishes and Haiwon's presents, and threatens that the family had better submit if they want Grandfather to live. After Narita leaves the group, Grandfather tells his family to throw away his shoes, because he will never again come outside.

That afternoon, as punishment for the party, the police come and chop down Grandfather's beautiful old pine tree, hauling away most of the wood. Sookan is depressed, thinking about having to go back to eating off of wooden dishes, and remembering how the pine tree was the only pretty thing left in the yard. For the first time in her life, Sookan wishes that she were Japanese instead of Korean, because she thinks she would be so much better off. However, when she sees Inchun, she wants to take care of him, so she comments on how lovely the fresh-cut pine smells. She points out to him that they have always wished they had a gift to give the sock girls, so the two children gather pretty, fragrant sprigs of pine off the ground, and give them to the sock girls to take home. Sookan suggests that the tree might keep growing, so she and Inchun water the roots of the tree.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter shows how the Korean people continue trying to find ways of making life bearable and even fun, although they are oppressed by the Japanese. The pine tree could be seen as a symbol of this indomitable spirit, but it is more openly a symbol for Grandfather himself, which foreshadows that he may die soon, as hinted by Captain Narita. The tree, which is very old, belongs to Grandfather, and it has weathered many hardships. The Japanese police somehow seem to know how much the tree means to Grandfather, so they use the tree's destruction as a way to get at him. Even though

Grandfather seems truly crushed by the oppression, his family still hopes that he will change his mind about leaving the house, and his grandchildren could be seen as the sprouts which continue to grow from the tree stump. Sookan knows that the tree's chances are not good, but she still hopes that the future will be brighter.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Thinking about the way her family lives, and how Captain Narita somehow knew when they were going to have their party, Sookan begins to wonder if the Japanese really do have godlike powers, as they claim. She has no chance to ask anyone about it, because everyone is so busy working that there is never any time for questions. The next day, Grandfather calls Sookan and Inchun into his room, but Mother warns them to simply listen and not ask any questions. Grandfather says that he wants the children to know about their family, and he wants Mother to tell them the stories in front of Grandfather, so he can know that the knowledge is being passed on.

Mother brings out a beautiful, but fire-damaged, box containing family photographs. There is an old photo of Grandfather as a young man in nice clothes and a topknot, which is a type of ponytail which represented Korean culture, and especially, the status of a scholar. Mother tells the children how the Japanese cut off Grandfather's topknot because everything Korean was forbidden. The Japanese burned their town, and in their family only Grandfather and Mother escaped to Manchuria with only this box of photos. Mother shows more photos, explaining how she and Sookan's father published an underground newspaper in Hangul for the Korean Independence Movement. There is a photo of Father Carroll, an American missionary who introduced Mother to Catholicism. The Japanese forced Father Carroll and other foreigners out of Korea, and once again burned the town the family was living in, taking Grandfather captive. Mother admits that the Japanese tortured Grandfather for several months before he was rescued.

Although Grandfather is now old and sick, the Japanese allow no doctors to visit him, because they say the doctors are needed for the front, and cannot be spared for a dying old Korean man. Instead, Mother and Aunt Tiger rub lemon oil into his skin to soothe him, and once day, Sookan is allowed to rub the oil on Grandfather's face. When Grandfather takes Sookan's hand, she feels as though a little chuckling Buddha has gone into her, and she imagines that she is benefiting from her Grandfather's powerful spirit. Then Grandfather asks Sookan and Inchun to rub some oil on his feet, but Mother grabs the rag and the oil from Sookan and insists that she will do it. Grandfather answers that just this once, he wants Sookan to wash his feet, and finally Mother gives in. Sookan feels honored to have such an important duty, but when she pulls off Grandfather's socks, she sees that he has no toenails, just like he has no fingernails on one of his hands. His toes are a mess, and she realizes that his feet and hand were ravaged by the torture of his Japanese captors. The next day, Grandfather dies.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Although Sookan has always been surrounded by the hardships of war, her family has managed to shelter her from some of the harshest realities, allowing her and Inchun to be children. Now, Sookan is being forced to confront very adult issues for the first time. Sookan finally understands what her family has been through, learning many adult facts that Mother has tried to keep from her, not wanting to burden the child any more. Sookan also has to deal with the death of someone close to her. This is a very dark chapter, illustrating the sad conditions forced on many people by the horrors of war. Some children are forced to grow up very quickly, in order to deal with what is going on around them.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

After Grandfather's death, Mother does not speak, but just works frantically. Sookan feels that her mother has become a ghost, and worries that perhaps Mother's spirit went away with Grandfather's. Sookan thinks that God must be punishing her for hating Captain Narita. To make up for Mother's absent-mindedness, Sookan and Inchun work hard too, helping make, sort and fold socks. One day, Captain Narita comes to the factory and asks to speak with Mother. He tells Mother that the factory is not producing enough socks, and so the factory workers should "voluntarily" offer their services relieving the Japanese soldiers at the front. Sookan does not understand, but she is shocked when Mother instantly comes back to life, and begs Captain Narita not to take them. Mother promises that their productivity will go up, and Captain Narita says that he will be back to check on them.

Mother begs the sock girls to run away and hide before they are taken captive, but the sock girls are determined to work harder, faster, and longer hours so that they might be allowed to continue working at the factory. Aunt Tiger points out to Mother that there is nowhere for the sock girls to go, nowhere that they can safely hide. Mother works so hard that she makes herself very sick. One night, after a long, hard day, Captain Narita and a truckload of police officers suddenly arrive and round up the sock girls. The girls scream in terror and wail that they wish they were dead, but the officers have guns, and shove them into the back of a truck. Kisa, the mechanic, tries to come to their aid, but he is beaten by the guards who laugh and leave him lying in the mud. Mother and Aunt Tiger tend Kisa's wounds, and then pray for a miracle. That night, some Japanese soldiers come and confiscate all the factory equipment, even though the family bought the equipment with their own money.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Kisa is the only man left at the factory, and he tries to protect the women around him, but his body is weak and injured, and he can do nothing to prevent them from being captured. He could be seen as a metaphor for the Korean people, who are helpless to resist the cruelty of the Japanese who have ruled over them for over thirty years. No one will tell Sookan what the so-called "Spirit Girls" do for the army, but she understands that it is a fate worse than death. In fact, the sock girls are being taken away to become sex slaves, probably to be raped, beaten, and tortured until they die of disease and starvation, or commit suicide. Sookan overhears Aunt Tiger and Mother talking about how many of the "Spirit Girls" commit suicide on the way there by jumping out of the moving trucks, rather than be locked in a public bathroom and abused by the army. It makes sense that the adults want to hide such horrifying circumstances from young Sookan, because she is still a child, which is all the more horrifying, considering that the sock girls are only a few years older than she is.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The family receives notice that Sookan has to start going to school. Mother and Inchun warn her not to speak any Korean at school because she will be beaten if she does. Since she has never spoken Japanese, she is only to say, "Hai, Sensei!" which means, "Yes, Teacher!" Sookan goes to school on her first day to find that her teacher is Narita Sensei, Captain Narita's wife! Since the girls all have to stand in order of height, and Sookan is the smallest, she has to stand at the front of the line, next to Narita Sensei. When the school sings the Kamigayo, the Japanese National Anthem, Sookan can not bring herself to sing it, but Narita Sensei notices that she is only mouthing the words. Everyone in the school bows to an image of the Japanese Emperor, while facing east toward Japan, but Narita Sensei hits Sookan on the head with a ruler for not bowing low enough. It is the first time anyone has ever hit Sookan.

In class, Sensei calls Sookan by her Japanese name, Aoki Shizue. Sookan hates having to answer to this name. School turns out to be almost entirely propaganda lessons about how wonderful and divine Japanese people are, and how horrid and stupid the "White Devils" are. Sookan is amazed that her classmates can repeat the stupid lessons. There are no bathroom breaks, and Sookan begins to worry that she will not be able to hold it. In fact, four girls in the class quietly wet their pants before Sensei notices and responds with disgust. She tells the girls to get out their cleaning supplies, and the whole class routinely moves the desks aside and scrubs the floor. Sookan can tell that they have done this many times. At lunch, Sookan shares some of her special, first day of school lunch with another girl who has very little food. A student on guard sees them sharing, and confiscates Sookan's lunch, along with the lunchbox made by Grandfather. Sookan learns that she must never share or help a fellow student, because it is against the rules.

After lunch, the students spend a few hours working in the schoolyard, making simple weapons and stockpiling them. Sookan's class is given the task of breaking pieces of rocks, ceramics, and glass into sharp shards that can be thrown at an enemy. A kind girl named Unhi befriends Sookan, and shows her how to grind down the sharp edges so that they become dull. One day, when the teachers are explaining how the children can use their weapons to defend themselves from an invasion by the Allied Forces, an older boy shouts out that the children will certainly use the weapons against the Japanese themselves. Sookan is so delighted to hear this that she claps her hands. She is immediately beaten by Narita Sensei, and wakes up in Mother's care. Sookan is expelled for her behavior, but the boy is severely beaten and taken away.

The family has not been paid in a long time, and they have run out of food. The Imperial Police announce that they have a little bit of rice for sale, if anyone has any valuables to trade. Mother decides to polish up her silver hairpin, and Aunt Tiger also relinquishes a gold pin given to her by her late husband. They trade these in for a tiny bag of rice, but

when they open the bag, they find that it has been mixed with sand to increase the weight.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Sookan is beginning to learn how her people are subjugated by the Japanese who rule over them. Although Sookan laughs inwardly that any of her peers can recite such silly propaganda slogans, she herself learns that if she does not show enthusiasm, she will be beaten. The way that Narita Sensei does not excuse her students for bathroom breaks, but treats them like filthy animals when they urinate on the floor, shows how the oppressors can use humiliation to dominate the oppressed Korean people. Finally, the Koreans become so desperate with hunger that they are willing to offer up even their most cherished valuables, only to learn that the Japanese have been holding out false hope, selling them sand in exchange for silver and gold. The only bright spot in all of this is that many characters speculate that the Japanese are becoming increasingly tyrannical because their position is desperate, and the war is nearly over. Sookan's family hopes that soon the Americans will come and drive out the Japanese for good.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

In August, it is terribly hot and humid, and Mother gets very sick. Finally, Kisa sneaks off to the convent to get her some medicine, and he hurries back with the news that the war is over! Although the Japanese Emperor has unconditionally surrendered, many Japanese in Korea do not want the Koreans to know about it, so that the Japanese can safely escape from Korea. People start flying the Korean flag, and Mother starts to get better. She knows that prisoners will be returning home, and she is looking forward to the return of her three sons and husband. Sookan and Inchun get out all the flower seeds the family has saved over the years, and plant all of them in a flower bed in the yard. The family uncovers their remaining valuables, and digs up a container of fancy, bright-colored Korean clothes from under the house. Sookan loves walking the streets with her family, in their beautiful clothes, speaking Korean. She and Aunt Tiger walk to where Captain Narita and his wife lived, and they discover that the house really belongs to the family of her friend Unhi. Unhi's family is happy to have Sookan and Aunt Tiger as their guests, and the next day, they visit Sookan's house. They find a storehouse of rice and ask Sookan's help in distributing the rice to all the families in town.

Things do not stay so happy for long. Unhi's two brothers return home from a labor camp, desperately ill from their treatment. Soon they both die, and Sookan feels sorry for Unhi when the funeral procession goes by. Soon the Russian army invades Korea, so Sookan's family hides in the house for several days. They have heard rumors of Russian soldiers with automatic machine guns, looting and raping. Most young men are rounded up and sent to Siberia for hard labor. People say that the Americans are never coming to Korea's rescue, but that America and Russia have divided Korea in half at the thirty-eighth parallel, so the Russians are there to stay.

When only Sookan and Inchun are at home, a pair of Russian soldiers comes into the house and steals the two clocks. One of them introduces himself as Ivan Malenkiv, and he tries to reassure the children that everything is all right. Sookan finds that she is not so afraid of him because he reminds her of Father Carroll, the only other Caucasian person she has ever known.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter is a major turning point, since it marks a major change in Korea's history. This is an example of going from the frying pan into the fire. Sookan remembers how Grandfather said that Russia and Japan both were fighting over Korea, like a delicious treat that they both want to eat. Sookan does not yet know what it will mean for Russia to rule Korea, although she knows that she is happy that the Japanese are gone. It is especially fitting that Unhi, the only other student to show kindness to Sookan at school, ends up living in the house that the Naritas had taken for themselves. However, even

Unhi, whose family is prominent and wealthy, suffers in the aftermath of Japanese occupation.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In late September, Sookan's neighbor, Mrs. Kim, comes around. With her, travels a pretty Russian woman named Comrade Natasha. Mrs. Kim is very pushy and loud, and tells the family that everyone is equal now, and that Mother Russia is going to take good care of all of them. She is clearly very excited about these changes, but Mother and Aunt Tiger are wary. Even though Mrs. Kim, who calls herself Comrade Kim now, strongly urges them to come to the nightly town meetings, they resist her. Mrs. Kim introduces Comrade Natasha to Sookan and suggests that Sookan will be perfect for the Little Proletariat School in town. Finally, the family agrees to go to a town meeting, and they join the stream of people singing happily on their way, glad to finally be allowed to celebrate openly.

At the town meeting, each of them is given an ID card, a Red Book, and a red scarf and armband to wear. They sing songs in Korean, about how wonderful Communism is, then eat a huge meal, and watch a propaganda film. Sookan is excited because she wonders what Russia is like, and the film shows joyful peasants working in abundant fields, in a "Workers' Paradise." The next morning at dawn, the comrades round everyone up everyone in town and take them to build a workers' paradise. Sookan works hard all morning, and in the afternoon attends school. School is nothing but constant propaganda, teaching the children how wonderful it is that Mother Russia has brought Communism to Korea. In fact, the "workers' paradise" is much more like slavery.

After almost a year, no one from Sookan's family has returned. In addition to constant work, the situation in North Korea has become more dangerous. Many people try to escape to South Korea, also called the Republic of Korea, south of the thirty-eighth parallel, but this is not easy. People trying to cross the border are considered traitors, and are shot on sight. In addition, if someone tries to escape, their family and friends will probably be targeted for persecution. At school, the children are strongly encouraged to talk about their family lives, but if a child reveals incriminating information, their entire family is likely to disappear. Sookan and Inchun try to say as little as possible, but it makes Comrade Kim, their teacher, suspicious. Kisa tells the family that they had better escape south as soon as possible, because it is getting more and more dangerous. In the meantime, they try to act as enthusiastic about Communism as they can.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Sookan and Inchun attend the Little Proletariat School, where they learn songs and chants about how important and valuable each of them is as a member of the proletariat. The proletariat refers to the lowest class of society, the poor workers with no



property. Communism aims to abolish the class system altogether, making everyone a part of the proletariat. In Communist societies, the wealth is evenly distributed among all the people, and no one owns the wealth, or the means of producing the wealth, because it is communal. Often, however, the leaders of Communist nations take advantage of those whom they call the proletariat, and the leaders live in wealth, privilege and comfort, while the proletariat struggles in poverty. Although Communism has lofty, egalitarian goals, the result is often the exact opposite of these goals, increasing injustice and oppression rather than fixing them. Sookan is learning that, although the Communists speak more kindly than the Japanese oppressors, she and her family are in the same desperate situation, and their lives are still in danger.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

One day, Kisa brings wonderful news: he has seen Sookan's Father, who is alive and healthy, as are Sookan's three brothers! Father has gotten a job transporting goods between North and South Korea, so he is able to help many people escape to safety, including his sons. He sends word that the family should be ready to leave on a moment's notice, and in the meantime, try not to attract suspicion. The family volunteers a lot for the Communist Party, and they manage to get a job making flags and posters at home, so they can wait for Father. Finally, they find out that Father can not take the risk of coming to them, so Kisa finds the family a guide who is willing to take them south. They obtain a large bag of jewelry, as well as a little money, which they will give to their guide as payment. They have to leave Kisa and Aunt Tiger behind to make excuses for their absence. Their guide is disguised as a peasant farmer, and he takes off right away, so that Mother and the children have to run to keep up.

The guide leads them to a train station, where a crowd separates them. Finally, they find him in the crowd and they all end up crammed onto a train with countless other people. When they get off the train near the border, the guide takes the children's passports and warns them not to let on that they know their mother because a mother and her children would look too suspicious trying to cross the border. Sure enough, after they walk for a long time, they come to a checkpoint, and the children are waved through, while Mother is detained. Inchun begins to act uncharacteristically babyish and Sookan carries him as he cries and falls asleep. Finally, the guide leads them to a small inn and disappears into the night.

An old woman at the inn asks Sookan if that was her guide, and when Sookan answers "yes," the woman gives them supper and puts them to bed. At dawn, the old woman wakes them up. She tells the children that their guide is really a double agent who has taken their money and their passports and turned their mother in as a traitor. The children must leave the inn at once so that the old woman will not also get in trouble. Inchun treats Sookan as though she were his mother, and tells her that they should go find Mother.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter shows just how vulnerable Sookan and her family are. Not only have their people been taken advantage of by one regime after another, but even those who seem the most trustworthy, like their brave guide, may end up betraying them. Now Sookan is alone in the world, with no resources, and she has to look out for Inchun while worrying about what will become of Mother. Although the chapter begins with unexpected hope, when Sookan learns that her father and brothers are all right, it plunges right down into despair. Havens which seem safe, like the inn, are not, and Sookan knows that if she

tries returning to her hometown in Pyongyang, she will be treated as a traitor for trying to escape.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The children go to the nearby market to look for Mother. They see a woman selling corn who is having trouble with her baby, so Sookan and Inchun offer to watch her baby for her. In return, she gives them each an ear of corn. They do this for three days, eating only corn, and sleeping in a nearby barn. Both children are filthy and covered with mosquito bites, so that they look diseased. A man working at the train station takes pity on them and tells them that he will try to help them. Sookan is tired of waiting, so she and Inchun go to the guardhouse where they last saw Mother. Although she is frightened, Sookan asks the guards what they did with Mother, and the soldiers tell them to come inside. One soldier introduces himself as Dobraski, and he gives the children some bread.

Dobraski plays with Inchun a little, then loads the children into a jeep. They are interrogated separately, but they stick to their story that they are visiting their sick grandfather in the south. Finally, the Russian soldiers tell them that they can not find Mother, and urge the children to go home. Sookan does not know what to do, and Inchun is getting harder for her to take care of.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Sookan and Inchun are lost and motherless and there are many relationships in this chapter which point to the difficulty of being a good mother. Sookan's Mother is trying her best, but foolishly entrusted her children to the wrong person, even though she paid him extra money in hopes that he would take better care of them. Sookan herself is forced to act as a surrogate mother to Inchun, and she finds that she is not strong enough or wise enough to give him what he needs. They, in turn, both help out the young mother who sells corn because it is hard for her to make a living while trying to care for her baby. Dobraski seems to act as a sort of parent figure to the children, but he ends up taking them to be interrogated. These all happen under the umbrella of the care of Mother Russia, which is military conquest masquerading as a mother's love.

Chapter 10 and Epilogue

Chapter 10 and Epilogue Summary

Sookan and Inchun go back to the train station and meet up with the man who works there. He gives them special tickets which will be a signal to his friend the conductor. The man gives them instructions for where they need to go to get across the border, which is very nearby. The children get in the correct ticket line, and the conductor whispers that they should go to the back end of the train, where they must crawl underneath the train to the other side of the tracks. Then they must cross a cornfield, lying down still every time a searchlight passes over the field. It is muddy, so Sookan takes off her shoes so that they will make less noise as she runs, but the freshly-cut cornstalks cut into her bare feet. The children are confused and terrified when they come to a train trestle going over a swollen river, and they realize they will have to climb the trestle and cross the river.

After the river, only a field and a barbed-wire fence stand in the way, and the children sprint across the field and try to scoot through the fence. Sookan gets caught in the barbed wire, but she forces through it, heedless of her pain. She and Inchun run blindly until they find themselves in the midst of Red Cross tents, and sense that they can stop running. They fall to the ground as nurses rush out of the tents to help them, horrified that these poor children are all alone.

Inchun and Sookan sleep for days in the care of the Red Cross nurses. Eager to be on their way, the children are only partially recovered when they take a bus to Father's apartment in Seoul, Korea. After joyously meeting their brothers, the children take weeks recuperating from their journey, but no one has heard from Mother. Sookan starts attending school and finds companionship with other girls who have escaped from the north, and they start a poetry club. Father continues helping people escape, and he starts a soy sauce factory, where he employs many of the people he has helped. After six months, Mother finally arrives, having escaped from her captors, and crawled through a tunnel crossing the border. In 1950, war comes again, and so Theresa joins the rest of the family. However, they learn that Kisa and Aunt Tiger were shot as traitors.

Chapter 10 and Epilogue Analysis

After such a sad, horrifying ordeal, it is surprising that this book ends up having a happy ending. Sookan and Inchun's final flight to the south is the climax of the book, as they abandon all other needs and wants in order to make it across the fence. The short telling of Mother's adventures, and the mention of Sookan's new friends, shows the reader that this story is not unique, but that many people have experienced the hardships of war. Not all is happy at the end, as the family remembers Kisa and Aunt Tiger, who made it possible for the others to escape. However, the hope mentioned at

the beginning of the book, symbolized by the springtime sun and Grandfather's pine tree, finally comes to fruition after years of turmoil.



Characters

Sookan

Sookan is the narrator and main character of "Year of Impossible Goodbyes." Sookan is about ten years old at the start of the book, and she is a very good child, who tries to be obedient and helpful to her family. Although she is a child in many ways, she has grown up surrounded by the oppression of war, so she understands some adult ideas all too well, like self-sacrifice, hard work, and hunger. Sookan is small for her age, so her family passes her off as being younger than she is in order to postpone sending her to the Japanese school. Sookan loves learning about Korean culture and history, but when she is forced to repeat Japanese or Communist propaganda, she finds it hard to conceal how silly and stupid she thinks the propaganda lessons are. She does what she can to sabotage Japanese efforts to crush the Korean spirit, and when she is upset, she tries to picture Buddha so that she can channel her Grandfather's wisdom and joy. Sookan shows that she is very strong and brave when she and Inchun make it safely across the border out of North Korea. She has to act as a sort of surrogate mother to Inchun, but she tries to find ways to look on the bright side and be resourceful.

Inchun, Sookan's Little Brother

Inchun is Sookan's little brother, the youngest of six children. He is only six or seven years old, but he often seems more like an old man, giving Sookan wise advice for how to succeed socially. He remembers from stories how important it is to never speak Korean at school. Inchun is even better behaved than Sookan, and since he can not use real drawing supplies, he likes to use a stick to draw in the dirt of their yard. Often, when Sookan is despairing about her life, Inchun motivates her to deal with her problems, for his sake. Inchun works hard along with everyone else, helping prepare the socks for the army. When the family is escaping to the south, Inchun can no longer control himself like an adult, and he often cries, begs Sookan for food, and has to be carried. He is good at being quiet when they are hiding, but when they discover that they must cross the river on the train trestle, Inchun balks, and it is only his faith in Sookan, and her patience, which make it possible for him to face his fear and make it to safety. Although it is an astounding feat for Sookan to get Inchun safely across the border, it is even more impressive that a child as young as Inchun can handle such a long, hard journey.

Sookan's Mother

Sookan's Mother gets separated from Sookan and Inchun when they try to cross the border. Later, she escapes from her job as a nanny and finds her way south, crawling through an abandoned tunnel to safety.



Aunt Tiger

Sookan's Aunt Tiger loves to tell stories about tigers, and she also complains loudly about the Japanese oppression. When the family escapes, Aunt Tiger has to stay behind to cover for them, and she is shot as a traitor.

Kisa, the Mechanic

Kisa is the mechanic at the sock factory. He is crippled, so he is unable to protect the sock girls from being taken as sex slaves for the Japanese army.

The Sock Girls

A group of teen-aged girls work for practically no wages at the sock factory. Captain Narita decides that they can better serve the war effort if they are made into "Spirit Girls" who will serve as prostitutes for the Japanese soldiers.

The Double-Agent Guide

A guide, disguised as a peasant farmer, agrees to take the family across the border in exchange for a lot of money and jewelry. Instead, he abandons the children, and turns in Mother to the authorities as a traitor.

Unhi

Unhi is the only person who speaks kindly to Sookan at school. It turns out that Unhi's family are the rightful owners of the Naritas' house.

Captain Narita

Captain Narita is the cruel Japanese Imperial Police officer who checks on Sookan's family. He loves finding ways to hurt them more and more.

Narita Sensei

Narita Sensei is Captain Narita's wife, and Sookan's teacher at Japanese school. She beats and humiliates her students while telling them how lucky they are to be ruled over by the Japanese.



Comrade Kim

Mrs. Kim is Sookan's neighbor, and she is the first to embrace Communism and the Russians. She also ends up being Sookan's teacher at the Little Proletariat School, teaching the children to love Communism.

Sookan's Father

Sookan's Father is an important worker in the Korean Independence Movement. He publishes newspapers and puts his life at risk to help people escape to safety.

Sookan's Grandfather

Grandfather is very old, and when he is forced to submit to Captain Narita's abuse, he gets very sick and dies. Sookan discovers that Grandfather's body is ravaged from torture at the hands of the Japanese.

Objects/Places

Kirimni, Pyongyang, Korea

Sookan's family lives in the Kirimni area in the city of Pyongyang in Korea. Today, Pyongyang is the capital of North Korea.

Thirty-Eighth Parallel

At the end of World War II, Korea was divided in half at the thirty-eighth parallel of latitude, with the northern section going to Russia, and the southern section being ruled by Koreans. Many people wanted to cross the border, but were prevented by North Korean forces.

Grandfather's Pine Tree

Grandfather's ancient pine tree is the only pretty thing left in the yard which brings any hope or beauty. Captain Narita has it cut down to hurt Grandfather.

The Communist Party

Once the Russians bring Communism to North Korea, everyone must act as though they love the Communist Party, or they will disappear overnight. Sookan's family tries to be very visible in their support of Communism, so that no one will suspect that they do not believe in Communism.

Japanese Occupation of Korea

By the beginning of World War II, the Japanese had been occupying Korea for thirty years. They ruled very oppressively, trying to stamp out anything Korean, and forcing the people to work as slave laborers.

Mother's Hairpin

Mother wears a silver hairpin that she has hidden from the Japanese by letting it stay ugly and tarnished. When the family is so hungry that they are desperate, she trades the hairpin in for rice, only to learn that she has been cheated into buying sand.



The Sock Factory

Sookan's family runs a small sock factory in their yard, making socks for the Japanese army. After the sock girls are taken away, the Japanese confiscate the factory equipment.

The Little Proletariat School

After the Russians come into North Korea, Sookan and Inchun have to go to the Little Proletariat School, where they learn propaganda about the joys of Communism.

The Japanese School

Before Sookan gets expelled for having a bad attitude, she is forced to attend Japanese school. She and the other students have to make weapons which they will supposedly use against the "White Devils" if the country gets invaded.

Seoul, South Korea

Once Sookan and Inchun escape to safety, they go live at their father's apartment in Seoul. Today, Seoul is the capital of Korea.

The Train Station

Sookan and Inchun hang out at the train station because they do not know where else to go, and finally a man who works there decides to help them get across the border. They have to crawl underneath a parked train before it starts moving.

The Barbed-Wire Fence

After all the other obstacles, a barbed-wire fence separates North and South Korea, and the children have to force their way through, tearing their skin and clothes on the barbs.

Themes

Hope for the Future

Although "Year of Impossible Goodbyes" is a very sad, dark book, it still carries a message of hope for the future, showing that even the worst of circumstances can still turn out well. This hope is hinted at in the beginning through several references to springtime. In fact, Sookan's Mother gives each of her sons a name containing the word "spring," in hopes that Korea will have a metaphorical spring, and in the end, all of her sons end up together and free. Springtime is a common symbol of new life and renewal, since the earth seems to come back to life after the winter.

Even though the Japanese have denied them every luxury, such as being able to plant a flower garden, Sookan's family keeps old packets of seeds for flowers, showing that they still hope for the future. The seeds represent not just the future hope to be allowed to plant, but also represent infinite potential in future generations, showing how Sookan's parents hope that her life will be easier than theirs have been. In the first chapter, Sookan is thinking about what the future holds, and thinks, "I wondered if we would ever be able to plant those seeds." (Chapter 1, p. 14) No matter how bad things get, Sookan manages to hold out hope for the future, hinting at the joyful ending of the book even when Grandfather's beautiful pine tree has been pointlessly chopped down. She says to Inchun, "The tree will grow again. Let's water the roots first." (Chapter 2, p. 31) Simple statements like these demonstrate her amazing ability to find joy and hope in a life constantly shadowed by war and poverty.

Korea's Struggle

Sookan's family has dealt with thirty-five years of domination by the Japanese Imperial army, and they put up what fight they can. At the end of the Japanese occupation, Sookan is stuck in the dangerous turmoil as her country goes from one totalitarian regime to another. Because of its relatively small size, Korea is an easy target for nations to try to conquer, so it is hard for the Korean people to try to maintain their national identity, especially when the Japanese try to wipe out everything Korean. After Captain Narita threatens to take the sock girls to the front, Aunt Tiger goes on a tirade about Korea's position in the world. She says, "We are like mice trapped in a dungeon of wildcats. We are Koreans; we are a cursed race and there is no hope for us as long as the Japanese are around." (Chapter 4, p. 55) Grandfather also sees Korea as a tiny morsel fought over by giant nations, and before he dies, he warns Sookan, ". . . the Russians always wanted to own Korea just as the Japanese and the Chinese had." (Chapter 6, p. 97) Korea ends up being divided in half, but many of the people left in Communist North Korea are still trapped as prisoners, even though the people of South Korea are free. Sookan's parents have been working for many years to help the Korean Independence Movement, and they continue helping people escape from North Korea for many years.

Interrupted Childhood

Sookan and Inchun are just children throughout "Year of Impossible Goodbyes," yet they are rarely allowed to act like children because of the oppressive rule of the Japanese. They have to work hard every day, and Inchun seems to have the wisdom of an old man sometimes. Mother tries to shield the children from some of the realities of war, like the fate of the sock girls, or Grandfather's torture. When the war finally ends, Mother is overjoyed to be able to spoil Sookan and Inchun, letting them behave however they want, because they no longer need to worry about offending the Japanese. However, this carefree slice of childhood does not last long, and soon the children are once again tangled up in the adult world of hard work and fear, cautious of giving away any secrets.

When the children get separated from Mother at the border, Sookan is forced to play the role of mother to Inchun, even though she does not know what to do. While waiting to be interrogated by the Russians, Sookan feels the despair of a parent, thinking, "I felt like crying, too, but I told Inchun it would be all right. I didn't believe it myself, and I wondered if that was how Mother had felt all those times." (Chapter 9, p. 147) Even while mustering the courage of an adult, Sookan still feels the terror of a child, and she describes the unfriendly terrain on her journey, saying, "The dark branches loomed above and seemed as if they would reach out and grab us." (Chapter 10, p. 161) War often threatens the normal growth from childhood to adulthood.

Style

Point of View

"Year of Impossible Goodbyes" is told from the first-person viewpoint of Sookan, a ten-year-old Korean girl in 1945. Sookan likely represents Sook Nyul Choi, the author of the book, but it is not autobiographical. Sookan has been raised to appreciate both Buddhism and Catholicism, but she wonders which religion can help her understand the tragic events going on around her. She thinks to herself, "When would Grandfather's merciful Buddha or Mother's Catholic God come to help us?" (Chapter 4, p. 58) Sookan has lived a sheltered life, rarely leaving her family home, but she is too familiar with the hardships of war, and she understands the implications, if not the details, of rape. Nonetheless, she tries to have a positive outlook and believe that things are going to get better for her.

At the beginning of the book, Sookan has never known a time when her people were free to walk down the street, speak their own language, or worship the way they please. The Japanese have always overshadowed her existence, having almost complete control over every aspect of her life. After Captain Narita mysteriously knows just when to raid her family's home, Sookan thinks, "I couldn't help but wonder if the Japanese truly were a divine race." (Chapter 3, p. 32) A confession like this shows just how the Japanese rule has forced its way into every aspect of Sookan's consciousness, so that she half-believes something which is obviously false.

Setting

"Year of Impossible Goodbyes" takes place in Korea in 1945, at the end of over thirty years of oppression under the Japanese Empire. At the end of World War II, Korea is divided into North Korea, where Sookan lives, and South Korea, or the Republic of Korea. North Korea is taken over by the Communist Russians, but South Korea is under Korean rule. Under the Japanese, Sookan and her family have to work like slaves, and no one is allowed to travel freely. The Japanese treat Korea like a resource to be exploited solely for the benefit of the divine Japanese race. At the very beginning of the book, Sookan portrays the poetic culture of Korea stifling under thirty-five years of Japanese occupation, so that each day is the same, despite the beauty of the changing seasons. She says, "The warmth of the spring sun and the thawing of the icy snow brought no respite from the oppressiveness that engulfed us." (Chapter 1, p. 1)

When Sookan attends Japanese school, her description of the school building could be a metaphor for Korea. She says, "High stone walls surrounded the building, and the gate was half closed." (Chapter 5, p. 68) The structure is dedicated not to learning or excellence, but to defense, and the half-closed gate indicates that it is not easy to get in or out. Even after the end of the war, North Korea is still a dangerous, forbidding place which is hard to escape.

Language and Meaning

At home, Sookan's family speaks Korean, and Grandfather teaches Sookan some reading and writing in Hangul, a Korean written language. She loves learning it, but has to keep it a secret, because it is against the law to speak, read, or write Korean. When Sookan starts school, she has never spoken Japanese before. On the way to school, she comments, "I could understand Japanese, but I had never spoken a word of it, and I didn't want to." (Chapter 45, pp. 66-67) She quickly learns that she will be beaten if she speaks Korean, or if she does not sing the Japanese national anthem. When the Russians take over, the people welcome the chance to go to meetings where they can speak and sing in Korean. Unfortunately, this does not mean that they are free to say whatever they want, and in fact, the Communists persistently try to root out "traitors" by drilling the children about their home lives.

In an environment like Korea, it could be dangerous to openly criticize the people in charge, whether they were the Japanese Imperial Army, or the Communist Party and Mother Russia. However, Sookan admires her Aunt Tiger for the way that Aunt Tiger speaks her mind, complaining bitterly about the hardships in her life at the hands of the Japanese. Sookan admits, "I thought it refreshing to hear her complain, for she so often said what I was feeling." (Chapter 1, p. 16) Sookan has learned that she must hold her tongue and pretend to believe whatever she is told to believe, without giving voice to her many questions.

Structure

"Year of Impossible Goodbyes" is divided into ten chapters and an Epilogue. Chapter one introduces Sookan's family and their situation living under Japanese rule. Chapters two through four show her family's daily life, and things quickly go downhill. Sookan's Grandfather dies, and the family's factory is dismantled, and their workers are kidnapped to become sex slaves. In chapter five, Sookan finally has to attend Japanese school, but she is soon expelled.

When Sookan finally learns that World War II is over, in chapter six, it marks a major turning point in the book. She says, "It was August 15, 1945, a day I would always remember as if it were my own birthday." (Chapter 6, p. 86) Unfortunately, life under Communism is not much better than oppression at the hands of the Japanese, and in chapter seven, a full year passes as Sookan's family tries to find a way to escape North Korea. In chapter eight, the family runs away to the south, but the children are separated from Mother, and they discover that their guide has betrayed them, leaving them alone and helpless. This is the lowest point of the book, followed by chapter nine, when the children wander aimlessly, looking for Mother, and trying to confront the terrifying forces of the Communist army. Chapter ten is a fast-paced nail-biter as Sookan and Inchun run for their lives, braving danger and injury, but finally making it to safety. In the Epilogue, the children can finally unwind in safety, and they end up happily reunited with most of their family.

Quotes

"I am too old and tired to be afraid anymore." (Chapter 1, p. 2)

"They keep us so hungry that we can't do anything but worry about where our next meal is coming from. They keep us hungry for so long that we are grateful for whatever little food we get." (Chapter 1, p. 10)

"We were all so happy that for a few moments, I forgot the Imperial police." (Chapter 2, p. 25)

"Captain Narita gazed calmly at Mother as he stroked his mustache that twitched as he formed his icy smile." (Chapter 4, p. 52)

"I heard half of them killed themselves by jumping off the speeding trucks rather than be locked in those latrines and used by those soldiers. Our poor girls!" (Chapter 4, p. 56)

"Wherever they were being taken, I could tell it was a fate even worse than death." (Chapter 4, p. 60)

"The grown-ups were relieved that we were safe and only prayed that things would not get any worse." (Chapter 4, p. 63)

"They keep us hungry, and when the babies cry for food and the grandparents are weak and sick from hunger, mothers will sacrifice even their most cherished items for a small cupful of rice." (Chapter 5, p. 82)

"It was as if all the sadness and misery that had to go unexpressed for the past thirty-six years had been unleashed." (Chapter 6, p. 96)

"We have been starved and treated like slaves for so long that we can be won over with a few kind gestures. People don't realize they're being brainwashed." (Chapter 7, p. 106)

"There was no need to think. Our every activity from dawn to dusk was programmed for us." (Chapter 7, p. 110)

"As Aunt Tiger put it, we weren't like the Town Reds, we were "Phony Reds" or "Pinks" who reluctantly did as we were told." (Chapter 7, p. 111)

"Even to cross the street I had to show my passport and have it stamped." (Chapter 8, p. 120)

"Mother kept looking around while trying not to attract the attention of the secret police, who seemed to be hiding everywhere." (Chapter 8, p. 131)

Topics for Discussion

How has war affected the Korean identity? Do you think that war has given Koreans a stronger or weaker sense of their own national identity?

Would you consider Sookan and Inchun to be children or adults? Why?

How are various objects in the story used to symbolize hope or despair? Are there any objects which represent both ideas?

Is Sookan's Mother wrong to trust their guide, who betrays them? What other options might she have?

How is the Japanese occupation of Korea different from Communist rule by the Russians? In what ways are they the same?

What are some little ways that the Koreans resist their oppressors? Are these small acts of rebellion significant?

What role does Aunt Tiger play in the story? How does she make Sookan's life easier?

What are some "impossible goodbyes" in the story? Which are the hardest goodbyes?