

READING EXERCISE

The Adventures of Lola Badiola

CHAPTER 70 – THE BOX

In some respects, Kim Lee Sohn was lucky. He had been sent to a reeducation camp rather than an internment camp. The probability of surviving the 15 years of imprisonment was significantly higher in the former than the latter. Furthermore the “guilt by association” rule did not apply to his crime and therefore three generations of his family were not forced to join him in the prison.

In other respects, Kim was not so lucky. The governor of his camp was a member of the Kang dynasty, a distant relative of the programmer’s boss at the Ministry of Information. Kim was therefore a marked man, someone who the governor wanted to punish for humiliating one of his relatives.

The reeducation camps were designed to break the mind and spirit of the prisoners. People with political, religious or cultural beliefs that did not correspond with the accepted norms of North Korean Society were slowly but surely brainwashed into submission. They were not allowed to speak to one another, they were devoid of any mental stimulation, they were given mind numbingly boring work to complete and then, at the end of every day, they would receive four hours of reeducation. The first part of this education consisted of patriotic videos, music and speeches promoting the North Korean way of life according to the Supreme Leader. The second part involved a series of self-criticism exercises in which the prisoners were expected to express shame for their criminal activities.

For creative thinkers like Kim, it was the cruelest possible punishment. He would rather have endured hard labour and physical torture than the continuous erosion of his thoughts, ideas and beliefs.

Every week the governor would inspect the prisoners and every week he would find some reason to punish Kim. “Why are you looking at the floor when I speak to you? That is disrespectful. Put him in the box. Why are you looking at me when I speak to you? That is insubordination. Put him in the box.”

The box was an underground room with no light and no sound, it was too low for standing and too narrow for lying down. Kim spent more time in the box than any other prisoner in the camp, enduring complete sensory deprivation, contemplating the pointlessness of his existence.

Suicide rates were high in the reeducation camps. The prisoners tended to be more intelligent, sensitive and fragile than other criminals. Without the freedom of thought, expression and creativity, many of them came to the conclusion that there was no longer any reason to live, so why continue the suffering. After his seventh visit to the hole, Kim was asking himself this very question.

The one thing that kept his mind distracted were the insects – the cockroaches, moths and crickets that voluntarily inhabited the camp with the prisoners. He observed them in minute detail, watching their routines and interactions, naming and classifying them, noting the new arrivals, and eating them when he was particularly hungry.

One day, while he was on his knees cleaning the guards’ toilets, he heard his name being spoken. It had become difficult for him to discern between the voices in his head and those of real people. So, he didn’t react, he kept his head down and continued scrubbing.

"Kim Lee Sohn!" The voice was real. It was one of the guards.

"Get up! Follow me!"

Kim rose slowly to his feet and prepared himself for another day in the box. He assumed that he was either cleaning too fast or too slow. But the guard didn't lead him in the expected direction. In fact, he was taking him to a place that Kim had never been before, a place where almost none of the other prisoners had ever been. He was going to the Governor's office.

Kim had no idea whether this was good news or bad news. But at least it was something different. A break in the endless repetitive routine of menial tasks and reeducation classes. It would be a new memory that he could play with for the days to come.

The Governor was sitting at his desk at the back of the office. He was a thin man with grey hair that was longer than the regulations allowed. In front of him he had some documents, an old Chinese desktop computer, a packet of cigarettes, an ashtray, and a framed picture of the supreme leader.

He told the guard to leave them alone, then he started smoking. The unmistakable smell of tobacco diffused into Kim's nostrils. It was not the acrid scent of cheap North Korean cigarettes, laced with woodchip and insects. This was the mellow smell of real tobacco, the sort that was only available to highest grade government officials, higher than the governor of a reeducation camp.

"My cousin, Kang, tells me that you know how to use a computer very well."

"Yes sir."

The governor took a long drag on his foreign cigarette.

"Do you dare to be arrogant in front of me?" he said softly.

"No sir."

"Good."

The Governor stood up and walked over to the window and looked out across the camp.

"You've spent a lot of time in the box."

"Yes sir."

"It can drive people insane."

"Yes sir."

The governor turned back to Kim, his silhouette framed by the window.

"My cousin Kang tells me that you can access the internet."

"Yes sir."

The governor walked back to his desk and crushed the cigarette into the ashtray. It was only partially smoked, a waste of the highly desirable contraband. He leaned forward and looked Kim directly in the eye.

"Could you access the internet from my computer?"

Kim was stunned by the question. The governor waited patiently for him to answer.

"I don't want to appear arrogant sir, but, yes, I believe that I could access the internet from your computer."

The Governor's eyes broke into the faintest of smiles.

"Guards!" he shouted.

Two men entered the room and grabbed Kim from behind.

"Take him back to the sleeping quarters."

Kim was marched back to the cavernous dormitory and left there by the two guards. Everyone else was at work - in the fields, in the factories or cleaning the toilets. He could hardly believe what had happened.

The Governor had given him the day off.

And hope returned to Kim's life.

READING COMPREHENSION

1. Where exactly is Kim Lee Sohn?
2. What is the difference between an internment camp and a reeducation camp?
3. Why is Park in some ways lucky and other ways not so lucky?
4. How and why does the governor make his life difficult?
5. What is the box?
6. How does Kim entertain himself in the camp?
7. Describe the Governor of the prison?
8. What does he want Park to do for him?
9. What happens when Park leaves the office of the Governor?
10. Why does Park have hope in his heart?