

Jung Yun
SHELTER
 336pp. Picador. £12.99.
 978 1 5098 1050 5

Jung Yun's debut novel sits somewhere between a literary thriller and a tale of a midlife crisis. Kyung has drifted from an unhappy, emotionally neglected childhood to a financially and mentally precarious period without, he feels, much luck or fun in between. On the surface things seem to be going well: he has a tenure-track academic job, a wife and child, a beautiful house near Boston. But despite this outward prosperity Kyung and his wife Gillian barely have enough money to get by. When Kyung's wealthy parents, Mae and Jin, are violently attacked in their home, they come to live with Kyung and his family, which initiates a further spiral of disaster until the novel's shocking, and very poignant, conclusion.

Since the identity of the invaders is known, the thriller aspect comes from the unexpected twists the novel takes as events reveal secrets and lies, both recent and festering. The economic crisis of 2008, and in particular the perils of the housing market and the personal devastation caused by negative equity, are a well-crafted backdrop to a life in which nothing seems to be a good fit.

Kyung's parents, boomer-age Korean immigrants, appear to have realized the American

dream, but Kyung's life sits in opposition to theirs. Never quite satisfied with his choices, never fully intentional about the directions his life has taken, he is a seething mass of unhappiness even before the home invasion sets the novel's chain of events in progress. His parents provided him with every material advantage but failed to show him affection, something that particularly rankles when his father bonds with Kyung's young son Ethan.

At times Kyung's lack of direction can be irritating, and his sad relationship with Gillian is a murky mess of contradictions that is occasionally hard for the reader to grasp. But Kyung's disappointment in his thirty-six-year-old self is excruciatingly convincing:

At twenty-two, he didn't have the foresight to understand how one decision could affect so many others. Now that he's older and everything has settled into a just-tolerable state of atrophy, the options he once had – options that his young students still have – feel like they've passed him by.

Kyung cannot forgive his parents for his childhood. When Gillian points out that he would have been justified in cutting his parents out of his life, Kyung counters that abandoning family is not the Korean way, but the ties that won't break here are more pernicious. This is a dark family drama that reveals layer on layer of what responsibility and duty mean, and what it looks like when they clash with an individual's long-suppressed sense of self.

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