

A Short Vacation

IN THE SPRING OF 1948, Song Yujin and Chun Saehi were married in a brief ceremony after knowing each other six days. Korea was preparing for its first-ever general election, even as the small peninsula country was being torn in two—Americans pulling one end and Chinese and Soviet forces pulling the other. Politics were on everyone’s mind except my grandfather Yujin’s. He was twenty-five and newly heartbroken after his father had vetoed a marriage to his true love, a miller’s daughter whose maternal stock was too dubious for the Song family line. The thwarted lover spent two months feeling sorry for himself and cultivating a fresh hatred for his *abuji*, who, as one of the richest men in his province, had fathered several semi-legitimate children himself and married anyone he’d damn well pleased. But the real salt on the wound came in March. The family hired a matchmaker to lock down a suitable bride before fall, and Yujin soon found his moping sessions interrupted by a weirdo in white old enough to be his grandfather. Talking to this man was impossible. He had a habit of grinning or grimacing at random and it wasn’t clear if these were reactions to the world around him or to some mysterious inner voice that the old man couldn’t switch off. Whatever their cause, his facial tics and shaky Confucian lilt unnerved Yujin to the point that he agreed to just about anything the matchmaker suggested: astrological “alignment” practices, weekly visits to the tailor, bitter root teas for his libido. Their brief conversations were invariably about dates, not the romantic kind but the actual days of the year that were ideal for marriage versus the days that meant certain doom. Not once did they discuss qualities Yujin might actually want in a wife. Personal preferences were petty, stressed the matchmaker. A man would shed them frequently, as a snake does its skin.

The matchmaker discovered my grandmother Saehi at a train station, where she was seeing off her younger brother as he left for Seoul. She lived in Naju, a few towns over from Yujin’s hometown, and the matchmaker happened to be visiting a friend who lived there. He spotted her on the platform in a demure schoolteacher’s uniform, her hair a sleek black ship anchored to a wooden pin, and was moved by her tears and warm wishes. Her brother had been swept up by the Korean democracy movement and was heading north to campaign for its candidate. In Saehi’s mournful gaze, the matchmaker later reported, he saw at once the sadness of the world and the strength of a

steadfast woman; she was like the lone fir tree rooted to the side of a mountain, which, even as it lamented its solitude with canted and sagging limbs, displayed a rare, indomitable beauty. (Years later, my grandmother would snicker at Yujin's version of the story and confess that she'd never gotten along with her brother. "Maybe I squeezed out a tear or two to be polite," she jibed. "But I was happy to lose the brat for a while.")

On a cold morning several days after the sighting, the headmaster of Saehi's school walked into her classroom and told her she had a visitor. My grandmother taught grades one to five and each day faced a roomful of children who had learned everything in Japanese just three years earlier. Some still called her *sensei* instead of *sonsaengnim*. The last thing she expected in these hectic, post-occupation times was to have her class interrupted mid-lesson so that she could hustle out to the playing fields and meet her future husband. He was waiting for her under a hibiscus tree that was in full, glorious bloom, and he wore bright yellow *hanbok* that clashed with the flowers behind him. Saehi was wearing a simple navy dress and hadn't used much powder on her face. Her homegrown beauty was beginning to fall out of vogue as more women throughout the country adopted western fashions. She had round cheeks, crescent-moon eyes, a flat bridge above her nose—all appealing features to a staunch traditionalist—and it was no wonder that the old matchmaker had been smitten with her.

The courtship lasted fewer than five minutes. Yujin's hoary wingman did all of the talking while the two young strangers fumbled with the thought of living together, making love, raising children. It was an unseasonably cold day but Yujin was sweating in his flamboyant suit. The matchmaker pitched a slow declaration of intent in the first person, as if he were the one proposing marriage and not the sullen bachelor sitting next to him. He had already done his homework, finding out Saehi's lineage and birth-year sign, both of which had garnered approval from Yujin's parents. The only question the groom-to-be could think to ask her was if she'd gotten sick during the last epidemic, which had been particularly nasty. (She hadn't.) Then they bowed to each other politely and Saehi headed back to her classroom.

My grandmother got a single good look at her young suitor before disappearing into the building. She didn't hear from Yujin again until six days later, when she borrowed a ceremonial dress, walked the six kilometers to her wedding, and married him.

MY GRANDMOTHER IS SITTING ON AN OLD IKEA COUCH in my Brooklyn apartment. She died three years ago but somehow she's here, dusty around the ears and

elbows but otherwise just as I remember her: shorter than a ten-year-old, hair in tight gray curls. Half an hour earlier I was eating pasta carbonara and reading an article about how TV news satirists are making us stupid. It was a too-serious article about not-very-serious people and I spun golf balls of linguine around my fork waiting for a joke, or at least a moment of cleverness. Then there was a knock on my door.

Throughout her life, my grandmother was a very practical woman. She wore clothes until they split at the seams and then stitched them back together so that she could wear them some more. Her outfits were always mismatched; she'd wear a formal blouse she bought in 1960 with a pair of exercise shorts from 1990 and shrug when my mom asked her what the hell she was doing wearing that to my high school graduation. She was a happy collage of history. She had a smile that could start brush fires. I'd gone to her funeral in 2006, the same day Ban Ki-Moon was elected Secretary General of the UN.

"Why aren't you speaking to your brother?" she asked before walking in. I didn't respond.

Now she's on the sofa chewing pasta carbonara and I can see each bolus of food slide down her flappy throat. In between bites she tells me that she's come back to find her husband, who has apparently gone missing from the afterlife. My grandfather died peacefully in his sleep eighteen months after burying my grandmother. He didn't mourn her long nor did he get particularly sick that year—I think he just got bored.

"Any idea why he left?" I ask in badly accented Korean.

She points at the pasta with her chopsticks. "What are these little burnt bits?"

"Bacon? It's not burnt."

"*Bacon*," she grumbles. "Americans cook the hell out of it. Waste of good pork."

I don't tell her that you're supposed to use guanciale for pasta carbonara, or that most Americans think crispy-fried bacon is God's gift to mankind.

"Was Grandpa not happy?" I ask. "What's it like, wherever you are?"

"He wasn't happy or unhappy. Your grandfather was the laziest person in the afterlife. All he did was play chess with some Serbian guy by the River of Animal Dreams."

I'm not surprised by this. When he was alive, my grandfather's idea of a good time was dozing off in the rec room at the Y. He'd take my brother and me to Chuck E. Cheese and fall asleep during the animatronic rock show. The only thing I remember him liking was Sunday services.

"Do you have church there?" I ask.

“Organized religion is sort of a big joke,” she answers. “We all tease each other about it. Except the atheists. They have no sense of humor.”

She hands me her empty plate and chopsticks, asks for more. I want her to stop this nonsense of searching for my grandfather. I want her to go back to the afterlife and enjoy herself, or make the most of her visit and see the world. All her life she waited on Grandpa, stood by him even when she shouldn't have. Let him go, I want to tell her. What do you need him for anyway?

MY GRANDFATHER WAS THE FIRST IN HIS FAMILY to convert to Christianity. Late in the nineteenth century, American missionaries started building schools and hospitals in Asia, and Jesus fever, after some early hitches, took off in Korea. My mother attributes this to our national character. Our folktales are all about unconditional sacrifice or absolute morality: mothers die for their children, evildoers are punished to gruesome extremes. Also, total deference to authority—bosses, parents, anyone older by a year or more—is something we're all taught from an early age. We love being led, my mother says. Especially if the leaders claim to have suffered terrible acts of violence for us.

Two years after Yujin took Saehi as his wife, war broke out between the Communist north and the U.S.-backed south. My great-grandfather, an exporter and industrialist who lived on the southern tip, was one of the few Communist sympathizers in his region, mainly because he'd won contracts with northern spies that nearly tripled his business. While his countrymen were out killing each other, Yujin's father threw lavish parties that went on for days. He gave his sons generous allowances to discourage them from finding work or making important contacts at university. So when the smoke cleared in 1953, with the Communists beaten back to the 38th Parallel and the family business seized, Christianity suddenly looked pretty good to Yujin and his brothers, who found themselves broke and with no marketable skills to support their families. The church offered them small jobs and free lunches, and continued to show rare compassion even after their father went heavily into debt, sold off whatever wasn't looted, and took a swan dive off the craggy peak of Mudeung Mountain.

Yujin was not cut out for the working life. He'd pored over Japanese literature in college, which meant he could recite Murasaki while standing in line for U.S. relief packages—“having waited for / the three-thousand-year flower / I feel inclined / never to move my eyes toward / the mountain cherry blossoms”—but he had no idea how to run a business, operate a machine, or toil in a field. His tainted name denied him work in large-scale commerce or civil service. Saehi, blacklisted by association, was quietly fired from her teaching

job and had to put in hours at a nearby textile factory. For many years, this was the family's only consistent source of income. But her hard work didn't make Yujin a devoted husband. I always saw my grandfather as a pious, family-first man, one who hated to miss weekly services with his wife and children. It turns out that Yujin was quite the lothario.

"Your grandpa's nickname was Frog," my grandmother says. "His home was the whole rice field and he'd hop into whatever puddle he liked." (In Korea the rice fields are flooded during the growing season and the sounds of different frog species croaking together at night is an orchestral and eerie wonder.)

At first Yujin kept his philandering habits out of town and Saehi didn't act on her suspicions. But when he started seeing a woman their neighbors actually *knew*, who lived within walking distance of their home and children, her tolerance vanished.

The woman lived across a large reservoir known to everyone as Drunkard's Tub. Its real name is long forgotten but the moniker had stuck for two reasons: one, the water was silty with fine white sand and looked a lot like unfiltered rice wine, and two, a step-stone bridge bisected the reservoir and led straight to the region's most notorious watering hole—a nameless *sooljip* and boarding house run by a widow named Lady Du. It was understood that only bachelors and out-of-towners were allowed to buy companionship for the night; married men in Yujin's town wobbled home over the slippery bridge and almost always fell into the water. Once or twice a year someone would brain himself on the rocks and the townspeople would have to fish out the floater in the morning. There would be an outcry by family and friends to shut down Lady Du, and then local officials would be freshly greased to do nothing and nothing would get done. Yujin, a regular at Du's, was the only man in town who never fell in. He would drink himself daft and cavort with the women, but not once was he purified in the chalky waters of the Tub. Saehi would find him passed out on the front stoop some mornings, reeking of stale wine, his coat torn or missing altogether, and she'd be convinced that he was blessed, that he'd skipped on the backs of angels the whole way home. Some thought he simply went around the water, a route that was infested with thieves and took twice as long. But on a clear night any sober witness could see Yujin hopping along the stones, arms out like a ballet dancer the entire half-kilometer across. He grew to be proud of his talent and lorded it over the other men. Maybe he thought it was some divine pardon for his sins.

Most inconveniently for his family, Yujin quickly became attached to Lady Du. One part Cruella de Vil and two parts mad Ophelia, Lady Du was not the

kind of madam who could pass for one of the house women. Choosing her was like forgoing the golden eggs for the goose. Not only was she sour-faced and a decade older than Yujin, but also, according to my grandmother, “Lady Du was batshit crazy. She used to carry a wooden reed with her and smack children who got too close. Didn’t matter whose kids, she hated them all. *Thwap*, right on the backs of their legs. The looks she got from the mothers could shy off a tiger demon. But who could blame her? We were all a little mad in those days. Everyone going hungry or getting shot, families splitting apart. Her husband never came back from the war and they say she went out some nights to look for him with a basket of rice cakes and a bottle . . .”

Maybe Yujin had taken pity on her; maybe he just wanted the free service. Maybe they were genuinely in love. Whatever the reason, it was only weeks before the whole neighborhood found out about the affair. His wife Saehi, of course, was the last to find out, though she could never confirm her suspicions by asking him flat out. Late one summer evening, Yujin told her that he’d landed a night shift at the quarry and would be back in the morning. The quarry was just south of the reservoir and not far from their house, so Saehi went to see him at midnight with some tea and barley porridge—only to find the whole site deserted. She bitterly dumped everything into the reservoir and cried for a while, then waded in to retrieve her cups and bowl.

The lights were on at Lady Du’s when she crossed the bridge and there were still a few men in the *sarangbang*, or main hall, slugging moonshine and discussing their plans for the night. What a sobering sight she must have been to these men, whose wives pickled kimchi with Saehi every fall, whose children she had taught to read and how to behave in front of their elders. They said nothing as she slunk past them toward the courtyard and *anbang*, or inner quarters. I’m not sure how she found the right door or retained her composure with all the noise coming from the rooms she passed. But the dip she’d taken in the reservoir and the long walk across it had cooled her off. She decided not to raise a fuss. She would simply gather up the father of her children—there were two by then—and go home quietly, with a shred of marital dignity.

Lady Du was nowhere in sight and Yujin was already asleep in an open room, having polished off a jug meant for two by himself. His shirt and pants were in a neat pile by the bed. Saehi called his name and he woke immediately, his wife’s voice being the last thing he expected to rouse him from his dreams. He jumped out of bed and the first thing he said was, “You left the kids alone?” A dam burst within Saehi and the blood ran hot and fast through her veins, this being the *wrong* thing to say when your wife has caught you in another

woman's bed. She did not remain calm. She did not give her husband the silent treatment. She all but dragged the bastard out of the room, and what little satisfaction she got from seeing him on his knees was marred by his fantastic denial: that he was just sleeping off the liquor, that he'd never touched Du. In all this excitement, Saehi had the presence of mind to grab his shoes and on the way home, alone, she chucked them into the reservoir.

Yujin came home an hour later, his feet cut to ribbons but quite dry otherwise.

"The stones were covered with algae that time of year," my grandmother grumbles. "It really was miraculous, considering how much he'd drunk. I suppose there were bigger punishments in store."

The infidelities went on for many years. Yujin even ran away with Lady Du one month, coming home without a word of apology or explanation. But my grandmother laughs heartily when she tells me this story now, as if it were a stranger whose husband had embarrassed the family, as if it were some other lady's misfortune. "You leave the kids?" she parrots in a dunce's voice similar to my grandfather's. "The kids, dear. You left them alone?"

I ask her about the bigger punishments and she tells me she could use another helping of "bacon noodles." So we go back to the kitchen.

I AM TEACHING MY GRANDMOTHER how to make pasta carbonara. It's fairly easy once the ingredients are ready. While the pasta boils, I fry up some chopped bacon and onions, grate a wedge of Parmesan down to the rind, and pour us two glasses of Amarone for inspiration. I've never seen my grandmother take a drink in her life, but it seems alright to give her one now. We sip the wine and she smiles at me, wickedly. She watches as I toss the pasta with the bacon-onion mixture and a raw egg, then helps me top it all with Parmesan and black pepper.

"What's this nonsense with your brother?" she demands. "Why aren't you speaking to each other?"

My younger brother Carl is the self-proclaimed black sheep of the family. He lives in Oakland, where he organizes workers' rights rallies, gets arrested regularly, and accuses my mother and me of hating him for being gay. We went out to surprise him for his birthday a couple of years ago and Carl wouldn't even let us into his apartment. The look on my mom's face made me shout through the door that I'd never speak to him again. I don't think I meant it then, but time has a way of proving this sort of statement regardless of how it's made.

"At this point, I admit, it's sort of juvenile."

I hand her the plate and chopsticks and we sit at my table to eat. My grandmother powers through her pasta like she hasn't eaten in years. Koreans have an expression for when we're really enjoying a meal: we say the food is so good that no one would notice if somebody died at the table.

"So call your brother," she says.

"Go out and enjoy yourself," I shoot back. "Maybe you could go to Europe and learn to cook like they do."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Why not? Why the hell not?"

My grandmother is a master chef, despite her habit of putting pork in everything. She taught me how to make three essential *jjigae*, or stews, before I went away to college, and I came home from my first year twenty pounds overweight. I imagine her cooking in her old house in rural Korea, that tiny daub two-roomer with the tin roof, and wonder how she got to be such an ace in the kitchen. Good ingredients were scarce for everyone after the war. Plain white rice was expensive and most people in town ate barley, which was hated by all until barley prices skyrocketed in one of those ironic culinary upheavals when a poor man's food becomes more fashionable than what it substituted. The family ate eggs once annually on the Lunar New Year, four of them split among six revelers. Beef wasn't even an option in their town. But no matter how many slings and arrows were suffered during those years, there was always room in the family budget for pork.

MY GRANDFATHER HAD THREE GREAT PASSIONS in life: children, church, and all preparations of pig—preferably flame-grilled and doused with enough chili and garlic to singe his eyelashes. Saehi bore two more children and he spoiled all four shamelessly, as his own father had done him, feeding them meat when other families in his income bracket got by on dried fish and roasted grasshoppers for protein. Every week he sent his youngest and favorite son, Joon Hi, to buy a fresh slab of pork belly from the butcher. Joon Hi was indisputably the most adorable four-year-old in town and the butcher would give him a bigger cut if he could identify the various meats on display. The boy always did. He was a brainy little charmer who began speaking at an early age and wouldn't shut up until he fell asleep—and even then he mumbled in his dreams. At three he was telling stories that could make a roomful of grown men laugh until dawn. His oratorical talents and a vicious wanderlust—Saehi literally kept him on a leash made of fabric scraps—had my grandfather convinced that he was bound for greatness. Politics, big business, America: Joon Hi was messianic. He could do no wrong.

Yujin desperately needed a savior among his sons, as he was fired from most of his jobs or swindled out of his wages. Saehi, who taught her children how to raise themselves, had to sign up for more shifts at the factory to make up for the family's losses. She was there working when The Bad Thing happened on that autumn afternoon in 1963. Yujin was out of town looking for a job, and all the children except Joon Hi were at school. The youngest boy was taking his midday nap on the heated floor, having been told to stay indoors until one of his siblings arrived. My mother came home from classes to make lunch only to find the house empty. She rushed to where the rice candy vendors set up their carts and down to the quarry where Joon Hi liked to watch the men working. Then she ran to the factory to tell her mother. By late afternoon, everyone in town was looking for the missing boy.

"Children were communal," my grandmother says. "Families were families but we all took care of each others' kids. It was like a code."

When every inch of the town had been searched, Saehi sat with some of the mothers and tried to come up with a plan. Most thought that Yujin had come back early from his trip and had taken the boy somewhere, though no one could think of a destination they hadn't already checked. The two might have gone for a walk in the woods, someone suggested. Maybe they fell asleep on the mountainside, said another, and got accosted by Communists in hiding. There was even a faction that thought Yujin had gone to a lover's house and taken the boy with him so he would have an alibi when he returned. As wrought with worry as she was, Saehi had the composure to listen to their theories and bat them down when they became untenable. She did not weep or lose her temper and focused on the most reasonable of her friends. But deep within herself my grandmother sensed a growing darkness, the portent of something cold and irreversible, a feeling that would revisit her many times in the years to come.

They found the boy just before sunset in the latrine, a wooden shed that the family shared with four other households. In those days, the outhouses were built over deep pits and you had to squat on wooden planks over a large hole. The pits were cleaned frequently in the summer to keep the smell manageable but when the fall chill came, they were often left alone for months. Four-year-old Joon Hi had fallen through and drowned in the muck. From above he was just a tuft of hair, my grandmother remembers. They would have missed him if the sun had set completely.

The little messiah was gone. Yujin returned from his trip the next morning to find a funeral being prepared for his favorite son.

There are two long scars on my grandfather's left bicep. When he was alive he had the habit of pumping his arm every few hours, as if to shake off a phantom soreness. He told me the cuts were from a fishing accident—a tale of demon bass the size of Volkswagens and his own champion netting technique—but my grandmother gives me the real story now. She recalls her husband walking knee-deep into the reservoir, shirtless and stone white, with her kitchen knife in his hand. I can picture Yujin's act of mourning: the family shouting at him from the rock bridge, the red trailing down his forearm and through the crease in his palm. My grandfather's pain is quite clear to me. But all I see of Saehi on the shore is a small figure, runny with strange light, and before she comes into focus, before I see what her son's death has made of her, I have to look away.

“IN ITALY THEY SERVE PASTA CARBONARA with the egg yolk intact and you mix it at the table. You can sit out on the cobblestone streets where guys with mandolins will sing to you.”

I am still trying to persuade my grandmother to abandon her search and go to Europe. She rarely got to go anywhere nice since Grandpa didn't travel well or like the idea of her having fun without him. But she does not seem keen on going abroad.

“Carl is doing well for himself,” she says. The word “Carl” is a doozy for the Korean tongue. The best approximation is *kal*, which is our word for *sword*.

“This is not about Carl.”

“Do you know how many siblings end up estranged from each other in the afterlife? It's ridiculous, these grown men and women acting like children.”

I tell her that we'll make up when we're ready, that he just needs to cool off for a while and then he'll come around.

She points at me with her chopsticks like she's going to jab me with them. “That's exactly what all those idiots say. And the blame gets passed back and forth until no one even remembers what started it all.”

I get up and grab a book from my shelf, a coffee-table hardcover featuring photographs of Greek ruins and artifacts. I open it to the Ancient Corinth page, slide the plate of pasta away from my grandmother, and shove the book in her face.

“Look at that,” I command her. “How amazing is that?”

“It's very nice.”

“Don't you want to see it?”

“You just showed it to me.”

“No Grandma, you have to walk around—”

“To do what?” She holds up a hand to keep me from answering. “Boy, I’ve seen the sun rise over the Taebaek Mountains and set over Kyunggi Bay. I’ve seen three of my children grow up and start families. I’ve sat on American beaches and had crab legs with my grandsons. That’s quite enough.”

She asks if I have any tea.

THE FIRST AND ONLY TIME Yujin and Saehi got on a plane was to move to the United States to support my mother. It was 1987. My father was dead, which is a whole other story involving bad neighborhoods and worse luck, and we fled New York for downtown Los Angeles. LA wasn’t all rainbows and ponies either, but at the time our only friends were in New York or California, and the former hadn’t left too good an impression on my mother.

Yujin was sixty-four and Saehi sixty when they arrived at LAX that summer, both of them in good health and ready to work. With their meager savings and a loan from the Small Business Administration, they opened a restaurant supply store in Koreatown that we all helped run. My job was to separate hundred-count bundles of steel bowls into five stacks, and even now, whenever I have to count large quantities, I do it in multiples of twenty. I remember weaving through those claustrophobic aisles with Radio Korea blasting on my grandfather’s secondhand static box. Every spare inch of the store was occupied. There were cardboard boxes full of cooking utensils on the floor and customers who weren’t careful would end up kicking them over. My brother had clean-up duties and was always shouting at folks who made his job harder. It’s not polite in any culture for a seven-year-old boy to rail at grown-ups, but our grandfather thought it was hilarious, made a big joke out of it. He’d tell guilty first-timers that they’d “woken up the goblin” and had better buy something before Carl really got angry. The threats didn’t work and neither did his blowout sales. Revenues were never good and Mom had to start looking for work elsewhere.

We all lived together in a two-bedroom apartment, with my grandparents in the smaller room. Yujin had a full-size bed and Saehi slept on a thin mattress on the floor. It was a marital setup that seemed perfectly normal to me, the child of a single mother, and it wasn’t until college that I thought to ask why Grandma and Grandpa didn’t share a bed. By then they were in their seventies and I’d learned that plenty of couples found their twilight years more comfortable in separate beds, nothing personal. But from my mother’s accounts and some awkward, head-scratching conversations with other relatives, I discovered that no one recalled them *ever* sleeping in the same bed, at least not after my youngest uncle, Joon Hi, was born. Further inquiries pro-

duced no straight answers; it wasn't so much that the question was taboo as it was a moot point. It was like asking why we bowed when we said hello or why we ate with chopsticks: it had always been that way and I'd do better to steer my curiosity elsewhere.

My grandmother seems comfortable filling me in now. "I put an end to it early, the bedroom business. I told him I had a heart condition and couldn't bear the weight of him anymore."

"But you did have a heart condition."

"It was much milder back then. I just needed an excuse."

"And he bought it?"

"He was a broken man. Life wears you down when everything you do ends in disappointment." She winces, as if she wants to take this back. "Anyway, I told him to think of me as already dead."

From the age of forty-four to when he died at eighty-four, Yujin would never again know the comfort of his wife's body. He could have had affairs later in his life but my grandmother doesn't think it likely. Joon Hi's accident had changed him, she says. Even the drinking stopped.

But what about her? I don't have the guts to ask. Had Saehi's anger over his past sins become full-on revulsion? Maybe she'd secretly charged Yujin for their son's death, blaming his incompetence as wage earner, his failure as protector. Or the attraction was simply gone and all the ugly moments of the past were just ice on an already dying flame. I'm not sure, but there's a keen difference in Korean between *sarang*, or love, and *jung*, which I'll translate rather lamely as "fond understanding." *Jung* implies loyalty, an unspoken allegiance. To call Yujin's and Saehi's marriage a loveless one would be to deny their perseverance, their staunch and silent agreement, but it would also be missing the point. Love was a luxury—nice to try on every now and then but never the fabric of their daily lives. A marriage lived on *jung* when *sarang* gave out, an old expression went, and their union, at least for Saehi, had switched gears for good.

"There was one night," she says, "right before we lost the store, when he begged me just to lie down next to him and I did. He'd stressed himself out—we were losing a lot of money back then. The next morning he was in a better mood."

That mood wouldn't last long. Weeks later, in April of 1992, massive race riots broke out in Los Angeles and some two thousand Korean businesses were torched to the ground. I remember driving out to K-town with my mother two days after the National Guard took over the city. The plaza that had once housed my grandparents' store was a pile of still-smoldering rubble. The only

things left standing were the blackened steel frames of the entryway and four or five burnt-out refrigerators. You couldn't even tell where our store had been. The roof was just a sagging canopy of metal wire, and some idiot had spray-painted "We'll Get Even" in Korean on a piece of cement.

Yujin and Saehi were heartbroken and uninterested in starting over, being almost seventy and without a penny to their name. I think we all knew that this was going to be it, as far as their working lives were concerned. It was time to take it easy: start gardens, buy bad Christmas gifts for their grandchildren. They found a decent retirement home and Carl and I soon lost interest in them, refusing to go with our mother on visits. The last chapter of their marriage is lost to us; even my mom claims to have felt like a stranger in that final decade. My grandmother and I reconnected just before she died, but by then she only remembered select bits from her past. After they moved out, Yujin and Saehi would come over for holidays and sit with their hands in their laps, with no more to say than the obligatory "you've grown up so *fast*" or "you ruin the meat when you cook it like that."

The last photograph we have of them together is in the garden of their retirement home, Easter 2003. They are sitting at a picnic table. Yujin is peeling tangerines and Saehi is nearly finished with a jigsaw puzzle of large flowers in bloom. Neither one is acknowledging the other; they might as well be strangers at the same table. Yet I see an unmistakable connection when I keep looking at the image, an odd resemblance. They're like two successive lines in a poem that seem awkward together until you read them over and over, until their intent quietly reaches out and takes hold. I suppose enough time will grant even the loosest fragments meaning. Maybe it's memory itself, more so than the contents of that memory, that binds my grandparents. It's the fact that a history so long, nearly fifty years without being apart, even exists—regardless of how it began or played out. The highlight of their lives is brief and unglamorous, but for Yujin and Saehi maybe the long haul was enough.

MY GRANDMOTHER LETS ME DO THE DISHES. She sips her tea and stands at my kitchen window, watching the street.

"I thought New York would be louder than this," she says. "Your mother said it drove her crazy when she came to visit."

"You saw Mom?"

"Yesterday. Your brother, too."

I feel a stab of jealousy. But my grandfather has never been anywhere near the East Coast and Grandma would have no reason to look for him here. If she

didn't find him in California, where my mother and brother live, then Yujin, without question, is back in his hometown overseas.

"Thanks for stopping by," I say, with more irony than I intended.

"Don't be a baby. You two were always my favorite grandkids." She rubs my arm as if to reassure me and I'm surprised to find her hand warm and, well, reassuring. "But you'll call Carl."

"Yeah, I'll call Carl."

"Good. I wanted to see both of you before going over to the old country. We had to settle this silly little feud."

She puts her tea down on the counter and heads toward the living room.

"You should stay over tonight," I say. "It'll get dark soon."

"Maybe. I'm going to rest my eyes a little."

I don't want my grandmother to leave yet. There are places in New York I want to show her, friends I'd like her to meet. We could go to the park in the morning and people watch, or I could show her some sights. She might want to eat lunch in Queens, at one of the dozens of restaurants where we'd grill pork belly at our table and take turns criticizing the stew. An itinerary forms as I finish washing the dishes and wipe down the countertops. I put a baggie of frozen chicken in some water to thaw, in case my guest is hungry when she wakes. The sun is just settling over the Manhattan skyline, a brilliant wash the color of ripe grapefruit. I tell my grandmother to come see it, hoping the view will convince her to stay a while. But when I walk into the living room she is already gone.