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Mother's Hands

Shoved with a xenophobic passion, my mother toppled to all fours like a creature. She was an object or something to be objectified. He spat at her like she deserved a punishment, like she was a puppy who couldn't meow for this disgruntled man. The chalky cement gnawed at her fragile knees, as did her safeguard to leave the house. The bruises on her knees and the scratches on her hands demanded that she shed the yellow undertones of her skin. If she didn't pull out her silky black hair, the cement might make another abrupt visit. What if another man decides that she's also worthless and deserves to be reprimanded? My mother pleads with me, “베키 같이 코스트코 와 줄래? 그 아저씨 Q66버스 타 거든.”¹

As a teenager, my mother, then called Jae, journeyed the globe and finally arrived in the United States. Her father, a brave South Korean ex-marine, would look back toward the sea and reflect, “I don't trust the Korean government.” America set the stage for a new venture, a new life, and unexpectedly, a new name. Jae's name was met with ridicule and shame for being a boy's name. She desperately yearned to be respected highly wherever she went, as did Queen Elizabeth. Thus, Elizabeth prided in her new name. She may not have exactly lived out the privileged royal lifestyle though, her body instead laboring at physically demanding jobs. For if she did not have the wisdom of the English language, her physicality had to make up for it. Her broken English worked her hands tirelessly until they swelled. Holding her hands was a testament to sixty years worth of sacrifice, to a single mother who only knew the life of survival. Still to this day, Elizabeth continues to stand on her feet to go to work.

1. “Becky, please come with me to go grocery shopping. That man takes the Q66 bus.”

Her pride was taken away from her decades ago. She knew the moment she stepped foot in the “land of opportunity” that her language, her culture, her entire essence was no longer accepted. She was expected to fully accommodate to the new master’s rules. America gawks at her, saying, “As long as you’re in my house, you follow my rules.” The same power play motive that shoved Elizabeth to her knees also lunged a piece of chalk across the room at her. Elizabeth’s first American high school teacher scowls, “Answer me! Why don’t you know English?” The face of a supposed caregiver, a guide to the American dreamer, was staring dead straight through her worth. As a puppy expected to howl like a wolf already, Elizabeth was innocently punished. For as long as she can’t pronounce her W’s and add an unnecessary syllable to each word, she will always be the victim. If her verbs come grammatically last in a sentence, then so will her acknowledgment in America. English is her crutch, while all at the same time, English is her savior. English is a capable bird that sweeps the skies and calls out to an open terrain. But like a puppy on a leash, drooping eyes and a tucked tail, so did Elizabeth’s wrinkles on the edges of her lips. The sparse gray in her hair creeps from the thinning of the shadows. She hides away her apple cheekbones, which used to be lifted to the heavens by a set of smiling eyes. The sad crease of her eyelids blankly stares back at the cash register, the bank accountant, the bus driver, anyone and their mothers. She whispers, “영어 잘 못해요.”²

Home is where my mother prepares kimchi stew, the only kimchi stew that I trust. From time to time, I see in my peripheral vision her peering over at me while she waits for the stew to simmer. The daylight peers into the dainty condo, along with two bamboo lamps sitting in opposite corners of our living room, altogether radiating a warm hue of security. We name our Wi-Fi “Woori Gip,” a romanized-Korean translation of “Our Home.” If only the Wi-Fi provider allowed “foreign” characters, then my mother wouldn’t be so confused to acknowledge “Our Home.” But regardless, home is the cocoon in which the silky webs nurture. A filled refrigerator, dishes still yet to dry, as the water rumbles in our tea kettle, Woori Gip has a living heart beat. We made sure to breathe life within each and every crevice. As the pigeons rest right outside our fire escape, the seven train whizzes by, reminding us that a space of belongingness must be created, despite the pushback of the world that pursues to reject it. It is curated and loved on, a space that invites you in, upon entry of that “Welcome Home” mat.

From the opposite corner of the kitchen, I sit crouched over my desk to retain my news article for my class presentation. My mother always preached the importance of an education. Practicing my speech over and over again until I make sure I reach the ten minute mark. No less, no more. But then I get a whiff of the red pepper powder dancing into a sweet and salty tango:

2. “I don’t know English very well.”

my mother's kimchi stew. The same smell that pervades the hallways of my building to hug me back home. Only this time, I'm already home. My nose perks towards the lead of the smell, and I see my mother already gazing over at me. She holds her evidently worked hands in front of her stomach. Her pursed lips lift her rosy cheekbones as her eyesight blurs and gleams in the light. My mother softly whispers, “영어 잘한다.”³

3. “Her English is perfect.”