

Umma

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During our springs, the air smelled sweet, of mugunghwa blossoms. We would pluck the velvet white petals from their branches, letting them melt on our tongues. My siblings and I marched in lines, across and over the rolling green hills behind our home. My brother would lead, his fists pumping, back straight. His face was tanned, brown, and dry—a chip in his tooth. Together, with my kid sister, we chased grasshoppers with large nets. We caught them and made fires, my little sister carefully picking the prettiest branches to add to the flames. I would rip fistfuls of dry grass out from the cracked earth, and watch as they crisped up in a smoky blaze. My big brother stuck the wriggling grasshoppers onto long pointed branches. Their wings would flutter and their thin spidery legs burnt off easily when we spun them around the fire. When perfectly roasted, we crunched them between our teeth, smoky, burnt, and rich. We frog-marched on our way back, nets tossed carelessly over our shoulders. Our skin smelt of the sun, and our faces were smudged and salty.

When we would come back home, the dog that Umma took in yapped relentlessly, its matted white tail thumping on the dirt. She was chained to the fence with a thick fraying rope Appa found in the shed when Umma decided she wanted to keep the mutt. My brother would kick up clods of dust at the dog to cease its barking. Sometimes he would kick her in the ribs, with his dirty white sneakers, the

rubber soles of them starting to peel off like a great panting tongue.

We slept packed together like anchovies in a can. The hardwood under our thin mattress pads was sharp under the knobby knuckles of our shoulder blades. We slept next to the stove, next to the cracked TV, and when morning came, we rolled up our beds and fitted them neatly in the closet. Umma and Appa slept on the other side of the wall, in a small room to themselves. We could hear Appa's snores reverberate through the house, and every morning, before the sun hit the horizon, Umma would inch out the door to feed the dog.

I could hear its tail thumping softly on the ground, could hear Umma crooning endearments to it as it dumbly ate its mush from the metal bowl Umma specially bought for it. After it ate, she used the hose from the side of our house, rinsing out the bowl. When she came back into the house, sometimes I would wake up from the sound of her plastic sandals tapping on the floor. She would peer into the smudged glass of the bathroom mirror, painting her lips red and brushing out her dark black hair. She tapped cold cream into the depths of her wrinkles and fastened big yellowing pearls onto her ears. She had a shiny red lacquered purse. When I was even younger, I would dump the contents of the bag out onto the table, thumb through her sticks of gum, twist out her metal tube of matte red lipstick. She left shortly after she got ready, left to a

job me and my kid sister were made unaware of until we were much, much, older.

My big brother cooked meals for us, dug into big steaming bowls of rice, and watched as we munched happily, wrapping the soft white grains in leaves of seaweed. Before she left for work, Umma always gave the dog a pat on her head, and it always barked at her retreating figure as she walked away from our house.

Now, I sit beside my husband on our couch. We watch television and listen to our two girls bicker over dolls and things that don't seem particularly important to us anymore. They each have their own room, one specially painted pink, and the other a vibrant lemon yellow. Our dog lays in my lap, snoring softly. Umma named her dog as soon as she had taken it in. Although I have tried hard to think back to those years, for some reason, I cannot remember the name it was given. My youngest daughter named our dog. His name is Mochi.

This morning, my husband and I took our daughters to the park. We watched as they ran and tumbled about in the grass, and I clucked at my youngest to keep her camisole from riding up her plump stomach. Afterward, we bought a box of mooncakes, the pasty red bean innards of the pastry thickly coating the insides of our mouths. My husband held my hand as we walked back to our home. His fingers are thin and slender, like those of a woman's. The ends of his fingernails are neatly trimmed and filed into round pink nubs. He is a pale, delicate man, my husband. The polar opposite of Appa—he is willowy and frail, quiet and gentle, whereas Appa is tanned and roughened, with knuckles like knots of a tree, and a voice that grates and grates and grates.

Our house is on Orchid Street, in a neighborhood lined with rows and rows of trees. During the summers, the town is filled with the hum of locusts. In the fall, the trees turn shocking shades of crimson and gold. Our winters are filled with

plump piles of snow, and branches twinkling with pearls of ice. The trees sprout white and pink cherry blossoms during the spring and the air is tinged with a fragrant sickly sweet. The flavor of my childhood hits the back of my throat, so sweet it hurts to swallow.

We have an emerald green painted door, one which my husband and I painted together when we first moved in. My husband had worn a bright orange coversuit while he painted, making the whiteness of his skin more prominent, and the blue of his veins fluorescent through his ungloved hands. I think of Umma during times like those. I think of her when I read bedtime stories to my girls in their warm twin-sized beds. I think of her when I go grocery shopping with my husband and pick up a small container of kimchi. I think of her when I walk the dog during autumn and Mochi nibbles on the yellowing leaves like they are sheets of honey. I do not know what I think of when I think of Umma. I remember her creamy pearl earrings and the way she doted on that dog. I remember her shiny red purse and how she would leave for work before I could wake up. I do not remember the sound of her voice, or how it felt to be wrapped up in her arms.

Last year, I visited her at the hospital during the month of November. My big brother and little sister were there too, under the harsh pounding artificial light of the room. My big brother wore a worn navy blue baseball cap, and a white shirt, where the fabric was too stretched out. When he spoke, his chipped tooth winked from under his top lip. There was a new scar on his burnt face, a thin line across his eyebrow, white and slightly raised. When he looks at me and my little sister, I am not sure what he sees.

We heard the rattling sound of Umma's cough. Her lungs were paper thin, like a tissue being crumpled tightly in a large angry fist. My baby sister and I exchanged an unsure look. We stood beside her bed stiffly, while my brother placed a tender hand on Umma's fevered brow. My sister had too

much eyeshadow on her eyelids, and when she whispered fearfully to me, there was a smudge of pink lipstick smeared on her front teeth.

Today, my baby sister called our landline. We had been out at the park and when we returned she had left a voice message. She called to ask if I could look after her eight-month-old infant for the weekend. I wait a couple of hours before I dial her back. When I tell her no, she tells me she'll ask our brother instead. I let her hang up first, and listen to the phone hum when she does. For dinner tonight, my husband makes fried rice. I wrap my arms around his waist and watch quietly as he cooks, the oil sizzling as it hits the pan. My daughters set the table, the napkins placed haphazardly, the forks crooked and the water cups half spilled. We eat mostly in silence, peppered with small chiding remarks when our daughters chew with their mouths open, and the sound of forks clinking on the side

of the glass bowls. Mochi skirts around our ankles, nestling against us in search of leftovers. Afterward, I help my husband with the dishes. I rinse, he scrubs, a perfect assembly line. We work in peaceful silence. We give our daughters a hot bath afterward, and they exit the bathroom wrapped in plush white towels, their hair wrapped up in a large towel turban, their skin pink and red like cooked lobster. They giggle and run around the living room in nothing but their underwear, their dark hair stringy and wet. They smell of baby shampoo.

The phone rings. I hear the thudding of my daughters' feet as they chase each other through the hallways. They giggle, loud, wild, and uncontrollable. I hear my husband softly chuckle at the noise from his spot on the couch. My big brother is calling me. I watch it ring until it goes silent. He leaves a voice message.