

Breaking Barriers

“What’s for dinner?”

My grandmother — my *halmoni* — looks up from the sink, where her soft, textured hands dutifully lather soap suds across a porcelain plate. She wears a shirt patterned with bright, full rose buds. Stemming from her shirt, her neck rises like a tree stump, then blossoms into a heart shaped face barely touched by age.

“Speak slowly,” she says in feeble english. I almost sigh out loud. Our conversations serve as a constant reminder that we will never understand each other, literally and figuratively.

“What’s for dinner?” I repeat, slower this time.

She glances towards the stove. “Curry. Tell your mom and sister.” My grandmother is seemingly incapable of saying the word “please”. In the past, my mother explained to me that my halmoni’s direct manner of speaking has something to do with the Korean honor system, in which elders claim total respect from the younger generation; I know she doesn’t mean to sound demanding, but she does, and I loathe it.

“Um. Okay.” Without waiting for a reply I head back upstairs, leaving my grandmother alone with her dish soap and rose petals. Just like that, the meeting between our worlds is over.

My last class of the day is AP Language. Five minutes before class ends, my teacher instructs us to write thesis statements for our recently assigned political climate essays.

Quickly, I type out a statement: “As American citizens increasingly view themselves as members of various factions rather than a whole nation, mindsets become increasingly narrow, until anything the “other side” has to say is automatically deemed unimportant.”

After being dismissed, I shut off my computer and leap down the stairs. I'm about to call out to my mom, but then I hear voices sounding from the kitchen.

My mom and my halmoni are speaking in Korean, their voices raised enough that I know something's wrong. Hovering just inside the hallway, I catch snippets of English within their conversation:

"Coronavirus rates are spiking..." ventures my mother before finishing her sentence in steady, self-conscious Korean that's far from fluency.

"China, China," I hear my halmoni argue.

"The president is being irresponsible..."

"He will protect us!" my halmoni insists before unleashing a string of Korean phrases that I can't comprehend. She sounds frustrated and miserable all at once.

I hear my mom sigh. "Sorry mom. I can't understand half the words you're saying." Knowing that their conversation is basically over, I step out from the hallway and tentatively stride into the kitchen.

"Oh!" my mom exclaims. "Alice. Is school over?" From the other side of the room, my halmoni leans against the sink. Her eyes are squeezed shut, and she's clutching a dish towel in one hand.

"Yeah, I got out a little early."

We talk a little longer and then my mom exits the kitchen, leaving me and my halmoni alone.

"Are you hungry?" she asks me.

"I was just wondering if you're feeling okay."

A fraction of a smile tugs at my halmoni's lips. "I'm a little tired," she says. Her pronunciation is hesitant, and her syllables are soft. There is no trace of the woman who immigrated from South Korea to California with three children in tow.

"Is there anything I can do?" I ask after a long pause.

"No," my halmoni says, a rueful expression on her face. "You wouldn't understand."

I can't stop thinking about what she told me. "You wouldn't understand", that's what she said... I can't even argue, because she's right. We will never truly understand each other.

I kick up my blankets as I toss and turn. As a liberal minded teenager, I have almost nothing in common with my conservative grandmother. *Maybe I should convince her to switch parties*, I muse. But then it occurs to me that she wouldn't appreciate that. In fact, it would just be disrespectful. With the clock flashing 2:09 AM, and my grandmother's sad eyes embedded in my mind, I slowly arrive at an epiphany that inspires a tectonic shift in my perspective.

In the United States, thousands of cultures, views, and ideas coexist. America is not a melting pot, but a salad bowl. People will always think differently in one way or another. Instead of ostracizing those who are "different", we should instead embrace the similarities that unite us.

My grandmother and I are family. We share heritage, and a history. I eat her food, am blessed with an education she never had, and sleep in the house she paid off with money she worked hard for. Maybe I'll never truly understand her, but at the end of the day, we are tied by a bond stronger than the stray threads that separate us.

An idea in mind, I jump out of my bed and rush to my computer. Using what I learned from three years of taking Korean class, I manage to type out a few sentences in Korean. I use Google Translate to double check my work before sending a text to my halmoni....

“Halmoni, I want to be a good granddaughter. Can I do the dishes with you tomorrow?”

Or maybe help you cook dinner?

“I love you.”