Geonppang and Sugar Stars

I was eight when my grandfather introduced me to his favorite snack.

We were sitting in the grass of a park near the Han River in Korea. I jealously watched a group of older girls share ice cream cones, the swirls going soft in the evening heat.

“Hye-in. Are you hungry?” My grandfather tore open a bag of chips and offered it to me.

I took it eagerly. There was writing in big, blocky Korean across the front: *Geonppang.* Traditional Korean fried-barley hardtack. I reached in and found the bag filled with identical brown rectangles that clacked against each other like dominos.

*Or rocks,* I thought, when I put one in my mouth and heard an ominous crack that didn’t come from the biscuits.

“Ugh.” Eight-year-old me complained, my mouth still filled with half-chewed biscuits. “This tastes bad, *halabeoji*.”

He laughed as I struggled to swallow the hardtack, thick, dry, and absorbing every trace of saliva in my mouth.

“Here.” He dug through the bag and produced a clear packet the length of his finger.

I squinted at him, suspicious, and he shook the contents out onto his palm. Stars, small and white—a dozen of them. He put one in my mouth, and I realized with delight, that they were made of sugar.

The sweetness melted over my tongue. Especially after the bland biscuits, the little sugar crystals tasted absolutely otherworldly, like real stars if they were candy you could pluck out of the sky.

Unfortunately, there were only about seven sugar stars for the entire bag of biscuits. I polished them off in an instant and was left with dozens of hardtack that I wasn’t exactly eager to finish.

But my grandfather crunched on them peacefully, the laugh lines around his eyes crinkling as I rooted through the bag for more stars.

I couldn’t take it anymore. “*Halabeoji!* Buy me ice cream!”

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Here is a fact according to my grandmother: Kim Hye-in is a mystery.

According to her, I was an anomaly. To her, I was a little girl filled with *why*s and *no*s instead of the *yes, grandmother*s that were accepted and expected in Korea. Her daughter-in-law had returned to Korea for the summer, and I was an unfamiliar creature that had come along.

“Oh my—oh my goodness. Look at her!” My grandmother gasped, when I shook my head *no* at her order to give my uncle a hug hello. An uncle I had never seen in my life, and, when he approached, reeked of cigarettes.

“Can you believe her?” She exclaimed to my aunts and uncles when I said that I wanted to become an author, not a doctor or lawyer.

“How have you been raising her for her to turn out like this?” My grandmother snapped at my mother when she found the margins of the math workbooks she’d given me filled with doodles, imaginary characters, and tangles of story plots stretching across the pages like webs.

Mom clenched her jaw but stayed silent.

Grandmother went on in cutting, rapid-fire Korean. “I knew letting you raise the kids in America was a mistake! The girl has no manners, and she has the strangest ideas! Look at all the other Korean girls. They aren’t like this.”

*I might not speak the best Korean, but I understand everything you’re saying,* I wanted to say.

That night, my grandfather found me sitting on the front porch, eyes puffy and nose running miserably, looking into the cold night sky with all the melodramaticness an eight-year-old could muster.

With a loud sigh, he sat down beside me.

And sat.

And sat.

“What is it, *halabeoji*?” I asked sullenly, scrubbing my nose on my sleeve.

He didn’t say anything. Instead, something crinkled as he slid it from his pocket. He nudged me with it.

A bag of hardtack biscuits.

“I don’t want it.” I tried to push it away, but he placed it on my lap.

“This,” he tapped the little packet of sugar crystals, small and sparkling and half-buried under all the hardtack, “is you. And this is the rest of the world.” He pointed to the biscuits filling the remainder of the packet.

The night air suddenly didn’t feel so cold.

Here is a fact according to my grandmother: Kim Hye-in is a mystery. A deviation from a pattern that has continued for years and years.

An inconsistency.

An anomaly.

A mess.

But here is a fact according to me: I *am* different. I may not act, speak, or think like the girls born and raised in Korea. But this does not make me ruined, bent, or broken.

I am my own person, both American and Korean. I am both and I am none, and these differences set me apart from others in a powerful, positive way. I am valuable, irreplaceable.

Here is a fact according to me:

I am a sugar star. I am proud to be an outlier.