

Report

Chuseok Dinner

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PROMPT: Short Story Competition
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GROUP: Write the World

I look out the car window for the 100th time and sigh. Going to the countryside every Chuseok used to be the most exciting part of the year. I used to love the chance to meet up with my cousins who live all over the country. I used to love running around my grandparents' farm yard chasing chickens and goats or catching tadpoles by the creek. But to be honest, I'm kind of getting too old for that. Besides, there's the issue of mom. The chemotherapy for her cancer hasn't been going well and it's honestly been stressing me out. I don't even know why she insisted on making

this trip considering how sick she has been feeling lately.

“This year is going to be special.” she said. Special how? Special why?

Our family is the last to arrive at the farm which is great because it means that much of the preparation for dinner would have taken place. I try my best to do as much as I can without being told so that Mom can rest on the couch. When the sun sets, everyone gathers for dinner. I have no idea how grandma prepares this enormous quantity of food on her two-burner gas stove. Galbi-jjim (braised short ribs), bosam (Boiled Pork Wraps), fried cod, and even two entire baked chickens straight from the yard. I eat hungrily but glance at Mom every so often; she barely picks at her food.

After dinner, Mom tells me to come back to the table after all the younger kids run off. “Since you’re 16 now, you’re old enough to join us for tea.” Surprised, I peer curiously at the celadon cup that I’m served. The smell is slightly acrid and the taste of the steaming concoction is a combination of bitter and—slightly alcoholic? Is this drink why the adults always seem excitedly expectant after

dinner? I gulp it down quickly and smile politely as my cup is refilled.

The adults around the table chat, the conversation segueing from stocks to scandals, politics to celebrity personas. As the stars blink lazily into being above the clouds, my younger siblings fall asleep, lying haphazardly on cushions and blankets over the living room floor. That's when I hear it, sneaking in, like moonlight through the blinds, the wispy note of a traditional haegeum instrument. Unsure if what I'm hearing is real, I wait, only to hear the twang of a gayageum and soon after, the sound of a janggu pounding in the dark. It's echoing, almost deafening. Surprised, I look around the room, expecting my younger siblings and cousins to wake but, as if she already knew my inquiry, Mom states, "It's the tea, dear. Only we can hear it."

Together, with the other adults of my extended family, my mom and I walk outside. The air shimmers and twinkles, as if fireflies are dancing through the air. Everyone seems to be patiently waiting, gazing past the fields into the mountains behind the farm. I stare too, watching the fog, hazy at first, and then more material as they approach. They stride, feet barely touching the ground, specters floating

over the carefully hoed rows of perilla lining the field. Wait, isn't that great-grandma? Didn't she die when I was five? And isn't that great-grandpa next to her? I wasn't sure because I've only ever seen him in pictures.

Suddenly, I hear a commotion behind me as my aunts and uncles bring out tables laden with yet more food. Great-grandpa smiles and invites me to sit and instinct suddenly kicks in; I politely kneel and bow before doing so.

“How are you great grandma, great grandpa? Have you eaten well?”

Dinner begins, again. As I chew on a songpyeon, I glance across the table and note who is present. There's my uncle who died of a heart attack two years ago. My grandmother's sister that passed away after a battle with liver cancer. There are also some that I don't recognize but my parents seem to know. And there are even more dressed in antiquated robes, on the shimmery side of the table, that quietly sit and eat, not talking to anyone else. The table stretches horizontally to accommodate all the visitors, stretching far into the distance beyond what I can see.

I talk to my uncle that passed and tell him how auntie and my cousins are doing. I

asked my great-grandpa what life was like before the Korean war. Mom seems to have a lot to say to her mother who passed due to COVID. Everyone seems congenial and happy, although I do notice my father glancing repeatedly at the sky. As the moon begins to slide, my relatives across the table seem to grow hazier, although maybe, it's just my eyes. But suddenly, a bird chirps and every person on the other side of the table grows alert at once. My great-grandparents rise, thanking us for the rice wine and for the meal and turn to leave.

They shuffle back towards the mountains as the first beams of sunlight shatter the night. But before they could go further, I ask, maybe a bit too loud, maybe a bit rudely even,

“Jung-ju halaboji (great-grandpa), What is it like on the other side? What does it feel like to die?” He pauses, and slowly turns his head to face me with a sad smile

“There’s no pain. There’s peace. And you’ll be with our family forever. Your mom will know soon. But you, don’t join us too soon.”

The sun slowly yawns and stretches into the sky as I watch him walk away, slowly

fading with each step. A shimmering haze seemingly waves goodbye.

When I walk back into the house, my younger siblings and cousins start to stir.

“Sis? Why you awake so early? Why are your cheeks wet?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong. Go back to sleep, little guy.”

As I walk past my mother, she looks at me tiredly, and smiles.

Message to Readers

The story revolves around the main character's mother, whose death casts a profound shadow over every narrative thread. Inspired by my mother's experience with a friend's cancer, the emotional weight of contemplating a mother's suffering is central. At 16, the main character gains access to a dinner revealing ancestral connections, marking a crucial coming-of-age moment. Magical realism unfolds through enchanted tea and ceremonial meals with ancestors, creating a delicate blend of fantasy and reality. By addressing the commonality of death and portraying it as a continuation, the story challenges societal perceptions, emphasizing enduring relationships with influential family members.