

MOON DROPS

Deborah S. Prespare

She lay on the floor on a sleeping mat. Everything about her was thin and frail, everything except her stomach. If I hadn't overheard my parents before we'd left the States, I'd have thought, with my eight-year-old understanding, that a baby, not cancer, was growing in there. Too scared to move, I stayed by the door.

"Jen," my mom said to me, "you slept with her when you were a baby."

An unbelievable fact. I turned to escape, but my uncle snatched my hand and dragged me to the crowded living room where my cheeks were punished with pinches. My uncle introduced me to his son, In-Su, who told me, in perfect English, that I didn't look Korean or American. I shrugged. With parents from such different places, it was no wonder to me that I didn't really look like either of them.

"You can speak English," I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “And Korean. That’s more than you.”

Later, having found no ally in my cousin, I stood at a hallway window, staring at the night sky, wishing I was home. Someone called my name. My cheeks still raw, I walked away from the voice, down the hall until I reached its end, the woman’s room. My name rang out again. I peered into the moonlit space. She was alone. I could see her reclined, skeletal silhouette, her swollen stomach. As scary as she looked, she seemed to be sleeping. I was sure no one would bother me or my cheeks if I sat hidden in there.

Watching her chest rise and fall, I entered the room and sat on the floor. Minutes that felt like hours passed. I scanned the shadows around me. Silver glimmers in an open closet caught my eye. Curious, sure that she was asleep, I crept to the closet, where I saw a box on a low shelf. Moonlight flitted from one oyster-shell flower to another across its lid.

“We’re not supposed to bother *Halmoni*.”

Startled, I almost dropped the box. My cousin, In-Su, had snuck up beside me.

“I’m not bothering her,” I said.

The woman coughed. I froze. My cousin said something, an apology, I guessed, to her. She said something in return, and he took the box from me

and brought it to her. In the moonlight, she motioned for us to come closer. I was not going to let In-Su see how scared she made me, so, sucking in a breath, I joined him on her sleeping mat.

She took a pearl bracelet out of the box and said something to In-Su.

“She wants to know if you know about the pearls,” he said to me.

I shook my head. She smiled and reached for my hand. I sat back.

“You scared?” In-Su, smirking, asked.

“No,” I said, willing my arm toward her. Her hands were cold, her skin like tissue paper against my wrist. She slipped the bracelet on me and said something again to In-Su.

He sighed. “She wants me to help her tell you about that bracelet,” he said, translating as she spoke, launching into the story, giving me no chance to think of an escape. “She lived in Japan with our grandfather and our uncle—their son, Myung-Ki—a long time ago. Grandmother sewed clothes, and her husband cooked. He had a food wagon—cart. They were poor. Their son, Myung-Ki—he could see the spirits of our—” He stopped, searching for the words. “Of our past family. The dead ones.”

“Like ghosts?” I asked, thinking ghosts weren’t nearly as hair-raising as the old woman’s thin hand on me.

He shrugged and continued.

§

Before dawn, Myung-Ki, already awake, quietly tried to make his top spin, but his attention kept returning to his sleeping mother, to her trembling eyelids, to the sweat on her forehead. His top, like usual, wobbled through a tipsy turn and fell to its side. Frustrated, he moved to twist the top again.

Fingers gripped his shoulder. Seeing a familiar pattern of meandering veins on the hand holding him, he smiled. “*Haraboji*,” he whispered to his grandfather as the old man materialized.

Grandfather nodded. “We are all here, my grandson.”

Myung-Ki looked at his mother again, and now spirits, never before revealed to him but innately familiar, smiled at him from their seated stations around her. Myung-Ki bowed, paying the familial apparitions—women in dresses of brilliant reds and blues, men in silver robes—respect. One woman who had the same thin lips as his mother bent low to his mother’s ear.

“What’s she saying, *Haraboji*?” Myung-Ki asked.

“That it is time to return home.”

Myung-Ki looked down at his lap. “*Haraboji*...”

“I know the dreams you have.”

“In Korea...”

Grandfather, stroking his white beard, nodded.

Myung-Ki looked at his mother curled on her side in restless sleep. “If we stay, I’ll be okay, but they won’t be, and they won’t go. Not without me.” He squeezed his top. “And the others won’t come.”

Grandfather touched Myung-Ki’s cheek. “You will decide what should be.”

With his grandfather’s words, Myung-Ki’s lineage faded. His mother opened her eyes, and, despite the anxious creases still lining her forehead, she smiled. “Is your father here?” she asked, twisting her hair into a knot.

Myung-Ki nodded.

She folded their tattered sleeping mat, pushed open the door, and stepped outside. Myung-Ki waved at his father, who was checking his food cart, making sure pots and ladles were secure. Other slum dwellers were up, moving about in the predawn shadows too. Myung-Ki could hear his parents talking, their voices quiet at first, but then came the harsher pitch of his father’s cursing.

A cigarette between his grumbling lips, his father followed his mother inside and slid the door shut behind them. "There's no work for me in Korea," he said. "You know that."

"Things will be better for us there. I feel it," she said.

"You think they'll just let us leave?"

"People are always coming and going."

"Approval's impossible to get now."

"People slip away all the time."

Frustrated, his father squatted next to Myung-Ki and set his top into a fast spin. He looked at his wife and sucked on his cigarette. "I tell you what," he said. "If Haruki here wants to go, we'll go."

"Don't call him that," his mother said.

"If he calls himself by his Korean name, just—you know the trouble that will find us? Now," he said, "if he wants to go, we'll go. He doesn't want to go, though. Right, son?" He ruffled Myung-Ki's hair. "He knows it's better here."

The top fell to its side. This was the moment. Myung-Ki's skin tingled.

"Are you crying?" his father asked. "I'll make it spin again."

There was only one choice. Myung-Ki grabbed the top. "I want to go, *Appa*."

His father, baffled, looked at his crying son. “We can’t,” he said. “You know that.”

“I want to go. *Umma* wants to go. Let’s go.”

“Please,” his mother said.

“This is ridiculous.” His father took quick puffs off his cigarette.

“Please, *Appa*.”

“*Yobo*, I beg you,” his mother said.

Shaking his head, his father stubbed out his cigarette in the charcoal stove.

“Both of you crying. I can’t believe this. Fine. We’ll go. You’re begging for us to leave, but you’ll see. You’ll be begging for me to bring you back here.”

“We can go?” his mother asked.

“I said so, didn’t I?” His father lit another cigarette. “It’s probably for the best. I hate serving these bastards food.” He looked at his wife’s raised eyebrow.

“Myung-Ki knows what a bastard is.”

“We can go today?” his mother asked.

“Today is no worse than tomorrow.”

His mother spread a blanket on the floor and piled their few belongings in its center—their clothes; a yellowed, time-chewed photograph of Grandfa-

ther; bowls and rice from the food cart; dried fish and squid. She tied the corners of the blanket together, making a bundle. With the bundle slung over his shoulder, Myung-Ki's father led them through alleyways that divided the overcrowded quarters of the slum, around excrement ditches where people were emptying their chamber pots, past naked babies playing in puddles of blackened water. They walked to the harbor, along streets that filled as the night's shadows faded. Bells on bicycles chimed. Greetings in Japanese were exchanged. The bark of bartering bit the air.

When they reached the pier, they saw that a line had already formed for the boat—*The Express*—that would take them to Matsuyama, where they could catch another boat to Shimonoseki, then onto Busan, Korea. Myung-Ki, gripping his top, studied the people waiting to board *The Express*—old people leaning on walking sticks, children bouncing a red rubber ball, package-laden women, and worn-looking men.

“All those people,” his mother said. “What if there’s no room for us?”

“It doesn’t matter,” his father said. “We can’t get in line. Not without a stamp.” He nodded in the direction of a pair of officers who were questioning people and examining their identification papers. The officers grabbed a man

from the line. More officers descended and escorted the man away. "I told you they were being more diligent."

His mother, sighing, nodded.

"No," Myung-Ki said. "We have to go."

"There's no way we can," his father said, dropping the bundle and lighting a cigarette.

A tap on Myung-Ki's shoulder. He looked up and Grandfather smiled down at him. Myung-Ki smiled too, but discreetly. His parents didn't like it when he saw those who couldn't always be seen. Grandfather whispered in Myung-Ki's ear, his beard scratching Myung-Ki's cheek. "That boat will take you," he said.

Myung-Ki looked to where Grandfather pointed. A narrow fishing boat bobbed in the water. A man sat on the boat's bow, his knobby legs dangling over the boat's side, his naked feet almost skimming the algae-coated water. Myung-Ki, unsure, looked at Grandfather again.

Grandfather nodded before fading away.

Myung-Ki tugged on his parents' hands. "We have to go. On that boat."

His father laughed and picked up their bundle. "The waves will eat that boat like we eat anchovies, with one gulp. Let's go home."

“No, *Appa*.”

His mother studied Myung-Ki’s face. She grabbed her husband’s arm. “Home,” she whispered. “That’s where we’re trying to go. You probably won’t be asked for your papers on that boat. No one is paying it any attention.”

“Too risky,” he said, matching her quiet voice. “Besides, how far will that boat get us? When we try to catch the next boat, what then? I’m sure they’re checking papers wherever that might be too.”

“We’re going to be okay,” she said.

“We will be, *Appa*,” Myung-Ki agreed.

His father sighed. “I can’t believe you two.”

The fisherman bowed when they approached him.

“Can you take us to Matsuyama, or as close to Matsuyama as possible?” his father asked. “I’m to work at the munitions plant there.”

“Why not take *The Express*? It’ll get you there faster.”

“*The Express* is full.”

“It’s full, huh?” The fisherman studied his father. He scanned the dock.

“You really going to Matsuyama?”

Myung-Ki’s father hesitated.

“I was just leaving to fish off the motherland’s coast,” the fisherman said in Korean. “I can take you. Right through the Kanmon Straits. No problem.”

Myung-Ki smiled. Grandfather always knew best.

“This boat will go unnoticed,” his mother said to his father.

“That it will,” the fisherman said. “And if we do get any unwanted attention, you’re my family, helping me fish, right?”

Whispering, speaking in Korean now too, his father asked the fisherman what his fee would be to take the three of them with him.

“I had to give those bastards all my catch. If you have some food,” he said, eyeing the bundle on his father’s back, “I’d be happy with that.”

“We have rice, dried fish and squid. We would be happy to share what we have with you,” his mother said.

The fisherman pointed to glass bottles under his seat. “And I have water and *soju*. We’ll have a feast.” The fisherman waved them onto his boat that smelled of seaweed and salt—both that of the sea and that of the fisherman’s sweat. The fisherman untied the boat from the dock and tinkered with the rust-coated motor. After a few sputtering starts, the motor, puffing smoke, lurched the boat forward. “We’ll use the sail when we clear the harbor. We should get a good breeze then.”

Gnawing on a piece of dried squid, the fisherman steered the boat around military, travel, and fishing vessels. “Going to see family?” he asked.

“My father—when we came to Japan—” Myung-Ki’s father cleared his throat. “We’re all that’s left of our family.”

“You have nobody?”

His father shook his head.

“Why go back?”

“To find work and— ”

The fisherman laughed. “Work? Good luck.”

His mother, ignoring her husband’s bitter glance, stroked Myung-Ki’s hair.

“Time for the sail,” the fisherman said, killing the engine. As he and Myung-Ki’s father hoisted the sail, *The Express* raced by them.

Frustration flooded Myung-Ki. It was going to take them forever to get to Korea in the fisherman’s boat.

The fisherman winked at him. “You think my boat goes too slow, huh?”

Myung-Ki shook his head, his frustration dissipating when he realized that a fast boat only meant a speedier arrival of his own fate.

“My boat might be slow, but it will keep us safe from sea mines. I’ve seen so many boats go *boom*.”

His father glared at his mother. “We’re risking sea mines? For what? To starve?”

“This boat, being light, sits up too high for mines,” the fisherman said. “Don’t worry.”

“Don’t worry?” his father said. “I won’t be able to feed my family when we get home. I can’t keep my family safe. The only thing in my power to do *is* worry.”

“Everything will be okay, *Appa*.”

His father laughed. “Sure it will be, son.”

“At least you’ll be home,” the fisherman said.

His father’s eyes snapped to the sky behind them. “My God,” he said.

A blazing light. A booming howl. A cloud, tremendous in size, sparking light, billowed over the land they had just left. Speechless, his father sat. His mother pulled Myung-Ki to her.

“What are we witnessing?” the fisherman asked.

That night, after a day of speculation on what could have caused such an explosion, Myung-Ki woke and saw his parents draped in the moon’s light.

The fisherman, a foot perched on a fuel canister, smiled. Myung-Ki, whispering thanks to his grandfather, nodded back into a sleep crowded with images of bursting stars.

When the boat drifted into Busan Harbor, Myung-Ki felt that a lifetime had passed. They thanked the fisherman, left the harbor, and entered slums similar to the ones they'd left behind in Hiroshima. After days of searching for work, they stood outside an herbalist's shop. Knowing there would be no work for him here either, his father still went in. After several minutes, he returned, his face pale.

"Don't worry," Myung-Ki's mother said. "There are more stores to check."

"We're okay," he breathed.

"They have work?"

He shook his head. He told them what he had learned from the shop owner. Hiroshima. All the whispering they had heard. The extent of the destruction was just beginning to be understood. An American firebomb had caused the cloud they'd seen and indescribable devastation to everything within a mile of its blast. The same type of bomb had been used on Nagasaki.

"Thank you," his father said. "For making us leave. If anything had happened to—" He cleared his throat and picked up their bundle.

Days later, still having found no work, his father led them out of Busan. They walked along country roads that sliced through soybean fields and rice paddies. They accepted food from generous farmers. Although there was no work, they were content. They were safe, and his father felt now that everything happened for a reason.

Dust covered their clothes. Their shoes fell apart. They slept alongside the roads they traveled on. With stalks of grass, his father, whistling, wove makeshift nets to catch fish in the brooks they passed. One night, as his mother served the day's catch, his father whispered something in her ear that made her laugh. Myung-Ki watched the orange light of the campfire flicker across his parents' happy faces. He shuddered. Flames. Fire. This could have been his parents' fate. And he'd prevented it. He took care of his family. Smiling, he knew he was his father's son.

A man on a bicycle raced by them one morning. "The bastards surrendered," he shouted.

"Do you think they did?" his mother asked his father.

"We can hope."

After several more days of wandering, his father was able to find work. Japan had surrendered, and its occupation of Korea was over. An elderly

farmer and his wife who were struggling to keep their soybean fields in order felt more secure with the idea of taking on help now that they knew their crops and profits would be their own. In exchange for his father's labor, they provided a small sum of money, ample food, and a pleasant shelter, a two-room structure—a room for cooking and a room for living—with a rice-straw roof. The house was bigger, warmer, and cleaner than their room in the Hiroshima ghetto. They were happy.

Later that fall, Myung-Ki sat on the front steps, trying to make his top spin. The wind stirred, sending leaves from the tree by their house fluttering around him. As he watched the falling leaves, he caught sight of his father working in a field. Even far away, his father looked strong and fierce. Myung-Ki heard his mother humming. He watched her hang wet clothes on a line strung up between the tree and the house. He looked at her pregnant waist. His lips, weighed by envy, sagged as he thought about the experiences his sibling was going to have. Envy was quickly replaced, though, with love. Knowing he had done what was best for his family, he twisted his top, and this time he was able to set it into a fast spin. He laughed.

When the winter winds came, the *ondol* firebox warmed the floor beneath them, and as night, enjoying its extended reign, spread itself over the

countryside earlier each day, Myung-Ki kept smiling despite the longing for his parents that had seeped into his heart. He clung to his mother each day as she poked at the charcoal stove. “You need to eat more,” she would say with a concerned frown. “Dark circles around your eyes are not good.” She would add more mallow to the simmering stews she made.

He watched his father light his cigarettes each evening. “Are you tired?” his father would ask through a swirl of smoke. “You should rest.” He would invite Myung-Ki onto his lap. Myung-Ki would place his head on his father’s chest and listen to the vibrations of his father’s sonorous voice as he talked of his own father.

Myung-Ki listened to the stories of his father’s youth, stories that his father seemed to find easier to tell the longer they were in Korea. Myung-Ki understood now that for his father leaving Korea had meant not only abandoning his homeland, but abandoning his family too. Myung-Ki would tell him that Grandfather understood that he needed to find work where he could, that he was proud. His father would look into his eyes. “He probably did understand. Everything does work out, doesn’t it?” Myung-Ki would nod, and his father would laugh and remember another story to tell.

Myung-Ki studied his parents as his father resurrected memories. He studied the curves of his father's shaved head and long nose, the brightness of his mother's smile and thickness of her hair. How he loved them. One night, he told them so.

"We love you too," they said, exchanging an anxious look.

He didn't mean to make them worried.

He put his hand on his mother's stomach. "I love you, sister."

His father tried to laugh. "A sister? You sure?"

Myung-Ki, wanting to ease their concern, laughed too. "I am."

"Then it's true," his father said. "You with your eyes that shine like a full moon. Like a mystic monk, you see all, I think." He tickled Myung-Ki, and as tired as Myung-Ki was, he giggled, hoping to make his parents happy.

Myung-Ki squeezed between his parents' warm bodies and fell asleep to their steady breath that night. The sound of a horse whinnying outside woke him. Not wanting to disturb his parents, he sat up quietly. A familiar grip squeezed his shoulder.

"*Haraboji*," Myung-Ki whispered.

The old man smiled, his eyes twinkling like the stars suspended in the sky that Myung-Ki found himself under now. Grandfather picked him up and set him on a white horse. He swung himself up on the horse behind Myung-Ki.

“Will they be all right?” Myung-Ki asked.

Grandfather nodded. “They will miss you, but your sister will come. Then others. And as time passes, they will understand that they will see you again.” He patted Myung-Ki’s shoulder. “Are you ready, my grandson?”

A tear slipped from Myung-Ki’s eye, a tear that caught the full moon’s white light, making it shine like a pearl as it bounced from his cheek to the ground. Other moon-catching tears followed. “I’m ready,” he said.

When the sun rose, his mother stretched and rolled to her side. His father’s eyes opened and met hers. She laughed softly. “I thought I heard a horse last night,” she whispered. “It sounded so real. What a dream.” He smiled. She looked down at their son between them, his face sweet with traces of infancy. She touched his cheek, a cold cheek.

She bolted up. His father shook him. His mother pressed him to her, her tears wetting his hair. Unable to breathe, his father ran outside, where snow fell from a gray sky. He turned his head heavenward and begged for understanding.

After Hiroshima, he believed that everything happened for a reason, worked out for the best. But this? How could there be purpose in this? He fell to his knees, pounded the snow-covered earth, and under the fall of his fists, he felt small beads. He looked at the cluster of white spheres that shone too brilliantly and felt too hard to be snow.

Through his tears, he picked up one of the spheres that glowed like a full moon, like his boy's bright, shining eyes. Warmth radiating from the drop of moon in his hand helped soothe the cold in his heart.

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“She says they're our uncle Myung-Ki's tears,” In-Su explained. “She wants you to have them.”

Lights flipped on. “Out,” In-Su's mother, angry, said in English. “She is in pain.”

I could see that our grandmother was. Her breath caught in her chest. I had assumed the soft shudders she made during the telling of her story were caused by the ache of reliving her memories, not by the agony of cancer. Despite her suffering, she smiled at us as my aunt shooed us out of the room.

I regret that I didn't thank her for the pearls. I regret that I didn't protest and stay with her that night like I used to when I was a baby. When I remember her hand over mine, her smile, when I touch the pearls hugging my wrist, I'm reminded, though, that she wouldn't have wanted me to regret. All was and is as it should be. She believed this, and thinking about her, my grandfather, and my uncle, Myung-Ki, I think I do too.

Deborah S. Prespare lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She completed her undergraduate studies at Cornell College and received an M.A. in Writing from Johns Hopkins University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Amarillo Bay*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Cadillac Cicatrix*, *Common Ground Review*, *decomp*, *Diner*, *The Diverse Arts Project*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *The Fiddleback*, *The MacGuffin*, *Marathon Literary Review*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Prospectus: A Literary Offering*, *Red Rock Review*, *Rougarou*, *Sanskrit Literary-Arts Magazine*, *Soundings East*, and *Qwerty*.