

Grand Mothers



E.J. Bahng

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Cover art by Alessia Lingesso

Dedication

To my late grandparents who cherished and
nurtured lands and lived along with Nature.

A hushed family affair has its own magical staying power. A long time ago, I heard a story about my grandma's mom who did not produce a boy for the family.

Already, she had six daughters with her husband. But, the family must have a son. Her mother-in-law finally asked her to leave after she gave birth to another girl, the seventh daughter.

She accepted it as her fate. Soon, her husband married another woman. It was how things were done.



In this unknown deep mountain valley on the Korean peninsula, everyone lived a frugal and agricultural life.

It was not the right time, nor the right place, nor the right family to allow her mercy. Particularly at that time, every woman, young or old, needed a family and a husband who would protect her.

Otherwise streets would find her useful. And, the streets loved nobody. Even wind could snatch a girl.





So, she made up her mind because she had a vision.

She wandered through the villages in this mountain valley, and dropped one daughter here and another daughter there, finding one home at a time for each.

At each village, she had one fewer.

She walked to the next village through a meandering narrow steep path, and then she had one fewer than before.

Her fifth daughter, who was my grandma, was finally dropped off at a decent looking home where she wouldn't be hungry.

“Would you like to have my daughter?” she asked the lady at the decent looking home.

“Well, she is still young but her hands look like she can work. And, that's a good quality,” said the lady.

“Why don't you be my step-daughter helping me around sometime, and when the right time comes, you marry my son,” said the lady with the decent looking home.



That was how her vision was manifested.

At this point in the family story, for some strange reason, my grandma's mom exits the story. No one knows what happened to her.

The fifth daughter, who was my grandma, glimpsed at the lady's son and suddenly her sense of time slowed down. There was sunshine emanating from the lady's son. She fell in love with him.





“It was love at first sight. The day’s field work was hard for a child of my age. But from time to time, I would glance at him, from a distance, he would be studying in his room, and then I would fall in love with him again. Then, all of my flesh’s fatigue from the field work would disappear. I would count the days till I marry him.”

無語別

十五越溪女
羞人無語別
歸來掩重門
泣向梨花月



Farewell Without Words

by Lim Jae

To a fifteen-year-old beautiful girl who lives by a stream.

I bid farewell to her without words out of great shyness.

Returning home, I locked the doors.

And, finding myself shedding tears
To the Moon between the flowers of pears.



My grandma married a studying man whose Fang family came from China with wealth and status a long long time ago.

The people in Korea and the Fang family endured the 35-year long Japanese occupation where my grandpa spoke Korean within the family, learned Japanese in school, and wrote Chinese at home.

When I was young, my grandpa would say, “Never forget where you came from. You must learn and practice Chinese everyday.”

Then, in the fields when we worked together under the heat of the summer sun, he would utter some Japanese words of this and that.

Later in the evening under the starlight, he would write Chinese words of this and that.

When the Korean war broke out in 1950, they had their first son.

And the war lasted for three years.

These years of war and many awkward casualties rooted out my grandpa's words and the spirit in his eyes. He stayed only at home and found comfort laboring in his fields.

He became silent and lost words. His eye gazes were either busy detecting danger, even in a child's jump, or sometimes his gazes were like a crescent-moon on the horizon, barely enduring the ghosts of war that entered his eyes.



My grandpa became the village beekeeper and a farmer, and started working alongside his wife whose spirit waxed like the flowering, pearlescent moon.

By then, my grandma's older sisters who lived among the surrounding villages had also established their families, and my grandma had become a well-networked, moving woman with all sorts of information.

My grandma was the full Moon, now the head of the Fang family, working in the field from early in the morning to late in the evening with her husband.

She also became the family mother for the war orphans when one of her sister's husbands died, and when my grandpa's big brother died in the Korean war.



When I was young, I would always wonder why my grandpa never uttered words but sat silently near his beehives.

For a long time, he would watch and listen to a thousand twangling sounds of yellow pollen-carrying honey bees.

‘What is it that he is thinking? How come he is not bored sitting like that for so long?’

I’d have passing thoughts like that. By then, I learned that I must not make any jumping or sudden movements when I was near him.

Then I would ask him, “Grandpa, grandpa aren’t you lonely here alone?”

I would lean on him. Then, he would hug me gently.



When swarms of bees suddenly appeared on a tree branch, villagers would ask him for help.

He would then, ever so gently, orient the honeybees to a handmade beehouse that he had prepared for them.

My grandpa's beehives were squid-shaped. Its roof was triangle-shaped made out of a bunch of dried straws weaved together.

Its body was column-shaped made out of a hollowed-out log for honey chambers.



Near the end of the log, each hive had paired narrow exit and entry bee-sized rectangles that were sustained firmly by thin-flat layered stones.

It was these two exit and entry ports that my grandpa sat nearby and silently gazed at the bees that danced in and out of their chambers orderly with their buzzing sounds.

From time to time, my grandma would say,

“You see that mountain over there, everywhere there were dead bodies.”

“In the darkest nights, I’ve seen ghost lights, *Dokkaebi Bul*, haunting and gliding in that mountain.”

“You see that stream over there, it was colored red and smelled of blood.”

“Some people have lost their minds and have gone crazy.”



“Soldiers on both sides were hungry for anything and destroyed everything.”

“One day, I asked a very young soldier I encountered on the road whether North Koreans were invading our village. He told me that he was a North Korean soldier and we laughed out loud, and parted our ways.”

“Well, I didn’t know who was who, and who was on which side.”

I was too young to understand history and humanities.



My grandparents worked early in the morning until late in the evening in the fields, spring, summer, fall and they rested in winter.

Many many years.



They had five sons.

The house had become so rich that they bought most of the lands, apple orchards, and fields in that village.

The Fang family compound was always frequented with seasonal field workers and my grandma always greeted them, lodged them and fed them well.



One by one, her five sons grew up and slowly her wealth was whittled away.

Her first son, who was my dad, wasted most of the family's land through gambling debts and drinking.

My dad would present all of us in front of his mom, my grandma, to create a theater of hardship and difficulty in raising us.

“Why did you help him again and again?” I asked my grandma. She smiled lightly and said,

“Your dad was born when the Korean war broke. He is my first son and I am his mom. I can't let my first son's wings wither when I can help him,” grandma let out another light smile.

My grandma's second son took some money from her and eloped with a woman who worked at a nearby textile factory. He never came back home.

Her third son, the good son, stayed with her as long as he could and worked in the field alongside her, but left for the big city.

Her fourth son persuaded her to give a lump sum for him to open up businesses, which took away most of her lands and orchards.

Her fifth son went to college and left the unknown mountain valley.

Later on in my grandma's last years, the fifth son came back full of wise-saws, learned words, and newfangled formal ideas, and stayed right by her.

“Mom, don’t worry. I will take good care of the land. I will live in this house,” assured the fifth son to her.



Near the end of her life, she decided to educate herself to read Korean characters.

She also freed herself of most possessions at every chance.

Slowly but inevitably, she lost her mind and kept looking for her first-born son.

A couple of months later, she no longer could swallow a single drop of water. She died amidst the height of the pandemic.

My grandma used to say very loudly,

“Well, I am going to give all of my land and money to whomever will be with me, and the last to wipe me.”
Then, she laughed out loud.

My grandma left everything to her youngest son, and he sold everything.

The Fang family farming compound was flattened and has now become a bus stop to the winding mountain valley.

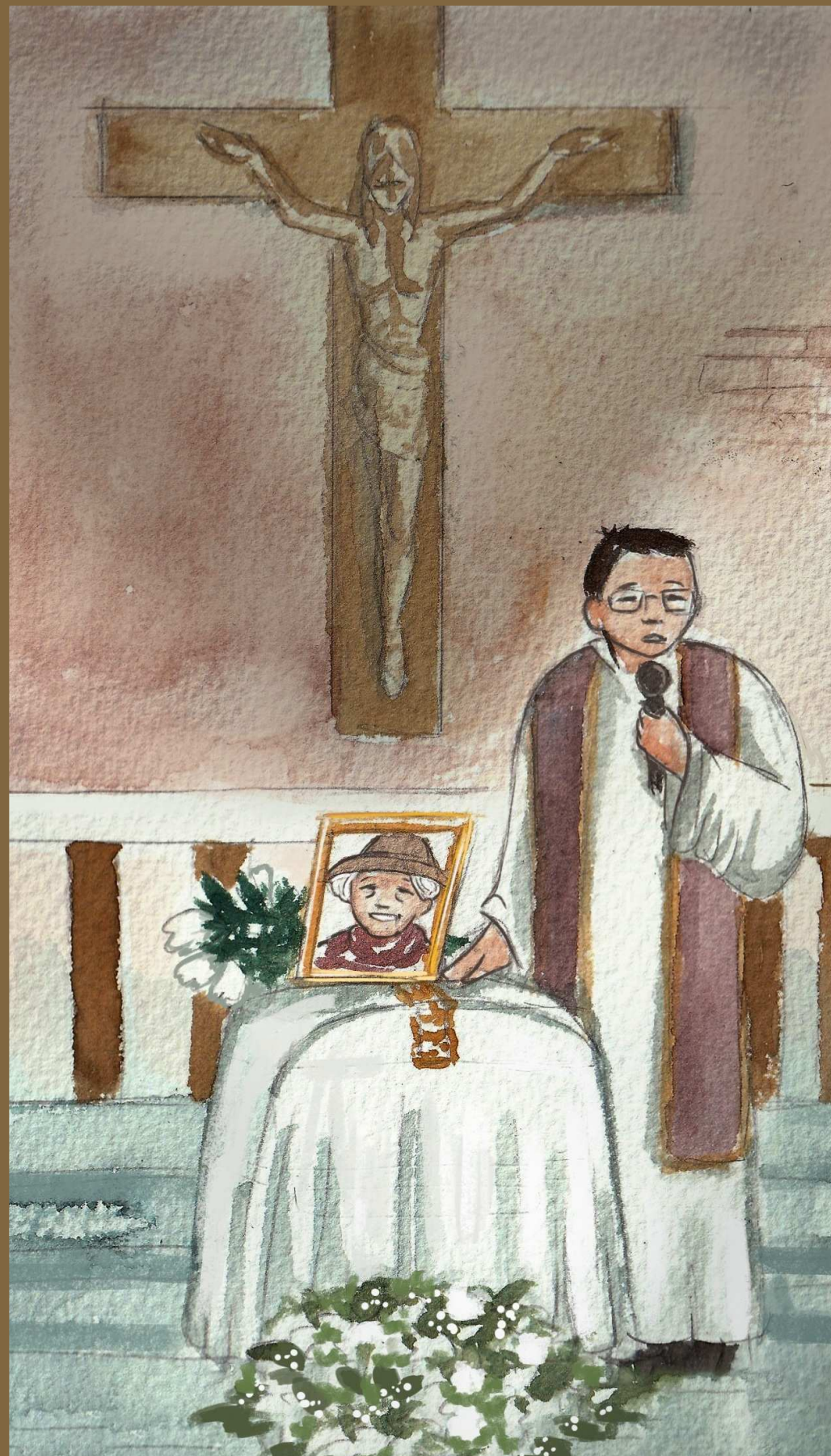
When my sister sent me a picture of her funeral mass, I was awash in childhood memories.

That's how I grieved for my grandparents who were farmers.

My sister and I were always dropped off and left in this deep valley during spring break, summer break and winter break.

Their home was our birthplace, childhood stomping grounds, and we unknowingly took courses in agriculture, nature, and human relations.

My mom and dad were too young, and too impatient to have two year-to-year daughters already.



My sister and I frolicked around the steep mountain trails where grandma's Korean war stories were buried.

We picked wild strawberries and blackberries that dyed our tongues and lips in mingled red and purple damask.

We were forged around our grandparents when their lives were timed with weather and seasons.

Grandpa would feed fresh mulberry leaves to silkworms in a dark room, and I would hear nothing but their eerie chewing sounds that made my skin itch.



Now, these childhood memories have become the scenes of seasonal courses.

Picking red cayenne peppers in the summer heat, enduring those boundless rows and rows and the surprising visitation of toads.

Dropping tiny sesame seeds amid the autumn breeze, breathing in the freed fragrance arising from grandma's and grandpa's alternate-thrashings of dried sesame plants.



Roasting sweet potatoes and peanuts inside a fire pit,
playing the winter game of Yutnori for winning cheers
and for learning how to lose gracefully, and cry not.



With all other kids of the village, we finger-caught dragonflies and cicadas in the daytime and fireflies in the night while witnessing fleets of baby-spiders bursting out in every corner of grandma's house.



My grandma's body was housed in a coffin and was placed for a mass at her Catholic church.

Her identity at the foot of the coffin was an image of her smiling, summoning her remaining sisters from nearby villages, her five sons, and her twelve grandchildren.



"Nothing worked. They couldn't find her second son," said my mom.

"Don't worry. I whispered your final words to her ear. It looks inhumane with all the tubes at the hospital, but her face was so peaceful, like a Buddha's face...she looked like she was smiling," said my sister.

"That's the end of the family legacy, right? It's almost like the story of *The Giving Tree*. Iowa has a story just like that, *A Thousand Acres*, similar to that of King Lear's three daughters," said my friend.



My sister sent me a YouTube video clip of my grandma who appeared on a TV program “*Grandma Goes to School.*”

I chuckled at watching her soft and proud smiles while learning to read and write Korean characters.



When we were children, my grandma used to take my sister and me everywhere, and she always asked us to tell her whether that bus or this bus or this train or that train goes to such and such a place.

I was too young to read Korean, but my sister would always walk to the front of the bus or the side of the train and was able to read the destinations.

She became the smart granddaughter. I was her second granddaughter whom she wished to be a boy.



Deep into her widowhood, her time to become a learned woman had finally arrived.

She saw Korean and wrote Korean repeatedly on the backside of last year's calendar.

She collected words, already a boxful of them. She enrolled in a grandma school, too.



Education and scholarly business were all her husband's charms. Again, my grandma tells me,

“I'd have a glimpse of your grandpa studying, then my heart would swell with the hopes of marrying this handsome man, and all the hard work in the fields would disappear.”

“Two more years...two more years...he will be my husband and I'll bear his son.”

After six months, the young teachers in the Korean class told her she was the top student.

She recites this to the world as her last history:

"Walking on the flower-festooned road"

My hands ache because I've grabbed on so many things.
My hands ache because I've loaded up so much life on my back.
Gone were my times because of the daily problem-solving.

My legs ache because of all the busy crisscrossing.
And my hands ache because I've grabbed on so many things.

Suddenly in this empty room of ours,
I won't be left alone?

Love, and only love.

From now on, I am going to only think about that word.
And, I am going to only imagine walking on the flower-festooned road.
Albeit, I am walking on the desert road.

From time to time,
Only when I feel overwhelmed and fatigued,
Please hear a little bit of my stories.



A 50-word summary

At the sudden news of the passing of a grandmother during the second-year of the pandemic, the narrator can't be with her grandmother and is hit by unprecedented grief, yet learns to say "Good-Bye."

Keywords

Family legacy, grandmothers, mothers, grand parents, humanity, history, literacy, war, and nature.

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The first poem in the story, *Farewell Without Words*, was written by Lim Jae (1549 - 1587). The second poem, *Walking on the flower-festooned road*, was shorted and modified from a Korean song titled "*Wish*" sung by SaYeon No. It was known that at the Korean school for grandmas, they taught Korean through lyrics from popular songs, and the words that appear in this book show how the narrator's grandma practiced her Korean.

Any topics, opinions, stories, fictional characters, or values expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding units.

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This book is possible because of the unconditional love that my late grandpa and grandma gave me. For both of my grandparents, I missed their final moments to say “*I love you*” into their ears because I was far away.

In 2002, the year my grandpa passed away, I remember him in my dreams saying good-byes in his kind and gentle way. In 2021, the year my grandma died, she didn’t visit my dreams. Instead, I was grieved by all the memories of childhood days with her. After six months the memories became so unbearable, I needed to have them all out in a story...an oral family story.

I am grateful to my older sister, Eunsook, who witnessed these adventures together at our grandparent’s place. Regardless of her busy schedules and international time difference, she has been there for me as a messenger, as a friend, and as a sister. After our grandma’s funeral, we zoom-talked about those critical childhood memories. Many times, I was surprised how our memories of some episodes differed as well as being similar.

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Finally, as I am nearing my own half-century existence on Earth, my sincere appreciation goes to all the fantastic grandparents who are the light and love to humanity in many daily small ways.

Cover story

The foreground photo on the cover, *Grandmother & Granddaughters at She-Ru Island*, was taken in the early 1980s during an autumn school field trip with the narrator. The older sister on the left and the narrator on the right, who both hold rainbow-colored paper flowers, were held by their grandmother. The grandmother wears very humble clothes while the granddaughters wear colorful dresses. Later, it was known that the one-piece dress that the younger granddaughter wore was a hand-me-down from her sister!

She-Ru Island, where approximately 250 people lived, was in the Danyang River, Danyang, South Korea. Long ago, this island was a major route for salt-carrying boats and boatmen songs.

On August 19, 1972 around 3 PM, typhoon *Betty* hit the Korean peninsula and She-Ru Island was faced with a great flood. The isolated people on She-Ru ran to high ground and made a human-shield by crossing each other's arms. "We only live by tightly holding our crossed arms" was their chant during the enduring hours. No one let their crossed arms go, but stood strong together. They endured a 14-hour battle with the harsh rain, wind, cold, and darkness. All survived but a 100-day old baby. It was said that the baby's mother never uttered a word of her baby's death for fear that it would crumble the human shield and all would risk dying. In 2017, the people of Danyang commemorated the mother with a statue of her titled, *14-hour fight with death and an enduring mother*.

Now, Danyang is known for *Eight Nature's Scenes* and various leisure activities like skydiving, water skiing, and the like.

The mid-ground curtains that lightly flow along with a summer breeze represent consciousness and the future. Once I heard a story like the following: One is granted a wish but with a curse at the same time. The curse part is that the one wish would never stop but repeat infinitely. So, what is your one wish?....Tell me what is your one wish? "My one wish is to sit down inside a train station on a hot summer day when suddenly a gentle breeze blows to glow people's spirits."

The cover invites a reader to be the present, the framed photo to be the past, and the open flowing curtains to be the future.



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