

A Mother's Art

When I hear the first knock on my bedroom door, I keep my neck bent and my eyes focused on my schoolwork. If I ignore the sound long enough, I reason, it might leave me in peace.

Another series of knocks, almost thunderous this time. Reluctantly, I give way.
"Come in."

My mother's head pokes in from behind the doorway, her eyes crinkling as she flashes me a smile.

"How school?"

I grimace at her broken English and overpowering accent. It has been more than two decades since my mother left her native Korea for a new life in the States, but no witness to her conspicuous omission of modifiers and verbs would ever believe it.

"Great," I reply, writing furiously to keep from looking at her.

"Need help anything?"

This time I set down my pencil and smirk. Even if I wanted help, I doubt that she could be of very much assistance on an English essay.

She seems to take the hint. "I be outside," she says. "Make kimchi in backyard. Very cold outside, very cold today...."

The door shuts, cutting off the trail of words that linger after her, and I plunge back into the realm of high school homework. As I sift through the papers that are splayed across my desk, the corner of a lime-green flyer catches my eye. Plucking it from the pile of calculus notes and Spanish worksheets, I scan it over quickly. I must have received it in homeroom and stuffed it in my backpack without looking at it.

"We need parent help!" the flyer pleads. "Ask your parents to volunteer as chaperones for the school dance next Friday."

I nearly laugh out loud as my mind drifts back to the last time my mother attended a school function—despite my protests, she insisted on taking me with her to the annual Back to School Night a few months before. I slumped in the bathroom doorway for hours as she curled her hair in preparation. She would pick up the heavy iron and bring it methodically to her head, twirling scant sections of graying hair around the barrel and painstakingly recurling the parts she didn't like—nearly all of them, it seemed. Finally she stepped back from the sink and smiled, satisfied with the springboard of curls that sprouted from her head.

When we finally arrived at school, my mother was all smiles and handshakes. "How she doing in class?" my mother would inquire, with big, bright eyes and a wide-toothed grin. "Great," my teachers would respond, "good"—and that was all that my mother understood. If my teachers began to converse with her further, my mother's brow would furrow in panic as she struggled to process their diffuse vocabulary, their confusing

American idioms. Cheeks burning and heart sinking, I would usher her away as other parents approached the teacher. From the corner of the classroom, I would enviously observe the blond-haired mothers who stood erect as they spoke, the ones who laughed at all the right times and rarely stuttered over simple words. As the night dragged on, I watched as my mother seemed to shrink in height, her once-perfect curls now droopy and limp.

I stare down at the green flyer now in my hand and crush it decisively in my palm. I'm doing it the good of both of us, I tell myself. I'm saving myself from certain humiliation. The crumpled ball sails across the room and into the wastebasket—a surefire three-pointer.

As I gaze at the textbooks on my desk, the sudden revelation hits me: my cultural studies report is due the next day. I remember the words of my social studies teacher when he introduced the assignment two weeks ago: "Describe the significance of a unique cultural tradition in your household."

In a fit of panic, I latch desperately onto my mother's mention of kimchi—that certainly qualifies as a unique cultural tradition, doesn't it? It does, but I begin to harbor second thoughts. Though my mother makes the pungent side dish every few months and wolfs it down with near-religious fervor, I have never taken a liking to it—I'd take a hamburger over a plate of the smelly, spicy stuff any day. Doubtful but willing to try anything, I pull a woolly parka over my shoulders and head for the backyard.

A blast of frigid air hits my face and momentarily blinds me as I step outside. After I wipe the water from my eyes, I can make out the figure of my mother crouched on the lawn, dressed in slacks and a worn-out shirt and seemingly oblivious to the wintry cold. Wielding a hose and a knife, she is busy washing what seem like thousands of Chinese cabbages and chopping them into quarters. Despite her rapid movements, I am struck by the way she handles each of the pale little bundles—with loving tenderness, much as a mother would cradle a baby.

Overcome by the sense that I'm intruding on a private ritual, I inch across the grass toward the one-woman factory. She looks up, a bewildered smile on her face.

"I have a report to do for school," I say, a little too loudly. "That's why I'm out here. I have to watch you make kimchi."

She nods and goes back to her work. After an awkward moment, I settle down on the grass a few feet from her.

Once she has finished cutting the cabbages, she reaches for a pot of rock salt next to her. Grabbing handfuls at a time, she flings the white crystals onto the vegetables and manages to salt all of them evenly in a matter of seconds. I watch the salt grains fly through the air with my chin resting on my knees, shivering but fascinated. My mother's hands, so thick and calloused that I playfully called them "ugly sausage fingers" as a child, are deft and strong. I study her face while she works and realize that I have never seen her so sure of herself than at this moment.

"It'll take a while from now," my mother explains to me in Korean, her voice smooth and lilting. "We have to wait a few hours for it to set."

I nod. Before retreating back into the house to finish up my homework, I watch as my mother retrieves a large metal tub and begins to make the kimchi marinade. With only her eyes and hands to gauge how much is needed, she dumps chopped radishes, ginger, red pepper, garlic, green onion, raw oysters, and fish sauce into the tub. The muscles twinge in her arms as she stirs the mixture into a thick red paste.

When I return to settle down again on the frosty grass, I become conscious of a snag in the cycle, a break in the flow. My mother is looking for something, and I suddenly see that I am sitting on the nozzle of the hose. I hand it to her with an embarrassed smile, and she washes down the mountain of cabbages one more time.

As she dips her hand into the paste to marinate the first cabbage, I clear my throat.

"Hey, Mom? Can I try?"

She swings her head to look at me, her fingers dyed red-orange from the sauce. "Of course," she says in Korean. "Come over here, and I'll teach you."

Under her guidance, I take a handful of paste and a cabbage. I lift each of the individual leaves just as she does, but I clumsily botch the work, tearing the leaves and adding too much sauce to some and barely enough to others. Eventually, I hand her my cabbage in resignation and become a spectator once again.

She works with an expert grace, her fingers fluttering as she seasons and caresses the leaves in one fluid motion. As I watch the wan little cabbages burst into red flower one by one, I slowly become aware to the sense that my mother is bearing the weight of her culture on her shoulders. Responsible for carrying on traditions in a new setting, she is the defining point of her familial line, the final runner in the relay—and with every leaf, she accomplishes her duty anew. I watch her work, confident and focused, and with a gust of frosty breath, I exhale a single word: "Wow."

When my mother is down to the last cabbage, I suddenly remember something. I dash into the house and back outside again, trying my best to smooth down the wrinkles in a lime-green flyer.