

Milk Stains

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If you stare at it long enough, the photograph almost writhes. An image of the fourth-grade class at Yeonghee Elementary appears on my social media feed—students seated in rows with two at each desk, each a study of agony. They have just learned that their teacher died: one of the victims of the Sampoong Department Store collapse, a freak accident that killed over 500 people and injured just short of a thousand. In 1995, it was South Korea’s worst peacetime disaster, among a spate of recent engineering failures in the country. In the photograph, some of the children are contorted in grief; one is wailing with her head tilted upward, while another is sunk into his chair, saddled under the weight of the news. Meanwhile, the rest sit facing forward with their hands folded, their faces betraying the poise ingrained in them since birth. The classroom at Yeonghee captures a national angst, a collective pain that swells with each insatiable attempt to express it.

A boy in the front row looks like me when I was his age. With olive skin and a mop of black hair, he turns his head from the camera, away from the milk box at his elbow. I was also as gangly, the rest of my body catching up to my bones. With a long neck and a toothy grin, I was the indisputable son of my

mother. I can't tear myself away, something in the photo calls to me, eliciting some buried response the way a taut string resonates after a certain pitch is sung over it.

Seeing, hearing, I also feel the image like a warm hand of an adult on my shoulder consoling me—unsuccessfully—as I awaken to a world in which disasters happen. Buildings collapse. Mothers die.

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I have two pictures of my late mother, but only one of them is visible to guests. Perched on a sagging shelf, the framed picture is of her in her mid-twenties, seated on a snow-covered hill. With hands folded in her lap, she looks beyond the lens in a quarter-turn toward the camera, with an easy smile that hints of her former life as an actress. I like it when people compliment her beauty, though I'm still not sure how to respond, opting for silence instead of disclosing that she died when I was twelve. Heart failure, a victim of medical malpractice, or so my family was convinced—had the jury not pointed the blame back to us. It's a tired story. I'd rather just focus on the picture.

But my favorite photo of my mother has always occupied a movable space: atop a squat dresser or a particle-board desk, next to shelved books that lean like crooked teeth. I'd have hung it on the wall, but fixtures hardly made sense in my portable adult life. I'd moved between three different cities, crossed the country, and changed jobs as often as I'd change a light bulb. Apartments merely staged my belongings before it was time to send again for a moving truck. Had I learned to stay still, my abandoned possessions would have filled a mansion with mismatched furniture and accoutrements of failed hobbies: snowboard, yoga mats, boxing gloves like new. In a life of always leaving, attachments never made sense.

And yet, I still have these two pictures of my mother.

The other one, mossed with dust, is of the "Old" Mother carrying the toddler me on her back in Palm Springs. About the same age as I am now, she still exudes a youthful glamour with that same easy smile, but her face begins to show the wear of her immigrant life and of raising a child while approaching her forties. The fatigue flinted in her eyes betrays the slow drip of despair and the years of physical pain: the backaches, sore feet, and bruises of hopeless nights.

Though I don't have many memories of her, this is the mother I remember, the recurring character in my flickering dreams.

Seeing the toddler aloof in her arms almost makes me feel responsible, knowing the weight she must carry in the years ahead. Maybe that's why I prefer the portrait of the Young Mother, still a dreamer of possibilities, even though that woman is someone I never knew, unformed by my existence. Had she passed me on the street today, the Young Mother would have greeted me with that half-nod some Koreans reserve for each other—and perhaps, amused by our striking resemblance, that same smile would linger on her face as she walked away into a different future.

I still hold onto that image, that wish for my late mother, though I find it slipping away with time. In fact, the image of the Young Mother is merely a copy on printer paper, the original photo lost somewhere between the many places I've been. A fading portrait and like all my other memories of her, another reminder of how suddenly the real thing can be taken away in an instant—an apt symbol of the mother I lost twice.

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Warning signs are obvious only in retrospect. After a sudden disaster, recalling those unheeded signs invites a lingering regret.

But the regret over the Sampoong catastrophe was barbed with rage. An investigation revealed a wanton disregard for safety codes by building officials who chased profit in an economic boom. Bribery, rampant corruption festered beneath South Korea's post-war prosperity. Yet, while the public sought justice, their familiar sense of despair was mingled with shame. Grief awakened within them their sense of *han*: that inexpressible pain latent in the Korean psyche, rooted in generations of suffering. Even if one believed *han* was a myth, a victimized mindset perpetuated by colonizers, one could not escape its curse in moments of tragedy. For Koreans, *han* meant always anticipating the worst. *Han* meant that it was somehow their fault.

Its only solace is that it is endured together, in shared rituals dividing the pain. Korean funerals, for instance, involved entire communities to help the bereaved heal and return to normal life; wailers took turns in solidarity to mourn the deceased, so that no one would mourn alone. But that was before

the sweep of modernity, when industrialization and Western consumerism commoditized time and people. Though the country rebuilt from war, rites of communal mourning became relics—dead weight for a new generation too busy chasing the capitalist dream—leaving the bereaved to face the void alone.

For many Koreans, Sampoong reminded them of not only their inherent grief but the question of what they deserved. After centuries of oppression, having felt their glory was due, their pursuit of it was foreclosed by what they had given in exchange, a communal virtue forged through suffering: to look out, always, for one's own.

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“Tell me what you remember about your mother being in pain.”

The lawyer sitting across the conference table looked the part. The kind in the movies you'd root against: slicked hair, square jaw, with a beady, methodical gaze. Sitting next to me in the deposition room, my family's counsel fit another unsettling type—that of the bumbling attorney hurting for a break. J.B. seemed a loose button away from being completely undone, the knot on his tie always in need of an extra cinch. With his face always dewed with sweat, he never inspired much confidence in our case—a malpractice lawsuit against the doctor who dismissed our mother the day she died—and the way he hunted for cigarettes in his jacket hinted at despair.

“You mean, the times I've seen her hurt?” I asked, shifting in my chair.

“You should be a lawyer,” Square Jaw said. Both attorneys laughed, but even at twelve years old I was aware of the bait. With his yellow legal pad and a tape recorder, he wanted the tale of my mother's tragic life: an immigrant who gave up her dreams in Korea to live out her years in America working for tips at a beauty salon and raising three children, while brutalized by an ill-tempered husband at home. It would prove that my mother did not die suddenly on that day in 1994, but rather as the result of a relentlessly burdened life. A living death. The trial was to spin the negligence of one physician to that of a family who had seen the warning signs and yet had done nothing, said nothing, about their mother who was falling apart before their eyes.

J.B. told me to answer the question as it was asked. So much for my legal precocity. But I was hesitant to speak, fearing that whatever I recounted of my

mother would condemn my family. Having lost her just months prior, it was also hard to think about her, let alone conjure those memories that became precious when she died. Not long after the funeral, we repeated the same stories about our mother as if we were keeping alive an oral tradition—to speak them here, only to have them spun against us in a court of law, meant tarnishing whatever few good memories I had left.

What I remember about my mother being in pain . . .

The silence in the room amplified its rustlings: pen scribbles, the whir of the tape recorder. J.B.'s breathing like pressed bellows, stirring the air steeped with cologne and tobacco.

My train of thought idled as I scanned the law books lining the shelves, splotches of sunlight against the wood grain of the large conference table.

And suddenly, the memory of milk stains.

Splattered on the dresser in my mother's bedroom, small half-moons on the old wooden panels. I don't know why we never cleaned them—droplets streaked at impossible angles, flung with great force.

I spoke of the times my father struck my mother and as I put words to the images seared in my mind, those images began to move as if animated on a reel.

Scene: My mother sitting on her bed. Drooping her head, she wrings her hands as she asks me whether she should get a divorce. I am ten years old, standing before her in my pajamas, a silent observer.

Scene: My mother sprawled on the linoleum floor of the kitchen, underneath the pale glow of fluorescent lights. She is kicking her legs while my father drags her by the hair. I am standing there, crying to no one.

As I gave witness to these memories, I spoke dispassionately, wrung of emotion. Whatever grief that was latent in my voice was muted with relief—that my mother would never have to suffer again.

I ended my testimony. Square Jaw stopped scribbling on his legal pad.

"Is that everything?" he asked.

"Wait," I said. Our attorney reached out his hand as if to restrain me, but the words were already spilling out.

Scene: My mother walking from the car in the parking lot of a grocery store, while I push an orphaned cart behind her. The cart shudders as the wheels strike her feet, causing her to collapse in pain. A man in a truck stops and asks her if she is okay, but she waves him off as she sits by herself, wincing and

holding her ankle. Meanwhile, I stand behind the cart, feeling useless in her agony—a familiar feeling having always watched her suffer—but this time, I am entirely responsible. Standing there in the parking lot, buried under the weight of my own guilt, I learn to fear catastrophe, the first inkling of the Worst That Can Happen.

Square Jaw clicked his pen.

“Thank you,” he said, shutting off the tape.

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On her rare days off, my mother was usually homebound, tending to the yard or preparing dinner in the kitchen. Wherever she was, I could hear her singing a familiar folk song from somewhere in the house, her soprano voice echoed beneath the vaulted ceiling of our dining room. But one afternoon bereft of song, I couldn't find her. She wasn't in her bedroom with the old Singer sewing machine, nor was she in the backyard tending to the roses outside her window. It was when I opened the front door of the house that I saw her, her wavy black hair unspooled, standing alone on the patio holding a cigarette. My mother never smoked and barely even drank. Her poise and blithe manner masked her travails; the tears, bruises, and groans all seemed to fade with her easy smile and the lilt of her timeless song. In my twelve-year-old mind, my mother would live forever.

But standing at the door, I was stunned, trying to reconcile this strange woman and the mother I knew. And without surprise or any attempt to hide the cigarette, she stared at me, exhaling a plume of smoke.

“Don't tell anyone,” she said.

I learned about death from Korean soap operas, one of the few indulgences my parents enjoyed together. These bewildering shows always seemed to revel in grief, each episode featuring the untimely passing of yet another character, followed by a long montage of theatrical weeping. Cue maudlin music, roll credits. These were different from what I'd seen in American dramas, whose plots and reversals were just as tortuous—and whose dead even came back to life—but when it came to on-screen emotion, *Days of Our Lives* seemed tame in comparison.

Watching a Korean soap with my parents one night, I witnessed a female

lead character die on screen. Captivated, I also experienced a bereavement. I felt a slow, irretrievable loss, like a dying flame on a cold night. And the pure fiction of that death was shattered when, sitting close to my mother and feeling the warmth of her presence, I realized that the forever chill of death would come for her too.

I sat holding back tears. For the first time in my childhood, I felt my security breached—the Worst That Can Happen was on my stoop, encroaching through a door sealed only with a broken lock.

“What’s wrong?” my mother asked.

“I don’t want you to die.”

My mother wrapped her arms around me and held me close, as the show segued into another of its long montages.

“I’m not going to die,” she said with a meek authority, the only promise I ever heard her make.

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I lost the Young Mother. Instead of somewhere more secure like a photo bin or a bank vault, I kept the picture lying around inside in an unmarked white envelope. Along with it was a picture of me at twelve with my dog, Cooper, a half-German shepherd puppy born the day my mother died. A surreal coincidence, but had Cooper been some supernatural manifestation of my mother’s spirit, he was more likely her *wonhon*—in Korean shamanism, a tragic soul meant to wander the earth. It would have explained his barking fits, hatred of men, and compulsions to escape. Yet, in contrast to his frenzy, it was his surreal calm whenever I was sad that made me trust him with my grief. Having lost the photo of my mother, I’d lost memories of my confidant too.

I’d searched all over my apartment, rummaged through drawers and stacks of loose papers. There weren’t many places to look; the remainder of my possessions were reduced to a few cardboard boxes barely unpacked, boxes full of old tax returns, clothes, and forgettable pictures from college. Perhaps I never held much sentimental value in things; had there been a fire, the contents of the unmarked white envelope would be my only items of value—visual reminders of the last time I felt at home.

Sitting on the edge of my unmade bed, my bare feet along the cold hardwood

floor, a familiar sadness washed over me. It had been over twenty years, but a memory trace of those mornings after my mother died came back to me: the disoriented bliss of my first waking moments, followed by the descent of a grim reality. How did this feel real again? Hadn't I mourned my mother long enough? As I sat in the dark, the scenes came back to me, none more vivid than the night I found my lifeless mother lying on her bed, next to the Singer sewing machine and the dresser stained with milk.

Why, after all these years, was I still shedding tears? Perhaps because this time, even if it was merely losing her photograph, I knew it was my fault.

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Grief begets a strange kinship. The pain of loss, unutterable alone, can become a shared language among the aggrieved—wordless in its expression, poetic through presence. As such, the image of the children of Yeonghee Elementary serves as a balm—the student patron saints of our undergrieved generation. When others would balk from such a tragic reminder, I see in the grainy picture not so much a *memento mori* as a sign of life. Transported, I share their defiant tears as they share mine, among those who grasp humanity by claiming it, writhing and wailing, in the face of unassailable death.

A kinship, but one only learned in honor of what we've lost, having loved in the first place.

In the occasional dream long after her death, my mother is still alive. But instead of a tearful reunion or even a long embrace, we stand at a distance, both of us knowing that the fact of her existence must, for some reason, be kept a secret. Of course, I'm still alive, she seems to suggest, not saying much, if anything at all. In each dream, I am stunned, wanting to know what my mother had been doing the past three decades. She does not seem elated to see me, but rather stays gracefully composed, with a look of assurance redolent of the Young Mother on the snow-covered hill. As in all the fragmented memories I have of her, she is reticent, revealing nothing. With her grayed hair combed back into a chignon, my mother only looks at me as I remembered her, standing with a cigarette on the front patio. As if to say, Don't tell anyone.

