

Word Count: 1470

Watermelon Seeds

I stared incredulously at the dripping hunk of watermelon in front of me.

“Eat it,” urged the old lady, her face wrinkled into a broad smile as she wiped her wet hand against the cloth of her baggy drawstring pants. “It’s ripe.” She seemed to drown in her loose clothes as she sat with her legs spread apart on a mat behind the counter. A small radio crackled faintly in the background. I couldn’t be rude. Smiling politely, I took the slice, cringing as its juice ran down my fingers. My eyes darted side to side, searching for a napkin, but there was only a wet washcloth crumpled on a counter that had been once white but had since faded to light grey. The old lady plucked the washcloth from the counter and wiped off the kitchen knife with one swift motion then stuck the knife back into the watermelon. *Was that really sanitary?* I nervously eyed the black flies buzzing around the watermelon, imagining the hundreds of thousands of germs that were surely crawling over my slice. *Why is she insisting that I eat this? Is there something wrong with it?* The small supermarket was swelteringly hot, and the only means of cooling down was a small electric fan that swiveled its head around the room. I glanced up at the woman waiting patiently for me to take a bite.

“Thank you, but I think I’ll save it for when I get home,” I explained, flashing a polite smile. I pivoted on my heel and turned to face the exit.

“I remember when you were a little girl!” The old lady beamed, the corners of her eyes wrinkling into deep creases. “It’s so nice to see you in Korea again.”

I left Korea eight years ago. I have no idea who she is. I slowly turned my head and nodded politely. *I want to leave.*

As if she had heard my thoughts, the woman swatted the flies away. “Go now, I’m sure you have to get back to your grandmother’s house.”

“Thank you, ma’am, and have a nice day!” I stepped out of the store as quickly as I could and exhaled deeply. I wrapped the handles of the heavily plastic bag around my wrist, flipped back the hair

from my sweaty neck, and set off back down the road. I glanced at the slice of watermelon in my other hand. The juice dribbled, and my fingers felt uncomfortably sticky. *I really wish I had a clean napkin.* I slowly walked back to my grandmother's house.

The sun beat down on the pavement, casting a harsh dusty-yellow light on the street, and the whining chorus of cicadas fell and rose like the heat wave pricking at my skin. I trudged down the middle of the road, dragging the ratty soles of my flip-flops across the steaming asphalt. There wasn't a car in sight. *I forgot how small this town is.* Dongrae-gu had a population that consisted only of either the very young or the very old; all the adults had moved to bigger cities in search of work. I swung the bag in an arc over my head and wiped the sweat from my brow with my forearm. *How could she recognize me after eight years?* I thought hard, struggling to bring back the hazy memories of when I lived in this town with my grandmother while my parents worked to build a better life for my family in Busan.

I've really forgotten.

I glanced at the watermelon once more, then cautiously took a bite. It was slightly warm, but it was ripe and sweet, and the juice quenched my thirst. I thought back to my initial suspicion of the old woman. Since when did I start misinterpreting the kindness shown by strangers? I thought about my town back in the U.S., where I felt comfortable knowing that my family would forever be isolated from my neighbors and that we would have the privacy to lead our separate lives. The floor of my apartment complex was inhabited by six other families, yet the interaction I had with them was minimal; once as I was leaving my apartment, I spotted a girl my age and her mother exiting the apartment across the hall. Clutching a plastic lunch box and a small canvas backpack, she quickly glanced sideways at me, then inched closer to her mother's side as they quickly shut the door and walked away. In school, my teacher would lecture my class about the danger of talking to strangers, waving newspaper clippings about horrific murders and kidnappings over our heads as she strode around the room, cautioning us of strange smiling men driving white vans and shadowy stalkers following us at night. We were warned that a next-door neighbor could be a serial killer, a friendly man at the coffee shop could be a rapist, and interacting with anyone outside of your family would guarantee imminent danger.

Here, there was no isolation; everyone either knew each other or knew of them, and it both surprised and bothered me that I belonged to that tight knit community whether or not I was fully aware of it. I walked past a large tree on the corner of the block; its sweeping branches were lush with glossy dark green leaves, and it cast a great shadow on the dirt ground. I remembered the countless lazy afternoons spent lounging under the shade of that tree, fanning the sweat from my forehead with a piece of stiff cardboard and swatting at the pesky mosquitoes buzzing near my ear. Most of the kids from the town would gather under the same tree in the morning, before the sun became too hot to bear, and trade marbles or play tag under the tree. My friends would always wait for me there, though I no longer remembered their names or faces, and we would lean against the trunk of the oak and braid each other's hair. Now, during the hottest time of day, there was no one under the tree except for a stray dog panting with its tongue hanging out. I walked past the tree and farther down the road; I thought of my grandmother and of the way she would always save the ripest fruit for me, deftly cutting out the bruised or dried-out portions with a knife and saving them for herself. When she smiled, her eyes would crinkle in the same way as the woman in the shop. *Maybe she wasn't a complete stranger.* Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted someone walking down the street up ahead.

"Student!" A middle-aged woman with a visor-like sun hat pushed down over her short curled hair called out from the side of the street. "Student! Why don't you walk in the shade? You'd sooner get hit by a car before arriving home, loitering around like that in the middle of the street." She squinted, straining her neck to study my face. "Say, aren't you Mal-sook's granddaughter? The one who went to the United States?"

I tilted my head to the side in confusion. "Yes, ma'am. How did you know?"

"Well, you're certainly not from around here. I see your grandmother at church every Sunday; I have a daughter your age back at home, so come with Mal-sook for dinner sometime!"

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll tell grandmother I met you on my way home."

"No need for that, I live three floors down, I'll come up later tonight to see her!" The woman started walking back, and I gave a polite nod. From the distance, she called out again, "The roads in

America must be very wide for you to be able to walk down the middle of them without getting hit!” I grinned, stepping sideways to walk under the shade of the trees. *She was actually nice. She reminds me of my aunt.* I felt more at ease now, and the run-down buildings baking in the sun didn’t seem so foreign anymore.

I reached the crumbling apartment building where my grandmother lived and started walking up the dusty concrete stairs. *That lady lives on the second floor. I wonder what her daughter’s like?* I climbed up to the third floor, heaving up the heavy grocery bag. *Who else lives in this apartment? I’m sure I’ll meet them sooner or later.* I looked down over the side of the stairwell and glanced at the village spread out below. The clustered low-rise buildings and clay tiled roofs seemed familiar, comfortable and oddly intimate. I stretched out my arms, sore from carrying such a heavy load, and picked up the groceries once again. I hauled the bag up the rest of the stairs and knocked on my grandmother’s apartment door. I was home.