

# *Mismatched Socks*

Seoul, South Korea, 1995

I remembered my wedding as a bright and fluid thing. It felt like standing under a waterfall, sun sparkling through the drops, deluged by guests and parties and presents and expectations. I was twenty-three. That was thirty years ago.

Marriage was a game of chance in Korea in the 1960s, before the West started to exert powerful forces of cultural change on Asia. I had met my husband three times before marrying him. I was lucky that my husband was a good man, funny and loving and childish and irritating all at the same time.

He was the mayor of our small neighborhood nestled in Seoul. Nothing happened in Korea without bribes back then. Men would come to our house sweating in new suits with birthday cakes all times of year. The birthday cake boxes were filled with money. My husband would nod and the deal was done. Where he provided approval, I provided support. Women would come to me sobbing about a lost business, a husband who drank too much, a son that needed to go to a good school. I would give them tea and *soju* and advice and money.

We both worked hard, day and night. He worked at his company and I worked in the home. We made deals and prepared rice and created alliances and mended shirts. We were powerful and important, corrupt and generous. He knew it. I loved it.

Like all Korean men, my husband would go drinking with his friends after working very late. They would go to clubs and bars and *soju* tents on the street, drinking beer and *makoli* and *soju*, singing and vomiting and being idiots until the early morning. Like all Korean women, I would chain lock the door so he would have to beg me to let him in the house. Sometimes I let him in, because he was a demon in bed. Sometimes I didn't, and he had to sleep on the doormat until sunrise.

Sometimes he didn't come home at all. There are places where the dancing girls do more than dance, and they all knew him by name, but he was smart enough to never get caught. There are some things better not talked about.

On weekends he was a child among my children. Together my husband and I had three strong children; one son, Yoonjoong and two daughters, Min-sook and Jinah. We would all lay in our bed on Sunday mornings, watching TV and eating tasty *kyul* oranges, arguing and joking and laughing. An hour after his coffee he would lift up his leg and let out a vicious fart, point to one of the kids and say "That one's for you!"

As he got older he drank less and stayed home more. Then I really got my claws into him.

We squabbled constantly about little things but we never stayed mad. I think that sometimes the fighting substituted for our diminished drive to make love. Our love was like the ocean, sometimes crashing and sometimes calm but always deep and powerful.

The ending was inevitable. Stomach cancer, from too much drinking and long hours of work. He tried to fight the sickness. He took Chinese medicines and I prepared special foods to cure him, but he just got weaker and weaker. Every time he came back from the hospital he just seemed worse, so he stopped going. We stayed together the last few quiet months like a family should. We didn't argue, just joked and smiled and remembered.

It came in the middle of the night. We were talking about visiting the coast when he told me that the pain had disappeared. The children were sleeping nearby and I thought about waking them, but I wanted this final moment to myself. We remembered the good times and laughed about the bad times. We talked about the children and their future. I cried. He wiped away my tears. I held his hand and prayed. He said goodbye and closed his eyes.

That was four years ago. He only was fifty-three when he died. We visit his grave four times a year, offering meat, fruits and *soju* alcohol to his spirit, and then have a picnic with the offerings. When spirits eat, the food still remains for those of us left behind to enjoy.

Every night his ghost leaves his grave and comes home to me. He hangs his coat on the rack, sits in his favorite chair and watches the television or reads his silly martial arts novels. He doesn't talk like he did when he was alive, but his comforting presence remains.

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I should have known something was wrong when Jinah asked me to go to the hair salon.

I spent my days cooking and cleaning and going out with my friends. After we cared for the home we went out shopping, to the hair salon, or to get drunk on *soju* and go out for *karaoke* in the middle of the afternoon.

My nights were for my family. Jinah and Min-Sook would come home from work. Sometimes Yoonjoong and his wife and my grandson would visit. We would eat dinner and watch TV and play silly games. Together, they were the light and liveliness in my world of crumbling traditions.

When my daughter joined me in the hair salon, my night and day had flipped.

We sat in the hair salon, our heads cooking in the hair drier. We flipped through magazines and chatted while my friend Young-Ok painted my toenails. The radio blared on about President Lee opening the Korean economy to the West. I got up, walked over to the radio careful not to disturb the paint on my toenails, and changed the station to a Korean opera.

When I got back in my seat, Jinah wore that mischievous smile that all my children had mastered. She opened her magazine to show me a picture of a wedding announcement. It was a shining handsome American man in a tuxedo, with a powdered perfect Korean girl on his arm. They stood together but their eyes were on the horizon, towards a better future.

“Do you think Min-Sook will ever marry?” Jinah asked.

My toe twitched, spilling the bottle of toenail polish. Young-Ok looked up sympathetically. She knew this is a sore subject. Min-sook was my oldest daughter, almost thirty years old, and still not married.

Sometimes I called my Min-Sook my favorite, but sometimes I didn't. Min-sook was the black sheep of the family; beautiful and intelligent, but strong-willed and arrogant, just like her father. She had graduated from one of the best universities in Seoul but couldn't stick with a single job. She was certainly the most unusual of my children, and the one most destined for happiness and sorrow, for great deeds and pain.

“Min-Sook will find a good husband. Some day,” I said hopefully, flipping the page of my magazine.

Jinah's mischievous smile deepened. “What if Min-sook wanted to marry an American with long hair, an earring, and wore socks that didn't match?”

I scoffed. “Absolutely not!”

There were certain things that just weren't permitted.

Min-Sook walked in the door with a nervous smile. She was serene, excited, and terrified at the same time. She wore a new jeans skirt that showed off her long legs, marked with tiny scars because she could never resist adventure.

“Mom, I've got something to tell you,” she said.

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“How did you meet him?”

“On a bus, Mom. He sat next to me and we just started talking. We talked about Kundera and Kurosawa, about France and Israel and Japan. We're going to travel together, travel the world.”

“He's an American?”

“Yes, Mother. But he's so nice. You'll be so surprised. He's really tall. Almost two meters! And he has long hair, like a girl. I wish he didn't let it grow so long.”

“Don't tell him that, Min-sook. Your mouth is like a gun sometimes.”

“Don't worry, Mom. He understands me.”

“Two meters!”

“I want you to meet him. He’s coming over to dinner this Saturday.”

“This Saturday? So soon? The house is a mess...”

“I love him, Mom, and he loves me.”

“He really doesn’t match his socks?”

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I think that I coped with the issue very well. The first thing I did was to get very, very drunk. I had three bottles of wine that night. I said a lot of things that Young-Ok will surely never repeat and I can’t remember.

The next morning I woke to a dry mouth and twisted sheets. The sun seemed way too bright as spilled through my window. I regretted my decision to drown my sorrows in alcohol, but what else could I do?

The doorbell rang and I remembered my appointment. I dressed as quickly as I could and went to the door. It was the fortune-teller.

He was a smiling little man with three rotting teeth and *soju* from last night still on his breath. He brought his own little stool and sat down in my living room. He pulled out and arranged magical texts, calligraphy pens and seals on the floor. We chatted and drank tea while he consulted ancient astrological books.

I couldn’t contain my nerves while the fortune teller hummed to himself. Even the most important weddings could be cancelled because of a bad match. No one wants bad luck. The fortune teller clapped his hands together once with a boozy grin.

“Kung-Hap,” he said gleefully.

Min-sook and her fiance had *Kung-hap*; a lucky match.

He gathered his things. I paid him money and he left. The living room was empty but full with the news.

I looked over to my husband for guidance.

He stood in front of the bookshelf. Most of the bookshelf was dedicated to his martial arts novels, but he had his finger on the spine of our family tree.

I pulled out the book. This copy had been made for us when we married. The pages were yellowed but the type was still crisp. Colorful diagrams traced our lineage back thirty generations of pure Korean ancestry. I had a legacy to consider.

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My next task was to break the news to my friends. I tried to be as subtle as I could, to gauge their reactions before. I asked my two best friends “What if your daughter wanted to marry a foreigner?”

One said, “Why not?”

The other said, “Why would she do such a thing to me?”

I talked to Young-Ok next. She already knew about the marriage but wisely hadn’t told me her opinion. I knew that she would give me a straight answer, good or bad. She told me that she had two daughters married to Americans. Both of them lived in the United States now, and both were very happy. That made me feel a little better.

Then I asked her, “Do your sons-in-law have long hair, or earrings?”

“Of course not,” she said with a rising tone, as if offended by the question, “They are both very nice boys, with good jobs and good families.”

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He was coming to the house on Saturday. I was so nervous. I wouldn’t even be able to talk to him. Min-sook would have to translate for me.

The house was a mess. That was my first, most immediate concern. This boy that wanted to marry my daughter may be an angel or a criminal, but he wouldn’t find my house dirty. It was time to clean the place up.

We had been talking about putting on a fresh coat of paint for years. Why not make it an event? Men in dirty coveralls came and tore up the house, pulling the furniture away from the walls, putting down speckled dropcloths, pulling off the old wallpaper, sanding the old paint smooth. Every night that week we went out to dinner because we couldn’t cook in the kitchen. Min-sook and Jinah both complained about the noise and confusion, but I could tell they were excited for the result.

My husband seemed unaffected by the chaos. He came home at the usual time every night and sat in his favorite chair. The television had been moved, so he just read his martial arts novels. I never understood why he liked those books.

The men worked like mice in a cage, always moving and shouting at one another. I buried all of my anxiety and excitement into the task. I stood in the center of my living room directing their every move. My house had to be perfect. When they finished I attacked the cleaning. Brooms and vacuums groaned like angry soldiers.

It turned out wonderfully. The walls were as white and smooth as a new baby. We cleaned and arranged until the living room looked like a museum. There was nothing left to do but wait.

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I woke before sunrise on Saturday morning. My head was still cloudy with forgotten dreams of dresses and waterfalls. I felt the same nerves as I did the day before my wedding. I did my hair and decided to wear a red blouse with a black dress. Min-sook told me that he likes red.

Jinah came over, bringing my my grandchild Sunoo. He was five years old, a spinning sugar-cube of creative destructive energy, bent on knowledge and conquest of his growing world. His fat little face was filled with wonder and sarcasm. At five he was already a comic. He was like Min-sook, just a bit too smart for his own good.

The kitchen was busy at nine o'clock, and would stay that way until his arrival at six. Meat was diced and browned, vegetables chopped, soups stewed. Jinah and I chatted while we cooked, watched TV, drank tea. Friends came and went, bringing little wrapped gifts and nervous smiles.

I chased Min-sook out of the kitchen, so she stayed in the living room playing with Sunoo. She read to him, mussed his hair, carried him around the room like a stuffed toy. Min-sook tried to introduce the idea of meeting Dante. Sunoo approached it with the same fearless curiosity he did with everything. Sunoo said, "I'm going to teach Dante how to speak Korean. If he says one, I'm going to say *hana*. If he says two, I'm going to say *duge*".

Sunoo was going to be in for a surprise. This would be his first time meeting a foreigner. It would be the first time for me, as well. Oh, sure, I've taken group tours to other countries and seen foreigners, but this would be the first time that I really met one.

All I really know about Americans is what I see on television, in the movies, or what I hear from others. They seem terrifying, loud, obnoxious, violent. I had a sudden image of my daughter, dressed all in flowing white, standing in front of the altar with Sylvester Stallone, wearing torn jeans and a naked chest, his muscles oiled and bulging, a machine gun resting on his shoulder.

At ten before six the doorbell rang. He was here.

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I looked up and up and up at him. Dante was so tall he had to duck under the doorway, with pale skin, round eyes and an enormous long nose like the head of a trout. He wore a nice shirt and slacks, but

his hair was tied back into a ponytail, and I could see a gold stud in his left ear. He was a little clumsy taking off his shoes.

I couldn't believe it. His socks really didn't match. I thought that she was joking about that. One was black and the other was white. They were thin and threadbare, the white one had a tiny hole near the big toe. I tried not to stare at them.

Dante greeted me with, "*Anyong-hasayo*," like that was the only Korean word that he knew. I said "Hello," with my hands clasped together to keep them from shaking.

"#%\*&%)\*(&," he said in English. I smiled and pretended to understand. We both were smiling like idiots, desperately trying to make a good impression.

"Would you like something to drink?" I asked him. Min-sook translated. He said he wanted coffee. I prepared him a cup, and sat down across from him. The room vibrated with tension. I asked him a few innocent questions, about his family and the like. After a few minutes, we started to relax. In person, he didn't look so...foreign. He was just like me, nervous and uncomfortable, trying desperately to please.

I told Min-sook, "I feel a lot better now that I've met him."

Dante smiled when he heard the translation, and replied in English. I understood the meaning without knowing the words. "Me, too," he had said.

He called me *Omonie*, mother, as if testing it on for size.

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Sunoo sat in his chair and refused to greet the stranger. He was sullen, all limp and mean-looking, staring at the television without looking up.

"He's just jealous," Jinah said.

Min-sook was his favorite playmate and friend. She would wrestle with him like a man would and take him to the park and the zoo. She talked to him as an equal, not as a child. Now, this huge foreign man was taking her away from him.

We tried to cheer and cajole him, but nothing would work. Even when dinner was called, he just sat at the edge of living room, staring at the floor.

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The dinner was a grand feast that had taken hours to prepare. The entire set of tables were covered with small white dishes of *kim-chee*, salads, vegetables, fruit, meats, noodles, and rice. Min-sook had told me many stories of Dante's appetite and he wasn't going to go hungry in my house.

I picked up the chopsticks and tried to show him how to hold them. He picked up his own chopsticks with perfect form and plucked up a piece of *galbi* meat to demonstrate.

I poked Jinah in the ribs, “He uses chopsticks better than Min-sook.”

I chatted with Jinah and Sunoo while Min-sook explained the food to Dante. I had prepared such a feast that I had almost forgotten about the foreigner. I turned my head when I heard Min-sook laughing, almost spewing out a face full of food. Dante puffed up and raised his eyebrows, gesturing grandly with his chopsticks. I didn’t understand the joke, but apparently Min-sook thought it was funny.

Jinah saw the way that they were joking around and said. “He is just like Min-sook.” Min-sook translated her comment to English, and Dante smiled and thanked her. Then Jinah added with a devilish grin. “That’s not supposed to be a complement.”

At that moment, Sunoo walked up to Dante, and without a word, stroked the thick black hair on Dante’s arm. Dante looked surprised but I understood Sunoo’s curiosity. Koreans have a mixed fascination and revulsion for body hair. Sunoo just wanted to know what it would feel like.

Eventually all of the plates were empty. Dante tried to help clean the table but I swatted his hand away and smiled. He probably thought it was kindness but I knew he’d just make a mess trying to be helpful. Min-sook followed me down the stairs into the kitchen.

“So?” she asked, her face filled with nervous expectation.

I could see how much this meant to her. I looked out at Dante, who was still eating and was trading mangled Korean phrases with Sunoo. He was so strange, alien, and yet he had that special quality of...specialness...that my Min-sook had.

“He seems nice,” I said.

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Jinah and I cleaned the dishes, while Dante and Min-sook stayed up in the living room. Sunoo had followed us down and was sitting in the corner with a deep frown. I could see a war playing out in his head. Abruptly, he stood up.

“I need to see if Min-sook is okay,” he asserted and clomped up the stairs. A few minutes later, I could hear Sunoo squealing in delight. I could hear Min-sook’s laughter, Dante’s low rumbling chuckle. The roughhousing, laughing and thumping went on for an hour.

Jinah called up, “Sunoo, come down here!”

“I don’t want to!” he shouted.

“Come down here right now!” she demanded.



He stomped down, making an incredible racket for something so small. He folded his arms over his chest and looked up at us, scowling.

“Why do I have to stay here?”

“I don’t want you bothering Min-sook and Dante.”

He frowned. Then he brightened with an idea.

“I left my socks up there,” he said, and ran back up the stairs. The laughter and thumping started once more. Jinah looked annoyed.

“They’re all children,” I told her, “let them play.”

Sunoo squealed in feigned fright. I heard him say, “Show me again,” and Min-sook said, “Go ahead, Dante, lift up your pants leg.” Sunoo squealed even louder.

His mother called up, “Come down, Sunoo!”

Sunoo thumped down the stairs in that clumsy, five-year-old way, vibrating with excitement. “What was all that noise about?” his mother asked.

“Mom, I’ve got a secret for you.” Sunoo said in his loudest whisper. “It’s not just on his arms. Dante is covered all over with monkey hair!”

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That Sunday I went shopping for some special gifts. When I returned home, Dante and Min-sook were sitting on my floor watching TV. His head was in her lap, and she was stroking his long hair. Her other hand was holding his, their fingers twisted together.

They acted exactly like I expected young lovers to act - always wanting to touch and stroke and kiss each other, always wanting to be together. Their heads were probably filled with wide hopes of tomorrows, of joys and laughter and wonder.

*My baby is leaving me.* Despite its aching newness, the thought no longer scared me. My daughter was that special kind of person that is allowed to have a special kind of love, like the kind in stories and movies. They were the kind of couple that walked in the rain, holding hands, unaware of the raindrops falling from the sky.

I opened my bag and dropped ten pairs of socks on his lap.

They would live and learn and grow together, through hardship and pain, love and joy. He probably would not cut his hair, or take out his earring. But at least he would wear matched socks.

My husband, sitting in his favorite chair watching the television, long dead but still not aware of it, nodded his approval.

