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Kyunghee Pak, Realtor

I was surprised to come across your photo in *The Korea Daily*. Startled, actually. It's been so long since we've seen each other. You look youthful, approachable but serious, without a trace of that naivety you once wore. Your ad is nice too. No gimmicks or slogans—modest, matter-of-fact. Just your name and contact information. "Licensed in DC, Maryland, & Virginia." With offices in Potomac, you must handle luxury properties. Your name was what threw me. Kyunghee Pak, Realtor. For a moment, I had the shivery sensation that I was remembering a stranger or someone dead. I had forgotten your name. To me, you were always Eunsu's mom—Eunsu Umma. And I was Isa Umma.

I cut the advertisement out of the newspaper and mulled over it for days, returning to the photo—stuck to the refrigerator—from time to time wondering, *Is this really you?*

Your hair is the same, every smooth strand curling in at your shoulders with that sheen I could see even in newsprint. Why haven't I seen your advertisements before? When did you become a real estate agent?

Did you know that the Korean Korner in Wheaton Plaza, where we first met, is gone now? All our old haunts. The *jajangmyeon* restaurant, the bakery, the *hanbok* shop, replaced by bigger stores and the internet. There are so many Korean groceries now. H-Mart, Global Mart, Lotte. Of course, you must know that already, being a real estate agent.

When the video rental went out of business, Isa set up a KorTV account for me. I imagine your daughters did the same for you. So many shows and movies. Hours and hours of entertainment. But I don't use the KorTV account. There are too many ads and instructions every time I turn on the computer: update this, click on this, click on that. I watch whatever is on TV, toggling between the three Korean channels. It's enough for me these days.

Isa must have been in school that day. Yes, because she wasn't with me. You looked like a child yourself, short and thin, your pants a little loose around your hips and thighs, your breasts almost imperceptible under your sweater. You were pinching one bitter melon after another. Then you put one to your nose and sniffed the end like you'd do with a *chamoe*. "No, no," I said. "This is how you pick one."

I have some knowledge of Chinese cuisine. When we first arrived in the U.S., Isa's father and I lived in Chinatown, DC. Our neighbor Mrs. Wing—a widow whose children and grandchildren hardly visited—

taught me a few dishes. Did I ever tell you about Mrs. Wing? She often cooked too much food and gave us extra soup or stir-fry. Some of it was too oily for my taste. But she was kind and watched Isa while we worked. Isa Appa was striking out on his own as a subcontractor and couldn't afford a crew. I tagged along to help.

The energy I had back then! From the part in my hair down to my toenails, every part of me was charged, possessed even. I could hardly sleep at nights, calculating how long it would take to save for a car, a house in Montgomery County, dates and prices danced through my mind. When I think of those days, those moments between tasks—cooking, dropping off Isa at Mrs. Wing's, working, picking up Isa, cooking, washing dishes, washing clothes—have disappeared. My memories flit from scene to scene, losing detail and continuity. Isa's face, her hands, what did we eat? I remember Isa crawling one moment, walking the next. I remember helping her father load and unload those heavy ladders, steel pump jacks, poles, and anchors. I picked up trash and aluminum scraps. We carried heavy boxes of vinyl siding from the truck to the house, one by one, each box bowing from the dead weight, the two of us jerking back and forth like a broken pendulum, until we could let them drop from our sweaty, gloved hands. It was backbreaking work.

So I was grateful when Mrs. Wing gave us food. She made a bitter melon dish that I still love. The melon has to be boiled, briefly, to cook out that metallic taste, then sautéed with thinly sliced, parboiled pork, garlic, and fermented black bean sauce. I told you bitter melon is excellent for regulating one's blood sugar and digestion. Mrs. Wing taught me that.

I gave you two ways to cook bitter melon: one Chinese and one Korean, my own recipe. I wrote them down on index cards. Do you still have them? You had no confidence in your cooking, no *sohnmat*, that instinct, the ability to season everything just right without measuring. Recipes are helpful, I suppose, but *sohnmat* is either something you have or something you don't.

You told me you had recently moved to Maryland, just behind the Korean Korner. Wheaton was not a good area back then. Aggressive kids on bikes hanging around the strip malls. And so many potholes on Viers Mill Road. But we all had to start somewhere. You said you had two daughters; Eunsu was ten, and Eunyoung was seven. The same age as Isa, I said. We had moved to North Potomac three years ago, and I advised you to do the same as soon as you were able. "Before the girls go to middle school," I said.

You moved your cart against the bitter melon bin, took out a pen and a pocket-sized notebook, and eagerly wrote. North Potomac, I repeated.

A good value with good schools. Bethesda and Potomac, of course, were the best and most expensive areas with the top public and private schools in the county. Rockville and Germantown, acceptable. We exchanged phone numbers, and you thanked me profusely.

You didn't know anyone yet, and your English wasn't as good as mine; like with your cooking, you had no confidence. If you speak loudly and confidently and throw in some common phrases like "no problem," I find Americans understand me, no problem. Isa says my English is broken, but I get by.

I offered to lend you my Chinese-Korean cookbook. We met for coffee. We talked about our children. We talked about our husbands. Eunsu Appa did interior remodeling, flooring, bathrooms. "My husband, too," I said, excited. "Exterior remodeling, windows, roofing, siding." I was glad to have met you. We exchanged *banchan* recipes that would keep well in coolers, commiserated over the tools and materials our husbands kept at home, the piles of scraps. "Our neighbors must think we're running a junk yard," you said. "Not that their yards would win any prizes for landscaping."

I knew what you meant. People at church owned their own businesses—dry cleaners, auto repair shops, liquor stores, newsstands in luxury malls. Some were real estate agents, insurance agents, even doctors and lawyers. Isa's father always felt out of place, a laborer among merchants and professionals. But we did our best to fit in, didn't we?

I admit I may have felt connected to you for selfish reasons.

There were other church couples whose husbands did similar work, but they had their lifestyles and routines. The Kangs drank and smoke, which I did not—do not—approve of. They lived in the country, in Clarksburg, where nobody had even heard of the schools. Their teenage sons were morons and troublemakers. And they attended church sporadically. You remember the Kims. The husband was a plumber. The wife a homemaker, like us. We should have been good friends, but we had nothing in common. She wore unflattering trousers and button-down blouses like a mailman and was rather gruff. She never even tried to lose that weight. No sense of decorum. It's no wonder she never fit in with the women at church. I remember their older girl was smart. Last I heard, she had done well, a professor somewhere in Boston. The younger one, who dressed like a boy and did nothing but play basketball, who knows what became of her?

But you. You were like me. Shy and friendless, eager to do well by your children. In a way, I felt like I was guiding my younger self. You were more than a friend, a comrade; you were like a do-over. You even looked like me. I had my hair permed and cut short at the time, easier when Isa

was so young and needed me. You had the bob, the same one in your headshot, chic then as it is now. But we had similarly long, oval faces, high cheek bones, crescent eyes when we smiled. Of course, you were shorter and thinner than me. It seems you haven't gained weight over the years. You looked like a waif—especially when we first met—but, deceivingly sturdy, you hardly ever fell ill. Sales clerks and waitresses used to ask whether we were related, remember? You'd say, "Why, is there a family rate?" It made me laugh and laugh. Every time.

I invited you to our church. We soon dropped the formality of speaking in *jondaemal*. And just like that, we had a routine, you and I. Church on Sundays, coffee, shopping, errands during the week, dinners at Arirang, fishing trips in the summers. We were close, not like siblings (though I imagine if I had a sister, the relationship would've been akin to ours), but like two women in the same boat. We were mothers, housewives, members of our church; we were the same age, we had never finished school, we were outsiders in our own way.

We talked about our children mostly. We could hardly think about anything else. We were never more fervent than when we discussed our children's education. New to the area, you didn't know much when we first met—gifted and talented, magnet, IB, Johns Hopkins summer programs—but you were a quick study. As soon as I told you that children needed to test into those specialized schools, you engaged that tutor I recommended, the one Isa was seeing to improve her math. I told Isa Appa, "She has *yokshim*." I respected that. I recognized it. You were hungry too, striving for more, for better.

But you were a little funny about telling me things. Secretive, vague. You acted nonchalant or obtuse when I asked whether your girls were seeing the tutor. You could have volunteered this information, but you waited until I pulled it out of you. Remember when we crossed paths at Mrs. Cho's?

She walked me to the door after Isa's piano lesson, thanking me for my referral. What referral? I wondered. I was caught off guard, but what could I do except respond in kind?

"You are an excellent teacher," I said. "Your reputation precedes you."

"You give me too much credit. Isa is a good student."

"She needs to practice more," I said.

"She's lucky to have a devoted mother like you. You must be giving out tips," she said. "Mrs. Pak observes her daughters' lessons as well."

When she opened the door, you were there, flanked by Eunsu and Eunyoung who stood solemnly, shouldering their tote bags of piano books. You apologized and said, "Oh, we're early," clearly surprised to

run into me, though I can't imagine why. Isa had been going to Mrs. Cho for more than two years.

"Mrs. Kwon," you said to me. "Hello." Then you reached for your daughters' hands as if you had to occupy your own. You dipped your head in a quick bow.

I bowed back and pulled Isa toward the car as she started talking to Eunsu. "Hurry, we're late," I said. "Late for what?" Isa asked. I squeezed her arm, too hard. What could I say? As I drove home, I wondered why you had acted so strangely, so cold and formal. I couldn't understand why you didn't tell me about Mrs. Cho. I thought our friendship was forged in our goals, that we would celebrate our successes, comfort one another in our failures. Maybe she's trying to preserve our friendship, I thought, to shield it from competition. Or perhaps you were embarrassed by your ambitions for your children. But on some level, I must have known. I would've acted the same way toward Mrs. Kang or Mrs. Kim. I wouldn't have wanted to be associated with them. See? We've always understood each other.

Isa Appa and I liked the two of you. You and your husband made us laugh. Your wit could start a fire if the sparks fell the wrong way. Danger was what made you so hilarious. We would gasp in relief as much as laughter, as you edged close to a hard truth—Eunsu Appa's unkempt appearance, Isa Appa's drinking—risking bruised feelings or permanent scars. No one, nothing was safe.

The foldout table was broken, and we were squatting around the camp stove cooking *ramyeon*, and I remember thinking how primitive we must've looked. The men fishing, the women cooking. Isa Appa got up to get another beer from the cooler. "I guess drinking just makes you thirstier," you said, adjusting your visor while holding chopsticks. I laughed, uncomfortable that you had noticed. When Isa Appa didn't respond, I couldn't help counting the empty cans in the sand beside his chair. The open mouths looked like dark zeroes.

Even your children weren't spared. "Eunsu will have to support us in our old age," you once said, feigning exasperation. "Not even a restaurant would hire Eunyoung." I was always earnest when it came to Isa. I couldn't joke about her future; my daughter wasn't destined to work in a restaurant. But for you, nothing was too sacred. Maybe you were scared that it was true and needed a cleansing laugh. Or—did your stomach secretly flip at the thought that Eunyoung might excel beyond our imaginations?

It's funny how our expectations change over time. Young people think they can do anything now. On TV, I see reports of Korean chefs, skate-

boarders, snowboarders, graffiti artists, even marijuana farmers! I think it's a good thing. These days, we don't have to worry so much about what our children do as long as they are the best and happy, of course. I'm sure Eunyoung is happy.

Your icy humor was warmed by your husband's jokes. A little sloppy and a little dopey, he had a laid-back attitude that put everyone at ease. He was a good friend to Isa Appa. Eunsu Appa's genial nature brought out a side to him I rarely saw. He became lighthearted, almost boyish. They could gripe about work, about subcontracting, their managers, their crews, the language barrier, picky homeowners.

Remember when Eunsu Appa hid fish guts in Isa Appa's tackle box? That night we drove the four hours home from Assateague, talking about the awful stench in the car. We even stopped once to investigate the smell. The cooler was fine. Our fish, cleaned and scaled, lay on fresh ice we had purchased from the tackle shop. When Isa Appa discovered the entrails—decomposing in a plastic bag—he yelled, "That son of a bitch!" He knocked his beer over, he was laughing so hard, into the trays and compartments, drenching spools of fishing line, drop shot weights, hooks, baits, and jigs in hissing foam.

I never shared this with you then, but I felt free on those trips, from all the cares and responsibilities we had. I could release the grip I had to maintain on this family, let go of the burden of everyone's needs. It was incredible, really, the energy you infused into our lives. Isa had approximations of siblings in your daughters, I had a friend, and even Isa's father seemed more present, less restless. As if he forgot he wanted to leave.

Those were happy times. The husbands looked content sitting on those cheap lawn chairs, drinking beers, staring at their fishing rods while we teased them and gossiped. And the children. They were in their own world. A pack of cards occupied them for hours. I thought they were gambling, but you explained they were just playing games, that they were like *hwatu* cards. We let the children stay up late. They were stimulated by the ocean breeze, the new shadows that danced on the tent walls, the uneven sand under their sleeping bags. They chased each other where our campsite's light faded into black or huddled around the twitching flame of a gas lantern, examining what, I don't know, collapsing into laughter and squeals.

Isa tells me her father has stopped drinking now. Eunsu Appa never really was a drinker, was he? I know he drank with Isa Appa to be polite. I remember how your husband's face, so pale even in the summer, would streak and blotch with pink. Nothing like Isa Appa's cardboard

brown face. I remember how he'd stop when he caught your eyes. He was perceptive, had that lightning fast *noonchi*.

Isa's father is remarried now and an elder at his church. Go figure. After all the years I put up with his drinking.

Your suit looks very smart and expensive, though I imagine you bought it on sale. You were so frugal back then, in ways that put my own frugality to shame. You knew exactly how and when to spend. We went shopping often. Exercise, we called it, to let a little breeze tickle our nostrils, as the saying goes. I'd buy a few things I needed until I noticed that you never bought a thing.

I'd started wearing Estée Lauder night cream around the time we met. An indulgence, I knew, but both Danny Umma and Mina Umma swore by it. They said their skin felt so moisturized and taut in the mornings. I always waited until Macy's offered a free gift with the purchase before splurging on a jar. I would offer to share the coupon with you, but you said you still used Pond's cold cream, which I like to use now.

I was leaving the house for Montgomery Mall when you called to meet for coffee. We met in the makeup department at Macy's. I never buy what I need right away. I make the sales woman wait on me, give me samples, and a free makeover. You declined, and I watched you pick up the night cream while the sales woman applied blush on me. You turned over the jar. You had glasses back then with thick lenses that made your eyes look small, almost beady. It looks like you have contacts now. Or did you get that laser eye surgery everyone talks about these days? Well, they seemed to get even smaller when you saw the price. "So expensive," you said as you returned the jar to the display tray. I don't think you thought I heard, but I did.

I was mortified, of course.

I wanted to stop the purchase. I was going to come back and buy it on my own. But it was too late, the sales woman had already rung up the box and the free gift—a makeup bag with samples of eyeshadow, mascara, and foundation that would last me months. I took the bag and said, "That was all I needed," linked arms with you, and guided you into the sunlit atrium where it was less stuffy. While you were talking, I was doing the math. I could have paid for two tutoring sessions for Isa or a piano lesson with Mrs. Cho or groceries.

We wandered into the Coach store. How we used to covet Coach purses. I ended up buying one years later. A gift to myself. God knows Isa Appa never got me anything. We admired the bags, stroking the smooth leather, admiring the number of compartments, pockets, and zippers. We needed them to organize all that we carried. We carried

address books brimming with business cards, datebooks with the children's appointments and lessons, checkbooks, wallets thick with coupons, nail clippers, coffee candy, mints for car sickness, gum for coffee breath, Advil, Tylenol, napkins, sugar packets, ketchup packets, soy sauce packets, individually wrapped toothpicks, lipsticks, tissues, glasses cases, and cleaning cloths. I realized Isa was no longer a child when she became horrified by my purse. She was eleven, and we stopped at a Roy Rogers to use the bathroom. I reached for the napkin dispenser, and she grabbed my hand and said "Umma" in a snarl that I had never heard before. You thought Isa was so well-behaved. She was, for the most part, only becoming difficult as a teenager. Did your children give you grief when they were teenagers?

You picked up a cross-body bag, pebbly black leather with tan trim, draping the strap over your shoulder and chest like a sash, holding it against your hip.

"This won't show dirt," you said.

"How much is it?"

"I'm just trying it on," you said.

At the Christmas Eve service that year, you wore a beautiful double-breasted, black velvet jacket with gold buttons. The Coach purse hung off your shoulder.

Did you sense then that we were not on the same path?

You followed my advice and moved your family to Potomac two years after we met, the summer before Eunsu entered middle school. You mentioned that Eunsu Appa's business was taking off. I know you saved and sacrificed to buy that house. I did the same for ours in North Potomac. You invited us over for a housewarming.

We were familiar with the area. On Sunday afternoons after church, I used to make Isa Appa take us there for a drive. Eye shopping, I called it. I had wanted to buy a house there, but North Potomac was a better value when we were looking. He didn't understand why we needed to leave our old split-level in Rockville. I imagined church gatherings, Christmas parties, and grandchildren. A space for our expansive life. When I was a child, my mother was a wealthy landowner. She lost her fortune after the war, but I remember our lavish New Year's celebrations. I remember feeling the envy of the town. Isa Appa always lacked imagination.

When we toured Potomac, we'd hear shrieks from the backseat, startling us, causing me to turn and Isa Appa to look at the rearview mirror. We'd joke, "Isa, when you grow up and make lots of money, you'll buy Umma and Appa a big house, right?" Isa would point to a house,

one with a fountain, wrought-iron gates, tennis courts, or a pool. “That one?” she’d ask. “Too small,” we’d say.

You moved very close to Mrs. Cho. Her husband was some kind of attorney in DC, but she also made a tidy income off her piano lessons. She was so particular about her place. When we arrived for Isa’s first lesson, I made the mistake of knocking on her front door. A Korean woman wearing an apron answered, and before she could ask us to come in, Mrs. Cho appeared and said she thought she had mentioned the side entrance over the phone. She looked uncomfortable for a moment then invited us in. We got a brief tour that day: a glimpse of the kitchen and living room as she led us to the sunroom with the separate entrance, where she taught piano. A glossy concert grand was the centerpiece in the living room, which must have had twenty-foot ceilings. And a fireplace in the kitchen, what a novel idea. The green-brown carpet in our living room and hallway seemed old-fashioned compared to her polished wood flooring. And the used upright we bought for Isa, shabby and dull. I wonder, if we had bought a new, shiny piano, would Isa have taken practice more seriously? Mrs. Cho’s eldest—the boy—is a concert pianist now. Her house resembled the pictures of celebrity homes in *CeCi*. And a Korean housekeeper! Can you imagine?

“Oh my God,” Isa said when we arrived.

We didn’t say much as we drove up your driveway. I didn’t know that your property was on that end of River Road.

Our voices echoed in the foyer. I almost walked into your house with my shoes on. I had forgotten—momentarily—what to do, how to act. Your daughters appeared at the top of the stairs. “Come on, Isa,” they said. Isa ran up those winding steps and disappeared into a bedroom.

I was holding a box of detergent.

“We brought you detergent,” I said.

I had meant to get you the big box of Tide, but they were out of the large sizes at the store.

“You didn’t have to bring anything, thanks,” you said as we walked to your kitchen. “Eunsu Appa!” He double stepped to us and dutifully took the box from my hands. He opened a closet door in the hallway. Stacked on its shelves were industrial-sized boxes of detergent, bulk packs of Charmin Ultra, and Bounty paper towels. It looked like an aisle at Costco.

You must have seen me staring.

“The church members in the area have been dropping by with gifts,” you said. “When Jesus comes and we all shit our pants, we’ll have enough toilet paper for everyone to wipe themselves.”

You opened a door off the kitchen area.

"The basement is unfinished, but when Eunsu Appa puts in flooring and lighting, we can hold our cell group meetings here. You won't have to host so many church gatherings now." You sighed. "It takes a long time to clean the house though."

"I can imagine," I said.

I didn't know you were planning on working. I ran into Danny Umma years ago, when Isa was away at college. She mentioned that you had gotten your real estate license. I wondered whether Eunsu Appa was making you work, or was it something else? She didn't mention whether there was any trouble at home.

We never talked much about our marriages, did we? We kept that part of our lives close to our chests. Once you slipped and said that Eunsu Appa was easygoing with a nearly infinite supply of patience until he ran out and he was not. You became quiet after that, knowing—I think—that you had broken some unspoken rule between us.

You must have studied hard to get your license, to learn all those terms and laws. You were always clever. I remember—early in our friendship—you asked what I thought about presidential candidate Kim Young-sam's campaign platform. I said I was too busy to follow elections in a country where I no longer lived.

"I'm glad he's running again," you said. "Otherwise, Hong Sookja's sacrifice back in '87 would've been for nothing."

Who was Hong Sookja? I wondered.

"Yes, well, I hardly have time to read the news let alone opinion pieces," I said.

You looked disappointed.

In 1987, Eunsu Umma, I was making ends meet. Isa was three, and Isa Appa had no work crew. Looking back, I realize we had never talked about whether you had gone to college. It just didn't come up. But, of course, you had. I asked if your daughters were participating in Mrs. Cho's upcoming recital.

"Oh yes," you said. "Eunsu is performing a difficult Chopin Nocturne."

Eunsu was the more musically gifted of the two, I think. Also, I would tell you now what a shame it is that Park Geun-hye made such a mess of her opportunity as the first female president.

It's funny that you're working now. I always talked about going back to work, remember? Learn a skill or start a business of my own. Isa Appa had always wanted me to work. As though I did nothing for the family. He never wanted to shoulder the financial burden by himself. In fact, he wanted to move to a smaller house, save money, and retire as soon as possible. So, move backwards? I'd say. He wanted to leave siding. He

said it was hard—the hours too long, the sun too hot in the summers, the cold too brutal in the winters. I knew it was hard. I was there, I helped him. But what else could he do? He couldn't start his own business; we had no capital for that. I couldn't go back to work. Who would have cooked for him? Cleaned the house? Looked after Isa's schoolwork, piano practices, driven her to lessons and recitals? It was impossible.

That's why I went to you.

I asked if you could put in a good word for Isa Appa to your husband. I thought he might hire him as an apprentice. Perhaps he could give him extra work if business was good. You said you would ask.

Days later, you said he was fully staffed and didn't have any work.

I ran into your husband at the store. Did he tell you?

"Eunsu Appa, hello. What are you doing here?" I asked. Isa Appa never set foot in grocery stores. He did help carry bags into the house now and then. Sometimes I'd leave a fifty-pound sack of rice in the car to see whether he would bring it in when I asked.

Eunsu Appa said you weren't feeling well. He was picking up *boyak* from the apothecary.

"That's so good of you," I said. "I hope our favor wasn't too much of an imposition."

"Favor?" he said.

"I asked Eunsu Umma if you had any spare work. Siding has been so hard on Isa Appa, I thought he could try flooring."

He responded politely enough, tried to cover for you, that good-natured husband of yours. But he had no idea what I was talking about. I knew you had never mentioned it.

"Red ginseng!" I said. I took a box off the nearest shelf. "This brand is the best, and you must get some for Eunsu Umma." I displayed the box like a TV presenter. Your husband took the box from me, bowed, and returned to the register. I left my cart. Was I so foolish then?

We saw less and less of each other. Isa was in middle school and often missed her 6:30 a.m. bus. I had to shuttle her across the county so she wouldn't be late for school. Such a long commute! That was one of the downsides of the magnet program. You're lucky your girls attended their home middle school.

We were becoming increasingly occupied with the children's growing schedules; it was an important time. Every decision, every year counted then. It was all worth it when Isa received her acceptance letter from Cornell. I'm sure you felt the same way when your girls were accepted to college. I dropped to my knees and thanked the Lord for her scholarship.

What pains me is that Isa did exactly as she was raised to do, exactly what we wanted her to accomplish. But her father and I didn't maintain

our part of the bargain. We failed to provide the stability she deserved. If there's anything I regret deeply, it's this. She's married now, which is a blessing. The husband is American, white, an architect, and they seem happy. When I first met him, I worried that there were far too many cultural differences. He comes from a wealthy, upper-class family in Connecticut. But I trust Isa to make sound decisions, after all, she has survived without my advice for a long time. There is one topic on which I cannot hold my tongue: they speak about having children as some sort of option. They say they have to weigh all the factors, consider their careers. Do your children speak this way? Is this a common phenomenon with young couples today? If you don't have children, then what do you live for?

I was sure you had heard the rumors. You didn't know how to react to the news of our divorce. Even your humor failed you. The summer before Isa started high school, she and I moved to a decent two-bedroom behind the Bed Bath & Beyond on Rockville Pike. I never did get to replace that awful carpeting in our old house. And you never asked for my new address. You never even asked why we were no longer at church. You kept your distance out of fear my life might be catching. One's health comes first, of course.

After Isa and I moved, I still went to the H-Mart near our old house, out of habit. I saw you once in the parking lot. Eunsu Appa's company must have been doing very well, I thought. The Mercedes sedan suited you. I suppose that old Camry you used to drive would've been an eyesore in Potomac. Also, I thought: dark silver was a good choice. Doesn't show dirt. Seeing you run errands, I wondered if you were also meeting Danny Umma or Mina Umma for coffee. I had always made sure you were included in our lunches.

After we moved to Rockville, I went back to work as well. I worked at KFC. My plan was to learn the business, work my way up to manager, and buy a franchise. But I couldn't get used to it again; I was no longer young. You see, I had worked in fast food years ago, when I first arrived in the U.S.—I never told you much about those days. The grease, Eunsu Umma. The smell of boiling grease and cooked chicken flesh and dull spices stays in your hair. I could smell it long after a shower, after multiple shampoos, on my days off. And you make the same things, day, after day, after day. A menu six-feet long, eight value meals, four family meals, thigh, breast, drumstick, any sides? Biscuit with that? Soda? No soda? Massive, poor, tired Americans counting out their change, teenagers who looked past you as they ordered, the occasional Korean family who looked around you with pity and shame. It was exciting at first, I admit. The free chicken. But months in, I craved nothing more than

rice and ripe kimchi, you know the kind. The kind that's weakened by fermentation but still makes an audible crunch when you bite down on the pale, ribbed squares. Garlicky, sour, and sweet. A taste that's alive and fights back.

During the slowest hours, I fantasized about kimchi, the sheer variety, the names. Winter solstice kimchi, bachelor kimchi, even the literal names, white, green, dice dice, rough chop, salt-wilted—all became poetry. I thought of our poor ancestors whose kimchi was dressed in only salt and fermented fish. No garlic or chili peppers. How deprived they were. And I was grateful that I could go home to my pungent kimchi, spicy and powerful.

Two years I toiled at KFC, the one on Georgia Avenue, before quitting. I found work at a dry cleaner, identifying stains, tagging clothes, operating the conveyor, watching jackets and dresses sway and bump into one another like wedding guests in a conga line. Then I worked at a hair and beauty supply shop. My job was to take inventory of the hair accessories. I spent hours sorting claws, clips, hairbrushes, hair ties, hair bands. That's where I got the idea to work at a salon.

I washed hair for a year at Prism Salon in White Flint Mall. An assistant, I restocked supplies and swept the floors. I observed the business, you see. I learned to spot the generous tippers. The women with coiffed hair, expensive shoes or purses, you can depend on them for a dollar or two. But the women who come in with knots, the women whose outfits don't match, whose makeup jobs are haphazard, who look stressed and tired: they're grateful. They're the best tippers—four dollars, sometimes five.

A Korean stylist worked there, Mrs. Min. I tried to learn from her, but she was so cold. She guarded everything closely, from her lunch to her brushes. She seemed suspicious of everyone. Isn't that sad? Between you and me, I think she was jealous. I think she knew that I would move on to start my own business.

When Isa left for college, I enrolled in barber school. The Academy of Professional Barbers. It's a very good one, in Rockville. There were too many products and chemicals in women's hair, I quickly learned. Men's hair is simple. No processing, no coloring, no perming. Men who want any of that go to a salon. Yes, you don't make as much per customer, but cuts and a shave are faster than most women's styles. Plus, the overhead costs are much lower. You only need chairs and mirrors, and barbers purchase their own supplies. It'd be a good investment, I thought.

I took the test over Isa's freshman year winter break at Cornell. I told them I needed a translator, and she helped me with the questions. She translated, and I answered with my studies and my work experience.

Did Eunsu or Eunyoung help you? I'm sure your English has improved over the years, but I've heard the real estate license exam is very difficult, that one has to study long hours.

I worked at a barber shop in Wheaton Plaza, where you used to live, remember? I suppose you don't visit that area very often. It's changed. It's quite nice now, with respectable businesses, many Korean owned. I go to the big, shiny H-Mart there because I'm quite positive they get seafood and produce shipments more often. Very fresh.

I don't work as much now on account of my hands. The doctors say it's arthritis, my fingers have thickened and gnarled over the years like burdock roots. I can't fit my scissors over my knuckles or hold clippers for long on bad days. Such a shame. I feel so young; I still have my ambitions and plans to open my own shop, but my body continues to betray me as I near seventy. You must be feeling the aches and pains of aging too.

I still go to work a few times a week for my regular customers. The boys at the shop call me Grandma. They're idiots and jokesters, troublesome children. Isa tells me I should stop working, that it's a waste of my time. She says I should live with her. She's in New York and works in finance at a big bank. But I think I'd just be a burden. I have a feeling that her invitation is out of some obligation, the way you and I were raised to take care of our parents-in-law. Thank God we were married in America. I tell her no because we'll needle and irritate each other the way mothers and daughters do. Besides, I need to stay. I have my license here and my clients who rely on me.

I suppose I should retire soon. Though I suspect Isa asks out of obligation, it's a comfort to have a daughter who calls and visits and aggravates me. At our age, wouldn't life be so lonely without our children to bother us? I'm sure your daughters are looking after you and Eunsu Appa. They were good girls, and you raised them to be successful.

Today I threw away the ad; my fridge was getting so cluttered. It was nice to see your face again, but I don't need a realtor any time soon. I hope you are healthy and happy. I hope your business prospers.