

Suphil Lee Park

Heartland

At thirty, Haeyoung finds herself at her friend Audrey's wedding, in a Californian vineyard. First to get married in the circle of Haeyoung's close friends, Audrey looks dumbfounded, as if someone tricked her into that white preening bird of a dress. The bride worries her fake lashes make her look like a nervous ostrich, and Haeyoung has to assure her: so pretty, no worries (at the very least a very dainty ostrich). The wedding itself is an odd melange of the bride's Americanized taste and some Korean traditions her parents insisted on. Guests bustling in pastel *hanbok* or chiffon and lightweight summer fabrics, careful not to stray off the rock patio. Grapes gold-rimmed against the afternoon sun. Clanging glasses, French-Korean fusion dishes, plate after plate. Unfamiliar faces intent on getting drunk, justifiably with all the wine, justifiably for the occasion. Then the finale, dates throwing ceremony. In the loop of stale conversations, a vaguely familiar face, which, as it turns out, belongs to a junior high classmate of Haeyoung's. Of course, Haeyoung thinks, of course. The bride—her sole remaining friend from their junior high, an international school in South Korea—unaware of this whirlwind. Small talks on the verge of prying, the naturally retrospective mood, then the inevitable mention of *her* name. Of course, of course. "Weren't you best friends with you-know-whom—Sojin?" Quick napkin dab about Haeyoung's lips. "You in touch with her? You were so close." Galbi steaks getting speared all around, pink juice pooling on porcelain. Nonchalant debates on the real estate market, matchmaking, hedge fund. A long way to the bathroom through conversations in pidgin English and Korean and other tongues blurred by the two. An unnecessarily long wait at the sink, in the sickening light. The rim of the sink, smeared with lipstick, for who knows how long. Then, of course, the surge of speculative nostalgia for her long-estranged friend.

Haeyoung has always imagined Sojin tall by now, as short girls with foal legs usually turn out to be, but that's about the only thing she feels she can predict for sure. She isn't even sure if Sojin would have kept her name. "It sounds like the word exhaustion," Sojin complained many times. Or it isn't entirely impossible that

Sojin, who could not even wait out the development of a plot and skipped straight to the finale of every show, might have found something as anticlimactic as life, not worth all the work, all the wait. When her speculations reach this point, which they usually do, Haeyoung feels a gush of hot breath against the nape of her neck: “Would that be a surprise?” A ghostly finger placed to the lowest of her spine, akin to a threat. A waft of Sojin’s post-sunbath scent, vaguely of stale cotton candy, and a not-disagreeable note of seaweed swept ashore to dry. The smell of self-indulging good night’s sleep from the pile of crumpled overalls she’d throw back on. Lips like the first leaf of the spring. A barrier after barrier of cornstalks, rustling like a million palace servants whispering, hand-over-mouth, across the expanse of the entire cornfield, *we’re all ears, we’re a wall with no ears*. Haeyoung would be rattled, flung back into flashbacks, then thrashed around, until she comes to, with a chilling afterthought: every year, at least one in school did commit suicide. Her country, so deeply and prematurely suicidal. And to be a teenager in that country was to become too factional to unlearn that, on occasions, a rarity demanded respect, while commonality did not. What surprised Haeyoung, over her Korean school years, was that they did not fall into one category to file away, could not be marked with “likely to take their own lives” stamps, any red-flag warning like a civil defense drill: you’re in a danger zone, hope you remind yourself sometimes. What surprised her, in the end, was that death, just as everything, was quick to grow mundane. *Another one of us down this year*, that easy. Easy to flick away with derision-stained fingers. Even to laugh at, as Sojin did.

But Haeyoung does not reminisce to that extent, not on her friend’s happy day. She dutifully reappears from the bathroom and stays through dusk descending like an intensifying series of camera filters. Out of tired friendly obligation, she makes sure to smile at the right moments, recite the right lines. We have celebrated life far too long, she often feels compelled to blurt, To try *this* hard. As with important secrets, however, important lies need good covers, under which they work, oh so marvelously.

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