

## PROTECTED AREAS

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*Eson Kim*

We took our old car to the first church picnic of the year because someone had broken into Dad's brand new Cadillac earlier in the week. He had parked it in the yard with the gate closed, but someone climbed over the wall. We woke up one morning to find the doors open, a vacant hole in the dashboard where the radio used to be. The speakers behind the back seats were also pried out, leaving a few wires sprouting along the top of the frayed cushions.

After the police left, taking fingerprints and scribbling down reports in triplicate, Dad sat in the car for a couple hours, resting his limp hands along the bottom of the steering wheel. I would check on him from the window upstairs, and sometimes it looked as if he was going to start the engine and drive through the back wall.

He had saved for three years to buy that car. He had initially planned to buy a Buick, but when he saw the Cadillac Sedan Deville in the lot, he lingered and circled it a few times. Peering inside with his hands in his pockets, he seemed reluctant to touch it, reluctant to hope for it.

He was coaxed into sitting in the driver's seat while the salesman started the engine and switched on the radio, which happened to be tuned to a classical music station. The whirl of the opera filled the car, the all-around speakers circling Dad with music. Even standing on the outside, I could hear the flood of the opera's signature bar scene, where the audience meets—and falls in love with—the main character for the first time.

Hovering by the driver's window, I could see my own reflection in the glass layered over my father's profile behind the wheel. I watched him close his eyes and smile, his head occasionally nodding to the music. When the salesman wasn't looking, I put one hand on my chest and mimed the sweeping operatic gestures. I sometimes dreamed that I would become a singer one day, because it was music that inspired Dad to sit still. Music made him truly happy.

While my father sat in that same car suddenly stripped of its musical

components, the rest of us sat quietly in the house. Even the baby stayed still and sober for the first time. And when Dad finally came back inside, we were extra nice to him, massaging his back and doing our chores without complaint. Even though he was hurting and fuming inside, he never once said an unkind or impatient word. Instead, he pulled me in his lap after dinner and said, “My good girls.”

That night I sobbed into my pillow for hours because I wanted to make things better for him, but there was nothing I could do, nothing I could offer. I wanted to be able to give him anything he wanted without someone taking it away. At the very least, I wanted to be able to say something meaningful to him, something that might ease his pain, but I couldn’t speak much Korean. And at times like these, I sorely missed being able to express basic sentiments using a native language that had long since slipped away from me year by year.

What was the Korean word for *sorrow* or for *love*? How about *beautiful* or *joyous*? *Understanding* or *sympathy*? It was times like these when I craved the nuance and shades of the language. I could convey simple sentences like “I am hungry,” or “I am going to school.” But these phrases weren’t the ones I needed when my family yearned for a kind word of encouragement. Sometimes I wanted to say, “I’ll be there for you,” but all that I could translate was “I am there.” Such literal translations sat like sloppy, unkempt lumps on the surface of my intentions.

It was times like these when I questioned why my parents let us abandon the language that would have helped us understand one another more. Unlike most of my Korean friends, my parents didn’t force us to speak their native language at home. They spoke to me and my sisters in Korean, and we replied in English. Family friends said it was a terrible mistake. “How will they know what you want from them? Without the language, how will they know who they are?”

Each time, my parents said, “They’re American. We came here because that’s what we wanted for them. Who they become is up to them.”

I could tell that this was a wildly radical and wayward idea because my parents were often regarded with a kind of subdued pity. Their friends were constantly trying to convince them to abandon this somewhat unconventional parenting approach. According to them, my parents were raising strangers in their own home, children who would grow up apart from tradition, values and family ties. All of this was folded into the

grooves of language, and taking that away was as careless as releasing a bunch of toddlers onto a busy highway.

But my parents didn't want to raise children caught in a limbo between two worlds. They wanted us to respect our traditions and our origins without being weighed down or oppressed by them. They had seen other Korean children suffer when their parents refused to teach them English until they went to school and their ignorance was exposed in cruel and condescending ways. There was no need for such imposed handicaps.

It wasn't an easy route for our family to explore. I often prompted confusion and dismay when I mixed up Korean words that sounded similar. It was mortifying to offer a houseguest a refreshing slice of "ripe scissors" or to send a distant cousin and her new spouse best wishes for a long-lasting and happy "egg." Unfortunately, I often made these errors in public among the very same friends who started treating me like a child with mental deficiencies.

Even worse, there was nothing more frustrating than bickering with my parents when neither of us knew what the other was saying. In anger, we forgot to use the simple words, creating a jumble and clash of two, incomprehensible languages. It usually ended up with one of us shouting, "Do you know what I'm saying?" If we were still sore and not in the mood to reconcile, we were dismissive: "I never know what you're saying." When we were more conciliatory or downright fatigued, we would recognize the ridiculousness of all the wasted breath, and start laughing meekly at our own futility. This would often calm us down enough to begin again, this time using more basic words and patience.

There were advantages to having fluent English speakers in our household. My parents relied on us to make calls to the utility companies to refute charges and arrange appointments. My mother never learned how to write her own checks; she had one of us do it for her. We helped them compare insurance policies and wrote out all the annual Christmas cards. They seemed to say, "This is your world; you can handle it better than we can."

It was easy to resent this burden; there were many times when I would have preferred to read fairy tales instead of contracts and invoices. I didn't want to wake up early on a weekend to go to the doctor with my mother so I could fill out the patient information forms.

Of course, as a child, it was also easy to poke fun at my parents for saying “joo” instead of “zoo” or “peenus butter” instead of “peanut butter.” I was happy to be unfettered by an accent in a world where such advantages count. I tried to mask my embarrassment when my parents made verbal errors in public, and I secretly thanked them for making sure the same difficulties would never happen to me.

For all the mistakes I made in Korean, when my parents’ friends excused my errors by saying, “She’s not really Korean,” I wondered if they meant it as a statement of fact or as an insult.

While my fluency in English did make life easier in school and in the community, my family did have to accept a boundary line within our house. Sometimes, the people we wanted to connect with the most were the ones who could least understand us.

I never found the right words to comfort my father about the damage done to his Cadillac. It stung every time I watched him explain to our church members why we hadn’t driven it to the picnic. We had admired and enjoyed the new car for the past few months. I remembered showing my friends the back seat but not letting them sit down until my Dad told me to stop being crazy. I reluctantly allowed a few to take a brief seat, but only the ones with clean clothes and shoes. My father had earned the car, and I wasn’t about to let them put their soiled feet all over the velvet-smooth upholstery.

Now the car was sitting in our yard, damaged and warped. It would take about \$2,000 to repair, a hefty sum that we hadn’t planned for. While the car would run fine without the radio and speakers, it was a priority for us to make it whole again. We resolved to go lean and count pennies for as long as it took to make the repairs. We never discussed it or said it out loud, but we didn’t need to.

The picnic wasn’t as festive and carefree as we had hoped, even though it was at a scenic new park that year, way out in the Pennsylvania countryside. I didn’t play much with my church friends. Instead, I stayed near my father for most of the day, watching him as he milled around with a group of other fathers. He seemed equally distant from the activities and events. For the first time in months, I saw him break open a couple of beers throughout the day.

I broke away briefly after lunch to take a solitary walk through the

wooded area of the park. Fewer people explored those areas because the trees were more densely packed and the canopy screened out most of the sun. But it was perfect for a quiet hike to clear my mind. It would be years before I would read any Thoreau, but I already knew I felt closer to God in those woods than in any church. Occasionally, I thought I heard water trickling in the distance but I walked in wide circles and never found its source. Maybe that is the magic of nature; it keeps you moving forward with an echo of something a little ways ahead.

By the time I returned to the picnic grounds, Mom was packing up, ready to go home a bit early. I helped haul the tote bags and blankets to the car, and prepared for the long ride back home. For the first time in my memory, Dad did not turn on the radio as he drove; so I was left to daydream in the backseat, letting the wind flutter my bangs above my face. A few miles away from the park, I heard the sound of rushing water as we passed a fast-moving stream that cut under the local road we were driving. "Look!" I said, pointing out the window. "That must be the water I heard from the park."

My parents looked over, caught by the beautiful foaming current that made the crisp air smell washed and filtered. Without a word, my father pulled over and we gathered by the roadside overlooking the river below. We were the only ones there, and we had the place to ourselves. After a few seconds, we noticed tiny splashes in the water; then a couple of silver salmon cleared the surface in jerking arcs.

My mother gripped my father's arm and said in Korean, "Did you see? Over there?"

He nodded and turned to us with a smile that seemed as wide as the bridge we were standing on. My parents, sisters and I clambered down a rocky pathway until we made it to the edge of the stream itself. Standing at the edge of the bank, we noticed that there was more to the current than we could see from afar. The tumult of the stream was caused by dense beds of salmon, all swimming side by side. There were thousands of them, fighting for space and struggling to get ahead.

Dad ran back to the car and returned with a couple of old tennis rackets and a shopping bag he found from the trunk. My mother took the rackets and used some boulders as stepping stones until she was standing several yards closer to the center of the stream. She stooped down, dipped the two rackets into the stream, and like salad tongs, fished out

a small, wiggling salmon. Surprised that this makeshift netting worked, Mom and Dad laughed as they bagged the first catch. Dad joked and sent Mom back out for two more—one for each daughter, he said.

He opened the bag and let me peer in. “Gross,” I said.

“Not gross,” he said. “Very tasty. Daddy cooking nice.” And while I hated eating fish, I looked forward to taking home our catch and watching Dad focus on making something good from this unexpected find.

Dad eventually joined Mom on her stepping stones, the two of them giggling and chatting like teenagers on holiday. By that time, another couple had stopped and parked their car next to ours. They were standing about 30 feet away, on the bridge above us. I noticed them pointing to a sign posted on the other side of the stream. It said: “No Fishing. Protected Area.”

I looked over at my parents. They were pretending to push one another into the stream, and couldn’t hear much over the slapping water. I knew I should call out and tell them that we were breaking the rules. They would have stopped immediately if they knew they were doing something wrong.

The newcomers moved closer to the end of the bridge, and the man stooped down to yell over to me. “You can’t fish here,” he said, speaking more deliberately. “It’s protected. Don’t you speak English?”

I didn’t answer; I just looked over at my parents again. They were still laughing and holding onto one another for balance.

“You understand?” the man asked again. “English?”

I turned toward him, ready to speak. But then I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders. *No, I thought. Not today.*