

Are You There?

Yulia Lee, College of Arts and Science

Ding dong.

My mom stood by the door and I stood beside her, holding her hand. Then I paced back and forth in anticipation, and I ran my hands across the bright red jjajangmyeon delivery stickers which concealed much of the door and the crumpled fliers for the upcoming Seoul provincial elections which flared from every crack. In my other hand, I held on to my middle school diploma, my most prized possession at the time.

Was the bell always this quiet?

The familiar, light footsteps got closer and closer. My grandma swung open the door and immediately beamed, emanating her comforting presence. She gave both my mom and me her signature side hug, rubbing her face so hard that it left the scent of cherry blossoms on my left cheekbone.

“Come in, come in! It’s been so long. Sweetie, you’ve lost weight. Are you sure you are eating well? Your mother’s food is not nearly as good as grandma’s food, huh? I already have the *jjigae* cooking, I hope you have an appetite!”

I took off my shoes and meandered through my childhood home with familiar footsteps. My grandma’s brown leather recliner near the television, the subtle cream-colored walls covered only by the 16x20 family portrait, and the plethora of dracaena plants near the window had not changed over the years. But it wasn’t the same. In my room, the lead streaks across the white wall that used to read 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006, each line higher and higher, now read 20, 200, 20, 2 like a broken code. The windowsill, which displayed my orange and green plastic telescope, was taken over by several dust bunnies. The kitchen sink was overflowing with dishes I did not recognize and the veranda was lined by black plastic bags of trash that reeked.

Naturally, my eyes were drawn to the back of my grandmother’s head. The roots of her hair were starting to split from the lack of washing and I could see patches of white growing behind her ears. Her floral blouse hung too loosely around her pronounced collarbones and sharp shoulders. Her white pants fit around her stilt legs like a pair of hand-me-downs. Her toenails curled at the ends from not having been cut and the back of her heels had begun to crack. The destruction of the disease could too easily be seen.

“Shoot, the *jjigae*! I hope it’s not burnt. Come sit around the table, let’s eat.”

At the dinner table, I displayed my diploma to her. In my head, I had already rehearsed the exact lines I would say to her describing my graduation and my plans for high school.

“You’ve already graduated, sweetie? Why is this in English? I thought you went to school just down the street from here.”

The disease had already conquered some of her memories.

“Grandma, we moved to India three years ago, remember? We don’t live in Korea anymore; we live in India, remember?”

She nodded her head and pretended to remember. I quietly lowered my diploma back by my side. Like always, we reminisced about the time we went on the family trip to Guam and how shocked my grandma was by all of the coconut bras and straw skirts, the time my grandma pulled out my tooth using a piece of caramel and I swallowed both the caramel and my tooth, the time my grandma taught me how to swim without floaties by throwing all of my favorite Hot Wheels in the deep end. After each anecdote I brought up, my grandma emptily smiled and nodded. These memories were no longer ones we could share. They were like broken codes to her. Memories that only I had access to: unanswered, esoteric, broken memories. If she couldn’t recall any of the memories that we shared, if she had lost our entire history, who was I to my grandma? If she had no memory of her own life, who was my grandma? I wanted to open up her head and wake her up, shake her brain, knock on it, ring a bell.

Ding dong.

My mom stood with a bag of pastries from Napoleon, my grandmother’s favorite bakery in the corner of the block across from her house. As I lifted my heels up and down in anticipation, I ran my hands over the laminated nametag in the smack middle of an uncomfortably bright, white sliding door to my grandmother’s room. In my other hand, I held on to my Vanderbilt acceptance letter.

Why is the doorbell so high-pitched? It’s annoying.

The slow, dragging footsteps got closer and closer. The door slid open and the nurse gave us the okay to enter the room. My grandmother looked up to see my mom and I walk in, then her head sunk back into her pillow. Her bed was raised at 30 degrees and a table rested just above her knees with a lunch tray of rice, kimchi, seaweed stew, sausages, and fried anchovies that had gone cold. At the end of the bed below her toes was her nametag and to the right side of her bed was a drainage bag for her urine. By the windowsill were a couple bouquets of flowers and cards, now taken over by dust bunnies. My mom walked over to the bed and brushed her hand through my grandmother’s hair.

“Ma, we’re here. Your daughter is here to see you.”

My grandmother slowly opened her eyes and stared up into my mom’s. She didn’t say a word. She had lost most of her hair and her figure was half of what it used to be. Forget the memories—she didn’t even know how to eat on her own, walk on her own, or shower on her own. As time

imprinted wrinkles around my grandmother's eyes, it also worked backwards, slowly snatching back each memory, each skill, each word she had ever learned.

"Ma, do you remember me? Soo Yong, your daughter. I'm here with Seo Yeon, your *sonyeo*. We brought your favorite red bean pastry from Napoleon."

My mom patted her palm on her chest over and over again, but my grandmother did not reciprocate any of my mom's signals.

"Ma, who is this?"

My mom pointed at me. I was still standing frozen by the door. My mom signaled for me to come closer to my grandmother. I lifted my heavy heels from the floor and inched closer to her bed. I scratched my elbow nervously in the heavy silence as my grandmother stared deeply into my eyes.

"*Neopjeoki*. I know you. You used to look just like your father. How could I forget my own granddaughter? I am terrible. I need to die. It's time for me to die."

Neopjeoki, which means little pancake, was what my grandma used to call me as a baby. Even now, my grandma has moments where she snaps back into her old self. For a few minutes at most, then she leaves again. I know that as time progresses, my grandma's state is only going to worsen. There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease. Each time I fly back home to Korea to see her, she will be a lot worse than the visit before. Every time I ring her doorbell, she will have lost a little more of herself: her thoughts, her memories, her words, her emotions. My childhood memories can no longer be shared, and I am no more than a stranger to my grandma. I will never be more than a stranger to my grandma. Whatever I do, whatever I say, it will all be erased from my grandma's memory within a couple of minutes. Nothing I do will ever matter to her.

Knock knock.

I swing open the wooden door to my grandma's room in the hospice and skip over to her bedside. Although she doesn't remember that she loves sunflowers, I bring her one every time just to see her smile as she holds it in her hands. Like my grandma did for me when I was a baby, I give her a bath and comb her hair, now completely white. I rub her back so that she can digest her stew and cover her with hugs and kisses. I show her unconditional love, love that will not be answered. Just as my grandma showed me how to love entirely without needing to be loved back, I do the same. My grandma tells me that I am her favorite grandchild because I am the only one she can remember right now, and we laugh. Five minutes later, she tells me the same joke again and we laugh just as hard as we did the first time. Throughout the visit, my grandma tells me the joke twenty more times, and each time we laugh like it's the first.