

Halmoni

Part 1 & 2

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It has been three years since Puppy had seen its grandma. At the end of this summer, one of its aunts sent it a photo of its grandma sitting in a hair salon. This was the first time its grandma stepped out of the house since the outbreak of Covid-19.



Its aunt wrote excitedly: 'Grandma now has so much more black hair! She is getting younger!' Seeing the white hair in the first photo, Puppy assumed that its grandma had in fact dyed her hair black. But when it asked to see its grandma's black hair, it received the following photos:



After a moment of perplexity, Puppy noticed the natural black hair growing under the white.

'I guess perspectives differ with age,' it thought.

The aunt in the photo, who is in her mid-40s, has become the sinner in the family for not marrying. In a recent phone call, its grandma told Puppy: "I love you even more than your aunt, because she is not married! I could die happy right now, but first I want to see you succeed — I want to see you get married and have children!" It didn't matter to Puppy that its grandma only ever talked about marriage and children as the sole objective, achievement, and happiness possible in life. It didn't matter, because Puppy enjoyed the other characteristics of its grandma's speech — the cadence and melody of her voice, the ebb and flow of the emotional tides beneath the words that sometimes exploded into a huge laugh or a sob. It loved its grandma very much, so it couldn't push away the creeping guilt. The older it gets, the more sorrow it will cause its grandma for not fulfilling her desperate wish.

'How could I love her in a different way?' it pondered, as it lay awake in bed.

The idea Puppy came up with was to slowly inch its way into its grandma's beliefs and views, and then gradually introduce its world to its grandma. It had never shared anything very personal with its grandma, thinking that it would only trouble her. 'Grandma won't be around for too much longer, so I should avoid telling her anything that could cause her sorrow,' it used to think. Now, however, its perspective had changed: 'Because grandma won't be here forever, I will try sharing my life with her.'

Puppy came up with a strategy. It would talk with its grandma about the performances it sees in Berlin, and through this conversation, it would, little by little, reveal its world. They would get to know each other over time in a (hopefully) gentle way, and its grandma would (hopefully) begin to understand its wish not to live a life with marriage as its main goal.

The first performance Puppy discussed with its grandma was *it's all love, blue spectres*, an HZT BA graduation work by Camille Jemelen. Camille, a friend of Puppy's, shared the inspiration his grandmother, Thérèse, had on this work.

"My grandmother loved to dance, but rarely had occasion to," said Camille.

'Hmm,' it thought, 'I don't know if my grandma likes to dance. I've never seen her dance.'

"I used to dance a lot with my grandmother. I have a vivid memory of dancing with her in her kitchen," he said.

'Hmm,' it thought, 'I've never danced with my grandma.'

"She truly adored Viennese waltzes and spent a lot of time watching and listening to them on German and Swiss television channels," he said.

This made Puppy think of its grandma's habit, the one that popped up ever since she lost her youngest child and only son, of blasting old Korean pop songs through the house at *all* times. Once, it heard its grandma singing gaily along and clapping in the living room, and stepped inside to join the festivities. The scene that met its eyes contradicted the sounds its ears had perceived. Its grandma lay helplessly sprawled on the couch in front of the big TV screen and her face was covered with tears as she sang and clapped along to the merry rhythm of the song.

'Delirium,' it thought.



Thérèse, 15 years old

Camille explained that this work was about him being a trans person, seeking to find reconciliation between his queer desires and practices on the one hand, and the perspectives on the body and sexuality of his ancestors on the other. The work was simple yet sophisticated. The space was softly lit with natural light shining in through a sky-light. Puppy saw Camille alone in the space in a red T-shirt, long blue training pants, and white sneakers, already in motion when it entered the studio. He improvised physically to Gabrielle Balfe's sonic improvisations, live via Zoom from Brighton where Balfe, who is also trans person, lives. Camille's limbs carved the space, his hair swooshed through the air, his spine undulated, his breath grew steadily heavier as the time went by. His movements and the sound waved in and out in varying textures without a break for 20 minutes. The energy was subdued yet intense, internally focused yet externally expanding, tender yet resilient.

Puppy began by telling its grandma that the dancer improvised for 20 minutes. Its grandma gasped and said, "For so long?" Puppy laughed softly and continued describing the sensitive dynamic between the sound and the movement, between Gabrielle and Camille. Intrigued by their fluid yet complex togetherness, after the showing, the assessors had asked Camille many questions in an attempt to unfold their secret mechanism. "What is the score?" they asked. "What are the conditions of your work?" "What's the structure that makes it work?" Camille couldn't offer any clear answers. All these questions had seemed awkward and silly to Puppy because they only concerned the brain and left out the strong elements of human connection — care and love. Although these things cannot be written down as a formula, care and love developed over time have the potential to produce understanding, spaciousness, and a boldness that can be expressed in non-verbal ways through the sensibilities of our bodies and emotions. Knowing the story between Camille and Gabrielle, it was clear to Puppy why the duet was strong and moving.

'Sometimes, analysis and words fall short,' it thought.

Puppy told its grandma that both of the artists were trans but its grandma did not grasp what it was talking about. So it explained. Before this conversation, it had never talked about sexuality and intimacy with its grandma. In fact, this was only the second time it had spoken alone with its grandma on the phone since it left Korea when it was 18 years old. It was, therefore, interesting to hear Puppy's grandma speak about intimacy in ambiguous terms as they discussed trans-ness further. Its grandma talked about a cis-woman transitioning to trans-man.

"They need to live like a man if they want to be a man. It's possible to live as a man, but to have intimacy with a woman is ... never possible. And one could never make babies," said its grandma.

"Trans-men do have intimacy with women and they also sometimes get pregnant," it replied.

"But trans-men can't sleep with women!" exclaimed its grandma.

After a bit of back and forth on this point, Puppy understood that its grandma was using the word 'sleep' to describe the specific kind of sex that leads to pregnancy. Its grandma's logic was that since trans-men could not inject semen into their partner's bodies, reproduction was impossible. When it asked if making babies were important, its grandma answered with an enthusiastic affirmation. It decided to take things a step further and told its grandma that, these days, due to the advancement of medical technology, even a couple consisting of a trans-man and a cis-woman could receive sperm and get pregnant. Its grandma was truly astonished.

Puppy's grandma commented that many people these days seem to do things that humans shouldn't do. For example, men living with men and women living with women. "It's the same as the women who don't get married," its grandma added. Its grandma then argued about the legitimacy of babies made by sperm donation. "The baby is still someone else's and not really your own, since it's not your own blood. If you get a sperm donation, you aren't actually making your own seed. This kind of kinship will prove to

be useless when most needed. For example, when you get sick and need blood a transfusion, your child won't be able to give you blood since it's not the same as yours," she said.

"But isn't at least half of the child your own blood, since it's the mother who produces the egg?" Puppy goaded.

"Hmm ... In the old days, they said that blood comes from the mother and bones come from the father. So I guess the blood between the mother and the child could be the same. But when I watch soap operas, it's the children that are not 100% yours who always cause problems ..." answered its grandma, ominously.

After some more discussion, Puppy's grandma commented that it seemed like people just did whatever they wanted to these days. "I don't know... I don't know... I live by the words and wisdoms of the old generations ..." Then, suddenly, its grandma said, "But *you* shouldn't do things like that. You can write about it, but don't do it. Through bad times and good times, you still need to live with a man, because ... living with a woman would be difficult."

After the phone call, it sat on the floor of its darkened room and listened to its grandma saying these words over and over again: "너는 그런거 하지 마. 책에는 내도 그런거 하지 마 너는. 너는 그런거 하지 말고, 잘 하거나 못 하거나 그저 남자하고 그냥 살아야지, 여자들하고 산다는 것은 힘들어."

(<https://soundcloud.com/user-345947129/oma-words-repeat-four-times>)

Puppy then stood up, turned on the light, and composed a simple and sweet piano song for its grandma. Could it be that its grandma had never had a song written for her before? It sent the song to the aunt in the photo above (this aunt lives with its grandma), and asked her to film its grandma dancing to the song. It added, however, that if dancing was too difficult, its grandma could just do anything along to the music.



<https://vimeo.com/474407655>

Puppy wanted to hold its grandma's hands in its hands. It remembered when its grandma whimpered like a child, complaining about how hard it was to deal with the kitchen tap because the water pressure was always much too strong. It knew, however, that if one pressed the handle down gently, the pressure decreased. Presuming that its grandma's hands had lost much of their sensitivity, it had simply agreed with its grandma's complaint.

It remembered walking into the bathroom and seeing its grandma, naked, vigorously rubbing the dead skin off her body. The sight somehow froze Puppy into immobility and it just stood there, staring at its grandma's bare body. After a while, its grandma told it to go out. That was November 2017. It is now November 2020.



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