

Halmoni

Part 3

[3]

There is a good time to care and a good time not to care. Today, Puppy feels like not caring. It is a liberating feeling. It is a day on which Puppy does not feel affected or ashamed by its own failures, weaknesses, and neuroses. It is a day that puppy does not tip-toe around its words, but rather just says them.

Recently, an acquaintance of Puppy's lost their grandfather. They were raised by their grandparents, and were therefore very close to them. Although they travelled to their grandparents' home for the occasion, they could neither hug their grandmother, nor attend the funeral due to the Corona regulations. Whenever anyone said, "I am sorry for your loss," they brushed it off by saying, "It's fine. That's life. People die." An old couple who Puppy knows well lost one of their sons in an accident. When Puppy met the couple for the first time, one of them said, "Well, we used to have two sons. But unfortunately, one died." Immediately after uttering this sentence, she burst into tears. "Well, that's life," she added, after collecting herself. Life keeps on happening, and that is, in fact, life. But deep inside, maybe, we all want and need a little help, a little healing.

It was the last day of October, a Saturday, and Berlin had declared a second lockdown, starting the following Monday. How to live life felt uncertain. Puppy had bought three tickets for the performance, *Healers* by Jasna L. Vinovrški, for that evening. 'This might be the last live performance I'll see for a long time!' it thought. It invited its friends, Bumpy and Thorny, to join it in this oddly festive moment of mourning. It was Bumpy's last evening in Berlin, since they had been visiting Berlin for just a short time, and were flying to Athens the following morning to

commemorate the death of their trans friend who was murdered last year. For Thorny, meanwhile, it was the first outing after a long quarantine, which made our meeting feel novel, exciting, and sensitive. Thorny, Puppy's closest friend in Berlin, had made the decision to move away from Berlin for good and would leave in mid-November. A tragedy.

November has always been a difficult month for Puppy, as it is the month of its uncle's birthday, and the anniversary of his death. The air felt tender around them as the three friends stood in front of the theatre. They could all use some touching of their insides, some healing.

Everything about the performance was white. White walls, white props, white costumes, and white people. It seemed as though the three performers, Cécile Bally, Darko Dragičević, and Jasna L. Vinovrški, were working with the aesthetics of subtlety — subtle movements, subtle gestures, subtle soundscape, subtle humour, and subtle changes in costumes and props. The performers stated that they “detect and remove those problems, unresolved issues, and emotional and energetic stagnations that might have been accumulating in the walls of the space ...” They carried out clumsy and unconvincing hand movements to “feel and work with energy,” and shared a fictitious-sounding history of Studio 1, which included a protest by some horses and then an artists' collaboration with those horses. Sitting through the performance seemed to take a very long time.

After the performance, Puppy, Bumpy, and Thorny debriefed extensively about their experiences of this “last live performance in Berlin.” Thorny summarised the performance as people acting and *pretending* that they could work with energy. She did not understand why the performers only focused on pretending, instead of *actually learning* to work with energy, when these techniques were learnable. Bumpy had a very hard time tolerating white people moving around minutely and carrying out small talks for such a long time, while trying to be somewhat funny. They added, that since the politics around race were so turbulent these days, and since having the chance to show a work was a privilege, we could not afford to waste that opportunity by presenting work that is void of meaning. Puppy tersely commented that the performance felt boring, the performers' humour did not work, and the work had no edge.

On the following week, Puppy called its grandma to talk about the performance. Before they could get to the topic, however, its grandma spoke for a long time about the hearts of parents. “Parents are the same even when they are a hundred or a thousand years old. A parent who is a hundred years old would still tell their child who is 70 years old to be careful when crossing stepping stones over a river,” she said. “In old sayings,” she added, “people say: ‘When a child dies, you bury them in your heart, and when a husband dies, you bury him in the mountain.’” She meant that a child is much more precious to a woman than her husband.

When Puppy finally had the chance to explain what the performance was about, its grandma had difficulty understanding what it actually meant to energetically heal a space. Puppy attempted to clarify: “For example, if some mysterious incidents happened in your room, and we needed to cleanse the air, we would hire a shaman, right? It’s similar, but in a ... ‘Western’ version, I guess.”

Immediately, its grandma agreed, “Yes, yes, shaman.” Puppy explained how the performers moved their hands, and was surprised at how its grandma was immediately convinced that the hand gestures embodied secret meanings. “It’s a conversation between the three performers. It’s similar to how mute people speak with each other. They must understand everything they say to one another! Because, for humans, the movement of the hands reflects what’s in their hearts. Don’t you think?” said its grandma. She then offered the example of how sometimes, when people reported hearing ghosts in their rooms, shamans performed their rituals. And when the shamans communicated with the ghosts and told them to leave, a very strong “smell of yellow” was left behind. In order to get rid of this “yellow smell,” people burnt things. She was very certain that the hand gestures of the performers in *Healers* constituted a similar kind of spiritual communication to that of the shaman banishing the ghosts.

“Do you think the bad spirits will just go away because someone moves their hands?” asked Puppy.

“That is a matter of one’s ability and power,” replied its grandma.

“Can one learn that ability?” asked Puppy.

“Oh no, one can’t. But if one longs for it deeply, desperately, and sincerely, one may be able to achieve something,” said its grandma. “But never go to fortunetellers!” she added. “They can only see your past, but not the future. They talk to spirits all the time, so they do know — they can really see ghosts and all — but don’t be fooled, because it’s all for nothing. It will only shake your heart. If they say something bad to you, it will remain in your heart forever, and that’s a truly terrible thing.”



Grandma, not in November

After a bit more small talk, Puppy carefully asked if its grandma was doing OK, since it was ... November. Its grandma replied that she could not show her sorrow, because that would hurt the hearts of its grandpa and the aunt who had moved in with them after the death of Puppy’s uncle, because they became so fragile. So she hid her heart from them, and thought about her son only silently. She talked to him and asked him why he left so soon, why he had to go. “If I can’t hold my own heart, no one

can hold it for me. I have to secure my heart with joy. If my heart shakes, that's the work of evil spirits," she added. Puppy cried softly as it listened to its grandma speaking. It thought about its uncle. They were close in age and grew up together, so it felt a deep kinship with him. They were the two 'different ones' in the family — Puppy had left the country to find another world outside of South Korea, and its uncle had entered the dark world of gangsters, violence, and trouble.



Grandma, in November

Puppy remembered its final conversation with its uncle. They were drinking *soju* and there was a gangster movie playing on TV. Its uncle made comments, such as, "When someone pisses you off, you go and slit their Achilles tendon from behind. Then they'll limp forever." This was the first time they had spent together, just the two of them, as adults. He was usually private and elusive, but the more *soju* he drank, the more he talked. He told Puppy that he must get married at least once and have children, because it was his duty to continue the family line. He was the only son in the family. Puppy's grandma had carried on having children until she finally gave birth to a son. He said that when Puppy got tired of living alone in foreign countries and wanted to return home, it shouldn't worry about where to go, because the two of them could live together. As he drank more, his skin and eyes turned red, and his words began to slur.

He suddenly held Puppy's hands and looked into its eyes, something he had never done before. By this point, the gangster movie on the TV had become background noise. Tears gathered in his eyes. "One thing that I want from you is that you don't become a lesbian," he said. Puppy did not know at the time that these would be the last words that it would ever hear from its uncle.

"Well, I guess that's life," said Puppy to itself as it put its hands on its heart.