

Halmoni

Part 4

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Puppy is from South Korea and Bunny is from Japan. They play music together in Berlin. They could never agree on a band name, but suddenly decided on the name 'disco tofu' during a tense phone call, when Bunny told Puppy that she didn't want her name to be mentioned at their upcoming concert. Not only was she afraid that she might face consequences from the Japanese government, she also did not want her name to be associated with the concert itself. The organisers had asked them how they would like to be introduced, hence the band name springing up. Bunny really liked the name and wanted it written as 'disco tofU'. Puppy did not care.

The concert was a part of a demonstration that took place on 25 November 2020, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. This demonstration was organised by the Korea Verband and was titled "Wir sind die Friedensstatue" (We are the Statue of Peace). The aim of the protest was for the right to keep the Statue of Peace in Berlin for an unlimited amount of time. The statue stands as a memorial to the comfort women — women and girls who were forced into a brutal sexual slavery by the Japanese army during WWII. As soon as the statue was erected in Berlin-Mitte at the end of September, the Japanese government demanded its removal. As a result, Mitte City Council ordered the removal of the statue as well, but, due to pressure from many Berlin citizens, they eventually allowed the statue to remain for a year. The head of the Korea Verband told Puppy, however, that the mayor of Mitte still claimed that he would have actively protested if he had known that the statue was going to be erected in Mitte because he considered it to be an act of singling out and attacking Japan, and would therefore like the statue to be replaced with a more "general" one in the future.



The Statue of Peace in Berlin

A week before the demonstration, Puppy received an email from the Korea Verband, asking about playing music at the demonstration. That evening, Puppy and Bunny met up to talk about it. It was a very challenging evening. The red curry with tofu that Puppy had ordered flooded from the bottom of its ripped container. Then, when Puppy opened the lid, it saw chicken, instead of tofu. Puppy is a vegetarian. This was a minor disappointment, however, compared to the conversation that Puppy and Bunny had while they waited for their food in the cold. When they talked about the gig, Bunny explained that she neither believed in, nor cared about, the history of the comfort women. “Japan and Korea are saying different things, and I cannot trust one side or the other. Anyway, my mother and grandmother lived through WWII, and I believe what *they* told me. And Japan already gave reparations to Korea. So why does it matter? It was wartime anyway,” she said. Puppy was shocked, especially because it had been recently helping Bunny cope with her own sexual violence case — a case which reflected a similar scenario involving an abuse of power that had infuriated Puppy. Bunny went on to say that she did not care that it was the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, because, for her, dealing with her own shit was enough. Puppy told her that they should not play the gig because it was too sensitive, and that they should stop talking about it altogether.

To cut a long story short, they did in fact play the gig at the end. It was a particularly cold day. As Puppy and Bunny set up their instruments and did the sound check, they could see their breath in the cold air. It was so cold that one of Bunny’s drumsticks snapped into two, and she had to quickly tape it back together again. As 4 p.m., the start time for the event, approached, the sun was setting and people started to gather. “Disco tofu is tofu ... Oh, excuse me, that was a mistake!” said the emcee, and laughter followed. Puppy and Bunny opened the event. Puppy felt its fingers freezing as it played the keyboard, and, as it sang and shouted, its cold breath smoked out wildly into the air. After their set, many speeches and some more music followed. Puppy and Bunny stayed till the end, dismantled and packed up their instruments, took them back to their studio, and then went to their separate homes.

Over the following days, Puppy was haunted by the rollercoaster of emotions and conflicts it had felt going through this experience with Bunny. Since Puppy’s grandma had also lived through WWII, it decided to call her and ask her about it. Its grandma was born during the Japanese colonisation of Korea (1910 – 1945), during which Japan enacted its policy to obliterate Korean culture and language. Korea was not yet divided into North and South.



Video Call

Puppy's grandma told it how her great aunt, who was 17 years old at that time, arranged a hurried marriage with a 44-year-old man who had four children just to avoid being captured as a comfort woman. "She lived like that for the rest of her life! Her youthful dreams ended, just like that ..." its grandma added. Its grandpa, who was sitting next to its grandma, joined in by saying that his aunt also got married to any man she could, as fast as she could, for the same reason. Its aunt, who came home at that moment, chimed in by saying, "It was in fact lucky that they at least understood the situation and tried to avoid it, because most of the women who were captured didn't know where they were being sent." So, an unexpected group discussion about stories of the lived past began.

Its grandparents repeated again and again how Korean people were not treated as human beings during the colonisation. "We were treated worse than dogs and pigs," they said.

"Even if we grew something, we couldn't eat any of it, because Japan took everything from us," its grandma said. "When Japan was preparing for the Pacific War, they took every single thing made of brass from our homes. We didn't have a single pair of chopsticks or a bowl left (back then, all kitchen items were made of brass). Your grandpa's older brother was forced to fight in the war, and my brothers were always on the run from being forcibly drafted into the army. We always lived shaking with terror, and we were so poor. Many people starved to death. I still wouldn't be able to talk to a Japanese person, because I would get too emotional. I know that we should also treat Japanese people as humans, and I'm sure that there are also good-hearted Japanese people — just as there are also evil-hearted Korean people. It is only natural that Japanese people didn't know about these atrocities happening in Korea, because they lived comfortably in Japan. But this is the *truth*. There's not even a speck of a lie in it, it is the truest of the truth! We *know*, because we suffered through it. I was probably too young to be taken as a comfort woman, but so many women vanished and never returned."

"The Japanese referred to the comfort women station a 'public toilet'," its grandpa added.

Before playing the gig, the head of the Korea Verband told Puppy and Bunny that Japanese politicians had signed a petition saying that allowing the statue to stay in Berlin was an attack on their dignity. 'If they are speaking of dignity, what about the dignity of the comfort women, which was mercilessly ripped to pieces?', thought Puppy.

After the gig, Puppy borrowed some books from the Korea Verband. It read the transcription of the testimonies of 40 comfort women survivors, published in 1995. It was one of the most devastating reading experiences that Puppy ever had. The survivors said, over and over again, that the things they went through could never be put into words. Words such as 'torture' or 'slavery' felt too mild to describe their experiences. They were brutally killed even for uttering a few words in Korean, as they were strictly required to speak only Japanese. After reading just a minuscule part of their experiences, Puppy could not begin to imagine describing any of it in words. It was too painful and monstrous.

There are things that cannot be erased. Some things are inscribed in blood, body, and soul.

After the demonstration, the head of the Korea Verband wrote to Puppy about the progression of events around the statue and her thoughts about it: 'The topic of sexual violence and rape makes many men feel uncomfortable. Therefore, assailers often want to ignore and erase their crimes ...' she wrote. 'At the same time, there is an unconscious and widespread thought of, "So many people do it, so why should only I get punished for it?" For this reason, it seems natural that the German male politicians understand the discomfort of Japanese government very well.' Although Puppy had experienced multiple and varying degrees of sexual violence, it had always kept these to itself. And because these kinds of attacks happen so frequently to countless women, Puppy often felt that it was unnecessary, and even boring, to talk about its own experiences. These lived experiences, however, made Puppy burn for justice whenever it heard about similar incidents happening to others. In the testimonies of the comfort women, almost every single one of the survivors spoke about the extreme shame they felt in revealing these facts. They hid this painful past for their entire lives, even from their closest friends and families, while

rage and sorrow ate them up from the inside. Puppy wanted to snuggle up at their feet lovingly and warm their hurt bodies with its own body heat, even just for a short moment.