

Halmoni

Part 6

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February 11 is Lunar New Year's Day, or *Seollal* in Korean, and one of the year's biggest holidays in South Korea. That evening, Puppy watches the online livestream of *Unfinished Fridays Vol.73*. The evening opens with a piece called *Searching for Home (In Berlin)*, created and performed by South Korean artist, Hanuel Kang.

Kang explains that today is *Seollal*, and that on this day in South Korea, people traditionally eat *tteokguk* (rice-cake soup). She cooks *tteokguk* on stage and cheerfully says: "From now on, it will smell like Korea." We hear a prerecorded narration of the artist saying that her father died in an accident seven years ago. We see a small table on the floor prepared for performing ancestral rites — a common tradition on *Seollal*. On the wall above the table, a photo is projected of Kang's father holding her as a baby. Kang says that her first home was her parents. After her father's death, she tells us that she came to believe that there was no logic to life and death. She describes the feeling of void, the exhaustion of her mind and body, and the need for healing. It was from this place that she began this project: *Searching for Home*.

The project began on an artist's residency in Iceland, and Kang plans to travel the world with it. In Berlin, Kang interviewed three South Korean female immigrants, because she was curious why other people left their homes. In the interview, she asks the following questions: *What was your first impression of Berlin? Why did you move here? How is it for you now in Berlin? How do you feel when you look at other female immigrants in Berlin? When do you feel like a stranger?*

The answers convey the considerable societal and familial pressure and expectations that exist for South Koreans living in South Korea. One

interviewee says that she had a girlfriend in South Korea but couldn't come out because she didn't feel she would be accepted by her family or society. Another interviewee says that she couldn't imagine raising her children in South Korea, and that she felt immense difficulty living as a woman there — she found herself constantly having either to put in unnecessary effort or to play down her abilities at work because she was a woman. Another talks about the patriarchal and conservative social structures of South Korea. After experiencing sexual violence and uncertainty around the future of her career as a woman, she felt she couldn't breathe anymore, so she ran away.

All of the interviewees say that they feel freer to be themselves in Berlin, despite having to deal with racial and sexual discrimination and legal disadvantages. One of them says that she feels foreign every day, because neither German nor English is her mother tongue. However, she adds, in South Korea where she could communicate in Korean, she still felt foreign.

When the video ends, Kang's narration resumes: "Standing in a subway packed with people, I felt alone. I was speaking Korean but we couldn't understand each other. I felt loneliness and despair. Born and raised in South Korea, I've become a foreigner here. Can I live here as myself? Where should I be?" Kang concludes this thought by describing the warmth she felt from the people she met in Iceland during her residency, and how she thinks that people can be a safe home for each other, despite speaking different languages and having different origins.

Puppy thinks back to a chat with a friend, Soapy, the day before. Puppy explained how it had learned not to trust the words that people speak easily, because its parents lied very frequently, and because, in Berlin, people often propose or promise many things, but they mostly all evaporate, as though they had never been spoken. Soapy stared at Puppy grimly and asked: "Then what *did* you learn to trust?" Without any hesitation and with a spark of playfulness in its eyes, Puppy replied: "My grandma's love for me and her food." After a moment of silence, it added, "Well, it's probably sad and dark, but I learned just to trust myself. Because if I were to depend on other people and things, if they

disappeared or broke down, then I would have nothing, and therefore I would also break down and vanish.”

Puppy has been a loner its entire life. Its answer to Soapy’s question came in the context of the lonely life that Puppy has led. The turbulences and struggles of its childhood and adolescence seem like a foggy dream from the past. Puppy has got used to being a foreigner and now it feels like an alien whenever it visits South Korea.

Puppy can’t remember the last time it was in South Korea for *Seollal*. It also doesn’t know, having always been the one who was leaving, how its family feels about its absence. Until these regular phone calls with its grandma, Puppy hadn’t spoken to any of its family on the phone since it left the country alone at the age of 18.

February 14, Puppy calls its grandma. Because it’s still the weekend of *Seollal*, its grandma, grandpa, and aunt all join the video-chat, shouting out new year’s greetings. Then, its grandma starts making her usual comments: “You need to get married! You look very pretty — now, so you need to get married while you still are pretty!” Although Puppy doesn’t normally resist much of anything she says, today it decides to instigate a soft rebellion. With a big smile, it replies: “Grandma, I was pretty 10 years ago and I will be pretty in 10 years’ time!” Upon hearing this comment, its aunt, the ‘unmarried one’, laughs with satisfaction and shouts: “I look my prettiest today! Every day is my prettiest day!” Its grandma grumbles: “Your aunt thinks you’re cool, but I don’t think you’re cool at all.” Its grandpa, who is always very reticent, sits quietly next to its grandma, sometimes smiling, sometimes coming close to the phone to get a better look at Puppy’s face. Growing up, Puppy never saw its grandpa smile or utter any unnecessary words other than short orders. Now he is older, however, he smiles often.



Its grandma pours out her sorrow of not being able to see any of her children and grandchildren on *Seollal*, due to Covid. When she is done speaking, its grandpa says in his typically economical manner: “Let’s hang up now.” Puppy laughs and replies, “But I’m not ready to hang up!” Every time Puppy calls its grandparents, they forget that the call is free, thanks to the internet. They always worry that it will cost Puppy lots of money, and therefore suggest to end the call hastily. Puppy reminds them that it is free, and they express, once again, their surprise and gratitude at how amazing and generous this world is.

Puppy describes Kang’s performance. After listening intently, its grandma makes a few short remarks, such as “That’s excellent”, “The artist must be very smart”, and “Good” but not much else. In an attempt to help, its aunt asks Puppy: “So what’s your question?” Puppy doesn’t feel it can just come out and say directly that it left South Korea for similar reasons, so instead it keeps talking. It explains how the patriarchy, conservatism, and pressure of South Korean society prompted the three women in the interview to leave the country. Eventually, it asks: “What do you think about this grandma?”

“Nowadays, men and women are equal. So it’s all fine,” answers its grandma.

Puppy laughs and exclaims, “Grandma, they are *not* equal!”

“I don’t think it’s so much about gender, but rather about societal pressure that sets impossible standards for young people and makes them feel gloomy about their future,” its aunt chimes in. “I personally don’t care so much about what other people expect me to be.”

“Well, grandma, what do *you* think about living according to other’s people’s views and standards?” asks Puppy.

“Oh, I care about it so much. It’s the most important thing for me!” answers its grandma. Puppy laughs. “We had to be that way in my generation,” its grandma continues, “because we lived a family-oriented life. I lived for my children, not for myself. It was only when our family seemed to be peaceful and well off that other people respected us. To

create that image, I worked until my bones ached and saved my money, so that I didn't have to ask for help and could dress my husband and children neatly."

"How did you feel when I left South Korea?" Puppy asks.

"I thought you'd come back," its grandma answers. "If I'd known you weren't going to, I wouldn't have let you go."

"How did you feel when my mother left?" asks Puppy.

Puppy's mother was its grandma's first precious child, born after 10 years of infertility. Its father was a poor but ambitious orphan who wanted to emigrate to the USA. Its mother didn't speak any English. Listening to what its grandma says next, Puppy feels as though it had been thrown suddenly into a feverishly spinning washing machine with all the pieces of its past memories swirling around with this new information.

"I was opposed to your parents leaving, but when they decided to go anyway, we sold 160 *pyeong* (about 529 m²) of farmland, gathered all the money we had, and gave it to them. Your mother worked endlessly doing menial jobs in that other country. She couldn't get a visa, so she had to move constantly and live in hiding. When I think of the pain your mother went through, my heart still skips a beat. When she was pregnant with you, her visa issues still weren't resolved so she had no health insurance. It would have cost her thousands of dollars to give birth to you there, so when she was almost due, she flew back here to have you. She didn't even open the door of the room where you slept, and 35 days later, she flew back to the USA. While your mother was gone, I didn't waste even 10 *won* (about 0,0075 euro), so I could save up and give your father as much money as possible whenever he came back to visit for this and that reason." On one of those visits, when Puppy was about three years old, he took Puppy back with him. Puppy had never laid eyes on its father before this moment. "Then when your father wanted to build a church in South Korea (he was a Christian pastor), we gave him all the money we had. When the church had been built six or seven storeys high, the Asian financial crisis and the IMF bailout hit, and everything collapsed. You and your parents flew to Canada — we bought your plane tickets — and all the

enormous debt fell to us. They threatened to repossess our house many times. Back then, three of your aunts and your uncle were still living with us! I thought of selling the house, but when I imagined my son wanting to get married in the future and not even having a place to live, I couldn't do it. I didn't tell anyone or ask for help. I don't even know how we paid back that enormous amount of money in just three years. God managed it for us."

Since its aunt is muttering in the background that *she* knows how they paid the debt back, Puppy asks her to tell it: "First, we sold off the rest of the farmland we had. We were lucky that it sold fast and at a good price, or our house would have been immediately repossessed and we would have been out on the streets. Second, your uncle didn't go to college, but worked instead. He gave all his salary to your grandma. Third, your grandpa also worked, and gave all the money to your grandma. We ate only rice and kimchi. Your grandma also worked doing anything she could do. Your uncle (who was in his early twenties back then) often gave your mother pocket money when you, your mum, and your sister came back to South Korea!"

Its grandma jumped in and said: "Your father ruined your aunt's life! She had everything prepared to go and study abroad and then disaster struck. She was so disappointed she never attempted it again. I still feel sorry for your aunt. Then your father came back again, and he asked us for our house. *That* time, I said no. After that, he met a rich woman and left. Your mother waited for him for 10 years. She believed he would come back. He didn't." At the end of the call, its grandma happily says that all these memories feel like a distant dream now, and that she is so thankful because she can still live financially independently of her children and can still give to others.

After the call, Puppy stands outside in the courtyard with its cat. There's snow on the ground and it's sunny. It decides to go to Müggelsee, a place it often goes to when it wants to find some comfort. At Müggelsee, it is surprised to see people walking, skating, and cycling on the frozen lake. It stands on the lake with the sun in its face, chewing gum and drinking cold beer. It thinks of a winter a long time ago when it walked alone on a frozen pond even though there was a sign there telling it not to. There was no one

around and it felt peaceful. Perhaps this was Puppy's quiet expression of its loneliness. But now, there are many people happily walking on the ice. Puppy feels the water flowing underneath the ice and all the water in its body. It thinks of the three generations of women — its grandma, its mother, and itself — trudging through water and ice in their variously shifting forms, and it whispers: "Happy new year!"



Müggelsee