

On Finding Our Dragons

Hair and the Search for a Personal Legend



By Esther Yoo

Many years ago, there was a beautiful woman who lived in a small village in Korea. At the proper age, she married. Her husband, a very intelligent man, wanted to be a scholar, and so one day, he left her and headed for the capital to take the government examination. The trip to the capital alone, she knew, would take many weeks. But weeks, then years passed, and he never returned. She gave up looking for him, and began attending school at night instead.

A rich man from another village saw that she was very beautiful. He asked her family if he could take her as his second wife, saving her family from the perplexing and unusual situation of having a married yet husband-less, and worse, childless daughter. Her family, unsure of what to do with her, agreed. But only if he kidnapped her. This freed the family from the dishonor of allowing a married daughter become another man's second wife.

One night, as she left school, a band of men grabbed her and took her to the rich man's house. She began life anew in a different man's house, but only as Second Wife.

Her first child was a girl. The rich man loved the baby girl, treating her gently as one would a fruit easily bruised. The woman became pregnant again. But this time would be different, the rich man believed. This child would be a son. As the day of the second child's birth approached, all the members of the household beseeched the ancestors to give them a son.

The birth was dramatic. From the moment the contractions began, they calculated the time. It was the year of the dragon, the month of the dragon, and finally, the dragon hour. In the zodiac, the dragon is the strongest of all animals. "A male born now," the rich man thought excitedly, "would be strong enough to rule the country." A son! A son!

A girl was born. There is nothing worse than a woman born with a strong sign. The rich man hated the baby. For three years, he refused to give the girl a name.

The story of hair begins with hatred and anger. Infuriated that the second baby is not a boy, a father refuses to name his daughter. Without a name, she is nothing, non-existent. The story of hair belongs to her: the unwanted, unnamed daughter, my mother's mother.

I received her story, a gift from my mother, when I was young. I cannot remember how old I was when I first heard it, so the story seems as though it has been with me all my life. I remembered the story at those times when I needed it most, after a fight with my own father.

artwork by Stella J. Yoon

When I was young, all I could see in the story was a girl, hated by her father, for no good reason. Sometimes, I thought my father hated me. At a certain period in my life, during junior high and high school, our home became a daily battleground. My father had reservoirs of anger. In Korea, he had graduated from a top university, the president of his class, and had worked for the elite think tank that guided the South Korean economy. Coming to America, propelled more by his family's vague, gilded conception of the American Dream than a strong dream of his own, he gave up trying to get his master's degree and became a drycleaner, a bit character in the self-absorbed daily lives of Southern California suburban housewives. His professional esteem thus deflated, he demanded respect from his increasingly Americanized children.

Anything could trigger his anger: an untidy room, an unfinished math assignment, a sarcastic comment. These could shift the tectonics of my father's temper.

One time I looked into his eyes while he lectured me, a clear sign of disrespect in Asian culture. Within minutes a fight escalated. My father shouted, "How dare you disrespect me!" My mother, who had initially tried to calm him down, finally just stood between us hysterically weeping. At first, I protested, "That's unfair. How can you get mad about something like that?" His litany never stopped, making the Korean language raw and harsh. I gave up trying to understand what happened, and stared at the ground, crying and mumbling over and over, "I'm sorry *Appa*. I didn't know. I didn't mean to disrespect you. I didn't know...."

Though he never hit me, for some reason, I braced my cheek, the roots of my hair tingled in anticipation, but the slap, the punch, the cracking of skull under skin never happened. Rather, my father searched frantically for a ready, airborne missile. Mornings after fights like this, I would sorrowfully take out to the trash pieces of some freshly smashed object from the night before — rice cookers, napkin holders, picture frames, a guitar.

He always ended his tirade, spent, lost in misery and self-pity. He cried, telling me to sit next to him. "I'm doing this for you ... because I love you ... I don't want you to become like me" These words hurt me more than his curses and condemnations. Inevitably, taking my hands, he gasped, "Let us pray." His desperate prayer, more beautiful than the sun, cut into me.

After the fight, I sat alone in my room. "Many years ago, there was a beautiful woman ..." I thought, and began crying.

When the Japanese colonizers left Korea, the rich man, like the rest of the people, had little to nothing. Barely an adolescent, my mother's mother ran away on a boat to Japan. In Japan, she learned enough Japanese to blend in perfectly and began looking for work.

She began working as a hair model. Her hair was the Asian feminine ideal — strong, long, and black. Though I have never met her, I know she was beautiful. I once found a photo album with all of my mother's pictures before she got married. One picture of my grandmother showed her hair, dark and beautiful, curled and pinned, like a 50's movie star's. Her slim eyes looked away from the camera, smiling at some distant object. Wearing a white, traditional Korean dress, she sat, her delicate hands placed upon her crossed knees.

Because the pay from one of these photo shoots was equivalent to a house in impoverished, post-colonial Korea, she sustained her family through poverty. When she returned to visit her family in Korea, she came bearing gifts for everyone in the family except her father. He did not complain. He had no right. Everyone watched the transfer of power awkwardly. The girl baby, once held in so much contempt by her father as to not even merit a name, had fulfilled a prophecy. Upon returning, the dragon unleashed her power, a power so strong, so mythical, the very foundations of the rich man's patriarchal household trembled.

My mother's mother transformed the meaning of hair. A woman's hair, in Asian societies, was her prized asset, the mark of feminine beauty. And essentially, beauty was all that a woman possessed. Other qualities got shuffled over by prospective husband in favor of the beauty card. A woman could play that card so well if she had it.

To some extent, this is true even today. Every time I am in the company of Korean women, I experience the exquisite pain of being told I am pretty and nothing else. Most recently, I was sitting in the worn vinyl chair in the Korean salon where I have, since I was a toddler, gotten my hair cut. When I looked up, I noticed a middle-aged Korean woman staring at my hair.

She was blatantly bored, waiting for her perm to set. Wielding a Korean woman's magazine in one hand and resting the other hand on her hip, she stared at me in the mirror. She spoke.

"What a pretty girl. Pretty skin, pretty hair."

She said this in Korean. I understood her, but I never knew how to respond, so I gave her my best demure, well-mannered Asian girl smile. But she saw my lack of verbal response as incomprehension. She spoke again, but in English.

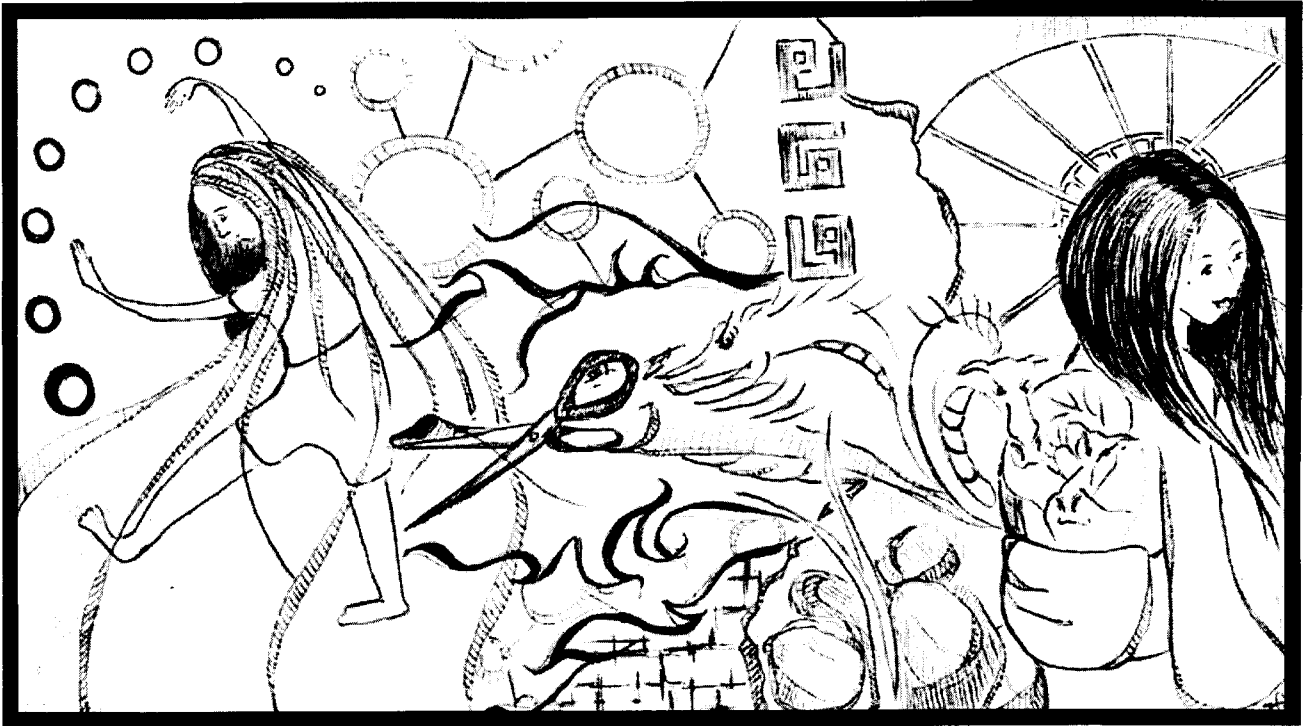
"You pretty, understand? What grade you in? Freshman?"

"No, I'm a junior," I answer in Korean. This much Korean I knew.

"You sixteen! No way!"

"No, I'm twenty."

"Twenty! You junior in college! What college you



go to?"

At this, I paused. "Harvard," I answered, refusing to look her in the eyes.

"*Uh-muh-na!*" she yelped. "Pretty AND smart!" She began speaking again in Korean. I understood, but I didn't listen anymore. I knew this part by heart already. It was the "Exhortation to Marry Korean" that is scripted onto every Korean woman's tongue.

"You must marry nice Korean man ... important because we're foreigners here, and we can't lose our identity in America... besides, Korean features only look good with another Korean"

Sometimes she paused, prompting some sign of agreement. "Of course," my smile said. "All you say is true." By this time, several other ladies, birds of a feather in their pink hair salon shifts, had come over to see and pet the curiosity, the girl who would marry one of the rare species, the Harvard Korean male.

The climax of the story of hair is fear. Years of fearing the repercussions of offending my father made me become what I fear more — a quintessential good Korean girl. There is even a word in Korean to describe girls like me. *Yahm-juhn-heh*. I have heard this word so many times, issuing from the mouths of relatives and parents' friends. Their looks of admiration and approval guide me; it is the current easing me down the river of traditions, myths, and roles to end up in the gully of empty "prettiness" and passive acceptance of who I should be, what I should do.

When I was seven, I lost control of something that mattered to me for the first time in my memory. My

hair, flowing all the way down my back, was my substitute for the quintessential childhood security blanket. Growing up in an immigrant family that knew nothing about security blankets, I never had one. I played with my hair instead.

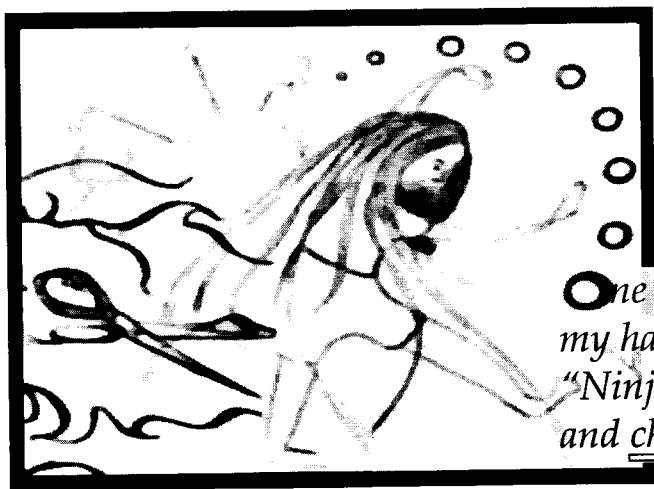
One day, my grandmother caught me playing with my hair. I was in the backyard, pretending to be "Ninja Woman," a super-heroine I invented after secretly watching all of my uncle's kung fu videos. Ninja Woman routinely defeated all the bad guys that threatened the peace and beauty of her kingdom. While she used the standard kicks and chops, she also had a secret weapon: her hair. It served as an invisibility cloak in extremely dangerous situations.

"*Sungeun-ah*. Come here," my grandmother, my father's mother, called. Her strident voice brought me out of an especially exciting and heated moment of battle. Reluctantly, I obeyed, and trotted back inside. Once I stood in front of her, she motioned me to turn around. She took my hair into her fists, then gathered it into a low ponytail in one hand. With her other hand, she brushed the small wisps at my neck. The withered skin of her fingers felt soft against my neck.

"Wouldn't you like to get rid of this heavy load of hair?" she asked quietly. Even at that age, I had learned the correct response — don't speak; don't move, but nod slightly to show her you were listening. She motioned my aunt over.

"Cut her hair," she commanded imperiously.

My poor, overworked aunt was peeling soybeans, preparing dinner as she did every night, by herself, for our huge extended family. She dared not disobey. She



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took my hand, made me sit, legs crossed Indian-style, in the middle of our family room. I tried not to think about what she was doing. Humming to myself, I heard the scissors snipping. I heard my aunt cursing under her breath. The sound of the scissors grew closer and closer, until it was near my ear. Finally, my aunt stopped.

"I can't get it even!" she cried, throwing down the scissors.

I ran to the bathroom mirror. I gasped. My hair was now a sheath of awkward feathers, wisping unevenly about my ears. It was as short as a boy's. After my initial shock, I felt outraged.

"I can't get even!" I moaned to myself. It was true. I couldn't blame or punish anyone for this injustice. As a seven-year old, and a girl at that, I knew that nothing I wanted, nothing I felt, mattered. I had to accept my grandmother's will just as she had to accept her grandmother's when she was young.

It was painful, but I returned to the scene of the crime. My aunt and I, with shaky breaths and pent-up tears, under the critical, watchful eye of my grandmother, picked up the pile of strong, black hair that had once flourished on my head. My grandmother had cut my invisibility cloak to shreds.

From that day on, I could no longer shield myself from the reality that so much of what I wanted, explicitly or secretly, was not in my control. I learned my roles instead — granddaughter, daughter, sister - and observed how I would play my future roles — wife, daughter-in-law, mother — from the Korean women I met. In some cases, I learned my role so well that I could no longer distinguish between what I wanted and what was expected of me. I became the actress, so consumed by the role, that she no longer needed cues from the director.

One day, I became the dutiful younger sister. My brother and I ended up in the final round of the school spelling bee, the last two standing. I cut it short by

deliberately misspelling the first word. My brother got it right. He won, and I felt happier that he had won. If I had even tried, I felt, it just wouldn't have been right.

As a teen-ager, I learned my parents' mantra, "lawyer not writer." As a young adult, I never questioned where I had to apply to college, where I had to go when I was finally accepted. Instinctively, I chose what was expected of me before anybody said anything, before a contrary impulse could arise within me.

And one day, it will be time for me to get married. At that age, my grandmother will conjure up the ghost of my aunt, the one who cut my hair, to remind me. This aunt, years after the disastrous haircut, eloped to Las Vegas with a much older, Japanese-American man. In Las Vegas, my aunt considered the odds of finding love, took a gamble, and got married. My grandmother, shaken by this affront to her authority, declared her non-existent. It was a warning to all of us. Marry an outsider and your family will forget you existed.

Though my parents have gradually brought my aunt back into existence, and my grandmother now allows her and her two sons to visit, though never during official family occasions, the memory of that fiasco still rankles my grandmother. The day I found out I was accepted to Harvard, I called her to tell her. She immediately tempered my jubilation by saying, "You must find a good Korean man at Harvard, Sungeun. If you don't marry a Korean, I will not come to your wedding. I will not give you any blessing nor will I recognize you as my granddaughter." Her comment made me pensive. What would it be like to become the family ghost? Could it approximate the sorrow I felt the entire year I discovered I had already become a ghost, invisible to the person to whom it should matter the most — myself?

I realized what could happen, even with a matter so personal as love. Unless I claim myself, this is what will happen — I will not seek love on my own terms, fearing disapproval. Instead of wanting, fighting for, and winning love, I will let time pass. At the age when

marriage is a dimmer hope, a concerned relative will introduce me to a nice Korean man who will save me from a barren, childless future.

Then, I will realize, a husband is as easy to get used to as a short, wispy haircut.

I wonder how my mother's mother felt when she boarded that boat to Japan. Did she fear, wondering if she should not be doing what went against tradition? Leaving home back then was unheard of, especially for a girl. Did she fear her father's anger if he caught her escaping? Did she consider the certain death, with no one to take care of her and no home to return to, if she failed?

These questions linger in my mind. Her story gave hope during those difficult years, when I feared my father, then feared my own ability to recover myself. It led me to believe that the story of hair could be transformed from one of fear to one of reclaiming oneself, finding one's own true passion and power. She had transformed the meaning of hair from the passive acceptance of the primacy of a woman's beautiful exterior to one in which the hair, though beautiful, was a means to fulfill a life-prophecy. She had found her gold, and the road there was lined with hair.

But the gold corrupted. The sudden power, the usurping of the leadership role in the family, my mother told me, made her selfish. I knew this. I have never met my grandmother because she never wanted the responsibilities of being a grandmother. She told my mother that she never wanted to see my brother or me. My mother said it was because she couldn't accept being ordinary, did not want to do ordinary grandmotherly things. She had to be forever young. No one who has seen their grandson or granddaughter can help but realize their age, that most of life is past and gone.

After her second husband, an American, died, my grandmother moved to Hawaii. In sixth grade, my best friend, her parents, and I went on a trip to Hawaii. A few weeks before the trip, a will had arrived in the mail with her return address. She lived in Waikiki, the very place where I was headed.

I can tell you a little about the trip. The beach was beautiful, but crowded. The flora and fauna in the rain forests was spectacular. We went snorkeling one day. But mostly, I remember old Asian women — Chinese, Korean, Japanese. One day, we were walking on the very street where my grandmother lived. I searched every old woman's face — the one sitting on the bench, the one waiting for the bus, the one carrying grocery bags, the one walking her white dog. Every time I looked at one of them, I thought, "She must be my grandmother." But the next face would bring me to the same conclusion, until I became utterly confused, and fell into an odd hallucination. Every person on the street became an old woman, and all of them started clamoring to be my grandmother.

During those times when I was hurting because of my father, or searching for my identity, I dreamt that she would come to me and tell me what to do. She would become more than a legend; she would become a real person in my life. But years passed, and she did not appear. In the meantime, my father underwent his own transformation. Inexplicably, though my mother humbly calls it an answered prayer, my father, the summer after my freshman year in college, asked me to forgive him.

I'm not sure what happened while I was in school. My parents



*The girl baby, once held
in so much contempt
by her father as to not
even merit a name, had
fulfilled prophecy.*

*Upon returning, the
dragon unleashed her
power, a power so
strong, so mythical, the
very foundations of the
rich man's patriarchal
household trembled.*

