A BITE OF KIMCHEE

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I was weaned on kimchee. A good baby, I was "able to eat anything my mother told me. But what I especially loved was the spicy, fermenting, garlicky Chinese cabbage my mother pickled and bottled in our kitchen. Not waiting for her to lick the red peppers off the won bok, I would grab and gobble the bits of leaves as soon as she tore them into baby-size pieces. She said even if my eyes watered, I would still want more.

Propping me in a baby carrier next to the sink, my mother would rinse the cabbage she had soaked in salted water the night before. After putting the leaves dry, she'd slather on the thick red pepper sauce, rub the cloves of garlic and green onion into the underarms of the cabbage, lifting the leaves, bathing it as she would one of her own children. Then grabbing them by their dangling leafy legs, she'd push the wilting heads into five-gallon jars. She had to rise up on tip-toe, submerging her arm up to her elbow to punch the kimchee to the bottom of the jar, squishing them into their own juices. We kept an extra refrigerator in the garage just for the kimch

Throughout elementary school, our next door neighbor Frankie, whose mother was the only other Korean in our neighborhood, would come over to eat kimchee with my sisters and me almost every day. After school we'd gather in our garage, sitting cross-legged around a kimchee jar as though at a campfire or a seance. During each other on, we would stick our hands into the mouth of the jar and pull out long strips that we would eat straight, without rice or water to dilute the taste. Our eyes would tear and our noses start to run because it was so hot, but it seemed as if we couldn't stop. "It burns, it burns, but it tastes so good!" we would cry.

Afterwards when we went to play the jukebox in Frankie's garage (we would pretend we were nightclub singers, karaoke performers before our time) we had to be careful not to touch our eyes with our wrinkled, pepper-stained hands. Sometimes it seemed as if the hot, red juice soaked through our skin and into our bones; even after we bathed, we could still feel our fingers tingling, still taste the kimchee on them when we licked them with our tongues. And as my sisters and I curled into the night, nestling together like doves going to sleep, I remember the smell lingered on our hands, the faint whiff of kimchee scenting our dreams.
We went crazy for the smell of kimchee—a perfume that would lure us to the kitchen table. No one in our house had to eat alone; the odor of kimchee beckoned for companionship. When my mother hefted the jar of kimchee out of the refrigerator, opened the lid to extract the almost fluorescent strips of cabbage which she placed in soup bowls at the center of the table, she didn’t have to call out to us, though she always did. “Girls, come join me,” my mother would sing and even if we weren’t hungry we couldn’t resist. “My stomach says no, but my mouth says yes yes!” My sisters and mother and I lingered over snacks that lasted two or three hours.

I smelled like garlic, like kimchee, like home.

I didn’t realize that the smell, carried within my intestines like a parasite, followed me to school. One day, walking across Middle Field towards the girls’ locker room, a girl I recognized from the gym class before mine stopped in front of me.

“You Korean?” she asked. She narrowed eyes as brown as mine, shaped like mine, like mock-orange leaves pinched up at the corners.

Thinking she could be my sister, another part-Korean, part-haole hapa girl, I nodded and welcomed her kinship with a smile.

“I thought so,” she said, sneering. Her lips scrunching upwards, almost folding over her nostrils. “You smell like one.”

I held my smile, frozen, as she flirted away from me. She had punched me in the stomach with her words; the wind knocked out of me, I tried to catch a breath like a gaping fish. Days later, after replaying this confrontation endlessly in my mind (in one fantasy version, this girl mutated into a hairy neanderthal that I karate chopped into submission), I thought of the perfect comeback. What should I have said, I thought then, was: “Oh yeah? Well, you smell like a chimpanzee.” I also tortured myself with the thought that I should have said something that day. Anything—a curse, a joke, a grunt—anything at all, would have been better than a smile.

I smiled. And I sniffed. I smiled and sniffed as I walked to the locker room and dressed for PE. I smiled and sniffed as I jogged around the field, trying to avoid the ball and other girls wielding field hockey sticks. I smiled and sniffed as I showered and followed my schedule of classes.

I became obsessed with sniffing. When no one was looking, I lifted my arms and, quick, sniffed. I held my palm up to my face and exhaled. Perhaps, every now and then, I caught the odor of garlic and cabbage in sweat and breath. I couldn’t tell; the smell of kimchee was too much a part of myself. I belonged to a tribe of kimchee eaters, marked by primordial scent.

I didn’t want to smell like a Korean. I wanted to smell like an American, which meant being odorless. Americans, I learned from TV magazines, erazed the scent of their bodies with cologne and deodorant, breath mints and mouthwash.

I erased my stink by eliminating kimchee. Though I liked the smell and the sharp bite—garlic and pepper biting my tongue—I stopped eating my mother’s food and purged it from my system.

I became shamed by kimchee, by the shocking red-stained leaves that peaked out from between the loaf of white bread and carton of milk, the stunning odor that, as I grew to realize, permeated the entire house despite strategically placed cartons of baking soda. When friends invited me to my home pointed at the kimchee jars lined up on the refrigerator shelf, squealing “Gross! What’s that?” I’d mumble, “I don’t know, something my mom eats.”

Along with kimchee, I stopped eating the only three dishes my mother could cook: kalbi ribs, bibim kooksoo, and Spam fried with eggs. (The first “American” food my mother ever ate was a Spam-and-egg sandwich; even now, she considers it one of her favorite foods and never gets tired of eating it. At one time in our lives, Spam was a staple. We ate it every day.)

I told my mother I was a vegetarian.

One of my sisters ate only McDonald’s Happy Meal cheeseburgers (no pickle), and the other survived for two years on a diet of processed cheese sandwiches on white bread (no crust), Hostess Ding Dongs and rice-dunked in ketchup.

“How can you do this to me?” my mother wailed at her American born children. “You are wasting away! Eat, eat!” My mother plopped heaping mounds of kimchee and kalbi onto mounds of steaming rice. My sisters and I would grimace, pout at the food and announce, “Too fattening.”

When we were small, my mother encouraged us to behave like proper Korean girls: quiet, respectful, hard-working. She said we gave her “heartaches” the way we fought and wrestled as children. “Worse than boys,” she used to say, “Why do you want to do things like soccer, scuba, swimming? How about piano?”

But worse than our tomboy activities were our various adolescent diets. My mother grieved at the food we rejected. “I don’t understand you girls,” she’d say. “When I was growing up, my family was so poor we could only dream of eating this kind food. Now I can give my children meat every night and you don’t want it.”
“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” we’d say as we pushed away the kimchee, pushed away the Korean-ness.

We pushed my mother, too, so much so she ended up leaving Hawaii. After she moved away, wanting to travel and explore the America she had once—as a new bride barraged with foreign language, customs, foods—been intimidated by, I ate kimchee only sporadically. I could go for months without a taste, then suddenly be hit with a craving so strong I ran to Sack- Save for a generic, watery brand that only hinted at the taste of home. Kimchee, I realized, was my comfort food.

When I became pregnant, the craving for my own mother accentuated my craving for kimchee. During the nights of my final trimester, my body heavy, restless, Tori longed, I hungered for the food I myself had eaten in the womb, my first mother-memory.

The baby I carried in my own body, in turn, does not look like me. Except for the slight tilt of her eyes, she does not look Korean. As a mother in love with her daughter, I do not care what she looks like; she is perfect as herself. Yet, as a mother in love with her daughter, I worry that—partially because of what she looks like—I will not be able to identify with the Korean in me and in herself. I recognize that identifying herself as Korean, even in part, will be a choice for her—in a way it wasn’t for someone like me, someone recognizably Asian. It hit me then, what my own mother must feel looking at each of her own mixed-race daughters: how strongly I do identify as a Korean American woman, how strongly I want my child to identify with me.

Kimchee is an easily consumable representation of culture, digested and integrated by the body and hopefully—if we are to believe the lesson of Malligan Stew taught us in elementary school—by the soul as well.

When my daughter was fifteen months old, she took her first bite of kimchee. I had taken a small bite into my own mouth, sucking the hot juice from its leaves, giving it “mother-taste” as my own mother had done for me. Still, my daughter’s eyes watered. “Hot, hot,” she said to her grandmother and me. But the taste must have been in some way familiar; instead of spitting up and crying for water, she pushed my hand to the open jar for another bite.

“She likes it!” my mother said proudly. “She is Korean!”

When she told me this, I realized that for my mother, too, the food we are growing up had always been an indication of how Korean her “mixed-blood” children were—or weren’t—at any given time. I remember how intently she watched us eat, as if to catch a glimpse of herself as she chewed. “Eat, eat. Have some more,” she’d say, urging us to take another serving of kimchee, kalbi, seaweed soup, the food that was linked to Korea and to herself.

Now my mother watches the next generation. When she visits, my daughter cleaves to her, follows her from room to room. Grandmother and granddaughter run off together to play the games that only the two of them know how to play. I can hear them in my daughter’s room, chattering and laughing. Sneaking to the doorway, I see them “cooking” plastic food in the Playkool kitchen.

“Look,” my mother says, offering her grandchild a plate of plastic spaghetti, “noodles is kooksoo.” She picks up a steak. “This kalbi.” My mother is teaching her Korean, presenting words my daughter knows the taste of.

My girl joins the game, picking up a head of cabbage. “Let’s make kimchee, Halmoni,” she says, using the Korean word for “grandmother” like a name.

“Okay,” my mother answers. “First salt.”
My daughter shakes invisible salt over the cabbage.
“Then garlic and red pepper sauce.” My mother stirs a pot over the stove and passes the mixture to my daughter who pours it on the cabbage.
My daughter brings her fingers to her mouth. “Hot!” she says. Then she grabs the green plastic in her fist, holds the cabbage to my mother’s lips, and gives her halmoni a taste.

“Mmmmm!” My mother grins as she chews the air. “Delicious! This is the best kimchee I ever ate.” My mother sees me peeking around the door.

“Come join us!” she calls out to me and tells my daughter, who really is growling at the fake food, “Let your mommy have a bite.”