On Not Liking *Kim Chee*

LYNNE NUGENT

In Korean restaurants, my non-Asian friends like to tell me how much they love *kim chee*. I smile weakly and pick up a few small face-saving pieces with wobbly chopsticks. Pickled, fermented cabbage infused with garlic and hot pepper, kim chee is a staple in Korea, where it was devised in ancient times to preserve vegetables through the winter. Since then it has become a nationally defining food. A typical Korean eats some form of the spicy side dish with every meal. When posing for pictures, Koreans don't say "cheese"; they say "kim chee."

I went to Korea two summers ago hoping to be won over to kim chee at last. It was my first visit as an adult to my mother's native country, and behind my hope for a kim chee conversion experience was a larger hope that I'd make all sorts of profound connections to my heritage, that I'd discover my Koreanness.

Staggering off a fourteen-hour flight from Chicago to Seoul, my mother, brother, and I left our bags at a relative's apartment and walked out into the humid night to look for some dinner. Despite it being close to midnight, pedestrians hurried past; shop windows were still lit. We found a storefront restaurant where we sat cross-legged on straw floor mats in front of low tables. The room was very stuffy. A dirty mirror hung on one wall; an ineffective fan whirled in the corner. Dehydrated from the flight, I felt lightheaded. The waiter brought out little dishes of kim chee. I looked down at the waterlogged squares of cabbage flecked red by chili powder and knew that I had never liked it and never would.

It is said that no one's kim chee can match that prepared by one's mother. Korean men are advised to find out if prospective brides make good kim chee, otherwise domestic strife can result when the man sneaks back to Mother's kitchen to get his fix.

My mother bought gallon-sized glass jars of kim chee at the Asian market. It was a long drive to the store, the only one of its kind near the St. Louis suburb where we lived, so she stocked up. Not at all tolerant of cultural differences, I complained that keeping kim chee in the refrigerator made the milk smell funny. I didn't especially want to be Korean. I wanted to fit in, and in Maryland Heights, Missouri, in the 1980s, that meant being white. I hardly hesitated over those forms that commanded: "Check only one box." I checked "White" without a qualm.

Resembling my dad, I passed reasonably well for white, although sometimes people would squint at me and ask, "What *are* you?" That made me grit my teeth. I wanted to be pretty, and "pretty" meant looking like the models in *Seventeen* magazine, which I read religiously. I wanted to be as different as possible from my mother, who didn't make cookies or socialize with my friends' moms. I felt ashamed when she chewed gum loudly in the car as she chauffeured my friends and me to junior high dances.

A jackhammer pounded at concrete ten floors below my head. I looked at the digital alarm clock: 3 a.m. As if jet lag weren't enough, the relentless destruction and construction of Seoul continued all night long, it seemed.

In the living room, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the city. Mom sat on the couch facing the view. "Can't you sleep?" she asked. "Are you hungry?" I was afraid she would offer to fix me some kim chee. I plopped down on the couch and we looked out at the lights of Seoul's buildings and the black velvety opaqueness of its mountains. At the far end of the living room the TV was on with no sound. It was the news. An anchorman and anchorwoman bowed to the camera at the end of their broadcast, and Mom asked what I would think if she moved back to Korea.

Once, I would have considered this familial treason, but I had been sensing ever since Dad died three years ago that Mom's balance of emotional attachment was shifting back to her place of birth. Besides, I thought about how much more fun it would be to visit Mom in Seoul rather than Maryland Heights. My desire to fit in had turned to complete disdain by the time I was in high school. With every year my desperation to leave the suburbs grew. I chose a college in the middle of a city, and my college friends found it interesting, not weird, that my mother was Asian.

There was one obstacle to being newly non-white: my looks. "You kids are so white because your mother drank a lot of milk while she was pregnant with you"—that was the folk belief repeated to Mark and me by Korean relatives as we were growing up. By college, instead of feeling not white enough, I felt not Asian enough. But I knew that even still, I had an out. I had a culture that would be there for me when I chose to claim it.

By the end of our first week in Korea, though, my brother was ordering *kim-chee-ji-gae* (kim chee soup) regularly, while I was making surreptitious stops at McDonald's for cheeseburgers and ice-cold Diet Cokes.

When I was in college, an anthropology professor said that, in the native South American society he studies, the word for "culture" translates literally to "something that takes a long time." In other words, "we have to do these rituals because our ancestors did, but they're damned inconvenient." How many people try to go back to their "roots," having lost the thread of their heritage, only to become annoyed with aspects of traditional ways?

Our relatives jammed full our visit with touring. They took great care of us but rarely let us in on the planning. It is assumed that family members (especially older ones) know what's best for you. "*Mogo, mogo!* (Eat, eat!)," they'd say, pushing a plate of boiled beef soup toward me. We met three uncles—younger brothers of my mom—whose faces were variations on a theme, and one aunt, her older sister, an elegant, well-dressed lady of sixty. We met shy cousins who were toddlers last time I saw them, now high school or college students. The cousins were embarrassed to try out their English on us, even the ones who admitted to being English majors.

Often, Mom met with her three best friends from high school. The four of them giggled and screeched like schoolgirls for hours on end. I wished I knew what they were saying. They and my uncles could speak at least a bit of English, but they didn't seem that interested in talking to Mark and me. I had hoped these people would help provide the key to my mother and thus to my own identity, history, culture, etc. Instead, when I asked a question they would answer with a laugh or in monosyllables.

Nor was Mom a willing translator. Occasionally, she herself would forget and speak to us in Korean. Mom speaking Korean is someone I'd like to know. None of the hesitation of English: she's assertive, even bossy. She orders waiters around. But all I could do was look at her blankly until she realized what she was doing and switched back to the foreign language her daughter speaks.

I BROACH THE TOPIC IN A PHONE CALL, after we cover the ritual subjects of whether my neighborhood is safe and when I'm going to visit her.

"Mom, what is kim chee made of?"

"Are you *making it?*" Total shock.

"No, I'm writing about how I don't like it."

This she seems to accept. She goes on at length, which she rarely does in English. "Well, you take Chinese cabbage, and put salt on, and leave it overnight so all the water comes out, so it gets all—what is the word—saggy, you know? Then you put in garlic, ginger, chili powder, and let's see, green onion, and leave it out on the counter to ferment. Not too long or it gets sour . . ."

She becomes philosophical. "I think when you have kim chee a lot growing up, you become addicted to it," she says. "In the past only Koreans ate kim chee. But now, Chinese and Japanese eat it, and Americans too, they try it, and they develop a longing for it. They long for it."

A REPEATED SCENE AT THE KITCHEN TABLE in our house in the Midwest: Mom is eating kim chee with rice porridge while I pour myself a bowl of Cap'n Crunch. We steal glances at each other's breakfasts, appalled, too polite to say a word. □

NATHAN JONES

Station the Eleventh: Jesus and the Rare Accomplishment of Faith

You're a mess in Your tree,
Your hailstorm, Your melancholia. You read anchors in Your palms, nails in Your wrists.
Your shroud is tapping its tiny foot while You're midair.
The vessel

has been severed, hoisted
in the churchyard—Your paleface wraiths pout on every hilltop leaking palimpsests,
crippled from decline, purpled with blood and
Elohim's breath.

The pardon will never arrive.
Pilate blushes at the shibboleth. Your lungs tell a bildungsroman, Your feet dangle
as a Foucault pendulum, Your abdomen slicks over
the fences.