

5-23-05

Dear Oisin,

Last year I started to write a story about you. I didn't have too much time to work on it, and I wanted to write everything very carefully. So I ended up leaving it alone after just the first chapter. One of these days I will finish it, hopefully before you grow up and actually live your life. You see, in that story, you are grown up already, and I try to imagine the kind of life you will have. Of course, in reality I wonder about that all the time. I would so much like for you to have a good life. At the same time, I also think a lot about what a good life exactly is. As you know, this is what Socrates wondered about all the time. These days, many parents are content simply to say 'I would like them to be happy.' There is no doubt that it is important to be happy. With Socrates, however, there is never an answer. He irritates many people in Plato's stories by constantly asking questions, and never suggesting a constructive answer to anything. Still at the end of a dialogue, one ends up with a very strange sensation that the matter is much better understood than before the questions were asked. This is the nature of much good philosophy.

I'm thinking tonight again about my own grandparents, that is, the parents of Haraboji and the mother of Halmoni. Halmoni's father died when she was just a little girl, so I never knew him except in pictures. My uncle, Halmoni's brother, often likes to say I look like him. Halmoni's father owned a company and did quite well with it. But I think my uncle likes to remember him as having been a scholar and a philosopher at heart. If my grandparents had had a chance to see you, even from a distance, say across the street or

through a window, they would have been absolutely consumed with happiness. I actually knew one great-grandmother quite well when I was a boy, Haraboji's mother's mother. She used to call me puppy. She was very spirited, and a famous story ran in the family about the time when she, already an old lady, chased a burglar out of the house all by herself, armed only with a cane. You can't help thinking that it must have been a gentle burglar.

When I was six years old like you, all of us went to America, to join Haraboji who was already working there. He was teaching literature at the university in Buffalo, New York. We had a good time there of course. Buffalo is well known for its heavy snow-storms. Grown-ups are not very fond of this, but you can guess that for children, there are few things as exciting as a yard piled up high with snow, day after day. There were many nice people teaching at Haraboji's university in those days. One of them was Liz whom you know. Another was named Charlie, and it's at his wife Angie's house that we spent that month in Sifnos. There was a very serious man named Larry who had many, many books going up the walls of a big old house. His five daughters were very gay, though, and loved to play with us, especially the youngest one Sarah, who was a year older than Maggie Komo. Years later, when I came back to America to go to graduate school, I had a chance to be at their family reunion in New Haven, Connecticut. It was at the house of Betsy, Larry's wife. Of her as well, I have many fond memories, because she used to love organizing the children into activities, like pumpkin-carving. She was much older when I saw her in New Haven, but still very friendly and bubbly. Unfortunately, Sarah wasn't at the reunion and that made me kind of sad.

In Buffalo, we adopted a small puppy from a lady named Margaret Small, who, Liz tells me, lives now in Chicago and helps poor women. I didn't know any English when we first arrived in America, but I don't remember having any difficulty in learning it. Everyone at school was so friendly that it didn't matter much. The first-grade teacher told one of the students (a very pretty girl with dark eyes!) to teach me English between the regular classes, and that worked out just fine. I remember still quite clearly sitting by the steamy window on wintry days, the little girl earnestly pointing out the different sentences in a green school-book and asking me to read after her. There were no places to buy Korean food in Buffalo in those days, so sometimes we were content with eating just long-grain rice topped with soy sauce as a treat. (I'm sure this sounds quite yummy to you.)

We were in Buffalo for three years before returning to Korea. One of those years, we heard that my great-grandmother had died. I remember crying, but it's hard to really remember at this point the actual sad feeling I must have had. Sometimes I regret that I didn't have you much sooner, so that you could have met your great-grandparents. Of course, that's a silly thought, since I didn't meet mommy until long after my grandparents had died. So if I had had children while they were living, they would have been some other children. Or would they? Isn't that a curious question? Perhaps the spirit of Oisin was flying around in the universe somewhere, as Plato says in one of his dialogues, just waiting to hop into the body of any child of mine. Of course, it would have been impossible without mommy.

During my grandfather's funeral, I had a very serious conversation with his best friend Mr. Choi. Mr. Choi was usually a very jolly old man, but this

was a good time for considerable solemnity. I recall sitting with my legs crossed over a cushion, facing him, and my grandfather's body resting just on the other side of a silk-covered partition that supported a brush painting of a lone crane sitting in a pine tree. He proceeded to tell me in a labored voice with a sad poetic tinge about the difficult life my grandfather had lived, and the magnificent effort he had put in to educate himself and his children in the poor farmland that he was from. He had spent a lot of his life in politics, and was very much admired for his high principles and righteous ways. Mr. Choi went on to speak about my grandfather's son, who is Haraboji, and about what a wonderful teacher he is, and a writer of learned books. Of course, the point he wanted to make was that my life was connected to theirs like the branches of a tree to the bough and the trunk and the root. The flowers at the top come out only at the end of years of growth from the root up, and the continued sustenance in the connection with the soil. I listened, as solemnly as he spoke.

The year we stayed at the Korea Institute for Advanced Study, there was one day that I went with Haraboji to my grandparent's grave-site. It's on the top of a mountain. It was an occasion to realize how old Haraboji was becoming as he huffed and puffed his way up, leaning against a tree now and then to rest. The path leading up there is quite pretty and it's lined with chestnut trees that fill up with fat juicy chestnuts in the fall. (You have to knock them down with a heavy stick and then trample on them until the thorny green cover peels off.) When you get to the top there is a spectacular view of the countryside, with rivers flowing on either side of the vista and rice fields and rolling hills as far as the eye can see. Your great-grandmother picked out the spot carefully years before she died. She believed, as many people

in Korea still do, that being buried in the right sort of place will bring good fortune to her children, and her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren. I don't really know the theory behind all that (it's called 'geomancy') but it's quite akin to the idea that we are connected like the branches to the root.



A funny story is from the first time we went up there carrying my grandmother's coffin. We had many workers to help us, but it was still tremendously hard. The road was steep and covered with bushes and brambles in those days. Everyone was sweating like a hog and terribly tired because of the heavy load. The funny part was that Haraboji was obviously quite mad at his mother for all that hassle, even though she could hardly have heard his complaints. He and your great-grandmother were

always arguing about little things when she was alive.

That day I went with Haraboji, it was much easier than the first time, except for Haraboji's old age. The path was much wider than before, and maintained by the villagers. Besides, we weren't carrying a coffin. We spent some time picking weeds out of the mounds and filling the sparse areas in with fresh clumps of grass gathered from the hill-side. Then we set some food (I think meat, apples, dried fish, and rice cakes) on the altar, poured wine, and bowed to the spirits of your great-grandparents. Unlike in the Illiad where everything is burned after the offering, Koreans actually eat the food following the ceremony, after waiting a respectable length of time. The food from these ceremonies is exceptionally good, especially when you are eating in the mountains. (That reminds me of one time when you were little and we went up to one of the strands by the stream in Sabino Canyon. I had put some soup into a thermos and had a box of California rolls. You really liked that meal, and spoke of the event many times in your funny little sentences afterwards: `We went to mountain. Ate soup.`)

Dearest Oisin. Somehow, I felt like saying that and writing that just then. I'm so far from you right now and my heart is heavy with salty water.

Ah, the spirit of Halmoni's mother is gently complaining that I didn't write anything about her in this letter. After all, it's quite a short letter, and it would really take years to write about everyone properly. But anyways. We, that is, Halmoni, Komo, Maggie Komo, Samchoon, and I, lived with her for a while when Haraboji was in America. It was at her house that we had that nice pet chicken that was eventually eaten by neighbors.

When I was older, she seemed always to be occupied with the affairs of the church. Unlike Haraboji's mother, she was quiet and reserved most of the time, that is, except on Christmas and New Year's and festive days like that. One of her best friends was a jolly Presbyterian minister, a very tall gallant man with round spectacles who visited her all the time with flowers and other goodies. If we searched a bit, we might be able to find in Halmoni's house one of the big flower arrangements she made out of colorful fabric and paper, delicately wound around wires. That was a great hobby of hers, and I'm sure she would have loved to show you how to do it. She would put them into nice glass display cases, and give them away as presents. In the last years of her life, she was unfortunately bed-ridden because her heart wasn't working properly. She liked to hear me sing church hymns to her as she lay in bed. I cried and cried uncontrollably as I sang them at her funeral, even though I was all grown up by then. The awful sorrow I felt then, I remember very well. Just now, I tried to find the English words to her favorite hymn, but somehow I couldn't. So I'll translate the Korean for you. I'm too tired right now to do a good job, but I hope the meaning is clear:

Unto that place above the earth  
I progress every day,  
With full devotion, loving care,  
On every day, I pray.

Oh Lord, just hold me by the foot  
To stand I need thy aid.  
I know that there on every road  
But light and love are laid.

Down here with naught but suffering,  
Shall I live here, till when?

Oh Lord, just lead me up, I pray,  
And pray to thee again.

Oh Lord, please hold me by the foot  
To stand I need thy aid.  
I know that there on every road  
But light and love are laid.

As I translated, I sang the song a few times in a  
quiet voice that only spirits can hear. She seems  
happier now. She is also smiling some wet smiles.  
Isn't that a convenient expression I picked up from  
Mr. Barry, who wrote Peter Pan?

Good night Mr. O.

Mr. D.



*St. John's Church, Little Gidding*

