

Writing | Symposium 2022

Halaboji and The Ugly Tumor

By Jennifer Soh

Halaboji is my mother's father, a 6'3" Korean man with salt-white hair and the stubbornness of a three-year old child. His stubbornness is what makes all of his sentences end with some version of a scoff or sneer, but coupled with his tall stature, it gives him command over any room. When he speaks, his voice is 10 decibels louder than anyone else's. You can only hear his bellowing voice when we stand to sing hymns in church, as he hits each note on its head with the precision and authority of a drill sergeant. He is demanding and infuriating when we buy the wrong fertilizer at The Home Depot or try to hide his license to keep him from driving on the roads that have become unfamiliar to him. But the same *Halaboji* taught me to hear the difference between □ and □ and how to ferment *kimchi* in an IKEA wash basin in our tiny, southern California beach town.

When I was six, he sat me down, pulled up the sleeve of his T-shirt, and pointed to a small, bite-sized scar on his upper right arm. It was marked by a puncture wound and paler than the rest of his tanned and weathered skin.

"We were on the ground, shooting blindly into the jungle. Bullets everywhere. When it all stopped, my friend saw my arm bleeding. A stray bullet scraped me right here." *Halaboji* served as a dentist in the Vietnam War, a source of never-ending pride that he carries with him. I spent most of my life thinking that his scar really was a gunshot wound until I learned about smallpox vaccines. The picture I found online looked identical to *Halaboji*'s.

I still let him retell the story. But as I got older, I stopped nodding and clapping when he would always end the story with:

"Your *Halaboji*? A hero."

"Kyu-Chil Lee... Seventy-three-year old man... Presenting with stage two gastric cancer... History of smoking... Here for a subtotal gastrectomy..." I only catch every other sentence.

I stare at the linoleum floor of the hospital and count the number of black dots I can find. One hundred and twenty-eight. I don't have to look at *Halaboji* to know he is holding eye contact with the doctor and nodding every thirty seconds like he has for most of his life in America. He smiles at the doctor when he's finished. *He doesn't understand*, I want to scream.

Just one month ago, my grandmother had been noticing stomach pain and abnormal bloating. *Halaboji* accompanied her and my mother to the doctor's appointment. The way my mother tells the story, *Halaboji* pointed to his own stomach and insisted the doctor order him whatever tests my grandmother was getting. I couldn't help but roll my eyes when I first heard this. *Classic Halaboji*, I thought, *insisting on making even his wife's pain about himself*.

My grandmother's tests came back clean. But in *Halaboji*, they found a tumor. It was ugly and stubborn, perched like a leech, on the wall of his stomach. Gastric cancer, they called it. Commonly found in East Asians. Most commonly found in Korean men over the age of 50. Now found in my *Halaboji*.

I had blamed God for a while before I blamed our Koreanness. I blamed the doctors for not knowing to check for the big, fat mass in his stomach earlier. I blamed *Halaboji*'s smoking. But mostly, I blamed myself for rolling my eyes.

"Do well." I forget the Korean words I need to string together to be able tell *Halaboji* "Good luck" or "It will be okay" or "I will see you soon, and you will be the *Halaboji* I have always known again – the one who can climb mountains and tile a roof without a ladder. You are still my hero." Instead I wave to him in his cot and say "□ □ ." We've always struggled between his English and my Korean, but he understands my brevity and my informal grammar. He nods and waves back.

We go to a restaurant by the beach to celebrate *Halaboji*'s second month of remission. My mother orders him the steak and potatoes, the most expensive choice from the menu. We clink our water glasses together and thank God for saving *Halaboji*.

When the waiter comes and places *Halaboji*'s platter in front of him, it hits me for the first time how small he looks, shriveled and limp as if someone took him and drained him of life in the form of fifty pounds. He stares at his food for minutes before wielding his knife in his right hand and his fork in his left.

"Just leave whatever you can't finish," my mother says. *Halaboji* nods, mustering up the courage to take a bite. He chews and chews with determination, crushing the meat between his teeth until it becomes reminiscent of the soft *juk* he's been restricted to. When it comes time to swallow, the determination morphs into defeat. *Halaboji* leans down and spits out a gray-brown pile back onto his plate. It resembles what I imagine the tumor that once lived in his stomach to look like. Big and ugly. We talk around it for the rest of dinner.

The waiter comes back to clear our plates. He looks around my age, kind and attentive. He probably would have pretended not to notice the chewed pile on the corner of *Halaboji*'s plate and the otherwise untouched steak, but to *Halaboji* it was too shameful to ignore.

"Half my stomach. Gone!" *Halaboji* flashes a smile to the waiter, trying to make him understand that it's not his fault. I look away because I can't imagine what the waiter is thinking, if his first thought could be that just two months ago, the small man sitting in front of him was strong. If he could think that *Halaboji* had an ugly tumor in his stomach that almost killed him. If he could realize that even though the tumor is now gone, *Halaboji* is never going to be the same again.

I only let my eyes wander far enough to see the waiter's hands use *Halaboji*'s napkin to cover his plate before taking it away.