Interrupted Beginning

By Lily Koo

I turned my head and looked over my left shoulder. My mother-in-law sat silently staring at the unfamiliar landscape through the window on the right side of the car. During the brief flashes of street lights, I could see the hardened wrinkles of her face. Her lips tautened into a small fine line with a slight bend downwards at each end. Her brows were furrowed into a v-shape, making her already small eyes into slanted slits. Yet I could still glimpse at the defiance of her eyes as she peered out the window trying to make out the shadows of the large maples, looming houses, and mailboxes that lined the curving road.

I loosened some of the strain on my neck as I brought my head back a little and focused my gaze on my husband. He sat stiffly, his back almost perfectly aligned with the driver's seat, the knuckles of both of his hands protruded from their clench of the wheel. His stare seemed to follow the beams of the headlights all the way down the road. The sole motion that broke the stillness of his body was the chewing of his lips. This was the first time his mother would see where he lived and he was probably wondering what her reaction would be.

"Uhm-ma, how was your flight?" I called to her in Korean, trying to soften the mood.

"Long." Her eyes never left the window.

"I'm sorry you had to come all this way alone. You could've waited until Ah-ju-shi could leave. The baby is not due for another month." I gently stroked my large belly.

"It's the first child. It's important that I come before the baby is born." Her voice was gruff and forced.

"Ahhh, here we are." The car bounced under the nudge of the tires against the curb. We pulled around the circular driveway and into the garage as its door opened with a motorized hum. My mother-in-law was the first to step out of the car. She stood at the edge of the garage and scanned the different shapes of the front yard and house. My husband slowly eased me out of the passenger's seat. I slowly shuffled my feet over next to my mother-in-law. I breathed in the slightly damp and cool air that smelled of sweet pine. My familiarity allowed me to see the pinks and purples of my garden and the rich green leaves of my trees, within the outlines in the darkness. My husband had gone in and turned on the lights of the yard and front entrance. I heard a short gasp from my mother-in-law as the sight, which I had known, unfolded for her. The lights to each side of the entrance door illuminated the grays and highlighted the texture of the stone walls of our house. I took my mother-in-law's arm and lead her to the front door. I wanted her to get the full effect of the entrance into the home of which my husband and I were proud. She should feel this pride, knowing that her eldest son has done so well in America.

My mother-in-law took tiny, hesitant steps as I led her through the door. Her mouth had fallen slightly, and her glistening eyes seemed more pronounced on her face. Her head turned inches from the left, to the right, towards the ceiling, and to the floor. She knelt to touch the gray and white marble floor. As she rose from the floor, she tilted her head so far that her hair bun almost touched her back. She pivoted so that her eyes could catch the shimmering rainbows of the crystal prisms on the chandelier of our foyer.

The dancing lights seemed to speak to her - she stood still, her back arched backwards, concentrating as if she were deciphering a cryptic message.

"Uhm-mah..." My husband brushed her arm with the tips of his fingers, wanting to shake her from her trance.
"OI-YAH!" She hissed as she snapped around to face him. Her eyes had hardened into black stones. Her sudden rage had made her tower over him and he meekly lowered his eyes. "You have been living like this?" She stepped backwards with calculated steps. Then she began screaming and shouting, flailing her arms and crying. Her hysterics had slightly weakened her as she fell to her knees, then leaned to sit on her hip in the middle of the foyer. "Your father and mother have been living like peasants and you live like kings! No respect! No gratitude! Who made you? Who sacrificed for you? It is your duty to return what we have done! It is your duty!"

She put her arms down to the floor and buried her head in them. The heap of her body rose and fell with each groan. I glanced up at my husband's face. His eyes were glossed over and the color in his cheeks had vanished. He barely moved even with each breath. In those few moments he had aged. The circles under his eyes were a deeper shade of purple. The contours of his face were etched with pronounced wrinkles and lines. His lips had turned a grayish blue, jagged with crusts of dry skin.

As I watched him, my chest started to tense with anger. Who was the ungrateful one here? Had she so quickly forgotten the lavish apartment he had bought for them with his first paychecks and the thousand dollar checks he sent to them religiously each month? Did she know that the reason he spent so much on our house was as a gift to me? That it takes me hours to persuade him to buy a new sweater because he'd rather spend the money on someone else?

She stood up and raised her small nose in the air. "No good son, you are no son of mine!" I wanted to bite her icy tongue. "Youngji-ah, show me where to sleep. In the basement with the dog, no doubt." I turned and grabbed one of her small bags. My husband made a motion to bring up her small suitcase, but she quickly yanked it from him and I led her upstairs into the guest room.

"Yobo . Yobo," I whispered into the darkness of our bedroom. I had just finished getting ready for bed and shut off the lights. My eyes were still unaccustomed to the dark and I stretched out my arms to feel for the bed. When I found its edge, I fumbled for the covers and climbed in. My husband lay curled up on the other edge of the bed. "Yobo, your mother is crazy, no? I have never seen or heard anything like that." I managed a stiff giggle, trying to make light of the situation. There was no response. "You are a good son, anyone can see that." I stroked his arm and then his hair, brushing his black strands behind his ear.

"Youngji-ah, get some rest," he almost whimpered. "You'll need it for tomorrow." I kissed his cheek and tucked myself into bed, snuggling up behind him.

The alarm went off at 5:30 am. I could not remember the last time I had gotten up before dawn. I felt dizzy - my body was clearly not accustomed to the new schedule. I quickly washed my face and brushed my teeth. I wrapped my thick, floral robe around me. The slits of the robe hung open around my stomach, too small to completely fold over my waist. I put on my slippers and walked out the bedroom and downstairs. Through the windows of the living room, I could see that though it was still dark, a slight tinge of orange was creeping over the horizon. I had to move fast to prepare breakfast. She will be up by dawn. After last night, I could not mess up my duties as daughter-in-law.

I turned on the lights to the kitchen. I sighed, knowing the work set out ahead of me. I wished I could just put out a couple of bowls of cereal and toast some bagels and make some instant coffee. Instead I pulled out some frozen mackerel and left it to defrost on the counter. I measured out eight cups of rice and started to wash them under the sink faucet. I gently filled the rice pot with water, looking at the swirls of cloudy white. I poured out the cloudy water carefully so not one grain would be lost. I repeated this twenty times. After that the water in the rice pot was almost clear, and I placed the pot into the rice cooker. Just as I was pulling out a bottle of kimchee my mother-in-law walked into the kitchen.

"Good morning mother, did you sleep well?" Damn, I thought. I haven't even begun making breakfast. My mother-in-law shook her head.
"No. The bed is too soft." She looked at the stark dining table with a disapproving eye. She pulled the chair at the head of the table and sat down.

"Breakfast will be ready soon." She responded with a heavy sigh.

I opened the bottle of kimchee. The putrid smell of vinegar and red pepper filled the room. I had pickled the cabbage myself just recently and wondered if it was ripe enough to serve. I put my nose to the opening and inhaled deeply. The smell was strong and I put my hand out onto the counter to hold myself up. I was one of those women who was still blessed with morning sickness though I was in my final term. I ran to the bathroom and vomited twice before I could come back to the kitchen. I started breathing with my mouth as I resumed cooking. The red juices from the kimchee stained my fingers and the cutting board and I sliced the long strips of cabbage into small squares. I took a furtive glance at my mother-in-law. She had sat with perfect posture, her head held up, staring out into our backyard.

I started setting the table for breakfast, laying out dishes of pickled turnip, Asian bean sprouts, seaweed, and bean curd. Luckily I had prepared most of the dishes the day before. I then started gutting the fish. I had to leave to the bathroom again, vomiting though there was nothing left in my stomach. I returned to the kitchen, finished gutting the mackerel, and then fried it in a pan. My husband then came downstairs. He sat to the left of his mother, and quietly whispered a good morning.

"Oi-yah," she nodded. I finished setting the table with the fish and rice. The two of them began to eat as I started to clean up and prepare lunch.

Not a word was spoken as they ate. I could hear their clicking chopsticks and the crunching of their mouths as they chewed pickled turnip. I quietly soaked rice dough in a bowl of warm water to soften it. Then I started to slice cucumbers. In the silence, I could hear every sliver of the cool, green skin, every thud of the knife's blade, and every jump of the cutting board.

"I had a dream last month." I almost dropped the pan I had been washing as I jumped as my mother-in-law's voice broke fifteen minutes of silence. "I was in a great rice field alone. There were no houses or other people in sight. I walked for miles and miles under the heat of the sun. Soon I became exhausted. My forehead and clothes were drenched in sweat, my mouth dry and desperate for water. Then as I was looking towards the sun, wondering if there would be relief, a dragon stretched across the sky. It was so large it shielded me from the sweltering heat of the sun. Its colors were silver and a majestic purple. It flew towards the sun until it became just a small speck in the sky. When it was gone, I was no longer in the rice fields, I was in a house with the both of you."

My heart fluttered nervously as she finished telling her dream. She dreamed of dragons before a child's birth. Ancient folklore told her that I was pregnant with a son. She got up from the table and walked to the sink where I was standing. She placed her hands on my shoulders and turned my body so that it was facing hers. Her grip was tight and I could feel each of her fingers pressed into my skin. She stared up into my eyes. I could not escape her piercing stare. I held my breath, waiting for her next words.

"You've already taken my son. Do not take what will be my first and maybe only grandson."

I glanced for help from my husband. Our eyes met for only a brief moment, then his eyes lowered and watched his chopsticks uncomfortably sift the food on his plate. His dedication to his parents had been slowly eating at him for the seven years we had been in the U.S. The scenario last night might have been all that he could take. He wanted to surrender. No more fights on the phone, no more guilty conscience. He wanted to go back to Korea. I was on my own.

"What if this baby is not a boy."
"You will eventually have a son. Might as well move now than later."

"This is my baby," I stated firmly but softly. Korean tradition dictated that I hold my tongue.

"In Korea the baby belongs to the husband and the husband's family."

"This is not Korea."

"That is what I am trying to fix."

I looked at my husband again. His eyes remained glued to the food on his plate though he had not eaten any more of it. My eyes returned to my mother-in-law's. She never ordinarily smiled, but now I could almost see the ends of her mouth inching towards her cheeks. The squeezing at my chest suddenly became too great and I quickly ran from the kitchen. As fast as I could, I climbed up the stairs and into my bedroom. I shut the door hard behind me and locked it. I laid down on my bed, grabbed my pillow, and started to cry. How could I go back?

I glanced across the room at my dresser. On top of it was a small gold-painted trophy. It had a woman figure on it. The figure held a racket on its right arm, bent at the elbow, and two pointed fingers of the left hand raised up at the ceiling. I had won a beginner's tournament in the tennis club not far from our house. I loved the sport - it was the first skill I had learned to call my own.

To the left of the dresser was a small table. On it were several sculptures. I had started taking a pottery class recently. My initial works were tall vases, stubby candy bowls, coffee mugs with intricate handles. The handles were in shapes of giraffes, flowers, and lions. These were far from the sculptures that I wanted to be doing. Since I had begun my class, I had taken several trips to the fine arts museum, sometimes three times a week. It was a constant inspiration that I could visit any time I needed to.

My eyes roamed over framed posters of Georgia O'Keefe and Monet paintings and stopped to the right of my bed. On the night stand I saw a box lamp that my uncle had given to me. It was a glass rectangular box and on the inside of it was a small model of a Korean house. A light lit from within the house when the lamp was plugged in. I started to picture what my room would be like in Korea, in that boxed house.

We would be living with my husband's parents. The rooms would be sparsely decorated. There would be no paintings or framed posters covering the walls. A thick mattress would replace the bed so that it could be put away during the day to make use of the room. The doors in Korean houses were made of paper; there would be no locks. My room would not be personalized with sculptures or trophies. My spare time would be used to cook and clean for my mother-in-law.

I looked at a painting of my husband hanging over the dresser. It was a painting I had done long ago while in school in Korea. But for the first time I noticed how I had painted his eyes. The eyes were a cold black color. I had tried to soften the eyes with warm hues of peach and tawny brown on his face. His hair was highlighted with auburn and brushed with delicate strands. His small smile was a gentle slope of supple pink. I looked at the hardened eyes again. Nothing had changed.

I heard a faint knock at the door. "Yobo-yah," my husband whispered. "It will not be so bad. You will live near your family and old friends again. You can still sculpt. Nothing will change, we will live there like we live here. It will be okay..."

I slid my hand over the clock radio and turned it on. I turned up the volume until I could just drown out the needy ramblings of my husband's voice.