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Gnats at Tiger Uncle's Funeral

The incessant armies of gnats that swam around our heads in drunken joy reminded me of the buzzards one notes in the sky on occasion. Garbed in the thick black fabric of mourning, we resembled in a way the darkly-feathered vultures when they stand hunched over on the road sides. We raised one arm, and then the other, in the air like wings to try and fend off these gnats without success. Instead of attuning to the gravity of this moment—a funeral service—and respecting the solemn grieving of the departed's family, I honed in on the way all the females' black heels sank into the cemetery soil with every step; eventually, they took off their shining pumps and allowed them to swing back and forth upon their fingers. I felt the heat of the June afternoon sun scoring all of our skin and being absorbed without mercy by our suffocating and sober outfits. *My skin will be completely burned*, I thought to myself, as my eyes tracked the minute gestures and sounds of the others sniffing and wiping their eyes with handkerchiefs. The one who died: my father's childhood friend, someone he had known for over three decades as children in Seoul, Korea, as teens in Northeast United States; as adults, as husbands and as parents. The body was already sealed inside an above-ground grave of beige marble: a clean-cut storage-cum-monument that gleamed in the sunlight. A section within this stone facility was left open and empty for family and friends to put away objects of remembrance before it too was sealed up like the body. As I watched the sealing of the personal objects (a handkerchief, some family photographs, a ceramic flask and two cups for drinking sake), I finally came down from coldly observing these acts, the ritual, to participating in the mourning. I felt a sharp sadness at the finality of the sealing and the paltriness of his personal objects in defining and memorializing who this person was. I was brought to a somber place, but only at the tail end of the service, and not without much inner tension because of who he was.

Although this person was a dear friend of my father's, I only had a handful of memories of this person and all of them repugnant. In my mind, he was scary, imposing, cruel, narcissistic, misogynistic and an alcoholic. As a child, if I didn't bow low enough to greet or farewell him, or end a response with the deferential and fear-inducing term, "Tiger Uncle", he would yell at me while grabbing hold of my chin. He would make me look into his widened, feline eyes until I repeated exactly what he wanted me to. Tiger Uncle was proud of his booming, growling voice that whipped in the air and struck his target without fail. He took full advantage of his roar by pressuring my gentle, abstinent father to drink whatever he was guzzling and by mocking my timidity in his presence. There was a continual cloud of cigarette smoke and stench around him morning, noon and night. He yelled at his wife. His fists would hit the table, unsettling the china, while he berated her about the rightness of his opinions over hers, or about what was being served for dinner. His spit would arc and sprinkle onto her lowered face. No one commented on his abuse. We all allowed it to happen. As a six year old, that unnamable feeling I now know to be ominousness hung upon me shroud-like every time we visited Tiger Uncle's house. My parents would relate to me how I would uncontrollably shiver in the backseat of our family van as we drove to upstate New York. I remember telling myself that this time it's going to happen: *he will corner me in the shadow, raise his hand and smite me out*. If he was the Old Testament wrath manifest, my father was the New Testament promise manifest, and I could never fathom why they remained such close friends.

This is the history with which I came upon the funeral, bearing the appropriate degree of outward solemnity but no more. I greeted and hugged the widow and the departed's mother, and stood behind them while others shared stories. When Tiger Uncle's sister stood up hesitantly to share a memory, she did not step up to the podium, but rather stood self-consciously a few feet away from it, small hands clasped in front of her. She straddled the uneven cemetery grass as though on a rickety rowboat, not able to evenly distribute her weight on both legs. As she began the story, you could see she was fighting to hold back tears, her small but plump mouth quivering like a tulip in a tornado. It was a funny story, to celebrate her brother's vivacity and love for family. After getting a c-section, sometimes she was not able to make it in time to the bathroom. One day, she narrated, she failed to get to the toilet in time to pee, and her urine made a squiggly line on the hallway floor. Her husband did not want to clean it up. Her brother, though, bent down and wiped up all her urine without hesitation. She began to

laugh and cry at the same time, thanking her brother for being there for her always, through everything. As she returned to her seat, I tried with all my might to imagine the Tiger Uncle of my memories bending down to the floor and cleaning up someone's urine. I couldn't.

My father's younger brother also came up to the podium and talked about how voraciously his dear friend read; he consumed historical novels on Korea, Japan and the West, and was not only able to speak on the nuances of these countries' pasts and characters, but also on the philosophical lines of thought that traced the development of these geographies. My uncle praised Tiger Uncle for inspiring in him the same tried and true bibliophilia and love of history. I already knew my uncle to be an intellectual bookworm, with his floor to ceiling shelves crammed to the teeth with literature. I was a born bibliophile as well and had always admired my uncle for his steadfast reading discipline, articulateness and knowledge. The fact that he admired Tiger Uncle for the same qualities, for being the role model for *his* love of reading and knowledge, was the second stone to thud menacingly at my feet. I could not picture Tiger Uncle in the character described so fondly by my uncle, no matter how deeply I dug into my memory bank.

When my father's friend was diagnosed with the final stage of lung cancer, and with a one to two month prognosis, my father, grandmother and aunt drove up to New York to see him. The doctor had told them that there were no treatment options at this point. Tiger Uncle spent two weeks in the hospital, then moved into a hospice, and then died after another two weeks. My father was present when he died in the hospice. At the cemetery grounds, listening to these memories of this person shared with such humor and love, I attempted to see him in all his human frailty: in danger of being swallowed up by the hospice bed, a transparent oxygen tube running in and out of him like an invasive ivy, his obstinacy in the face of his dying. But instead of willing this image to till some compassion in my heart, I realized with terror that all I wanted was to hear how much his voice must have degraded along with his health. A musty corner inside of me relished imagining his voice on the death bed, to get such a confirmation of his mortality, and the knowing that *he* knows of it. Because nothing speaks more to one's decline, one's nearness to the dark, than one's voice. *You hear it, Tiger Uncle? Do you hear the brokenness of yourself in your cracked, dusted voice, in your hacking and throttled whispers? Listen to your mortality, and confront the consequence of your forty years' of smoking, and through that, the falsehood of*

your invincibility. And as I roared at his burning soul in my head, while standing there slightly stooped in black on the patchy cemetery soil, I came upon the realization that I *was* the vulture—a creature scavenging on a lifeless body with malignant joy—because Tiger Uncle still had the same control over me. It was a terrible realization, something that filled my ribcage with ice; what did this mean about *my* own character? About the depth and longevity of my disdain for another human being?

There was a forceful feeling of imbalance that played out in my heart while I gazed at the handkerchief, photographs, and sake flask and cups huddled inside their own tomb. On the one hand lay my fear and derision for this man, and the wish to force him to pay his just due by remembering him as was mirrored in my memories: a mean and mocking drunk who abused his wife. I felt a responsibility to continue remembering him this way since everyone else looked upon his legacy in such well-lit terms. On the other hand, my sorrow and empathy for the dead, and the moral imperative to say goodbye with compassion would not brush aside his faults, but rather acknowledge his humanity. And on the other, *other* hand, the death of anyone affects sorrow—or, should. Death makes one acknowledge the vulnerability of even the meanest of individuals; in other words, *we all* are mice being toyed in the same set of scaled claws. I stood there, hunched, brooding over my ugliness and the conflicting obligations that swarmed inside of me. And I couldn't come to a conclusion.

We continued to sweat through our black clothes, a crowd of somber vultures, talons gripping the cemetery field, circling the widow and mother in silence. Before I knew it, we were done. The women trotted back to the pavement with bare feet, re-fastening sharp narrow pumps to their soles. We returned to our air-conditioned cars, took off suit jackets and cardigans and shoes—the sunlight reflecting off white, ironed undershirts and tank tops. The funeral reception was at a Korean barbecue restaurant nearby. There we congregated, with slices of pork belly sizzling on a table top grill and individual pots of white rice sweating next to our bright napkins and glistening silverware. We failed to wave away small gangs of gnats that had collected near our drinking glasses and kimchi. As I wrapped some grilled pork belly and hot rice in a leaf of lettuce, I wondered if anyone felt an iota of relief at his parting. The crisp cold produce relieved the heat that had filled my body like trapped steam. I wondered if Tiger Uncle was still laughing in his full throttle manner, fists clenched and teeth flashing.

If he was at peace and diving into a good historical novel, thinking about how a pack of Marlboros would really round out his stay.