

**GRAMMA:  
TOWARDS AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis – the documentation for my graduate project, *Gramma* – records and discusses the artistic choices in the creative process of writing and performing.

Although often simultaneous, the creative development is artificially divided into two chapters for coherence. Chapter One articulates the development of the script in the trajectory of autobiographic writing. The chapter explains how life experience and memory serve as material for a creative writing, and records experiments in the construction of the play structure. Chapter Two describes the making of a theatre production in the light of intercultural theatre – including integration of cultures and hybridization of aesthetics.

The thesis examines the combination of writing and performing theatre as an autoethnography, and concludes with the direction of my future research and artistic practice.

**Keywords:** Autobiographic Writing, Intercultural Performance, Autoethnography, Korean culture, Self, Home, Memory

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strengthen and clarify my theoretical contextualization. Through her triangulation exercise I have learned to bridge and balance theory and practice.

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## Introduction

Possibly we're in the process of experiencing a new relationship between theory and practice. At one time, practice was considered an application of theory, a consequence; at other times, it had an opposite sense and it was thought to inspire theory, to be indispensable for the creation of future theoretical forms. In any event, their relationship was understood in terms of a process of totalization. For us, however, the question is seen in a different light.

The relationships between theory and practice are far more partial and fragmentary. On one side, a theory is always local and related to a limited field, and it is applied in another sphere, more or less distant from it. The relationship which holds in the application of a theory is never one of resemblance. Moreover, from the moment a theory moves into its proper domain, it begins to encounter obstacles, walls, and blockages which require its relay by another type of discourse (it is through this other discourse that it eventually passes to a different domain). Practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another. No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall.

*Gilles Deleuze in conversation with Michel Foucault*<sup>1</sup>

My background is in the theatre practice. In my undergraduate program, I focused on performance training, and later broadened my interest to writing as well. I believed that theoretical knowledge would add another dimension to my practice, and I specifically sought both more creative opportunities, as well as more theatre study. I consciously chose the MFA program to achieve a balance between theory and practice.

While the studio courses provided opportunities to create, in the seminar courses, I encountered theories and discourses that have helped me understand my practice. Simultaneous research and practice reinforced each other.

## Autobiographic Writing

Historically, Western autobiographic writing locates its genesis in Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. Although it was a popular genre, autobiographic writing was considered less than literature, and incomplete for its open-endedness. Theories about autobiography flourished in middle Twentieth Century. Critics, such as Georges Gusdorf, saw autobiography as a key to understanding culture, history, and the essence of human itself. Gusdorf, in *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, argues that historical perception of 'bios' cannot understand the truth and reasons of 'autos' for 'autos' conceal and create themselves. In the seventies, French critics, such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes, claimed that the text was its own self, which has no author. Thus, the text/self is a fiction with characters on the page who can also be deconstructed. Their modernist view resulted in the death of the author, and therefore, the end of autobiography.

However, Sherrill Grace contends that autobiographic literature gained a renewed attention "because we live in a culture of *me* or *I* at a time when access to this cultural production is easy".<sup>2</sup> She continues:

Auto/Biographies satisfy our desire for story at the same time as they promise to give us truths (if not Truth), to provide meaning, identity, and possibly even order, in an otherwise incoherent, arbitrary, and often violent world... the autobiographical voice and eye/I are available to minorities and to groups, such as women, who have been excluded from the dominant discourse and whose stories have been dismissed as worthless. With the post-postmodern return of the author and the waning of a deep-seated anti-humanism associated, in Western culture, with modernist ideology and aesthetics, a desire for agency, voice, visibility, and subjectivity has surfaced, clamouring for attention and seeking ways to create meaningful identity (personal and public, individual and

communal) in the face of contemporary dehumanization, fragmentation, trauma, and commodification.<sup>3</sup>

In her book, *Aesthetic Autobiography*, Suzanne Nalbaltian provides a definition of Aesthetic Autobiography. According to her, autobiography is a hybridization of fact and artifact, which does not require extrinsic verification. She argues that the only standard is art, and the aesthetic self surpasses personal or cultural one. Aesthetic Autobiography transforms life-writing into fictional literature by creating archetype, universality, social stereotype and myth. It selects and manipulates recollected experiences, and transmutes time, place, objects, and characters through aesthetic techniques. In the process of transmutation, autobiographical memories become fictional cohesions, simultaneously revealing and concealing the self, in which truths of fact become truths of fiction and art.

## **Intercultural Performance**

Intercultural theatre practice in the Twentieth Century European context can be traced back to at least as far as Epic Theatre in which Bertolt Brecht integrated Chinese acting to achieve 'alienation' effect (1920s), or to Antonin Artaud's theatre introduction of Balinese techniques (1930s). The best known intercultural practitioner in European/Western theatre is arguably Peter Brook, whose nine-hour long Hindu Sanskrit epic, *Mahabharata* (1985), gained international attention. He founded International Centre to gather a group of collaborators from all over the world. Many European practitioners followed Brook's example, taking foreign cultural elements to create a new aesthetic.

In the early 70s, Richard Schechner, a theatre practitioner and theorist, introduced the term 'interculturalism'. He spent significant time in Asian countries to study and incorporate their cultures into the Western theatre. There have been many attempts to collaborate between Eastern and Western theatre artists. One instance is SITI Company, founded by Anne Bogart and Suzuki Tadashi (1992), which combines Suzuki training and Viewpoints "to advance the fellowship of theatre artists from around the world".<sup>4</sup> A recent local example is Vancouver-based Pangaea Arts Theatre's *The Gull: the Steveston Noh Project* (2005), a collaboration of Canadian and Japanese artists.

In a time of global migration and displacement, it is not surprising to find more and more inter/cross-cultural theatre productions. Postcolonial playwrights have been exposed to two (or more) cultures, and have articulated multiple cultural identities. David Henry Hwang, best known for *M. Butterfly* and the remake of Rogers and Hammerstein musical *Flower Drum Song*, is one of the leading intercultural playwrights. In Canada, Djanet Sears, the author of *Afrika Solo* and *Harlem Duet*, interweaves North American culture and Caribbean culture; Tomson Highway examines First Nation's history and European/Western cultural influence in *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing*.

## **Autoethnography**

A 'theory' is exactly like a box of tools. It has nothing to do with the signifier. It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (who then ceases to be a theoretician), then the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate. We don't revise a theory, but construct new ones; we have no choice but to make others.... A theory does

not totalize; it is an instrument for multiplication and it also multiplies itself... As soon as a theory is enmeshed in a particular point, we realize that it will never possess the slightest practical importance unless it can erupt in a totally different area.<sup>5</sup>

Research in autobiographic writing and intercultural performance – especially its application to my graduate project making – led me to autoethnography. According to Michael Fisher, as paraphrased by Catherine Russell in *Experimental Ethnography*, “autobiography and ethnography share ‘a commitment to the actual’”; the former committed to the actual of self, while the latter records others. Fisher claims that “‘ethnic autobiography’ should be recognized as a model of postmodern ethnography” because it is “an exploration of the fragmented and dispersed identities of late Twentieth Century pluralist society”. He calls it ‘art of memory’, in which identity is a representation of the self as a performance. Anthropologist, Carolyn Ellis, states that travel/exile makes the distinction between the ethnographer (self) and others blur, which leads to the need for autoethnography.

In *The Ethnographic I: a Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, Ellis defines autoethnography as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot. Thus Autoethnography claims the convention of literary writing”.

From Ellis’s perspective, autoethnography records the personal and its relationship to culture, and displays multiple layers of consciousness. It explores the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural

descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation. As autoethnographers look into many dimensions of self, “distinctions between personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition”. Autoethnographic performance interprets culture through the self-reflection and cultural refraction of identity.

Catherine Russell, in her chapter “Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self” from *Experimental Ethnography*, proposes autoethnography as an intercultural/cross-cultural method, which challenges ‘ethnicity’ – “an inherited identity, a fixed history of the self”:

When autoethnography becomes an archival practice... memory is fragmented into a nonlinear collage. The pieces that are assembled into the shape of a diary forsake the authenticity of documentary realism for a fiction of forgetting... in which the past is endemically fictional. To recall that past by way of memory trace is to render it ‘another culture’ in an ever receding palimpsest of overlapping cultures, of which past, present, and future are merely points of perspective.... The journey to this parallel universe is linear neither in time nor in space, moving across histories and geographies to produce a dialectics of cultural representation.

## **Application to Practice**

Playmaking can be divided into two creative processes – literary creation and performance creation. One is creating on the page, and the other is creating on the stage. Writing and performing a play gave me an opportunity to experience both processes continuously, even simultaneously. Although the processes are intertwined, and feed each other, for the purpose of this paper, I will discuss each process separately. First, I will articulate the process of making the script as a trajectory of autobiographic writing. Second, I will focus on the process of making the performance in terms of intercultural theatre practice.

Finally, drawing on the discussion of my graduate project, I will examine the direction and goals of my artistic practice in the future.

## Chapter One: Creating on the Page

And identity is funny being yourself is funny as you are never yourself to yourself except as you remember yourself and then of course you do not believe yourself. That is really the trouble with an autobiography you do not of course you do not really believe yourself why should you, you know so well so very well that it is not yourself, it could not be yourself because you cannot remember right and if you do remember right it does not sound right and of course it does not sound right because it is not right.  
You are of course never yourself.  
Gertrude Stein <sup>6</sup>

During my BFA, I wrote an autobiographic play, *Home of My Soul*. It was based on my personal history, and set in my native country, Korea. When I started my MFA program, I intended to write a sequel to *Home of My Soul* which would record my Canadian life over the past five years. For my FPA 889 Directed Study, I proposed a playwriting and dramaturgical course, combined with studio exploration of the written material. As I started preliminary writing, the instructor encouraged me to write down whatever came to my mind without thinking about structure or plot. At first the writing was a series of random events, memories, and reflective thoughts. I would bring pages of writing that had no beginning and no end, and no flow from one excerpt to the next. The instructor and I discussed the written materials, isolating visual images, and possible actions. He also asked me questions about what I hoped to achieve in the play, why I wanted to tell my personal story, and how I perceived my

Canadian life. I made notes of my reflections inspired by our discussions while I continued with my extensive writing.

At that point, I assumed that the theme of my play would be the meaning of self and home. What I had started in *Home of My Soul*, and what I hoped to continue, was a search for 'home'. This 'home' did not have geographical (where I was born or grew up) or biological (where my family lived) location. To answer what kind of home it was that I looked for, it was necessary to better understand who I was. As they say in English, 'home is where I can be myself'. I believed that the answer to the question of self would help me find my own 'home'. I failed to find it in my homeland, and I took a chance in Canada. As a result, my life in Canada was a constant search and quest for this 'home'. In my writing, I poured out the longings for both ideal and real homes, as well as the shock of encountering situations that resembled anything but home.

After pages upon pages of writing, I started structural exploration. I sorted the various episodes, anecdotes, and associative thoughts and memories. Small pieces accumulated into bigger units. I gave each unit a title, which made it easier to consider structure, since the title indicated the kind of stories each section contained. At the same time, I started physical exploration with the text excerpts. I spread out the pages, grouped under each title, on the studio floor, so that I could move freely back and forth between text and exploration. I experimented with different scene transitions, and I tried different movement and sound experiments with them. Some of these physical explorations came back later as I moved into production process.

But I had a hard time shaping the structure. I tended to fall into a chronological storytelling, which made the play a flat narrative – one incident after another. I also realized that because I had not gained enough distance from my new life at the time of writing, I could not grasp an arc or throughline that would tighten the structure. I even lost the purpose in some of stories. If I successfully made a sequence of a few sections, the rest scattered in all directions; if I forcefully threaded all the parts, transitions became awkward, and the structure fell apart. I was stuck, and the pages covering the studio floor seemed bottomless traps.

While I was still married to the original proposal of writing a sequel, the instructor/dramaturg advised me to go back to my writings and to read them again with the eyes of a stranger. To my surprise, even though I wrote them, I noticed that I dedicated many pages and sections to the senior lady with whom I lived for three years. Yet I was reluctant to engage with the dramaturgical suggestion to focus on her story. I intended to write an autobiographic play, telling my Canadian life experience, and I was unsure how telling someone else's story would reveal my perspective and thought. There were many things that I wanted to say, and I stubbornly desired my voice to be heard. However, as I looked down at the pages on the studio floor, I had to admit that I was holding onto more than I could manage. Giving voice to everything in one play made it impossible to control all the disparate anecdotes and episodes. The more I hesitated, the more the process became stagnant.

Before I went back to the writing, I emptied myself of previous intents, and readied myself to let go of any attachment. I read the pages again with a

completely open mind, and began to see a potential structure within the story of the senior lady. I saw the possibility of extending her story to shape the structure. Also, the experience of living with the lady had taken place a few years ago, therefore I felt that I could reflect upon it with a certain distance. Moreover, I realized that life with her constantly evoked the ambivalence of home/homeless and the meaning of family. In other words, I could both explore my themes and develop a coherent structure. I became excited by new possibilities that I discovered by letting go of my preconceptions.

I put many stories in the back drawer of my mind to bring out in the future plays, and moved into expanding the story of the lady I called 'Gramma' – a working title which eventually became the final title. As I recalled and wrote down more episodes around Gramma, fact mixed with fiction either because my memory blurred, or because the play structure necessitated fictionalization. It became harder and harder to distinguish event from imagination, which I believe is a positive thing in creative writing.

Autobiographic writing lies in the realm of art, and is different from a historical documentation or archival material. One's real life may be the starting point, but the aesthetic creation of self is not limited to a true event. Even if one tries to record truthfully, it is not possible because the record is created through a filter of memory. And memory can never reproduce the fact itself<sup>7</sup> no matter how detailed and closely recalled. The recollection of the past includes many lapses and gaps, which allows the imagination to fill in and to mingle with the facts. I was encouraged by the instructor's comment, 'an artist should be truthful to art, not to reality', and kept adding scenes and developing the structure.

The writing became more a biography of Gramma than an autobiography of myself. Most scenes were combination of both, yet I located myself more as an observer recounting her story. This position enabled me to split my character in two – Maki recounting the story now, and Maki living the memory then. Each self presented a different quality and different reading of her situation. Maki-Then was fully in the past interacting with Gramma, while Maki-Now met with the audience to articulate her thoughts. The transformation from the past self to the present self involved Gramma, whose character functioned as an axis. As the story unfolds, my character evolves around Gramma, moving from then to now, and from there to here. The transmutation of perspective through time leads to an epiphany; where Maki-Now discovers that Maki-Then has not been looking into a window, as she had thought, but at a mirror. Maki-Now realizes that Gramma was not a stranger on the other side of window, but herself reflected in a mirror. Ironically, by observing Gramma, Maki-Then has described herself. As a result, Gramma's biography serves as my autobiography, which I call 'Gertrude Stein effect'.<sup>8</sup>

In autobiographic writing, presenting a self through other characters is termed 'relational identity'.<sup>9</sup> I recognized that expressing myself through others could effectively describe a more complex identity. Gramma's story, for all its virtues, was limited to Gramma's character. I wanted to interweave a sub plot that could broaden the range of 'relational identity' exploration, and therefore enhance the complexity of the play. As I searched for a character who would reflect another essence of myself, I drew upon the character of Simchong from a traditional Korean tale.

The Story of Simchong is an old fairytale, a Korean equivalent to Cinderella or Snow-White. The strongest theme in Simchong's story is filial piety, one of the highly regarded values in Korean culture. Although Simchong is a fictional character whose personal life is completely different than mine, she undeniably shares characteristics of my cultural self. The Confucian emphasis upon filial duty and elder respect, combined with the female obedience to the patriarchy, clearly manifests in Simchong's life, and is deeply rooted in my psyche. Introducing Simchong's story into the play implicitly explained my perceptions of and actions toward Gramma.

The excitement of discovering Simchong was soon undercut by the challenge of integrating her into the structure. For Koreans, Simchong's story is so familiar that I do not even need to tell the story, just referencing her would be enough. But in an English script for a Western audience, I thought I might need to explain the whole story. I hesitated, however, to bring to life all the many and diverse characters in Simchong's story. If I were to fully include scenes from Simchong in order to make the audience understand her story, it might distract from the main plot. For the economy of writing, Simchong's story had to be recounted rather than enacted. The solution was a storyteller who could summarize the story and provide an outline.

The idea of including a storyteller inspired further developments in the script. The story-within-story structure, or 'frame structure' in Korean literature, enhanced the possibility of switching between Gramma's story and Simchong's. Without losing the throughline of Simchong's story, I was able to juxtapose relevant parts of each story that would support both plots. I imagined a typical

Korean narrator/performer, 'Gwangdae', as Storyteller, and I discovered another potential of 'relational identity'. In Korean tradition, the storyteller is a travelling performer, often an outcast with no fixed dwelling. Displacement and homelessness are undeniably mine. The presence of Storyteller, even though no background for her was given, could also express an aspect of myself. In a way, Storyteller carries the very core of my national and cultural identity. We share the same history and culture, and even more, the same occupation of performer.

After the discovery of these plots and characters, and the addition of scenes, it was time to harmonize them into a map that would guide the audience – temporally (not chronologically), geographically, psychologically, and emotionally. Since Gramma's story was filled with quite mundane and repetitive incidents, I wanted to interrupt the order with 'jump cuts' that would pull the audience out of her world. Yet I did not wish to bewilder the audience. The goal was to achieve a balance between breaking the predictability and keeping the arc of story. In other words, I hoped to achieve an orderly chaos.

Ever since I shifted my writing direction to Gramma's story, I had the imagery of traditional Korean funerals. Even though I attended Gramma's funeral, which was a Western style, whenever I remembered her death, I had a mental image of the Korean funeral ritual. As I began physically exploring the ritual procession, I felt a strong impulse to open the play with the ritual for foreshadowing. I was a bit concerned about revealing the climax, and thus the ending, so soon. However, the decision to begin Simchong's story before Gramma's story supported the impulse. The ritual provided a funeral for both Simchong and Gramma. Placing Simchong's story after the opening ritual

foreshadowed Gramma's death, yet prevented it from being exposed. This allowed the ritual to return at the climax, explicitly for Gramma, which provided continuity in the structure.

I believed that the sooner Simchong was introduced, the better an audience could grasp her unfamiliar story. The audience would need time to get used to the strange Korean names and places, and to remember the new information for reference and comparison. The ritual pauses to introduce Simchong. The Story of Simchong begins with Simchong's birth and includes a lengthy description of her background and upbringing. In the script, Storyteller gives only a short summary, and directly moves to the reason Simchong left home and was about to die. The ritual resumes, and at the end of the ritual Simchong disappears into the sea. Paradoxically, the opening scene of the play begins with death and ending. I wanted the audience aware of the paradox, knowing that I would go on performing. We all know, the play continues. What one perceived then, may not be what he or she perceives now. Time after time, a death turns out to be a new life, a goodbye becomes a reunion, and an ending is another beginning. By the end of the play, the paradox becomes orthodox.

Whatever might follow, Simchong had to leave because 'the time has come' for her. And, like Simchong, the time of leaving home approached Maki-Then too. The motivation for both characters is the filial duty assigned by Confucian philosophy. While Simchong left home for the fulfilment of the duty, Maki left for the lack of it. Still, Maki mirrors Simchong (Scene Two), feeling hopelessly drowned as she looks down at the Pacific Ocean from the airplane to Canada.

Following Simchong's physical drowning, Maki metaphorically sinks into the uncertain future, sharing the pain and fear of Simchong.

When 'the time has come' around for the third time, it is for Gramma. Although the reason for her leaving home is different, the pain and fear must have been the same. So, the three women share the loss of home, yet with different results. Simchong's loss is restored, and her story has a happy ending. Gramma never comes back home, and dies alone in a strange place. Maki is left open-ended, with the possibilities of both. In a sense, she is still falling into the unknown.

After both Simchong and Maki sink into the water, Simchong's story returns. Supposedly a surprise, although not surprisingly, Simchong does not die, but her life gets better. The symbolic meaning of the turtle or the Dragon King is skipped, as well as the sight of Water World Palace, and the interesting exchange between Simchong and the underworld creatures. Instead, a Western reference was offered. The image of 'Birth of Venus' painting provides familiarity, as well as fun. For a Korean audience, the description would rather be unfamiliar and redundant. This is one of the moments that made me aware of the language I wrote in, and for what audience.

In the Emperor's palace, Simchong initiates the question of displacement. After leaving home and journeying through the water, she has lost the sense of where she is. She asks herself, 'Where am I?' – the same question that Maki asks in the basement, and that Gramma wonders aloud at the nursing home. All three characters arrive at a new place. Simchong rebuilt home and family at her new place. For Maki, even though it was temporary, there was a home in her

displacement. Gramma could not adapt herself in her displacement, and fails to settle in her new environment.

Simchong's encounter with the Emperor mirrors Maki's arrival at Gramma's house. But what happens to Maki is very different from what awaits Simchong. The grand entrance of Gramma is marked with a grumpy, almost accusatory, question, 'What do you know for sure?'. This was Gramma's habitual line in reality, and it became her signature in the script. By introducing her with this abrupt question, her character makes a memorable impression. Moreover, Gramma's habitual question underlines a profound tension in the play – knowledge<sup>10</sup> and uncertainty. Maki-Then assumes that she knows Gramma. She is sure that Gramma's place is anything but home. Maki-Now cannot agree. She admits that she did not know the truth, and that she failed to see home because she was so sure of her perspective.

The first encounter between Maki and Gramma is filled with Gramma's words thrown at Maki-Then and Maki-Now's comical descriptions of both Gramma and the basement. As her life begins in the Gramma's basement, Maki-Now explains her days in general. Instead of going back to Storyteller for the Simchong story, Maki-Then directly acknowledges Simchong, comparing their opposite situations. The acknowledgement enlarges the empathy between the two characters and underlines the stark contrast between their situations at the same time. Unlike Storyteller, Maki-Then is able to observe Gramma, which leads to the comparison with the Queen. Thus, Gramma's position now resembles Simchong's new status.

The depiction of power continues from Maki to Storyteller. Simchong's life is transformed from hardship to luxury. Her past, skipped at the beginning of the story, is briefly recounted to emphasize the contrast. Like Gramma, Simchong has her seat in a higher place. She seems content with all the material success, and Storyteller is happy to tell the good news as if she herself has had her character's luck. Storyteller and Maki-Then almost lap each other. By the end of telling about Simchong's desirable palace life, Storyteller becomes Maki-Then dreaming of a better life in her harsh environment. Storyteller's hard life as a homeless minstrel is projected onto Maki's environment.

Maki's daydream is interrupted suddenly by Gramma's calling. From here numerous unpredictable incidents begin, always initiated by Gramma. However, the audience never hears Gramma's actual call to Maki. Later when Maki is alone in the house, she misses Gramma calling her name, yet no one else has heard the oppressive voice that conjured fear and dread in Maki-Then. An audience member later asked me if my motivation was 'False Consciousness';<sup>11</sup> for her, Maki's character could not break out of the oppression, but rather justified it, missing her abuser and oppressor. Similarly, some people take Maki's love for Gramma as the result of 'Stockholm Syndrome', the psychological response of an abducted hostage who becomes empathetic with his or her abductor.<sup>12</sup>

It was a very interesting interpretation, and surely that kind of psychological manipulation exists. The Korean equivalent might be the 'Good Woman Complex'. In fact, I asked myself with the same question as I was writing the script. Am I, like the fictional Maki, still bound to the filial piety and Good Woman Complex? Am I blaming myself for the failure of relationship with

Gramma, like millions of other Korean women? Do I still want to be like Simchong, embraced by the Confucian, Korean, and patriarchal world? Even more, is it the cultural, moral oppression that makes me feel guilty and apologetic? These are tough questions. After a long struggle, I admit that for me the answer to all these questions is yes – partially.

However, for the fictional Maki, the answer is not the same. Maki-Now re-establishes the definition of family and home, even though the articulation of it comes much later. There is a moment when she is about to leave the place of oppression. At that moment, she seems to stay involuntarily, left with no choice. But the truth is that she makes an unconscious choice.<sup>13</sup> If Maki only felt the oppression, she would not have stayed. She had already left her homeland even if that meant possible death. Ironically, it is her regret of leaving home that makes her choose to stay the second time. Notice that, no matter how much she misses home and family and regrets her decision to leave, Maki never expresses a desire to go back to the oppression of her homeland. She has sacrificed her family to break from oppression, but she does not want to lose family again. Even though Maki-Then does not realize it yet, she stays with Gramma because she is family, not as a result of psychological deception.

The reason I delayed Maki's revelation is not only for Aristotelian narrative development (which I have nothing against), but also for the abrupt shift of perspective and as a surprise as it syncs with the sub plot. I have already mentioned the metaphor of window and mirror. As Maki realizes she has been looking at herself in a mirror – not Gramma on the other side of window – she also understands that her oppression by Gramma is an illusion. Maki-Then

believes her relationship to Gramma is a servant-master relationship, and she suffers under the master's power. Maki-Now, who transmutes through the axis, perceives a new view. Their relationship has not been an employment contract, but a family connection. Maki becomes able to see that love prevails behind the illusory oppression, and to see the strength in herself that Gramma pretends to have, but fails to possess. That metaphoric insight coincides with Blind Sim's gaining physical sight. Gramma cannot be the oppressor because she does not have any tangible power. The cultural values and behaviours within Maki-Then, along with the negative aspects of displacement, had created a false authority. The authoritative calling, to which Maki has submitted herself like a puppet, is indeed a desperate signal of a trapped and wounded animal. To prevent spoiling the epiphany, and to fortify the illusiveness of oppression, Gramma's hideous callings are omitted. Instead each incident starts with Maki's reaction to the illusion.

As those abusive encounters unfold in the plot, they reveal various characteristics of Gramma. I hoped to achieve here, as Maki-Now eventually finds in herself as well, common traces of humanity in one of the oddest characters. Even though Gramma has an extreme personality, and even though the episodes and conversations are carefully constructed to provide immediacy and intensity, Gramma is not unrealistic. Rather, she is stereotypical, an archetype of antagonist. And yet, I cast her as the protagonist for I believed she was fully human. She does not deserve mistreatment nor abandonment, especially from her family. Her uncontrollable anger partially results from the isolation from her family, which Maki-Then explicitly re-produces. I am sure

many people have a Gramma in their lives, and see Maki's traits more or less in themselves.

The grocery-shopping scene serves two intents. One is the public exposure of humiliation. I would argue that the humiliation is not only for Maki, but also for Gramma. The difference is that while Maki acknowledges it, Gramma does not recognize it, thus she is not able to bear it. In a sense, like the illusory oppression that causes Maki distress and anguish, the imagined humiliation brings Maki embarrassment. On the contrary, Gramma does not have the abstract idea, nor notice her indignant actions. She truly believes that she has power, and that she demonstrates her rights. Therefore, she is not embarrassed.

The other function is to reveal the limit of material richness. Gramma's power seems to expand as she steps out of her house, extending her control into the public space. However, her power is not recognized in the public domain. Maki is still the only one she can control, and no one else yields to her order. For passers-by, Gramma is a weak senior lady, seemingly abused by her companion, who cannot afford a barbeque chicken. Some people, Maki for one, wonder why she does not treat herself to chicken when she has enough money. Others might find her behaviour familiar. The basic human necessity should be met, and even though the lack of material goods put me in difficulty, I do not believe that material excess is essential for the quality of life. In the end, Gramma's upstairs is not much better than Maki's basement.

One might argue that if Gramma had spent her fortune to live a comfortable life, she would have been happy. That is what Maki-Then wonders as she watches Gramma pass by the chicken. The question is answered by

Storyteller who reports how Simchong feels in the palace. Like Gramma, the Empress Simchong cannot enjoy the richness that fills her life. The pain of parting from family never disappears; in the opposite situation, Simchong is as unhappy as Maki. All three characters feel detached and lonely because they lack love of family. Materialism is unable to cure their unhappiness. The easier her life gets, the more painful Simchong's thoughts of her father become.

The sad image of Blind Sim overlaps with Gramma, and the scene switches into Gramma's kitchen. Oddly, Gramma and Maki-Then are at peace here. In this scene (Eve of Storm), which is about the mid-point of the play, Gramma and Maki meet in the middle ground, on the Thirty Eighth Parallel, unarmed, without hostility. Gramma becomes a storyteller remembering a home, her place of birth. And in the unfamiliar place and time of Gramma's story, Maki understands Gramma's loss and longing.

The sorrow of memory is contagious, and causes Maki's homesickness. Recalling her own memory, Maki changes her perspective. She comes to appreciate what she took for granted only after it has been taken away. Facing the harsh reality of torturous hunger, Maki appreciates her mother's care that she used to feel as controlling. But her blindness to the present still continues, just like Blind Sim whose current situation Storyteller is about to report. Blind Sim is right to expect to regain his sight. He, like Maki, sacrificed his family for what he wanted. Detached from family, both Blind Sim and Maki have become miserable with their hearts full of apology.

Blind Sim's deterioration parallels Gramma's, but their attitudes toward the deterioration are very different. Blind Sim almost gives up life altogether.

Gramma, on the other hand, is a fighter, tightly holding on to the last remnant of life. After the calm scene of remembrance, life seems to revert to the usual unpleasant interactions. However, Gramma is gradually falling apart, losing her grip on reality. Her fear and insecurity grow, and her effort to hide them worsens the situation. Gramma and Maki-Then go through an irreconcilable phase, and while Gramma travels into oblivion, Maki hides in the past. The intensifying false accusations block even her escape into Storyteller, so she finds her emotional escape in a song. For the duration of the Korean song, the play shuts out all structure and flow, resisting spoken explanation or communication. The singing allows me to express a self of mine, which the English language cannot translate.

Time moves forward, the symbolic winter finally cracks open the stretched emotional skin. Maki-Then, blinded with rage, packs up, and is about to abandon her second family. Her head spins, and everything is in the chaos of blizzard. Suddenly, it halts, and time is suspended. There is a long, uncomfortable pause, and, Maki finally makes her choice to continue on with Gramma. She momentarily achieves a metaphysical escape, only to be interrupted by Gramma's need. Gramma's inability to apologize does not upset Maki, but rather conjures pity. Watching the can of soup, Maki learns that being able to say 'I am sorry' is a blessing. Deprivation of humanness is a hard experience, but the experience has taught Maki empathy toward the lack of humanness in others.

However, these insights cannot make reality better. Gramma only gets worse, which is implied in Storyteller's insertion of Ppangdok omi. For Maki-Then, Ppangdok omi's nature represents the oppressiveness of Gramma, which

Storyteller's information supports. But like Simchong and Blind Sim, Ppangdok omi also takes a double role, and resembles Maki as well. Although Maki justifies her avoidance of Gramma as a result of Gramma's unpredictable rage, it is also true that she becomes mean and deceitful towards Gramma. She knows loneliness, yet Maki coldly refuses Gramma's desperate need of companionship.

Maki is relieved by Gramma's departure, and for a brief moment she celebrates the new freedom. But it does not last long. Maki soon realizes that she has once again repeated the mistake of not appreciating what was given to her. Sitting alone in Gramma's rocking chair, Maki senses a genuine love for Gramma that has been hidden beneath other feelings. A moment too late her heart fills with regret, and with the regretting heart emerges the hymn. In the singing, Gramma and Maki completely overlap, at which point Gramma becomes memory.

The three visits to the nursing home are like steps – to new emotions, to reconciliation, and to an eternal farewell. Even though Gramma consoles herself with the hope of coming back home, and even though Maki-Then tries to suspend time by keeping the house the same, both know that the final 'time has come'. Maki senses Gramma's departure, this time from life, yet denies it, hoping for Gramma's return, and occupies her mind with household chores. But time is up, and a self who knows it sings the third song – a song of despair. The unspoken presentiment becomes real.

The news of Gramma's death causes the most radical shift between Maki and Storyteller. All along, the two characters have balanced on the opposite ends of the emotional spectrum. As a persona of Maki, Storyteller has often come to

rescue Maki's falling emotions. When Maki is too affected by her personal story, Storyteller brings distance with a myth. But now, as Maki falls into a bottomless despair, Storyteller sours it further with the happy ending of Simchong's story. One extreme emotion transfers to another extreme emotion, as Storyteller laughs in Maki's grief. Gramma's journey ends, so does Blind Sim's: one in mourning, the other in celebration. Mourning takes longer than celebration, and to spare the time for Maki, Storyteller leads the celebration. Finally Storyteller's job is done; she opened the play, it is Maki-Now's task to close the play.

The celebration over, Storyteller gone, Gramma's lonely death is followed by the lonesome funeral. Everyone has left home, and now home itself dissolves. There is one last truth to discover. Gramma's insistence on sheltering Maki functions as proof of the mutual feeling neither has understood. With the comfort that beneath all the resentment and animosity existed love, Maki delivers her private eulogy for Gramma. I am deeply in debt to the dramaturgy, but with this part I owe a special gratitude. Originally, I went on for pages and pages with ways of saying goodbye to Gramma. Although I knew it was self-indulgence, I could not control the emotional writing. Thanks to the dramaturgical eye, I gradually gained a distance, and gathered the courage to cut the excess.

As Maki-Now remarks that Gramma is her mirror image, she also confesses her incorrect assumption that she regarded herself as Simchong. The irony of her confession is that by admitting her true identity as Blind Sim and Ppangdok omi, Maki achieves the identity of Simchong. Maki finally understands that Simchong's choice to sacrifice herself was not the obligation of filial piety, but pure love for her father. The insight, obtained at the end of her journey with

Gramma, enables Maki to penetrate the camouflage of patriarchy. Forced to live with the Confucian value of filial piety, Maki has felt the value only as a compelling task that would hinder her self-realization. However, being separated from her family, and losing Gramma, Maki recognizes that what she has dismissed was not an obligation, but the willingness of love. The outcome may look similar to the patriarchal portrait – an obedient and caring daughter – but looks can be deceiving. For Maki, what is important is the root cause, and she is now ready to love not because of authoritative oppression, but with her free will.

Regrettably, it is too late. Maki-Now is still separated from her biological family, and Gramma, her surrogate family, has vanished. She has to count on ‘next time’, a second chance, yet her regretting heart still aches with ‘Han’.<sup>14</sup> To ease the pain and to complete the farewell, the ritual that began the play returns. For Maki, who bears all the traces of her Korean mythological characters, the Ritual of Releasing<sup>15</sup> is necessary. As Maki conducts her personal ritual for Gramma, she is compelled to empty her regretting heart. No amount of writing could accomplish it, so I gave Maki another song. The last song, sung by the ‘no-longer-blind’ Maki-Now, condenses the whole history of Gramma and Maki, and concludes with a reconciliation both with Gramma, and with her past self, Maki-Then.

The segment after the song once belonged to the eulogy. But I wished to separate it for the articulation of hope. Maki longs for reunion, promises to remember and return. She hopes for the chance to say ‘I love you’ and ‘Good bye’ to Gramma in person, whether in dream, or on the other side of the river. For now, she misses Gramma, and she embodies Gramma’s signature phrase: ‘What

do you know for sure?'. Nothing is for sure, Maki now understands. She will never know which ending she will get, Simchong's or Gramma's. She will go on with uncertainty, forever without closure. Autobiographic writing remains open-ended.

## Chapter Two: Creating on the Stage

The challenge today is to seek a unity that celebrates diversity, to unite the particular with the universal, to recognize the need for roots while insisting that the point of roots is to put forth branches.

*William Sloane Coffin* <sup>16</sup>

If creating on the page is a lonesome process, creating on the stage is crowded. Even solo theatre involves a group. Since I was to perform this one-person play, I needed a director who could see the stage, and the performer, from outside. I also wanted to find a lighting designer, because the play depends on lighting for the swift change of place, and an organized stage manager is a must for the success of a theatre production. I found talented young artists in SFU theatre program. Ether Reich, a senior performance student, was a committed Director who brought many interesting visions on the text. Yee-Hang Yam, in her last year of the production design program, was both skilled and resourceful Lighting Designer. Stage Manager David Balfour, a keen multi-tasker as well as technically knowledgeable, took care of everything both on the stage and back stage. The collaboration with enthusiastic and creative people resulted in a satisfying realization of the script on stage.

Long before the production-making began, while I was working on numerous revisions, I envisioned performing Korean elements on stage. Although I was not familiar with Korean art practice, Korean culture and history are embedded within me. Consequentially, my autobiographic writing could not

escape my Koreanness. As I would be the performer, portraying myself on stage, it was very natural for me to integrate a Korean aesthetic into the performance. I did not seek to create an intercultural theatre piece, but intercultural practice inevitably came along with my work.

The initial image connected to a Korean performing style was the funeral. Korean funeral rituals from my childhood memory came back to my mind visually and aurally. The recollection conjured complicated feelings and emotions that I felt at Gramma's death. So even though Gramma's real funeral was not Korean, I made an artistic choice for the fictional funeral. Since I reside in Canada, Korean resources were limited. Besides, my skills to present any Korean performance style were negligible. However, I was not concerned with a re-enactment of Korean funeral ritual, but looked for an essence that could provoke the Korean sensorium.<sup>17</sup> My impulse urged me to find a way to create the atmosphere of Korean ritual.

Tentatively, but with a conviction that it would lead me somewhere, I registered in a Korean percussion class at UBC. I was fortunate to learn from Dr. Nathan Hesselink, who is an expert in Korean percussion. There was not much time, but I decided to see how far I could get, and then to create the soundscape accordingly. Taking the class opened up endless questions and sensibilities. My Korean self was strengthened, and so was the sense of place. The more I played the instruments, the more I felt at home, myself. At the same time, the loss of home and the confusion of identity intensified. Except while drowning myself in the percussion sounds, I felt completely displaced, ambiguous, and invisible. I could not explain the feelings and emotions surrounding these questions about

identity. The more I was perplexed by those questions and senses, the more I was excited by the percussion sounds. It was a disorienting, yet welcoming, sensation. And the sensation influenced my performance, especially for Storyteller.

The performance dates were set, and I had my artistic ensemble. The director and I met early in the production process to schedule rehearsals and set deadlines. Since the lighting designer and the stage manager could not join us until later, the director and I started with physical explorations. I was still revising the script, but the basic scene structure was complete. We decided to start with a working draft, keeping in mind that the rehearsal process would help shape the final script.

For the first rehearsal, we did an object improvisation. Both the director and I brought objects that were somehow related to the play – whether logically or intuitively. Each of us created a stage with the objects, and examined the other person's perceptions and interpretations. A rocking chair meant home, authority, trap, and permanent time; a cart implied baggage (therefore exile), coffin (therefore death), mobile home, and temporary time; an apron, mittens, and gloves associated service, help, labour, and slavery; a pair of slippers, placed far away from Gramma's chair, blocking the basement entrance, presented dominance and imprisonment; baby clothes and princess pictures stimulated the 'good girl' image and a childhood fantasy for Simchong and Maki, and even possibly Gramma; a can of soup in the middle of stairs became a symbol of connection and communication, a point of contact. This exercise was crucial

because most of the objects ended up in the play – if not the actual object, then an association with it.

In later rehearsals, we shifted the focus to the characters' physical and vocal qualities. We experimented with sets of oppositional physicality such as free/bound, sustain/sudden, heavy/light, and focused/scattered. We moved onto improvisations of Simchong's story. The director requested that I work with images, not text, and physically interact with the images I saw one after another. Ppangdok omi's walk in the performance came out of this improvisation. We also worked on Gramma's and Storyteller's physicality, and discovered that each character possessed contrasting qualities. Storyteller's movement was scattered and light, whereas Gramma's was focused and heavy.

Neutral reading was another way that we explored the play. The completely monotone reading erased presumptions, which enabled both the director and I (as the playwright) to notice various potential interpretations. I (as the performer) did the neutral reading, while the director stopped me and posed questions, which were later discussed in director/playwright meetings. As an actor, I found it hard to read my own writing neutrally. I would automatically insert subtext no matter how subtle, and the director would make me stop and repeat. Reading the lines without judgment allowed us to discover other possible meanings in the lines.

We set aside the script for a while, and the director asked me to improvise the whole play as I remembered it. I thought it would be easy since I wrote the script and knew it so well. To my surprise, the improvisation ended up far from the play. As the performer, I could not remember all the scenes, not to mention

specific lines, and so I made it up as I went along. Simchong's story became much more elaborate, and I talked about the unfairness of a festival which excluded women. Without conscious intent, I improvised Storyteller's life story, and in this version, she wore a mask to cover up her sadness. This image inspired the metaphorical mask for the performer in the actual performance.

Recalling Gramma's story, I compared the lack of health and lack of material goods, and wondered which misery is worse. In my improvisation, Gramma's actions were pitied and defended with an explanation that humanness could only be stripped away by another even less human. For example, Ppangdok omi, who humiliated Blind Sim, lacks human dignity herself, and Gramma exposed her inhumane nature by diminishing Maki's humanness. In other words, it was cyclical. Lack of self esteem and self respect caused the cruelty towards other human beings, and that cruelty resulted in more lack of self esteem, and more cruelty.

At one point, the performer proposed that Gramma's character represented Canada, which the playwright had never perceived. From that perspective, Gramma provided a shelter for Maki with the price of hardship, and Maki constantly measured the possibility of home within the temporary shelter. The interpretation was insightful. Gramma's story could be a miniature version of Maki's Canadian life story.

As the improvisation continued, the plots became jumbled. The performer insisted that Simchong was the only good girl because only her story ended happily. Gramma, Maki, Ppangdok omi, and even Storyteller, were all bad girls, who deserved their bad, or potentially bad, endings. The performer kept

changing her opinion about the characters. One moment, Simchong was a traitor to all women, and Ppangdok omi was a victim of a male dominated society. The next moment Simchong was a model for humanity, while Ppangdok omi, Gramma, and Maki were all blamed for not taking the responsibility of their choices.

As the characters from both stories became tangled in the incoherent improvisation, the performer attempted to get back on track, and to conclude the improvised play. The performer ultimately accepted all the possible understandings of her characters. I, as the performer, let go of any regret caused by choices that the characters made. And in doing so, I began to visualize my many selves layered inside one another like Russian dolls. The improvisation closed with the reconciliation among my selves, and the Russian dolls were a sustaining mental image. While I performed, I took out the Russian dolls one by one, played with them, and put them back.

After being away from the script for a while, we began to play with the working draft. We did a series of script readings with physical and vocal experiments. The first one divided the space into the character zones. The director assigned one corner for Gramma, another corner for Maki-Then, and the other two corners for Storyteller. Maki-Now got the broad centre space. Depending on which character spoke the line, I moved to the character's zone to read it. This exploration helped the performer to clearly see who said what to whom, to define the sense of space, as well as the distance between the characters. The physical differentiation between two interacting characters also began to develop, which led us to the balance structure exercise.

We focused exclusively on dialogues for this exercise. With each line, the performer had to make a balanced pose, and every time the character speaking switched, so did the pose. For a balanced pose, the director asked me to go for extreme and unnatural poses in which I could barely keep the balance. The shift of poses became continuous. There was no time to think, so I just followed impulses, trusting my body. Some of the poses were weird and grotesque, yet in most cases, the body revealed what the text concealed. We recycled some poses for the production, such as Gramma's leaning forward, or Maki's ducking pose.

The expressive movement made words more animated, full of emotion. We went further with the exploration of the words. We gave them physical and vocal qualities such as piercing, spreading, heavy/light, distracted, or drowning. These animated words, with their heightened senses, stimulated an even more expressive movement. I would read the whole script with constantly shifting postures that were highly stylized, and with most unlikely voices for the characters. There was even a reading in which I switched between the highest level possible and the lowest level possible, instantly on the director's cues. One reading after another, the range of artistic choices broadened, and the possibility of realizing them was in sight. All representational movement, such as describing Gramma's dishes, or looking down at the ocean, came from these explorations.

While the rehearsal process was on its way, the director, the lighting designer, the stage manager, and I had production meetings. The stage manager, who also functioned as the technical director, proposed a diagonal configuration when we were discussing the placement of the risers. Everyone was happy with the idea for it would provide a wider range of accessibility to the risers without

limiting the sightlines of the audience. Also, we could create more audience seats with better views. No one imagined a realistic stage, and all were in favour of a minimalist set. At this point, we also planned on only two major set pieces – a rocking chair and a cart – thus ramps were to be attached to both sides of the risers for access of the cart.

I left all lighting decisions to the designer and the director. I understood that the temporal and geographical distances between two story worlds would make the shifts between them heavily dependent on lighting. I indicated moments in the script when the story switched. As long as the differentiation effect was achieved, I did not have anything specific to add. I had no technical knowledge, nor any idea of the resources available; but also I would not be able to see how I was lit. The lighting designer brilliantly placed the lights in unlikely places, such as behind the risers and beneath the audience seats. The result, I am told, was fantastic. As I was performing, the colourful lights heightened the atmosphere and energized my performance.

The director envisioned Storyteller as a puppeteer, and wanted to integrate some kind of puppet show. Although I had never imagined puppets when I wrote the play, I was eager to try because a theatre production should have the artistic freedom to re-create the literary creation. But as it was a self-produced play, I needed to be economical and clever with a limited number of props and costumes. We agreed to simplify the puppet, should we make one. We also looked into the transformative use of props. For example, a can of soup or a beet in Gramma's story could become one of the characters in Simchong story. In our

rehearsal, the director and I went back to our object improvisations, only this time we played with the objects as potential puppets.

The principal characters – Gramma, Maki, and Storyteller – all had very different fashion styles. The task was to present their disparate styles without undermining any one character. Finding a Korean traditional costume for Storyteller concerned me, but fortunately I was able to borrow a Korean folk music performer costume. The outfit was completed with three long, colourful sashes. Relieved of solving this character, the director and I visited second-hand stores for inspiration. After manoeuvring through the Christmas shopping crowd, and trying on numerous clothes, we picked up an oversized, outdated dress and an old-fashioned wool vest for Gramma, along with a pair of worn-out jeans and a hippy toque for Maki.

The choice of shoes troubled us for a long time. The performer could only wear one pair, and there was no pair that all the three characters would be happy to share. We opted for a neutral choice, attracting no attention at all, but nothing felt right. I finally brought a pair of eccentric, anything-but-neutral, shoes out of desperation. However, the bright and shiny colour of the shoes complimented the saturated red, blue, and yellow of the sashes. And I loved the outlandish, almost futuristic, quality. The shoes seemed fearless, anxious to walk into the uncertainty of the characters' journey.

When I planned the production process, I asked the percussion instructor to help me with my performance and the potential soundscape of the play. I set music rehearsals with him, and we worked on percussion playing for the performance. I had originally thought I would use 'Ggwaengwari', a small gong,

and 'Janggu', an hourglass-shaped drum. But when the instructor read the script, he suggested 'Kut Jing', a shaman gong, for the ritual, and 'Buk', a cylinder-shaped drum, for Storyteller. The grave echo of the shaman gong was perfect for the opening sound, which would come back for the closing of both the ritual and the play. By giving the drum to Storyteller, we integrated elements of 'Pansori', Korean Singing Theatre.<sup>18</sup> Instead of the accompanying drummer, who normally would play the drum along the storytelling, Storyteller herself would play at the beginning and end of each story segment. The small gong was assigned for the celebratory sound in the last scene of Simchong's story, which consisted of Korean traditional folk rhythms.<sup>19</sup> The percussion instructor selected rhythms that I had learned, and that he felt confident were within my ability. He arranged them in order of four, three, and two beats so that the sound would end with ecstatic, whirlpool-like banging.<sup>20</sup>

As I was practicing the rhythms of celebration, an indescribable sensation came over me again and again. And with that sensation, the physical presence of Storyteller became stronger. A Korean merriment liberated and heightened Storyteller's movement and gestures, and I could sense the verge of a transcendent reviving. It was a moment of reunion, in which my culturally confused self met a solidly rooted self. Storyteller's impulse, to intimately interact with the audience, was so strong and so unpredictable that I had to restrain her. I convinced her that she could not steal all the focus from Gramma, and I promised I would provide opportunities for her to release her impulse elsewhere.

As soon as the fall semester ended and the performance space became fully available, we went into intensive rehearsals – blocking and shaping the performance. Each rehearsal was like putting another piece into a jigsaw puzzle. Up to this point, we had worked with the shopping cart for its multiple functions – the altar for ritual, the stage for puppets, the luggage, the coffin, the shopping cart, and the mobile home for homeless characters – as well as for its symbolic contrast to the rocking chair. But the cart gave us trouble. One of the wheels kept falling off, making it unsafe to work with, and the wheels made lots of noise. Every time the scene changed, its massive body blocked a range of audience sightlines, and it was hard to make a transition while worrying about getting the cart out of the way. Finally the director decided to cut the cart from the performance.

For a moment it felt like a major setback. We had to re-block the scenes, and the manifestation of themes seemed to vanish. However, there were new discoveries, and we could not believe how much artistic freedom the choice unleashed. The cart was supposed to symbolize mobility and freedom, yet it had become a static burden. Without the cart, the stage opened up, the characters became more dynamic, the transitions quickened, and the audience could concentrate on the story better. Moreover, the themes were more profoundly presented. In contrast to the visible body of the rocking chair – home, immobility, imprisonment, authority, certainty, and permanent time – the absence of any other tangible material symbolized the absence of home, possession, territory, obligation, and even time itself. The homeless characters could go any where at any moment without a burden to carry and with no

attachment to hold them back. Wherever, and however long, they might stay would be home for the time being.

Another unbelievable discovery came after the arrival of musical instruments. I finished music rehearsals at UBC, and brought the instruments into the performance space. I reported and demonstrated to the director what I had worked on so far. She loved the shaman gong opening and closing the play, and did not mind the ear-deafening (celebratory) sound of small gong. But we faced transitional problems with Storyteller's drum since Storyteller could not be close to the drum every time her scene came back. As much as I wanted the integration of Korean theatre aesthetics, I did not want to make the same mistake as holding onto the cart. Besides, I never wished to present Korean elements for their exoticness. I gave up the 'Pansori' rhythms that had been arranged for the drum, and looked for new ways with an open mind. Maki could access to the drum more easily than Storyteller, and thus the director and I developed rhythms for Maki's storytelling. Moreover, the instruments began to reveal themselves as more than musical. They too became props, not just once or twice, but multiple times, transforming over and over. For example, the small gong served as a teacup, a bowl, or a fire alarm; the drum performed as a lawnmower, a table, a chicken, or even a toilet.

More often than not, letting go can be a benefit. Time after time, the director and I acknowledged that letting go of a choice dear to us, allowed even dearer choices. So, we confidently made another cut. We let go the notion of puppet show, at least the way we initially thought of it. We still wanted to use the Korean doll that we spotted at a second-hand store, but we eliminated other

puppets. We also abandoned the limitation that the puppet idea was solely for the use of Storyteller. Storyteller would still use the doll as Simchong, but she herself impersonated Blind Sim and Ppangdok omi. The Simchong puppet travelled to Gramma's house along with Maki, transforming into Maki's mom, the visitor, even an imaginary friend for Gramma. And, like the musical instruments, the doll could turn into other than human figures such as a grocery item, a lotion bottle, a phone, and even Maki's luggage. Whenever I used the Simchong doll as the luggage, I was amazed with the appropriateness of Simchong, Maki's cultural self, tagging along with Maki.

The set was minimal – the three risers as the stairs, and Gramma's rocking chair, covered with her blanket, on the right side of the top riser. The props were simple – a drum, a gong, and a doll, covered with a sheer blue fabric, on the left side of the middle riser, a mat as the altar on the centre of the bottom riser. The costume eventually abandoned the excessive symbols of Gramma's vest and Maki's toque, and stuck with only the basics – Storyteller's arc-sleeve top, Maki's jeans, Gramma's dress, along with the futuristic shoes and the Korean colour-palette scarf for the journey.

The largely empty stage opened to endless imagination, and now I could freely travel through time and space. I could enter numerous doors of possibility on the bare stage. Less is truly more.

## Post Script

The show is over, for now. For a moment, I feel somewhat like Gramma's empty chair. The festivity ended, and the audience gone. Staring at the dark empty stage, I feel as though the playmaking process has been a dream. But I know it is not a dream because I have the memory. I remember the lonely phase of monstrous writing, the intense dramaturgical discussions, the paralysis of my creative mind, the excitement of discovery, the dungeon of self-doubt, the insightful advice and feedback, the delightful collaboration, both contentment and disappointment after rehearsals, the palpitating moment on stage, the energy from the audience, and on and on.

Memory pushes me forward, convincing me that someday I will find what I have looked for, and still look for. The playmaking has informed who I am and what I do; it will contribute to the shaping of who I, and my work, will become. By tracing personal memory, not only am I able to approach to the question of identity, but I also arrive at universal human understanding. I do not wish to locate myself in Identity Politics or Post-colonialism, or to abuse universality as a cliché.

On one hand, I strongly believe that the issue of identity should not be dismissed no matter how much it has come to feel a repetitive, tedious subject matter. On the other hand, I do not want to entrap myself in any presumed, static way of understanding the question of identity. Although theorized insights

have provided tools for me to engage with my identity entanglement, the amazingly correct categories and definitions still fail to tell me who I am. I am not interested in presenting my autobiography as representative of any group,<sup>21</sup> a race, a gender, or a class. My identity may be found within these groups, and thus I cannot be fully understood outside of them. But I am apprehensive about the over-reliance on these classifications.

Perhaps it is human nature to band together, and I do not deny my longing to belong to a communal group, a secure place, and a protective system. Yet no two persons share an identity even within their collectivity. I am aware of the scholarly usage of 'Difference' and 'Other',<sup>22</sup> but to me, whose understanding of English vocabulary is limited to dictionary definitions, everybody is 'different', and is 'the other'. My 'Difference' – socially marginalized, racially discriminated against, and gender oppressed – has made me feel victimized, excluded, and even cynical. Yet my difference – as one human from other humans – has relieved and liberated me. I cannot thank enough my supervisory committee members, and my academic advisors, for encouraging me to take this liberation into my work.

My intent with the creation of *Gramma* was to achieve human understanding and community through individual difference. Within each character, so distinct from one another, I identify a self within me, and find the resemblance of all the characters to each other. Differences are doors, not barriers, for the acceptance of humanness. The memory of my life with Gramma has taught me that I, and every individual, have the choice between seeing barriers or doorways. In other words, it is the rejection of the difference in others that diminishes the humanity of the rejected – and consequently of those

rejecting – and damages our co-habitation. *Gramma*, in a way, is the personal testimony of the human condition. By providing my own experience, I hope to convince the audience because I believe that the more personal a story is, the greater potential of its universality.

Where there is human understanding, where there is acceptance of difference, and where there are doorways instead of barriers, I see the possibility of finding home. Through *Gramma*, I have searched the meaning of home, and questioned conditions such as permanence, territory, boundary, family, and security. In a time of displacement and global migration, those conditions are less and less stable, which increases the sense of loss and longing for return. Even for Gramma the meaning of home is ambiguous. She lived a life in exile with only the memory of home. Maybe the very nature of home is an idea, not a place; it is not a static state of being, but a becoming – always in the process of building, demolishing, and re-building. *Gramma* is a record of the search, a map toward a way home.

My map-drawing continues, but I have found a creative home as a performer on the empty stage. On stage, I become fully myself, invite and entertain people, share my story, feel secure and comfortable. For me, performing is a home in which human connection unfolds. When I perform, I am the shaman of my personal ritual of releasing. However, along with that freedom of being home, I recognize the challenge of presenting cultural difference. Even though including elements of a Korean performance style enabled me to express my cultural self, I must also consider the audience who witnesses my performance. I have to find a way to communicate with them through unfamiliar

aesthetics. It is certainly a task to find the balance, and it does not require compromise, but rather negotiation. The hybridization of cultures could bring a better understanding, and result in a new aesthetic.

For me, the search for home (human understanding, acceptance of difference, and the creation of doorways, not barriers) through writing, and the fragmented experience of home by performing, are inseparable. I am piecing the puzzle together in two simultaneous ways – the articulation of home on the page prepares me for the physical test, and the lived experience of home on the stage clarifies the articulation. The two creative processes compliment each other, and keep me balanced. I love the solitude of writing, being able to reflect and contemplate. I equally treasure the collaborative communion of performing, connecting with other artists and with the audience. So the layering, like Russian dolls, will continue as I find my way home. I am not anxious for a closure, the record of my journey will be always open-ended.

The trajectory of my work lies in autobiographic writing and intercultural theatre. In the larger puzzle, my playmaking is an autoethnography. Having a heterogeneous cultural experience and living on the metaphoric border, the record of any one culture cannot solely describe who I am. I have to create my own ethnography, and I would argue that the need applies to everyone. Edward Said says, 'no one today is one thing'. Our unique and complicated individuality requires a distinctive representation, especially in our multi-cultural environment. I believe that every single human's difference deserves attention and respect. I take up the courage to tell mine, and I look forward to hearing others'.

One festivity is over, but more will come. Anticipating the next festivity, I will revisit *Gramma*, yet again with open-mind, ready to let go. I am excited to find something I have never noticed before. The most enduring discovery from this playmaking is the character of Storyteller. The timeless and boundless Korean spirit fascinates me. I notice more versatility to be developed as I extend my research in Korean traditional theatre. The ancient Korean storyteller, 'Gwangdae' (the same term for clown), is capable of many roles – ringmaster, jester, trickster, imitator, actor, singer, dancer, musician, shaman, acrobatic, puppeteer.

I am currently taking FPA 252 Playmaking, in which students work with masks and clowning. Coincidentally, but perhaps not entirely by chance, Korean traditional theatre is deeply rooted in mask plays and clownish performing styles. I see an excellent opportunity to explore new ways for cultural and artistic integration. I am thrilled to see how Storyteller will manifest herself/myself in coming plays.

# End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze in conversation with Michel Foucault. Donald F. Bouchard's *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, p205-6.

<sup>2</sup> Sherrill Grace's *Theatre and Autobiography*, Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2006, p14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p15.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Bogart's *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre*, London & New York: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Bouchard, p208.

<sup>6</sup> Gertrude Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography*, New York: Vintage Books, 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Nalbaltian's *Aesthetic Autobiography*, London: MacMillan, 1994, p49-50.

<sup>8</sup> In *Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, Stein objectifies and impersonalizes herself by taking the persona of Alice B. Toklas, her secretary and lover. Thus, Stein writes Toklas' biography as an autobiography. Since the character of Toklas extensively records the biography of Stein, the book is also Stein's autobiography. In "Performing the Auto/Biographical Pact", Sherrill Grace remarks that all autobiography involves others' biography, and "indeed, even biographers are coming to see the importance of the autobiographical within biography and theorists of autobiography have long recognized the role of the biographical within the autobiographical". Marlene Kadar's *Tracing the Autobiographical*, Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005, p67.

<sup>9</sup> In the article above, Sherrill Grace borrows John Eakin's terminology. Relational identity is achieved when a play broadens its primary focus from one individual's life story to others' that constitute "I".

<sup>10</sup> In his lecture at College de France, Foucault paraphrases Nietzsche; "Knowledge is an 'invention' behind which lies something completely different from itself: the play of instincts, impulses, desires, fear, and the will to appropriate.... if it gives itself as the knowledge of truth, it is because it produces truth through the play of a primary and always reconstituted falsification.... thus, selfish interest is radically posed as coming before knowledge, which it subordinates to its needs as a simple instrument". Bouchard, p202-3. For G.W.F. Hegel, "real knowledge knows, discovers, both the 'I' and the 'thing' as historical and mediated constructions. It knows these processes through the self-reflection that was impossible for earlier claims to knowledge. That is through self-reflection about these previous forms of knowledge themselves.... no matter how secure it appears knowledge is always rooted in time and space, and is thus transitory". Roy Eyerman's *False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1981, p48-9.

<sup>11</sup> The term is associated with Marxist theory. Ernesto Screpanti's *The Fundamental Institutions of Capitalism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, p19:

The mystery of the employment contract is that it induces the workers to feel estranged from themselves. This mystery is created by a sort of existential contradiction, since, formally, workers enter into the contract as autonomous subjects, but, by doing so, they renounce their freedom ... since they consider themselves human beings, they like to feel free. Hence their labour obligations must be considered as a manifestation of freedom. They freely accepted the employment contract and, in order not to feel slaves... and this is how the commonplace, thence the ideology, of commodity labour is originated. It must be clear, however, that the roots of this ideology are dug deeply into the workers' false consciousness. Economists build on the products of this false consciousness.

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<sup>12</sup> Disparate audience responses really surprised me. There was another audience member who could not empathize with Maki-Then at all. She told me that from the beginning she felt sorry for Gramma, and upset with Maki's unkindness. There were also people who said Gramma reminded them of a family member of theirs, and their own ambivalence towards them. Everyone watched the same show, but no two persons interpret it identically. Just like Maki, each one understands things through their own personal reason and history. Yet no one can be completely sure that his or her understanding is the same as any other's.

<sup>13</sup> Hegel defines three forms of false consciousness – stoicism, scepticism, and unhappy consciousness. Stoicism “defeats the power of domination, pain and servitude by denying its existence”, while scepticism “denies the possibility of any better world”. In unhappy consciousness, “the oppression and suffering brought on by the condition of servitude is internalized by the slave and made into a noble form of life. The slave here, like the medieval monk, accepts a life of suffering as its highest form”. Eyerman, p53-4. In these forms, there is self-denial for the falsification of consciousness. None of these denials explains Maki's choice since her choice is unconscious. While she is, or thinks that she is, still under the condition of ‘servitude’, she admits and resents her slavery. It is not until the slavery ends that she consciously changes her convictions.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Han’ is a Korean sentiment, either personal or collective. It might be roughly translated as grudge, resentment, vexation, regret, sorrow, or unresolved emotion. But, none of these can describe the nature of ‘Han’. Perhaps it is a mixture of all the negative emotions that sit undigested on the chest, mixed with resignation and acceptance, even sublimation and transcendence. Although ‘Han’ is in every Korean, generally women accumulate more since it derives from repressed emotions. The following quote is close to what I mean to express by ‘Han’. Kim Yong-Sook's *Chosonjo Yuryumunhakkyungu*, Seoul: Hyejinsugwan, 1980, p82:

The word “han” I would describe as being that state whereby after a woman washes from her heart all emotional turmoil, her feelings of delight, sadness and rare ecstasy, there arises in their place a quiescent light that is not an airy feeling but like smoke lingering over the lowland that shines upon her other self in yonder land. This I call “han” when a woman gazes on the course of her life as irrevocably predestined fate. Sorrow, regret, guilt, yearning and the passions of love and hate, all these emotional complexities intermingle and transcend the triviality of emotion to a higher realm of beauty.

<sup>15</sup> The Korean ritual of releasing is called ‘Salpuri Kut’. For Koreans it is very important to clear ‘Han’ from one's chest, especially on the behalf the dead, since Koreans believe that too much ‘Han’ can leave the soul wandering in the liminal space between ‘this world’ and ‘that world’.

<sup>16</sup> William Sloane Coffin as quoted in “The Arts of Social Integration: English Renaissance Drama and Korean Pansori”. Hendrik van Gorp's *Genres as Repositories of Cultural Memory*, Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> In her article, “The Memory of the Senses, Part 1: Marks of the Transitory”, C. Nadia Seremetakis talks about the embodiment of senses or memory of senses. She gives her own experience as an example. When she remembers her childhood, certain senses come back to her. Even though the source of these senses is no longer available, she experiences them regenerating within herself. These senses are embodied in her sensorium. Or, perhaps it is the memory of these senses that regenerates the sensorium. Seremetakis' *The Senses Still- Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Pansori’ is an aural tradition of storytelling. It is a solo performance, in which the performer tells a story by mixing speech and singing. A drummer accompanies to enhance the atmosphere, and to support the performance by interacting with the performer. Besides drumming, the drummer often inserts ‘chuimsae’, a short exclamatory word, along the story.

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<sup>19</sup> The Korean folk rhythms I used came from Cholla South province. Korean folk music, 'Pungmul', developed regionally. The rhythms are similar in most regions, but the score and performing styles vary. The rhythms are played by four kinds of percussion, which is the reason that the performance is also called 'Samulnori', four-instrument-playing. The score for Maki's celebratory sound incorporated the 'Pungmul' rhythms. The specific rhythms I performed were 'Pungryu' and 'Samchae' for four-beat, 'Genjigen' for three-beat, and 'Huimori' for two-beat. I opened and closed the percussion performance with 'Orumsae', bouncing-ball rhythm.

<sup>20</sup> Korean percussion sounds enhance 'Heung', Korean merriment. In Korean traditional theatre, which is often a communal festivity, all the theatrical and ritualistic performances intensify to a trance-like, ecstatic point with extreme merriment. I did not expect that the Canadian audience would experience the Korean merriment as a Korean audience might. I only hoped to introduce it to the audience. Some may have felt the sound noisy and disturbing, which would not offend me. I would be delighted if even one audience member felt the excitement and joy arising from the percussive sound.

<sup>21</sup> Carolyn Ellis explains, "[Conquergood and Pelias] claim that any performers should not try to speak 'for a community', but instead should be engaged in shared conversations in which they speak 'to and with the community'. The stage becomes a forum for ongoing and open dialogue that involves the text, performer, and audience. Performance is not so much representational as it is dialogic and conversational". Ellis' *The Ethnographic I: a Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> I have great respect for many 'visible minority' scholars such as Stuart Hall, Bell Hook, and Trinh T. Minh-ha to name a few. Their insights in cultural studies have helped my understanding of self. With that knowledge as my foundation, I hope to build my own definition of my identity. I agree with Deleuze who emphasizes "a system of relays within a larger sphere, within a multiplicity of parts that are both theoretical and practical. A theorizing intellectual, for us, is no longer a subject, a representing or representative consciousness.... Representation no longer exists; there's only action – theoretical action and practical action which serve as relays and form networks". Bouchard, p206.

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## **Appendices**

## **Annexe A: “Gramma” Production Script**

### **Scene 1**

*Sound of percussion. Lights fade in. Road Ritual enters. Pallbearer’s tune.*

*Goodbye, my dearest.*

*You are about to cross the river of oblivion.*

*When will you come back?*

*You will never come back.*

*How can she leave everything behind?*

*How can she take eternal farewell?*

Simchong, the filial daughter, had taken care of her blind father, doing any rough chore just to feed him. But Blind Sim only complained and felt sorry for himself. He always said that nothing would make him happy unless he could see. A monk told Simchong that if she donated three hundred sacks of rice to the temple, her father’s eyes would open. Where could she find such a large donation?

Simchong’s heart ached for her father.

Then one day she heard a rumour that some sailors wanted to buy a young girl.

They needed a sacrifice to calm the fury of the sea so that they could sail.

Simchong wasn’t afraid of death if she could please her father. She was worried

what would happen to him after she was gone, but he would be happy when his wish came true. And if he could see, he could manage. Her only regret was that when her father was able to see, she wouldn't be there. After a heart-tearing farewell with her father, she followed the sailors to the shore of the Indangsu.

*Ritual of Farewell begins.*

*Remember not this harsh world.*

*No more sorrow, no more pain.*

*Please go without a grudge.*

*For you will have no more heartache at last.*

*Rest your soul at home*

*And wait for us.*

*Sooner or later we all must go there.*

*When we reunite, we shall revel.*

The time has come for Simchong.

Praying for her father's happiness, she gave herself to the furious sea.

*Jumping into the water. Lights change.*

## **Scene 2**

*Airport noises. Sound of flight.*

Above the clouds, at thirty some thousand feet, all I can see is a field of water. Will I see my family again? The time has come for me, too, Simchong. The longer I was with my family, the more I brought disgrace. People never ceased to point fingers at my parents for having an unmarried, unsuccessful daughter.

It had to end. The cause of disgrace must go. So, I am leaving. Although the heartache of leaving home tears me apart, this is best for my family.

As I look down at the vast ocean, I feel your pain, Simchong, your fear. How courageous you were when you jumped into the Indangsu! And now, I am falling into the deepest ocean with nothing to cling to. I want to disappear while I'm in the air without a trace, dissolve into millions of molecules, before I hit the rocks, before I sink into the water. But gravity is pulling me down, and down. I am about to drown in the unknown.

*Sinking into the water. Lights change.*

### **Scene 3**

Death, Simchong thought. For sure. But the water didn't choke her, and she found herself on the back of a turtle. The turtle brought her to the Dragon King. The ruler of the water world was so moved by Simchong's filial piety that he placed Simchong inside a giant lotus flower, and sent her back to earth.

The lotus flower floated far away and eventually arrived at the pond of the palace. The Emperor was strolling in the garden when he spotted the lotus, and the flower began to open. Simchong's heart pounded fast as the petals fell away one by one. 'Where am I? What will happen?'

If you have a difficulty imagining this, think of the famous painting 'Birth of Venus', replace the seashell with a lotus, and wrap the nude with a Korean traditional costume.

So death, for Simchong, turned out to be the birth of the Oriental Venus. People murmured with amazement, Simchong slowly opened her eyes, and saw the handsome Emperor smiling at her. He gently offered his hand.

*Rubbing eyes in disbelief. Lights change.*

## Scene 4

Well, I don't see any emperor, just an old lady.

"What do you know for sure?"

She is standing at the door with her body slightly leaning to one side, one hand holding the door, and the other holding a portable phone with an amplifier. She wears far too large glasses, and has a hearing aid in one ear. She is tiny, her arms and legs are very skinny. Her hair is snow white and looks like a cactus.

She is unhappy because her afternoon nap has been interrupted. She doesn't ask any questions, or smile, she just shows me to the basement. I take my two bags in.

"Oh my goodness, you are just a baby. When you were born, I was around for sixty years already!"

Hmmm, that sounds incredible. She is ninety years old, and lives alone in her house. In my country, where filial duty is the highest virtue, a ninety-year old taking care of self is unheard of. An independent ninety-year old, as she is proud to tell you, is very very impressive.

"I might make it to a hundred. What do you know for sure?"

Suddenly she looks like a walking history book. Or fossil. Ancient and timeless.

“You have everything here. It’s fully furnished.”

I look around the room. The dresser top is chipped, the bed squeaks, the chesterfield fabric is torn, and the armchair seat is sunken. One chair has a broken leg, another has a broken back.

“I have to show you something.”

She grabs my arm and takes me into the bathroom. Beside the toilet is a worn-out carpet. She pulls up the carpet and beneath is a hole with rotten wood around it.

“Be careful when you sit on the toilet. If you don’t like it, fix it. I don’t use it, so I won’t pay for it!”

Ummm...

“Call me Gramma.”

## Scene 5

Oh, Simchong. As Gramma always says, what do you know for sure? You became an Empress, I became a maid. I pay my rent by working for Gramma. Life in her basement is not a palace, that's for sure. She hates to use heat and electricity, so the basement is cold and dark. Days I read in the bathroom because it's the brightest room in the basement. If she sees a light turned on during the day, and she comes down soundlessly, I go through a thunderstorm. The light bulb is forty watts only because she couldn't find twenty five watts, so it's not worth having the light on.

But I'd rather be sitting in the dark basement, than...

*Running upstairs.*

Yes, Gramma! Oh, your hearing aid needs a new battery. Here we go.

*Coming down and going up.*

What now, Gramma! Yes, for sure, I will cut out the grocery coupon. There.

*Coming down and going up again.*

Again, Gramma? No, I didn't forget to stir the peanut butter for you. I'm almost done with my homework, and you still have some left anyway. Ooooookay, I'll do it right now.

*Down and up.*

Now what? No, there's no stain on your sweater. If it gets a stain, I'll tell you, and then I'll wash it.

*Down and up again.*

Uh..... Yes, today is Wednesday... No, Wednesday!

You see what I mean?

She constantly calls me up, so I might as well stay upstairs. The kitchen gets nice sunshine, it's bright and warm. I wouldn't mind reading up there and waiting on her.

But, no way. Upstairs is Her Majesty's territory. All day, she sits in her throne, the rocking chair in front of the living room window.

"From here, I can see if a visitor is coming."

The kitchen is ready for her company. Although most of the time it is empty, I'm not allowed to hang around up there.

“You are like a little mouse, living in my basement, ho ho ho.”

Okay, okay, I see the Thirty Eighth Parallel. South Korea here, North Korea there.

*Lights change.*

## **Scene 6**

Simchong had been so poor her whole life, begging, cleaning, washing, sewing, child-tending, sweeping, digging, you name it. And now, her life changed for good. That's what happens to a filial daughter, you see?

Now she sat beside the Emperor with everyone looking up to her. The whole palace was hers. There was absolutely nothing she could not have. Everyone loved and adored her. No more labour, no more begging.

*Lights change.*

## Scene 7

*Jumping up.*

Yes, Gramma!

“I need to cook beets. Clean them first.”

Is this a vegetable?

“You don’t know beets?”

I have never seen one. How do you cook them?

“Goodness gracious. What do you know for sure? Well, you just follow my instructions!”

Okay.

“No! Don’t cut there! Too much water! Turn the heat down! Open the lid! Use that fork! Move the pot here! What a mess! This is my house!”

Anyone ever cooked beets? They make a mess! I clean up the stove, wipe the counters, but her eyesight is so bad she can’t even tell the difference. I will never have anything to do with beets again in my whole life!

“Do you know what salt is?”

Oh, yeah.

“Put some on the meat.”

Here.

“More!”

It’s too much already.

“Not enough!”

But it’s going to be too salty.

“Ha, I don’t taste it at all.”

Why do you need salt then?

“I don’t like my food without salt!!”

*Throwing arms and coming back to the basement.*

Grandma, I’m in the bathroom! Ugh, of course she can’t hear me. This is the worst. (*in panic*) I’m coming, I’m coming, please, please, be patient.

“Ha, isn’t that funny you are always in the bathroom when I call you?”

Always? It’s not that often, besides you call me many times throughout the day.

“What is this? I just ask a few simple things, and you complain that’s too much?”

No, I don’t. All I’m saying is that sometimes I can’t come up right away. So if you could just wait for a bit...

“It can’t wait! I can’t hear! How do I know when you’re coming up!!”

Grandma is always right. There’s no logic, no reason. She is right. Period. All you can say is: ‘Yes, Ma’am.’

“This is my house!”

Yes, Ma’am.

“Everything is mine!”

Yes, Ma'am.

"Don't touch!"

Yes, Ma'am.

The North Korean military should recruit you, Gramma.

"Today you have to do my laundry."

No problem.

"Why do you take my blanket?"

I'm gonna wash it.

"It's not dirty! Don't waste water!"

But it smells.

"Lie! I don't smell anything."

That's because you can't smell.

"No! I'm telling you it doesn't smell!"

With her bladder problem, the blanket on her rocking chair needs to be washed often. I don't dare talk about her health and sanitation. I just wash the blanket at midnight after making sure she's sleeping. But I can't do anything about her bed sheets. While several sets of nice sheets wait in the closet for a guest, Gramma uses her worn-out sheets over and over.

## Scene 8

I have given up going to the bathroom when she is awake.

Or I put our note paper on the kitchen table. This is the sign between Gramma and me. When I go out, I leave a blank note so that she knows I'm not around, and doesn't get upset all by herself.

I used to leave a nice note: 'Good morning, Gramma. I'm out. I'll be back before three. Have a nice day!'

"I have a hard time reading. Besides why do you waste paper?"

So, we use the same blank note over and over. I leave the paper on the table, she puts it away in the drawer, and I take it out and leave it again.

Sometimes, I leave the house just not to be there. There aren't many places I can go on foot. If I don't feel like walking all the way to the library, I go to the park near the house. I sit on a bench and look at people. Families, friends. After a good time together, they head back to their warm, bright homes. Ah me, time to crawl back to the cold, dark mouse hole.

I'm back, Gramma.

"Good. I was worried I forget before you come back. There are some dang weeds I want you to pull out."

It is amazing, in her blindness, how she can spot weeds. Pulling weeds is a never-ending chore, but doing what pleases Gramma is safe for me. I can stand the sun, but mosquitoes eat me alive. I cover my skin with long sleeves and long pants, but still they find my exposed flesh.

Gramma would watch me spraying mosquito repellent before I go out to the garden.

“Stop! You spray too much! It’s not cheap!”

But it’s not enough, Gramma.

“I’m telling you that’s enough for sure. I don’t get mosquito bites, why do you need it anyway?”

Even though I used the spray very sparingly, with weeding almost everyday, it ran out.

Gramma, the spray is gone.

“Good grief! Did you take a shower with it? I don’t have that kind of money!”

I choose mosquito bites over her biting words.

*Scratching mosquito bites.*

“Bring me a trowel from the garage.”

Umm, what does it look like?

“Good for nothing!”

How deep should I dig?

“Deeper...stop! Don’t put the seeds too close!”

*Chasing mosquitoes.*

“Hurry up! We don’t have all day. You have to cut the grass.”

You have to show me how to use the lawn mower.

“For goodness sake!”

Okay, I got it.

“Stop, stop! You are cutting the electric cord!”

No, Gramma. It’s a dandelion!

“Oh... Don’t you break the machine. I’m going inside for my lunch. It’s so tiring to teach you!”

## Scene 9

Humiliation in private is one thing, and humiliation in public is another matter.

Grocery shopping!

*Pushing a grocery cart.*

No, Gramma. It's not in this aisle. You need to get the jam first, then we'll go around to get your cereal.

"Why do you change the routine? It confuses me!"

No, Gramma. This is exactly the same routine we do every time.

"Are you getting the right one?"

For sure!

"Let me see!"

Here!

"How much is it?"

Three forty-nine.

"What? Has the price gone up?"

No, Gramma. It's the same price!

Although I can pick up the exact items she wants with my eyes closed, she still has to see each one and has to check the price. Of course she can't hear well, so I have to yell, and people look at me as though I were abusing her.

I have no choice. If she couldn't hear me, she would scream. But then if she didn't like what she heard, she would scream anyway. She wins no matter what. She would get mad at me if the price went up, she would scold me if there were something extra to get, she would yell at me if the store were crowded.

"Excuse me. I need to get my groceries!"

Gramma, we can wait.

"What?! Listen, that person is getting in my way! Why can't people move faster?"

We're not moving fast either.

"That's because I'm old!!"

Yes, Ma'am.

The store always has whole barbecue chickens on sale. Every time we go shopping, she stops to stare longingly at the chicken.

"How much is it?"

Five ninety-nine!

"Huh...?! Forget it!"

She grunts and passes by. At every shopping. She has never bought a barbecue chicken, even once.

You would think she is poor. Ah-uh. On the contrary, she is quite wealthy. Her husband was a successful businessman, and she is basically sitting on her pile of money.

What can you say? If she cannot buy a chicken, she cannot buy a chicken.

She has saved every penny for her children. Poor, poor rich Gramma.

*Lights change.*

## **Scene 10**

In spite of all her power and fortune, Simchong was not happy. Even surrounded by many kind people, she still felt lonely. Her heart ached for her father.

When she was having a wonderful time, she wished that her father were with her so that they could enjoy it together. When she dreamed about her father, she wept all the following day. She felt guilty eating the delicious palace food without him. Simchong was worried that without her, Blind Sim wouldn't even get himself a bowl of water.

*Lights change.*

## Scene 11

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

Yes, Gramma.

On good days we would have tea time at three in the afternoon, precisely. I have never known anyone so strict with time. If someone comes by a few minutes after three, she gets no tea from Gramma.

“Too bad for you. You should’ve come a bit earlier.”

Dear me, what difference do a few minutes make, Gramma?

Ah-uh! Gramma, the Commander!

“Polly put the kettle on”, she would tell me, and put out two cookies. On her big plate, they look very lonely.

“I can’t have too many cookies. I’m a diabetic.”

I’m not.

“Did you say something?”

Nope.

Over tea she would tell me her life story. A long, long time ago when I wasn’t born yet, about places I can’t envision. When she re-lives her past, she becomes soft, dreamy, and I feel surprisingly safe and comfortable in her old-fashioned

kitchen. Memory seems the only thing that makes her happy. It is lovely to see her feel so good even for a brief time.

“...It was a long time ago, you know, when I was a little girl. I remember...”

*Listening to her story.*

That magical atmosphere eventually disappears as she signals the end of storytelling: “I don’t know what I’m gonna eat for supper. I have corn, I can have carrots, there’s green beans, maybe some potatoes.... Time for you to go downstairs.”

Eating is her only activity. There isn’t much to her cooking, but she is lively while she is fixing her meals. It is the only time she is more active than me. Sitting alone in the dark cold basement and smelling her dinner is torture.

I used to feel tortured when my mom tried to make me eat breakfast. I slept until the very last minute, and then rushed to school. I used to complain that her side dishes were always the same – boring and cheap. I never once sincerely thanked her for the meals. Ah, Mom, if only I could eat your meal once more, I would bow a big bow to you, and massage your arms. I would eat anything and everything you cook. Mom, I’m sorry.

*Lights change.*

## **Scene 12**

For a while, Blind Sim expected that he would be able to see. Maybe today, maybe tonight. No, oh, no. There was not even a remote sense of vision, and he blamed himself for his daughter's futile death. Having lost the only one who cared for him, now Blind Sim had to manage all by himself. He was malnourished, his clothes were tattered and stained, and his mind became dimmer. He no longer believed in the promise of seeing, and he lost his will to live.

*Lights change.*

### Scene 13

Life is getting harder for Gramma, but she has a strong will to go on. She will make it to a 100, for sure. She might even live longer than I do. Gramma is invincible.

One hot summer day, we were having our tea time, and she mentioned that her granddaughter called from Ontario, and said it's over eighty some degrees there.

I don't know Fahrenheit, how hot is that?

"What do you mean Fahrenheit? It's Celsius!"

Gramma, it can't be Celsius. It's almost the temperature water boils in Celsius.

"Who cares if water boils or not! It is over 80 Celsius!!!"

Here's the thermometer with both Fahrenheit and Celsius, look, Gramma!

".... I can't see!!!"

Augh... ..

"Why are you opening the window?!"

It's too hot, and we need some fresh air.

"No! I don't want dust to come in!"

Don't worry. I'll clean.

"Listen! I can't hear. What if someone sneaks in?"

I'll watch.

"Ha! What could you possibly do if someone broke in! Close the window!!!"

Do you really think if the window is closed nobody's gonna break in?

"For sure! I'm telling you, close it. Now."

Nobody, absolutely nobody, beats you, Gramma.

"I have many nice things. I don't want them to get stolen! They will go to my children and grandchildren. I've already made the list of who's getting what."

True, she has many beautiful ornaments, dishes, and antiques – and a sticker on each one, with her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren's name on it.

*Dusting the ornaments.*

"Be Careful!!!"

*Startling. Dropping an ornament. Horrified.*

## Scene 14

Each day is painful, but I hate holidays more because it's family time. There is really nowhere to go but the basement, and nobody to see but Gramma. I can't help imagining families getting together in their houses, happy to share time together. I can almost hear the chatter, the laughter, and then the image appears – family members filling the room, exchanging greetings and looks.

The image shifts and then I see familiar faces, the faces of my family. Vividly, yet blurry at the same time. Oh, I feel they miss me, wonder how I'm doing. My mom sighs, all teary and weary. Mom, I'm doing just fine.

Would she make my favourite dumplings, and wish me there to eat them?

Probably. Or maybe she wouldn't feel up to it. Mom and I used to make them together. An army of dumplings would gradually line up, and when the tray was full, Mom would steam the dumplings, and we would repeat the process, on and on.

Mom, we could open up a family business making dumplings?

“No thanks. I don't like this labour. I only do it because you like dumplings.”

Oh, look at Daddy, and Brothers. Mom, they don't help, but just go around making a mess. They don't work, they don't eat. We won't give them any dumplings, right, Mom? “Never mind. We don't want their help, they're clumsy. Just big babies.”

*Giggling.*

“What were you doing?”

Oh, not much.

“Then why don’t you pick up the crabapples?”

I just picked up a bunch yesterday.

“They keep falling! I saw a crabapple on the sidewalk.”

You can’t pick up a crabapple every time one falls, can you?

“I don’t want my mailman to step on it!!”

Your mailman doesn’t come today, Gramma. It’s a holiday.

“Oh.... Well, there might be some special delivery, you never know! Just in case, no crabapple should be on the sidewalk!!”

I’ll pick it up right now!

## Scene 15

Even a basement, a gloomy place most unlike Simchong's palace, you get used to it. You adapt yourself to the given circumstance.

I become her eyes and hands, executing anything she needs. Before I wake her up, I do her dishes. Depending on what I wash, I know what's to be done. If there's a plastic pitcher to wash, it's time to make milk – mixing the milk powder and water. If there are four clean glass bowls, I make Jell-o, and fill the four bowls again. Everyday the dishes I wash are almost the same. A bowl, a cup, and a spoon for breakfast. A small plate, a knife, a fork, and a mug for lunch. A big plate, a knife, a fork, a bowl, and a glass for dinner. Some days a pot or two. They are even stacked in the same way everyday. She cannot stand change. I guess she likes to know everything 'for sure'.

This climate is so dry, and my skin gets cracked. I used rubber gloves that were sitting under the sink for years. They eventually wore out.

Gramma, I need a new pair of gloves.

“Why do you need them just to do a few dishes? Why can't you wash them with bare hands?”

My hands get so dry and cracked, it aches...

“Use that lotion. It's mine, but you may use it!”

I glance at the lotion beside the sink. I'll bet it's been there over twenty years. It smells funny, has a weird colour, and it's all dried out around the cap. It's there only because everything has to occupy the same place in her house.

I could use the lotion after, but I need new gloves. These have holes...

"You made a hole in the gloves on purpose to waste my money! Forget it!!"

Uh.....

"What are you standing there for? Go away. It's my nap time."

How come I ended up here? Hey, Simchong. I'm not saying I deserve to be an Empress like you. But here I am living in the cold dark basement with nothing but the frustrated voice upstairs. Why this misery?

Simchong, you were such a good girl that you gave up your life for your father. No wonder the Dragon King rewarded you, and your deed became legendary. I pretended that I left home for my family's sake. No... I deserted my filial duty. I abandoned my family because I wanted to have my life for myself, free from obligations.

Selfishness deserves to be punished with intolerable loneliness.

Mom, Dad, come and get me out of here. I don't think I can take this any longer. I shouldn't have left.

*Closing her eyes and singing "Beauty of Death"*

*My life that roams in the wilderness  
For what have I come to this world?  
This way or that way, still it's just a life  
Fortune, honour, love, I care none*

*\*Alternative song "Wish Song"*

*Confronting this harsh world,  
What is your wish?  
If you had fortune and fame,  
Would your wish be content?  
Looking into the vast sky with the bright moon,  
All the worldly things are empty dreams*

I dreamed someone was shouting my name.  
No, it's not a dream. It's Gramma!

*Running upstairs.*

What's wrong, Gramma?  
"Why did you wake me up?"  
What are you talking about? It's not even seven o'clock yet.  
"I know! So why did you wake me up?"

I didn't. I was sleeping and you woke me up.

"Nonsense! You are supposed to wake me up at quarter to eight. Why did you wake me up early?"

You must have been dreaming or something.

"I don't dream!!"

I was sleeping, believe me. I don't get up until when it's time to wake you up.

"Then why did you wake me up at the wrong time?"

I told you, I didn't!

"Yes, you did! Don't you lie to me. I want to know why you woke me up!!!"

I didn't, Gramma. God knows. God knows!!!

"You didn't?"

Never ever!

"Well, there is absolutely no need to yell. Why are you yelling?"

... ..?!?!

"Maybe I was dreaming then. Will you wake me up at quarter to eight? I have to eat on time, you know. I am a diabetic, you know"

.....I'm sorry, Gramma. Don't worry. I'll wake you up on time.

Gramma was proud that she never needed an alarm clock. Ever since she got married, she had woken up at exactly same time every single morning.

But one day, she couldn't wake up at that same time anymore. Her body clock stopped functioning, just like that. One more task to add to my list, and one more reason for her frustration.

“I can take care of myself just fine. You do nothing for me. If I wasn’t such a nice person, I would’ve kicked you out long ago!”

*Shaking her head and shivering.*

## Scene 16

Gramma is cold enough. But then comes winter.

The cold basement is now freezing. Being outside actually makes me feel better. At least it is brighter, and I can get warm from walking. Some days I just walk and walk without destination. Homelessness soaking to the bone, colder than the weather. Everywhere all white, and wind like a knife slashing my skin. Welcome to the north country! Here's a souvenir for you – a blizzard!

“Why didn't you shovel?”

I'm going to shovel right now.

“You should've shovelled already!”

The snow just stopped, and look, I'm ready, my mittens are on.

“No! You were going to school without shovelling!”

What?

“You don't want to do anything for me! You live for free, paying nothing. You live in my house and everything you use is mine. You do nothing. You are good for nothing!”

I was going to shovel!

“Don't you lie! You were not! You never work! I don't want my visitors slip on the snow!”

Nobody's coming! Who wants to see you anyway! I do everything you ask!!  
What's your problem!!! Okay, I'm leaving! I'm sick of it!!! I'm packing right  
now!!!!

*Explosion of emotion. Sudden silence.*

I have nowhere to go. It's 40 below outside. Oh, no, I am trapped. Shit.

Whoa! When did she come down?

"You are gonna shovel now, aren't you?"

Yes, right now!

I find a can of soup on the stairs. This is her way of saying 'I'm sorry'. (*reaching out for the can*) Nope! I'm not a beggar. If she thinks that a can of soup mends what she's done to me, that I would wag my tail, she's so wrong. I'm human. I have my pride! (*considering the can, hungry*) Oh, well, to hell with my pride. (*grabbing the can*) I don't know what I am anymore. My humanness has shrunk so much that now I do feel like a mouse.

Sometimes she would wander around upstairs and eventually make her way to the basement. Whether I am there or not, she would go around here and there, making sure everything is where it is supposed to be. She even checks around my few belongings.

"Privacy? Ha, you do not have privacy, because you pay nothing! I can kick you out any time! This is my house, and I can go anywhere in my house!"

Yes, Ma'am...

*Light change.*

Where am I? (*looking about*) My room? Ha ha. I'm home? Home sweet home!  
Hey, Mom. Good morning! I had such a weird dream. In the dream, I jumped into the water, went to this strange place, a cold dark basement in an old house, and there was this scary lady who treated me like a slave. She was like a thousand year old nine-tailed fox. I hated being there and missed home like crazy. What a nightmare. Mom, I'm gonna have breakfast with you, ok? Daddy's already gone to work?

*Alarm goes off. Lights change.*

Fire!

*Fanning under the smoke detector.*

Ugh, look at the black popcorn. The microwave timer was set at 50 minutes. She must have pushed the zero button too many times. Great, now I have to clean the microwave!

(*looking around*) There she is, in her usual rocking chair, oblivious to all the smoke and noise and smell. She doesn't even notice me until I am right beside

her. Of five senses, she only has one left, touch, but her skin is so rough and wrinkly she can't really tell what she's touching. What defines human?

*Lights change.*

## **Scene 17**

Blind Sim's ordeal was far from over. He met Ppangdok omi, an ugly, mean, sly, greedy, selfish, deceitful, disgusting, evil woman who lived in the next village.

When the sailors took Simchong away, they generously left Blind Sim extra money. Ppangdok omi approached Blind Sim for the money. She pretended to look after him, but spent his fortune for herself. She ate all kinds of delicacies, but fed Blind Sim only rice porridge. She dressed up in silk and expensive jewellery, but didn't even mend the holes in Blind Sim's worn-out clothes. She decorated her room with luxurious furniture and beautiful ornaments, but gave Blind Sim a room with no heat. Blind Sim couldn't see what she was doing. Ppangdok omi bullied him, but poor Blind Sim had no one else to turn to.

*Lights change.*

## Scene 18

Blind Sim and Ppangdok omi. A bad combination. For sure. I am stuck with a blind lady whose personality is like Ppangdok omi. Awful, just awful.

*(sings)* 'There she goes, there she goes again...'

Here I am.

"Where did you put my candle?"

Do you have candle? I've never seen one.

"I need it! What did you do with it?"

You know I never touch anything without asking you. I have no idea where your candle is!

"But who else is there? It has to be you!"

Oh, please, be reasonable.

*Sound of knocking on the door.*

Gramma, someone's at the door!

"Hurry up. Open the door."

She's got a visitor. I am safe for now. She is very excited. I can see twinkling stars in her eyes. No wonder. This doesn't happen often. She fusses around to put the kettle on, to clean the table, and to make tea. Her friend asks me to join

them, and to be honest, I'm excited to have a chance to talk to a real human. I mean, with Gramma, normal conversation is not normal.

Thank you. Gramma, I'll set up.

"Well, uh, don't you have homework to do?"

No. No, I have time.

She reluctantly puts out three cookies.

It's obvious that Gramma is not happy to share the visitor's attention with me.

She could not keep up with our conversation, and she got agitated.

"I went grocery shopping yesterday. Now I'm set for two weeks."

Uhh.....

"My blood sugar has been up and down. This morning it was seven point five.

Yesterday it was eleven point two!"

Who wants to hear about your blood sugar?

Now she is going on with what she ate to get her blood sugar down, then she moves onto what she bought for grocery. Oh, Gramma.

Her friend asks me how I like living here.

Umm... yes... I like it... it's nice.... Gramma is good to me....

"We are like family, you know."

## Scene 19

There is no escape. Home is merely a dream. The more she becomes dependent on me, the more she resents me. Now I feel like I am smaller than a mouse.

When I come home from school, I go to check her. As always, she is sunk in her rocking chair, staring out the window, longing for a visitor.

*Staring. Mistaking someone's coming, excited for a moment, then disappointed.*

"Hello?"

*Waiting for a while.*

"Oh... nobody's here."

*Grabbing the phone.*

"Hello?"

*Listening.*

"Oh... nobody's there, either."

*Back to staring.*

Framed by the window, she was like an old photo left behind when a family moved out.

It would have been nice to chat with her, to shed a bit of boredom from her day. But, I know how it would end. Her anger and frustration that has grown throughout the lonely empty day would all come down upon me. Her wrath is unpredictable, and I can't take a chance. So I am just glad to see that she's okay, and I sneak down to the basement.

Even when I am in the basement, I put the blank note on the table so that she thinks I'm out. I am paranoid about her irrational rage. I do all my tasks before she asks so that I can avoid her. When I have to face her, I make it as brief as possible.

"What do you know for sure?"

Nothing....

"You don't know nothing? Oh, you poor thing!"

Whatever...

*Hiding to the basement.*

*Hearing her name called. Great anguish and resentment.*

What?

“Bring me a loaf of bread from the deep freezer.”

Again? I just brought a loaf up yesterday.

“No, you didn’t!”

I know better than argue with her. But the truth is she did eat the whole loaf of bread in one day.

“What day is it today?”

Saturday.

“What happened to my medication? The nurse fills for a week every Tuesday.

But it’s gone already!”

Uh-uh, this is serious. Now she sleeps too much, and whenever she wakes up from her naps, she takes her medication.

Gramma, wake up. It’s quarter to eight.

“Is it morning?”

Yes.

“Is it my breakfast time?”

Yes.

“What’s the blood sugar?”

Seventeen point nine.

“What? Are you sure you didn’t make a mistake? Or maybe the machine is broken.”

No, it’s because you ate too much bread yesterday. I told you.

“.....I was so bored. It was just something to do! I’m disgusted with myself!”

*Lights change.*

## **Scene 20**

Ppangdok omi spent every single penny that Blind Sim had. She even pawned everything in the house. Ppangdok omi saw there was no more to get from Blind Sim, and she was about to leave him when she heard about a national festival for blind men. Blind Sim was not excited about the festival, but he had to attend because it was the Emperor's order. Ppangdok omi insisted on going with him, planning to swindle as many blind men as she could. So the unlikely couple – Blind Sim and Ppangdok omi – set out on their long journey.

*Lights change.*

## Scene 21

Nothing stays the same, even for Gramma. She becomes more and more like a baby. Now I have to run upstairs in the middle of night. Nothing could be worse than this.

The time has come for Gramma – she has to leave her home.

“I am doing just fine. This is my house. I’m not going anywhere else! Besides you need me.”

Oh, no, Gramma. You can’t do that. After all that beating and biting, don’t pretend you care about me.

“What would happen to you if I’m not here?”

I’d be better off.

“Why should I have to leave my home?”

You are not the only one.

“I might manage here as long as you help me?”

Who are you kidding?

“Take care of my house. I’ll be back soon”

No, you won’t.

“Goodbye, house. I don’t know why I’m leaving.”

*Seeing her off. Breaking into dance.*

Man-se, man-se, man-se!

Yaaaaahooooo! Freeeeeeeeedom!

Independence day!

The Dragon Lady is gone! I won! I am human again! This is my house! I can go anywhere in the house I want! I can touch anything I want!

*Running around. Switching things around.*

*Sitting in Gramma's chair.*

'This is my chair!' Well, Gramma, come and get me!

*Gradually calming down. Looking around.*

Hello?.....

Gramma?!

The tyrant moved out. I should feel free. Happy. Peaceful... .. Creepy, it's too quiet. A frail 100 pound woman sat in a rocking chair all day, yet her presence was all over the house. I used to hear her singing to herself from the basement. Her fragile voice would break my heart. I do that too, Gramma.

*Singing Hymn. Staring out.*

It is a lovely day, Gramma.

“No, it’s not laundry day.”

No, I said lovely day.

“Listen, I’m telling you, it’s not laundry day. Don’t you dare waste extra water! I know when it’s laundry day.”

Okay, never mind.

Those days are forever gone. All that’s left are memories. Maybe having an enemy is better than having nobody.

## Scene 22

*Visiting Gramma in the nursing home.*

Hi, Gramma, it's me. How are you?

Her glassy eyes stare at me, but she doesn't know who's there.

Gramma, are you feeling okay?

She slowly traces my words.

"Oh, I think I am fine. What time is it?"

Almost tea time, remember Three o'clock tea time?

She doesn't answer, just stares at me as if trying to figure out who I am.

"Thanks for visiting me. Nice to meet you."

Oh, no, Gramma. No. Don't go away. Stay with me, please.

Gramma, your house is just fine. Everything is all right in the house. I keep everything just the way it was.

She is not here. She is at the shore, about to cross the river of oblivion. Her eyes are full of curiosity.

"Where am I?"

Oh, oh, oh.

"Are you eating? Whatever you find in the cupboard, you eat it all."

Gramma, I don't want you to be nice. Get mad at me. Be strong and yell at me from the top of your lungs. We can have a good fight. Remember, Gramma?

Don't you miss it? She distorts her mouth, and I know she means to smile. I hold her bony hand for a long time. I am glad she is still on this side of river, although I don't know what difference it makes to her.

I clean out her cupboard and refrigerator. I eat up whatever is still edible. As I throw away expired bottles and cans, I feel as though I'm parting with old friends. The shelves are so empty. Now I can sit in her kitchen for as long as I wish, but it's not the same. The coupons come as before. (*starting to cut out coupon, stops*) There will be no more grocery shopping.

## Scene 23

*Second visit.*

Hi, Gramma.

You look very good today.

“Oh, I got nothing to complain about. How is our house?”

O... K...

“Well, you take care of our house.”

Too late, Gramma, a little too late. Now it is no one's house.

Nobody to wake up at quarter to eight, but I still open my eyes automatically. No smoke alarm, no midnight security call, yet I don't sleep soundly. I don't have to run up and down. Still I walk up and down, up and down, peering into your bedroom, looking around the living room, cleaning the kitchen over and over.

Noon, time for lunch; one o'clock, time for nap; five o'clock, time to prepare dinner; ten o'clock, time to make peanut butter toast.

I should hear your footsteps, your chair squeaking, the microwave buzz, the toilet flushing, you calling my name.... But nothing, nothing, nothing.

## Scene 24

### *Third visit.*

Today, she doesn't look good at all. She glares far away.

If she had been less lonely, she may have been in better shape. I was the only one who could have helped her, and I cared only about my own loneliness.

“I want to go home. I want to see my garden.”

When the weather gets nice, maybe you can come see your garden.

“Yes, when it's nice...”

I spend lots of time in the garden, her garden, and my first garden. I am glad she dragged me around the garden every spring. I try to remember what she used to do, what tools she used, how she looked after the plants. I planted her favourite vegetable – beets.

I keep cleaning in and out of the house for her visit. She is too weak to walk. For her wheelchair, I cut the hedges along the sidewalk in the backyard. As I cut the grass, I wish she could stand at the gate and yell at me. Mosquitoes are back, and I don't care. I'd welcome back her biting words. 'ssaumyonsoe jongdunda' – a Korean saying. You become attached as you fight.

Ah, Gramma, why couldn't I let you feel right and powerful, if that's what would have made you happy? We might have had a better time not by changing *you*, but by changing *me*.

You will be pleased to see your garden growing. Each day it's getting nicer and nicer. Gramma, you can visit soon, very soon.

*A lullaby.*

*While Mom is away picking up oysters*

*Baby is home alone waiting for her*

*While the ocean sings a lullaby*

*Baby lies quietly falling asleep*

*Falling asleep.*

*Startling.*

Early morning phone calls are usually not very good news. There is no phone in the house, so instead I get an early morning visitor. Gramma, your suffering has ended at last.

*Lights change.*

## Scene 25

The festivities went on for several days, and each day Simchong desperately looked for her father among the blind men. As the festival was winding down, Simchong's fear was growing. 'Maybe I won't see him until I go to the other world.'

Blind Sim would have been at the festival already if it wasn't for the selfish Ppangdok omi. Ppangdok omi had abandoned Blind Sim for another blind man – who was rich, and even better, mute. So, Blind Sim had to crawl and grope his way to the palace.

On the very last day of the festival, Blind Sim finally arrived at the palace, exhausted, dishevelled, and covered with dust. Blind Sim didn't even look human, but Simchong recognized her father at once. With no time to even put her shoes on, Simchong rushed to him. 'Father, father'. They embraced each other and wept. The moment Simchong's tears touched her father's eyes, they opened, and for the first time he saw his daughter's face. What a moment, what a reunion!

*Celebration of dance and music.*

All their suffering ended. The filial daughter and her no-longer-blind father lived happily in the palace, and never parted again.

*Lights change.*

## Scene 26

*Packing. Looking around the empty space.*

When the temple and the monk don't get along, the monk has to leave. But when the temple vanishes, what should the monk do?

Gramma asked her grandchildren to visit to pick up their inheritance while she was alive, but nobody came. Even at her death, most didn't show up. Pick-up trucks and moving vans came to empty out the house. The 'For Sale' sign on the lawn pierces my eyes.

"Don't you dare to sell the house! She has nowhere to go."

Gramma's son tells me that nothing could convince her otherwise. Gramma always won. Even with the extra expenses, even with her deteriorating and confused mind, Gramma wouldn't let her son sell the house.

What do I know for sure?

I was blind.

Gramma, I used to watch you with disbelief, yet now I see myself in you. I thought I was Simchong, thrown as a sacrifice to calm your fury. What

ignorance. What arrogance! At best, I was Blind Sim. At worst, I was the bully Ppangdok omi. Gramma, would you forgive me?

I used to complain to God, 'Oh, God, how could you love and bless someone like her?' You know what, Gramma? God would answer: "I can love *you*"

Gramma, it was my home too. Yes, it was our home. After you were gone, I became homeless. There are so many spacious houses with empty rooms, but no one needs me. But, I'll endure for you made me very strong. And, yes, Gramma, next time I'll love before it's too late.

*Ritual of Releasing begins. Percussion instrument playing.*

*Song "Love".*

*Sorrow, heart-tattering grief*

*Love is rage, absolute hatred*

*Love is wailing, blood-covered wriggling*

*Definite separation proceeding to unity*

*Love is suffering, atrocious pain*

*Love is practice, complete execution*

*Love is toil, the labourer's dazzling white path, tedious and painful*

*All the sea and mountain and plain and sky rising and storming*

*Thundering and roaring, new-born in the bloody gleam*

*Therefore, at last love is*

*Glittering sea of quietness, sunlight-pouring blue sky*

I'll remember and miss you until I, too, cross the river of oblivion. And when that time comes, let's return to that place where two lonely strange women lived together for three years. I'll meet you there, and we will have our reunion. I didn't get to see the garden growing either. We will see it together. It will be lovely.

*Smiling. Waving.*

Hello, Gramma!

What do you know for sure?

**The End**

**Annexe B:**  
**“Gramma” DVD Performance of the Production**

The DVD appended to this book forms part of this thesis.

This disk can be played on a conventional DVD player.

Contents of DVD: Scenes 1-26 (See Appendix A)