

# Two Dried Mushrooms

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My 90-year-old great-grandmother's bushy eyebrows furrow in concentration as she works in the tiny, sunny laundry nook with its wood-paneled walls and ancient top-loaders. She is careful as an anxious toddler tending her first garden. Everything must be perfect. Every decision is monumental.

Every day my mother checks the delicate, tottering piles. During the summer my great-grandmother arrived, her laundry folding skill was incredible. The large harp covers I left in the living room were her first target.

Harp covers are essentially canvas mattresses lined with fluffy cotton and carved into the shapes of harps. Great-grandma couldn't sit still once she spotted them lying in an untidy heap on the ground. She puttered back and forth in front of them for nearly an hour. Then she ushered me over.

"That thing, *chogoneun*, *chogo*, you know, *ne ga*, I do. Okay?" She stared into my face intently.

"*Ne*, *Halmoni*." I resorted to my all-purpose "Yes, Grandmother." to get her to settle down. The next time I walked into the living room, all three blue and brown harp covers were folded neatly in a pile tall as my head. My father, mother, and sister gathered to marvel at it. Great-grandma stood next to the stack and beamed.

Then the weather got colder and leaves turned brown. My mother walked into the laundry nook a few days after Thanksgiving and came out holding my father's navy dress shirt knotted together with my yellow turtleneck. She stood silently for eternity until I wandered over to her.

"That's not bizarre," I said as she handed the damp bundle to me.

"Maybe she was going to..." my mother trailed off. I somberly assessed the knotted shirts.

"...make a rope to escape from a laundry monster," I said.

Later on in the day, I heard a strangled cry from the breakfast nook. I rushed over and saw a whimpering dog sitting beside my whimpering father. My father's most expensive coffee beans were soaking in our dog's water bowl. They had disintegrated into a soggy mush.

"*Gheneun mogo*," said Great-grandma. Dog eat it. My mother started to laugh while my father burst into tears.

Christmas time came and Great-grandma was her old

self for the family party. My grandfather played Korean folk songs on a timeworn piano while Great-grandma sang and danced along. The careworn lines on her forehead smoothed out and her eyes shone beneath heavy, wrinkled lids. Her creaky old voice sounded both ageless and fragile.

The next day I opened the refrigerator's meat drawer and found a slimy, orange lettuce head set on top of a t-bone steak. The lettuce had been washed. Great chunks of it looked as if they had been melted away. I picked up the remnants and re-tossed them into the compost bin. Then I locked the shiny, new mechanism which held it shut.

A week later, I had just arrived home from school and was waiting for Great-grandma to let me in. She banged her head against the glass when she bent down to remove the iron bar that held the sliding door in place. I frantically waved at her to stop, but she kept trying and banging her head again, and again, and again.

It started to rain and the glass was quickly blurred by water droplets. I cut through our neighbor's back yard to get to the front of the house and slammed the doorbell. The banging stopped.

That evening, I found panties stuffed into socks and hidden inside of an office supply bin. I ran to my mother.

"She's losing it," I said.

"Yes, she is," my mother sighed back.

"I don't like it," I said. My mother silently continued to scrub my father's coffee mug. I stared blankly at the kitchen's cracked and stained floor tiles. Several large dust balls floated like tumbleweed across its grainy surface.

"I thought G. M. swept the floor."

"She did."

"I'm scared."

"I know."

Great-grandma has joined me in the living room. She sits in front of the T.V. with her wispy, white hair clinging to her head like a cloud struggling not to disappear. I reach out and touch her hand with its gray, weathered skin. It feels like an old, dried mushroom cap. She turns to me smiling, and for a moment, I think she can read my mind.