

## Kimchi Affairs

By Sylbi Bae

Don't drink the kimchi soup first.

I booked the earliest business-class flight to get here. Today is the Sunday before Thanksgiving, my favorite day of the year at Wesley church. It's not the Thanksgiving Mr. Williams celebrates after a long day at the consulting firm, it's the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, the Korean Thanksgiving, or *Chuseok*. Its origins trace back nearly 2,000 years of harvest, family, and ancestral memorial services. It's when the moon is ripe on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, and so are the persimmons.

Wesley church is one of those places that keeps dragging me back, no matter how many business trips pulled me away. It is home, and home gave me long-winded lectures, pats on the back, and bubbling stone pots. And there is always Sora, who I look forward to reuniting with the most. We met during our junior year of high school, both fresh off the boat. I proposed to her after my promotion was announced and I could finally provide a stable future for us. She is as infinite as the sky and pure as a conch shell. When I'm away from home, I call her every night despite my tiredness. But for the past month, our calls have been cut short. I would be ready to call it a night while she rushed to start her day. The women's bible study should be over by now. Where is she?

Both the Korean and English-led sermons had finished, and stomachs were growling. There was already a line outside the door, and it was getting longer. In the front, men hoped to get served first while the food was still hot. I caught Yeongja, the

women's bible study leader, pushing past the line toward me. Her grey hair was turning white. We used to have one-on-one bible studies at her house. She helped me become closer to the Lord and therefore closer to Sora. Yeongja knew everything about everyone, or at least, she knew everything they confessed to her.

"Yeongja *Imo!* Have you seen my Sora?" I asked.

"Peter, so good to see you! Sora left us early to volunteer in the kitchen. So many mouths to feed today!" Yeongja said.

"Yes, it's nice to be back. Thank you, *Imo. Chuseok jal bonaeseyo!*" I said.

"You two make a beautiful couple! You have to see the wedding invites I ordered! I'll give you a call when they get here. *Chuseok jal bonae!*" Yeongja said.

The kitchen is in the building across from this one, past the line and the crowded cafeteria. There must've been at least a hundred people. It was quicker to reach Sora on the other side of the world than it is to reach her here. If only I could split this sea of people and expose her coordinates. Godspeed.

As I weave through the gossip line, it's like I never left the church. The youth piano recital is next Saturday, and little Rachel is eager to wear her dress. Mr. and Mrs. Choi are funding the new playground; they're getting a zipline. The entire kimchi stash would be gone after today's feast. Mrs. Yoon and her small group volunteered to make kimchi tomorrow morning. Suzy just graduated from *hangul hakyo* and is tutoring her little brother for allowance. The benches are peeling and need to be replaced. Don't eat the honeysuckle bushes, Tae was vomiting for a week. Mary had no children, so she was assigned to babysit at the daycare. She couldn't wait to go home.

In the news earlier this morning, I read that of the seven million Korean immigrants, 2.6 million claimed the United States. We are a tough breed. Only thirty percent of Koreans living in Korea identify as Christian. For Korean Americans, it's seventy percent. Despite South Korea being just an Oregon-sized peninsula with four times as much mountainous land, our motherland produces more missionaries than any other country besides the States. I used to wonder, out of all the populations that practice this popular religion, why us? Sora taught me it was because Koreans love to stay together. And this is even more true for those of us who leave Korea and become minorities. We call this *jeong*, an intimate and warm attachment to one's relationship with another that motivates loving acts of service. It can be in the form of a grandmother handing her grandson plate after plate of food, or a mother being like a mother to everyone. That's why we refer to our mothers as "our mom" instead of "my mom." *Jeong* is more than just love, it's our people's social responsibility.

I made it halfway to Sora when I heard a group of *ajusshis* echo a familiar name. David. David Kang. David *hyung*, who hosted Friday night poker at his parents' mansion and won the biggest pots. We used to hit the bars together after work and debate who we thought rigged the last game. Occasionally, we played basketball in the church's indoor court. When it was finally time to take over his family's venture capital dynasty, he quit gambling. We had no reason to get together after that with our busy schedules. I've been meaning to reconnect with him. I admired his zest for life and his loyal commitment to his family, church community, and wife. He gave me good advice about navigating life as the oldest son. I had never heard anyone talk shit about him.

"Before the sermon, I heard David and his wife arguing," said the first man.

“About what?” said the second and third man.

“Something about how they’re being pressured into having kids. You know David’s mom, she’s a tiger,” said the first man.

“Man, I feel bad for Grace. This kind of thing is bound to end in divorce. She doesn’t stand a chance against his mom,” said the second man.

“But David isn’t doing anything about it. He just wants to keep his mom happy,” said the third man.

“If Grace can hang in there until an in-law dies, she’s set for generations,” said the first man.

I didn’t take David to be a pushover, but even the most powerful Korean man in the world could not go against his family. These men could learn a thing or two from David. I could hear their pride from twelve people away. A good Korean man served his family, not himself. That’s why I asked for Sora’s father’s blessing for her hand in marriage. I stayed by her side even when things got rocky because my mother accepted Sora as her daughter moments after meeting her.



I found Sora in the kitchen flipping *pa jeon*. I realized I missed her badly. When work was stressful, the thought of our future gave me peace. I’m grateful for her reassurance and for staying with me when I had nothing to my name. The church was lucky to have such a devoted woman. Sora was an active member and volunteered at

almost every event. This kind of work is natural for a pastor kid. During high school, she insisted on organizing Operation Christmas every year.

I was in Japan for a client deal that was supposed to last three weeks but extended to three months. This was typical for the business trips I was assigned to. Mr. Williams said I would be the perfect man for the job after he found out that I'm twenty percent Japanese. The Japanese are skeptics, but this made for a great conversation and brought them on my side. I want to tell Sora all about it, that even the restaurant perfume made me think of her, and that I brought gifts. I surprised her with a hug and a peck on the cheek.

"Peter, you made it!" Sora said.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," I said.

"You look so tired. Look I made your favorite! The *ajummas* thought it would be too much, but I told them someone would eat it. I'll make you a plate." Sora said.

I might've convinced myself my favorite food was omakase to satisfy the Japanese businessmen's curiosity, but it wasn't as warm and filling as a home-cooked Korean spread. Variety is key: scallion pancakes, mackerel, stir-fried sweet potato starch noodles, braised short ribs, with a side of white rice and kimchi soup. For dessert: Asian pears, honey cookies, and *songpyeon* rice cakes filled with brown sugar and sesame. The menu had Sora written all over it. She handed me a plate of neatly stacked food, making sure I had some of everything. This was a gift I could only wish for on my birthday.

"I'll find our seats. Just look for a man who looks madly in love with you," I said.

"Okay," Sora said.

I found two seats at a table near the trash bin next to David Kang, the man of the hour. He sat with a group of suits, obligated to be here by their mothers, wives, or in-laws. The men's plates were eaten clean, they should've gone home with their families hours ago. Maybe they were watching the *ssireum* game, but they weren't looking at the TV, they were looking at David. He knew how to get a crowd to react as he wanted them to. That certainly helped him win many poker games.

"... then I secured the deal. With one golf ball!" David slapped his hand on the table.

The table erupted in laughter and I took a seat.

"Peter? Come join us! David said.

"David *hyung!* It's been too long, how've you been?" I reached my hand out.

David's hand met mine halfway. "I heard you were in Japan for business. Did you go to Kyoto? It's one of my favorite places in the world."

"No, I—"

Sora put her plate down on the spot next to me. "It's hard to find you with your back turned."

"Sora? I didn't even recognize you all dressed up like an *ajumma!*" David joked.

"Says the *ajusshi* wearing his dad's easter suit," Sora joked.

"Hey! I was just kidding! You look really nice Sora." David said.

"Thanks, David. You look good too." Sora said.

“Are you two coming to prayer night tomorrow? It starts at seven,” David said.

“That’s tomorrow? The worship team is practicing so hard for it,” Sora said.

“I’ll have to skip. I have a call with Mr. Williams, but you should go, Sora,” I said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then, Sora *ajumma!*” David winked at Sora and left with his groupies.

Sora and I ate in silence. There was already so much noise from the chatter in the cafeteria. We were both tired.



Yeongja called me. She had concerns about Sora and me. During the women’s bible study, Sora seemed closed off and less enthusiastic, she said. It’s been three years since our proposal, and still no wedding. She went to prayer night to pray about us, she said. She saw David give Sora his jacket, and they left prayer night together. Yes, David and Sora, she said. They left together.

Sora had warned me about gossipy *ajummas* like Yeongja. David and Sora grew up together in the church. If they had feelings for each other, they would’ve revealed themselves by now. Of course, David would offer to drive Sora home. But why didn’t Sora have a ride? David and Grace are happily married, and soon me and Sora will be too.



I took Sora out for a wine and dine night. She deserved to be pampered after all her efforts for *Chuseok* week. We hadn't had much time with just the two of us between work and church commitments. Tonight, I would be her provider, protector, and listening ear. Yeongja was right about one thing. There was something off about Sora. At first, I thought our silence was because we got used to being long-distance. We've been apart for long periods before, we should've overcome it by now. Did our *jeong* run out?

"So how was prayer night?" I asked.

"It was nice," Sora said.

"You didn't help with it, did you?" I asked.

"I may have made some suggestions," Sora said.

"Of course you did. We should start planning the menu for the wedding. Do you want to come over tomorrow?" I asked.

"I can't," Sora said.

I know Sora tends to be quiet and less expressive when she's busy. In high school, we decided to wait until after college to start dating. Sora's parents would not allow her to date in school, as a result, her focus grew unbeatable. That's what drew me to her. I noticed an opposite side of her that she learned to keep hidden. The confident and carefree Sora. Is there another side of her that I'm not aware of? If we are to get married, I should know these things. Like why did she not call me to drive her home from prayer night? Was she avoiding spending time with me? What changed while I was away?



“You do so much for the church already. I feel like I haven’t been able to see you much since I got back,” I said.

“I’m sorry, I can’t. I have to—”

“How did you get home after prayer night?”

Sora looked away, “I just drove myself,” she said, lying through her teeth.

I couldn’t correct her.



I’m in my car parked a few houses down from Sora’s. I’m not sure how I got here, why I’m here, or what I’m looking for. I just need answers. Answers to questions I haven’t asked myself before. It’s unlike Sora to lie. She could call you out for anything that wasn’t the whole truth. She didn’t mention anything about another man in her life. I tried to make her feel less lonely while I was away, I felt guilty. Every night before bed, I called her to let her know how my day went, and she did the same. I was the only man she was ever serious about. The only man she truly loved. Did she finally realize that David was the better man? After all, he was older, more successful, and mature in his faith. I was a few steps behind him.

I idly sat in my car thinking for an hour or so, then I saw Sora open the front door from inside. A man appears behind her, steps outside, and stops to talk to her. I can’t see his face, but he looks disheveled. Clothes are hung on his left arm. He softly brushes her forearm, looks left and right, and reaches for his pocket. He hands Sora something. A

stack of cash. I wish I could run out and tell him to put it away, that Sora doesn't need money or anything else he was offering her. Instead, I grab my phone and take a close-up picture of the man's face. Zoomed-in, it almost looks like David *hyung*.

I was wrong about David. He is not a good Korean man. He does not serve his family; he serves himself. David is married to Grace, a loyal woman. The rumors about their doomed relationship were true. I guess the money changed him and fed into his greed. Sora is a few years younger than his wife, and she is more active in the church. Of course, David is interested in her. He watched Sora grow from a shy girl into the beautiful woman she is today. How much time did he spend with her rekindling their connection while I was away? That's why they were so friendly in the cafeteria. My mind is foggy from the anger boiling inside me, and I don't feel like myself. I pull out my phone.

Me: Meet me on the court this Friday 8pm for 1:1

David: Sure buddy



David arrived twenty minutes late. He was stealing my time and my future wife. All those hours wasted with him in the bar, his poker games, basketball. What was it all for? To get closer to me or Sora?

David held out his hand waiting for mine. The same hand organized his poker winnings and caressed Sora in her bed. The audacity.

“Hey man, I’m glad you reached out! I’ve been wanting to catch up!” David said.

“Let’s just play,” I said.

“Um, okay?” David said.

I dribbled the ball to the other side of the court where the hoop was higher. David may be older but I’m at least three inches taller. I can’t lose and embarrass myself in front of him. He probably thinks I’m so pathetic. I start with a test shot at the free throw line. The ball bounces off the rim.

“Aw, so close,” David said as he grabbed the rebound and raced down the court. I try to keep up with him, but my defense falters, and David takes a clear shot and makes the first basket.

“C’mon Peter, where’s your head at? It’s not in the game that’s for sure.”

“I guess not. So, how’s Grace? You guys good or what?”

“You know, too? Yeah, Grace and I are done. We’re just in different places now. I did love her though.”

I caught David staring off into space and stole the ball mid-air. “That’s too bad, but I don’t feel that sorry for you. I know you got another girl in your life already.”

“Is that what people think?”

I’m already on my side making a layup. “Stop playin’, David. What girl could reject you?”

“You’re the lucky one. Sora’s the most wife-like of them all.”

We were both soaked in sweat, the AC must've been off. Endorphins were kicking in and the fog in my head cleared up a little. It was just me and David.

“She is. You’re right, *hyung*.”

What was I thinking challenging David? If he’s interested in Sora and she feels the same, maybe they should be together. Sora deserves to find out what she likes and doesn’t like and experience more men. She’s the total package. It would be greedy to chain her to me with my career taking off. It wouldn’t be fair for her. I called Yeongja but it sent me to voicemail. I told her to return the invitations. I’m sorry, but the wedding’s off.



I didn’t have much to do, so I went to Sunday service. Not with Sora, of course, she always came an hour earlier to marinate the meat for lunch. I’m not sure if I even want to see her. How can I explain that she would be better off without me? She wouldn’t understand no matter what I say. Her heart couldn’t bear to leave me, after all, I’m all she’s ever known.

Pastor Baek walked up to the podium holding a bible and wearing a headset mic. “Good morning, church. Today, I want to talk about temptation, more specifically—adultery. In a world that is numb to or even glamorizes adultery, Jesus reminds us of its seriousness. In Matthew 5:27-28 he says, ‘You have heard that you shall not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.’”

How fitting that, out of all things, adultery is the topic. God must've heard my prayers. Is it possible to pray in your sleep? The covenant between David and Grace was broken when David's interest in Sora began, not the night they spent together. But when was that exactly? Did he leave Grace to pursue Sora? Or was Sora and I's covenant broken before David and Grace's?

"But do not fear church! Our God is a God of mercy. Remember the story of the woman who committed adultery? Jesus didn't condemn her but said, 'Go and sin no more.' Church, let us open to John 1:9 and read it together."

The church chanted. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." I looked around the room. Sora and David were indeed chanting with everyone.

"Church, no matter our past, we can seek forgiveness, abandon our old ways, and allow God to heal and restore our souls. If you struggle with temptation, turn to God for strength. I invite you to come up and bow to the Lord in prayer, confess your sins, and ask him to deliver you from temptation." Pastor Baek stepped down from the platform and took off his headset. Ten at a time, people lined up in a row and crouched down on the carpet in prayer.

Pastor Baek motioned for David and Sora to come talk to him. "David! Sora! Go confess! You must ask God to cleanse your souls of adultery before—" Yeongja waved furiously at Pastor Baek. The headset in his hand caught his voice and revealed their secret to the entire room.

“Adultery? Pastor, I wasn’t going to pray about that. Why do you think I—” Sora said.

I stood up, “I saw you with David that night you slept together! Don’t try to deny it Sora! You’re so bad at lying!” I could feel my face turning red and my vision was blurry. I couldn’t even see Sora’s face.

“What? Slept together? No! What? What is going on?”

David stood up, “I think I know the misunderstanding here.”

“There’s no misunderstanding! I understand exactly what’s going on! You and Sora have been sneaking around behind everyone’s back for God knows how long! I saw it, Yeongja saw it, who else has?” About thirty people raised their hands. “Goddammit, look at that! Do you think we’re stupid?” I stomped on my chair, it broke to pieces, and one leg flew across the room.

“Peter, stop it! Look at Sora! Look at your fiancée!” David pointed at Sora trembling on the carpet with her head in her hands.

“You know what? You two deserve each other! I thought you were all about serving God, but no, you serve yourself. You should be together.”

“Peter, listen! Sora’s not cheating! The truth is she’s been helping me keep a secret. I didn’t want it to get out. You know how quickly word goes around here! I would rather have people think we were together than let them know my secret, but I realize that was very selfish.”

“So, what’s the secret? What could possibly be worse?”

“My parents and I got into an argument, and they cut me off. For good this time. I lost my job, moved out of the house, and had to knock on doors for food. I happened to knock on Sora’s door. I begged her not to tell anyone.”

“Then why were you at her house that night? Why did you take her home after prayer night?”

“I told him to come over!” Sora finally stood from her spot, “I gave him some clothes I washed from the church donations. But I couldn’t take too many at once or else people would notice so he returned the clothes I gave so I could take more. We met many times, but we weren’t having an affair!”

In the cafeteria, Sora made fun of David’s *ajusshi* easter suit. So that was from the church donations? After prayer night, Yeongja saw David give Sora his jacket, but that wasn’t his jacket. David took Sora home to pick up the clothes from her house. Sora couldn’t come over to plan the wedding menu because she was expecting David. The night I staked out at Sora’s house, David had donations hung on his arm and gave her the money he could. And I was an idiot just like the rest of these people.

“I’m sorry, Sora. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You weren’t thinking at all! You always do this! The promotion changed you. You can’t see past your pride! You’re not the Peter I fell in love with.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what else I should say.”

“You don’t need to say anything. We can’t do this anymore,” Sora ran outside.

I shouldn’t have drunk the kimchi soup first.