

The Pepper Farmer's Wife

by Grace Suh

Come to think of it, I never knew her name, the pepper farmer's wife. She lived in *Jindo*, on that speck of an island, a piece of paradise on water. The locals say that if you throw a stone from one end of the island, it lands on the other. All her life, with her body, her hands, her fingers, her eyes, her mind, and her breath, she worked on a plot of that island, growing things.

I never knew if she had any loves; she hinted of tragedies. Her first child, her *jang-son*, was stillborn. Her youngest daughter killed herself on her honeymoon.

No one talks about it. She must have had ambitions; she hinted of yearning.

Pale lavender was her favorite color. She thought purple suited her tan complexion. She wore her thick, long hair in a single braid, twisted in the back and held together with a jade pin. If I close my eyes, I can hear her voice. Towards the end, the timbre lost a measure of its resonance but still remained clear. Her voice never quivered.

I had embraced her a few times. The last time, sensing the near finality, I made an conscious effort to commit the embrace to memory. Her diminutive figure, a reduction of her former self, felt as fragile as blown glass. Her wizened, leathery skin was surprisingly soft, supple, and warm.

I never knew her scent, and this leaves me with pangs of hunger for its memory. She must have had one. We all do. Even places have their smells. She never wore perfume. I know that much.

Her face was never adorned with rouge or soothed with scented salves or balms. She bathed in well water with soap made of lye

and tallow. She washed her clothes in the same water and hung them out to dry in the hot island sun.

I can imagine that she must have smelled a little bit like the sea, like brine, reef, and wet sand. She must have smelled tart and spicy like the *gugicha* peppers she grew. She must have smelled refreshing like the pine trees in the mountains overlooking her village, swaying and singing with the wind. She must have smelled a bit like the earth, too, like golden barley and wheat at harvest.

Because she was a woman, I imagine that she smelled a little sweet, like the acacia blossoms and honeysuckle in summer. And because she was a mother, she must have smelled nourishing, like fresh figs on fenceless orchards and persimmons ripening in her backyard. After all these years of feeding her family, she must have smelled at least a little like steaming rice, boiling in its cast iron pot over her wooden stove.

I can imagine these things, but here she lay in this stainless, aseptic room, listless. Her skin was calm, cold and resting. Her dark, almond-shaped eyes, closed. Had I resented the shape of her eyes? She wore her *sang-bok*, the dress she had made with her own hands before the sickness. Her final dress for her final journey was not of pale lavender but rough ivory linen. She smelled only of formaldehyde and alcohol.

It seemed unfair to me, for the ocean, the wind, the earth, and the trees, to carry on, as if nothing had happened. Did they not know that one of their own was

gone? Send the gales, fell the trees, tear the petals, crush the fruit, and uproot the crops. It is not sufficient for me to feel the grass under my feet. Turn the heavens black, unleash the torrents, and drown her earthly world in bitter cold water to express the quiet storm in my heart, even if just for a moment. A life of minor significance

unacknowledged even in her passing is too tragic to bear.

I suppose I did love her, if merely out of duty. The pepper farmer's wife, whose name I do not know, whose eyes are now mine. She left behind little else. She must have taken her scent with her.