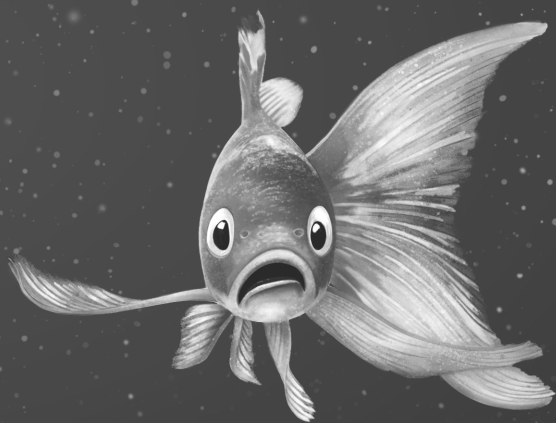


Unidentified Suburban Object

MIKE JUNG



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FOR ELLEN OH AND MARTHA WHITE,
BECAUSE FRIENDS AND CRITIQUE PARTNERS
WHO CAN MERCILESSLY HOLD MY CREATIVE FEET
TO THE FIRE WHILE ALSO MAKING ME THINK
"AW, THEY'RE SO SMART AND FUNNY WHEN
THEY INCINERATE MY FEET LIKE THIS" TOTALLY
DESERVE TO HAVE A BOOK DEDICATED TO THEM.

ONE

THE RECIPE FOR KOREAN DUMPLINGS ON THE K-Chow Goddess's blog has a picture of her dumplings after they've been made but before they've been cooked, and they look so good you can practically smell them. The filling is exactly in the middle of the dumpling; the crinkles in the wrapper are evenly spaced and totally identical; and each finished dumpling looks like it could be hanging from somebody's earlobe if it was 10 percent of its original size.

Yes, I'm good at math. All Koreans are, didn't you know? Yes, I'm good at sarcasm too.

Shelley and I crossed our arms, shoulders touching, and stared at a printout of the recipe, which lay on the table in front of our own platter of newly made dumplings.

"Our dumplings," I finally said, "do not look like her dumplings."

"I'm not sure what they do look like." Shelley

scratched her nose, leaving a small streak of soy sauce and sesame oil. “Baby squirrels?”

“Mutant baby squirrels is more like it.” I picked up a dumpling and poked at its edge. You’re supposed to fold the round pastry wrappers in half with a lump of filling in the middle and seal the edges together with a little bit of water. Our edges kept springing leaks.

“Mandu, right?” Shelley said.

“Is that what these are? I’m not so sure.”

“They’ll probably still taste good,” Shelley said in a firm voice, which I totally knew she was going to say. Best friends are predictable like that.

“Oh yeah, mutant baby squirrels are always delicious.”

“Today on *Survival of the Weirdest*, watch as new cast member Chloe eats a mutant baby squirrel!”

“I could totally have my own reality show. Okay, I guess we need to fry the baby squirrels now.”

“Oh sure, let’s absolutely add some burning hot oil to the mix.” Shelley snorted as I started pouring vegetable oil into my dad’s big frying pan.

The frying process was . . . exciting.

“Flip them! You have to flip them!” I shouted over the sizzling of hot oil, making a shoveling motion with one hand. The dumplings we’d put into the pan

were ugly, but at least each of them had been in one piece. That wasn't true anymore.

"What do you think I'm trying to do? They're sticking to the pan!" Shelley shouted back. She held the handle of the pan with an oven mitt and scraped at the dumplings with short, choppy motions. A thin haze of smoke drifted through the kitchen.

"Hold on, I'm gonna put in more oil!"

Shelley leaned back as I tilted the oil bottle over the pan. I tried to pour the oil slowly and evenly, but when it hit the pan it made a huge sizzle and sprayed up in the air like liquid death. Shelley let go of the pan as we screamed and jumped back from the stove. The smoke got a little thicker.

"That didn't work," I said.

"Yeah, oops." Shelley waved at the smoke with her oven-mittened hand.

I put on the oven mitt Shelley wasn't wearing, moved the pan to an unlit burner, and turned off the lit burner. The pan was still spitting oil and I didn't feel like deep-frying my face, so I had to stretch my arm out as far as possible. I stepped back as Shelley reached up and turned on the fan over the stove.

"Cooking mandu is hard." I thought Shelley's pronunciation of "mandu" was better than mine, even though we learned it from the same YouTube video.

“Yeah. Loud too. Do you think they’re done?”

Shelley snorted again. She pulled a big plate out of the dish drainer and held it while I scraped the dumplings out of the pan.

“They don’t actually look that bad,” I said. “I’d eat that one piece right there, the one with . . . oh wait, I didn’t see that. It’s complete charcoal on the other side.”

“No, look, there’s a whole . . . huh.” Shelley’s shoulders sagged a little bit. “Never mind. Geez, the edges of the wrappers don’t stick together at all, do they?”

“We’re probably doing it wrong. But look, the filling from this one held its shape!” I held up the spatula, which had an oval lump of cooked meat and vegetables balanced on it.

A few minutes later the first platter of fried mandu was on the kitchen table.

“Okay, so here’s what we do.” I scooped a pile of dumpling fragments onto Shelley’s plate. “We just pretend they’re all in one piece.”

“Oh, that’s a genius plan.”

“Foolproof.”

“Hey, they’re okay!” Shelley said around a mouthful of dumpling bits and pieces.

I nodded, chewing, then swallowed. “You have to make sure you get some of the wrapper mixed up with the filling, though. The filling’s kind of mushy by itself.”

“How do you think—” Shelley was interrupted by the sound of a key turning in the front door.

“Helloooooo,” Dad said as he closed the door behind him. “Wow, something smells good.”

“You want to try some, Dad?” I used my fork to stab a dumpling that wasn’t completely falling apart and bounced up from my chair as Dad covered the six steps between the front door and the kitchen. His face had that crinkly forehead expression it gets after a really busy day at work, but he smiled when he saw me holding up the fork.

“What’s this?” Dad said, giving me a kiss on the top of the head and looking at the mangled dumpling. He wore a white shirt, beige cargo pants, and leather sandals—he runs an aquarium store, so it’s not like he needs to wear a tuxedo to work.

“Mandu,” I said cheerfully.

Dad looked at me with a blank expression, as if he didn’t know what I was talking about.

“. . . Uh, Dad? You know, Korean dumplings?”

“Oh, *mandu!*” Dad’s eyebrows shot up like a couple

of tiny, startled birds. “Yes, right, dumplings.” He put his leather satchel down on the kitchen table and scratched his scalp, making a big clump of his hair stand up.

“I haven’t had . . . mandu in a long time.” Dad’s pronunciation of “mandu” was more like mine than like Shelley’s. “Where did you get the recipe?” Dad took the fork from me and held the dumpling up, inspecting it like it was a diamond.

“*The K-Chow Goddess.*” Shelley smiled a big toothy smile at Dad, who smiled back. “It’s a food blog.”

“Was this your idea, Shelley?”

“No, it was mine,” I said. Why was he asking Shelley that question?

Dad smiled at me, but it was a more complicated smile than the one he gave Shelley. It was more, I don’t know, droopy in the eyes, maybe even sad. He kissed me on the head again, and we sat down at the table.

“Mandu.” The way Dad said it you’d think he was saying “Atlantis” or “Bigfoot” — like he could hardly believe he was looking at something real. He took a bite and chewed slowly, with a very spaced-out look on his face.

“Um, Dad . . .” I said after what felt like a couple of minutes had gone by. “What do you think? Good?”

Dad smiled, but it was one of those mouth-only smiles.

“Good,” he said. “Just like your grandmother used to make.”

I looked at Shelley out of the corner of my eye. I could tell she was trying to control her face, but her eyes were so wide open that it looked like her forehead was being pushed closer to the top of her head.

“Your mom’s mandu was just like this, Mr. Cho?” Shelley said.

“Yes, it was,” Dad said, but he was totally lying. After almost thirteen years of having him as my dad, I could tell. Ow. There was suddenly a lump in my throat, and I clamped my lips together and swallowed hard.

“You know what, girls, I have some work to do.” Dad got up and slung his bag over his shoulder, then ran a hand over his head, which kind of smoothed out his hair but not really.

He eyeballed the kitchen table and the counters, which were covered with cooking stuff, bowls, cutting boards, and assorted vegetable scraps. “You really went to a lot of trouble to make these, didn’t you?”

“Yup,” Shelley said. Dad chuckled as he picked up an empty can.

“Canned mung bean sprouts. They actually have these at Speedwell’s?”

“No,” I said. “We ordered a bunch of stuff from the Internet.”

I must have sounded at least a little mad, because Dad stopped chuckling and looked at me with his head tilted forward.

“Chloe? Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said, drawing out the “F” and biting off the end of the word.

“Are you sure?”

Clueless dads are the worst, aren’t they? I let out a gusty lungful of air and smiled at him, sort of. He smiled back and kissed the top of my head again.

He started walking toward the master bedroom but paused in mid-step, turned around, and came back to the table. He gave me a *fourth* kiss on the head (Dad likes kissing people on the head, obviously), then headed back to his and Mom’s bedroom.

Shelley and I sat there for a minute, the mandu forgotten on the table in front of us.

“So . . .” Shelley said. “That was strange, right?”

“Yeah, that was.” I chewed on the edge of my thumbnail for a second.

“Your dad does actually know what mandu is, right?”

“Duh, yeah. He was born in Korea and everything.”

I forked up some dumpling bits and slowly started chewing them. “You know what’s weird?”

“I know a lot of things that are weird, but I don’t know which one you’re talking about right now.”

I swallowed hard and got up to get a glass of water. “Come on, Shelley, you’ve only been over here every single day since forever.” I walked around the table, slipped behind Shelley’s chair, and went to the kitchen sink. “Have you ever heard my mom and dad talk about that stuff?”

“About what stuff?” Shelley grabbed the half-empty platter of mandu and put it on the counter between the kitchen and dining room. “You mean being Korean?”

“Yeah. Being Korean.” I took a long drink of water, wiped my mouth on my sleeve, and leaned my back against the edge of the kitchen sink.

“They never talk about it, right? Don’t you think that’s weird?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like my parents talk about being from England.”

“Maybe, but they weren’t born there, were they? My parents are *from* Korea but they still never talk about it.”

“They sound American. Well, mostly.”

“Duh, they know English.”

“I mean they don’t have really thick accents or anything. Just a little.”

“They’ve been here a long time. It’s . . . I don’t know, it’s just bizarre.”

“I guess. We’re keeping these, right?” Shelley held up the platter of uncooked dumplings—we’d only cooked about a quarter of the whole amount. “This is two weeks of babysitting money right here.”

“Yeah, let’s freeze ‘em.”

After cleaning up, we went to my room to finish the process of getting ready for school.

It was a miracle that Mom and Dad finally let me start buying clothes online—they were sure I’d accidentally buy a pickup truck or something—but it took seven years of in-store shopping (which included three years of in-store fighting) to get there. Shelley must have been thinking the same thing.

“I can’t believe you can finally pick your own clothes!”

“Well, I can’t always—Mom and Dad shot down a few things. I don’t have to go to Wallingford’s anymore, though.” I shuddered. “Hey, want to see what I found in the back of my closet last night?”

“Totally—is it what I think it is?”

“Probably.” I walked to the closet, went digging in one of the plastic boxes on the floor, and emerged with a football jersey.

“Oh wow,” Shelley said, snorting with laughter. “A Condors jersey. EVERYONE was wearing those things.”

“So ugly,” I said, shaking my head.

The Capital City Condors were the best team in football during fourth grade, so of course everyone in Primrose Heights turned into a fashion lemming and HAD to have a Condors shirt of some kind.

Yeah, I turned into a lemming too.

“Shopping for this thing was the worst,” I said. “I was surprised they didn’t demolish Wallingford’s and rebuild it in the shape of a football.”

“I still can’t believe you wore that all year,” Shelley said, holding out her hands. I tossed the horrible jersey to her.

“Yeah, well, you had one too.”

“I had three, and unlike you, I actually liked them.”

Shelley was right—I’d never actually liked that hideous jersey. That wasn’t the point, of course—the point was to *fit in, yeah, go, Condors!*

“Mom was soooooo into it,” I said.

I could still see how her face had looked when I pulled a Condors jersey off the shelf—a huge, open-mouthed, OMG-style smile. She practically vomited happiness. Football jerseys! If fashion police actually existed we'd have all gone to jail for the rest of our lives. My clothes sure looked like everyone else's, though.

In fifth grade I decided it'd be nice to wear clothes I actually liked, because superstripey maxi dresses were what all the annoying girls wore and that is just not the look for non-toothpick-shaped Chloe Cho. So I started my campaign to pick my own school clothes, and after proving I could earn my own money (by babysitting and working at the fish store), buy clothes online without accidentally applying to college, and return stuff that didn't fit right without whining, I finally got to shop for clothes online. It only took THREE YEARS.

"I can't believe tomorrow's finally the first day of school," Shelley said as I held up the skirt I'd ordered through ThriftStoreBetty.com the week before. "I like that one."

"Thanks, and I know, finally! Look, this was a total steal." I put on my new vintage jacket, the one with the pattern of tiny red flowers all over the sleeves, and spun around with my arms extended.

"I couldn't wear that, but it looks good on you."

"You brought your stuff, right?" I shrugged off the jacket.

"Yeah. Not the books, but everything else." Shelley hoisted her backpack off the floor and onto my bed while I pulled a plastic box of school supplies out from under the bed.

We spent a totally awesome hour analyzing notebook designs, organizing markers and pencils, and deciding what buttons to pin on our backpacks before we got around to comparing our class schedules.

I groaned. "So we only have three classes together? That sucks."

"Yeah, but did you see this one?" Shelley pointed at the grid of classes on her schedule. "Social studies with Ms. Lee."

"I saw that! There's no Lee family in Primrose Heights; she must be from out of town. Wild."

Shelley grinned her crafty, sideways, I-know-something-you-don't grin.

"Oh, it's even wilder than that," she said. "My dad went to the school board meeting last night—her whole name's Su-Hyung Lee."

Whoa.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. I think that might mean she's . . ."

“Asian.” My mind was blown. All of the teachers I’d ever had in my entire life were white. Every single one of them.

“Yeah, and you know the thing about people with the last names Park, Kim, or Lee. She must be—”

“Korean!”