

2024 ADULT ESSAY CONTEST – 2ND PLACE

The Yellow Floor

By Kyra Swantkowski

Situated in the quiet countryside in Korea, my family would travel at least twice a year to visit my mom’s childhood home. We reminisce over the persimmons dangling from the trees and playing hide and seek between the clay pots—whose interiors housed preciously fermented cabbages and homemade pepper paste—but nothing beats our memories of the yellow floor.

My grandmother was always preparing food. There were fish hanging in the kitchen, peppers drying out in baskets, and blocks of bean curds solidifying in the main room. When it was time to cook the side dishes for our ancestral veneration ceremony, the women would lay out newspapers underneath a small, portable griddle on the floor and beginning frying all types of *jeon*—a Korean savory pancake. The kids would sneak bites while the men grilled the meat outside. Our gluttony had to be kept in check to leave some for when we bowed in front of our ancestors’ portraits.

When the smell of oil filled up the main room, my grandmother would bring a metal bowl full of pure joy: rice cakes covered in soybean powder. She would adamantly stuff us with her treats while we sat around her on the floor. This was her way of showering us with love, and we gladly accepted her sweet, irresistible offers.

My grandfather would sit in his one-seater sofa, rarely leaving it empty. He was stuck to his chair like rice paste, his eyes fixed on the television. Even though he was often rough with his words, he cared for us in his own way. With the sofas occupied by adults, the kids were content on the floor.

After our daytime activities, we would gather and sit to play word games. The loser would get bopped on the back by the winners which signified the start of the next game. After a few more rounds, the kids would end up giving their parents massages, and laughter would fill the house.

When it was finally time to sleep, the rooms were divvied between the different siblings, but the kids always got the floor. With the underfloor heating to keep us toasty and warm throughout the night, we kept in our tiny grievances. We picked our favorite pillows and blankets from the mother-of-pearl cabinets that smelled of mothballs. My uncle would light a few mosquito repellent coils to keep our skin safe. The botanical smell meant it was time to close our eyes.

Life on the floor was happy. Even after my grandfather left his favorite chair and became a frame we bowed in front of, we continued to sit there and chat. Now, I greet my grandmother through a phone on the holidays, hoping she remembers she is not alone. As her memories get fuzzier and our distance apart seems too wide, I will remember for the both of us how her hard and bare floor filled us with an unforgettable warmth.