

Tastes Like War

Grace Cho

Introduction

My life as a scholar and writer has been dedicated to unknotting the tangle of forces that created my mother’s mental illness, which became apparent to me in 1986, when I was fifteen. The biomedical paradigm of mental illness was dominant in the 1980s, and it said that her condition – a set of perceptions that Western psychiatry calls “schizophrenia” – was nothing more than genetic bad luck, her voices nothing more than symptoms of a broken brain. Her illness might have been cured, I was told, had we noticed it earlier. Schizophrenia was (mis)understood to be only a young person’s disease and not an ailment that could befall a middle-aged woman like my mother, and so the counselor at the community mental health center where I sought help for my mother said that it was “too late.” That year was when the seeds of my future work were planted.

It was not until 1994, the year I turned twenty-three, when I learned from another family member that my mother had been a sex worker at a U.S. naval base in my birth city of Busan, Korea, that I began to question how her life experience under U.S. empire was at the center of her dis-ease. I investigated this question not through the things my mother said, but through the things she couldn’t say – the unspeakability of her past leading me to so many other forms of silencing in the Korean diaspora. Out of this research came my first book, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy and the Forgotten War*, a book that I dedicated to my

mother. Writing about the secrecy in my history deepened the fractures in my family, and my mother and I stood together on one side of the fault line. During the last few months of her life, she expressed excitement and wonder about my forthcoming book, as well as her desire to reject the shame that had forced her into hiding. “I wish you would publish it under your real name,” she said about the pen name I had adopted in an effort to appease the relatives on the other side of the family fault line. When *Haunting* was in production, two days after I got the cover design and the day before I received the copyedits, my mother mysteriously died.

In the wake of her sudden death, a deluge of long-forgotten childhood memories returned to me, and I wrote them down for fear of forgetting again. Those memories would later transform into pieces of memoir. *Tastes Like War* began as a record of my grief and was fueled by the unfinished project of bringing my mother out of the shadows. *Tastes Like War* tells the story of my always-changing relationship to my mother as I arrive at understandings about the multiple causes of her schizophrenia, realizations that often took place at the dinner table. The story is an unknotting enacted through the serial acts of feeding and being fed, whose loosened threads led me to the Korean War, gendered state violence, xenophobia, and an American mental health care system rooted in social control. The following excerpt is set primarily in 1994, during some of my early encounters with my mother’s traumatic history.

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She did the same for my brother's, but there was another time-date I didn't recognize: 9:45. She did not repeat it in the same way, but said it only once every twelve hours. I was frightened the first time I witnessed it because we had been in the middle of a mundane conversation, and suddenly she straightened her posture, pointed to the clock with one firm shake of her right index finger, and announced in a loud, arresting voice, "September forty-five!" And then, as if nothing had happened, she returned her attention back to me and finished her previous thought exactly where it had left off. I was always spooked by it, much more so than any of her other quirks. It didn't feel like these words and actions had just been generated by her mind, but rather, that there was some other presence in the room, a supernatural force that was using her body to speak.

The layers of meaning behind the "timing thing" would begin to unfold that year, and for years to come.

In September 1945 the United States occupied the southern half of the Korean peninsula, where they would:

- establish a new nation called "South Korea," with a hand-picked, Harvard-educated president;
- lay the groundwork for a "laboratory" in which new weapons of mass destruction would be tested on communists and groups of refugees that might be harboring them;
- build an infrastructure for "entertaining" the American troops that would remain there to this day.

In every memory I have of my mother's first months on the East Coast, I am cold. Chilled in

her underheated apartment. Shiver-ing in the driveway as my sister-in-law stops me from leaving so she can tell me something important, her words like incendiary bomblets scattered over my psyche, sometimes exploding long after impact.

Grace, your mom is doing this thing. This panicking thing.

Grace, your mom is getting worse.

Grace, your mom—there's something I need to tell you ...

The day before New Year's Eve, she dropped the big bomb, its devastation swift and brutal. I had been staying with my mother over the holidays and was on my way to meet Sandra and Jaquetta at a mall in Philadelphia when my sister-in-law pulled up. She got out of her cream-colored station wagon and began unloading a delivery of groceries. She had taken on this responsibility of shopping for my mother while also caring for my infant niece. In retrospect, I see how the stress of a baby and my mother—two new arrivals with completely different needs—must have worn her to the bone.

"Are you leaving already?" she asked.

"I'm just going shopping for a New Year's Eve outfit, but I'll be back in a few hours."

Her face showed the strain of sleepless nights. "Grace, your mom—there's something I need to tell you . . ."

What now? I was feeling stressed by all her pronouncements, though I couldn't articulate exactly why, only that it made my helplessness in the face of my mother's illness all the more painful. What new development could have caused my sister-in-law to hesitate like that?

Why the preface when she usually just spat out the words? There was nothing she could say about my mother's condition that would have come as a shock to me. I had already been through eight years of erratic behaviors, mood swings, and hallucinations. What could she possibly tell me that I didn't already know?

"Grace, your mother used to be a prostitute."

What is she talking about? My skin turned hot, barely able to contain the feelings of confusion bubbling beneath it. "How do you know that?" I can't remember if I actually vocalized this question, but she answered it nonetheless.

"Look, your brother remembers it. Go ask him. He remembers when she used to get dressed up." Dressed up. The clothing, a metonym for the profession.

My memory flickered with scenes of Halloween 1984 when Jenny and I had made a last-minute decision to go trick-or-treating. "Let's dress up as hookers," one of us said. We were thirteen-year-old girls beginning to explore our sexuality, and prostitutes were the only women we knew of who had the freedom to be overtly sexual. We hastily got dressed: caked-on makeup, teased hair, miniskirts, and fishnet tights that we had bought at Spencer's. As I was about to walk out that night, my mother blocked the doorway with her body and glared at me. "What d'you think you are supposed to be, huh?" Her scornful tone stung, and I feared that at any moment she might uncross her arms and slap me. My voice was meek, but I answered quickly. "A punk rocker." Even then I knew that she would kill me before she let me be a prostitute.

Of course she had wanted to stop me. I was glamorizing the very life that she had escaped and had tried to bury. But how could that be? How could that have been her life?

My head started to spin and I leaned against the open door of my car to hold myself up as

my sister-in-law continued to talk. "He never told you because he wanted to spare you, but now you need to know. Your mom's getting worse."

Spare me? I wasn't sure if I was more disturbed by my mother's past or the fact that it had been kept a secret from me my whole life. Why was I the last to know?

And then I would twist my face up to hold in the tears, and my sister-in-law would try to console me by saying that it hadn't been that bad. "It was one of the nicer clubs. It wasn't like she was on the streets."

Even after the revelation, my brother never told me. He never could say the words that his wife spoke, nor could anyone else in my family say the word "prostitute."

When I asked him if it was true, he said, "How do you think she met your father?" as if I were stupid for not realizing it sooner.

When I asked my father about it, he broke down in tears and said, "Your mother did that as seldom as possible. She didn't want to do it. I got her out of there."

"But didn't you have something to do with her being there before you got her out of there?" My father just stared at me, dumbstruck. "You know," I said, "because you were one of her customers before you got her out of there? She couldn't have worked there without the customers. You know, supply and demand."

In September 1945 the United States acquired the "comfort stations," a system of sexual slavery that had been set up by the Japanese imperial army, keeping both the facilities and the women who had been laboring there, turning them into the first brothels to service American soldiers in Korea. In the 1950s these brothels would draw a new crop of girls from

the countryside, girls who sought to support themselves or provide for their families in the aftermath of the Korean War. By the 1960s the South Korean government would officially sponsor sexual services exclusively for US military personnel.

Before her mental illness drove her indoors, never again to be the object of another's desiring gaze, my mother had the beauty and allure of a celebrity—smoky black kohl smudged around her double-lidded eyes, always dressed to the nines. Her face was round and symmetrical with deep dimples and perfectly straight teeth, her complexion an even sandy brown—exotic, but not too brown for most white men. I could see how her attractiveness helped her make a living and survive during and after the war.

In the accounts of civilian experiences of the Korean War that I would research in graduate school, some of the variables that helped people survive were youth, femininity, and ability to communicate in English. Those three things meant that American soldiers were more inclined to help them, or to spare their lives during a massacre. Despite my mother's lack of formal education, she taught herself English, one word at a time from a dictionary, and tried to perfect it by watching a lot of American movies. She was beautiful, and she spoke English. My mother was determined to survive.

Shopping provided a momentary diversion from the avalanche of thoughts and feelings set into motion by my sister-in-law's disclosure, but when I came back to my mother's house later that night, the weight of her hidden history pressed down on me as soon as I walked through the door. I looked at her sitting quietly on the couch, doing her usual nothing.

"Do you want to see what I'm wearing

tomorrow night?" I asked, trying to act as if nothing had changed.

"Yeah, let's see."

It was a long black skirt with a slit up the side and a long-sleeved black lace top. I modeled it for her, turning from side-to-side at the end of an imaginary runway.

"That's very attractive, Grace," she said. "Very attractive." I was relieved that she approved of the outfit.

"I'm going to a New Year's Eve party with Sandra and Jaquetta at SOB's. It's a Brazilian nightclub in New York."

"Nightclub? Be careful of what kind of things going on in there."

"Don't worry, Ma. It's just for dancing."

For the first time I understood my mother's alarm whenever I mentioned that I was going out to a club or bar. For her they were not merely places to socialize and let loose.

My sleep that night was fitful, and each time I lay awake,

images of my mother as a prostitute intruded upon my thoughts.

A Suzie Wong clinging to her white man. A lotus flower arm in arm with her GI John. No, I thought. Not my mother.

I tried to visualize the transaction—the exchange of sex for money, my mother in the back room of a nightclub—and imagined her feeling ashamed and afraid, but finding some inner strength to cope. When it happened, maybe she pretended to be a Hollywood actress in the role of an impassioned lover, or perhaps she found ways to dissociate by staring at some spot on the wall the way she did whenever she avoided my questions about what kind of work she did in Korea. Maybe her voices had been

there all along, talking her through it until it was over.

I tried to stop the endless questions in my mind, the stream of images of my young mother—she would have been younger than me, maybe twenty or twenty-one—with some grunting American soldier on top of her, one after another.

No. Make it stop.

Later that night, after she had said goodnight and thought I was asleep, I heard her shuffle into the kitchen and chatter under her breath. I couldn't make out the words, but they were coming fast, as if she were speaking in tongues. Then I heard her gulping air.

"Ma, what's happening? Are you okay?" I called out toward the sounds.

She answered only by breathing louder and faster. I threw the covers back, got up off the couch, and walked into the kitchen. I squinted into the darkness and saw her holding on to the edge of the counter with both hands, rocking back and forth against it.

Then the heavy breathing, the chanting, the rocking, all of it stopped suddenly, and she became still. "Everything is fine. Go back to bed."

Varick Street was still relatively quiet when I met Sandra and Jaquetta at SOB's. We ordered three rum and cokes and sat at a table decorated with fake palm fronds. Normally the prospect of getting dressed up to go out, especially on New Year's, would have excited me, but there was a heaviness blanketing the celebration. My sorrow must have overpowered the electric energy of the party because one of them asked me what was wrong.

"Yesterday my sister-in-law told me that my

mom was a prostitute in Korea."

Jaquetta gasped and covered her mouth, a reaction that mirrored the shock I was still feeling. But Sandra didn't seem the least bit surprised. She gave me a sympathetic look and said, "But you must have known. You must have known there was something else."

Huh? Even my friend knew before I did?

I can't remember how long we sat there like that, or if there was any further conversation about it, but I have some vague memory that I wanted to talk, to begin to sort out all my feelings of sadness and shame—shame that I would later come to interrogate and beat into submission through my research. If I had started to talk about it, I was probably interrupted by the promoter introducing the night's entertainment. It was an up-and-coming pop singer named Marc Anthony, donning basketball shoes and a Tweety Bird cap, and by the time he took the stage, the three of us were on our feet and dancing. He kept making eye contact with me as he sang and shimmied, prompting Jaquetta to shout over the music, "Hey, I think he likes you!" I tossed my head back and laughed. "Not my type!" Maybe it was the attention, or maybe it was the rum talking, but I told myself I was going to have fun. Fuck it! It's New Year's Eve, and we're ringing in 1994!

In 1994, eight years after I diagnosed my mother from a high school psychology textbook, she got an official psychiatric diagnosis of schizophrenia, and the doctor started her on medication. We thought that drugs were going to be the answer to all our problems because that's what the rhetoric of the time had been saying: that schizophrenia and other mental illnesses were simply chemical imbalances of the brain, corrected by feeding the brain the right cocktail of chemicals.

We waited for the drugs to work so that my mother could be normal again. Instead, her affect grew duller, and she complained more. I don't like it. My hands are all the time shaking. My tongue feels swollen. The side of my face is numb. She began to suffer from tardive dyskinesia, a condition of repetitive involuntary motion of the face and limbs. To treat her schizophrenia, she was given a new disease.

It was unthinkable at the time to allow her to go off her meds, because we had waited so long for her to get on them, and she had finally agreed. The public perception of schizophrenia was that it was a disease of violent aggression, and although I had never known her to be this way, the responsible thing to do was to keep her on the medication so that she wouldn't hurt others or herself.

I can't remember if the first drug my mother took was Haldol or Mellaril, but both of them came under intense scrutiny decades after they were first put on the market. Like most people in 1994, I was unaware of the critique that psychiatry was becoming a bedfellow of the prison-industrial complex—that drugs were being used as a form of carceral control or that mental illness was becoming increasingly criminalized. Sometimes the diagnosis came after the imprisonment, as a method of chemical incarceration. The trend of substituting incarceration for mental health care would continue until there were far more mentally ill people in prisons than in health care facilities. These bodies—primarily Black and Brown bodies, bodies inscribed with social illness—would become concentrated in large penal institutions. *The race issue has been like a stove driven into the American system of values, a stove so deeply imbedded in the American ethos as to render America a nation of ethical schizophrenics.*¹ By 2007 Los Angeles County Jail, Cook County Jail in Chicago, and Rikers Island in New York City would become the “three largest inpatient psychiatric facilities” in the United States.² In other words,

the largest drug dispensaries, the new asylums.

In the late 1960s schizophrenia was in the midst of getting a radical makeover, from an affliction of white middle-class housewives and intellectual white men to a “protest psychosis” that befell angry Black men and others that suffered from “delusional anti-whiteness.”³ Haldol was being used as a chemical restraint to keep oppositional behavior in check, often prescribed to psychiatric detainees affiliated with the Black Power Movement. One of the first ads for Haldol depicted a Black man with a clenched fist, and the caption read, *Assaultive and belligerent? Cooperation often begins with Haldol.*⁴

Decades later, the research would show that the first generations of patients who were prescribed Haldol were given ten times the appropriate dosage, effectively turning them into zombies. The use of Mellaril was also challenged after research linked it to heart attacks and shortened lifespans of its users, and it was taken off the market in 2005.

In 1994 my mother was finally in treatment for her schizophrenia and was prescribed either Haldol or Mellaril. Even though all the signs would show that her mental state was getting more disturbed, we were told to keep waiting for the drugs to work.

And while we kept waiting, she kept speaking up about her growing mental discomfort. *This medication makes me feel like something is wrong.*

*The voices of the mentally ill are equivalent to the miner's canary. Their stories are alerting us to the fact that something is wrong with psychiatry's overreliance on a biological model of suffering.*⁵

I was back in Providence on January 7, 1994, my twenty-third birthday, and an on-and-off

love interest had planned to take me out to dinner for my birthday. It was my first real date since graduating from college, and I was eagerly awaiting his arrival when big wet flakes started falling from the sky. There was already an inch on the ground by the time he rang the doorbell.

I buzzed him in and as he walked up the stairs and into the loft kitchen, he brushed the snow off his shoulders and said, “I was thinking we could stay in and order a pizza so we don’t have to go out in the snow.”

Order pizza? I couldn’t hide my disappointment, and the sadness I’d been carrying around with me since New Year’s rose to the surface. I didn’t want to cry in front of him, and especially not then, but there was no way to hold it in. I plopped down at the tiled kitchen table, rested my forehead in my hands, and began sobbing in great heaves. When I caught my breath, I said, “It’s not just about the pizza. It’s my mother. I found out that she used to be a prostitute.”

He stood there in silence watching me cry for a minute, then started back toward the door.

“You’re leaving?”

“I’m sorry.” There was a chill in his voice. “That reminds me of things from my own past that are equally disturbing.”

“But it’s my birthday,” I whimpered as he walked down the stairs and back out into the flurries.

I stared at the little puddle of dirty melted snow that his boots had left behind on my kitchen floor as I wiped my nose on the back of my sleeve. There was nothing I could do but crawl under my comforter and nestle deeper into my grief.

On January 7, 2009, the *New York Times* ran a story about a group of former sex workers breaking a decades-long silence about the South Korean government’s role in setting up a sex trade for the Americans. “Our government was one big pimp for the U.S. military,” one of them said.⁶ The number of women speaking out would grow, and eventually 120 of them would file a lawsuit against the South Korean government for enabling systematic abuse against thousands of women and girls.

It would take eight years, but a panel of three judges would rule in favor of fifty-seven of the plaintiffs—workers who had serviced the US military in the 1960s and 1970s, the same time period in which my mother worked on the base. The court determined that the government had illegally detained the women by locking them up in rooms with barred windows and forcing them to undergo medical treatment for sexually transmitted infections, constituting what one judge described as a “serious human rights violation that should never have happened and should never be repeated.”⁷

According to Park Young-ja, one of the plaintiffs mentioned in the article, “They never sent us to doctors even when we were so sick we almost died, except they treated us for venereal diseases . . . not for us, but for the American soldiers.” Park also challenged the popular notion that she and her fellow sex workers at the American military bases were “willing” prostitutes. She pointed out that some women had been tricked by job-placement agencies, but even those who knew what kind of work they’d be getting into had never consented to the abusive conditions. “I was only a teenager and I had to receive five GIs a day with no day off. When I ran away, they caught and beat me, raising my debt.” The plaintiffs would later file a lawsuit against the US government.

I heard my mother’s voice chanting as I read the article from the *New York Times*.

Januaryseventhjanuaryseventhjanuaryseventh her solidarity with the plaintiffs.
 ... I had always thought it was in reference to my birthday, but then I wondered if the date was also her vision into the future, the voice of

Grace M. Cho is the author of *Tastes Like War* (Feminist Press, 2021), a finalist for the 2021 National Book Award in nonfiction and the winner of the 2022 Asian Pacific American Literature Award in adult nonfiction. Her first book, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), received a 2010 book award from the American Sociological Association. Her writings have appeared in journals such as *Catapult*, *The New Inquiry*, *Poem Memoir Story*, *Contexts*, *Gastronomica*, *Feminist Studies*, *Womens Studies Quarterly*, and *Qualitative Inquiry*. She is Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the College of Staten Island, CUNY, and she has lived in NYC since 1996.

Notes

¹ Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed, John Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 184.

² Michael Rembis, "The New Asylums: Madness and Incarceration in the Neoliberal Era," *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada*, eds. Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carrey. (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014), 139.

³ Jonathon M. Metz, *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), xiv.

⁴ Metz, *Protest Psychosis*, xiv

⁵ David A. Karp and Lara B. Birk, "Listening to Voices: Patient Experience and the Meanings of Mental Illness," *Handbook of the Sociology of Mental Health*, eds. Carol Aneshensel and Jo Phelan (New York: Springer), 28.

⁶ Choe Sang-Hun, "Ex-Prostitutes Say South Korea and U.S. Enabled Sex Trade Near Bases," *New York Times*, January 7, 2009.

⁷ Choe Sang-Hun, "South Korea Illegally Held Prostitutes Who Catered to GIs, Court Says," *New York Times*, January 20, 2017.