We have to write support letters, Dad, it’s just part of going on mission trips.”


Was it so his son could write to those clucking ajumas and harrumphing ajushis for alms that he had worked tirelessly for the past 25 years? When was the last time he had taken a day off for sickness? Had he ever slept in late on a Saturday morning? Work, church, work, church, the cycle of his honest and hard weeks stretched behind him like a statue erected to the steadfastness of his character, the virtue of his sacrifice.

Had he not worked himself to the bone, and then to the very marrow, so that his children could study at competitive schools, gain the advantage he had never had, fulfill the American Dream that he had crossed the oceans for 25 years ago, with nothing in his pockets and a silent bride by his side, twisting and twisting the map of New York between her trembling fingers?

He had built all of this up for them from the pitiless ground—the very lives they lived. And yet they were so unappreciative. He sighed, his heart heavy with pity.

“Dad, you’re so proud!” his youngest son had cried out in adolescent throes of despair. “All you care about is your image, your reputation. How can you be so materialistic and go to church every Sunday? You never understand me!”

Never understand? Who didn’t understand?

— “Mr. Jeong Gets a Haircut”

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Depending on the reader’s perspective, “Mr. Jeong Gets a Haircut” can either be a scathing satire or a heartbreaking story of an immigrant family. Ashley Woo ’12, undergraduate English major, does not tell her readers which it should be.

Mr. Jeong is a larger-than-life blend of typical Korean immigrant stereotypes—down to the model of his car and the blue-striped polo shirt. He has devoted everything to achieving his American Dream, but he must see it fulfilled through his children—his second-generation, English-speaking children, with their blaring music and meat-filled hamburgers. They bewilder him with crazy, idealistic desires to save the world, throwing away the opportunity that he desperately constructed for them. So he will make them do what he wants, because he knows what is best for them.

It is a story that perhaps every child—Korean or not, immigrant or not—knows all too well. The second-place winner of the Arthur Lynn Andrews Prize for Fiction tells the story from the perspective of Mr. Jeong, that hard-working, selfless, obstinate, and overbearing father who loves his children, but will not listen to a word they say. As readers we instinctively side with the protagonist, but listening to Mr. Jeong...
is like listening to our own parents yell through the closed bedroom door; we find that we see from the perspective of his children, as well.

“My intent while writing the story had been to get into the mind of a middle-aged Korean man and spend time there. That was all,” explained Woo, the American-born Korean writer. “I wanted readers to understand more, but not jump to a conclusion.”

Woo said she found it strangely easy to tap into the perspective of an uncommunicative father—to speak his thoughts out loud. “It’s funny how it came to me,” she said, explaining how she was at Olin Library when the idea struck her. “It was one of those weird cases where I could very clearly visualize this project, if not Mr. Jeong, and I sat down and just wrote it in one go.”

At the time, she was in English professor Maureen McCoy’s creative writing course, and she submitted the story for workshop. She received constructive criticism and comments from McCoy and other students in class. She remembers one particular Korean student who sent the story to his siblings back home because it reminded him so much of their father.

Her older sister, an English alumna from Cornell, served as her editor, while her mother read the story over and corrected some details on Korean kimchi. Encouraged by McCoy to continue to work on the story, she revised and submitted “Mr. Jeong Gets a Haircut” to the competition. The rest, of course, is history.

“I got some people saying that they hated Mr. Jeong,” Woo remembers. “I guess the outcry against Mr. Jeong was expected; I didn’t really write him as all sympathetic.”

Yet something about the selfless tyrant touches readers. The logic whirling inside Mr. Jeong is hard to deny. He wanted an opportunity so badly and worked so hard to achieve it, but his children cannot assert themselves without falling into youthful, whiny pathos. On the other hand, they cannot understand where he is coming from because he never tells them, never communicates fully with them. We are driven speechless equally by Mr. Jeong looking for “some nice Korean boy” so that his daughter does not take a white boy to prom, and by his son accusing his father of sending him to the Ivy League only to boast to other parents.

With a simple plot and melodic language, Woo has portrayed both sides with admirable authenticity. The honesty in her writing allows the readers to feel for Mr. Jeong, despite everything. “I think to be honest about something, you need to have experienced it, to some extent,” she said. Woo’s own father was very flexible, she remarked, but watching other friends’ dads and men at church gave her that inner view, while still allowing her enough distance.

“For a while I wanted to get away from being a Korean writer writing about Koreans,” she laughed. “But I think it’s what I know best and what I can write about the best.” Woo has tried being experimental in her writing, she admits, trying out wild styles and branching out from the Korean-American niche. Those efforts usually proved to be when readers misunderstood her stories, but they were also fun experiments that helped loosen her creative process.

Woo is up in the air about her future. She is keeping all of her options open: she took the LSAT and is considering the possibility of an MFA program in creative writing somewhere down the line. Like all writers, however, she is pretty sure that even if she doesn’t publish, she will always write. “Writing helps me to think better,” she said, “to observe more carefully. And it’s cathartic.”

Joo Young Seo ’12

Joo Young Seo was an English major in the College of Arts and Sciences. She is attending law school at Columbia University.

Depending on the reader’s perspective, “Mr. Jeong Gets a Haircut” can either be a scathing satire or a heartbreaking story of an immigrant family. Ashley Woo ’12, undergraduate English major, does not tell her readers which it should be.

Ashley Woo ’12

Working with Stuart Davis, English, Woo’s honors thesis was on the elusive Cornellian Vladimir Nabokov. She was awarded second place in the 2011 Department of English Barnes Shakespeare essay contest for her paper “Dismembering, Remembering, Speech” on Titus Andronicus. Woo is taking a gap year after graduation to experience the world and its wonders on a “grand or microcosmic scale,” as she puts it, before going to graduate school.