

King Grandma and the Handsome Bastard

Novel Excerpt

By Gene Kwak

새끼 : (sae-kki, --): A noun often used to derogatorily refer to a person. The word, when not used as a profanity, is used to describe the offspring of an animal. Generally means bastard, but depending on context can also mean offspring or child.

“It’s an honor just to be Asian.” - Sandra Oh

Chapter 1

Pyramid Head and Luigi are pooling their resources to snag a last day grab bag while I'm over here eating a gas station sandwich: wet slice of ham, slice of American cheese, smear of mustard and smear of mayo on a cheap bun that's probably the legal limit of what can be considered bread. We're sitting in the Zen Garden at the Ramada Inn at the biggest anime convention in Omaha, Nebraska, which equals seven thousand diehards and newbies descending on Warren Buffett's backyard to play dress up in their weekend best. The Ramada Inn used to be a real dive with shit carpets, but thanks to heavy renovations in 2012, the main waiting area is now anchored by a coffee bar with one of those generic neon signs that advertises that LIFE HAPPENS WHEN FOAM BEGINS and for some reason the O is wearing an oversized scarf. Alongside the coffee bar is a winding walking path lined with big-leaf ficuses, small boulders the size of small boulders, and a mini-waterfall that diverges into a stream that wends through the center of the now slightly less shitty carpets. A tiny footbridge crosses the stream mid-way, but it's prime photo-op real estate, so it's normally choked with bodies. Posed. Splayed. Wielding fake swords. Except today. Pyramid Head, Luigi, and I are Sunday stragglers. Last of the convention goes. Sunday squads are usually hungover from partying all weekend; they'll walk around in robes or those full-body animal onesies. Biding their time and saving on discounted merch while waiting for their rides or flights out of town. I get picked up by my Uber in two hours.

"Two for five dollars," I say, use my foot to slide my duffel bag over to them. Luigi has less upper body weight, so he bends down, gives me a skeptical look, then unzips the bag. Sees dust-covered tchotchkes with my face and name plastered along them. Makes sense they didn't move, because to save scratch I had them manufactured from a cheapo company overseas that insisted on the same mold: dimple on the chin caught the corner of a Class of '88 ring. Clean or

not, they still wouldn't sell. My heyday has long gone. And nobody wants a knockoff from the source. Be like Jordan in the flesh trying to shill the fake Chinese Jordans with the fat-assed Jumpman.

"Who is this?" Luigi asks through his costume mustache. Holds one up for inspection. Pyramid Head, who at this point has taken off his pyramid head, reveals himself to be one of those scraggly-haired white boys with big noses and neck tattoos that white girls bed in getting their best shot at Adam Driver. Local Kylo shrugs his shoulders. It's me from *Dusty Roads*, a cowboy period piece with time-traveling breakdancers, in which I played a Chinese railroad worker, but it was far from historically accurate. From the same producers who brought you *White Chicks*. So, my character was buck-toothed and sported a wide-brimmed hat, although accented by a pair of white, three-stripe Adidas Superstars. And a gold dookie chain.

"Ten dollars for the whole bag," I say. Makes sense they don't make me. I don't resemble the smooth-skinned, twentysomething version of me forever arrested in fan's direct-to-DVD memories. That version also had bleach blond tips and the rumor of a goatee. I am Korean—Korean-American—so I still don't look my age. With enough foundation, I could push mid-twenties. Asian doesn't raisin. Also, after the acting gigs dried up, I transitioned into voiceover work. My last seven hairstyles have been unseen by fans. And the goatee is definitely gone. But I'm relieved they don't know. Because when people recognize me, they really recognize me.

During the early aughts, I was in a slew of teen movies as the Asian sidekick, the math whiz, the nerdy virgin. I can't complain. I made coin. I was "famous." Partied with a less slim Josh Peck and a less roided up Jonathan Lipnicki. Did blow off a life-sized glass unicorn's ass at a bat mitzvah with Mischa Barton and Lindsay Lohan. I was never a star, I swooped in and helped buff up their luster. But check the record: I'm in a ton of those generation-defining

movies. Or at least their knockoffs. I'm not exactly proud of my work, but I cashed the checks, so I have to live with my choices. Played as the often accented, comedic relief. The butt of jokes about dick size, sexual prowess, romantic skills. Which has led to encounters where during my daily comings-and-goings, frat boys from that era who are now traffic cops or middle managers scream out at me and demand I parrot some of my most famous lines. Imagine getting stereotyped sayings yelled at you in public, but by bystanders begging you to say them back. Their phones at the ready, but in a different kind of gotcha.

My phone vibrates while I'm trying to peddle my past racist roles in their bouncing big-headed glory. I ignore it at first, because I'm afraid. Recently, unhinged anonymous emails bounce into my inbox and they're hard to ignore when you get that notification and the first couple lines tell you to eat sand and shit glass.

I can't make out the notification because the cracked screen impedes my reading. Every image looks like it's sauntering through a half-assed haunted house: partially obscured by a spider-web. I dropped it in the public shitter at the last con when a fan in a nearby stall recognized my shoes and asked for an autograph once we were "both done" that is. The buzz is a direct message. Twitter or Instagram, I think. I can't tell. I slide my thumb, snag it on a crack, feel the instant recognition of pain, see a drop of blood bubble up then lose its shape into a tiny spill. Fuck. I wish Dirt Bike were here.

Dirt Bike is my assistant. So to speak. Right hand man. Confidant. Caretaker. This half Hmong, half white kid in his mid-twenties with a pompadour-rattail combo; he calls it "party in the front, even bigger party in the back." Dresses like a dad on a first-time trip to Hawaii: brightly colored flower print shirts, basketball shorts, and espadrilles are his uniform. He started following me around with a camera after one of these conferences out in Denver. Or maybe it

was Kansas City. No, it was definitely Wisconsin. Daisho something or other, which Dirt Bike informed me was Japanese for Big Little. He came up and introduced himself as a fan. Said he made YouTube videos. Went viral for an accident on a Dirt Bike, which hit big. Dropped out of college, tried his hand at recreating his virality by riding different vehicles: skateboards, one of those red Little Tikes Cozy Coupes, a hoverboard. Viewership started flagging, because you can't catch lightning on a dirt bike twice. Wanted to film me, said something about making a triumphant return. Not sure if he meant me or both of us.

Dirt Bike is back in Minneapolis, where he lives in a studio apartment the size of a closet in a studio apartment. I moved in with him two weeks ago, when I was on the receiving end of a robbery gone bad back in my old Echo Park neighborhood. I was out one day walking my neighbor's tiny terrier, Apolonia. I was sporting a gaudy robe and old Gucci slippers, but those slippers were gifted to me in a swag bag at an MTV Movie Awards. A bunch of teens, kids really, asked me to fork over any dinero post haste, and I said, "The fuck if I will," and pointed down to my waistband where a pistol was holstered.

"Isn't that shit from Star Trek?" one of them asked and pointed. Really it was an expensive replica of Han Solo's blaster I'd bought from a pawn store on the same corner. They started wailing on me, giving me no time to offer any sort of answers; I had to curl up and take my ass whipping. The dog ran off. I told her owner she was stolen and my bruises and busted lip backed my story. I was about to be evicted anyway, because I owed three months of back rent, so I threw my few belongings into a backpack and hopped a Greyhound. Flipped a middle finger at all the sights: fuck you Chinese Theater, fuck you Griffith Park, fuck you Hollywood sign. I worked that bird as we whizzed up the 15 on the way out of California. Trick in keeping an empty seat next to me was to pretend to be asleep with my fly down anytime fresh passengers

boarded. Zipped across America, moved in with Dirt Bike. He's been a godsend ever since. Cooks great eggs. Offers moral support. Gives me lifts.

One day, I awoke to him pointing a tiny video camera in my face. "I've got an idea," he said. "Mountaintop," he said. Thrust that thing in my face almost every waking moment. "Immersion," he said. When he wasn't recording me himself, he had me either use my phone or a small handheld camera.

But I'm in Omaha and he's in Minneapolis filming commercials for local mattress tycoons to keep our lights on. I gingerly tap around on my phone, unlock it with my face, find the message. A direct blast from Instagram. It's Esther. I stop breathing for a second; almost choke on the cold ham. Esther is the greatest non-love, love of my life that I lost touch with almost a decade ago. It's a short ask; call her it says. Undertone reads urgent.

Phone calls are already awkward, but at least Esther and I are both from the generation that still remembers having to call your crush on a landline and possibly getting her parents. It's been so long since we've spoken. I'm anxious. Feel a slight throbbing in my temples. No napkins at the ready, I use my dry ass sandwich bread to soak up the sweat from my hands.

Not sure what's her angle: is she going to profess her love? Think I'm still fat with cash and try to shill for a pyramid scheme of smarter water? Tell me it was all a big misunderstanding? I walk over to a tucked back corner, half hidden by a fake palm frond. Dial her number. We've both been long gone from Omaha for at least twenty years and yet we both have 402 area codes. I dial.

"Geoff, it's about your cousin," she says, getting straight to it. Not the response I was expecting.

“Gunmo’s dead,” she says. “Did you know?” She’s half-whispering and trying to speak quickly. Almost like she’s on a landline hiding around a bend.

“Where are you?” I ask.

“At my parent’s place,” she says. Tells me she’s been cooped up there for the last two weeks after her marriage hit the skids. Now it’s one wheel dangling over the edge of a huge drop off. Her parents and my parents live next to each other in a retirement development right outside of Orlando. She heard about Gunmo from her parents and assumed I knew.

Gunmo moved out to Los Angeles to be a producer; wanted to learn the ropes from me. He’d been there for seven months and I’d seen him once. We met for Birria tacos on Sunset. The news is a surprise to me, but honestly, I wasn’t that close to him, so it’s more guilt than grief wave. And knowing I’m not going to hear the end of it from my grandmother. King Grandma will say it’s my fault. I should’ve been a better older cousin. She’ll use the Korean word for older brother, which means something beyond blood.

I glance back at where Pyramid Head and Luigi were seated. The costumed twosome are gone. A crushed paper cup in their wake. The rest of my sandwich ghosted with them. My duffel bag in a slump on the ground. The bobblehead examined earlier half shoved back in, peeking its face out of the zippered opening. Even from here I can tell the contents haven’t shifted. Then my eyeline goes straight to the nearest near full trash can and I see that unmistakable bun periscoping out of the top. Like seeing the back of a good friend’s head as she recedes into a crowd. Figure they did me a favor.



Chapter 2

Esther and Geoffrey. Yes, Geoffrey. I know a Korean Janet, Phillip, and Henry. Not to mention Esther. Not sure why our generation of Korean parents were obsessed with saddling us with old Anglo names. Maybe to try and trick future white supervisors who would peruse our cover letters, but as soon as they would see our Kims or Kwons or Kwaks, the game would be up.

Growing up, Esther and I were always background actors in school plays. Bush and tree. Two of three wisemen. A pair of passersby. Although one year we did a take on Marco Polo and I was by default Kublai Khan since I was the only Asian boy in the entire grade. Although Esther fought me for the role and even showed up to auditions with a fake beard Sharpied in and honestly, she would've been the stronger choice. I didn't even have the acting bug that early, I just did it to get some freedom from being stuck at home.

We burned herb together for the first time sitting in my Honda Civic in the parking lot of the McDonald's where we had our first part-time jobs. Got so high that during break we drove over to the Burger King that was less than a block away from us and went inside to order. The manager politely asked us to leave. We still had our headsets and uniforms on. Slapped the counter, demanded our Whoppers, paper crowns slanted on our heads.

High school came and went. Boyfriends. Girlfriends. Driver's Licenses. Keg stands. Fake IDs. Parties. Proms. Or more like squatting in parking lots at proms.

Then I hit my big break: a minor speaking part in a teen movie starring Kirsten Dunst. I backed into this pursuit rather than full swandive. They were filming on location at a high school in Millard and looking for a young Korean or Asian boy my age. Nobody else fit the bill in our greater metropolitan area. A scout called a Korean pastor who called my mom. The role was playing the school photographer. I had three lines and most of the time my face was obscured by

me holding a camera. I pocketed an easy \$500 and had to sign up for SAG-AFTRA, just SAG back then.

I told my parents I wanted to pursue this thing. See where it went. It took convincing, but we agreed on a one-year deadline. So, I moved out solo to a closet apartment west of Hollywood. Esther went to college at UNL. My parents prodded me—but in the strong-armed way that ranchers use zapsticks on cattle—to pursue a college degree in conjunction with my bright lights fantasy, but I told them it was too much work and one of the conditions of our agreement was that I would be able to go after this full-fledged. Which was bullshit. I definitely could've accrued the credits at a community college, but I was memorizing scripts and couch sitting while ripping bong hits with my fellow thespians. Overall, my parents were proud of my acting accomplishments. Or maybe proud is overdoing it. They were happy I was making money. They figured it'd eventually fizzle out and I'd come crawling back to Nebraska. Enroll in classes. Get a part-time job. But I followed through. Found another gig. Then another. Four more after that. And on and on. Not that I was an incredible actor or anything; it was likely a mix of dumb luck, good looks, and doing the shit parts that no one else who looked like me would do.

Then came the drift between Esther and me. No real reason. No major fallout. Feels like the worst kind of split is the one that can't really be pin pointed. Disagreements over this life partner or that big decision can sometimes be talked through. If the loss is just a gradual decrease in seeing each other, both parties failing to maintain that bond and then blaming each other for not playing their part in the upkeep, then it's almost harder to come back together. Time and distance. Easier to mend one large crack rather than a bunch of little offshoots.

But in the story of Esther Park and Geoffrey Kim, it was less of a big whoosh of breath and more like a roach quietly being extinguished. I was at a wrap party in the Hollywood Hills

for this movie based on a video game based on an '80s board game. I wasn't involved, but I had a roommate who played a sentient game piece and they served free finger food and champagne. Models who had been in burger commercials lounged on outdoor furniture that looked like indoor furniture. I remember foams were a big thing on all the hors d'oeuvres. Caviar-flavored foam. Foamy caviar. I was bending the ear of LaDainian Tomlinson's agent, asking if he had any fantasy tips, when my flip phone buzzed. It was Esther. I didn't pick up, which was new for me. I almost always picked up. But this time I sent it to voicemail; forgot to call back for a few days, weeks, months. Years.

Of course, I ran into her on occasion, a holiday get together, a mutual acquaintance's gender reveal wig party.

But what's the point beyond salvaging an old friendship? Do you try to act like nothing's changed? For years we politely waved at each other across crowded rooms. Mom had a stomach cancer scare and Esther called. Her parents lost some beachfront property. I sent a card. Esther got married. I really wanted to go, but I was dead in the middle of filming *Shark Party 5*. I sent a large bouquet of flowers and a Neti pot. Think Esther left a corporate accounting gig and found herself teaching at a state school. I made more movies. *Shark Parties 7* and *8*. Followed each other on Facebook. Twitter. Instagram. Liked each other's photos when they came across the timeline. Made little jokes in the comments. Fire emoji, heart emoji, prayer hands. That easy pseudo friendship outreach that social media allows.

Now she's half an hour outside of Orlando, in Kissimmee. Probably partying it up with an alligator wearing sunglasses. I don't know.

"What's it been like living out there?" I ask. Even though I've visited my parents over the years, whenever I stayed over, which was never for more than a few days at a clip, I always kept

my radius to the small neighborhood around their retirement community. Barely set foot into Kissimmee proper, if there is such a thing. Years ago, I took King Grandma to Medieval Times, but then she complained I didn't buy her a big enough sword and that her roasted chicken was tainted by the smell of horse's ass.

"Real easygoing. A lot of golfing. A lot of slow walks," she says.

"I meant living with your parents again."

"Don't get me started," she says. "Fucking rough."

And that's all it takes to ease into the old us. Feels odd after so long and it's not quite the same, but it's close enough. A start. And it still feels effortless. Like working a scene with an old pro and you're both playing off of each other playing pretend.

She tells me how at first she was so warmed at the thought of her mother leaving her breakfasts with cut fruit and blueberry muffins every morning. Her mother in another life would've waited for her to wake up, but now her parents were on this early morning golf schedule and so her mother has been leaving her a plate along with a nice note about a cup of coffee to heat up in the microwave.

It was calming at first, just being with them again. Doting. Attentive.

But within two days came the questions. "When are you getting back out there? I know a nice boy who's not married. Want me to introduce you?"

"I love my mom but calm down. We're not even technically divorced yet, just separated." Esther's soon-to-be-ex-husband is a white guy who made decent scratch launching a chain of Taekwondo schools. Esther's parents liked him enough, but he never really fit; never quite grasped Korean norms. Couldn't stomach kimchi; didn't bring anything when he visited. Or at least this is what I heard third-hand from my mom.

“Gotta set that bar in the dirt,” I say. My parents still needle, but I pulled such bullshit moves in my early years that they’re mostly happy I’m not dead. There’s a TMZ photo of me from seven years ago when I fell into a pile of trash after being physically forced out of a club and I wasn’t wearing any underwear, so my pants slipped and revealed my full ass to the camera; blue birthmark included. Some joker posted the photo of my ass on my Wikipedia profile. Thank God my parents don’t know TMZ from the DMZ.

“But Gunmo,” she says. “Did you—did you know?”

“No,” I say. “Also, does King Grandma?”

“Not as far as I can tell,” she says.

“Fuck.”

“I know,” Esther says.

“How’s she doing by the way?”

“Chipper as ever. I see her doing rounds with a sunhat and giant sunglasses on. Whenever she comes by me, she slaps me on the ass.”

“Sorry, she hasn’t kept up with the times,” I say. Move my phone away from my own face briefly, wipe away the sweat accumulated on the screen. This is the longest I’ve talked on the phone in a decade.

“It’s fine. It’s the most action I’ve gotten in a while. Anyway, what are you going to do?”

“No clue, but I’ll call Mom and Dad. See what they have to say.”

“But you can’t let them know you know. They’ll know I told you. Are you coming back anytime soon?” Esther’s voice gets a little bit softer in pitch at this last part.

“How much longer are you there?” I see my first child in swim gear. The Ramada is connected to a water park, so during off-con days, I imagine it’s not uncommon to see toddlers

running through the halls in their slap happy flip-flops and half-inflated water wings. Most of the con is adults parading around in their costumed pageantry, but this is my first swim kid. Goggles askew on her head. Towel wrapped around the shoulders. Wielding a pool noodle like a soft saber.

“Not sure, no real plans. I have a ton of vacation time that I’m using right now. Maybe another few weeks. Trying to sort everything out.”

“I’m really busy right now. Convention after convention lined up.”

“Whoa, Mr. Hollywood. Don’t go out of your way.”

“I’ve got another one next weekend, but then I’ll come down.”

“It’ll be good to see you.”

Something like joy trickles out of this old beat-up heart. A quick goose to rev up a near dead motor. After we get off the phone, I can’t help it. I let loose a loud, “Yeehaw!” No lie, right then, about twenty feet away two young women walk by in horse onesies. They both peer back at me, disgusted. On a large screen TV, the weatherman Rusty Lord gives his afternoon forecast. Cloudy with a thirty percent chance of precipitation.

“I’m from Nebraska,” I say, as if to absolve myself.

“You’re not from Nebraska,” a random passerby says. He’s dressed like a warlock.

Chapter 3

But I am from Nebraska. Bleed scarlet and cream. Slept with a Cornhuskers pennant crookedly hung above my crib. I grew up here, although the truth is I haven't really been back in almost twenty years. Post-retirement, parents flew the coop to Florida, so I don't even have family here. I return on occasion for work and it feels surreal to drive some of the same streets I drove as a freshly-licensed teen not knowing which way to turn onto Leavenworth. Home in a small talk sense, but no place really feels like home to me. Certainly not one panhandle over another.

I call Mom. She's at her home, knitting headcovers for her golf clubs. Since she and dad relocated to Kissimmee, they golf religiously. Five years ago, my parents retired from their hybrid Chinese-Korean restaurant, moved away from Omaha to warmer climes, and have been Orlando adjacent ever since. King Grandma lives with them.

I've rarely felt like any place was home. I don't want to go off on this diaspora rant, but does any group of people shuttered from their homelands into a new land with different plants and sunsets ever feel at home? Like we get grouped: freckles with freckles. And now we have to pretend our new freckles mean something. I never fit in is what I'm getting at. And Orlando is no one's home unless you're a cartoon mouse. Or own a jet ski.

"Have you been eating?" is the first thing Mom always asks.

"Did Gunmo commit suicide?" I ask.

"Don't say that word," she says. "You've been talking to Esther." But I can tell by her not instantly berating me and the slight warmth in her voice that she's at least a little glad I've been talking to Esther.

"Do we know for sure?" I ask.

Little Uncle knows. Gunmo's father. The rest of his immediate family. They live out in the suburbs near Chicago, but I haven't seen them in years. Little Uncle has to have known. But hasn't told any of us. I guess a few extended family members are clued in, but it's need-to-know. Biggest issue is telling King Grandma. She's Dad's mom and the oldest of all the grandmas so we call her King Grandma. Great Grandma, but same shit. She's in her late eighties and they don't think it'd be good to hit her with that kind of shocking info. People can die of a broken heart is what I'm told.

Whenever I see King Grandma she calls me a bastard. She thinks I squandered my talent. That I could've been bigger if I didn't sell out. Once she told me that she was ashamed to tell the other grandmas that I was her grandson. This is when I was doing particularly well due to having a bit part in a parody of a horror movie, the only new thing in theaters that August. I ordered ten large boxes of napa cabbage sent to her old house. They had to unload it on a pallet. She couldn't find it in her heart to let all that cabbage rot and even if she made kimchi for the year, there's no way she'd dent that haul. So, she had to give some away to her fellow Korean grandmas who naturally inquired as to why she was so cabbage rich. In Korea, fans or other celebrities will often rent out coffee trucks as a note of good luck for a specific celebrity. The coffee trucks will have banners and drinks plastered with the celebrity's name and face. I sent the delivery truck with my face blown up on it; my forehead at least three feet wide. Truck screamed: acknowledge me, King! Although I'm sure she ignored the obvious as she doled out those heads of napa to her fellow grandmas under my giant dead eyes.

After my mom fills me in on some of the details, the silence between us is a mutual understanding of the signs. "Mom, it's obvious," I say. "Giving away his car, cutting up credit



cards. There's a reason Little Uncle hasn't spread the word. If it were an accident, why would it be a secret?"

"No matter what, we can't tell Grandma."

"Why?"

"She loves Gunmo," Mom says and she's not wrong. Gunmo was the baby. I'm the oldest of the grandkids and supposed to be seen as an example, but I didn't exactly live that out. Also, I once asked my mom if that made any sense: I'm nineteen months older than any other cousin, so I have to shoulder that burden for the rest of my life? Korean culture is big on birth order. It affects everything from the language you use to how you treat each other. I understand why the rules exist, but I wish we could push past those staid traditions by now, especially when we have androids in Saudia Arabia advocating for women's rights.

"Are you coming here for Thanksgiving?" Mom asks. I hear her knitting needles click.

Thanksgiving reminds me of Gunmo. He often floated the notion of coming out to California, one he was set on as early as junior year of high school, and he'd ask me about it whenever our families got together.

He wanted to go to school at USC or UCLA or one of those yellow-friendly, West Coast schools, but he didn't have the money. One thing about Korean families is if you've got the goods, you're supposed to help out others in your extended family. Not just the sibs you grew up making Play Doh food with. Like the cousins you might see once a year. Because if you're the most financially successful, everyone's hoping for trickle-down economics. Or else King Grandma was going to ride you. No fucking winter blankets for you, dipshit.

Gunmo's family assumed I'd help him out with tuition, but I was too busy hobnobbing with celebrities and dropping way too much money on the devil's lettuce and Bolivian marching powder. I had to gracefully decline.

When I saw Gunmo at the next Thanksgiving, which was at their house in Lake View, he called me a fucking sellout to my face. All I did was ask him to pass the yams.

Koreans have this veneer of deference, and we do have that built-in, respect your elders, Confucian-based bullshit that can be great, but it can also crush motherfuckers under expectations. Also, when whatever's been bubbling underneath the surface comes up, it comes up fierce. Screaming, yelling, slapping motherfuckers with giant heads of uncut kimchi. I'm kidding. It's not really that cliché, but you can't hand out decades of disrespect and always expect the person on the receiving end to turn the other cheek.

I screamed at him to "Trust the process!" Whatever that meant. I was two seconds from loony; spouting hard rock. He looked at me dumbfounded, anger boiling in his veins.

Everyone started raising their voices. Food wasn't flying, but it might as well have been. That's not true. A glob of inadvertent mashed potatoes hit a cousin's eyebrow after a spoon was violently pointed. A glass of Cab got tipped over and broke its stem; stained an expensive off-white rug. Gunmo's parents yelling at my parents for not raising a better me. Gunmo calling me a race traitor. King Grandma telling him not to call the bastard a sellout. Me, I wasn't a full hour off an airplane and still a bit loopy from the one-two of drinks and Xanax when I pulled out a handful of hundred-dollar bills from my pockets and pretended to dry my tears. I wished him good luck in attending Chicago State. We didn't have Thanksgiving together for a few years after that.

"Think sooner. Probably after this weekend," I say to Mom.

“Why? Where’s the money coming from? Don’t come.”

“I want to see Esther.”

“Oh, okay, good idea. Come see Esther.”

“Not like that Mom.”

“How are you doing with money?” The needles stop clicking.

Royalty checks waver from a few hundred dollars to enough to cover a value meal. It’s inconsistent. I have massive debt from bad business dealings. A few years ago, I tried to open a Korean BBQ joint, but not that kind of Korean BBQ. Like true southern BBQ. Slow-smoked. Korean and southern appetites have a lot of crossover. Tender meat. Boiled peanuts. Pickled things. But it didn’t catch on because people would walk through the doors thinking it was the kind of thin-sliced beef on a grill type of Korean BBQ. It was called You Know I’ve Got Seoul, but the only thing I had was monster debt.

“I’m fine Mom. I’m fine,” I say, but I know when I land, I’ll have to borrow a few bucks from Dirt Bike. Whatever I made at this appearance has already been spent. I really did a number on the mini-fridge too, which is stupid, but late-night cravings and nothing being open in the middle of Omaha, gets you deep-throating a sleeve of Ritz crackers that costs five dollars.

All I ate this morning was that gas station sandwich. Or half that sandwich. I almost consider salvaging it from the trash.