

## DANCING ON KNIVES

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*Aram Kim*

Last of eight children. That's why she had no legs, they said. Or maybe because she was born in the can. Villagers whispered, She should've drowned in that puddle of shit than hang on dear to her mama's lifeline.

Kids used to call Bobae ape, gorilla, carved it on the backs of her hands with the edges of river stones. Once, her mother pushed her head into the water and yelled for the river goddess to come and swallow her away. But her father ran from his field and struck the mother with the wooden handle of a rake. When Bobae's hair swept the ground behind her, a sister braided it, tied the ends with a thick strip of straw.

At age ten, Bobae was sent to a factory that accepted people like her. Far away from her country village to a mountain above the capital. She was taught to add and subtract, to write her family name – gold, king, yellow mountain. We Are Han River Miracles were written on dormitory hallways. Tagged on each door was a list of rules: No Petting! No Licking! No Begging! Once, a reporter from Seoul came to interview the workers for an article entitled, Second Chances for the Unadorned. When he crouched to Bobae's eye level, she said, Kiss me on my neck, and spun around to let her pigtails slap her cheeks.

In the small space of her room shared with five others, Bobae wiggled around on her behind. From a thermos, she poured water into a metal basin and washed the gunk from her eyes. When a roommate stepped into her corner, she pressed a thumb hard into the girl's eye. During morning exercises, when workers gathered in the courtyard to stretch their necks, reach their toes, Bobae swung her arms from side to side. She shoved whoever was in her way.

Morning after morning, a foreman hoisted her up onto a high stool. Bobae laid metal spoons on the conveyor belt, ten at a time, smooth and creased like the wing of a fan. Her eyes searched for defects, an inaccurate curve. To her left worked Hannah, whose head was wider than her shoulders. She worked with towels around her neck to stop the head from bobbing. Jiyeon worked to the right of Bobae, and always wore

a faded cap. What was left of her face throbbed like fat, dying worms. Bobae often asked to touch Jiyeon's skin, though the girl never let her, instead scraping away her face with a spoon.

One night, Bobae snuck into Jiyeon's sleeping room and snatched the cap from her head. The next day, she spent her lunch break watching Jiyeon cry against the gray concrete of the factory courtyard.

The first time she ran away, Bobae pounded her way to the base of the mountain. Her knuckles roughened from dry, mountain soil. Smoke drifted from a thatched roof and Bobae pulled herself along on her forearms to rest her hands. She tightened her braids, adjusted her suit sewn to cover her stump.

Here, she called to the inside. Over here!

The door unlocked and a woman peered out. She looked down at Bobae's raised hands.

I'm lost, lied Bobae. Will you please –

The scream knocked Bobae out of balance. Before she could right herself, the woman rolled her away with a broom. Shoo! Shoo! she cried. Get out of here!

It took the day and early evening for Bobae to arrive back at the factory. As punishment, she held up a block of concrete over her head. She was positioned in the middle of the courtyard, watched over by a foreman who pinched her when the arms gave out. But when the foreman dozed, to the workers who gathered, Bobae bragged.

Fairies, she said of the outside world. Boys with golden hair and pigs that walked on two legs! She flaunted her scars and called herself brave.

Once every few months, Bobae ran away. Sometimes she returned on her own from hunger to tell more stories of wingless birds and flowers as large as the moon. Other times, a tolerant mountaineer carried her on his shoulder and handed her to the foreman who called Bobae the worst of her kind.

Still, there hung a lull thick enough for her to braid. After the whistle blew, Bobae performed handstands, threw gravel at the mute workers. But no play carried away the drone of machinery.

So the days went until Giant Jung tripped over her in the supper line. When Bobae thumped head first to the floor, he hid behind his giant hands.

I'll forgive you if you show me something, she said.

While the foreman picked the turnip from his teeth, Giant Jung crawled on his stomach out the factory gates with Bobae lying flat on his back. They went in search for a hiding place.

Jung's face reminded Bobae of the very mountain they walked on. The forehead, cheeks, and chin the brown, rugged earth. The eyes, nose, mouth its caves. His hair stroked the tangled branches. How the birds would mistake his head for a nest! she joked. Five of Bobae's fists fit in a single of his footprints, and in this she found a quiet thrill. He was like the others, yes, but that he made up five of her. That he could be mistaken for a tree!

They settled beside a stream. She climbed up his shins and sat on his thighs.

Show me, she said.

He coughed. But it's cold, he said.

It's all right. It won't take long.

He began to unbutton his shirt, but had trouble with his tree-trunk fingers. Have you ever seen one? he asked.

Sure.

Whose?

My brothers'. When they took me to town to beg for change.

The giant looked the other way. When he showed her, she stared and fingered it until the giant cried out from her tugging.

They snuck out the next day and Jung played for Bobae a melody with his lips puckered on a willow leaf. She swayed back and forth on her stump for him to raise her high above his head. And when he did, she hooted and chuckled all over the mountain air.

Bobae leaned on the giant who leaned on a fallen tree. She smelled his hands that smelled like the inside of a watermelon. She closed his eyes and closed her own to the hum of water. They dozed until awoken by sounds.

The mountain is a singing woman, said Bobae.

They followed the noise through splitting paths, over secreted caves. Finally, from a break in the bushes, they saw colors. Oranges and blues worn by a woman who sang and danced from inside out.

Bobae gestured for the giant to duck down low. Let me take a look, she said.

She crawled close enough to smell the fruits and dried fish set on

lacquered tables. Lying on the ground, Bobae watched as the woman picked up bells and rattled them in the air. Her eyes rolled around in their sockets. From her mouth leaked voices that sang without end.

But all of a sudden, it stopped. Energy still flowed from the woman like smoke from a cooling coal. She threw the bells to the side. She undid the ribbon tying together the many layers of silk over her body. Then she stepped onto a set of knives, attached to a wooden board on their dull edges. Midair, she seemed a floating piece of cloth. No expression showed on her face, nothing like pain. Bobae shuddered at the sight of the blades, cutting deep into the woman's feet.

A massive hand came from behind to hide Bobae's eyes. Come on, said the giant. Let's get out of here.

When Bobae took away his hand, the woman had already noticed. She wobbled now, struggling to stay balanced. And when she finally fell, the giant heaved Bobae over his shoulder. He ran down the narrow path, past the stream, over slippery rocks to the gravel courtyard, all the while Bobae bouncing like a feather pillow beside his mountain face.

They were punished with no food and extra shifts.

What do you think is out there for your kind? asked a foreman. You think anyone out there wants you? This is the only place that'll take you and you want to mess it up?

He pinched whatever skin he could find on Bobae and clicked his tongue at the giant thrice his size.

The next week, Jung found Bobae crawling on her back out the factory gates. What if they catch you? he asked.

Bobae shrugged.

Can I go with you? he asked.

You'll ruin things like before, she said. But come meet me at the stream later at sundown.

Promise? asked the giant.

Secretly, she wanted it to herself. Whatever it was, she wanted it all to herself.

Back where they had seen the woman, Bobae found nothing. No fish bones. No rotting fruit seeds. She looked around and saw that it was autumn. The earth was cracked in a thousand places. She smudged the dirt to give the impression of a break-less land.

When she came upon a small dwelling, Bobae snuck into the yard and looked around.

You're an eyesore, she heard from behind.

Here was the woman, whose hair was gray and eyes droopy.

I'm not as bad as the others, said Bobae.

Where's your giant friend? asked the woman. She was inside a room with doors slid open. In front of her were a small bowl of rice and a side dish of cabbage.

He's scared to come back, said Bobae. He's a giant, but I like him. We're going to get married.

The woman scooped some rice out of the bowl and shaped it into a ball. She beckoned for Bobae to come for it.

We're allowed to get married, said Bobae. As long as you can write your name and count stones right.

Bobae leaned on the steps. The two ate their rice in silence.

What are you called? asked the woman.

Bobae air-stroked her family name – gold, king, yellow mountain. And Bobae is what I'm called, she said.

A monk, a witch, a rope-rider in a circus? Bobae counted off jobs that might require dancing with bells.

I'm a Spirit Mother, said the woman. She opened her mouth and there were teeth like baby beans.

Spirit Mother wore costumes and performed for the dead. She distracted them from acts of revenge on the living. Sometimes calling forth greater gods to do the convincing for her.

Who gets to be one? asked Bobae.

Very few, said Spirit Mother. First you see things. In the end, you have no choice.

I could be one, said Bobae. I've seen things.

Spirit Mother whistled through her brown teeth. I'm sure you have, she said. But the way you're made, sitting girl, you can't ever dance on knives.

Bobae was sent away with fried anchovies for her trek back to the factory. She was told to come back and help out around the dwelling sometimes. She knew in her sturdy shoulders that she, too, would become a dancer for the spirits. Colors dimmed the sky as she dodged the low branches, having forgotten all about Giant Jung who waited unbut-

toned at the stream, its wetness coating his immensity like the thinnest of metals.

Growing up, Bobae did see things from inside where she was kept: pigs mating, a man being dragged by the feet, an old boy who played a song on his guitar in exchange for a bowl of rice. When her brothers took her to town to beg for change, she saw them naked next to the women with baggy breasts inside alley theatres. She once saw a star drop from the sky and asked a sister to go look for it the next day. The morning she left home, her mother took her to the outside market. There, she saw a baby horse dragging a wagon full of yellow pears.

That morning, she also heard the music. When it drew near, people cleared to make room in the crowded market aisle. The wooden board approached, attached to four wheels. The small radio playing the music was roped to its front. The man lay face down, using his arms as paddles to roll himself forward. His hair was greasy and black, like the legs of spiders. The empty pant legs were rolled and clipped below the hips. And near his face was a small drainer with a few coins inside.

If you don't want to be this, go away from here, said her mother.

That afternoon, Bobae was hoisted onto the back of a hog truck to take her to a new home. Around her neck hung a small radio her mother had given her. Just in case, she said.

Week after week, Giant Jung lay in front of the gate to block it. Don't go, he said to Bobae who crawled up his stomach. They're going to find out. I'm going to tell.

I don't care, said Bobae. Soon, I'll be too great for here anyway.

At Spirit Mother's, Bobae swept the yard with the broom's handle snug between chin and chest. She picked chili peppers from the garden and washed them in the freezing water. And when the clients came, she hid in a kitchen corner.

The clients brought with them family heirlooms, legacies of jade and mother-of-pearl. In turn, Spirit Mother danced and sang to convince dead wives to leave their husbands alone. To angry, dead babies, she promised embraces from goddesses. She thrust the air above the grieving mother with a kitchen knife, then filled her mouth with water and sprayed the mother's face three times. After each performance, she

tossed some food over the gate to lure the leftover spirits outside.

But these were stubborn ghosts. When the clients left for their cities, Bobae counted how long it took for the dead to leave Spirit Mother. A finger, maybe even a whole arm unwilling to let go, opening and closing its hand deep inside her. Sometimes, Spirit Mother ran in place to make them tired. Sometimes she guzzled rice wine to knock them unconscious.

It took hours before Spirit Mother returned to this world. When she opened her eyes, they were yellowed and faint. She often forgot who Bobae was, screaming at the sight of the sitting girl staring at her from behind a tree.

Bobae knew it would take time to prove her worth. The arcs she drew to call forth dead babies could be refined. She could learn to handle a weapon or two more. It was only a matter of time before she would be noticed. After all, Spirit Mother was getting tired, even she could tell. Her yawns grew bottomless and her limbs were loose. Bobae would assume the role and take over. She would be the daughter Spirit Mother never had.

Giant Jung waited for Bobae in the shadows, blending in with the trees.

You smell like oranges, said Bobae.

Jung dug in his pocket and took out half of a peeled orange. I saved it for you, he said.

They sat on the steps while the workers gathered to pierce ears with ice and needles. Bobae undid her braids and Giant Jung brushed the long locks with his fingers.

Hurry up, she said. I have to talk to the gods.

Again? he asked.

I need to practice, she said. The more I practice, the sooner I can get out of here.

The giant rebraided her hair. Can I watch? he asked.

No, she said. You'll ruin my concentration. She offered the giant her sticky fingers. When he refused, she licked them herself.

Jung stood and blocked out the night sky with his raised fist. They'll find out, he said.

When will you understand, she said, that I don't need this place?

Go with the one with the fan, said Bobae, chewing on seaweed. A good man will come and give you a fan to hide your face.

Jiyeon crouched behind her. When will he come? she asked.

In about five, ten years, said Bobae. You wait. As long as you do, he'll come and take you away from here.

Bobae began to predict fortunes for the workers who crowded her during mealtime. She repeated things she heard Spirit Mother say.

She told Hannah to take small, short breaths, and to exhale big and long. It's all the air inside you, she said. You have to let all that out.

To others who wanted better lives, she advised to leave a bowl of water outside in case the spirits got thirsty. And once in a while, she said, bow a hundred times facing the sun. And do it wrapped in linen.

Some asked why they were born this way. Because a great great ancestor of yours had a third eye, she told one. And to another, she said, Your father hated the calluses on your mother's hands. She was unwifely, her body didn't work. And so she had you.

How will I die? asked one with jumbo ears.

You'll carve a wooden chopstick and stab your ear to death, she answered.

During these sessions, Giant Jung stood near the doorway on the lookout for a foreman. When one sauntered by, he asked questions like, How many spoons are enough to feed the world?

One midnight, Bobae threw gravel at Jung's window.

Help me steal the cow's head from the kitchen, she said. I need to practice balancing it on this trident. She took out the weapon she stole from Spirit Mother.

Is that all I am to you? he asked.

What? asked Bobae. A cow's head?

The giant sighed. Do it yourself, he said before shutting his window.

The full moon of October kept the spirits elsewhere. With fewer clients, Spirit Mother was brighter than usual. She took walks down to the stream, Bobae trailing behind with a basket full of dirty sheets balanced on her head.

My river child, Spirit Mother called the stream.

She took off her clothes and lay on the jagged rocks. She immersed her ear and listened, smiling and frowning at the silent words of the stream. Bobae watched as she pounded the sheets with small wooden paddles. Out of the stream she made a mirror, fingered it to melt away her image.

In light of Spirit Mother's good mood, Bobae asked, What did you see? Spirit Mother waded into deeper water. Garments changed into warriors in my hands, she said.

Just like me! said Bobae. And when the warriors called my name, I yelled, who are you, who are you?

Funny you didn't know, said Spirit Mother, curling her body. Because you're supposed to.

Bobae used her teeth to spread the sheets over the rocks to dry. She said, I did know. I just wanted to trick them, so they'll leave me alone.

The sun was a soft white like an infant moon. Bobae knotted her braids into one. Balanced on a rock, she assaulted the air around her. She poked and elbowed, rolling her eyes from earth to sky. Look what I can do, she said.

What did I tell you? said Spirit Mother.

I'm ready, said Bobae.

Spirit Mother emerged from the water, her skin dewy. Not everything can be done out of will, she said. You've got enough on your hands sitting girl. Don't ask for more.

On their way back to the dwelling, Spirit Mother walked behind Bobae. Her sighs grew heavy and once they reached the door, she stopped. She gathered her hands and lifted them before her as though she held a lamp. The only light in a dark, graying land.

Giant Jung didn't block the gate anymore. He didn't stand in the doorway of the cafeteria when Bobae predicted fortunes. Every afternoon, he flaunted around the courtyard with Hannah riding on his shoulder. He held on to her head in case she tipped over.

Bobae was kicked out of her room by her roommates who complained of her chanting and hidden weaponry. The foreman clicked his tongue and said, Last chance, and pushed her into the workroom to sleep with the boxes of spoons.

When Bobae asked what spirits came to her that day, a dead lover, a murdered king, Spirit Mother closed her door. With more and more clients struggling through the muddy roads, Spirit Mother began to hole up in her bedroom, poking her head to tell Bobae she didn't need her help today. Sometimes, she left for days at a time, skipping ceremonies,

leaving the clients huffing and puffing. Bobae hid extra carefully inside the outhouse, listening to them yell Scam! Scam! all over the yard.

There was an itch Bobae couldn't rid. She felt it was time. No longer could she sit still on the stool, pretend that she belonged in the world of the misshapen. She was different. She could draw ribbons for good fortune. Interlace voices for longevity. She knew these and they were hers.

It had rained in the night. The air was damp, blanketing the whole mountainside. Bobae wrapped her hair around her neck for warmth and continued on.

Spirit Mother was about in her dwelling. In the middle of the yard were stacked things, blankets, pans, boxes of candles and cloths of silk.

Are you cleaning? asked Bobae.

Spirit Mother wiped her forehead of sweat and continued to pile things as though to set them on fire. I have to be on my way, she said.

Where are you going? asked Bobae.

Spirit Mother reached for a black mother-of-pearl box. This is for you, she said. You've been a good help.

Wan strips of light landed on the piles of things. Can I come with you? asked Bobae.

In the early morning light, Spirit Mother's face wore a ghostly sheen. Why? she asked. I am not your mother. She disappeared into the kitchen with a sword under her arm.

Bobae looked around, up at the rolling sky, down at her stump. She looked for the trident to show off her balancing skills. She tried to remember numbers. She had to do something.

While making room for a stage, underneath a lacquered table, she found the knives fastened to the wooden board. She set the blades upright. She examined her hands, chafed the palms against a rock to roughen and deaden. When her hands were numb, she tightened her fingers and raised herself onto the knives.

Her mind was on the wind that slipped around her. It shifted the air holding her up and she tilted to one side. The stump swung front to back like a pendulum above the blades. Bobae straightened her elbows. The two middle fingers held the weight of her half body, the knives cutting into the bones.

Spirit Mother appeared like she was there all along. She whistled through her brown teeth. Look at you, she said.

Bobae nodded. She had done it. She had proven that it could be done.

When Bobae was pushed off the knives, she couldn't tell what came first. Spirit Mother's smile revealing teeth like baby beans. Or the sight of flesh, slices of her hands, scattered on the ground. All she was certain of were the sound of Spirit Mother's feet, shuffling around the yard like those of a thief. Back and forth. Back and forth. Eager to cover any trace of her ever having been here.

When they came to her room, Giant Jung was rebandaging Bobae's hands. There were chunks of missing skin. Outside was falling snow, the first of the year.

You're no use to anybody, said the foreman. Behind him were the other foremen. One of them handed her a paper, but when there wasn't a hand to receive it, he took a pen and wrote on her forehead.

This is where your family is, he said. You could go here, if they'll have you back.

You said she could stay! cried the giant.

We lied, said the foreman. You should blame yourself for telling on her.

But We Are Han River Miracles! cried the giant, pointing at the dormitory hallway. You said so!

The foremen shook their heads. That's just for show, said one.

The last thing they did was pack for her. The gloves, the extra suit sewn to cover her stump were placed in the middle of a large handkerchief they tied to her back like a hump. They hung the radio around her neck.

Bobae was tossed onto the snow. The workers gathered to watch her crawl. But she was still, waiting. She waited for the giant who was surely packing his own things.

When he did show up, Giant Jung had Hannah at his shoulders. He was far away, behind everyone else.

Who needs a giant anyway, she thought.

Bobae rolled herself down the mountainside, refusing to give the others satisfaction in watching her crawl. She picked up speed and layers of snow as she rolled and rolled, directionless. She used her elbows to

change course and arrived at the end of the frozen stream.

Her reflection showed the black letters written on her forehead. She rubbed it against the ice and smeared them away.

The snow had stopped, but the mountain was white. It was the quietest she had ever known. Bobae used her nose to turn the radio knob. Static and music hung over the silence. She leaned against a rock, using her bundle as cushion. Looking up at the colorless sky, she wondered how much longer it would take for the spirits to come and finally notice her.