

Just a housewife

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I hide out in the last room I ever thought I would find refuge in.

Growing up I would watch my mother buzz around cutting boards, bowls of chopped up vegetables, pots and pans on the stove, stopping over each one to stir or smell the contents. Was she a busy bee or more of a mad scientist? Neither does justice to describe the way she made that space. Frenetic. Dynamic. A little terrifying. I was always in the way. Sometimes I would be asked to chop vegetables but I did it so poorly I was usually shooed out. Even learning how to make rice in the rice cooker was a delicate art—a seemingly simple task, but one that I feel I've never gotten quite right until really recently. But I always saw the kitchen as a foreign place and not my place.

Now, I shoo the kids out, too.

The first time Mom graduated me from just cleaning the rice to actually cooking rice meant that I'd grown up a little in her eyes. It was almost a solemn moment when she said she would teach me how to do it. I saw a little sadness in her eyes, maybe because of the passage of time that eluded her the few years leading up to this point. And a little anxiety, even. But, determination, too, after all, every Korean girl should know how to make rice with one hand tied behind their backs by the time they're ten.

The rice cooker was clean, and she pulled out the container. After measuring out the cups of uncooked grains and pouring them into the container, dancing all over like the sound of maracas and feet, seeds falling on the ground, and even like the rain—she showed me how to rinse it all in the sink until the water would pour clear. The water was cold as she filled it up and massaged the grains in methodical handfuls around the perimeter. Like she was coaxing out softness and flavor.

My “desk” is right next to the rice cooker, and I love the smell of rice steaming into the room, especially those last few minutes where it seeps into every corner of the house, and envelopes everything in the feeling of home and comfort, family around

the bahp-sang (table on the floor), my mother chiding me to eat more, my father demanding more rice, my brother covered in it from head to toe, its stickiness the perfect image of Korean *jeong*—one Korean-English dictionary defines it as the “feeling, love, sentiment, passion, human nature, sympathy, heart.” Although it is complicated to introduce a clear definition of *jeong*, it seems to include all of the above as well as more basic feelings, such as “attachment, bond, affection.” It’s flesh and blood, it’s lives intertwined in explicable ways, it’s stickiness.

Every time I make rice and let the grains fall through my fingers I think of the small things that tie me to my family, to my parents, to my children.

When it was my turn—this rite of passage—she had me massage some of it as well before pouring out the smoky water carefully so no grains would be wasted. I rolled the rice around in my hand like marbles or pebbles, like sand at the beach. I nervously tried pouring out the water, too, but immediately at least half a cup slid towards the drain.

“Ayyyyy!!” She scolded before grabbing the container from me. “Slowly,” she chided me in Korean, tipping it towards the sink so that all the water rushed out but the grains magically sunk to the bottom and stayed in the bowl. “Three to five times should be plenty to rinse the rice.”

And then instead of taking a measuring cup to pour water into it to cook, she showed me she used her hand. The directions maybe say about one-and-a-half cups of water for every one cup of uncooked rice, but she put her hand in the water, rested it on top of the rice, and filled it up even more until it hit about the middle of the top of her hand. She put the container back in the cooker and pushed start, and about 20 minutes later with the steam pouring out from the top it was done. Perfect. Soft and sticky.

Now, the twins are shrieking their demands to each other and to me fighting over the little plastic hippo or Anna is fighting Ozzie off as he tries to take her black-and-white stuffed kitty. And I’m taking shelter in the kitchen trying to avoid being found out. I’m doing any number of things: cleaning, prepping for a meal, snacking, and typing away desperately on a laptop or phone. I see why my mom spent so much time in the kitchen. The last and final domain she had some semblance of power, and I feel the kingdom I’ve inherited to also be fraught with tribal clashes and conflicts that flare up at a moment’s notice so it makes sense to take cover.

And I think, again, I'm just a housewife. My mind turns to a review article I read a while back on a book about the rise and fall of domesticity, and housewifery in American culture during the 19th and 20th centuries, and how it was a high point in prestige for women in respect to women's work, in fact, it was the golden age of domesticity, where "women had the epic role in which the home provided a touchstone of values for reforming the entire society." Of course, [according to the writer of the article this is just one revisionist scholar's opinion.](#)

Still. I'm back to that feeling of "what am I doing here" and "what is my life?" thoughts. It feels like someone is always whining. This is their dialect, their language, their communication. Why can't they just talk in normal tones to me? It's almost always a high screech, filled with tears, and the way it is so shrill it feels like mosquitoes under my skin and no amount of DEET or scratching will relieve me of this irritation.

But before I can totally spiral down into that all-too-welcoming, familiar despair they come running into the kitchen and ... I stop and release it all with a loud exhalation. I close the laptop, plug in the phone up on the shelf, and pull out all the pots and pans, big mixing bowls, spoons and measuring cups, toss barley rice into each one and they are squealing, shouting, and down on the floor with me, running their fingers through the rice, scooping and shaping, transferring and spilling, smelling and tasting the dry rice, and **I'm laughing. I'm laughing at the pandemonium. I'm laughing at how mortified my mother would be if she saw me wasting that rice (though I likely would use what didn't fall on the floor). I'm laughing at how I'm just a housewife, and how the kitchen is my favorite room in the house, how I'm more than just a housewife.** And then, laughing at the joy of my little kingdom.

Originally posted at [Kim-Kort's blog](#)