

Deodorization

By Jina Kim

The smoky, sweet aroma of kalbi marinade and burning charcoal wafts into the artificially raspberry scented bathroom. I stare at the Kim Jong-Kook fan club reunion poster on the dingy pale-tiled wall as I feel the heaviness of the combined smells prickle my sinuses, travel up, and press the nerves behind my left eye. The fast-paced shifts at Seoulfire BBQ are already fucking brutal but working with a migraine would make the 10 hour shift hell. I fish through my purse for an Ibuprofen, while trying to maintain the perfect squat over the toilet seat.

Once I am done, I push down on the lever of the toilet with the tip of my toes and wash my hands, making sure to scrub between my fingers and fingernails while singing “Happy Birthday” twice, just as CDC recommended. Ignoring the preachy reminder on the paper towel dispenser to consider the environment, I pull out at least 4, patting down on every last droplet, remembering how quickly germs spread through moistness. I look in the mirror before I head out to the patio, the restaurant’s new make-shift dining area, the last thing I do before I clock in. I tie my black apron around my waist, tuck my T-shirt under it, and pull my N95 mask over my nose. My phone vibrates—a text from my mom reads “Sora-ya, what time will you be home today? Appa and I are both working late, so make sure you go home as soon as you’re off so Dong-hyun isn’t home all alone.” I sigh. I had plans to get drinks with some coworkers after work, but I guess I would just cancel again for the gazillionth time in a row. I tell myself I’ll respond to my mom later, and I put on my name tag. It says Alice.

9 hours inch by slowly. The Ibuprofen never kicked in, but I try my best to fulfill my responsibilities. My arms start cramping from grilling pork belly and makchang. The migraine

makes all the scents of the restaurant tangible, almost painful. I carry out continuous loads of hot charcoal; the heat and smoky aroma burns straight up my nose to my temples. I take out the pungent Korean side dishes on trays; the stench of fermentation makes my mouth water. I refill customers' drinks; the smell of alcohol pierces my nostrils and makes my stomach sink. I forget here and there that the customers cannot see my whole face, so I do my best to convey my customer service-tailored friendliness through my eyes. I think at a certain point my eyes begin to lose focus, but I try to power through because that's what gets the Americans to tip.

In the last hour, close to the last call, I finally get a minute to sneak to the back and breathe. The cooks in the kitchen have fried up some dumplings, and I wolf several down nearly at once. I chatter a bit with some coworkers about crazy customer stories as the manager comes and asks me to close out table 9's bill.

The cool night air is refreshing, especially at a nearly empty patio. The usually bustling street out front allows only one or two cars to shoot by. I walk past the tables with half-eaten meat that are wearily being cleaned into a big rectangular plastic bucket. I ask the customers at table 9, in the most American accent I can muster, "How was your meal?" I see their blue, blue eyes shine and hear "SO delicious!" before returning to their conversation. I don't mean to eavesdrop, but sometimes, customers treat servers like a fly on the wall. The one with the blonde hair is telling a story about her business trip to Korea, where her hosts took her to a kimchi-making class. She is fascinated by the jangdokdae and the probiotics that facilitate gut health. One of her friends, the one whose skin color makes me realize why they call these people white, remarks, "Only the Koreans would know how to make something so smelly, so delicious." I feel my cheeks burn, and I quickly gather the plates, take the card, and march back to the kitchen. The humiliation settles in. I suddenly become so aware that my uniform reeks of

barbecue and my breath swirling around in my mask smells like the onion-y soy sauce from the dumplings. My head swims. I feel so exposed, so foreign. I knew that Korean food smelled, but I had never thought it could be unpleasant. I guess to Americans it could be, but did all Americans associate stinkiness with Koreans?

What did it matter what they thought? They were making fun in front of the clean plates that had been stacked to the brim with Korean food at the beginning of their meal. They can't say something's smelly and then polish off a plate of that same thing. Americans have no respect. I have a right to be proud of my culture, I think as I drive home, but even as I rationalize, even as I seethe, I become self-conscious about the barbecue smell soaking into my fabric seats. I turn the 10 minute drive into 6, racing down the streets of Koreatown, eager to change.

I dread going into my apartment because of the cockroaches. My parents always say they're going to call an exterminator, but the priority level of that task has kept going down the list since my brother Dong-hyun's near biweekly visits to the emergency room. He greets me when I come in, and although he's the one that's lost weight and has seemingly permanent bags under his eyes now, I immediately feel myself shrink in the presence of the skittering brown ovals everywhere. There's a few roaches on the wall, one trying to climb on the ceiling, and a few dead ones on the floor that none of us have gotten around to cleaning up yet.

I walk into the kitchen to put some food I brought back home for Dong-hyun into the fridge when a mustiness I've never noticed translates straight to nausea. I feel my throat jump slightly and it makes me fear our apartment as I realize the smell is due to the army of roaches, mating, thriving, and conquering. They shamelessly inhabit the sink, chasing each other between the dirty dishes that have begun to smell sour days ago, the cabinets, finding sanctuary in the

darkness, and the dish-drying rack, clustered and swarming. The combined odor of rotting food and the almost chemical smell of pest pheromones brings back the migraine that had at long last subsided. My family treats them like they're our roommates, and it makes me wonder if we've all given up on life since moving to the States, if we really moved here in pursuit of betterment, or if the best thing we could hope for here, in this foreign world away from our family and friends, is survival. I remember one time, my dad and I were examining a particularly slow one together, staring at it in disgust and curiosity. It had a red egg with horizontal stripes, nestled between its wings. We had just gotten back from pulling an all-nighter at the hospital after Dong-hyun's 5th visit to the ER in 3 months. He had gotten COVID on top of his condition. His heart had stopped for a few minutes and the doctors had to perform CPR. We thought he would die and for a minute, beneath the tears and rude intrusion of grief, I felt relief imagining we could all finally stop working so hard to keep ourselves afloat. Squatted in front of the six-legged, soon-to-be mother, my dad and I had squinted our eyes at the symbol of toxic abundance side-by-side and my dad said solemnly, "How could death and life coexist so naturally under one roof?" All I can think about, recalling that memory, is how my dad's hand, hard-working and nimble as a sushi chef's hands should be, wrapped around my shoulder in tenderness, smelled like fish.

I rush out of the kitchen into the bathroom, hiding from the smell, and I take a shower. I scrub myself down hard with a coarse loofah lathered in citrus body wash. I don't want to take any chances of carrying any unpleasant smells with me back to work. I don't want to be another smelly Korean to these Americans. I want them to think I belong, that I deserve to be here, that I'm not just using their country to escape mine.

I have bought deodorant, a new body spray, some coconut scented lotion, and some mouthwash. I go into work day in and day out, doused in all the sweet smelling scents I can find. They make my migraine a regular occurrence at the restaurant now. I can sense my heartbeat pulsing on my temple, but at this point, I'd rather be tortured by my own body than the judging eyes and condescending tone of the customers. The more I try to smother any stench of kimchi, barbecue, cockroach pheromones, the more often I get a whiff of foulness invading my senses. Even with my armor of fragrances, I can't fight the smallness I feel amongst the pale American faces. Their masks begin to irritate me as I imagine they find it reassuring to have a filter between their inhalation and the polluted air of the restaurant. I start to feel furious. I hate them for making me feel so alone, so ostracized. I had thought looking different from the people here would be manageable. I could handle some of my white coworkers making ching-chong jokes and the customers making constant references to K-pop, but to feel the need to police something so uncontrollable as the smell of my body enrages me. I let my voice get flat when I ask the customers if they need anything else. When they ask for extra spicy bean-paste, I lie and say we've run out. When I see that a customer has left the garlic pickles completely untouched, I slam it into the trash, taking my anger out onto the food I had once found so tasty back home. Yet, I find a routine every morning to cover it—first shower, then scented lotion, then deodorant, a heavy helping of body spray, and lastly, 3 minutes of Listerine burning the insides of my cheeks.

One Friday evening, I walk to table 5 to replace their griddle and I see the customer catch my eye, lifting his mask over his nose within the same beat of the sentence he's uttering about how the Chinese have started the pandemic from eating a bat. I stop in my tracks, turn around, and clock out. I drive home and go straight to the shower. I will fit in. I will be accepted.

I pump the soap onto my loofah until it's dripping down the sides and I scratch myself with it until my skin feels raw. A new smell drifts up and makes my migraine disappear. It is the iron tang of my blood.

Author's Note

As I mentioned in my proposal, this story is based on my own experience of racialized smell, how different it made me feel, and Hsu's concepts of deodorization, atmo-orientalism, and transcorporeality. As I was writing, I was also thinking about Jose Muñoz's ideas on feeling brown as a very ostracizing and un-American sentiment. He likens feeling brown to feeling like a problem as he "considers the complexity of racial recognition, commonality, and belonging," (Muñoz 36). He claims that "feeling like a problem is about feeling apart, feeling separate," and argues that feeling like a problem and its commonality, may provide us with a better understanding of feeling brown" (Muñoz 35-38). Sora, my protagonist, certainly struggles with feeling brown or rather, feeling yellow. I tried to convey her pre-existing sentiments of racial recognition in her feeling like she could handle the K-pop references and the ching-chong jokes. In the beginning, she also feels that she must produce an American accent when speaking to the customers. She is not unaware of her racial differences and how it separates her from Americans. As the story progresses, the feeling of separation strengthens as she realizes smell becomes a form of racialization and the more she attempts to subdue her smell, the more she feels separated. This sense of isolation turns into anger and desperation, and eventually it becomes self-harm.

I also attempted to incorporate the visceral within my story. Sharon P. Holland, Marcia Ochoa, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins define the visceral as a sensuous reaction of experiences within a structure of power. I was inspired by their discussion of the somatic identity and how the visceral becomes a place that maps the "abject and erotic territory" (Holland et al. 394). Although I acknowledge that they mainly liken the visceral to a digestive tract, I thought I would interpret the overlying concept of blurred boundaries of embodied experience into Sora's migraine, which becomes an indicator for her changing relationship with smell. I tried to

incorporate how the migraine translates into bodily sensations, connecting the pain of smell and racialization to nausea, burning of the nose, and mouth watering. Personally, when I have a migraine, it over-stimulates my senses, making non-tangible encounters tangible, and I tried to consider this overload into what smell becomes for her. I was particularly thinking about the abject and erotic territory and its indistinction with Sora's short re-memory of seeing the pregnant cockroach with her dad. I recalled the definition of viscosity as the "index for the logics of desire, consumption, disgust, health, disease, belonging, and displacement..." (Holland et al. 395). Her dad comments on the coexistence of life and death, signifying the indistinction of disease and health, while they observe the red egg after coming back from her brother's near-death experience. I tried to illustrate this through Donghyun's unnamed condition and the noxious environment that their house preserves through the facilitation of cockroach breeding. In the same space the cockroaches thrive and multiply, one teenager slowly decays.

Writing this story made me realize many personal experiences of racialization and how this is manifested. I reflected on the microaggressions that have caused me to feel extremely yellow, such as the COVID pandemic's rising anti-Asian hate and my high school friends' comment about my onion, garlic, kimchi smell. I also reflected on the personal experience of a noxious environment in an apartment filled with cockroaches and how unsafe, uncomfortable, and self-conscious living in this environment made me feel. I remember wishing that a cockroach would not stick to my clothes or shoes and find its way to the restaurant I myself was working out, concerning myself with the pervasion of this environment to the very American places I needed to assimilate into. I did my best to weave all these elements together to create Sora's journey of feeling yellow, her awareness of the viscosity of smell, and atmo-orientalism.

Works Cited

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