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Shiwonhada

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I was born in a country where people fight the weather with the things on their plates. This ever-popular practice, especially in the summer, is best described as a battle of the senses; the bad feeling brought on by the oppressively humid weather on the peninsula is shed completely by purging the tongue with something equally unbearable. Something spicy enough to make the body burn up and bring out sweat from every pore of the body. There are tears, and calls for ice cold drinks to replenish all the water that has just been boiled out through the skin. The air is full of shouts of a phrase native to South Korea - *shiwonhada*, which simultaneously means “it’s cold” and “it’s refreshing.”

Though such a ritual unites South Koreans, who supposedly have an affinity for spicy food, people have their different reasons for eating and drinking to rid themselves of the unbearable heat of summertime. Mine called for things spicy enough to bring an end to a certain summer that superseded the change of the seasons, a place in time that grew in length and intensity as the memory of a painful coming-of-age persisted, ached to be remembered.

The summer before I entered middle school, I fell into a mirror. It only took a little bit of pubescent doubt to push me off of the edge. All children ask their parents unanswerable things about life, about death, the nature of existence, or something like that. But soon they let the question go, just as overwhelmed as their parents who futilely attempt to understand and explain. Even when the answers were all used up, I questioned and pushed from the pitch black center of my brain, trying to reach the light outside.

But if you look for too long at yourself in the mirror, parts of you collapse into themselves and turn into black holes, hurling into faraway space what yesterday seemed as substantial as the flesh you feel now on your face. As a shadow was cast in my mind, the rising

sun began its reign on the outside world; the summer months came, a heavy desert wind blowing across Southern California, smothering my nose and my mouth and making it impossible to breathe. I could have stripped down to the bone and it would still not have been enough to fight the fire of the sun, whose bloodshot eyes watched my every move, mocking mouth laughing tactlessly at my misfortune. I began to despise the inconsiderate sun.

In that summer, more than fear, there was numbness, an overwhelming feeling that time had stopped, a cessation of the needle of my internal clock and a subsequent loss of appetite for life. Summer remained in my head year-round for years, so it may seem like a far-fetched claim that food alone brought an end to the unbearable season and my dilemma. And perhaps it didn't, but people doubt the ability of food to rid a body of a specific sensation, to drive certain thoughts out of the mind. It may not have been an absolute cure, but it was certainly an agent of change in this raging battle of the senses; something that brought back enough vitality to give me the awareness and energy to face the sun, to fight back against situations that had seemed absolute from childhood throughout adolescence.

A food that is spicy enough can churn the insides of the stomach and release energy into the body. The first few minutes of chewing give rise to an intolerable sensation, but I learned not to ask for water and let my tongue burn itself from numbness into feeling, and the heat from the spices rise up into the top of my head, making even the back of my throat and my sinuses burn. When the meal is finished, every part of the flesh has a tingling sensation, pleasantly irritated by the spiciness, and suddenly there is an awareness of the extreme heat making its way through the body. The temperature gradually rises — then, it drops in an instant. Sweat rains down from the forehead, down the back, and all over the rest of the body, releasing the cleansing feeling of

being both cold and refreshed. Raising the temperature in the body to not only match, but surpass that of the environment sends the senses into a momentary madness, a journey away from the fatigue of body and soul.

It was even a remedy to my constant crying — not only does spiciness make the body burn up with heat, but their pungent flavor also causes fluids to run freely from the body. Perhaps it was because there had been so much weeping as the darkness had settled in; perhaps it was the dryness brought on by the ceaseless, sweeping winds, the huge warm walls of air moving down the coast that dried up my eyes. But even on the most miserable and driest of days, when the skin cracks at the slightest touch, a dish made from enough pepper paste will cause salivation, runny noses, and stinging tears in the eyes. My mother explained this was why she ate spicy foods to break through the most persistent of bad feelings — spiciness opens up the respiratory passageways, bringing bodily fluids and fresh air to the nose and the mouth. This is why South Korean people have a phrase dedicated to the sensation of eating spicy food, she said — it signifies a perceived decrease in temperature as well as a sensation best described in English as “refreshing.” No, she fussed, that isn’t quite right. The truth is that there is no particular word for it, because for any person in the world who craves spicy foods, it is a flavor of breakthrough that transcends the simple way that we think food can change the way we feel or improve the way we live.

Summers just like that one still come from time to time, as I continue to grow and discover difficult truths and situations too complex for my understanding. Tasting is part of being human, of experiencing and taking in the world around us; a sense just as present as the events that we see happening before our eyes, just as tangible and relevant as the sensation of

skin on our bodies as we run towards the future. In eating spicy things, I eat life, consume a sensation that I sometimes cannot find in myself, in summers full of growing pains.