



"Will make you reconsider your  
choices—and long to visit Korea!"

- Ovidia Yu, author of the History Tree Mystery series

# WHITE CLOUD MOUNTAIN

GRACE CHIA

“Many Singaporean writers go on residencies, but do not write about them; Grace Chia is a notable exception, providing a fictional account of a residency in South Korea. She writes with insight and empathy about the spiritual and physical journey of her protagonist, Audrey—from culture shock to cultural acceptance. An exceptionally good read.”

–Robert Yeo, poet and playwright

“Honest, detailed descriptions highlight more than physical contrasts between Audrey’s internal and external explorations at Toji Cultural Centre and sleepwalking through her life in Singapore. Following her through *White Cloud Mountain* will make you reconsider your choices—and long to visit Korea!”

–Ovidia Yu, author of the History Tree Mystery series

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GRACE CHIA

WHITE CLOUD  
MOUNTAIN



EPIGRAM

**Also by Grace Chia**

*The Arches of Gerard Street* (2021)

*Mother of All Questions* (2017)

*Every Moving Thing That Lives Shall Be Food* (2016)

*The Wanderlusts* (2016)

*The Cuckoo Conundrum* (2016)

*Cordelia* (2012)

*womango* (1998)

**As Editor**

*We R Family* (2016)

*For Iva & Konstantin*

“In any given moment we have two options: to step forward into growth or to step back into safety.”

–Abraham Maslow

“I’m not in this world to live up to your expectations and you’re not in this world to live up to mine.”

–Bruce Lee

# 1



The tyres on the silver Hyundai make loud, gravelly sounds against the rocks while dust clouds float up into sight; acres and acres of yellow flowers are in bloom everywhere I turn. I find myself in Wonju, a city in Gangwon province, an hour-and-a-half bus ride away from Seoul, where I will spend the next four weeks in a retreat in the mountains. I imagine myself a foreigner among the locals, tongue tied and awkward, an urbanite lost without city bearings, no digital connection, no human connection, no Starbucks within walking distance. I'm terrified I won't last a week, let alone a month.

The ride to the retreat itself is twenty minutes, but it feels even longer when two strangers are sitting beside each other with nothing in common, least of all language. Gayoon, the driver, is one of the retreat managers. She picked me up from the Wonju bus terminus after I transferred at Incheon International Airport. Dynamic

and brisk, Gayoon is middle-aged, with short curls and her ajumma get-up—grey blouse, floral trousers and white sneakers—but possessing the bullish, youthful energy of a twenty-year-old, while I, on the other hand, at thirty-five, am sluggish, jelly soft, useless.

Earlier, Gayoon had been kind enough to pick up my bulging luggage from the coach, drag it without effort with one hand, then swing it into the boot of her Hyundai with one swift movement—ignition still running, radio leaking a sappy, sorrowful Korean ballad about, oh, I don't know, somebody's long lost love—and then she was back in the driver's seat and off we went.

I don't know what to say to her. Gayoon has made no attempts to engage me in small talk either. Idle and feeling inept, I begin chewing on my lips, tugging and biting with my incisors till the thin membrane stretches and tightens. I keep at it—chew, tug, bite, chew, tug, bite—until I break through the surface. A drop of sweet blood pools. I lick it away before she notices. This calms me down. Yet again.

I retrieve my phone to message Mum to tell her I've arrived safely. Her reply arrives a minute later: *Make sure you follow people you know. Don't go off by yourself, especially not into the forest. Like last time. Your dad and I are busy this week with fundraising. Try to meet new friends, OK? Don't just keep to yourself!*

At one in the afternoon, Wonju is jam-packed with

cars. The human traffic along the streets reminds me of a weekday shopping scene in the Singapore heartlands—crowded, but not sardine packed. There are leggy office ladies chatting into phones and male corporate types sizing them up. When our car stops at a traffic light, one of the men turns in our direction; his eyes, narrowing to unreadable slits, fixate on mine. His complexion is vanilla fair, mine is dusky, tropical. His inquisitiveness about this foreigner, evidenced by my darker skin, makes me feel exposed. My fingers reach up towards my neck and fiddle with the topmost buttonhole on my collared shirt. The button is fastened; no vast swathe of naked skin asking to be groped. I avert my eyes, look in the other direction.

I don't like being stared at.

On one side of the road, I see mothers in baggy dresses fussing over toddlers, cheeks rotund as peaches. Cyclists in too-tight spandex and spherical helmets whiz past my window. A troop of schoolchildren is being shepherded by teachers as a group of rambunctious teens heads into their path then steps aside to let the children through. Very well-behaved, these Korean kids, I think, and smile.

To the left and right of us are buildings advertising products in Korean. The hangeul letters look like circles, lines and angles. I see a few Chinese characters here and there, but the entire text makes no sense to me. Opening my backpack, I peek at my red passport—it's there, good,



I haven't misplaced it. The lion and tiger on the Singapore crest roar at me with a golden glint: *We've got your back*. Just like that, I feel more secure, tuck the booklet away and zip the pocket closed.

The lights begin to change. Gayoon readies herself. She chooses this time to speak. Her English is halting but grammatical.

"How is the flight? First time in Korea?"

"Good," I say, smiling nervously. "Yes, first time."

Gayoon steps on the accelerator, revving the engine to angry grunts. She drives so fast I find myself clawing my nails into my seat as she swerves and changes lanes like a disgruntled cab driver with a death wish. I want to ask her to slow down, but I'm too scared to say anything. To be fair, she's a good driver, manoeuvring the car with expert ease—her steely eyes affixed only on the road and nothing else, her iron-clawed grip on the wheel, shoulders hunched and ready for action. Looking at her, you know not to mess around with her. This is no lady who will let any punk with four wheels fly past or cut in front of her.

In twenty minutes, up rocky terrain with dirt tracks flying with dust, past scenes of yellows and reds and pinks, all kinds of roadside flowers and native foliage I don't know the names of, Gayoon's car reaches Hoechon village where the retreat is located. I can see, flanked on either side, farms with crops and houses none of which are the same, each decorated to the owner's quirks and

likes. Wind vanes, wind chimes, scarecrows and potted plants hung or on the ground in various sizes and states of brokenness, overflowing with all kinds of plant breeds. Scattered throughout the idyllic scenery: lean cows and fat cats and scampering dogs. No tall concrete skyscraper anywhere, only field after field of corn and rice not yet ripe in a spectacular sea of green that never ends.

Just before she reaches the centre—which I can see from the road, an impressive modern building with a triangular roof, a couple of storeys high, perched on a hill—I notice by the roadside, five life-sized statues in white traditional Korean costumes with blue vests and red-and-yellow sashes. All the statues are holding some kind of a drum instrument, except the first, which is brandishing a gong.

I point to the statues. "What are those?"

Gayoon has seen these statues a thousand times coming up and down this road. She knows what I'm referring to without turning her head. "Farmer percussion band. They play drums to the villagers and the gods."

"For what?" I realise I probably sound dumb—this city slicker genuinely has no clue.

"For good harvest, for good fortune. To drive away bad spirits."

Soon, Gayoon turns the car into a dusty driveway. She switches off the ignition and the radio. "We are here," she says. The noise that I have become accustomed to

during the ride is now replaced by an overbearing silence. She hops out of the car before I do and opens the boot to retrieve my luggage. I follow suit.

“Welcome to Toji.” Gayoon gestures her arm at the view before us.

Ahead of me is the modern building where my retreat is. This appears to be at the foot of a mountain so large I cannot see where the peak rises and ends. It is late spring. All around are green foliage and brown bark; pine trees everywhere, surrounding the incline of the mountain like sentry. In the faraway distance on the opposite side, rivers interlock with rice fields.

Gayoon points to a two-storey building to the right of the driveway. It is shaded with trees basking in the hot, post-noon breeze, with bushes encircling its perimeter. The walls are painted tangerine, though age and rain have dulled its bright hue somewhat. “This is your guestroom,” she declares.

I turn to look in her direction.

“And this,” she points to the modern building looming in front of us, “is where the office and cafeteria is. Also games room and more guestrooms. Come, put down your things in your room first then I show you where cafeteria is so you can have lunch. The cook save you some food. See you in the main building in ten minutes.”

According to the literature Gayoon had sent me by email, Toji Cultural Centre was set up in 1999 by Pak

Kyong-ni, a famed Korean author whose epic novel, *Toji (Land)*, written over twenty-five years, had inspired the name of this place. These had been the grounds of her home until she passed away at eighty-one and where she had written many of her works. Pak had wanted to create a space that would nurture other writers, and in such a rustic environment, she wanted her guests to focus on writing, not worry about what to eat, so she personally prepared their meals.

I’m looking forward to my first lunch in Korea. The last meal I had was a microwaved airline pack on the flight, a dry, miserable-looking nasi lemak without the lemak. It was food that sustained me for three hours, but I would hardly call it a meal.

“Anything you need, just ask,” she adds. “There is no supermarket here, but we provide you with toilet paper and dry food for a week. After that, you buy your own. The other guests can help you get around.”

“Thank you,” I reply hesitantly, feeling out of my depth.

Is toilet paper going to be something I need to buy and ration? Dry food? So this is not a hotel with supplies, I get the drift, more like an Airbnb or a hostel. The fact that I have to seek help from the other guests to get my weekly supplies means I will have to make friends here to survive. I’m no longer in Singapore, where everything I need is within reach, whether downtown or in the heartlands,

a simple bus, cab or MRT ride away. Here, Toji is in the thick of the Korean countryside with arable farmland and forested trees endlessly stretching into oblivion, with one dirt track for a road for the entire Hoechon village. Only one way in and one way out.

I start to panic a little. I've forgotten the crippling fear of feeling and being lost. I've never travelled alone, always preferring to huddle in group tours with my parents or schoolmates. Coming here by myself was a big mistake. I don't know anyone, I don't know where I am, I can't speak the language, I don't even know how to call the police or the hospital if I'm in trouble. And God knows I've been in trouble before.



Starting out as a retreat for writers, Toji Cultural Centre now welcomes anyone involved in creative activities—artists, musicians, actors, dramatists and of course, writers. Many who come here apply to the centre directly through the art form they excel in; others are recommended through an outfit such as an arts council. I find myself here with the help of Laura, a friend and colleague, a bona fide novelist, whose glowing recommendation was the main reason I managed to secure a place at the retreat. Suffice to say I have a huge case of imposter syndrome coming here. Sure, I had

written stories and poems during my time in college, things Laura had read and liked, but none were ever published. Nor do I have any ambition to be a writer like she is, or dream of pursuing a creative life. Some people are born with a gift of the gab; some are good with their hands; others visualise. I am none of those. I am a routine-loving, process-driven, expert paper-pusher administrating the hell out of any convoluted Excel sheet.

A career civil servant, that's who I am, comfortable and complacent in my line of work, having settled into a sloth-like sedentary routine. And why not? The years of dedicated focus towards building my nest egg have set my retirement plan in stone. My CPF account is more than modest. Each of my long-term financial investments will pay off in ten, fifteen and twenty years' time. I'm medically insured down to my toes. Sweet, deluded Laura, to think she can make me change anything about my life. My perfectly structured, planned-out life. I only agreed to the retreat because I needed a *holiday*. I'll go, come back, and return gladly to the grind. It's *all* I know. It's *what* defines me.

"This place will help you find a deeper purpose in life," Laura had enthused, trying to drum up my interest.

"I have a purpose. I have my work," I told her.

"This place is healing. You'll see when you get there."

"I don't need healing." I turned to her, offended.

"Oh, but we *all* need some kind of healing. Especially

you,” she said, looking at me knowingly.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for starters, you don’t seem happy. Trust me, this place is bliss. You’ll feel it when you see it, when you feel its *aura*.”

Laura was misguided. I was neither unhappy nor happy. For the longest time, for as long as I could remember, I was simply unable to feel a thing.



I look at my watch. One-thirty. Gayoon wants me in the cafeteria pronto. I am still on Singapore time so I adjust my watch to two-thirty, then enter my guestroom. A self-contained studio of twenty square metres, it has a single bed, a wardrobe, a dressing cabinet, a low table for eating, a cushion for sitting on the floor, a standing fan, a desk with a metal chair, a work lamp and a mini-fridge. Behind the wall where the bed is, a toilet and shower are in the same space, no curtain, no separation, as utilitarian as its purpose.

Outside the guestroom, a balcony overlooking the trees. I open the glass door and the smells and sounds of nature spill right into the room. Moss and grass and chlorophyll. Distant chirping of invisible birds. What bliss. This will be my slice of luxury. A balmy afternoon, perfect location, no view of the road. No sound of traffic. No sound of

footsteps. No sound of cars honking or raging drivers, no sound of kids shouting or adults squabbling, no sound of construction, no sound of stray dogs and cats fighting, no sound of irksome human voices hammering away. Only leaves rustling and falling, sunrays piercing through gaps between twigs and branches, throwing silvered shards of light on the shadowed pine deck. I stretch my olive arms out with languid ease to absorb this moment, let nature come to me. It’s beautiful here, so quiet, so quaint.

I give myself three days before I lose my mind to boredom.

To my left, I see a partial view of a garden the size of a basketball court, rows and rows of edible plants basking in the afternoon heat. A cat with a half-white, half-black mottled face does a serpentine walk between the vegetables, its tail curled into a tight worm. Between random plants, the cat stops, nose to the ground, one paw scratching the surface of the soil to find unexpected treasures. My heart warms; I am reminded of Flash Gordon, who used to do the same, the best Jack Russell terrier a girl could get at the age of eighteen, Dad’s birthday gift to me. Flash died two years ago from old age; a part of me went along with him. His speed at catching things, his spiritedness, his constant curiosity, his habit of sniffing at odd objects to detect their worth, many of them worthless. He kept me on my toes, making this lump of a sloth take him on daily walks. Often we

would play catch with his mallard toy as well as little games that injected a boost of life in him—and in me. He kept this deadweight from being glued to the telly and watching one of many forgettable romantic dramas on Netflix.

Turning to the mottled garden cat, I make a loud sucking sound with my lips. Tsktsktsk. Chutchutchut. Tskchut tskchut. The cat doesn't flinch nor even look my way. This place is so idyllic even animals have retired their instincts. I may be a novelty but not even vaguely interesting for the cat to check out. Squeezing its fat bottom between two bushes, the cat flicks its tail and disappears from my sight. I realise I have to go meet Gayoon.

Exiting my room, I pause at the top steps of the balustrade. There, to the left of the garden is an assortment of enormous earthenware pots covered with lids, dark brown, waist-high, numbering at least fifty. Is this for fermentation? Is this where they store kimchi? I've never been this close to the ecosystem of my food source—from the start of its process to the end, where it is served, grown, harvested and fermented, right smack where I live. For someone inured to urban living—detached, disposable and doctored—this is absolutely thrilling. To be able to eat what I see, and see what I eat; nothing can be more wholesome than this.

Approaching the main building, I notice a small group

of people staring at me, their faces blank, unsmiling. The insecurity of feeling foreign returns. I make my best attempt at a smile.

"These are some of our guests," Gayoon says, introducing me to them. Two women and a man.

The man starts first. "Hi, I'm Hae-won. Welcome to Toji."

A tall, slender woman pale as the clouds goes next. "I'm Eun-hye."

Followed by a woman with long cascading curls, her dark eyes sparkling. "Min-soo."

There is an awkward silence after that. I think of something to say. "Are you all writers?"

Two of them nod. One of the women shakes her head.

"Musician." The man points to the woman with the long curls, who smiles.

Nobody probes me. I look at them and they look back.

"We see you at dinner," Hae-won says, ending the impasse. "We go for a walk now."

Gayoon shuffles me off to the cafeteria and explains the rules of the residence. Food is served twice a day, buffet-style. You take only what you need; avoid wastage. The vegetables are grown organically from the garden. Every week the meat served depends on availability—fish, chicken or beef. Any allergies do inform the cook. There's a laundry room beside the cafeteria. Upstairs are a library and seminar rooms. Downstairs is a games

room with table tennis and assorted sports equipment. But keep the noise down please, silence is sacred here to allow creativity to flourish.

Gayoon takes me to one of the tables in the cafeteria where metal bowls of food await me. A bowl of rice, mackerel and banchan, side dishes of pickled dark green leaves I assume are kale or spinach, kimchi and an egg roll. I uncover a bowl—small, warm pearls of Korean rice emanate a light whiff of fragrance into my nostrils. I close my eyes, wilting a little. *Abh...* The smell of rice is the smell of home.

Opening my eyes, I look down at the bowl, made of stainless steel, and cannot help but be amused. What was Dad's favourite expression again? Iron rice bowl. The one and only job he recommended for me when I graduated from college; and the same work he had done for over three decades. I know this Korean bowl isn't made of the same material, but I bet dropping it many times won't break it either. Smart Korean tableware. More practical than fragile porcelain.

For the longest time, my father has been telling me to never leave the iron rice bowl. To him, the stability of a job outweighs interest. And since I didn't have an overriding passion for any of my academic subjects, nor was I gifted in a certain skill, I picked my subjects from secondary school all the way through to college by consulting him and Mum. I guess that's why they often spoke of me with

much pride and affection to our relatives and their friends. *Audrey, such a good girl!* Those words were often said by my parents. *Yes, she's our good girl!* Three years of Red Cross in primary school encouraged by Mum, four years of National Police Cadet Corps in secondary school encouraged by Dad and two years of librarian duties in junior college, encouraged by a teacher. Every single extra-curricular activity that I'd devoted time and energy to was chosen by an adult who told me they knew what's best for me. I went along with their suggestions, not raising any objections—since I didn't really know what I wanted or didn't want, what I liked or didn't like, why not just follow what the adults say? This was how I lived my life. First, obedience, then subservience. Not exactly the most exciting evolution of a woman, but as a young girl, what the hell did I know? I am a good girl. I have to live up to everyone's expectations.

In this way, I've followed my father's footsteps as a civil servant ever since I graduated from one of the top local universities years ago. Sometimes, in quiet moments of desperation, during a particularly harrowing week at work being accused of ineptitude, I find a creeping thought entering my mind. Do I really want to end up like my father? A lifetime of servitude to a cubicle, punctuated by lunches and tea breaks and vacation leave calculated down to exacting squares on a desk calendar? Last year, Dad finally retired, but not before he received

yet another long service award. Again. (Every five- to ten-year milestone, an award gets dished out to officers for their unbroken streak of employment.) So here it was: another piece of paper patting my father on the back for having survived thirty-five years in the same job, a one-off lump-sum bonus and a photo op with some decorated civil service director on one of the highest echelons.

Is that all there is? Out with the old, in with the new? Next up, fresh blood for the anthill. That paper cert is now lost among the other documents he has accumulated over the years, from professional development courses he had attended to copious utility bills and reams of medical reports. Thirty-five years of grit collecting dust, signed by someone who once wielded power over his work—a boss or a boss' boss—but now just a name on a plaque on a door.

Each year, like my father, my work performance bonus is subject to the whims of multiple chains of bosses above me. Questions: *Does she inspire? Does she have capability? Does she create impact? Can she see the big picture? Does she achieve her KPIs? Does she perform above and beyond her current grade? Is she a team leader?* And, getting to the crux of the most important question of all, *Is she one of us?* A pseudo-mathematical rubric of measuring the merit of an employee based on how much other people notice what she's said and what she's done, rather than the invisible labour behind

the fanfare. Often, there is an unspoken secret among team members about who's the current management's favourite, who steals the thunder, makes the whole team toil for one person's credit. Typically, that person is the one who aces the best bonus. For it is easy politics, a no-brainer. The loudest wheel gets the grease.

I'm not loud enough. I don't get the grease.



The flight from Changi to Incheon, two transfers and settling down in a foreign place have been overwhelming, leaving a hole in my stomach that is starting to rumble. But I can't eat yet. I have to perform my ritual every time I eat in a place that is unfamiliar to me. I notice there's a tissue box on the dining table. I take a few tissues and carefully wipe clean the cutlery. Then I begin. I stuff food as fast as I can manage into my mouth, practically inhaling my lunch. Even though the dishes are no longer warm, which usually bothers me, I am able to taste the difference between the vegetables here and those back home. Maybe it is hunger or heightened anticipation or less chemical gunk on the organic vegetables but, somehow, everything I eat tastes sweeter. I hardly even notice the seaweed soup is cold as I shovel rice, meat, vegetables and broth into my mouth as if it were a dumpster. When finished, my mind blanks out. The carbs

take control of my limp body. I melt in the chair, still and contented, wondering where my parents are right now, what my colleagues at work are doing. I feel a tinge of nostalgia even though I have just arrived here. I shake my head, shake off my silly sentimentality. Everyone I know must be so jealous of me right now. I am in South Korea, land of K-pop, K-drama and all the kimchi in the world.

I return the dishes to the cafeteria tray and walk back to my building. My guestroom, on the second floor, shares with two other studios an open-air corridor and a wooden table with benches. Someone has placed a vase with a dried flower on the table. I sit down on a bench. The panoramic scenery in front of me, of an endless stretch of pine trees amidst farmland countryside in springtime, is hypnotic. Nature is a palette of brown bark, yellow and green foliage, and red, pink and orange blossoms, with the whitest clouds sailing on the bluest skies stretching from the horizon upwards.

I sit still until the shadows move. I yawn, feeling drowsy. My lungs, infused with fresh mountain air, start to detox. The cat I saw earlier saunters past, turns in my direction, fixes its gaze upon me, the new guest. I make a chutchut sound again. The cat meows back. We've made contact, finally. Time for a catnap.



I hadn't set an alarm—no loud sounds, I remember—and wake up fifteen minutes to six in the evening. Dinnertime. The nap is invigorating, though I awake to a cramped neck and back. The mattress I'm sleeping on has no spring, no bouncy foam, so all the tension from my tired body has not eased. My body feels more in pain than before the nap.

The curtains are partially open; the twilight casts shadows of purple and blue inside my room. Birds squabbling can be heard. I sit up in bed, head whirling from too much sleep. One bird lands on the balcony railing, checking out the latest house guest. It cackles at me.

"Hello," I say to the bird, which flies away at the sound of my voice.

Into the bathroom I go, throwing water on my face to wake myself up. I'm not hungry but I can't miss dinnertime or else there will be no food for the rest of the night. I check my reflection in the mirror. My eye bags are visible from the long journey—cab ride from home, a fourteen-hour flight with a transfer, a coach ride to Wonju and a car ride to Toji. In total, seventeen hours. The water droplets on my face drip down to my buttoned-up white shirt, soaking its collar. Sticky and sweaty from the trip, I unbutton the top button. The shirt opens up slightly, shy and hungry for air. My thin eyebrows are feathery and unkempt. I must have mashed my face on the pillow



while sleeping earlier. My dry lips have shrivelled and are now prune-like, cracked in corners. I look flattened, dry and colourless, like a ghost.

I make myself comfortable in my room by unpacking my luggage: laptop goes on the study desk, my clothes into the cupboard—tops and bottoms to the right of the shelves, underwear and socks to the left. Toiletries are tucked away in the bathroom cabinet, with the most important items on the right and the least important on the left: face wash, toner, moisturiser and whatnot, then nail clippers and Q-tips. The Muji bedroom slippers brought from home go on the floor at the right side of the bed, same place as usual. All so I can replicate my home away from home for this creature of habit.

Outside, I find that the evening temperature has dropped from cool to cold. I come back in, grab a thick cardigan, change my cotton pants to jeans, put socks on before my shoes then exit again. I quicken my footsteps, having dilly-dallied long enough.

The three Koreans I met earlier are seated at one long dining table. There are other guests I'm seeing for the first time. Gayoon is there too, at a separate table, with what I assume are the other managers or administrators in pressed shirts and office wear, and an elderly man in dirty pants and rubbery black boots who is possibly the caretaker. Everyone in the cafeteria turns to look at me. I smile and say hi. They nod, resume eating and chatting.

This feels like my first day of school.

I take what I need from the buffet and sit next to Hae-won. He acknowledges me with a nod; I nod back. No one at the table says a word. I take tissues from the box on the table and clean my cutlery. I can feel eyes watching me as I'm doing this so I lower my head and start to eat, hoping they will stop ogling.

Hae-won turns to me. "Can you take spicy food?"

"I do."

"Ah, good. You will enjoy Korean food then."

He looks at the mound of kimchi I have taken from the buffet table.

"You know this kimchi is made at Toji?"

"Is that what's inside the big pots in the garden?"

"Yes. Also doenjang, or soybean paste, and different chilli pastes. The big pots are called onggi."

At one point, there is a particularly long piece of kimchi cabbage I have trouble separating with my teeth. I tug and chew forcefully with my molars, attacking the stubborn vegetable that refuses to bend to my will, in full view of the others. I am cognisant of my barbarism among the genteel natives. I tug harder at the cabbage. Finally, giving up on trying to take it apart, I gulp the entire leaf down. The vegetable moves down my oesophagus, grudgingly. I cough from the effort.

Hae-won has been observing me all this time. I feel embarrassed. My eating etiquette must be poor in

comparison to the Koreans'. He leans forward, mutters, "Too much kimchi is not good for your stomach."

I turn to him. "I thought it's full of probiotics?"

"Yes, but too much of anything is not good. Kimchi is a fermented food, and is preserved by salting. If you eat too much, it will cause gastric problems. Do you know South Korea has the highest number of stomach cancer in the world?"

"From eating kimchi?"

"From eating fermented and preserved food. Which a lot of Korean food is. Also from barbecued meat when grilled until black. But mostly from alcohol. Koreans drink too much alcohol. It's a real problem in this country."

"I'm not much of a drinker," I tell him, "so I won't have that problem."

Hae-won resumes his meal while conversing with the others in Korean at the table. To my untrained ear, their tone alternates between utmost solemnity and light frivolity, the pitch of their voices seesawing high and low. Someone seems to have made a joke and everyone laughs. Someone brings up a grave topic and everyone murmurs in low baritones. I concentrate on my meal, not understanding a word. I understand food. Food will comfort this stranger for now.

On the table, I notice shared bowls of raw leafy vegetables which the Koreans are taking from in turn. I

assume it's salad, but there is no sauce or vinaigrette in sight. I'm not sure what to do with it.

Hae-won notices my confusion. "This is perilla leaves. You eat it like this."

He picks a leaf, takes a piece of meat from his plate with his chopsticks and places it in the leaf, wraps the bundle up and stuffs it into his mouth in one go. He chews and swallows. "Try it."

I follow suit, putting more rice and meat than he did into one tiny leaf, making my own version of a rice dumpling bazhang. The bundle becomes a lumpy ball. I can't see how the whole thing will fit in my mouth so I bite it in half. The tight bundle bursts open, projecting loose contents onto my plate and the table. Both my hands are dripping with rice and sauce running down to my elbow. Aghast, I grab as many tissues as I can and clean my arms and the table. Hae-won pretends not to see it, which only makes me feel worse.

"Here, try this." Hae-won pushes towards me a small condiment dish with chilli paste. "This is ssamjang, a dipping sauce to go with ssam, the salad wraps. Put a little with the meat and rice. Don't use too much, it's spicy. But it tastes good."

"This is not gochujang?" I only know this chilli paste, which looks similar, having seen it in Korean recipes.

"Gochujang is thicker than ssamjang, and used mostly for cooking and marinade—"

“And bibimbap,” I interject, quick to show off the little I know.

“Yes, and bibimbap. Ssamjang is mixed with gochujang, doenjang and sesame oil, sesame seeds and garlic. Think of gochujang as the base. The most important ingredient for both is gochugaru, or Korean dried chilli flakes. In fact, the gochu, or chilli peppers, are grown here at Toji. Everything you eat here is from our garden.”

I follow his instructions, layer some sauce between the leaves. He is right. It is spicy and tastes divine. The combination of the fresh leaves and the sweet saltiness of ssamjang awakens my tongue in a way similar yet different from sambal belacan. My brain is confused and pleased and alert. Something new to stimulate my palate. I empty my metallic bowl of rice and quickly finish the rest of my main dish, a Korean-style stir fried chicken with a layer of spicy gravy, likely from one of the sauces he had mentioned.

“Mmm...” I mumble. “Delicious.” I make another wrap, this time shoving the entire bundle in my wide-open mouth. It is inelegant, but at least I’m not making a mess. I make a mental note to wrap it smaller next time.

To show my appreciation of the food I’m eating, I make a thumbs-up to everyone at the table. Big smiles and nodding all around; and growing murmurs of what I assume is approval. If this is a cultural assimilation test, I think I just aced it. Korea’s staple dish, and this new

visitor is swallowing it by the tonne. I am a quick convert. There’s something compelling about the way their pickle is made, teasing out the rich and complex sweet-sour, hot and salty flavours. It’s seriously addictive. Words fail to describe it. Perhaps it’s all down to a special technique or indigenous ingredient, or the salt-of-the-earth organic produce made right here at Toji. Flavoured by mountain magic.

Eun-hye, the woman with the long silky black hair, turns to me. “You eat kimchi *a lot*,” she says matter-of-factly.

I nod. “I’m from Singapore. We eat a lot of spicy food there.”

“Then you will like Korea.”

“After dinner,” Hae-won turns to me and says, “do you want to join us for a walk?”

“Where do you go for the walk?”

“Up the mountain. Walking after lunch or dinner is good for digestion.”

“Sure, I’ll come along,” I reply, grateful to be included.

Dinner ends when the last of the guests clears their dishes. The rest of them have gathered outside the cafeteria underneath a sprawling tree; a couple are using tree stumps as stools. The air is so clean and crisp it wakes me from my post-dinner inertia. A few of the guests are drinking coffee and gathered in circles, deep in discussion. I can’t understand a word and don’t know

who to keep company with. When someone lights up a cigarette and its acrid smell snakes in my direction, I move to an isolated spot. I find Eun-hye here, looking meditative, sipping on a hot drink from a ceramic cup which she holds with her palms.

“You want corn tea? You can get it there.” She gestures to the cafeteria where, from where I stand, I can see a hot water dispenser with sachets of tea and coffee.

“Maybe later,” I tell her. She lifts her cup close to me, as if wanting me to sniff it, which I do. There is a faint scent of roasted corn and something sweet. “Hmm...” I say by way of a response.

Up close, I am struck by a certain radiance emanating from Eun-hye’s face. She possesses a certain *je ne sais quoi* that would have captivated Korean emperors of the past; her features are elegant and vulnerable, startling enough to be the muse of painters. By modern standards, her beauty is unconventional. Her single eyelids are untouched by the knife, as the intensity of her gaze is undiminished by her sleek almond eyes. Her nose is a petite button, while her blushing cheeks hardly protrude. Her butterfly lips are lightly rouged, though I can’t tell if they are rosy naturally or made to appear so with make-up. Her undrawn eyebrows are two bushy tufts framing her delicate, oval face. And her complexion is like silken tofu. She is almost 1.8 metres tall wearing flat shoes, with hair so long it swishes past her waist. Her slender arms

and legs are elongated by the long sleeves and trousers she wears.

“You from Singapore?” asks Eun-hye, sipping at her tea.

“Yes. You’ve been there before?” I turn to her expectantly.

“No...no...” She shakes her head.

“You want to visit Singapore?”

“No...no...”

“Oh,” I say. This conversation isn’t going in the direction I am expecting.

“It is...”—she furrows her brows, thinking hard for a description—“...too clean.”

Hae-won suddenly stands up. “Let’s go,” he announces and everybody starts to move. A few go separate ways. The rest tag along with us. I can’t remember the names of everyone who were introduced to me earlier—I note to myself to make a bigger effort.

We walk on the rocky dirt tracks in front of the main building where cars enter and exit out of our premises. Each time someone’s shoe hits the ground, a dust cloud springs forth. Turning left, the path we are on meets the main road. We pass fenced houses overflowing with pink and orange rose bushes and a never-ending stretch of wild yellow flowers in bloom on the open fields.

“What’s the name of these flowers?” I ask Hae-won.

“Canola flowers.”

I do a double take. “As in canola oil?”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Grace Chia is the author of two novels: *The Arches of Gerrard Street* (2021) and *The Wanderlusts* (2016); three poetry collections: *womango* (1998), *Cordelia* (2012, finalist for the 2014 Singapore Literature Prize for Poetry) and *Mother of All Questions* (2017); a short story collection: *Every Moving Thing That Lives Shall Be Food* (2016); a chapbook: *The Cuckoo Conundrum* (2016); and two non-fiction titles. She is also the editor of the prose anthology *We R Family* (2016). The inaugural NAC-NTU Writer-in-Residence for 2011–12, she has judged regional and national poetry competitions and taught creative writing at Nanyang Technological University and DigiPen-Singapore Institute of Technology. *White Cloud Mountain* is her third novel.

“An exceptionally good read.”

-Robert Yeo, poet and playwright

All her life, Audrey has done what is expected of her, following her father's footsteps into the civil service, the “iron rice bowl” of Singapore. When a chance opportunity arises to attend a writing retreat in the Wonju mountains of South Korea, she grabs it, not knowing what to expect. Unexplainable things soon start happening to her, while a long-buried memory surfaces, threatening to unravel her calm and carefully-orchestrated world.

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