

*A
dirty
plate
is not
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Hanul Bahm

Things get messy, and things go to entropy. Not just physical matter, but affairs in our lives. You have spring and summer, and then autumn is when everything that has had its function browns and withers. The wind blows all the leaves away down the street, and they disappear somewhere into nature. Winter comes and gives a big blanket of snow. Snow has this quality where it can absorb all types of energy. It can absorb sound, not just external sound, but the internal radio we have going in our heads all the time. If I walk through falling snow, my mind goes completely quiet. In that vastness, I come full circle and something gets restored. Some type of pure state, some origin state. And then it starts all over again. Until you get things back to that clean slate of winter, the beauty and renewal that is spring can't happen. I guess for me, cleaning is like winter.

Koreans have a beautiful euphemism for death. In the U.S., we say someone "passes away." In Korea they say "doragatda," which means "to return." My grandpa was the first elder to pass away when I was a child. I pointed to a picture of him and asked my dad, "Where is he? What happened to him?" My dad said, "He returned." I visualized him walking up a hill, making a u-turn, and walking back down. That was always my image of what death was. He returns. It's this thing that needs to happen in the house, as well. When we clean, we return things to a state of beginning.

As a child, I visited my eighty-year-old grandmother in Korea and slept in the same room with her. In the morning I observed her daily ritual. First, she wiped the windowsill clean of any dust that had blown in overnight. She folded up the thick mats and blankets that we slept on, and put those in the closet. Then she swept the floor and wiped it clean with a wet rag, picking up any hairs that had fallen onto the floor. Finally, she picked up a little hand-mirror and powdered her face. She did all of this before leaving her bedroom in the morning. She had this meticulous ritual in order to face the day. Things had to be cleaned and made presentable. Perhaps the ritual was a positive side-effect of a negative inherited sexism that she had to endure. I don't know. In her times, they didn't have a concept of "sexism." You are ingrained in a culture with all its big or petty injustices. You learn to cope with it.

I was always so moved by her morning ritual. She wasn't in the best of health at that time. She didn't have to do all of that. She could have let her children or grandchildren clean up after her, but she didn't. She wanted to be self-sufficient and not leave any trace of messiness that other people would regard as a burden. I admired how strong-willed she was. I thought she was like a warrior preparing for her day.

I grew up in a house with a dad, a mom, an older brother, and me. I never saw my brother doing the laundry, or doing the dishes, or folding. As soon as I was old enough to take directions decently well, at about age eleven, my mother had me start doing the dishes after dinner. She also had me take the wet laundry and flap it in the air to get rid of excess moisture, and then hang it on the clothesline. I folded the family's laundry and their underwear. I did not like the differential treatment that happened as a result of gender, but I was never angry about it, because I liked the rhythm of the work and looked forward to doing it.

I'm sure there are households where men do a lot of that work. I didn't grow up in a household like that. A couple of times, if we had guests coming over on the weekends, my dad would help out by picking up the groceries or vacuuming the floor, instead of decompressing from an obviously really stressful job. My dad worked for Samsung for a long time. My mom had a nickname for him for just those moments: "Ebbun Sohn," which means "Pretty Hands." I thought that was the perfect way of saying it. A helpful hand is a pretty hand, so she'd call him "Pretty Hands" when he vacuumed, which wasn't often. That was the only time he would be called "Pretty Hands," or get any type of endearing nickname, for that matter.

I think it's kind of a blessing in disguise that, on top of everything else, women have this extra parcel of work that, for whatever reason, traditionally we have had to inherit. Cleaning and cooking is for the benefit of other people. It's very selfless work. Consistently doing that level of selfless work makes you stronger over time. I don't think it makes you weaker. It also teaches you how to take care of yourself really well, and not just give all your energies toward the benefit and maintenance of other people. I think women learn that lesson of balance in life, implicitly, by doing house chores. You have to manage your time.

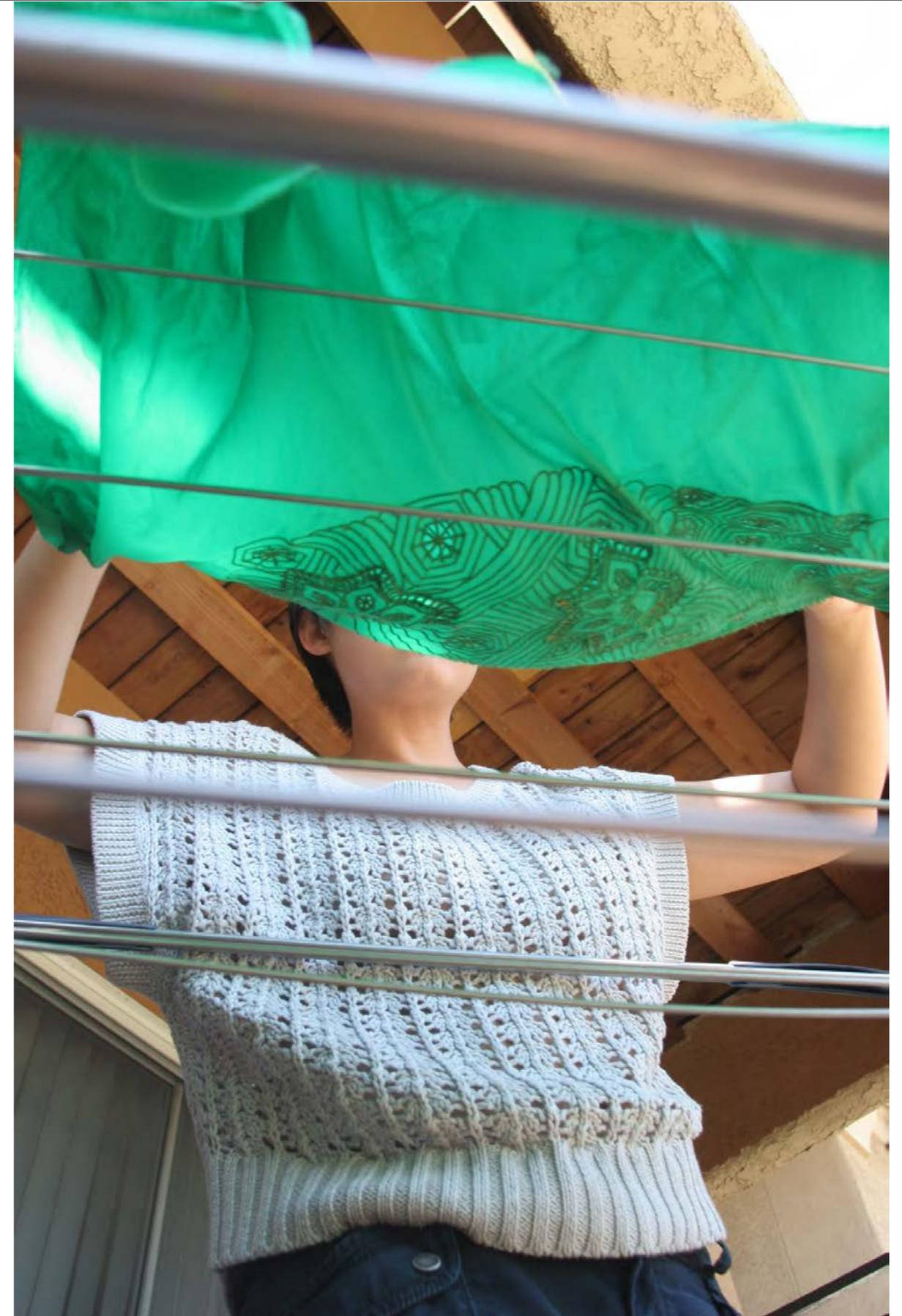


You know that book by Kobo Abe, *Woman in the Dunes*? It's also a great film. *Woman in the Dunes* is about a man trying to dig himself out of a sand dune. Every day the wind blows in more sand, and he's not making any real progress, because it's this never-ending cycle of tending to things. It's kind of an existential metaphor. A lot of life and survival is a never-ending cycle. You have to tend to yourself and whoever is in your care and custody. We all have to eat. We all have to go to work. There are fun things, but a lot of our psychic and mental energies have to go into maintenance, just so we can live. Since that's an inevitable fact of living, I think it makes more sense to try to make peace with it than to resent it. If we feel inclined, perhaps we can even regard it with a little bit of affection and artistry.

You can argue that it's terrible that we're these beasts that continually litter and have to clean up after ourselves. But that rhythm is what creates the fabric of our life. My best memories of my grandmothers, my aunts, and my mother are of watching them do housework. I remember seeing my mom and grandmas hunched over a big circular basin full of laundry, with a washboard dipped in, beating the dirt out. They would take a big saucepan and boil undergarments to disinfect them, so that they were really, really clean—bright white clean. They took managing the household to an art form.

It's really beautiful to observe people cleaning. It makes them look holy to me. There's something about their gesture that is really dignified. They're dealing with other people's laundry and leftover plates, and they're making them whole and useful again. A dirty plate is not useful.

I'll share one of my earliest memories of why I associate cleaning as a good thing. I was maybe three years old, living in a tiny apartment with my family, on the outskirts of Seoul. It was spring or summer, a hot day. My mom was mending the white linen that goes on the underside of a blanket. That white linen is the part that makes contact with us when we're sleeping, so it absorbs sweat. Every now and then, you have to unstitch that underside, wash it clean, iron it, and then stitch it back onto the blanket. I remember watching her stitch that sheet onto the blanket. She had an old, worn out, black thimble that was really cracked, with red stitching on it. I'm sure she had inherited it from somebody. The blanket was very thick, about six inches thick. It took up the whole floor of our tiny little bedroom. The top part of the blanket was a beautiful blue silk, with stitched-in roses. The silk felt cooling on the skin, especially on a hot day, without air-conditioning. I rolled around and swam on that silk, while she was working on the borders of the blanket. I had one relationship to it, while she was having a different relationship to it, simultaneously. I knew that this was something that my mother had to do, but she didn't seem like she minded. I think she enjoyed it. She saw it as a form of downtime. I think she saw it as something kind of meditative, that stitching and washing, and going through all of that process just for something so basic as a blanket.





They help you eat.

They help you be dressed.

They care for you.

Why not care for them back?

Koreans have a word called “sahllim.” I’m not sure what the equivalent word would be in English, but it refers to how well you manage and upkeep your home environment—the home’s economy, aesthetics, and functionality. It encompasses everything—not just cleaning, but how you manage your food, and everything else in the home. Korean culture is really old; it’s five thousand years old. They have four distinct seasons, and it’s mountainous, without a lot of natural resources, so people have had to live by their wits and their resourcefulness. You’re prized for that. For women—I wish I could say for men as well, but traditionally for women—part of your worth or your merit was how well you managed your household. It’s a big thing. As more generations go by in Korea, and certainly in the U.S., life becomes more automated and hypermodern. You don’t have as much time to devote to household work, and something like “sahllim” takes on smaller significance. But when women stayed home more and had more children, they would take pride in how elegantly, economically, and efficiently they could pull off all the demands made of them as a householder.

I think I inherited some of that. I’m a very watered-down version of it. I have aunts in Korea who have gardens on their verandas in big, concrete, Le Corbusier style apartment buildings. They make special shades out of milk cartons, to protect smaller plants from the cold night air. Every morning before sunrise, they get up and unshade all their plants. It’s really insane, the level of care they will put into things. Insane by our standards. I think when you don’t have a lot of leisure or diversion, or other ways to devote your time, you try to think of how you can care for your sphere. All these things—clothing and plates and spoons—are assets in your life. They help you eat. They help you be dressed. They care for you. Why not care for them back?