I Wrote a Play About Me, My Mom, and Guy Fieri at the Korean American Dinner Table
By Gavin D. Pak

“I’m writing a play,” I drunkenly shouted over the glitter, glam, and glib of a particularly bougie college party. I hardly knew the person I was talking to. I hardly knew what my play would be about until that instant. “It’s probably Korean,” I started. “...And gay, and there’s definitely food in it.” Entirely new to the practice of playwriting, I at least was savvy enough to “write what I know.”

During my last two hellish years of high school, it was just me and my mom. My older brother Colin was already away at college, and my dad worked such long hours that the most dependable time to see him became when college applications kept me awake until he’d come home at 4am. An abusive long-distance relationship, waning friendships, maelstrom bouts with my concerned but tired parents, and mountains—truly mountains on avalanching mountains—of schoolwork and college apps brewed me into an unstable fireball of emotions, already struggling to come into my own without also reconciling the loneliness of my being Korean American and questioning my sexuality. I came to understand that the only times I could truly allow myself to be at rest and feel like me were during sleep or mealtime.

As a playwright in the present day, I kick myself for not realizing earlier that the sanctity of mealtime was a prevailing theme through my life. “Never fight over food. We’ll buy you more,” my mother would say to me and my brother when we’d brawl over goodies in our childhood. “You don’t have to thank me for dinner,” my dad would say even during the worst of the economic depression, when I knew every morsel I ate was a dollar my parents would’ve selflessly spent on my education anyways. It’s very Korean, woven into the fibers of our being, rooted in the same earth that creates grandmas who overfeed their grandchildren. So when I, decaying in the study room, would hear the heavy bubbling of boiling, viscous broth and the unmistakable barking of Guy Fieri, I knew it was time to slough my burdens, lower my hackles, and join my mom at the dinner table.

“That’s where my play begins” I spontaneously decided, booze fueling my creativity and dousing my inhibitions more than any lucid pouring over a laptop had by then. At a dinner table, a mom and her son sit opposite each other. On one side of the table sits a closeted American-born kid, wishing his Korean immigrant mother could understand him. Across sits a mother wishing the exact same thing. In between them, budae jjigae boils as they tepidly journey into this dreaded, dangerous conversation they know they must have. “It’s a universal story, but I want the audience to know they’re in an Asian place.” As the short play I was devising somehow came together, my alcohol infused mind naturally inclined towards the delicious, the nostalgic, and the emotional. I painted a picture of my home, four years prior.

Unceremoniously sitting atop the table is a cavernous electric hot pot. A clunky python of a wire ungraciously cascades over the table and extension-cords into the wall while cumulus clouds of pungent steam billow into the dining room. Newspaper protects the table from the intimidating behemoth it grounds. Peer into the maw, and you’ll see a broth as red, thick, and hot as molten lava, enoki mushrooms and chewy dduk rice cakes my mom knew I’d kill for, instant ramen—Shin Ramen if you’re smart—thickening in a pasty gochujang, beef stock broth, kimchi to remind you this is a Korean dish, and curiously hot dog sausage and Spam to make you wonder if it is. Mom would set up the iPad at the end of the table, playing on-demand Food Network to score the momentous meal we’d undertake together.

Budae jjigae, roughly translated into army base stew, was born out of necessity. Thrust into unfathomable poverty by the harrowing Korean War, starving Koreans rummaged through the garbage of US army bases to find surpluses of preservative-heavy foods. Kraft singles, Vienna sausage, Spam,

beans, reportedly even cigarette butts shamefully combined with Korean cooking to feed a dying nation before becoming a comfort food staple when those who first survived off it nostalgically fed it to their children. My mom struggled, juggling between working to make ends meet, taking care of me, and suddenly having to become a cook when affording the help of our housekeeper became impossible. Budae jjigae was not a staple of my childhood. It arrived in my house out of necessity.

It was an instant neutralizer in strenuous times. If you didn't eat immediately, the soup would cool into something resembling a paste thanks to all the gochujang, and the cheap 99 cent ramen would reduce to mush. Plus, who could be upset while Guy Fieri presided over your meal, setting a standard for your own imminent slobbering over indulgent junk food? But most of all, Mom knew it was my favorite. It made us feel rich, its decadence filling body and soul alike when both of us would've liked nothing more than to give up, at least for a little. It was one of the few things that made me feel connected with my mom and my heritage. It ineffably melted away the loneliness I felt being stranded as a queer Korean American while a torrid high school experience tried to tear me and my precious relationship with my parents apart. Metaphorically cheesy though it may be, I'd look at budae jjigae and see something odd, born of two different worlds never meant to interact in that way. Out of tragedy arose a dish that inspired comfort and a sense of home, things I desperately pined for. I'd look across the table and see a mom who I loved so much, who loved me even more, but felt so distant from in the midst of chaotic strife. Yet we'd both reach into the same hot pot and eat of the same chaos.

Not yet knowing how the pieces fit, or why they were even in the same box, I instinctively cobbled a puzzle together. "The son, he's Korean, is gay and in the closet. He wants to come out, but there's all this food! He doesn't wanna ruin dinner!" In my play, budae jjigae would be the bandage to salve the wounds when Mom would broach a difficult subject. It'd be an excuse to not respond to a damning question. It would be the discussion point to return to when things got too real. Troughs of food hid a more complicated reality wherein the circumstances queer children of color find themselves in these days are scarier and more confounding than they've ever been before, and the pressures and hardships of that truth can sometimes alienate them even further from even their loved ones. With enough bites out of the way, the mother and son in the play have nowhere else to stow their rampant emotions as they each circle closer to the truth of the son's being gay. In my life, budae jjigae delayed conversations about noticing I was being ostracized by friends due to my growing moodiness I'd later call depression, lectures on the need to academically succeed in order to secure direly needed scholarships and financial aid, and explosive arguments about how I was wasting time on my abusive partner who would've ended my life instead of finalizing college applications that could begin my life. Those would happen eventually though, once *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* had ended. We'd leave the dinner table, crying and as red in the face as the broth. We'd return the next day, smiling but tireder. My mom and I, depending on each other for company, didn't want this daily ritual to end just as much as we wished it would. "Maybe in the end he comes out. And maybe in the end Mom says saranghae." I love you.

Life didn't wrap a nice ribbon on things like a short play could, because one day I somehow found myself leaving home for school. It, as the saying goes, got better. Slowly. Over four years, college afforded me a lot: I escaped the abusive situation that influenced the person I became throughout high school; I no longer felt bound by 18 years of baggage to keep myself in the closet; distance between my parents and I made the heart grow fonder. What college dining halls did not offer me was any satisfaction for my daily cravings of Korean food.

In college, I came out to my parents twice: once as bisexual, and once before as a theater major. They took the latter harder; it must've prepared them for the former. As a requirement for graduating with a bachelors in Theater and Performance Studies, I was asked to devise an original piece that summarized

the entirety of my work in college. While I'd be hard-pressed to recount to you the finer points of Brecht or, for some reason, de Tocqueville, I could easily communicate the work I did to grow into the precarious but self-assured person I became since high school. So, as I drunkenly professed at a glamour themed college party one night, I'd write a play. It'd be Korean. It'd be gay. And there would certainly be food in it.

Riding the wave of creative genius last night's alcohol afforded me, I called my mom the next day. "Mom, what would you google if you were looking for the big table grill we'd make jjigae in?" This question could've been a text, but... "Ooh, what a treat, you calling Mom!" she'd sassily interject, not answering the question at all. I wanted to hear her voice, and let her know I'd been thinking about her and the lonely meals that blurred nights of my traumatizing high school experience together into a nostalgically digestible, orange haze—and that I wanted to write a play about it in which I'd be serving the audience budae jjigae. Her voice lit up. "Joong Boo market is too far from you, but the home good section might have one. Just look on Amazon" she'd tell me, she and I then oblivious to the corruption of Big Bezos and too Korean to look the other way from free 2-day shipping. Amazon it was. After a reliable two days, I unboxed my own hot pot, wiped away tears, and broke out the instant ramen.

What would happen if the typically white "living room tragedy" genre of plays ever thought to prescribe a homemade Korean meal for the fraught relationships they dramatized? I'd find out on the night of my performance. At home and behind the script, I prayed that a divide as expansive as the Pacific Ocean could be remedied with a meal. While telling a universal story about the relationship between a mother and her closeted son, I marked the space of my play with the specificity that emotionally resonated with my highschool self's yellow shade of loneliness. Food, cooked in real time onstage, graced the theater with its aroma and made its ways to audience members' mouths before the show. Asian actors earnestly spoke their stories through my words. And sure enough, an electric hot pot sat between the two of them to egg them on. My short play made the impact I had hoped. I looked into the audience and saw young queer students, many of them people of color, crying and applauding. My gay, Chinese American friend would text me later that night, thanking me for sharing his—our story. The short play would go on to win a departmental award and be read at a professional Chicago theater.

In high school, scared, insecure of my queerness and Koreanness, I would never have guessed budae jjigae would make a playwright of me. Today, I continue to write as an out and proud Korean American artist. I look back on my high school trauma and smile at how sincerely the cliché of telling your younger self "things will get better" resonates for me—it's truly a blessing. When I miss home, I call my parents and joke with them like I never thought would be possible then. They tell me how proud they are of me. I tell them how thankful I am to have them in my life. Regularly, when I'm feeling nostalgic, I produce the hot pot I bought for my play and propose to my partner we make some budae jjigae. We assume our battle stations, my partner grilling up a storm of garlic, Spam, kimchi, onions, eggplant, and zucchini in sesame oil while I brew home made beef bone broth with copious gochujang, a careful splash of soy sauce, and shameless scoops of MSG and spices to boil our rice cakes and mushrooms in. We combine our wares in the hot pot, pouring glug after artery clogging glug of broth over eagerly awaiting Shin Ramen. We garnish it with green onions to feign healthiness, and turn on some food show. We make a beautifully gay evening of it.

So often, being Asian American can feel like a void, too American to feel like a minority, and too Korean to feel like an American. At my lowest points, this feeling resounds as strongly as it constantly did through high school. But now, I have something I can do about it. Witnessing a marked absence in the proper representation of Asian American stories, I feel a responsibility to insert my voice in the hopes of being a lighthouse for other adrift Asian Americans. Like a dish shamefully born out of the

trash bins of American army bases, I became a playwright out of necessity in the hopes that someday, we can just skip the “shame” part. Skip the hardships, the hiding, the misunderstandings, the damned loneliness, and cut right to the being seen. I deserved that as much as any other lost Asian American kid out there does, as much as any of us deserves the healing that only happens when worlds or people meet and evolve into something greater than their own troubled histories. I propose that work is best done over a boiling pot of budae jjigae.