

MOTHERS

(On stage: Daughter-in-law, Mother-in-law #1, Mother-in-law #2)

Daughter-In-Law: I was living with my husband and mother-in-law when our baby girl Hanbi was born. I met my husband in England. We were there studying to get our degrees, mine in ceramics, his in business. I was on a full scholarship. I come from a poor family and we could never afford university.

Our courtship was short. He swore that he loved me, but I think he was just lonely and missed home. I never felt that way about him, though I liked him a lot. When I got pregnant, I had to come back to Seoul to live with his mother. I could not refuse. She's rich, and she made the decisions in our family because she had money and we both depended on her.

Mother-In-Law #1: But why would she refuse? My mother and father had good judgment because they arranged a good marriage. I never worried about a thing, after I got married. And now she wouldn't have to worry either. She was lucky to be with us.

Daughter-In-Law: When my husband completed his degree, he moved back to Seoul and started working.

Mother-In-Law #1: And then everything fell apart.

Daughter-In-Law: Two months after Hanbi's birth, my husband had an announcement. He had fallen in love with his boss and they were going to get married.

Mother-In-Law #1: Can you believe it? What did she do? How could she not keep him? I told him not to do it. They had been married less than a year!

Daughter-In-Law: Mother-in-law was against it, but new wife was rich and so now he didn't need to listen to his mother's opinion because he didn't need her money anymore.

Mother-In-Law #1: Terrible. Can you imagine talking that way to me?

Daughter-In-Law: New wife told him that the only way they could get married was if he would get divorced and never see me or Hanbi again. He agreed.

Mother-In-Law #1: He turned against me. My only son.

Daughter-In-Law: She said she was going to hire lawyers and get the court to declare me an unfit mother.

Mother-In-Law #1: She is an unfit mother. If she were a good mother, my son never would have divorced her. I was prepared to take full custody of the child.

Daughter-In-Law: She wanted to take away my daughter.

Mother-In-Law #1: That's what I said. Truthfully, I'm not sure what I would have done with her. My Daughter-In-Law was a good mother. A bad wife, but a good mother. Anyway, she disappeared.

Daughter-In-Law: In just a few hours, I went from complete ignorance to being in a taxi cab with a suitcase and a baby and no money.

Mother-In-Law #1: I knew she would be back. What is she going to do? Sleep in Seoul subway station?

Daughter-In-Law: I couldn't go back home. I was too ashamed to face my mother and father. I stayed with a friend a few days. Then I went to the bank and got a loan for key money, \$10,000. I put the money down on an apartment.

I didn't have a lot of time to look for an apartment, so I put the money down on the first one I found. It was terrible. Small, like a prison cell. Dirty. No windows. It was hard to breath because it was the summer time and the building was very hot. It was like living in a pizza oven.

My daughter screamed all day and all night long. She was sick with colic. Also, I think she missed her father. Whatever the reason, she screamed and cried and cried and she was never silent. Being in that hot apartment with her, suffocating, breathing in her screams. Sometimes I got what might be called an out-of-body experience. My mind would float up and I would be at the top of the room, looking down on me and Hanbi. It was like I was looking at two people trapped in a dungeon.

I got jobs as a tutor, but I couldn't ask anyone to come to my apartment because Hanbi was always screaming. I had to go to work and I couldn't afford a baby sitter. So I just left her. She shit in her diapers and got rashes. I didn't want to do it, but I couldn't do anything else. She was going to scream anyway, and there wasn't anything I could do about it. I couldn't take her along. I had to work or we couldn't eat.

Three months after I moved into the prison cell I got a note on my door from the building owner. The bank had foreclosed on the building. The key money was gone. I was being evicted. Now I was paying the bank a \$10,000 loan for an apartment they foreclosed on. I was broke, and I was about to be out on the street.

I got a visit from my next door neighbor. I had never met him before. He seemed very kind, very gentle and understanding. We talked about the situation with the landlord, and he told me not to worry. He said it would take months for them to evict me, and anyway, I should fight them in court.

Well. I fell in love with this man. And for some mysterious reason, he fell in love with me. A woman with a baby daughter. He asked me to marry him on our 100-day anniversary.

His mother was not happy.

The first time she saw me, she looked me up and down and said two words:

Mother-in-law #2: Too short.

Daughter-In-Law: But we were expecting something like that.

Mother-in-law #2: I told my son later this was not a good match. She's already got a child. So now he has to pay for her mistake. And she isn't pretty enough. And she has those awful bug eyes. He could do a lot better.

Daughter-In-Law: But he held strong, and told his mother he was going to marry me anyway.

Mother-In-Law #2: As soon as the divorce comes through. Do you see the kind of woman we're getting?

Daughter-In-Law: Mother-in-law had a hard life.

Mother-In-Law #2: My husband left me after the birth of my sixth child.

Daughter-In-Law: That's true, he did.

Mother-In-Law #2: I worked in the salt mines Kangwon-do.

Daughter-In-Law: That's also true.

Mother-In-Law #2: I raised six children by myself.

Daughter-In-Law: I thought that she would understand me and accept me because I also came from a poor background.

Mother-In-Law #2: When you have six children and no husband, you have to make plans. This is what I did. The first two, my two oldest sons, they were going to have to work. So they had to quit school and work. My two daughters would get married, so I wasn't worried about them. That left me two younger sons. The older boys and I would work and save money, and then the younger boys would go to school. Then, when they graduated from school, they would work and take care of us when we got ready to retire.

Daughter-In-Law: And that's how it worked out. My husband finished his studies in Oriental Medicine and became an acupuncturist. He gave his mother one million won every month.

Mother-In-Law #2: That isn't much.

Daughter-In-Law: We got married. I got pregnant soon after and we had a baby.

Mother-In-Law #2: A girl.

Daughter-In-Law: This was really terrible for her.

Mother-In-Law #2: I've got eight grandchildren and I've only got one grandson. What if he gets sick and dies?

Daughter-In-Law: I didn't dislike Mother-in-law. I felt sorry for her.

Mother-In-Law #2: What if he gets sick and dies? Then our family line stops.

Daughter-In-Law: Mother-in-law had four sons, and they all married. All of her sons' wives really hated her, except me. But my sisters in law tell me I came at the very end. They had known her for years. She treated them disrespectfully. Whenever there was a family meeting, they were told to stay home. It was only the sons and daughters and their husbands who could come. The sons' wives could not.

Mother-In-Law #2: People complain too much.

Daughter-In-Law: And she treated them like slaves.

Mother-In-Law #2: I worked in a salt mine. I know about hard work.

Daughter-In-Law: When she died, older brother's wife said it was because poison had leaked out of her bones and pierced her heart.

Mother-In-Law: No, it was cancer.

Daughter-In-Law: The funeral was very strange. At the funeral home, it was very sad. All of the sons were crying very hard, and we, the wives, were crying too. Crying, for our dear mother-in-law. Then we headed to the graveyard. All of the sons got in one limousine, and the wives got into another. As soon as we were in the limo, and the door closed, I could not believe it, the crying stopped and all of the wives broke out in huge smiles. There was a lot of laughing and joking, and everyone was in a very good mood. Older brother's wife said she wished she had champagne so we could clink glasses and toast each other. When we arrived to the cemetery, second older brother's wife said, "We're here. Be sad again." And the car door opened, and everybody started crying, and we all got out and went to gravesite.

Six years have passed since Mother-In-Law's death. I know she was mean, and I know a lot of people in my family hated her, but she was strong. She was a strong woman. Admirable.

I'm still madly in love with my husband. We had another baby last year. And I'm very, very pleased to say that this time, it was also a girl.

CURTAIN