

THE RIDE HOME

By Jennifer Hwang

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

The Family

JISU – A Korean American teenage girl, fresh out of Sunday school and halfway between childhood and adulthood. Smart, restless, unsure of her future. Wears confidence loosely and uncertainty quietly.

HALMEONI – Jisu's grandmother. She is a hardworking H Mart employee. A first-generation immigrant who carries groceries and wisdom with equal steadiness. Practical, observant, warm, blunt when necessary. Speaks in a mix of Korean and English.

The Passengers

THE ELDERLY WOMAN – A quiet passenger offered a seat by Halmeoni. Polite, slightly embarrassed, grateful.

THE MAN ACROSS THE AISLE – Watches more than he speaks. Briefly amused, quickly intimidated.

THE GROUP OF STUDENTS – Loud, carefree, absorbed in their phones. A reminder of youth in motion.

SCENE 1

A public bus in San Jose stops in front of H Mart. The doors hiss open.

Passengers board carrying plastic bags filled with glass banchan (side dish) containers, green onions, and kimchi cabbage wrapped in newspaper.

JISU boards last, earbuds in, phone out. HALMEONI follows with a worn reusable H Mart bag.

They tap their cards.

BEEP. BEEP.

A young woman stands to give HALMEONI a seat.

HALMEONI

Thank you.

JISU tries to hold the grocery bag. HALMEONI takes it anyway.

After Bird Avenue Station, two seats open. JISU sits beside HALMEONI.

SCENE 2

HALMEONI

Why you sit like shrimp?

JISU

(startled)

What?

HALMEONI

Your back. Curved. Like this.

She exaggerates the posture.

JISU

I'm fine.

HALMEONI

No one who says "I'm fine" is fine. Sit up. You want neck like question mark when you're

thirty? You think posture does not matter? Body remembers everything. When you sit small long enough, you start thinking small too.

JISU

It's just how I'm sitting.

HALMEONI

Nothing is "just." You think I don't see how you walk these days? Shoulders forward. Head down. Like you are apologizing for taking space.

JISU straightens.

A man across the aisle watches.

HALMEONI

What you looking at?

He looks away.

SCENE 3

HALMEONI

Did you eat? You get skinnier every day. Does school not feed you?

JISU

Grandma, I ate.

HALMEONI

What did you eat?

JISU

Food.

HALMEONI

Food is not food. Rice is food. Sandwich is snack pretending to be meal. You think I raised you on turkey and cheese?

JISU

It's normal food.

HALMEONI

It's not the food from home. When you were little, you used to sit on the kitchen counter and

swing your legs and yell “Halmeoni, 더 줘!” before the rice cooker even clicked. You didn’t wait. You trusted me to feed you. Even when your cheeks were full, you still asked for more.

JISU

I was five.

HALMEONI

Yes. And you were fearless about being hungry. Now you act like you don’t need anything. Growing up does not mean pretending you are not hungry.

JISU

I just don’t feel hungry sometimes.

HALMEONI

That is worse. That means something inside is tired.

She pulls out a dosirak wrapped in napkins.

JISU

Grandma... on the bus?

HALMEONI

It’s still warm.

Steam rises. The smell of sesame oil spreads.

JISU

I already ate.

HALMEONI

Then eat again.

She presses it into JISU’s hands.

SCENE 4

An elderly woman boards. No seats left.

HALMEONI stands immediately.

HALMEONI

Sit. Sit.

WOMAN
Oh, it's okay—

HALMEONI
You want to stand until next life?

The woman laughs and sits.

HALMEONI squeezes back in beside JISU.

HALMEONI
See? Kindness is simple.

JISU
You bullied her into sitting.

HALMEONI
Same thing.

They ride quietly.

HALMEONI
You don't talk much these days. What you learn in Korean school? Just grammar? Just worksheets? Language is not a worksheet. Language is how you remember who you are when everyone else tries to tell you.

JISU
I know who I am.

HALMEONI
Do you? When someone asks you where you're from, what do you say?

JISU
San Jose.

HALMEONI
And before that?

JISU
Grandma—

HALMEONI
I am not fighting you. I just don't want you to shrink yourself because it is easier. English is easy here. Korean is work. Roots are work.

JISU

Sometimes I don't want to be different all the time.

HALMEONI

You think I wanted to be different? When I came here, I spoke like a child. Grown woman with child words. I sounded small. But I kept speaking anyway. Different is not punishment. It is an inheritance.

JISU

Yeah, and that is why I go to Korean School every Sunday.

HALMEONI

Why wouldn't you speak Korean with me? I did not cross an ocean for you to whisper.

JISU

You text now grandma.

HALMEONI

I send emojis. That is art.

A small smile.

A group of students board laughing loudly.

HALMEONI

(in Korean)

저 애들 봐. 폰만 보고 있어.

JISU

Why do you care about other people so much?

HALMEONI

Why would I not? People are interesting. If you don't look up, you miss them.

JISU locks her phone and stares out the window.

Her backpack slides off her lap and hits the floor. Papers spill out of her folder. Halmeoni reaches for it before Jisu.

HALMEONI

Homework?

JISU

Yeah for Korean school.. I forgot to submit it.

She squints at the page. The page is blank.

HALMEONI

“What is your favorite part of your culture?”

JISU

It is just a question I have to answer in Korean.

HALMEONI

Just a question? Then why you look like it's hard?

JISU takes the paper back. The page is blank. She stares at the empty lines... like a space she doesn't know how to fill.

SCENE 5

JISU

Grandma... do you ever regret stuff?

JISU freezes. She didn't mean to say it out loud. She looks down quietly.

HALMEONI

All the time.

JISU

Like what..?

HALMEONI

Not learning English earlier. Cutting my hair too short in 1983. Trusting a man who sold fake honey.

JISU

I mean big stuff.

HALMEONI

Big stuff is made of small stuff you ignore.

She taps JISU's knee.

HALMEONI

Like sitting wrong. Like not eating. Like pretending you are not scared.

Pause.

JISU

I don't know what I'm doing. Everyone already decided something. Pre-med. Engineering. Business. Even if they hate it, at least they picked something. If I choose wrong, what if that's it? What if I end up at a wrong place?

HALMEONI

When I came here, I did not know the bus routes. I stood at the wrong stops. I took buses going in the opposite direction. I got off and waited again. I was embarrassed. I was tired. But bus still came again.

JISU

That's different.

HALMEONI

It is not. You think everyone else knows exactly where they are going? They just pretend louder. You are allowed to not know. You are allowed to change your mind. Life is not straight line. It is turns and transfers, and waiting in the cold for the next ride.

JISU

That sounds exhausting.

HALMEONI

It is. But it is moving.

A beat.

HALMEONI

Dead people are very certain. Living people are confused and still walking.

JISU laughs softly.

The bus slows.

HALMEONI

Our stop.

They stand.

JISU

Thanks... for coming with me.

HALMEONI

Of course. You think I trust you alone on bus? You think I would let you ride without someone watching the doors close properly?

A small smile.

HALMEONI

No matter what, you know where to find me. H Mart. Same place. Same aisle with the sesame oil. Even if you don't come every week, I will still look for you when the bus pulls in.

She adjusts her bag.

HALMEONI

And when you ride somewhere farther one day, don't forget how to sit straight. Don't forget to eat properly. Don't forget to look up when someone sits next to you.

They step off.

HALMEONI links her arm through JISU's.

HALMEONI

Next time, sit up from the beginning.

JISU

Yes, ma'am.

Lights fade.

COOKIE SCENE

Lights up.

JISU sits alone on a bus at night.

She unwraps the rice ball carefully and takes a bite.

No one tells her to sit straight.

She straightens anyway.

JISU smiles faintly and looks out the window.

Lights out.