Run, Dad!

Kim Aeran, Kevin O'Rourke

Azalea: Journal of Korean Literature & Culture, Volume 1, 2007, pp. 227-239 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: 10.1353/aza.0.0011

Run, Dad!

by Kim Aeran

Translated by Kevin O'Rourke

I cried a lot when I was a fetus. I cried because I was scared of the tiny darkness within my seed-small womb. I was diminutive; I had miniscule wrinkles, a small, rapidly beating heart and a body that didn't know what language was. I'm talking about a time without yesterdays or tomorrows.

I came like something in the mail, my arrival announced by mom, a parcel of flesh without language. Mom gave birth to me in a semi-basement room where summer sunlight rough as sandpaper shone relentlessly. She flailed around with only a shirt to cover her. And with no hand to hold onto, she simply grabbed a scissors. Outside the window she could see the feet of people walking by. Every time she felt she wanted to die, she stabbed the floor with the scissors. This went on for hours. In the end, she didn't kill herself; instead she cut my umbilical cord. Here I was, newly arrived in the world, and I couldn't hear mom's heart beating. The silence made me think I was deaf!

The first light I saw as a newborn was window-sized. I knew it existed outside of me.

I don't remember where my dad was. He was always someplace else, or he was late, or he didn't come at all. Mom and I held onto each other, heart against rapidly beating heart. Mom, naked, looked down at my solemn face and wiped it several times with her big hand. I liked my mom, but I didn't know how to tell her; I just frowned all

the time. I discovered that mom laughed a lot when my face puckered with wrinkles. I think I concluded that love was not so much two people laughing together as one looking funny to the other.

Mom fell asleep and I was left on my own. The world was quiet; the sunlight lay over there on the floor like a polite "Dear John" letter, the first unpleasant note I received in this world. I had no pockets. So I clenched my fists.

When I picture dad, it's always against the same background: he's running resolutely somewhere. He's wearing luminous pink shorts and has thin, hairy legs, and he's running straight-backed with a high knee action. He looks like a referee who's enforcing rules no one cares about. So he cuts a comical figure. I guess he's been running for twenty years, his posture and face always the same: a laughing red countenance sporting a row of yellow teeth like a bad painting someone stuck on him.

It's not just dad, though. Everyone playing the exercise game looks funny. It embarrasses me when I see middle-aged men in the park bouncing their bellies off the trunks of pine trees, or middle-aged women clapping their hands as they walk. They're always so serious about what they're doing and so enthusiastic. As if getting healthy entails looking more and more ridiculous.

I've never really seen dad running, but as far as I'm concerned he's been running all his life. I may have gotten this idea from something mom told me long ago. When she first told me this story, she had a washboard stuck in the V between her legs. She was scrubbing laundry in a welter of soapy suds and breathing so hard she looked very angry.

Mom says dad never ran to her. He wasn't the kind of man to come running: not when she said they should break up, not when she said she missed him, not even when I was born. People called him a gentleman; mom thought he was a fool. If mom made up her

mind to wait for him on a certain day, he'd show up the next. And when he arrived late, he looked haggard. She always had a joke to greet her diffident lover—with his inevitable late-schoolboy look. He made no excuses, used no big words to explain himself. He just "came" with his thin lips and his dark face. I imagine he was afraid of rejection. He was the kind of man whose sense of guilt just wouldn't let him come. And guilt generated more guilt. In the end he felt so bad he decided that being bad was better than being a fool. This decision to be bad, I believe, removed him from the ranks of the gentle. When he behaved badly he made others feel bad, which probably means he was a bad man. I think of him as the worst man in the world, and at the same time as the most pitiable. But I don't really know what sort of man he was. A few facts are all he left behind. And if facts give us the reality of a man, dad was bad. If they don't, well, I don't really know him.

Anyway, the important thing is that my always-late dad ONCE mustered all his energy for a race. It happened a few months after he moved to Seoul to make some money.

Dad got a job in a furniture factory. Leaving home to make money in Seoul was a strange thing for him to do. That's how I see it. But he was just following the crowd. Dad and mom exchanged letters from time to time. His letter was always longer. Because mom was angry with him for going to Seoul in the first place.

One day mom came to dad's rented room in Seoul. She'd had a huge fight with her father—their relationship had always been bad—and made up her mind to leave home. With dad's address written on an envelope, she combed through a maze of twisty alleys until she found him. She had nowhere to go and planned to stay for a few days. Dad, of course, had different ideas. The day she arrived he launched a whirlwind courtship. A young man living with a girl he liked and sleeping separately? It was all so predictable. Dad's pleading, his cries of frustration, his blustering went on for several days. Mom was touched. Maybe she thought she wanted to carry him on her belly for the rest of her life. Eventually she said OK, but on one condition: she

would share his bed if he bought her birth control pills.

That's when he started to run. He ran full speed from the top of Moon Village to the pharmacy downtown, red in the face as if bursting to pee and laughing enough to crack his lips. A dog began to bark at the sight of him and soon every dog in the neighborhood was barking. Dad ran and ran. Red-faced, hair flying, he jumped over stairwells as he sliced his way through the dark. He ran faster than the wind and in his haste tripped and fell into a heap of coal briquette ash. Covered head to foot with white ash, he shot back up on his feet and ran on as if his life depended on it, as if bound for places unknown.

Did he ever run as fast again? The image of dad running through Moon Village for a love tryst with mom made me want to shout, "Dad, you run a lot better than I thought," though I knew he couldn't see me or hear me.

Anyway, he ran so fast he forgot to get the instructions for the pills. Mom asked her ash-covered lover how many she should take. He scratched his head. "I think they said two," he replied.

For two months mom says she took two pills religiously every day. And for two months the sky was yellow and she felt nauseous all the time. Strange, she thought. So she asked the pharmacist and he told her to reduce the dose to one.

One day, she had to break the ice in the bucket in the moonlit yard to wash her private parts, and she was so numb with cold that she forgot to take the pill. That was the night she got pregnant. Dad's face got paler and paler as he watched her tummy swell. He left the day before he became a dad and never came back.

Jogging is the most popular sport there is; it doesn't matter where you are or how old you are. A blend of walking and running, jogging provides appropriate stimulation for heart and lungs. It's a complete body exercise that enhances your stamina. It doesn't require any special skills or high speeds and has the added advantage of not being restricted by place or weather. They say running demands stamina. What else does it demand? I don't know. Nor do I know

how to interpret the mind—and the energy—of someone who left me but keeps on running in the space he left behind.

Dad left home so that he could run. That's what I want to believe. He didn't leave to go to war, or to get a new wife, or to sink an oil pipeline in the desert of a foreign country. And when he left home, he didn't take a watch.

I don't have a father. That's not to say he doesn't exist. I see him in his luminous pink shorts. He's in Fukuoka, he's traveling through Borneo, he's running toward the observatory in Greenwich. I see him turning by the left foot of the Sphinx, slipping into bathroom 110 in the Empire State Building, crossing the Guadarramas in Spain. I can make out his figure clearly in the dark. His luminous shorts glow. He's running. But no one's applauding.

~

Mom raised me with a joke on her lips. When I'd get depressed, she'd lift me up with her wicked wit, which was often very vulgar, especially when I asked about dad. Not that he was a forbidden subject. He just wasn't that important to us, so we didn't talk about him much. And when we did, mom often indicated she was bored with the topic.

"Have you any idea how often I've told you about your father? Any idea?" she asked.

"*Alji*—I know," I said diffidently.

"*Alji*," she said gruffly, "is a bare bollix." And she laughed wildly.

From then on I associated *alji* (knowing) with something vaguely obscene.

The biggest thing I inherited from mom was the ability not to feel sorry for myself. She didn't treat me as if she owed me anything, or as if I was to be pitied. I was always grateful to her for this. When folks ask me how I am, I know they're just interested in how they are themselves. Mom and I had a sturdy no frills relationship that demanded neither sympathy nor understanding.

Whenever I asked mom about sex, she always answered with style. Not having a dad I was curious about many things. Once after an accident that left a man lame I asked, "How does he manage with his wife?"

"Does he do it with his foot?" she said curtly.

And when my young nipples began to develop, mom reacted not with alarm but with a sense of fun. She'd pretend to link her arm in mine and then jab her elbow into my breast. I'd run away from her with a shriek, but I liked the tingling sensation that spread across my chest.

There was only one other person in the world who was aware of mom's charm, and that was her father, and their relationship was bad until the day he died. I don't remember much about him except that he never spoke to me—I was a fatherless child after all—and that he invariably tore mom apart with his foul curses. I liked my handsome grandfather, but he neither made me his pet, nor gave me a hard time. Maybe I was so small that he didn't even see me.

Once, however, he *did* speak to me. He'd been drinking poppy tea and was in good spirits. He looked intently at me and asked, "Whose child are you?"

"Cho Chaok's" I answered loudly.

He asked again as if he hadn't heard. "Whose girl are you?" This time I answered in an even louder voice, "Cho Chaok's!"

And as if he were deaf, he asked again, slyly, "What? Whose girl?"

I jumped up and down with frustration and cried as loudly as I could, "Cho Chaok's, Cho Chaok's."

I could shout as much as I wanted in the concrete yard of my childhood. Granddad said, "Ah, ah, you're Chaok's girl." His face darkened. "Have you any idea what a terrible bitch she is?" he said suddenly.

He sat me down in front of him and regaled me with a litany of mom's childhood misdeeds. With big blinking eyes I listened to everything he said. He kept disparaging her, describing how she

always counterattacked when he bad-mouthed her, not like my docile older aunt who was a wonderful daughter.

There was another side to the story. One of the things mom said to me most often was, "A good family is very important." If she hadn't left home after the fight with her father, she said, things would have been very different. I'd sit there, eyes blinking, listening quietly to her complaints just as I listened to granddad. Forget how much they hated each other; forget how granddad ridiculed her for having a fatherless child; forget how much she resented him for making granny wash his concubine's drawers. Forget all that. I still had a reason to respect him: something he said a few days before he died.

For someone who had dropped in casually, he sat there for an awfully long time until suddenly he grew awkward in the face of the inference of mom's silence, which was that surely now he had exhausted all areas for trivial complaint and interference. He thought for a moment about what to say and then began another harangue on the virtues of my docile aunt in comparison with mom. Having exhausted all the resources of foul language, again he found himself at a loss in the face of mom's silence. He fidgeted with his cup of juice, reached for his hat and stood up. Mom and I saw him off politely. He hesitated in front of the gate before throwing a strange parting shot over his shoulder.

"You know if it was love I was after, I'd pick the younger bitch over the older one."

Granddad died a few days later. I think he knew the little secret of mom's charm. With granddad gone, I'm the only one left that knows it.

~

Mom's a taxi driver. At first I figured she took the job so she could keep an eye on me as she threaded her way through the streets of Seoul. Then one day I surmised that maybe she drove a taxi because she wanted to run faster than dad. I imagined the two of them

running side by side, now one in the lead, now the other. Racketing through my mind were images of mom's face, twenty years of resentment stamped on it as she hit the accelerator, and dad's face when his whereabouts were discovered. Maybe mom thought that the best revenge wasn't catching him, but running faster.

Mom found the taxi job tough. The distrust directed at an underpaid woman driver and the ridicule of drunken passengers were hard to take. It didn't stop me though from asking her regularly for money. Had I plastered politeness on top of my inscrutability, I think mom would have felt even worse. Of course, she never gave me more money because she felt she owed it to me. She gave me what I asked for, but I didn't forget what she said: "Everything I earn goes up the kid's hole while I fuck myself trying to make a living."

It had been a normal run-of-the-mill day for me. I got lectured by mom for eating with the TV on. I had to listen silently to her long-winded account of a fight with a passenger the night before. She got so worked up telling the story that she threw down her spoon and cried, "Fuck it, was I so wrong?" She was looking for solidarity from me, so I had to give a good answer. And as I slipped into my runners, I had to explain to her how I proposed to use the 10,000 won I had asked her for. Half-slumped over my desk at school, I watched the trainee teacher struggling to swallow his nonexistent saliva. For a fatherless child, there was nothing particularly bad or different about this very ordinary day. At least not until I got home.

Mom was sitting glum-faced in the middle of the room. She had a one-page letter in her hand. The envelope, torn open roughly, lay on the floor, the same floor she had once stabbed with the scissors. I knew from the address that it had been sent airmail. Mom couldn't read the letter, but she sat there looking at it, filled with a strange feeling of foreboding. Her face betrayed her unease; she was like a woman from the country who didn't know what to do.

"How long has she been like this?" I muttered to myself, snatching the letter.

"What does it say?" she asked, looking at me intently.

The letter was in English. I began a groping explanation of its contents, aware that it involved some loss of face for me. At first I didn't understand, but after reading it two or three times, I realized that it held very important news for us.

"What does it say?" she asked again.

I swallowed. "It says dad's dead."

She looked at me with the darkest of dark faces.

Mom always reacted with a witty remark when I wore that kind of expression. I wanted to say something witty too, but I couldn't think of anything appropriate.

In a way, dad had come home—gossamer like—in the mail, twenty years late. Dad had come home—like a statement of good will, motivation unknown—like thunderous applause at the end of an interminable play. A death notice with a strange intonation. In the end, maybe dad's reason for running to the four corners of the earth was to tell us that he was dead. He had traveled to distant places and had come back now to tell us he was dead. But dad hadn't really been racing around the world; he'd been living in America.

Dad's son sent the letter, which I deciphered in bed with the help of a dictionary. This is what it said. Dad married in America. I was a bit surprised by this. I couldn't understand why he had abandoned mom unless he didn't want a family. Either he loved the second woman a lot, or it wasn't as easy to run away in America. A few years later he got divorced. The exact reason for the divorce wasn't specified, but I guessed it had to do with his basic incompetence. His wife demanded alimony. Dad hadn't a penny so he offered to cut her grass every weekend. I remember hearing that in America you could get reported to the authorities by your neighbors for not cutting your grass. She promptly married a man with a lawn the size of a football field.

Every week dad pressed the doorbell as promised, stuck his face in front of the security camera, said "Hello," and trudged in

to cut the grass. Imagine it. While she sat cozily in the living room drinking beer with her new husband, he crouched down outside tinkering with the lawnmower. In the beginning they might have been a bit put off by him, but I'm sure she said to her husband, "Don't pass any remarks, John." Dad soon became irrelevant. When he looked through the thick glass wall of the living room and saw them making out, he revved the engine and strode up and down outside. The boy who sent the letter insisted that this is what dad did—maybe he wanted to give his dad's bereaved foreign family some words of comfort. What kind of kid, I wondered, would write so pryingly and in such detail? Obviously he didn't think he was anything like his dad. I imagined the pair's lovemaking in the living room. Nipple and breath stuck fast to the glass; the blinds hurriedly pulled down. I look at them from a great distance, my eyes slit in a frown. Brrrng! Dad charges with his lawnmower. But his attack peters out, and he goes back to striding impatiently up and down outside. When the woman couldn't take it anymore, she gave him the latest automatic gasoline model as a present. But dad insisted on using the old model in the shed. He went around the garden making the same awful din.

One day dad and the new husband had a fight. It began when the new husband started criticizing the way dad was cutting the grass. Dad held his tongue though it was killing him; he just kept cutting the grass. The new husband's griping went on and on; eventually he began to curse. All this time dad had been silently cutting the grass. Suddenly he lifted the old lawnmower with its furiously whirring blade and charged. The new husband slumped to the ground in a blue paroxysm of fear. I don't think dad had any intention of hurting him, but unfortunately, he did get hurt. Now it was dad's turn to react with shocked dismay. At the sight of his own blood the injured man lost all control. Every curse in the language poured from his lips and he ended up reporting dad to the police. Dad took fright. He hesitated for a moment, then ran to the shed, saw the new lawnmower in the corner, hopped on it like a gunman

jumping on his horse in a western, and with his heart pounding, switched on the ignition, spurred the mower out of the shed and dashed out onto the road. Dad fled at the top speed the mower could muster, scattering the smell of fresh grass cuttings behind him. Where was he heading?

The letter ended by saying that dad was killed in a traffic accident. The son said the family had been truly saddened by his death. They held a simple service at the cemetery. Regrettably, the son said, he never liked dad very much. When he was a kid, he said, dad left him in front of the TV to go to work and he used to wait there all day. That's how he grew up. He was hoping now he would be able to forget dad. Though he had never met his foreign half-sister, he wanted me to know that he also grew up waiting for dad, so he knew the pain. "I found your address in my dad's belongings," he continued. "My mom doesn't know I'm writing this letter."

It all seemed like lies.

Actually I was the real liar. I told mom that dad had been killed in a traffic accident, but I didn't tell her what kind of accident.

"Why is the letter so long?" she asked.

"English is always longer than Korean," I said.

Then she asked if there was anything else in it. How he lived, who he lived with? Was there really nothing else? No one knew the answers to these questions. She probably wanted to ask why he'd left home that night. But then again maybe that was the one thing she really didn't want to ask. "Dad . . ." I began. She looked at me with the expression of a whipped puppy. "Dad always felt bad," I said. "He felt guilty all his life. That's what it says here." Her eyes danced. I chanced a further comment. "And mom, this bit was really lovely." "Which bit?" she asked with trembling voice. I showed her the bit that said he came to his wife's house every week to cut the grass. "This bit here," I said. Mom looked like she would burst into tears as she looked at the part of the letter I indicated and rubbed it fondly. It was the first time I ever saw my witty mom who never cried with a lump in her throat.

That night mom didn't come home until dawn. I lay in bed with the covers pulled up under my chin and thought about dad, about his life and death, and about cutting the grass, that sort of thing. But still he keeps running around inside my head. Images that have been in there for so long aren't going to disappear that quickly. It occurred to me that I kept imagining him because I could not forgive him. Maybe the reason I kept him running in my mind was that I was afraid I would charge at him and kill him the moment he stopped. I felt sad. I better go to sleep, I thought, before this sadness dupes me.

~

Mom came home after the peak-fare time ended. I thought she'd try not to wake me, that she wouldn't put on the light, that she'd take off her clothes very carefully. Instead she poked me in the ribs.

"Ya!" she cried. "Are you asleep?"

I stuck my head out from under the covers. "Are you crazy? My God! The taxi driver's drunk!"

Mom said nothing. She just laughed and tumbled down on the covers. She curled up small like a clenched fist. I thought of tossing the bedcovers over her but didn't. In a little while, she slid in under them, maybe because she was cold.

In the dark mom's breathing gradually got gentler. She smelt of cigarettes. I was angry with her. You're bad, I thought, folding my arms. Mom had her back to me, sleeping like a shrimp. I was staring up at the ceiling. The long stillness caressed her breathing. I thought she was asleep, but suddenly she spoke, curling up even more tightly into a ball. There was no trace of malice toward the dead man in what she said.

"So, what do you think, is he rotting OK?"

I didn't close my eyes all night long. I kept looking at the ceiling, reviewing the various images of dad in my imagination. I saw him in Fukuoka, crossing Borneo, approaching the Greenwich

Observatory, turning by the foot of the Sphinx, going through the Empire State Building, climbing the Guaddaramas. My laughing, racing dad. Suddenly I realized that all this time he had been running in the blazing sun. I thought I'd imagined everything he needed for running. I dressed him in those luminous pink shorts, put on his cushion-soled runners and his airy running vest. But isn't it strange that I'd never thought of giving him sunglasses? I'd forgotten that even the most rubbishy man in the world gets sick like everyone else, likes the things everyone else likes. All those years I was picturing dad in my mind, he was always running, his eyes sore and swollen from the blazing sun. So I decided tonight to put sunglasses on him. I imagined his face. He wore a little smile; he was filled with anticipation but trying hard to conceal it. He closed his eyes, like a boy waiting for a kiss. With my two big hands I put the sunglasses on him. They suited him really well. He'll run better now, I thought.