

# KODAMA'S RAMEN SHOP

*by Ellen Oh*

Jessie could see the old faded sign that read “Kodama’s Ramen Shop” as her bus pulled up to the stop. Her mom told her that when Jessie’s grandparents first bought the shop, her grandmother’s ramen broth tasted so good it would cure people of whatever ailments they had. It was like magic.

But that was a long time ago. Inside, the small, cramped tables and the faded countertop with its old and worn bar chairs were a sad sight. Jessie could remember when there was a line halfway down the block of people waiting to eat her grandmother’s ramen. Now only the old regulars came in, people as old as her grandmother. And even they didn’t come as often as they used to. Jessie wanted to blame it on the bougie noodle shops that had opened in the newly gentrified neighborhoods of Washington, DC. Fancy, high-priced ramen with noodles shipped all the way from Japan. Three

different pho places within a ten-block radius. There were so many choices. But the truth was, Obaasan's ramen didn't taste as good as it used to, even if Obaasan failed to recognize it.

Opening the door, Jessie heard the familiar jingle of the bells that her mother had hung so many years ago. It was one of her happier memories. For a moment, she thought she could hear her mom's cheerful voice call out "Irasshaimase!" welcoming customers to the store. Jessie fought back her tears and stepped inside.

"Hi, Jessie! How was school today?" Auntie Mio asked. She was her mother's best friend and had been a hostess and waitress at the shop since Jessie was born. "You have a date to Homecoming yet?"

"Nope," Jessie said. "I don't have time for boys. I need to work on my college applications."

Auntie Mio nodded but shot a worried glance toward the kitchen. "Have you talked to your dad about college?" she asked.

Jessie recoiled. "I'd rather eat a live tapeworm."

"First of all, that's really disgusting, and now I'm going to have nightmares," Auntie Mio said. "Second, you have to! Your Obaasan is too proud and stubborn to remind him of his responsibilities. But you're his daughter! His only daughter! Besides, he makes a ton of money as a partner in that fancy-shmancy law firm of his. You guys have let him off easy all these years. It's time to make him pay!"

This was a constant refrain of Auntie Mio's. Jessie's father,

Luke, had left his family when Jessie was seven. Not that he'd been around that much in the first place. All he ever did was work. When Jessie was born, he'd insisted that her mother quit her job as a teacher and stay home and help Obaasan at the ramen shop.

Not long afterward, Grandfather died, and Obaasan moved in with them. But it was clear that Obaasan never liked Jessie's mom, Carrie Sun. Especially because Carrie had refused to take her husband's name.

"Korean women keep their last names out of respect to our ancestors," Jessie's mom had said. "It's one of the few things we inherit. One of the few things we can say is truly ours. I'm not throwing it away."

Obaasan hated that. Thought it was so disrespectful to the Kodama family. But Jessie loved and respected her mom. Unlike her dad.

Jessie despised her dad. She barely remembered him from when she was little, but she did remember the ugliness of the divorce. Her father's rages and her mother's sobs. After the divorce, Obaasan blamed Jessie's mom, even though it was her father who'd deserted them. And yet Obaasan stayed with Jessie and her mother. Sometimes Jessie thought Obaasan stayed with them simply to have someone to constantly complain about.

Meanwhile, Jessie's father remarried, moved out of the city, and stopped pretending to be her father. Obaasan always referred to her new white daughter-in-law as "That Woman," even to her face. And Dad went totally MIA. He only showed

up at the anniversary of her grandfather's death. He would make a big production about Jessie visiting them but never followed through. He was the king of insincere promises and the worst absentee father. Plus, Jessie had never forgiven him for bringing "That Woman" to her mother's funeral.

The truth was Jessie would rather eat nasty instant cup noodles forever than ask her dad for a dime.

"Jessie, can you make some new signs?" Auntie Mio asked. "The old ones have faded. But everyone loves your art so much! They say your pictures look good enough to eat!"

"Sure, I'll work on them tonight," Jessie said. On the walls of the restaurant were signs for colorful bowls of ramen and curry rice with the prices in big bold letters. Jessie loved drawing food. Ever since watching Studio Ghibli's *Spirited Away*, she'd developed a fascination with drawing food. It was her dream to one day create an animated cooking show. Sometimes Jessie thought animated food looked better than real food.

"How's the broth today?" Jessie asked.

Mio shook her head. "Still too bland. That's why you only ever see old people here these days. If this keeps up, we're gonna go out of business soon."

Jessie looked with worry toward the kitchen.

"You have to tell your grandmother about the broth," Mio said.

"No way! Obaasan won't listen to me; she'll say I'm just like Mom," Jessie said. "She always thought Mom was trying to sabotage her precious broth. *You* should tell her."

Mio rolled her eyes. "As if your Obaasan would ever listen to me. She doesn't even trust me to manage the store."

"But you practically do," Jessie replied.

"Without any of the authority, it's meaningless," Mio said. "Look how she makes you drag your butt all the way here after school just to take care of things that I could be doing for her."

"She needs help. At least when Mom was alive, Obaasan would let her do the paperwork and taxes. Now it keeps piling up. I'm worried she's going to miss something important."

"Your Obaasan is the most stubborn human I've ever met. There's no changing her."

Jessie sighed. Auntie Mio didn't even have to work. She did it to keep busy and because of loyalty to Jessie's family, even Obaasan. Although Obaasan made it hard at times. She was old-school Asian, which also meant old-school racist. Auntie Mio was half-Japanese and half-Black, and although Mio spoke perfect Japanese, Obaasan never let her forget that she wasn't 100 percent Japanese. Anytime Mio would try to offer suggestions about the food or the menu or even the restaurant decor, Obaasan would cut her off rudely, saying, "What do you know? You're not true Japanese!"

Jessie once asked why Auntie Mio let Obaasan talk to her so disrespectfully. Mio shrugged and said, "She is who she is. Old and set in her ways." But Jessie thought it was unacceptable that her grandmother was so racist.

Auntie Mio heaved a big sigh. "I'm going to have to quit."

"You say that all the time," Jessie replied.

"Yeah, but this time, I'm gonna do it." Auntie Mio took off her apron, grabbed her purse from under the cashier's booth, and walked out.

Jessie wasn't worried. It was three o'clock and the restaurant was closed until five. She knew Auntie Mio would be back for the dinner shift. Jessie walked over to the kitchen, where her grandmother was prepping vegetables and meat with Rosa, her cook.

"No, Rosa, you must slice the onions thinner!"

"Yes, Mrs. Kodama," Rosa said.

"And the celery and carrots are uneven! You have to cut everything evenly or they won't cook right. How many times do I have to repeat myself?"

Jessie checked the vegetables. They were all cut exactly as her grandmother wanted. But as usual, her grandmother was looking for things to criticize.

"Hi, Obaasan," Jessie quickly cut in.

"Jessie, good. I will check the inventory." Her grandmother didn't even glance up from stirring her broth.

Jessie rolled her eyes, and Rosa gave her a wink.

Rosa was hired two years ago, right after Mom was banned from the shop. Jessie remembered the last big fight between Mom and Obaasan. As always, it was about ramen. Mom had made a delicious kimchi ramen that she wanted to add to the menu. She was always trying to add a Korean touch to the restaurant. But Obaasan had been insulted. She accused Mom of ruining her broth with kimchi.

Obaasan hated Korean food, but she seemed to hate

kimchi the most. Jessie's mom had to buy a small kimchi refrigerator and put it in the garage because Obaasan wouldn't allow it in the kitchen. Jessie had never understood why she couldn't eat kimchi in her own house just because her Obaasan didn't like the smell.

The irony was that it was Jessie's mom's house, as part of the divorce settlement. Yet Grandma had chosen to live with them and not her own son.

Jessie had once asked her mom why her grandmother hated her so much. Her mom had hugged her and told her it wasn't true.

"Obaasan doesn't hate me," she'd said. "She's just biased against Koreans. It's a cultural thing. She was raised to believe that being Japanese was superior to being anything else. And she had hoped your dad would marry a Japanese woman. But she doesn't hate me. She's disappointed, that's all."

"Well, I think she's wrong! Koreans are the best, and I'm proud to have you as my mom."

"Me too, baby," her mom had said. "I'm so proud to be *your* mom."

Jessie tried not to think too hard about the situation to keep from getting angry. Dad was married to "That Woman," Tiffany Huntington, and raising their kids, Chase and Bradley. But Obaasan preferred to live with Asians she looked down on than with white people who made her feel uncomfortable.

Every day except Tuesdays, when the restaurant was closed, Jessie would come after school to work at the ramen

shop. Business had gotten so slow, most of the waitstaff had quit. Auntie Mio and Rosa were the only ones left. And Jessie was afraid that Obaasan would drive them away.

When Obaasan went into the storage room, Jessie started chatting with Rosa.

"Auntie Mio said the broth is still bland," Jessie told Rosa with a sigh.

Rosa's cheerful face turned serious. "I try to tell your grandma, but she don't listen to me." She shrugged. "What can I do? She thinks everything I do is too salty and too much."

"She doesn't get that her taste buds have changed." Jessie bit her lip. "I'm worried."

"It's not for you to worry about, Jessie. You worry about school."

"How are Pilar and Gabriel doing?" Jessie asked.

Rosa beamed. "They are doing great! Ever since you started tutoring Gabriel in math, he's been so much happier at school. I'm so grateful to you."

Jessie smiled. "They're awesome," she said. "I'm happy to help anytime."

"What are we going to do when you go away to college?" Rosa sighed. "They will miss you so much."

Jessie was quiet. "I don't know if I can go away," she replied. "I might have to wait a bit."

"Oh no, Jessie, you have to go!" Rosa grabbed Jessie. "I know you love your grandma and feel responsible for her, but you have to think of your future. This ramen shop is not



your future. You always said you wanted to be an animator for Disney. Then that's what you should do."

Before Jessie could respond, Obaasan returned. "What are you doing? Get back to work! No time to fool around."

"Yes, Mrs. Kodama," Rosa said as she went back to her chopping.

"Come, Jessie," Obaasan said. "I need you to go to the bank."

"Why don't you let Auntie Mio go to the bank for you?" Jessie asked, for what seemed like the hundredth time. "She lives right around the corner from it."

"Don't trust anyone but family with money matters," Obaasan said.

"Auntie Mio *is* family," Jessie retorted. "In fact, she's a million times more reliable than our real family."

Obaasan didn't reply, her favorite tactic when she didn't want to admit to anything.

"Hurry back so we can prepare for dinner service," Obaasan said, ending the discussion.

Jessie took the money pouch to the bank and thought about how this used to be her mother's job. Jessie's heart ached from missing her mom. If only Jessie hadn't gone away that weekend. She didn't even like camping. If only she'd changed that stupid lightbulb at the top of the stairway. Obaasan had been nagging Mom about it for a week. Jessie made her mother promise not to change it on her own. But Mom was so stubborn.

Jessie remembered Auntie Mio's call. They'd found Carrie

at the bottom of the stairs. By the time Jessie rushed to the hospital, her mother was already gone. She never got to say goodbye. To tell her mother how much she loved her. Sometimes the guilt was almost too much to bear. But the worst part was the overwhelming sense of loss. Jessie had lost the most precious person in the world.

It was why Jessie was afraid to go away to college. What if something happened to Obaasan while she was away? Then she would be truly alone.

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That night, an elderly couple showed up for early service.

"Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Tanaka." Jessie smiled affectionately at them. They'd been regulars since before she was born. They came several times a week because Mrs. Tanaka hated to cook and Mr. Tanaka loved Obaasan's grilled mackerel.

"Jessie! How are college applications going?" Mr. Tanaka asked. "Are you going to apply to CalArts? It's got such a great animation program. Our grandson loves it there."

"I don't think so; it's too far from home," Jessie replied wistfully.

"That's right, dear," Mrs. Tanaka said. "You should apply to RISD. That's at least on the same coast as us."

"She'd like California a whole lot better," Mr. Tanaka said. "And she could meet Brian and he could show her around and maybe go on some dates."

"Matchmaking again, Mr. Tanaka?" Auntie Mio said as she passed by on her way from clearing off a table.

"She's a young lady now! She needs to spread her wings, not be stuck in this ramen shop forever," Mr. Tanaka said.

"Hush, don't let her Obaasan hear you," Auntie Mio said.

Mrs. Tanaka grabbed Jessie's free hand and held it tightly. "Jessie, dear. You look so much like your beautiful mother. She was always singing and laughing. Such a joyous presence. How I miss her."

Tears sprang into Jessie's eyes. "I miss her, too."

"She'd be so proud of you."

Jessie wiped her eyes and smiled. "So what can I get you tonight? The usual? Salmon onigiri appetizer, grilled mackerel, and curry rice?"

Mrs. Tanaka nodded. "Yes, but extra takuan, please."

Jessie called in their order and watched as Obaasan made two salmon onigiri, hot rice filled with salmon stuffing and wrapped with seaweed. Jessie put extra slices of the pickled yellow radish on the plates and brought them to the table.

"Onigiri appetizer, extra takuan," she said.

"Thank you, dear," Mrs. Tanaka said.

Mr. Tanaka rubbed his hands together before taking a big bite of his onigiri. "Onigiri never changes. Always has the original taste."

It amused Jessie that the Tanakas came to their ramen shop and never ordered ramen. It was why they were her favorite customers. The last ramen she'd had was her mother's kimchi ramen. It was the only ramen she ever liked, other than instant Korean ramen, which was not at all the same thing.

At eight-thirty, Jessie was sitting at the counter, trying to work on her college application essay, when the door opened. A young Asian lady came in by herself and sat at the bar. She ordered a miso ramen and then pulled out a laptop and began to work. Jessie didn't pay attention to her until she noticed the woman grimacing after tasting her ramen broth.

"Excuse me, do you have anything spicy, like kimchi, by any chance?" she asked.

Jessie smiled wistfully. Her mom would have approved of this customer.

Auntie Mio passed the woman the shichimi. Jessie looked up when Mio gasped. The customer was shaking the spicy seasoning with a very heavy hand. Soon her soup was drowning in the colorful spices. Obaasan came out from behind the kitchen. Jessie was immediately on her guard.

"You won't even be able to taste anything!" Obaasan said in an aggrieved tone.

"Ah, that's okay," the customer said with a smile. "I'm Korean. I love everything really spicy."

She took a bite and coughed. "Mmmmm, delicious!"

"Crazy Korean," Obaasan muttered in Japanese under her breath. "No taste, no class."

Jessie gritted her teeth. This was what Obaasan used to say about Mom.

"You don't know how to eat ramen," Obaasan said.

The customer shrugged. "I've been eating ramen all my life, just the Korean way."

"Instant ramen is not real ramen," Obaasan retorted.

"Yeah, I hear that a lot," the customer replied. "And that's okay. That's why I'm here tonight!"

"Do you live in the area?" Jessie asked quickly, before her grandmother could say anything more.

"No, I'm just visiting my aunt, who lives in the neighborhood. I'm from New York."

"Oh, there must be lots of ramen shops there!" Auntie Mio exclaimed.

"Yep, but my favorite ramen shop is owned by a Korean Japanese couple. They make the most delicious kimchi ramen," the customer said. "I love it because it reminds me of my favorite instant ramen but has that amazing broth that's been cooking for hours."

"My mom used to make one," Jessie said. "It was the only ramen I ever liked."

"Kimchi does not go with ramen!" Obaasan said emphatically.

The customer laughed. "I think ninety-nine percent of Koreans would disagree with you."

Obaasan harrumphed and walked back into the kitchen.

"Don't mind her," Jessie said. "She hates kimchi. In fact, she banned my mom from working here after she tried to put a kimchi ramen on the menu."

"Something tells me I'd like your mom." The customer smiled. "Is kimchi ramen your favorite?"

"Yeah, but I never get to eat it anymore," Jessie said sadly. "My mom died two years ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I can't imagine how hard that must be

for you," the customer said. She put down her chopsticks and gazed sympathetically at Jessie.

Jessie choked up and wiped her eyes. "Thank you. I miss her more and more every day. It's so hard. I try to hold on to my memories of her, but it feels like she keeps slipping away from me."

They sat silently together. After a few minutes, Jessie cleared her throat. "Your ramen is getting cold and your noodles will be all mushy."

The customer picked up her chopsticks again. After she finished her ramen and paid her bill, she approached Jessie.

"I'm Anna Kim," she said.

"Jessie Kodama."

Anna smiled. "So did your mom make Korean food?"

"Oh yes! All the time! She loved to cook all kinds of recipes, but my favorites are kimbap and bibimbap."

"Oh my gosh! Mine too!" Anna gushed. "And my favorite thing is to put kimchi in both!"

"Really?"

Anna nodded enthusiastically. "When you roll your rice, meat, and vegetables in the kim, I like to squeeze the juice out of kimchi and roll it all tight."

"Why squeeze the juice?"

"So your kim doesn't get wet and soggy."

"Kim is the fried seaweed, right?" Auntie Mio asked. "I remember your mom used to give you little packages of the stuff and you would eat it like potato chips!"

"I still do," Jessie said. "Luckily, they sell them at Costco now. They even sell kimchi there, but I haven't tried it yet."

"Why not?" Anna asked.

"It won't taste like my mom's."

"Your mom made her own kimchi?"

Jessie nodded and said, "I helped her. It was our tradition."

"You're lucky to have that memory."

Before Jessie could reply, Obaasan stuck her head out from the kitchen. "It's closing time. Leave. Now."

Auntie Mio waved Obaasan away. "Don't pay attention to her. There's no rush."

"No, that's okay. I have to get going anyway."

Anna turned to Jessie and squeezed her hand.

"Listen, as one Korean to another, if you want to honor your mom, don't forget her food. Make her favorite dishes, and eat lots of rice and kimchi. Especially kimchi," she said.

Jessie laughed. "My grandma won't even let me keep kimchi in our kitchen because she can't stand the smell. We have to use a kimchi fridge in the garage."

"Totally normal," Anna replied. "Lots of Koreans do that. Although in my family we kept it in a separate fridge because we ate so much of it and all kinds! Kimchi is our soul food. Do you have your mom's kimchi recipe?"

Jessie nodded.

"That's your mother's memory. Keep it alive. It's your tradition," she said. "I think your mom would appreciate that."

Anna squeezed Jessie's hand one last time, then packed up her laptop and headed to the door.

"Oh, and next time I come back to visit, please add your

mom's kimchi ramen to the menu," Anna said with a smile and a wave goodbye.

Jessie sat staring at the door, missing her mother more than ever.

"Finally, that crazy woman left. We can close up now," Obaasan said.

Jessie's temper flared hot. "Don't call her crazy! She was really nice, and I liked her!"

Obaasan sniffed. "Well, I don't like her. I hope she doesn't come back."

"Why?" Jessie yelled. "Because she's like my mom?"

Obaasan went quiet and returned to the kitchen, ignoring Jessie as usual.

"No, Obaasan. You don't get to walk away again," Jessie said. "All my life, you've made me feel like being half-Korean was something to be ashamed of. That my mom was someone to be ashamed of. And I hate it!"

"Jessie, don't talk to your Obaasan like that," Auntie Mio said.

"Why not? Why shouldn't I tell her how I really feel? About all the ways she's hurt me and my mother?"

"She's old. . . ."

"That's not an excuse!" Jessie said. "Being old doesn't make it right to treat people badly. You've been working at this restaurant for nearly twenty years. You've been working at you the manager when Mom died. But she didn't, and we know why. Because she's racist. Because she doesn't see you as a real Japanese."

"You go too far, Jessie," Auntie Mio said.



“No, I think you and Mom and I have been afraid to tell her the truth,” Jessie said. “Mom never wanted to tell Obaasan how much it hurt to hear her mocking Korean people and Korean food all the time. Because she said she was too old to change. Auntie Mio, you never tell her how hurtful it is to you that she doesn’t trust you, because she’s too old to change. And I’ve never told her how ashamed I am of her for disrespecting my mom and my favorite Auntie for not being a hundred percent Japanese. I’ve never told her how sad she makes me.”

Obaasan was loudly cleaning up.

“Jessie, stop,” Auntie Mio said. “What good does it do to yell at her about the past?”

“What good?” Jessie was crying now. “Maybe it will keep me from resenting her for the rest of my life!”

The sounds from the kitchen stopped.

“Nobody ever tells Obaasan that she’s wrong. All we ever do is make excuses for her, and I won’t do it anymore! She drove Mom away because she was offended that Mom wanted to add kimchi ramen to the menu. But Mom knew that was the only way I would eat Obaasan’s ramen! And she kicked Mom out! Obaasan has always loved this ramen shop more than her family.”

“That’s not true,” Auntie Mio said. “She loves you.”

“It doesn’t matter. She drove my mom away, and now she is driving me away, too,” Jessie said. “I don’t want to come into this shop anymore! I hate the smell of her ramen! I can’t wait to go to college and get away from this place!”

“Jessie, you don’t mean that!” Auntie Mio scolded.

"Yes, I do! I feel like I'm trapped here because there's no one else to help her. And I'm so frustrated. Because I don't want this to be my life. I want to go to college and become an animator, not work in a ramen shop when I hate ramen."

"Oh, honey, your Obaasan doesn't expect you to work here forever."

"I don't know what she expects from me because she never talks about anything but this stupid store!" Jessie let out a loud sob. "I miss Mom! I miss her singing. I miss her cooking. I miss her kimchi! I miss her so much."

Shoving her laptop into her backpack, Jessie ran out of the ramen shop. Her mind was filled with memories of her mother and how much she missed her.

At home, Jessie locked herself in her room and played videos of her mom on her phone.

"Jessie, stop! I look a mess!"

"Mom, you always look beautiful! Especially covered in kimchi juice!"

"You'd better get over here and start helping me or I won't give you a single bite!"

Her mom picked up a small pickled radish and ate it with gusto. "Mmmmmm, delicious. None for Jessie, all for Mommy."

"Okay, okay, I'm coming!"

Jessie curled up under the covers and cried herself to sleep.

In the morning, Jessie woke up and got ready for school, only to find Obaasan sitting at the kitchen table, staring at a coffee mug.

“Jessie, I want to talk to you,” Obaasan said.

“I’m late for school.” Jessie walked into the foyer and pulled on her shoes.

Obaasan shuffled after her. “Do you hate me so much?”

Jessie opened the door and paused. “I’m trying not to hate you.”

“How can you say such things to your grandmother? How can you be such an unnatural granddaughter? Your mother should have taught you better. . . .”

Jessie slammed the door and turned to face Obaasan. “My mom never said anything bad about you all my life. Even when you were mean and constantly criticized her, she never spoke badly of you. But I’ve never heard you say anything nice about my mom. Not even once. So please don’t ever say my mom should have taught me better. Because being mean is something I learned from you.”

With one last angry glare, Jessie walked out of the house.

After school, Jessie was toying with the idea of not going to the shop, when she received a call from Auntie Mio.

“Jessie, don’t be alarmed, but your Obaasan is at the doctor’s. She’s okay, just had a slight anxiety attack that felt like a heart attack,” Auntie Mio said. “I’ll bring her home and close the shop for today.”

Guilt and fear hit Jessie, and she found herself trying not to cry on the bus. She raced the seven blocks home and ran

up the stairs to her Obaasan's room. Auntie Mio sat next to Obaasan's bed. Jessie swallowed hard. Her grandmother looked so much older and frailer in bed.

"Obaasan, I'm so sorry," Jessie cried. She didn't notice Auntie Mio leaving as she sat by her grandmother's bedside.

"That's enough, I'm fine," Obaasan said. "No more crying."

Jessie wiped her face and blew her nose as her grandmother sat up in bed.

Obaasan let out a loud sigh.

"Jessie, I had no idea you hated the shop so much," Obaasan said.

"I don't hate it. I just don't like ramen," Jessie said. "I never have."

"But I saw you eating instant ramen with your mom all the time!"

"That's not the same," Jessie said frankly. "It doesn't taste anything like yours. The only reason Mom made that kimchi version was because she wanted me to like your ramen."

"Why don't you like my ramen?"

"I don't know. Why don't you like kimchi?"

Obaasan pursed her lips. "It has such a strong, pungent taste and smell. It doesn't go with ramen."

"That must have been how you felt about Mom, too," Jessie said bitterly. "She was too strong-willed. She didn't match your ideals. That's why you always hated her."

"I didn't hate your mom," Obaasan said. "I loved her. And I regret that I never told her how much I appreciated her. How she was like the daughter I never had. How she

was more like my own child than the flesh-and-blood one I bore. I never got to tell her how sorry I was for raising such a no-good rotten son. How sorry I was that he made her life miserable. And how proud I was of her for being such a good mother to you.” Obaasan bowed her head and sobbed.

“Why didn’t you ever say any of this?” Jessie cried. “All you did was criticize her!”

“I never told her because I was ashamed,” Obaasan said in a shaky voice. “I was ashamed of my failures and my mistakes.”

“Well, you have to change, starting now,” Jessie demanded. “You have to look inside yourself and recognize that you’ve been terribly wrong. And racist. Being Japanese does not make you superior to everyone else. If you don’t change, you’re going to drive everyone away from you.”

Obaasan sighed. “I am the product of another generation. Another time. It is hard for me to talk about these things. But that doesn’t mean I can’t change. I’ll just need reminding.”

“Yes, and the first reminder is to be good to Auntie Mio and Rosa and listen to them,” Jessie said. “You’re really lucky to have them.”

“I know. And I’m so lucky to have you, too.” Obaasan hugged Jessie tight. “I’m going to miss you so much when you go to college.”

Jessie paused. “Don’t worry, Obaasan. I won’t go far.”

“Don’t you dare!” Obaasan said sharply. “Apply to wherever you want to go and don’t worry about money. You leave that to me.”

“But, Obaasan . . .”

“Jessie, you are all that I have left in the world. You are all that is important to me,” Obaasan said. “I’m sorry I did not make that clear to you before. Your father is a huge disappointment, but he is my son. And I will make him pay for every cent of your college education. You leave him to me.”

“Obaasan!” Jessie was crying as she hugged her grandmother.

After several minutes, Obaasan wiped her eyes and patted Jessie’s cheeks.

“You look so much like your mom,” Obaasan said. “She was such a beautiful person. And I was such a fool. I let my pride ruin everything, and I will always regret it. But I can do something for her now. Will you teach me her kimchi recipe?”

Jessie smiled through her tears. “Sure, Obaasan. I think she’d really like that. Let’s do it.”